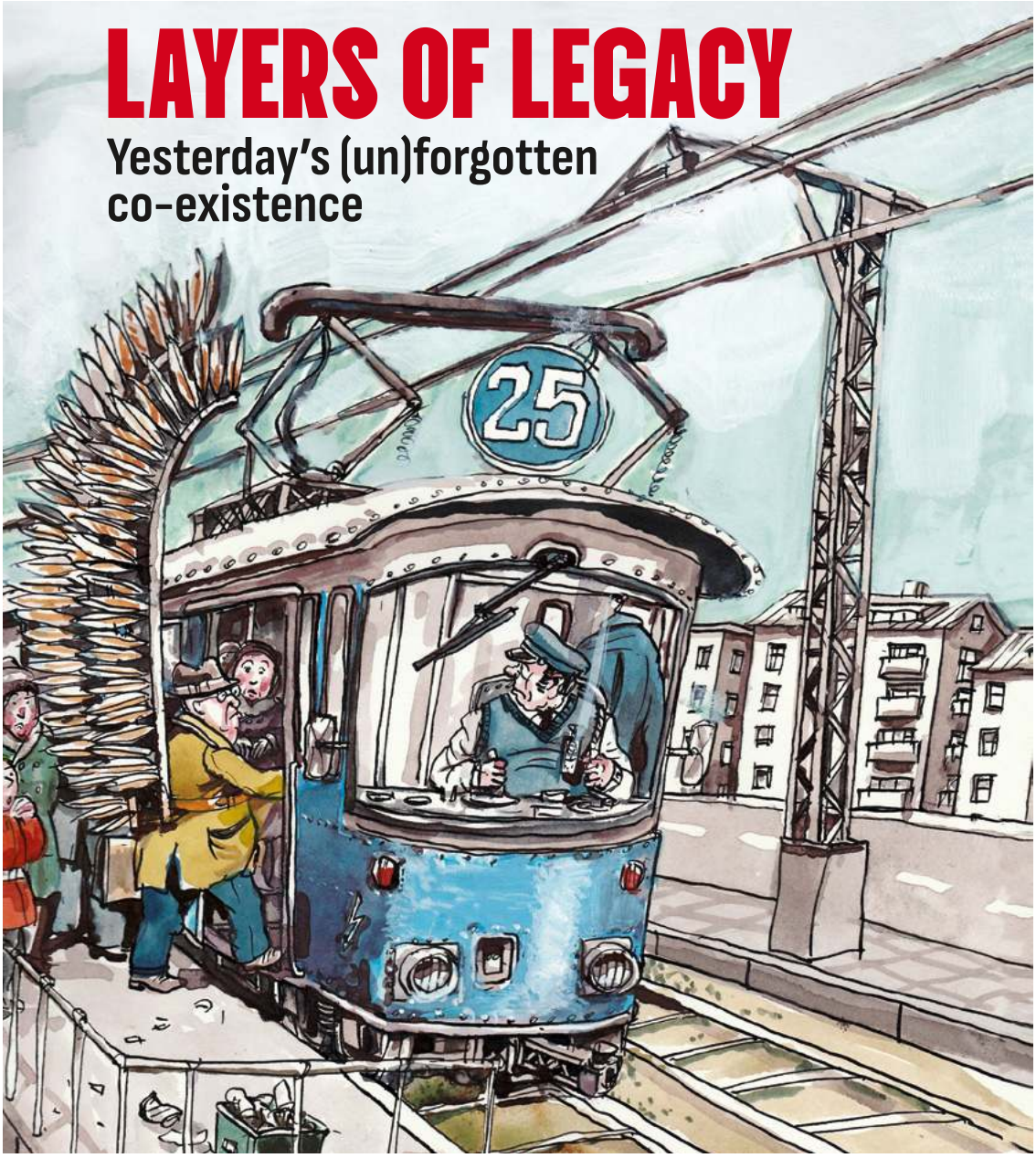
Bimonthly **January-March** **No 1-2 (LXV)/2025**
25 PLN (w tym 8% vat) | 15 EUR | 17.75 USD | 9.99 GBP
neweasterneurope.eu

New Eastern Europe

ISSN 2083-7372

LAYERS OF LEGACY

Yesterday's (un)forgotten co-existence



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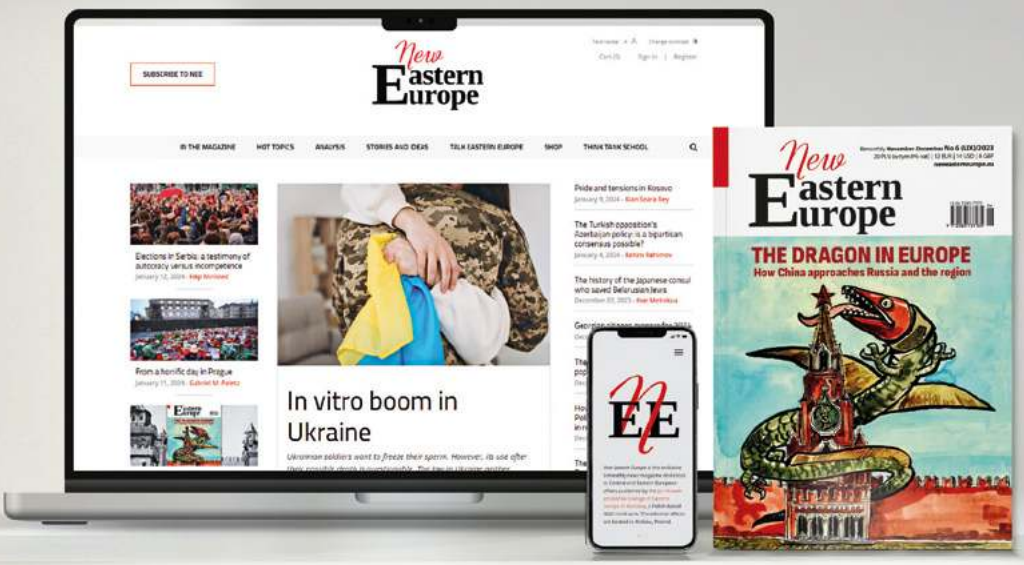

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DEAR READER,

The region of Central and Eastern Europe is a complex one with an often forgotten history of multiculturalism and co-existence. Despite this, the region is also one of conflict, imperialism and wars, which continue even today. As Great Powers once again attempt to decide the fate of Central and Eastern Europe it should be useful to reflect on this region's past and ensure that peaceful co-existence is a legacy that is not forgotten. That is why in this issue we have decided to dig deeper to uncover the various layers of legacy, many of which point to a strong multicultural past, unlike what many Western Europeans nations experienced. This in fact is what makes this region unique. From the Baltics down to the Western Balkans, various societies have long been shaped by a confluence of cultures, religions and traditions. Empires such as the Habsburg, Ottoman and Russian left lasting imprints, creating a mosaic of identities that continue to influence the region today. Yet, this diversity has often been overshadowed by nationalist narratives and geopolitical struggles. In this issue, we explore how this historical multiculturalism persists in memory, language and everyday life, and how it might serve as a foundation for a more inclusive and stable future amid ongoing challenges.

But these lessons are not all positive. As Tomas Venclova points out in the opening interview of this issue, the threat of Russian imperialism looms large. And as we set this issue to print, this statement could not be more relevant. At the end of February, we will commemorate the third anniversary of Russia's illegal full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The level of destruction and terror brought on by this invasion has yet to be fully comprehended, as the war continues to take lives, displace millions and challenge the very foundations of European security. As we reflect on the region's history, we must ask: have we truly learned from the past, or are we doomed to repeat the same mistakes? Following the recent moves by the President Donald Trump and his administration, we can only hope that the path forward will not be paved by concessions and appeasement to the Kremlin.

We are closely monitoring all the developments in the region – including those also in the South Caucasus, Western Balkans and Central Europe – and encourage you to sign up for our new weekly newsletter – *Brief Eastern Europe.*

Sincerely,
The Editors

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New Eastern Europe

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

College of Eastern Europe in Wrocław

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

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

EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CENTRE
pl. Solidarności 1, 80-863 Gdańsk, Poland
https://ecs.gda.pl/, ecs@ecs.gda.pl

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ILLUSTRATIONS AND COVER
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LAYOUT AND FORMATTING
Małgorzata Chyc | AT Wydawnictwo

EDITORIAL OFFICES
New Eastern Europe
ul. Szlak 26/12A, 31-153 Kraków
editors@neweasterneurope.eu

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

Co-funded by the European Union

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

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

Ministry of Culture and National Heritage
Republic of Poland

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

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The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was far from being just "Poland"

A conversation with Tomas Venclova,
Lithuanian philosopher and writer.
Interviewer: Nikodem Szczygłowski

NIKODEM SZCZYGŁOWSKI: Lithuania and Poland shared a common state for several centuries. This union could be compared to, let's say, the union between England and Scotland. However, no one dares call Scotland "England". As for the Republic of the Two Nations – or the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – to this day it is often simplistically referred to as "Poland". Why is that? Is there a lack of terminology?

TOMAS VENCLOVA: Yes, this is due to a lack of terminology. England and Scotland have a common term – Great Britain. Lithuanians and Poles also have a common term, but it is a long and not very convenient term – *Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów*, the Republic of the Two Nations – which nevertheless emphasizes the fact that there were *two nations*, as in the case of England and Scotland. There are also differences between the English and the Scots and the Poles and the Lithuanians. The Scots have hardly preserved their language – unlike the Lithuanians, who did – and the Lithuanian language is very distinct from Polish, which clearly separates Lithuanians from the Poles. And what unites Lithuania and Poland is the Catholic religion. Whereas the Scots have their own religious tradition, the English have theirs. By the way, it is not only the Scots who can be compared to Lithuanians, but also the Irish. There was a violent conflict between the English and the Irish nations, I would say bloodier and worse than the Lithuanian-Polish conflict in the 20th century. But it has now ended there too. The Irish have also not preserved their language and speak English, the old Gaelic language is almost nonexistent. It is again a different situation

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when compared to the Lithuanian one. In Lithuania, three million people speak Lithuanian, and mostly, primarily or exclusively Lithuanian. And that is how we differ from the Scots. I always say that we have to remember that the Republic of the Two Nations – or the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – was far from being just "Poland", it was a common state made up of two different entities.

Can Lithuania and Poland now be regarded as equal heirs to this common state? And what about the Belarusians and Ukrainians? How should their role in this common state be viewed?

That state consisted of the Polish Crown and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which was ruled from Vilnius, that is to say, from the territory of what is now Lithuania, but which nevertheless also included Belarus and, until the Union of Lublin, also Ukraine. Lithuania, just like Poland, now recognizes the May 3rd Constitution proclaimed in 1791 and believes that this legal act, had it not been destroyed by the Russian Empire, would have opened up a certain space for the development of Lithuanian culture, as well as – perhaps – for the Belarusian and Ukrainian languages and cultures. Since this failed, things began to develop differently.

Czesław Miłosz once said of Vilnius that it was a strange city. I quote: "It was a city of different, intertwined forms, like Trieste or Czernowitz." Of course, Miłosz was referring to the city of his childhood and youth, which, in fact, no longer exists in that form. You mentioned in a recent speech that Vilnius is "a city of all the peoples to whom it is important". That includes also Poles and Belarusians. How do you feel about the recent discussion which is taking place in Lithuania about the so-called Litvinism, which is essentially a claim stating that the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was "primarily Belarusian"?

I have spoken to a Belarusian activist, an independence activist, somebody who is against Alyaksandr Lukashenka, and I asked him what percentage of the Duchy of Lithuania he thought was Belarusian and he said that it was 100 per cent. I was surprised to hear that, so I asked him what the Lithuanian percentage was then. He thought about it for a while and said: also, 100 per cent. Well, if this is the way to understand *Litvinism*, then we have nothing against such *Litvinism*. Certainly, the Belarusian element was very noticeable in Lithuania. A large part of the nobility was of Belarusian origin, of the Orthodox faith, but not only that. If the Radziwiłłs were Catholic and of Lithuanian origin, although they spoke Polish, the Chodkiewiczes were of Belarusian origin, their ancestors spoke Ruthenian or Old Belarusian, and they themselves already spoke Polish – and in that sense they were not too different from the Radziwiłłs. But still, these are two different branches of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The problem is being overblown a little bit, I think for provocative purposes, and I believe Lukashenka has his own interests in raising

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the issue, so that, you know, there is a claim that Lithuanian statehood is effectively "Belarusian statehood". That is not the case. It was a common state. There were both Lithuanians and Belarusians. Of all those national differences today, you cannot apply them to those times. It was different. The concept of Lithuanian back then meant both Lithuanian and Belarusian. It was about both. Mikalojus Daukša* was Lithuanian, spoke Lithuanian and wrote Lithuanian books. Francišak Skaryna** was Belarusian. He spoke Ruthenian or Old Belarusian, and published Slavic books. Both of them published those books in Vilnius. So, old Lithuania was in fact dual. There was both a Baltic element and a Slavic element in it. This, I think, has to be acknowledged. Only those Litvinists who do not recognize this fact are wrong, but I do not think that they are very influential, and I do not think that they are very numerous. The smarter ones recognize the duality of the Grand Duchy.

Let's imagine that in the near future Belarus is a free and democratic country. How, in your opinion, should that country and Lithuania regulate their relations in order to avoid disputes, for example, about common historical symbols, such as the coat of arms?

Based on my current contacts with the Belarusian diaspora, which includes refugees, academics, as well as independence activists, I daresay that our disputes will not go that far. I think that it will be made clear that the current borders are not disputed. In Europe, it is only Vladimir Putin who is violating borders now. Vilnius, even in the 20th century, used to be to a large extent the capital of the Belarusian culture – but it was also one of the capitals of Polish culture and, in a sense, perhaps even one of the most important ones, because it is the city of such Polish artists as the poets Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, Władysław Syrokomla, or the composer Stanisław Moniuszko. It was also the capital of Jewish culture, and it was a place where Russian culture was expressed, and far from always in a bad way, sometimes in a good way, by theatres, painters, and so on. Miłosz said it well that there is a little bit of Trieste and a little of Czernowitz in Vilnius. I would say that there is even in it a little bit of New York, which is a centre of many cultures. But Vilnius is even more multicultural than New York, because in New York the English language culture is clearly dominant, whereas in Vilnius, if we take the whole of its history, no culture or language is clearly dominant. In some periods it was one, in other periods another, but several national cultures have a right to Vilnius and

* Mikalojus Daukša was a 16th-century Lithuanian priest and writer who played a key role in preserving and promoting the Lithuanian language through his translations of religious texts.

** Francišak Skaryna was a 16th-century Belarusian scholar, printer, and humanist who is renowned for publishing the first printed books in Eastern Slavic languages, including his influential translation of the Bible.

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that right cannot be challenged. But the cultural law is one thing, the state law is another. Lithuania, thus, has the only state right to Vilnius.

You mentioned Putin, the only person who is violating borders in Europe. In your opinion, how is the Putin regime and its imperialism today different from the older manifestations of tsarist, or even Soviet, imperialism?

First of all, today's Russian imperialism is anachronistic. Before, imperialism was more or less a natural thing which was universally accepted. Today, imperialism is anachronistic because the modern world is no longer divided into spheres of influence of individual empires, it is becoming more and more homogeneous, more and more globalized. Russia broke away from that general trend in this regard and is dragging us back to the 19th, 18th and even earlier centuries. This must change, because you cannot swim against the tide and get somewhere successfully. From a historical perspective, Lithuania probably has never had such a good time in its history as the last 20 years. This is especially true in terms of the political and economic opportunities that membership in the European Union and NATO has provided. However, the last few years have brought back some uncertainty. The brutal war waged by Russia represents a real threat that cannot be underestimated. What is being said is that it is also a war of values, a conflict between democracy and authoritarianism, which is based precisely on colonialism and imperialism. Britain was once colonialist and imperialist, now it is not anymore. Germany was once colonialist and imperialist, now it is not anymore. Though it is not proven, it is often said that Russia is fundamentally different from Britain and Germany. It's just that in Russia the process took longer. Partly because it inherited the Byzantine imperial tradition. Eventually that too may change. When one argues that Russia has never been a democracy, I say that is not true. Russia was democratic in 1917 – for eight months, from the February Revolution to the October Revolution. Russia was also democratic after the fall of the Soviet Union – and not for eight months, but for at least eight years. The next period may well be 80 years; and then it could be 800 years. But this requires effort and first of all it requires effort by the Russians themselves. I often recall Andrei Sakharov or Natalya Gorbanevskaya, and the other dissidents who were Russian and who spoke out not only against communism, but also against Russian imperialism. There were such people even in the 19th century, such as Alexander Herzen, who supported the 1863–64 uprising and even sent a ship with weapons to support the Lithuanian rebels. Unfortunately, the wind threw that ship ashore in the Curonian spit, the arms did not reach Lithuania to help.

Russia today is first and foremost an extremely centralized country despite the "federation" in its name. There is not a sin-

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gle state school in Russia where all subjects are taught in a language other than Russian. The situation of the cultures of the so-called "small nations" is particularly difficult. Russification has reached unprecedented heights not only through education but also through mass culture. What is more, Russification continues outside Russia wherever there are admirers of the "Russian world". We can even say that the Poles in Lithuania, for example, remain rather on the orbit of Russian, not Polish, mass culture. Is the process of decolonization in Russia, whose future at these moments is extremely vague and difficult to predict, possible in your opinion? What should it look like?

In terms of language and Russification, Putin's Russia is even worse than the Soviet Union. In Soviet times, there were schools of many languages. But the Russian Empire is permanently crumbling. This process started in 1917, when Poland, Finland and the Baltic states broke away from the empire. This was continued under Mikhail Gorbachev, when the empire continued to collapse, the Caucasian republics broke away, the Baltic republics regained their independence and the Central Asian republics became independent. I believe that the time will come when the Buryats, the Yakuts, the Tatars, the Bashkirs and many other peoples will have far greater sovereignty than they have ever had. That is certainly the next stage that will come, I am sure of that. How it will happen and by what means is difficult to say, but it will happen. As for the Poles in Lithuania being influenced by the Russian culture, Putin is indeed trying very hard to make sure that this is the case. But perhaps not always successfully. I think that the Poles in Lithuania are, however, also influenced by present-day Poland, which is strictly anti-Putin and, so to speak, its influence on the Poles in Vilnius is, I think, at least as great as Putin's. And it is our duty as Lithuanians to make sure that it is Warsaw's influence that is stronger than Putin's influence.

How could this be achieved in your view? Does the end of a rather silly dispute over the spelling of surnames make any difference in this context?

In my opinion, the dispute over the spelling of surnames was stupid, and there was a malicious element, because it took advantage of Lithuanian prejudices and the narrow-mindedness of some of our figures, and was also influenced by Putin's propaganda. But the dispute ended well. I think that nothing terrible would have happened either if, in places where there are numerous Polish speakers, there had been place names in two languages. It is often said that there are no Poles there, just Polonized Lithuanians. This is not quite the case, because there are many Poles in Vilnius who are not of Lithuanian origin, just as there are many Poles who are definitely of Lithuanian origin, whose great-grandparents still spoke Lithuanian. But so, what? They are now speaking Polish and forcing them back into Lithuanian is a wrong, I would say imperialist, policy. It is a petty, little imperialism, which is no less disgusting

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than great-power imperialism. Those people should be left alone and they will inevitably learn the state language because it is difficult, if not impossible, to exist in Lithuania without the state language. In the public space, where Poles live, the Polish language has a right to exist, just as the Lithuanian language exists in the Sejny region (in northern Poland), and nothing terrible is happening there. Concessions are sometimes more helpful than the introduction of a so-called strict statehood.

You have spent most of your life in the Cold War period. Would you agree with those who call what is happening now a "new Cold War"?

Yes, and I would dare say it is even worse. Much worse. During the Cold War there were still some rules. The Soviets were more cautious and there was some kind of contact, at least towards the end, between the Soviets and the West, which closed the door to major threats, especially nuclear war. Now that contact is all but non-existent. Putin is worse than Brezhnev. He may not be as bad as Stalin, because he has not imprisoned millions, not yet, but he is clearly going in the direction not of Nikita Khrushchev, not of Leonid Brezhnev, but of Joseph Stalin. So, yes, we do have a real, new Cold War, and it is much worse than the one that I remember. EE

Tomas Venclova is a Lithuanian philosopher, writer, poet and translator. During the Soviet times he was a dissident known for his advocacy for human rights. He was a co-founder of the Lithuanian Helsinki Group.

Nikodem Szczygłowski is a reporter, a writer and a translator from Lithuanian and Slovenian. He is a frequent contributor with *New Eastern Europe* as well as other media outlets.

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Is Ukraine multicultural or just Ukrainian with influences from other cultures?

ROMAN KABACHIY

The ability of Ukrainians to embrace their country's diversity not only enriches their own understanding of the country but also allows them to showcase this richness to future visitors. As a nation that was itself historically subordinated to others, Ukrainians tend to be more empathetic and do not treat their own minorities with an imperialistic mindset.

Ukraine, as one of the republics of the former Soviet Union, inherited from it many stereotypical ideas that it has struggled with for decades. These include the idea that "more than 100 nationalities live on our territory," therefore meaning that the population is inherently tolerant of others and otherness. In the Soviet times, nations and ethnic groups were mixed. Initially this was done by harsh methods of deportations of entire nations, such as Chechens, Ingush, Crimean Tatars, Germans of the Northern Black Sea coast and Volga region, or Poles from the former Polish national region, etc.

After Stalin's death in 1953, such methods were eliminated but the mixing continued – in a more "humane" way – such as sending people to work in other republics after graduation on the false grounds that "there are no jobs here." Indeed, Ukrainians and Belarusians thus turned into instruments of Russification in the

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Asian, Baltic and Caucasus republics, while the Russified peoples of the Russian Federation were sent to Ukraine and Belarus, creating the myth of the mentioned "100 nations". Why was it a myth? According to the 1989 census, after the Romanians, who made up 1.3 per cent of the population of the Ukrainian SSR, "all other minorities" had a smaller presence in the country. Representatives of nine nations (if you combine Romanians and Moldovans into one whole, then eight) subsequently made up a rather small amount of the population of Ukraine.

Erasing roots

When the Soviet Union collapsed, adherents of the myth of the "100 peoples" remained among those who did not accept the need to learn a new state language, which became Ukrainian. Since the days of the USSR the Russian language was imposed as the only language, many representatives of national minorities in Ukraine lost their own languages and ended up speaking just Russian. Thus, new generations of Ukrainian Greeks, Bulgarians, Gagauz or Jews grew up as Russian speaking. They were often critical of efforts to make them learn Ukrainian, as they still saw it as a language lacking in prestige – one that had belonged to a minority but had "suddenly" become the majority language. They clung to the myth of the "100 peoples", which not only served as a shield against the new reality but also as an excuse to avoid learning the language of the state's titular people. Why did this happen?

Let us go back to the Soviet era. In the 1920s, the entire Soviet Union pursued a policy of so-called "*korenizatsiya*" (the policy of "indigenization"), in which not only representatives of the titular nations of the republics were given the right to develop their own national cultures (in Ukraine this process was known as "Ukrainization") but also minorities living in compact communities. National regions and national village councils were created as a result. However, ethnic-based oppression began already in the 1930s. The first people who suffered on this basis were Ukrainian Poles. First in 1933–35, the case of the "Polish Military Organization" was conducted, and in 1937–1938 the "Polish operation of the NKVD" was carried out – the victims of which were 111,000 Soviet Poles. From December 15th 1937 until mid-March 1938 the "Greek operation of the NKVD" unfolded, affecting almost all Greek families in the national republics. In Ukraine repressions occurred primarily in the Azov region, where the Greeks had resettled in the 18th century from Crimea. In the summer of 1941, after Hitler's attack on

> When Ukraine gained its independence in 1991, one of the state's primary tasks was to restore the rights of Ukrainian culture.

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the USSR, Germans living in the Northern Black Sea steppes were deported to the deep regions of the USSR (primarily to Kazakhstan). In the late 1940s, a massive antisemitic campaign began.

Thus, many nations tried to erase their own roots. They changed their names, did not accustom their children to religious practices, and assimilated into the dominant culture, which was not the culture of the Ukrainian, but of the Russian nation. The Russian language began to prevail even in the cities of western Ukraine – Chernivtsi, Lviv or Uzhhorod.

Therefore, when Ukraine gained its long-sought independence in 1991, one of the state's primary tasks was to restore the rights of Ukrainian culture. This included aligning the number of Ukrainian-language schools with the proportion of Ukrainians in each settlement. Schools for national minorities remained where they existed during the Soviet era, primarily for Hungarians and Romanians. New schools for national minorities were created very slowly. At the time of the occupation of Crimea in 2014, when about 250,000 Crimean Tatars lived there, there were only 12 schools teaching in the Crimean Tatar language.

Interest in the culture of national minorities began to grow once the rights of Ukrainian culture had been firmly established and reached a point of no return. By then, comparing the status of the Ukrainian language in Ukraine to that of the Belarusian language in Belarus was no longer accurate, as Ukrainian had become dominant in public spaces, media and social networks. Following the victory of the Revolution of Dignity, Ukrainians started to take a greater interest in the diverse cultures of national communities and minorities. However, a major challenge arose in 2014, when Ukraine's largest indigenous group, the Crimean Tatars, came under Russian occupation, along with some of the Azov Greeks. This situation worsened in 2022, as most of their settlements also fell under occupation.

Our others

Between 2014 and 2022, certain changes indicated that Ukrainians were becoming willing to abandon the Soviet myth of "100 nationalities". Instead of clinging to this outdated concept, they began to recognize the rich and valuable contributions of the communities that had lived on Ukrainian land for centuries. The first signs of this growing interest appeared with Olesya Yaremchuk's book of essays, *Our Others* (first edition, 2018). The author explored topics that were both easily visible – such as visiting the Poles of the Zhytomyr region in Dovbysh, the former "capital" of their ethnic community, as well as the Hungarians of Transcarpathia and the Romanians of Bukovina – and those that required deeper investigation.

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She sought out the last Jewish woman in Brody, a city where Jews made up 90 per cent of the population before the Second World War; the last Armenian women in Kuty in the Hutsul region; and the last Swedes in Zmiivka, the only Swedish colony in southern Ukraine, located near the Kakhovka reservoir.

Yaremchuk also documented the unique *Volokh* (or "white Gypsy") community in Transcarpathia, known for their traditional craft of wooden spoon making. She explored the story of the Meskhetian Turks, a small group deported from the Georgian borderlands to Central Asia under Stalin. In the late 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev allowed them to return – not to Georgia, but to the European part of Russia and Ukraine. Additionally, she visited Hrushvitsa, a village in the Rivne region that was home to Czechs before the Second World War and where, in 1947, southern Lemkos from Slovakia were resettled.

Alongside Yaremchuk's work, the team from the online platform *Ukrainer* began its expeditions to national communities. This is a unique volunteer group that describes the everyday life of individual groups, subregions and professional communities. From 2022 they were among the first to visit the territories liberated from the Russian occupation. The expeditions to the national communities resulted in both video and text materials which were included under a common cover in the book *Who Are We? National Communities and Indigenous Peoples of Ukraine* (in which the author of this text was honoured to be a consultant). The 2021 edition contains more than 30 essays, including "new" communities such as Cubans, Nigerians, Vietnamese, Koreans, Syrians and Indians.

The *Ukrainer* team went beyond the framework established by the law "On Indigenous Peoples of Ukraine", which defines only three such peoples – Crimean Tatars, Karaites and Krymchaks (all of them were formed in Crimea) – adding Ukrainians to the list and presenting them in three essays about Ukrainian highlanders – Hutsuls, Boykos and Lemkos. Representatives of the Azov Greeks – the Urums and Rumeians, who were also largely based in Crimea – as well as the Gagauz have legal claims. However, this last group has been denied the right to be indigenous people of Ukraine on the grounds that Moldova has an autonomous region where they reside – Gagauzia.

What Ukraine means?

Bogdan Logvynenko, founder of *Ukrainer*, and Yevhenia Sapozhnykova, its editor-in-chief, described how *Ukrainer*'s reports on national minorities came about during a discussion on the return of diversity on October 8th 2023. Logvynenko said that when they started filming minorities in 2016, some argued that this term

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The Swedish Lutheran Church in Zmiivka, a historical Swedish colony in southern Ukraine, located near the Kakhovka reservoir.

made them feel uneasy: "We preferred the term national communities and it was then picked up by other media." By the way, when Ukraine ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, these included 13 languages: Belarusian, Bulgarian, Gagauz, Greek (Malas meaning modern Greek, not Urumian and Rumaic), Jewish (without clarification whether this means Yiddish or Hebrew), Crimean Tatar, Moldovan, German, Polish, Russian, Romanian, Slovak and Hungarian. Now the Russian language has been removed from the list.

Returning to the work of *Ukrainer* on representatives of national communities, Sapozhnikova emphasized that they were interested in "what is dear to them, what they are trying to preserve – what artefacts as a tradition makes them remember who they are." She noted that many of these people had already faced threats to their memory and culture, preserving their heritage within families and small local communities. For example, during their deportation, the Crimean Tatars could take only fragments of their material culture with them. Now, under Russian occupation, they are experiencing another period of traumatization. Some Crimean Tatar activists have once again been forced to flee their homes, relocating to Kyiv-controlled territories – often without even being able to take family photos with them.

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Logvynenko emphasized that Ukrainian minorities and national communities feel more protected in Ukraine than in the Russian Federation: "Imagine that we recorded the history of the de-occupation of the Greek village in the south, in which Bulgarians from the Bolhrad region in Bessarabia participated: Ukrainian Bulgarians de-occupy the Ukrainian Greek settlement on the border of the Donetsk region and Azov coast. They are all volunteers. While Russia is using this war as another act of genocide against its own national minorities." And Sapozhnikova recalled that at the end of each interview they asked what Ukraine is for them? For example, many Gagauz said that they live better in Ukraine than their counterparts in Moldovan Gagauzia.

Naming and renaming

The process of growing interest in the national communities in Ukraine goes hand in hand with the process of decolonization, proclaimed by a separate law in 2023. For what reason was this law created? This move is intended to return to the diversity seen in historical place names that prevailed before several waves of Soviet renaming. In 1944, for example, after the expulsion of the Nazis from the Ukrainian SSR, the Soviet government removed almost all toponyms which would indicate the existence of any national minorities prior, such as Jews, Germans, Czechs, Nogais and other Turkic-speaking peoples, Poles (including the fact that Yanivka was renamed Ivanivka, and Yuzivka as Yosypivka), etc.

The problem with this new law is that it requires the creation or restoration of a historical name only if the current name glorifies Russian or Soviet imperialism, or is in the Russian language. For example, a Gagauz village near the city of Bolhrad was called Kurchia before 1944, and after 1944 it was called Vynohradivka (from the Ukrainian word for vine), a "fruit" village. So that the Bolhrad municipal council could return to using its historical name, it used the precedent that after the enlargement of the district there were three villages with the name Vynohradivka. Yet, the village in question has not yet been officially renamed because many people who prefer the Soviet name in this village have filed two lawsuits in court regarding its renaming, and the case is stuck there. However, the very realization by representatives of the authorities and society of the importance of returning diversity to the map of Ukraine is rather demonstrative.

Then also comes the realization that Ukrainian minorities may be interested not only in Ukrainians but also in the world. The Albanian village of Karakurt in the same Bolhrad region was founded in 1811 by immigrants from Dobruja, to which they, in turn, came from the south of Albania. It was in the aforementioned Zmi-

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ivka that the Swedes lived, speaking a dialect from the island of Dage in the Baltic Sea, which now belongs to Estonia. It is in Crimea that there is a Roma Chengine people, who preserved the musical culture for the Crimean Tatars. The Russian Lipovan Old Believers built the entire town of Vylkovo on the Ukrainian Danube delta, literally "moulding" it from river silt. They planted vineyards there and dug channels between the islands. This turned the town into a kind of Venice. It is in the Ukrainian village of Sinne (now Sadove) near Rivne that Anna Walentynowicz, the mother of the Polish group Solidarity, was born into a Ukrainian Protestant family.

The ability of Ukrainians to embrace their country's diversity not only enriches their own understanding but also allows them to showcase this richness to future visitors. Since the full-scale war has restricted Ukrainian men from leaving the country, domestic tourism has grown, often centred around local traditions, national identity and regional cuisine. As a nation that was itself historically subordinated to others, Ukrainians tend to be more empathetic and do not treat their own minorities with an imperialistic mindset. However, for many years after 1991, it was not the Ukrainian people but rather the authorities who viewed minorities as a potential threat. As a result, they failed to fully acknowledge and support these communities – most notably, the Crimean Tatars.

Speaking at the October 2023 discussion, the historian Martin-Olexandr Kyslyi, an expert on Crimea and the Crimean Tatars, pointed out that western audiences often fail to understand why Crimea should be a part of Ukraine, believing instead that it has "always been Russian". However, Kyslyi argued that recognizing the history of the Crimean Tatars before 1783 can help connect Crimea's past with that of mainland Ukraine and inspire hope for its liberation. He emphasized that Ukraine's response to supporting the Crimean Tatars should be to grant them autonomy. "The first thing we need to do is listen to those in the occupied territories and understand the perspectives of national minorities. Ukrainians must treat the Crimean Tatars as they themselves would want to be treated. The feeling of lacking political agency is deeply painful," Kyslyi explained.

Sapozhnikova, the editor in chief of *Ukrainer*, highlighted an important point that serves as a fitting conclusion to this discussion: the very act of discussing regional diversity and minority communities distances Ukraine from the legacy of empire. Ukraine's tolerance toward its minorities – despite its status as the core nation in building the Ukrainian state – reinforces its European character and affirms its commitment to a European future. EE

Roman Kabachiy is a historian and writer. He is a senior research associate at the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War.

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A pagan canary in a Catholic coal mine

MICHAEL STRMISKA

All across Eastern Europe a decline in membership in long-established religions is being counterbalanced by rising interest in various alternative forms of religion and spirituality. The case and struggles of Romuva, a neo-pagan religious movement that claims that its traditions go back to the ancient period before the Christian conversion of Lithuania, illustrate the tensions between heritage, identity and modern religious norms.

In discussions on the development of democracy in post-Soviet societies in Eastern Europe, the role of religion is not often accorded great importance by political scientists. Yet, a more sociological perspective reveals that religion often serves as a driving factor in public sentiment, policy debates and political decisions. While the constitutions of Eastern European countries generally guarantee a generic freedom of religion, the question of how this freedom plays out for particular religious groups is far more complicated. Most societies usually contain a variety of religions, whose different sizes and different histories result in them having differing statuses in society. This involves widely varying degrees of privilege or vulnerability in relation to prevailing social attitudes approving or disapproving of particular religions, as well as government policies affecting the functioning of religious communities.

In the competitive conditions of modern democracy, governments and politicians often feel tempted or pressured to cater to the most popular or long-estab-

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lished religions, and to disfavour or discriminate against others. A recent case in Lithuania touching on these issues reached all the way to the European Court of Human Rights.

The Romuva movement

Lithuania is often described as a "Catholic country", but this is not a completely accurate description of a far more complex reality. While the Catholic Church certainly dominates the religious life of the country, there are other religions as well, from Eastern Orthodox, Uniate (Greek Catholic) and Lutheran Christians to small populations of Muslims, Mormons, Jews, Hare Krishna followers, Buddhists and others. It would be more accurate to characterize Lithuania as a Catholic-majority nation, with a variety of religious minorities.

One such minority is Romuva, a neo-pagan or modern pagan religious movement. It defines itself as the "ancient Baltic faith community" and is dedicated to reviving the pre-Christian spiritual and folkloric traditions of Lithuania for contemporary religious observance. Romuva can be considered either a very ancient or modern religion depending on how we assess its history and, perhaps more importantly, the claims that it makes about its history. Romuva claims that its traditions go back to the ancient period before the Christian conversion of Lithuania that commenced in 1387, when the formerly pagan rulers of Lithuania agreed to accept Catholicism as a condition of an alliance with the Catholic-majority kingdom of Poland.

The antiquity of myths, names of gods and other aspects of pre-Christian belief are encoded in Lithuanian folklore and archaeology, as well as chronicles of the medieval period. While there is room for debate as to how old this or that tradition or belief or practice is, comparative Indo-European linguistics have established parallels between Lithuanian and Indian languages such as Sanskrit. This provides the basis for assuming certain cultural commonalities as well, including those in the matter of religion and mythology. Simply put, there is some very old stuff that modern Lithuanian pagans claim as their religious basis. They have fashioned their modern religion around a heavy reliance on Lithuanian folklore, especially certain types of traditional folk songs with mythological allusions.

The current Romuva organization only came into existence in the 1960s, when it was first developed as a folkloric study association under the watchful eye of the Soviet communist authorities. One of Romuva's founding members was Jonas Trinkūnas (1939–2014), who gradually shifted Romuva's focus from collecting old folk songs to researching the elements of pre-Christian religion embedded in these songs and related traditions. He began to organize Romuva into a quasi-religious

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association and organized efforts to revive such pagan traditions as solstice celebrations. When the Soviet authorities caught onto what Trinkūnas and his associates were up to, the movement was suppressed in the early 1970s.

The movement was revived in the late 1980s under the more open conditions of *glasnost*, and was registered with the government in 1992 after Lithuania regained its independence from the Soviet Union. Since that time, Romuva has been a small but distinctive religious community in Lithuania, first under the leadership of Trinkūnas, and then, after his death in 2014, his wife Inija Trinkūnienė (b. 1951).

Authentic standard bearer of Lithuanian identity?

Because Romuva is dedicated to the preservation and performance of traditional Lithuanian folklore, it can declare itself a bastion of Lithuanian identity. At the same time, Romuva is also a religious association and so it can claim to represent the oldest form of Lithuanian religion. It therefore presents itself as all of the following: highly traditional, highly Lithuanian and highly religious. Trinkūnas was decorated with the medal of the Order of Gediminas by the President of Lithuania, Dalia Grybauskaitė, in 2013, in honour of his lifelong service as a guardian of Lithuanian folklore, tradition and identity.

Romuva's place in Lithuanian society seems secure enough, but it has faced continuing opposition from the Lithuanian Catholic Church. This might seem a bit silly when we consider the relative size and resources of the two religions. According to the most recent census figures from 2011 and 2021, nearly 75 per cent of the Lithuanian population belong to the Catholic church, with some two million Roman Catholics reported in 2021. A mere 3,917 Lithuanians, less than one per cent of the population, identified themselves as members of Romuva in the 2021 census. The relative size of the two religious communities suggests an elephant standing next to a mouse. One might think that the huge Catholic Church would not be worried about such a tiny competitor, but it is. This is because Romuva poses a direct challenge to the Catholic narrative that celebrates the Church as the foundation of Lithuanian national identity.

With its claim to represent the revival and continuation of native religious traditions linked to ancient Indo-European traditions that predate the arrival of Christianity to the Baltic region in the Middle Ages, Romuva endeavours to present itself – not the Church – as the authentic standard bearer of Lithuanian national identity. From the pagans' point of view, Roman Catholicism is a "Johnny Come Lately" foreign religion that Lithuanian rulers only agreed to take up in the late 14th century as a condition of a grand alliance with the Catholic kingdom of Poland. This

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alliance enabled the two states to join their military forces to successfully defeat the aggressively conquering and colonizing Teutonic Knights, who were menacing both Lithuania and Poland in this period.

This is not, to say the least, the version of Lithuanian history favoured by the Catholic authorities. From the Catholic perspective, Lithuania was a backward land of primitive tribes who only made their first steps on the road to western civilization after coming under the tutelage of the "One True Faith". And indeed, if one strolls through the streets of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, one cannot fail to be impressed by the many beautiful churches and cathedrals that adorn the narrow streets of the Old Town district. There are a range of architectural styles, from the Gothic to the Renaissance to the Baroque and the Neo-Classical, on display in this area. The oldest educational institution, Vilnius University, is indeed of Catholic vintage, having been first established as a Jesuit college in the year 1579. Catholicism is also revered for serving as a bastion of resistance to Russian domination during the tsarist era and to communist rule during the Soviet era. This is the Catholic claim on Lithuanian patriotism, and it stands on solid foundations – but it is just as much a highly selective version of Lithuanian history than the pagan version.

Romuva endeavours to present itself as the authentic standard bearer of Lithuanian national identity.

Missing from the Catholic account is the long history of religious diversity in Lithuania. This involves not only pagan elements, which lived on in folkloric form even after Catholicism became dominant, but the Jews, Karaites and Muslim Tatars that became established in Lithuania from the 15th century if not earlier, as well as the Orthodox, Uniate and Lutheran denominations. More recently arrived eastern religions and assorted forms of New Age spirituality have further expanded the menu of religious options.

However, of all the different religions existing in Lithuania today, there are only two that can make a credible claim to represent Lithuanian national identity: Romuva, which presents itself as the bearer of ancient, indigenous pre-Christian Lithuanian traditions long suppressed by Christian authorities, and the Catholic Church, which sees itself as the builder and saviour of the Lithuanian nation, not an oppressor but a liberator. The two religions therefore offer not only competing visions of Lithuanian history but competing versions of religious nationalism. Each one claims to speak for the "true, authentic" Lithuanian nation. From the Catholic point of view, this makes Lithuanian paganism a serious threat and helps explain the Church's recent intervention in parliamentary proceedings involving Romuva. This intervention raises serious issues about church-state relations and the treatment of minority religions.

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Struggle for state recognition

Lithuania, like other Eastern European countries, has a legal structure regarding religion that is sometimes called "managed pluralism". This involves different levels of state recognition for religious communities, with higher levels of recognition providing the possibility of state funding and other privileges. The minimal level of recognition is that of simple registration with the government as a legal entity. Such "registered religions" can legally gather for religious activities but receive no state support and enjoy no further privileges. Religions recognized as "non-traditional religious communities" receive some state funding, such as contributions to health insurance and pension programmes for clergy, and are permitted to perform legally binding marriages, provide religious instructions in public schools, and to broadcast religious services on public media.

Religions accorded the highest level of recognition as "traditional religious communities" are allowed to establish private or public-private hybrid schools, with the support of state funding, and to send chaplains to serve in hospitals, prisons and the military. Traditional religions are therefore entitled a much higher level of representation in different sectors of society, which translates into greater social and political influence. Other privileges include exemption from certain taxes for traditional religions' clergy and religious workers, including members of monastic orders. High officials are also provided with diplomatic passports alongside state funding for the upkeep of sacred buildings. Such privileges add greatly to the power and wealth of traditional religions in Lithuania, above all the Catholic Church.

Since first registering as a legal entity in 1992, Romuva has sought recognition as a "non-traditional" religious community, which would allow it to receive state funding, provide religious instruction in schools, and perform legally binding marriages. However, the law was changed in 1997 such that "registered" religions had to be in existence for 25 years before they could apply for higher status.

> Traditional religions are entitled a high level of representation in society, which translates into greater social and political influence.

When those 25 years elapsed in 2017, Romuva applied again. The Lithuanian justice ministry commissioned a study by academic scholars and scientists to assess Romuva's validity as a religious community and its role in Lithuanian society. The academics issued a report supporting Romuva's validity as a religion, its positive role in society, and its application for higher status. The ministry conducted its own study, which likewise expressed a favourable opinion of Romuva. The ministry therefore recommended that Romuva's higher status be approved. The matter headed to the

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Seimas, the Lithuanian parliament, for a vote in June 2019. With Romuva having won the support of academic experts and government officials, it seemed likely that the religious movement's application for higher status would be accepted. But then the Church intervened.

On the very eve of the vote, the Lithuanian Bishops' Conference, an important organ of Catholic authority in Lithuania, headed by Archbishop Gintaras Grušas, sent a letter to members of the Seimas, picking apart various points in the petition to argue that Romuva was not a legitimate religion and urging them to reject its application. The next day, that is exactly what happened. It seems more probable than not that this letter had a significant effect on the outcome, as the application had appeared to be on track for Seimas approval up to the moment when the bishops' letter arrived. It seemed to many that one religion, the Catholic Church, was effectively exercising a veto over the status of another, which was Romuva.

Long struggle

Romuva appealed to the European Court of Human Rights for redress, and in June 2021 the court ruled in Romuva's favour, declaring, "The Court found … that the state authorities had not provided a reasonable and objective justification for treating the applicant association differently from other religious associations that had been in a relevantly similar situation … Members of the Seimas had not remained neutral and impartial in exercising their regulatory powers." This ruling by the ECHR had no immediate effect on the situation in Lithuania. Romuva's application for higher legal status again came up for a vote in the Seimas in October of 2022 and was once again defeated.

The most creative argument put forward by opponents in the Seimas may have been that of the representative Vilija Aleknaitė-Abramikienė. She expressed the concern that Romuva might be a fifth column of support for Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine. Her logic rested upon a book written in 1995 by Alexander Dugin, the right-wing Russian ideologue sometimes referred to as "Putin's brain", in which Dugin had described the Lithuanian Catholic Church as a particularly problematic adversary of the former Soviet regime. Since Romuva is also known as an opponent of the Catholic Church, Romuva must therefore be working to help Putin conquer Lithuania today, because why else would anyone oppose or be critical of the Catholic Church?

This argument conflated the Lithuanian nation with the Catholic Church and Lithuanian paganism with Soviet oppression and Russian imperialism, implying that enemies of the Church are in fact enemies of the state. Lithuanian pagans were

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thereby defined as unpatriotic, not because they oppose Lithuania, but because they oppose the Catholic Church. This argument also implied that that the rulings and polices of European Union bodies could be disregarded if they conflicted with the wishes of the Lithuanian Catholic Church.

Romuva's application for higher level state recognition was again revisited in the Seimas in 2023 and again voted down. However, in autumn of the following year, after elections changed the composition of the Seimas, it was approved on December 12th, 2024. This was a victory not only for Romuva, but for other minority religions and the broader principle of respect for religious diversity in Lithuania as well. It may also be a step toward a greater appreciation of social diversity in general.

The torturous road that Romuva had to travel to achieve its victory over and against the roadblocks put up by the Lithuanian Catholic Church illustrates the immense, and arguably excessive, influence of the Church over government and parliamentary matters, an influence that is not limited to blocking other religions from obtaining higher legal status. Efforts to guarantee marital rights for the LGBTQ+ population and to secure parliamentary approval of the Istanbul Convention providing women with protection from domestic violence have also faced Church opposition and fallen short in the Seimas.

It can be argued that such political projects were doomed to failure anyway regardless of any opposition by the Catholic Church, owing to the general conservatism of the Lithuanian populace, but this assumes that the two are unrelated. When we consider the privileged position of the Church in many areas of public life, from schools to the military, it becomes evident that the Catholic Church is provided with ample opportunity to influence the society without challenge from dissenting voices or alternative perspectives. It is not irrelevant to note that Lithuanian news media often report the position of the Church on issues facing the Seimas, as if the Catholic Church were a political party with its own voting bloc in the parliament. This is perhaps not very far from the actual reality.

The path forward?

If it is agreed that Lithuanian's church-state relationship, with massive Catholic influence underwritten by state support, is suboptimal for a modern, democratic and pluralistic society, the question then arises as to what kinds of changes might be desirable. While some might seek to simply cut back the Catholic Church's range of state support and privileges, this seemingly rational solution is unlikely to find support owing to the Church's powerful position in society. A different and possibly more feasible way of counteracting excessive influence by one religious de-

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nomination, in this case the Lithuanian Catholic Church, would be to provide other religious communities with greater representation in the public square in such areas as education, the military and news media. This would allow for the viewpoints of multiple religious communities to enter into public and political discussion, so that when an issue like gay marriage or violence against women is raised, it would not be anything strange for politicians and the news media to not only pay attention to the Catholic position, as in the past, but to also ask what religious minorities like Jews or Buddhists or Muslims think, in order to arrive at a more inclusive understanding that enables the members of all of the country's different faith communities to feel valued and heard. The new level of state recognition for the Romuva religious minority may be a step in this direction and may have implications outside the borders of Lithuania.

All across Eastern Europe, a decline in membership in long-established religions is being counterbalanced by rising interest in various alternative forms of religion and spirituality, from Europeanized versions of Buddhism to native forms of Paganism, and these small but growing religious communities are likely to assume an ever-greater role in public life. The ascendance of the hyper-Catholic Law and Justice (PiS) party to a position of political supremacy in Poland may have been felt by some to be a fantastic victory for the Catholic cause in Poland, but it actually resulted in a decline in Catholic affiliation among the Polish populace during the years that PiS held power. It would seem that when a religion's political and social influence is seen as going too far, it may trigger an anti-religious backlash.

A decline in membership in long-established religions is being counterbalanced by rising interest in various alternative forms of religion.

Czechia provides another instructive example. In recent years, the Czech nation has often been touted as the most non-religious or even atheistic of Eastern European societies, though Estonia appears to be competing in this regard. In one recent opinion poll concerning Czech religious preferences, a greater number of respondents chose the mock-religion of "Jediism", inspired by the Star Wars franchise, over the Catholic Church. However, if we go a few centuries back in time, we find that there was once a time of intense Czech religious fervour in the form of the neo-Protestant Hussite movement. This group arose as an anti-Catholic sect after the burning at the stake of the dissident Czech priest Jan Hus in 1415. At the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620, Habsburg imperial forces decisively routed the final offshoot of the Hussite movement and imposed a harsh new social order built around the Catholic Counter-Reformation. Despite their ultimate failure, the Hussites remain

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patriotic heroes in Czech national consciousness. The memory of the brutal suppression of the Hussites followed by the imposition of the very religion that the Hussites had given their lives to oppose may be among the factors causing many Czechs to develop a sceptical, even cynical, view of religion, and to show increasing interest in non-traditional and alternative forms of religion and spirituality.

It should also be noted that the right-leaning, illiberal politics of Viktor Orbán in Hungary contain a substantial religious component, with much beating of the chest about Hungary as the "protector of Christianity" against the atheistic forces of the European Union. While this may seem like mere rhetoric designed to scoop up conservative Christian votes, it plays an important role in his friendly relations with Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, who make similar claims about saving Christian Europe from progressive politicians and activists. From these examples, we can see that the religious picture in Eastern Europe is growing more complicated, is likely to have increasing impact on the social and political evolution of the region and definitely bears watching. EE

Michael Strmiska is a professor of world history at SUNY-Orange (Orange County Community College), Middletown, New York, USA.

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Oriental or local?

Poland's Tatar community

MICHAŁ ŁYSZCZARZ

The Tatars of Poland remain one of the country's most enduring ethnic minorities. Arriving in the area as early as the 14th century, this group has maintained its own distinctiveness while adapting to many wider Polish customs. This process has involved as much positive as negative developments.

Had you, 30 or 40 years ago, visited Kruszyniany, a village near the Belarusian border that is home to one of the two traditional Tatar settlements in Poland, you would have encountered the tranquil rhythm of community life centred around *bayrams* (a Turkic word for festivals or celebrations). In Muslim tradition, religious holidays are moments for families to gather in prayer at a mosque or a cemetery (*mizar*). To join their relatives in these celebrations, descendants of Tatars from all around Poland would flock to Kruszyniany. However, once the festivities were over, only a few Tatar families stayed in the village, enjoying its tranquillity and the slow pace of life. These families were the descendants of Samuel Krzeczowski, a Tatar commander whom the Polish king, Jan III Sobieski, granted landed estates in 1679. Despite this heritage, the Tatars remained a minority even in their own village, where they lived among their Polish and Belarusian neighbours.

Paradoxically, it was the communist Polish state that created the conditions that allowed the Tatar community to become self-sufficient. Even with a small population, Kruszyniany thus had its own primary school, a library, a post office and a co-operative shop. There was also a news agent, a café at the farmer's club, and a local bar called the Golden Horde. Additionally, there was a milk plant and a fire station.

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Traditions which have survived

Today there are no physical traces of these places. They exist only in the memory of the village's oldest residents. The community that lived off agricultural work is also no longer there; it ended with the post-communist transformation. The 1990s brought a crisis and pushed many young people out of Kruszyniany, where they no longer saw opportunities for themselves. It seemed that the village, affected by hard times, would follow other villages of this kind. Yet, things turned out differently. Now connected by a decent road with the towns of Krynki and Bobrowniki, Kruszyniany has become what we call a summer resort or a weekend getaway. Many of its old buildings have now been replaced with new ones, with the largest one highlighting the Tatar character of the locality. In 2015 the site of the former parish house was used for the construction of a large Centre for Muslim Education and Culture of the Polish Tatars. It was opened thanks to the resources gathered by the local religious Muslim community. The space of the centre was managed alongside a nearby agro-tourism farm, Tatar Yurt, which had been burned to the ground in 2018.

Tatar Yurt had not been an ordinary farmhouse but a landmark. In 2010 it was visited by King Charles III – then the Prince of Wales – who came here to learn about the Tatar community and its culinary traditions. It is thanks to the farm's founder, Dżenneta Bogdanowicz, that Kruszyniany has become widely known and its Tatar culinary traditions have gained protection. For example, in 2009, a traditional meat pie, *pierekaczewnik*, was included in the EU's Guaranteed Traditional Specialty scheme. It also received the status of one of the main tourist products in the region. This recognition and popularity would not have been possible had Tatar Yurt not been promoting the traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation. Luckily for this community, some of the customs, which were very little known 30 years ago and even threatened with disappearance under the pressure of modernity, have survived. For this and other reasons, Tatar Yurt became an inspiration to other Tatars in Poland, who live in Białystok, Bohoniki, Supraśl and Suwałki.

From the Golden Horde to the Grand Duchy

Tatars are one of the smallest ethnic communities in Poland. For centuries they were settled in what was called Poland's "Eastern Borderlands" (*Kresy*). Their origins yet go back further in history. Namely, they are the descendants of the steppe peoples who joined the state structures that had emerged upon the disintegration

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of the Golden Horde. These were members of noble families who fell into disgrace and, as a result of losing the struggle for power, were forced to leave the khanates, joined by their supporters. The Tatars who settled in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as early as in the 14th century were thus refugees. In today's terms we can say that they were even political refugees.

The Tatars received assistance from the Grand Duke of Lithuania Gediminas and his successors, who allowed them to construct their military settlements around Trakai, a political and administrative centre of the Duchy. As experienced soldiers, Tatars supported Lithuanians in battles against the Teutonic Order and Moscow. This military cooperation went so well that soon more Tatar colonies were established in the Vilnius region and later in the Grodno and Navahrudak regions, which belong to today's Belarus. By choosing a sedentary lifestyle, Tatars started to adopt new ways of farming. Among other things, they successfully tended gardens and orchards, bred horses and engaged in wagon-making and tanning. However, their main occupation – certainly the one most cherished in the community's memory – remained military service. Tatars earned esteem in light cavalry while their units became known as lancer troops, thus alluding to the name of one of their commanders. Several centuries of military assistance and sacrifice on the battlefield served as the basis for building their own ethnic ideology. Cultivating an ethos of chivalry, Tatars emphasized their deep patriotism, ties to Poland (which they treated as their homeland), and a sense of community with the Polish nobility.

As experienced soldiers, Tatars supported Lithuanians in battles against the Teutonic Order and Moscow.

Several hundred years of life in these multicultural borderlands allowed Tatars to become well integrated with other residents of this area. At the same time, thanks to the high social status that they had enjoyed due to their military achievements, Tatars managed to maintain their identity. In Lithuania, where they had arrived as free people, they were endowed with land and possessed family marks (*tamgi*), which later often became their noble coats of arms. As members of the nobility, Tatars enjoyed all the personal, political and economic rights and freedoms they were entitled to in line with their status. These included profit from serfdom for those who owned farms. They also enjoyed the freedom of religion and could build their own religious buildings. The cultivation of the Muslim faith has played an important role in maintaining their community's identity. However, as non-Christians, Tatars could not participate in royal elections.

In the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Muslim mosques were a permanent feature of the north-eastern landscape. Unfortunately, many of these religious buildings did not survive the bloody 20th century, with its two world wars and Sovi-

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et rule. In the Polish-Lithuanian state, which was known for its tolerance, the followers of Islam were disturbed only by some minor incidents. The most serious among them were the destructions of mosques in Trakai and Solkienniki, which took place in the early 17th century. With the exception of a few clashes, however, religious freedoms were not overly threatened. It was mainly during the time of the Counter-Reformation and the wars with Ottoman Turkey when Islamophobic rhetoric against the Tatars entered public debate.

Polish patriots

Poland's partitions and the collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which took place in the 18th century, put these Tatar communities under tsarist rule. Having recognized their military traditions, the Russians encouraged Tatars to take up service in their army, offering them promotion even to the rank of general. The Russians hoped that by including Tatars in their imperial elite they would quickly become subject to Russification. This, in turn, would cut them off from their pro-Polish patriotic tendencies. This did not take place. For the most part, Tatars treated service in the tsarist army as a well-paid contract that ensured them a peaceful life. They might have declared their loyalty to the tsar, which is evidenced by the Cyrillic-language inscriptions on some Tatar tombstones, but they continued to bring up the next generations in their family traditions, just as they had done before. In the 19th century, when the category of nation was constituted in Europe, Tatars, and especially those of the highest class (military officers, officials, and the Tatar intelligentsia who resided mostly in Vilnius), unequivocally favoured Polishness, supporting both the 1830 and 1863 uprisings.

During the short interwar period of Poland's Second Republic, Tatars nurtured Polishness in a particular way. Through their patriotic attitude and loyalty to the Polish state, as well as the memory of their military involvement in the defence of the republic, they gained far-reaching freedom of religious worship and the state's support for their social and cultural activities. This allowed them to build solid institutional foundations for their religious and identity-building activities. These included the Muslim Religious Union in the Republic, as well as the Cultural and Educational Union of the Tatars of the Republic. The second group operates until this day. As compared to other ethnic groups, Tatars received exceptional treatment from the Polish state authorities. This is mainly thanks to the support they had offered to Józef Piłsudski. First, they assisted Piłsudski in incorporating the Vilnius region into Poland. Following this, they also supported his political camp after the May coup d'etat in 1926.

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A Tatar tombstone with Cyrillic inscription in Kruszyniany.

Photo: Michał Łyszczarz

The traditional Tatar wooden mosque in Kruszyniany Poland.

Photo: Avillfoto / Shutterstock

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Entrance to the temporary headquarters of the Tatar Yurt at the Center for Muslim Education and Culture of the Polish Tatars in Kruszyniany.

Photo: Michał Łyszczarz

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Gdańsk Tatars lay flowers at monument to the Tatar lancer on Polish Independence Day.

Photo: Michał Łyszczarz

A stone commemorating the Tatar settlement in Bohoniki.

Photo: Michał Łyszczarz

Tatars proved their Polish patriotism in early 1920, when the Tatar Uhlan Regiment (named after Colonel Mustafa Achmatowicz, a renowned 18th century Lithuanian Tatar cavalryman) fought against the Lithuanians near Vilnius and was involved in the war against the Bolsheviks. In 1936, the Polish Tatar community succeeded in establishing its own cavalry squadron within the 13th Vilnius Lancer Regiment. This unit had its own mace and badges decorated with a star and crescent. It took part in the September 1939 campaign. However, after an unsuccessful charge it was broken up near Tomaszów Lubelski and disbanded.

Consequences of the war

The Second World War marked a tragic turning point in the history of the Polish Tatars. As a result of the war's atrocities, many Tatar leaders perished. They were killed either by the Nazis or the Soviets. Among the fallen were well-known pre-war activists (the brothers Leon and Olgierd Nayman-Mirza Kryczyński and Ali Ismail Woronowicz) as well as those who due to their overt anti-communism and cooperation with the Nazis (among them Mufti Jakub Szynkiewicz and his nephew Edige Kyrymal-Szynkiewicz) could not return to Poland and were forced to live in exile. The war also brought annihilation to Tatar cultural heritage. Not only were the collections of the Tatar National Museum and the Tatar National Archive in Vilnius lost or destroyed as a result of war activities, but numerous private family heirlooms and monuments of religious writing also disappeared in the turmoil of war.

Among the consequences of the end of the Second World War were the changes in Poland's borders. The loss of the Eastern Borderlands meant that out of a group of approximately 6,000 Tatars, Poland, within its new borders, had from that moment on only one small community and two mosques (in Bohoniki and Kruszyniany). The repatriation campaign that was organized by the Polish authorities after the war involved resettling mainly the most patriotic part of the Tatar population who resided in Vilnius. In contrast, Tatars from the Novohrudok region, who lived mainly in the countryside and small towns, remained mostly outside the new Polish state's borders (in today's Belarus). Their departure was hampered by the attitude of the Soviet authorities, who often did not allow Tatars to leave the Soviet Union, questioning their Polishness. The much more traditional Tatars from Belarus were so strongly attached to their land that additional pressure from the authorities sufficiently discouraged them from leaving their small homeland.

Tatars who were relocated to Poland were settled in the western and northern lands that had been abandoned by Germans. As a result, the community, which be-

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fore had lived in dense clusters, was dispersed over a large area and started living with other repatriates. The largest group of Tatars settled in the Tri-city area, which includes Gdańsk, Gdynia and Sopot, as well as in Szczecin, Lubuskie Voivodeship and Lower Silesia. After the first political unrest in communist Poland, which took place in October 1956, as well as the so-called thaw that came as its result, Tatars from the so-called Recovered Territories started to move to the north-eastern region of Podlasie. They opted for this move mainly because of the sense of alienation they had experienced in their new surroundings and the desire they felt to strengthen contacts with their families in eastern Poland.

Stereotypes

Tatars' own perception of themselves and their community can be interpreted as idealized and positive. This image derives from the stereotyped presentation of elements of Tatar culture and history in Tatar poetry, and especially the collections of two prominent Tatar poets, Selim Khazbiyevich (Selim Chazbijewicz) and Musa Chachorovsky (Musa Czachorowski), which were published in the 1980s. The rise of the popularity of poetry among members of the Tatar community in Poland at that time was linked to the revival of ethnic identities that took place in this decade. In other words, the 1980s, which marked the declining moment of the Polish People's Republic, saw different ethnic groups return to social and cultural activities after years of stagnation and concealment.

Stereotypes about Tatars, which exist until today, did not necessarily derive from the history of their settlement in Poland.

Symbolic images and elements of Tatar culture were first and foremost used to bring back the mythologized memory of the shamanistic times of the Golden Horde (thus the archetype of the steppe, the residential yurt, fire and attachment to horses) or to highlight the continuity and tradition attributed to Tatar ethnicity. They have also pointed to Tatars' connection with the Polish state (e.g. lancer traditions, patriotism, common history and armed action) or their Muslim religion and its traditions.

Historically speaking, in Polish culture there was a completely different image of Tatars. Stereotypes about this ethnic group, which exist until today, did not necessarily derive from the history of their settlement in Poland. Instead, they focused on the invasions of the Mongol hordes, which started to take place in the 13th century, and the plundering expeditions that were organized by Crimean Tatars from the second half of the 15th century until the end of the 17th century.

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The memory of these events has proved to be permanent. As such, it has completely overshadowed, at least in common perceptions, the history of Tatar settlement or the merits of the lancer regiments. Instead, in the preserved historiographical and personal documents, which include chronicles, diaries and memoires, we can find such negative descriptions of Tatars as: "a horde", "a plague", and "a mob". At the same time, their oriental features were presented as "Asian". Tatars have also been referred to as "barbarians", "savages", "cruel people" and "plunderers". They have also been said to be "greedy", as well as a "sneaky and treacherous" people. Portrayed as culturally alien, they were called "raw meat connoisseurs", "cannibals", "blood drinkers", and "kumis lovers", who were "reeking of animals". Also seen as religiously alien, they were called "polygamists", "sorcerers", "messengers from hell", "pagans" or "circumcizers". However, even in texts where such negative terms have been used, there is visible admiration for the Tatars' military tactics and skills, which – especially in medieval times – provided an effective alternative to European military doctrine.

Followers of Islam

As followers of Islam, Tatars developed a model of religiosity that has allowed them to survive as a distinct community. This is all the more important to mention today, at a time of growing civilizational antagonism between western secularization and eastern fundamentalism, when there are tendencies to make simplistic judgements about Islam. Although the religion that was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad has a universal character, its global dissemination has resulted in significant modifications that were related to such factors as linguistic and national traditions, location, historical experience, adaptability to conditions of social change, or status within the social structure.

The Tatar religious model has adapted to the requirements of life in a non-Muslim socio-cultural setting.

Tatars are Sunnis. They adhere to the Hanafi school of Islam, which is the most liberal branch of Muslim jurisprudence. This explains the Turkish provenance of Islam, as well as the strong cultural links with the Turkic peoples. The Tatars' religiosity was undoubtedly influenced by their rather late Islamization. Specifically, it took place in the 14th century, just before Tatars had arrived in the lands of the Grand Duchy. It can also be explained by the peripheral location of their settlements that impeded contacts with the main Muslim schools. As a result, for a long time Tatars adhered to the pre-Islamic (shamanistic) traditions and their religion

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took on an unorthodox, even syncretic character. This can be seen in Tatar rituals, which display traces of both Sufi and Shiite as well as local Christian influences.

As a matter of fact, the Tatar model of religiosity has evolved over years, adapting to the requirements of life in a non-Muslim socio-cultural setting. Therefore, it has undergone significant self-restraint, which was necessary to minimize the risk of potential conflicts with neighbours. This could be seen in its selective approach to Islamic doctrine (the so-called pillars of faith) and the principles of religious law (*sharia*), which were difficult to implement for a minority operating in a non-Muslim society. Tatar folk religiosity also resembled some of the local practices with its emphasis on rituals, attachment to tradition and a close connection between the sphere of sacred and family life.

For the small community of followers of Islam in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, religious education was always a challenge. Imams who possessed the arcana of theological knowledge became leaders of the *jemiat* (religious community), as well as authorities on matters of morality. Their importance went far beyond the role ascribed to "guides in prayer", as it is known in Middle Eastern cultures.

Despite the difficulties of practicing Islam in a non-Muslim society, Tatars managed to develop their own traditions. This became their heritage that has been passed down in families from generation to generation. In this process, religious manuscripts, which acted as a treasury of ancient knowledge and material evidence of the continuity of traditions, were of the greatest importance. Today, unfortunately, Tatar *khamsils* (prayer books), *kitabs* (theological codes) and *tefsirs* (translations and commentaries of the Koran) are rare keepsakes. They are carefully preserved by Tatar families, as well as archives and museums. Their exceptional importance lies in them being a source of analysis concerning the Tatars' approach to Islamic doctrine, their knowledge of the Arabic language, and foreign elements influencing their religiosity. However, at the same time, the value of these manuscripts also comes from them being the materials that touched on all spheres of human life. Hence, they described superstitions (e.g. "non-soul days" – feral days), magical procedures and even witchcraft (black magic) alongside various divination techniques. Tatar literature has been written down mainly in the north-eastern borderland dialect, but using a notation with a modified Arabic alphabet, symbolizing the sanctity of the Koran. *The Tafsir of Tatars of the Grand Duchy* is recognized as the oldest translation of the Koran into Slavonic. Today, *aljamiado* constitutes the research field of a dynamically developing new scientific discipline – "kitabistics".

For the small community of followers of Islam in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, religious education was always a challenge.

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In an age of fluid identities

Polish Tatars are an exceptionally interesting group, whose original Oriental roots, stemming from their Golden Horde history and religion, have been affected by the locality of their centuries-long settlement and contacts with multiculturalism in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Yet, the Tatars' full integration and peaceful relations with neighbours have not positively influenced public perceptions of this group. Thus, until today numerous stereotypes ascribe a stigma of savagery to the Tatars, which is part of an orientalizing perception of this community. Even the popular dish of raw beef, in Polish called *tatar*, was linked to the group's name. It fitted perfectly with the image present in Polish literature, which portrays Tatars as steppe warriors with a stockpile of meat hidden under their saddles. It comes as no surprise, then, that *tatar* is not offered at the earlier mentioned restaurant – *Tatarska Jurta*.

The Tatars objected to these harming images of their community by creating the foundations of their own ethnic ideology, which emphasized their patriotism, loyalty to Poland and military sacrifice. This philosophy, which is a key element of Tatar ethnic identity, is familiar to the Polish society and largely coincides with the symbolism of Polish national culture. Overtime, the Tatar's identification with Polishness has only increased. The process of assimilation made those strands of heritage that exposed their cultural separateness disappear. Even the Tatar version of Islam has lost a lot of its original oriental nature, as religion is regarded only as part of private life. Tatars do not feel the need for missionary work, they are fully convinced of the uniqueness of their own model of religiosity. Since conflict emerged with the wider Arab community in Poland – in the second half of the 1990s – they have limited their contacts with the international community of believers, with the exception of the culturally close Turks. This state of affairs is probably due to growing Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments in Poland.

As a minority, Tatars are quite conservative and fear the influx of culturally different Muslims. They are not susceptible to the influence of orthodoxy, trying to maintain a still dominant position within the group of Polish followers of Islam. For this reason, after initial gestures of solidarity, relations between Polish Tatars and their Crimean brethren, who began arriving in Poland as war refugees after 2014, have cooled down.

The Muslim religion perpetuated the ethnic distinctiveness of Tatars for many years and, as a result, representatives of this group were referred to as Muslims. This name stressed the key role that religion plays for Tatars in the cultivation of tradition, and indicated that until the 1970s they were the only followers of Islam in Poland. After the Second World War, the nationality policy of the communist

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authorities was so hostile to minorities, and assimilation processes so intense, that Tatars also concealed the ethnic aspect of their identity under their religious identification (as Polish Muslims) or limited its significance to their origin alone (Poles of Tatar origin).

It seemed that the renaissance of Tatar ethnicity in the 1990s would effectively solve this problem. This has been the case as Tatars have begun to show pride in their roots and who they are. However, some controversy within the community was stirred up by the results of the 2021 national census. While the number of representatives of the minority (5,083 people with Polish citizenship) corresponds with wider estimates, the spatial distribution of people declaring this nationality is completely different to how the community commonly views itself.

The "True Tatars" from Podlasie, for unknown reasons, did not want to show their identity, while Tatar nationality was declared in large numbers by persons unknown to Tatars from outside the community, who live in big cities and who unexpectedly showed up in census results. This discovery shows that a community that has managed to preserve its heritage for centuries, and successfully promoted and commercialized it in Kruszyniany, may fall victim to its own success and lose its exclusive character. Time will tell whether the new trend of increasingly subjective ethnic self-identification will be sustained in an age of fluid identities. EE

Michał Łyszczarz is an assistant professor in the department of sociology within the Institute of Political Science at the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn. He is the author of the book published in Polish titled *The Young Generation of Polish Tatars. A study of generational changes of youth in the context of Muslim religiosity and ethnic identity* (Olsztyn-Bialystok, 2013). His research interests focus on issues related to the Polish Tatars, the problems of ethnic and national minorities, media discourse, and the presence of Islam in Poland and Europe.

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Tracing 700 years of Armenian heritage in Poland

OTTILIE TABBERER

Cemeteries, khachkars, churches and bakeries all point to the Armenian presence in Poland that stretches far back to medieval times. Though often overlooked, Armenian communities once played a vital role in trade, diplomacy and culture, traces of which remain in cities dotted around Poland. A new wave of Armenian migration is mixing with the "Old Polish Armenian" communities, adding a fresh influence to the enduring legacy of Armenian heritage in Poland.

If you want to glimpse a country's multicultural heritage, a cemetery is a good place to start. On a snowy winter's afternoon in Warsaw's Powązki Cemetery, I read scraps of evidence relating to Poland's ethnic compositions, links to empires, wars and border shifts. Dr. Zahorowski (1802–1878) was born in Vilnius and died in Warsaw (all cities named are using the contemporary spelling – author's note); Leopold Kronenberg (1812–1878) was a Jewish banker in the Russian partitioned territory of Poland; Daniel Sztyber (1987–2022) fought in the Ukrainian International Legion: "For your freedom and ours," his stone declared. I wandered on, winding through the cemetery's grids, past mock ancient Greek columns and angels, lanterns and fake flowers which decorated these silent testimonies to the past. Some graves used Cyrillic, while some had Polish and Ukrainian national ribbons.

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My cheeks had solidified with cold by the time I asked a gardener where the Armenian graves were. He simply replied that "There aren't any," making it clear that our conversation had ended.

The Armenians of Lviv and Zamość

My search for Armenian traces in Poland began last summer when an apricot-coloured stone in Zamość caught my eye. From experience, such a colour is associated with Armenia and this small city in south-east Poland is far removed, or so I assumed, from the South Caucasus. Yet, on closer inspection, it was indeed an Armenian *khachkar*, a monument to Polish-Armenian friendship, similar to many such orange-brown stones with intricate carvings found in Central and Eastern European cities. Close by lies Ulica Ormiańska (Armenian Street), which runs to the central Renaissance square of Rynek Wielki. Here, Armenian tenement houses proudly stand, lavishly coloured and decorated like bars of iced marzipan. On that hot afternoon in July, I wondered more about Zamość's Armenian population, as well as why Poland's former eastern provinces had so many Armenian communities and what had happened to them. The trip to the Powązki Cemetery in Warsaw did finally reveal Armenian graves. Paschalis Jakubowicz (1736–1817) was from Tokat, Anatolia, and made a roaring trade in *Kontusz* silk belts. Metaxian Szełkownikow Sergiusz (1871–1929) directed the Warsaw Opera, while Leon Ter-Oganjan (1910–2002) was a prominent activist, born in St Petersburg before living in Kharkiv and dying in Warsaw. In fact, a total of 164 graves can be found, according to the Foundation of Culture and Heritage of Polish Armenians. The unmistakable Armenian "*-jan*" ending gave away some surnames, while others were Polonized beyond distinction. Further research revealed repeated words like "trade", "merchant" and place names like Lviv and Riga. A pattern seemed to be emerging.

The Armenian presence in Poland can be concretely traced back to 1356 in the Foundational Charter of Lviv.

The Armenian presence in Poland can be concretely traced back to 1356 in the Foundational Charter of Lviv, where the largest Armenian group put down roots. However, some scholars trace their settlement to the 11th century in Red Ruthenia, now part of western Ukraine and southeastern Poland. The Lviv Charter granted minority rights to its citizens of multiple faiths, languages and ethnicities, who had moved to this newly founded city and were attracted by its position on the transcontinental trading routes. The Armenians were allowed to freely operate their own judicial system,

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build churches, and conduct services in their own liturgical rite. Although people lived side by side, they were strictly segregated along religious and ethnic lines.

Polish kings favoured the dominant German Catholic community and the non-Catholic minorities such as the Armenians, Jews, Ruthenians and Tatars were kept separate topographically and economically in the city. However, while the non-Catholics had restricted economic opportunities and were banned from entering artisanal guilds, Armenians quickly filled an economic niche trading with the East. Soon, trade items such as carpets, gold embroidery, decorated weapons, spices and exotic fruit became known as "Armenian goods", infusing Polish culture with Eastern elements. Moreover, their knowledge of languages like Kipchak and Persian made the Armenians invaluable for diplomatic relations. For these reasons, Polish kings like Casimir the Great (1310–1370) granted protection to their communities.

Over time, Armenian clusters burgeoned in cities to the west of Lviv, such as Jarosław, Lublin and Kazimierz Dolny.

As connectors of East and West, the Armenians of Lviv amassed extraordinary wealth from the 14th to 17th centuries, even surpassing the city's affluent Polish burghers. They owned 62.5 per cent of specialist guild shops despite only making up 19 per cent of the city's population. The Catholic patricians saw additional efforts to buy houses in the central market square as a threat to Catholic authority in the city. Appeals to have equal civil and economic rights with the Catholics were repeatedly rejected by Polish King Sigismund II (1520–1572). Criticism also sprang up among the Catholics in 1682 when Stanisław Karwowski, the city prosecutor, filed a lawsuit against Jan Jaśkiewicz, an Armenian, for hosting an excessively lavish wedding for his daughter. The bride's husband, Mr. Borykowicz, an Armenian from Kamianets-Podilskyi, was also criticized for wearing clothing featuring gold buttons, gold embroidered shoes and Dutch cloth lined with llama wool. The use of ostrich feathers in the diamond crown worn by the bride sparked a particular scandal, as such accessories were traditionally reserved for the spouses of magnates.

Over time, Armenian clusters burgeoned in cities to the west of Lviv, such as Jarosław, Lublin and Kazimierz Dolny, which are all contemporary Polish cities. This was also seen in the contemporary Ukrainian cities of Berezhany, Horodenka, Lutsk, Mohylów Podolski, Ivano-Frankivsk and Balta. Around 130 kilometres west of Lviv lies Zamość, a fortified city with a once-significant Armenian population. It was founded by Jan Zamoyski (1542–1605), the Grand Chancellor of the Crown, who signed a degree in 1585 inviting Armenians to settle and trade in the city: "Wishing that the city I have founded should flourish rapidly thanks to trade, I willingly decided that [the Armenians] and their descendants should be granted

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all the rights and liberties that have been conferred on this city by the consent of His Royal Majesty and me."

Henceforth, a new city was filled with a prosperous and autonomous Armenian community, and wider rights were granted than in Lviv's model of autonomy. A trade monopoly on oriental rugs, carpets, sheep and goatskin leather with Moldova, the Ottoman Empire and Persia began and, exempt from taxes for 20 years, the Armenians of Zamość enjoyed more extraordinary wealth. By 1603, of the 28 houses encircling the city's Rynek Wielki, 11 belonged to the Armenians, six to the Poles, five to the Greeks, four to the Italians, and one to each of the Russians and Germans. They were skilful craftsmen, goldsmiths, translators and diplomats, holding negotiations with the Tatars and Kalmyks of Crimea on behalf of the Polish authorities. Forming an established part of the multiethnic medley of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and blending into the higher echelons of society, boundaries often dissolved, leading to integration and assimilation. Conversions to Armenian Catholicism played a considerable role in this process. As the endings of ethnic Armenian surnames changed from "*-jan*" to the Polish "*-wicz*", Armenian numbers dwindled, and by the late 19th century the pressures of Polonization had blurred ethnic boundaries further.

Armenian Catholics

It was early on a winter's morning in December when I walked to the Armenian Catholic Church in Gliwice. Nicely dressed people were also hurrying in the cold fog to various destinations of worship. When the church appeared, the lights in the window were a welcome glow. I went through the little gate, noting the apricot-coloured *khachkar* at the entrance and into the incense-filled church. Although it was still ten minutes to seven, the mass had already started and I made my way to the back of the full congregation and up to the balcony.

The grey concrete exterior of the church betrayed nothing of the beauty within. Lining the base of the ceiling ran gold banners of blue Armenian letters. The ceiling was decorated with stylized flowers, geometric shapes and cypress trees shot up between them. Carpeted steps ran up to the altar, and silver candleholders framed in a background of reds, oranges and blues hung above. There were portraits of Pope Francis and Rafael Bedros XXI, a memorial to the victims of the 1915 genocide, a bookshelf holding prayer books in Polish and Latin, and magazines in Armenian. It could have been a typical Polish Sunday mass if you closed your eyes and just listened. And yet, with all senses engaged, it was a remarkable mixture of two cultures, a microcosm of "Armenianness" enclosed in a squat little church in Poland.

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The Armenian Catholic Church is an Eastern Rite member of the Roman Catholic Church. As an entity, it first came into being in 1740, when the Armenian Bishop of Aleppo was elected patriarch of Sis, today's Kozan in Turkey. Today, dioceses exist in as many countries as Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Ukraine, the United States, Argentina, Iran, Israel, Athens, Mexico and Romania. In Poland, Nicholas Torosowicz was responsible for the union of the Armenian Apostolic Church with the Roman Catholic Church from around 1630. This hybrid form of worship, motivated by political and social pressures rather than faith, was met with resistance from the Armenian community. The wealthy Armenian merchants were the ones who helped cement the union, being deeply tied to Polish Catholic leadership despite resistance from their own people.

Over time, the community accepted the Armenian Catholic identity, allowing them to retain their own liturgy and customs while recognizing the power of the pope. Even though the liturgical clothing lost its original appearance, they became "famous for their Eastern magnificence and splendour" and "Polish cut". In this way, the Armenian Catholic Church, albeit a hybrid, served as a pillar of cultural preservation and a space for belonging. At the same time, by becoming Catholic, these Armenians became more like the Poles.

A Polish cradle

The Second World War, border shifts and the Soviet occupation of post-war Poland dealt a hefty blow to minority communities in the country. Only about ten per cent of the traditional settlements remained within the new Polish borders and Poland became one of the most religiously homogeneous countries in Europe.

"Members of my family, as so many other families, were deprived of their normal lives, their homes, properties," writes Monika Agopsowicz, a Polish cultural activist of Armenian descent. "They were scattered all around Poland and the world. Natural family ties were broken, the Soviet "new" history and "*uravnilovka*" (equalization in Russian – author's note) banned the idea of minorities, of the existence of *Kresy*." Agopsowicz, the 2014 winner of the Polish History Book of the Year award (*Książka Historyczna Roku*) has written extensively on her Armenian ancestors, who lived in the south-eastern borderlands of pre-war Poland, a "kind of Polish cradle", from the 17th century until the beginning of the Second World War.

The *Kresy* is a mythologized borderland that still has nostalgic value in the Polish imagination, a place that no longer exists in contemporary geopolitical reality and yet is a testament to the multiculturalism of the former Polish state. Encompassing various regions and several ethnic groups, this area now comprises Poland,

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Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine. So strong was the connection between Polish identity and this region that after 1945, when they found themselves outside of Polish territory, Muslim Tatars, Karaites and Armenians migrated back to Poland. They mainly resettled in Poland's so-called Recovered Territories in the west, like Wroclaw, Gdańsk, Gliwice and Opole. But the memories of the former eastern Polish territory and its cities never faded.

"I was lucky to have grown up in a home where my father and his friends would freely talk, with a great sense of humour, about their beloved and lost Lwów (Lviv) and *Kresy*. This was – despite the war – their youth. And I would listen to their never-ending stories." Agopsowicz continues by saying that she was raised in Gdańsk and baptized and confirmed by Kazimierz Filipiak, the last priest of the Armenian Catholic Church in Stanisławów (now Ivano-Frankivsk in Ukraine). "All the Armenian Catholic churches had remained in the *Kresy*, apart from some church items brought to Poland by Armenian Benedictine nuns from Lviv," she tells me. Priests who took care of the churches in *Kresy* were either killed during the war or came barefoot from the Soviet work camps. "Kazimierz Filipiak was an exception. In 1946 he brought from Stanisławów all (all!) the furnishings of the church and the whole parish library!"

Father Filipiak died in 1992 with no successor. Anxious not to lose any more valuables, the Ordinariate of Poland for Armenian Catholics in 2005 gave a group of Polish Armenian volunteers the responsibility of cataloguing the remaining artefacts and information. From this initiative, the Foundation of Culture and Heritage of Polish Armenians was born and established in Warsaw. For the past 19 years, these volunteers have worked together to conserve and popularize the history of Polish Armenians and make available everything they can share. These groups organize exhibitions, lectures, concerts, publications and meetings to help Poles of Armenian descent connect with their heritage. Thanks to such organizations many Poles can (re)discover their Armenian roots through genealogists and research done in Lviv's Lychakiv Cemetery and Warsaw's Powązki Cemetery. Other organizations have been founded on similar motives. Their activities not only contribute to promoting Armenian history and culture but also help to integrate newly arrived Armenians into Polish society.

Preserving roots

In today's Poland, Armenians are considered one of nine national minorities, as well as one of the oldest. Two of the six conditions to be regarded as a national minority are, according to the Act of January 6th 2005 on National and Ethnic

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Minorities and Regional Languages: 1) having an awareness of a historical national community and 2) having ancestors who lived in the current territory of the Republic of Poland for at least 100 years. For Gohar Khachatryan, the Armenian heritage in Poland was unknown to her until she came to Poland from Gyumri, north-west Armenia, in 1992. She studied chemistry at Yerevan University and moved to Kraków with her partner, who was an exchange student in Poland. They became chemistry professors at Kraków's Agricultural University.

For them, the move was an opportunity for a better life, one removed from economic difficulties caused by the earthquake in 1988 and hostilities of the Nagorno-Karabakh wars. The crippling effects of the Gyumri earthquake, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the civil war in Syria have driven large numbers of Armenians to Poland, contributing to what is often called the "new emigration" of Armenians, which is distinguished from the "old emigration" of the Middle Ages.

Such terminology is problematic and seen to cause potential rifts in the Armenian community in Poland. Gohar began to learn about the Old Armenians via the Armenian Cultural Association (ACA) of Kraków. Both she and her husband have been active members.

In today's Poland, Armenians are considered one of nine national minorities, as well as one of the oldest.

The inclusion of the question: "Do you also feel that you belong to another nation or ethnic community?" in censuses after 2002 was the fruit of minority organization leaders' efforts to allow people to express more complex, dual national identities. Therefore, in Poland's 2021 national census, 6,772 people declared Armenian nationality, while 4,361 declared this to be their only nationality and 2,140 felt a dual national identification.

"Even if they don't speak Armenian, if they are one-half or one-quarter Armenian or if they recently discovered some Armenian roots, they are Armenian," says Gohar's daughter, Lusine Khachatryan, born in Germany and raised in Poland. "If they are proud of this identity and heritage in Poland, then that's reason enough to claim Armenian identity."

In 2004 Gohar and her friends, with the help of the president of the ACA, Adam Terlecki, decided to open an Armenian Saturday school, initially for themselves and their friends' children, to maintain their language skills and knowledge of Armenia. From just a handful of learners, the school now has 27 pupils aged between six and 13. When classes first began, the children of Armenian families born in Poland had very poor Armenian and little knowledge of their country. But now, Gohar tells me, the children speak very well. They learn about Armenian history, music, traditional dancing and famous Armenian Poles and participate in ethnic minority festivals in Poland.

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A new wave of Armenian migrants has also increased the language level. Lusine says that she has a Polish accent when speaking Armenian and the new migrants are a welcome opportunity to improve it. Apparently, these migrants from Armenia and Ukraine are very different to the economic migrants of the 1980s who held low-paid positions. "The most recent wave of migrants have well-paid jobs in tech, there's more money, time and resources to focus on education. They also seem to have less emotional problems and it's easier to gain legal documents to live here. There's a general sense that these families have a firmer footing to begin their new life than those who came to Poland before."

The new wave of Armenian migrants to Poland is very different to the economic migrants of the 1980s who held low-paid positions.

Gohar is quick to tell me that her pupils go on to become doctors, lawyers, designers and artists. "My school is one of my proudest successes; the first being my children and the second – my school." She feels that she's doing something for her country and giving the community roots to their homeland. "It's very important to know your roots and be proud of them," adds Lusine. "Growing up in Poland, we have unfortunately had some unpleasant experiences. I have faced rude and offensive comments from Poles just because we look different and people are ignorant about Armenia. The school in this way is extremely important because it taught us about where we come from, about our history and roots. If we know our roots and why we seem different, then we can be proud and resist such discrimination."

When our chat turns to food, both women smile and admit that they eat a lot of Georgian food from the ever-increasing number of bakeries and restaurants in Kraków and wider Poland. Armenian restaurants open and close but Gohar believes that restaurants will become more popular due to more Poles visiting the South Caucasus each year. "Armenia is now more attractive because since they've seen Georgia, they want somewhere more off the beaten track!"

Warm bread

Our conversation reminded me of when I visited a Georgian-Armenian bakery in Warsaw, after my visit to the Powązki Cemetery on that December day. I chatted to the owner and learnt of her last six years spent in Poland, how the business is doing, the difficulties of cultural differences, the cold, and learning Polish with her children. She lamented the fact that there was no Armenian Apostolic church for her family, just a travelling priest who holds services in Armenian in Catholic churches each Sunday.

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She could not believe I knew her hometown, Dilijan, in Armenia's lush mountainous north. I bought some *tan* (a yoghurt drink), a *khachapuri* (a Georgian cheese pastry), some Georgian mineral water and left with a round of warm bread, given as a gift. I waited for the next bus in the bitter cold and held the bread to my chest. Its warmth seeped through my coat.

Uprooting and building a new life comes with a great many challenges, ones which the Armenian community in Poland has weathered via remarkable adaptation, resilience and strength of community. Long may their heritage continue and evolve for many years to come. EE

Ottilie Tabberer is a master's student in East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies and an editorial intern at *New Eastern Europe*. Her studies and personal interests (languages, mountains, markets!) have led her to live in Ukraine, Georgia, Estonia and currently Poland.

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Polish language and nation

A rather recent pairing

TOMASZ KAMUSELLA

Standing fast by Poland's national "master narrative", the country's schools teach that the Polish nation, defined as all the speakers of the Polish language, is a millennium old. Yet, this pairing of the Polish nation and language dates back only to the late 19th century.

In Polish popular opinion, the view that the Polish nation consists of all the speakers of the Polish language is not controversial. Hence, the Polish speech community is unreflectively equated with the Polish nation. In turn, all the territories where speakers of Polish reside compactly are deemed to rightfully constitute the Polish nation-state.

This now widely accepted definition of the Polish nation is a realization of the goal of ethnolinguistic nationalism. In a nutshell, this ideology can be presented with the following algebraic equation: Language = Nation = Nation-State. After the First World War, ethnolinguistic nationalism became the predominant ideology of creating, legitimizing and maintaining statehood across Central Europe (and in Eastern Europe after the breakup of the Soviet Union). The Allies granted this ideology to the region at the peace conference in Paris. In this process, the Allies' negotiating teams drew on Leon Dominian's 1917 study *Boundaries of Language and Nationality in Europe* that was recommended by US President Woodrow Wilson.

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National history

At present, ethnic Poles opine that their nation is at least a millennium old. How do they know? Since the founding of the Polish nation-state in 1918, successive generations of schoolchildren time and again have been taught to think about their nation in this ethnolinguistic fashion, all with a clear primordialist bent. Yet, what Polish and other Central European nation-states' schools teach about the past is not disinterested history. Instead, it is national history, or a strategic selection of events and myths (that is, fabrications) from the past distilled through the lens of this or that national "master narrative".

National ideologues and state officials develop national master narratives for the sake of generating, justifying and maintaining a politically usable image of their nation in terms of space and time, as anchored in the present (not the past). The state's leadership typically decides on the "uses" of the nation's image and firmly instills this in citizens' minds. The citizens learned about their nation's history at school, thanks to compulsory and free elementary education. As a result, politicians are able to rally the state's entire population by merely referring to this or that emotive element of this internalized image of the nation.

The ideology of nationalism arose in Western Europe as a reply to the decline of the feudalistic *ancien régime*. In the region's traditional monarchies, the population was allocated by accident of birth to unequal estates (nobility, clergy, burghers, commoners). In Central Europe, the peasantry – or most of the population – was even placed outside the system. Defined as serfs, their status was closer to slavery. Thanks to the divine right of kings, the monarch was eligible to reign over a realm organized in such a manner. The ruler was answerable only before the monotheistic God, not his subjects.

Ideologues develop national narratives to generate an image of the nation as anchored in the present (not the past).

In contrast, proponents of nationalism proposed that the population of a state be equal before the law and should enjoy the same suffrage. Together they constitute a nation that is the sole font of legitimacy for the state and its government. In the case of the democratic government, its legitimacy (or its loss) is confirmed through regular elections. These ideas, as developed in the 18th century for the first time, were trialled in the creation of the United States and revolutionary France.

The neologism of "nationalism" in English (and *nationalisme* in French) was coined as late as 1798. Likewise, the English and French meaning of the Latinate term "nation" for denoting all the population of a state as equal before the law and the source of political legitimacy emerged only in the mid-18th century. Obvious-

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ly, the original Latin word *natio* is much older, but it meant different things (for instance, the goddess of birth, a people), not what is understood in the modern world under the term nation. Likewise, in English and French the word nation was employed much earlier than the 18th century. However, it conveyed different meanings. For example, it could refer to a class of things, such as a group of university students stemming from a region or polity.

The forgotten non-national past

In Polish the word *nacya* (from Latin *natio*) or naród (all-Slavic for "a people"), meaning nation, predominantly denoted the *ancien régime*-style estate of nobility until the mid-19th century. Likewise, the expression "the Poles" in the pre-national age denoted the nobility of the composite Commonwealth of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (in short Poland-Lithuania). To complicate matters more, in the late 18th century, this realm was partitioned between the Habsburgs (Austria), Prussia (Germany) and Russia. As a result, the Polish-Lithuanian nobles joined the nobilities of the three partitioning powers.

After the Congress of Vienna in 1815, St Petersburg found itself in possession of four-fifths of the former lands of Poland-Lithuania, alongside the majority of the vanished realm's nobility. As a result, at the turn of the 19th century, Polish-Lithuanian nobles accounted for three-quarters of Russia's nobility. However, their share among the empire's nobles fell to two thirds in the mid-19th century and to a mere quarter by the turn of the 20th century.

At the turn of the 19th century, Polish-Lithuanian nobles accounted for three quarters of Russia's nobility.

Polish-Lithuanian nobles organized two anti-tsarist uprisings in 1830 and 1863. St Petersburg saw these insurrections as illegal "Polish rebellions". In turn, Polish history textbooks nowadays label these two insurrections with the adjective national (*narodowe*). The practice suggests – in contradiction with the facts on the ground – that it was the modern ethnolinguistically defined nation of Poles who rose up against the Russian Empire. But in reality, at the time of these uprisings, the Polish adjective *narodowy* referred exclusively to the Polish-Lithuanian nobility. Polish ethnolinguistic nationalism and the increasingly popular movement for building an estate-blind modern Polish nation composed of Polish speakers emerged only in the last third of the 19th century.

The unexpected success of this national movement came in 1918 with the founding of the Polish nation-state on the basis of the ideology of Polish ethnolinguistic

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nationalism. However, in Polish history textbooks this new nation-state is posed as a continuation of Poland-Lithuania. The claim today, repeated in Poland's constitution, promotes an unevidenced idea that in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Polish-speaking serfs and burghers also belonged to the Polish nation (of nobles).

They did not. At that time, only Poland-Lithuania's nobles saw themselves as Poles. Neither burghers, let alone serfs, would have even dared to refer to themselves as Poles. As a result, in 1846, nominally Polish-speaking serfs had no qualms with slaughtering the local nobles, or Poles, in western Galicia. These serfs did not see the nobles as co-ethnics. Hence, most Polish-speaking descendants of serfs did not consider themselves to be Poles until the mid-20th century.

Linguistic change

In the first half of the 19th century, ethnolinguistic nationalism spread across Central Europe, from Scandinavia in the north to the Balkans in the south, and from what today is Germany in the west to present-day Ukraine. The first serious standoff between proponents of ethnolinguistic nationalism and stalwarts of the *ancien régime* came in the course of the 1848 revolutions. The nationalists lost, but for a brief time only. Already by 1861 and 1871, respectively, Italy and Germany had been founded as ethnolinguistic nation-states.

Most Polish-speaking descendants of serfs did not consider themselves to be Poles until the mid-20th century.

Unsurprisingly, in Poland-Lithuania there was no shred of legislation on the official status of Polish. In this *ancien régime* Commonwealth, by the strength of custom, Latin predominated in written and official employment, although Polish functioned as the de-territorialized but mainly spoken sociolect of the Polish-Lithuanian nobility. Even with the improved availability of Polish-language books in the late 18th century, nobles preferred to read novels in French. In 1773, a decision was taken to replace Latin with Polish as the leading medium of education in Poland-Lithuania. But the switch was not introduced in the lands lost in the first partition (1772) of the Commonwealth. Furthermore, the change in the official medium of instruction was not fully implemented before the two further partitions (1793 and 1795) erased Poland-Lithuania from the political map of Europe. In the Austrian and Prussian partition zones, Latin persisted, or Polish was replaced with German for administrative purposes.

It was only the Russians, in their partition zone of the Polish-Lithuanian lands, who organized the first ever comprehensive Polish-language educational system.

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Wilno (Vilnius) University would be at the centre of these developments. Around 1810, two thirds of all of Russia's graduates finished this university. This meant that at that time, most Russian subjects with university education were literate in Polish, not Russian. Paradoxically, from today's perspective, this Polish-language system functioned in what at present is (eastern) Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus and (central) Ukraine. The system went defunct after the 1830 uprising. The suppression of this insurrection brought about the replacement of Polish with Russian as the official language of administration and education across this broad swath of land.

The change in the official language did not apply to the (Congress) Kingdom of Poland in personal union with Russia. The Russian tsar reigned there as the Polish

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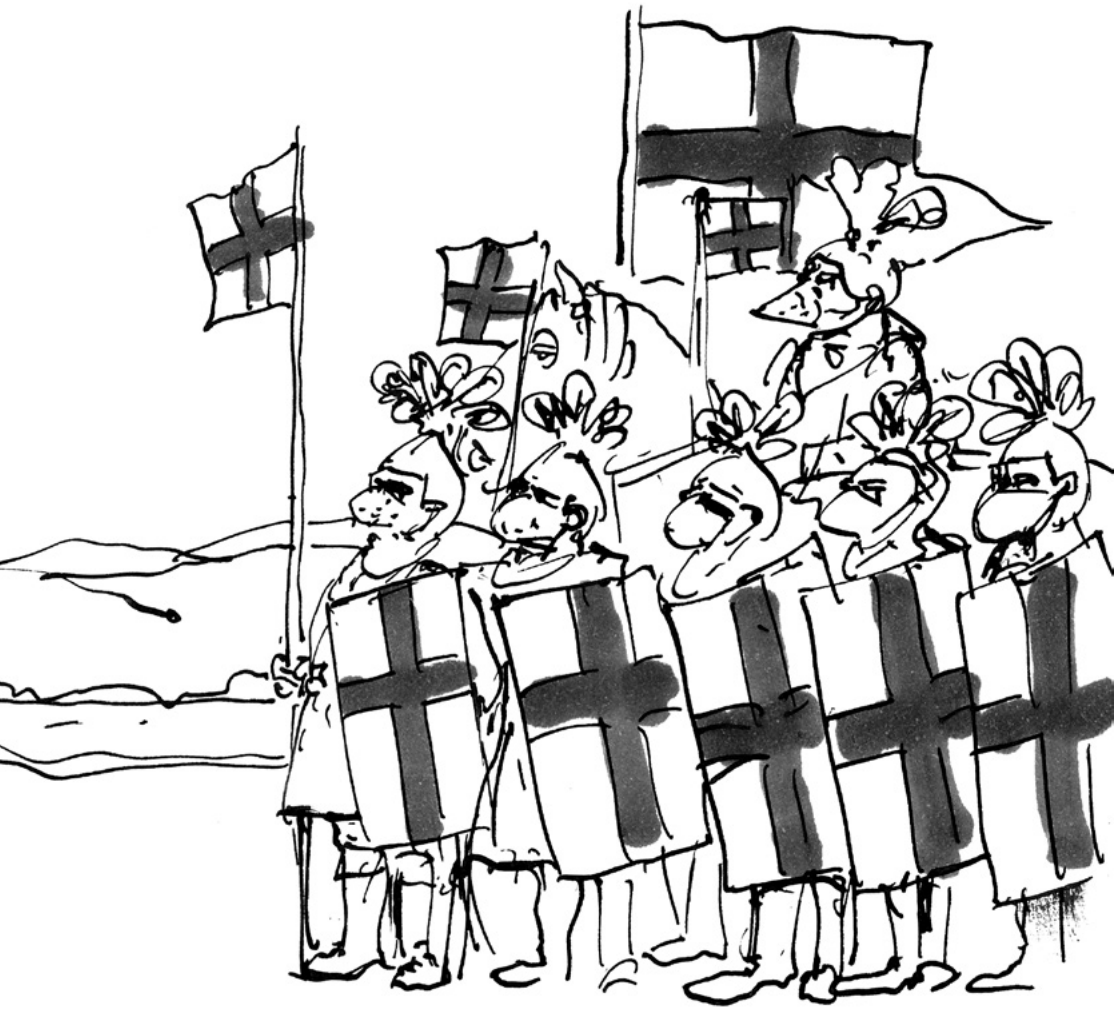

king. In 1815, he granted this kingdom with a constitution. For the first time in history, a legal document anointed Polish with the status of the official language of a polity. Furthermore, this constitution made a reasonable command of this language a requirement for naturalization in the kingdom.

From the noble to ethnolinguistic Polish nation

Outside the Congress Kingdom, across the rest of Russia's partition zone of Poland-Lithuania, the social and political arrangements were changing fast. The goal

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was to break with any Polish-Lithuanian traditions in favour of the full integration of this area with the rest of the Russian Empire. Beginning in 1840, a widespread action commenced with an eye to verifying the status of Polish-Lithuanian nobles. After the 1830 uprising, St Petersburg wanted to decouple this nobility from the concept of Polishness and radically reduce their number in the Russian territory, especially outside the Congress Kingdom. Landless Polish-Lithuanian nobles and those without any serfs were simply deprived of their noble status and turned into free peasants. On the ethnolinguistic (and sometimes confessional) basis, they assimilated with nearby Ukrainians and Belarusians. As a result, in what today is central Ukraine, the number of Polish-Lithuanian nobles plummeted from 410,000 persons in 1831 to a mere 70,000 in 1850. Anachronistically speaking, it was Russia's first case of liquidating a socio-ethnic group of people as a class.

Previously, Polish-Lithuanian nobles were distributed rather evenly across Russia's entire partition zone of Poland-Lithuania. These nobles constituted the unquestioned elite of these lands. They continued to claim the former Polish-Lithuanian territory for a future (noble) Poland that they trusted would be recreated soon. Polish – not Russian – functioned there as the de facto language of cultural attainment and social advancement. The situation continued until the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, even leading to the spread of Polish in the area not subject to partition between Kyiv and Kharkiv in Ukraine.

On the part of the tsarist administration, this decision to take away many nobles' status was a deft move. With the smoke screen of a scientific approach, the ploy allowed for furthering Russia's claim to the former Polish-Lithuanian lands outside the Congress Kingdom, or in today's Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus and (central) Ukraine. On the other hand, two decades later, in the 1870s and 1880s, the lasting socio-economic and political impact of this action encouraged the nascent Polish national movement to espouse an ethnolinguistic definition of the Polish nation. The failed 1863 uprising constituted a turning point. This crushing defeat made Polish leaders painfully aware that the estate nation (*natio*) of Polish-Lithuanian nobles had become a thing of the past.

Galicia: where (not only) Polish modernity emerged

In the wake of this uprising, Russian replaced Polish as the official language also in the Congress Kingdom of Poland. For a couple of years there was not a single territory where Polish would function in an official capacity. However, following the humiliating defeat at the hands of Prussia in 1866, the following year the Austrian Empire was overhauled into the Dual Monarchy of Austro-Hungary. In Vienna's

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partition zone of Poland-Lithuania, known as Galicia, Polish was elevated to the region's official language in 1869.

Polish nationalists of an ethnolinguistic persuasion could try out their hand at all the trappings of modernity through the medium of Polish, be it technology, railways, the civil service, criminal law, compulsory elementary education, welfare provisions, preventive medicine and the like. Yet, from the purely ethnolinguistic perspective, Ukrainians accounted for almost half of the province's inhabitants. Vienna played this group against Poles for the sake of placing a curb on more radical demands that Polish nationalists might have wanted to put forward.

By allowing the parallel use of the Ukrainian language in (mainly local) administration and education, especially across eastern Galicia, where most Ukrainians lived, Vienna encouraged the coalescence of a Ukrainian national movement of an ethnolinguistic character. From the nationalist perspective, Galicia became a Piedmont (or the epitome of a region where a national movement emerged) for both the Polish and Ukrainian nations. Civil servants, politicians and teachers from Galicia helped with the founding of both Poland and Ukraine as nation-states in 1918 and initially almost entirely manned the two polities' administrative and educational structures. At that time, outside Galicia there were no extensive pools of administrators and teachers who would be fully literate in Polish or Ukrainian.

Thus, a "classless" (non-estate-related) commonality around the Polish language was created, making its users susceptible to the allure of the then normalized ideology of ethnolinguistic nationalism. However, languages – or rather, standardized entities of written communication, regulated through dictionaries, grammars and school textbooks – are not a product of nature or a gift from a deity. Considerable resources and expertise must be invested to ensure the creation of a standard language of this type. It is an artefact of human ingenuity and effort. Hence, behind each language there is the social and political history of individuals who created this standard and people who adopted it (or not) for (mainly written) use.

Multiple standardizations

The history of a language is the history of its creators and users. Only humans and their groups amount to agents in history. A standard language, like a train, building crane or a radio, is an object with *no* agency in and of itself. It may become part of a story, only if humans make a use of it that impacts an event.

With the passing of the Polish-Lithuanian nobles as founders and guardians of Polish language and culture, the Polish-speaking (or rather Polish-writing) intelligentsia took over this role, as writers, educationalists and researchers. The first

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consciously designed standardizing dictionary of the Polish language was released in Warsaw between 1807 and 1814. It became the basis of standard Polish, as employed in Russia's Congress Kingdom of Poland. The division of the former Poland-Lithuania into this Congress Kingdom and the three partition zones of Austria, Prussia and Russia spawned four separate administrative areas where the nascent Polish intelligentsia effectively developed and employed at least four different standardizations of the Polish language.

In 1806 a Polish dictionary earmarked for the Prussian partition zone came off the press in Breslau (today, Wrocław in Poland). A similar dictionary directed at Polish speakers in the Russian partition zone (but not in the Congress Kingdom) was published in 1861 in Vilno (present-day Vilnius). The second edition of the 1807–1814 Warsaw dictionary was produced in the Galician capital of Lemberg (today, Lviv) between 1854 and 1861. As such, it conformed to the needs of Polish speakers in the Austrian partition zone (Galicia), where modern Polish culture and nationalism emerged. The Congress Kingdom joined the language modernizing competition late. However, it would soon have the most extensive dictionary of the Polish language, which was published in Warsaw between 1900 and 1927. The fact that no authoritative dictionary was produced in the Polish nation-state solely between the two world wars made the 1900–1927 lexicographic work into interwar Poland's main standardizing dictionary.

However, scholars and users of Polish in other partition zones, from which the Polish nation-state was cobbled together in 1918, were reluctant to give up on their regional standardizations of the Polish language. Thus, they mostly rejected the Warsaw standardization spearheaded by the 1900–1927 dictionary and its supporters. The leading opponents of this standardization were active in the Galician cities of Kraków and Lwów (Lviv). Instead, they pledged their loyalty to the 1854–1861 dictionary and the Galician standard of Polish steeped in this work.

It took almost two decades before linguists and politicians worked out a compromise for a unified, standard Polish language in 1936.

Meanwhile, apart from former Galicia, compulsory elementary education for all was introduced in interwar Poland's other areas. The goal was to make all Polish citizens into competent speakers and writers of a *single* standard Polish. Under the strictures of ethnolinguistic nationalism, only this achievement would ensure making them into full-fledged members of the Polish nation. The persistence of the regional standards of Polish hampered efforts to achieve this nationally laudable outcome.

It took almost two decades before interwar Poland's linguists and politicians worked out a compromise. This resulted in the unified standard of the Polish lan-

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guage in 1936. But the adoption of this standard was slow. Ironically, it was only the German and Soviet occupation administrations that enforced this language reform during the Second World War. German and Soviet slavists specializing in Polish had little interest in internal disagreements concerning the appropriate form of standard Polish. Basically, when in employment of the occupation administrations, they fell back on the published 1936 principles of Polish orthography to produce wartime publications in Polish. The first-ever authoritative dictionary of Polish for all the post-partition regions of the Polish nation-state came off the press in Warsaw between 1958–1969.

Thus, the lexically and orthographically unified Polish language spread fully among members of the ethnolinguistically defined Polish nation only in late communist Poland, namely, during the 1970s and 1980s. However, prior to this achievement, in the course of the initial two post-war decades, the communist regime made it possible and even coaxed all the country's population to gain working literacy in Polish. Thus, the ethnolinguistically defined Polish nation was fully actualized as dictated by the Central European type of nationalism steeped in language.

Dating the Polish language and nation

Speaking about a millennium-old Polish nation of an ethnolinguistic type amounts to succumbing to myths and illusions of a national persuasion. The unified single standard of Polish was in the works between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries. In the mid-19th century, Russian civil servants liquidated the estate nation (*natio*) of Polish-Lithuanian nobles, replacing it with an estate-neutral ethnolinguistic definition of the Polish nation (*naród*). A Polish national movement coalesced around this idea during the 1880s. Subsequently, such an ethnolinguistic Polish nation was gradually created during the first half of the 20th century. The process was put into action mainly through compulsory elementary education and military conscription, first in Galicia, then in the Polish nation-state between the two world wars, and finally in communist Poland.

Despite the adoption of ethnolinguistic nationalism for building the Polish nation, the proposed linguistic commonality was insufficient for achieving a sociopolitical unification between the nobility and peasantry. The remembrance of serfdom appeared to constitute an unbridgeable gulf of difference between descendants of Polish-Lithuanian nobles and their serfs. Faced with this dilemma, ideologues of Polish nationalism decided to bolster the proposed union with religious commonality. Catholicism was identified for this purpose, alongside its darker aspect in the form of antisemitism. Unfortunately, the present-day Polish nation was cre-

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ated through the exclusion of Polish Jews. Some Polish national leaders used antisemitism as a form of social glue for nullifying the distrust that the descendants of serfs felt toward their former noble owners and their offspring, who led the Polish intelligentsia.

Ironically, the most renowned masters of Polish literature were of ethnically or confessionally Jewish origin, be it the poets Adam Mickiewicz, Bolesław Leśmian, Julian Tuwim, Antoni Słonimski and Tadeusz Różewicz. There have also been many Polish writers of Jewish origin, such as Józef Wittlin, Bruno Schulz, Aleksander Wat, Marian Brandys, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński and Stanisław Lem. EE

Tomasz Kamusella is Reader (*Professor Extraordinarius*) in Modern Central and Eastern European History at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. His recent volumes include *Rreziqet e Neoimperializmit rus* (Kristalina 2024), *Politics and the Slavic Languages* (Routledge 2021), *Eurasian Empires as Blueprints for Ethiopia* (Routledge 2021) and *Languages and Nationalism Instead of Empires* (Routledge 2023). His reference work *Words in Space and Time: A Historical Atlas of Language Politics in Modern Central Europe* (CEU Press 2021) is available as an open access publication.

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Seeing the present in the past

Byzantium and the Balkans

MIRELA IVANOVA

The legacy of the Byzantine Empire in the Balkans stretches back for centuries. Today's politics should remember that the idea of Balkan states as homogenous entities is not natural. This is a relatively new idea that was realized through violence, population exchanges and expulsion at the turn of the 20th century. This process then continued well into the 1990s with the Yugoslav Wars.

The Byzantine Empire is the medieval successor to the ancient Roman Empire. Its origins are traditionally traced back to the time when the Roman Empire began to re-position its centre of power towards the Eastern Mediterranean, adopted Constantinople as its capital, adopted Greek (rather than Latin) as its primary language, and Christianity as its official religion. This all roughly happened in the period between the years 300 and 400.

Throughout all these developments, the Byzantine Empire was in control of significant parts of the Balkans. In total, Byzantium ruled the Balkans for nearly five hundred years across the medieval period. This came in two spells, between 300 and 600 AD and then again between 1000 and 1200 AD.

The impact that Byzantine rule had on the region is vast and undeniable. Medieval East Roman rule and its ancient Roman predecessor brought significant urbanization and with it the expansion of the associated crafts and skills, from pot-

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tery to metallurgy and mining. The late antique period in particular (300–600) also introduced Christianity to the region, as well as its associated infrastructure: churches, city-planning organized around churches, and a clerical class in charge of the spiritual wellbeing of their people.

Churches and mosques

The remains of Byzantine fortresses, cities and churches across the Balkans are relatively well preserved today, often as regional places of interest and tourist attractions. See for instance, Emperor Justinian's new city, Justiniana Prima, in modern-day Serbia; the mosaics in the Euphrasian basilica in Poreč, Croatia; or the late antique church of St Sophia in Sofia, Bulgaria.

Although modern nation states will prefer to highlight the medieval occupation of these fortresses and churches by Croats, Serbs or Bulgarians, the sites themselves are rarely particularly contentious in Christian-majority countries. They have not been subject to the same kind of systematic destruction or targeted abandonment like Ottoman heritage. One mosque a piece survives in Belgrade and Sofia today, when estimates for the number of mosques in both cities from the Ottoman period range from 20 to 50. Evliya Çelebi even claims that there were 217 mosques in Belgrade in the 17th century. Yet, more Byzantine-era churches than early modern mosques survive: two (very ancient) Byzantine churches stand in Sofia today in contrast with the single mosque.

A catalogue of Byzantine-era inscriptions in Bulgaria alone records 259 stone-inscribed texts in Greek between 300 and 600.

Whilst the Christian-majority Balkan states make some uncontentious use of Byzantine ruins, what is much more problematic about the Byzantine legacy is the question of language and the ethnic makeup of the empire in the Balkans. The empire's ruling elite spoke medieval Greek, the language of court and power. A catalogue of Byzantine-era inscriptions in Bulgaria alone records 259 stone-inscribed texts in Greek between 300 and 600. The majority of these come from south of the Balkan Mountain Range (*Stara Planina*), but a solid number are found in the northeast and northwest of the state's modern borders. Similar texts are found across the Western Balkans. It is clear therefore that many people who lived in those territories spoke Greek up until 600 at least.

From 600 onwards, the Balkans were subject to the arrival of new peoples: Avars, Slavs and Bulgars. How many came, and even what languages they spoke, can be hard to discern. But by the turn of the eighth century, new polities started

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forming on former Byzantine land under the names of the Bulgars, and later the Croats, Pannonians and Serbs.

National historiographies have tended to view these new kingdoms or duchies as the originators of the modern ethnic groups and states of the Bulgarians, Serbs or Croats. And it is clear that the understanding of the two periods of Byzantine rule in the Balkans was heavily influenced by the modern political events that shaped the early 20th century and still shape the region today.

Lost peoples?

One major assumed similarity between medieval kingdoms and modern states is that of ethnic and linguistic homogeneity. Too often, modern nationalist historiography assumes that these kingdoms, because they are named after ethnic groups, were ethnically and linguistically united; that they resembled the idea of modern nationhood. As a result, it is assumed that the population of Greek speakers that had lived in the Balkans across the fourth to seventh centuries under Byzantine rule simply disappeared, or was replaced by Bulgars, Croats, Serbs and the like. Where they went is unclear and almost not worth explaining; it seems obvious that they were gone. The tendency is to assume that when political leadership changes the population changes to reflect that. But political regimes change much more easily than people's language or culture. Regimes come and go, but cultural signifiers are much more stable: so where does this assumption of linguistic and cultural transformation come from?

Most probably, it comes from the expectations of modern nationhood. The early 20th century saw the forced homogenization of the Balkan nation states. Those who spoke the wrong language or practiced the wrong faith were literally sent away, displaced to the more appropriate nation state. Greece and Turkey's exchange of 1923 was the greatest in numbers and most studied by scholarship: over 1.2 million Orthodox Christians were expelled from Asia Minor and the Caucasus and arrived in mainland Greece, in exchange for around 400,000 Muslims from Greece sent to Anatolia. Many settled in Northern Greek Macedonia. But there were many others. Around 30,000 Greek speakers were forced to leave Bulgaria between 1920 and 1926. An estimated 50,000 Slavonic speakers fled Greek Macedonia to settle in Yugoslavia, primarily to the People's Republic of Macedonia, and to Bulgaria in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, early 20th century scholars assumed some sort of ethnic simplification must have existed in the medieval period. It made sense to them that people would naturally move in order to accommodate political regime

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Despite its Ottoman history, the Banya Bashi Mosque is the only active one which survives in Sofia today. It is estimated that the number of mosques in the city during the Ottoman period could have been nearly 50.

change. But these population exchanges were historically unprecedented; they were neither natural nor the product of historical tradition. A similar concern with politics at that time can be found in the traditional nationalist accounts of the second period of Byzantine rule in the Balkans, roughly between 1000 and 1200. In this period, the once "de-Byzantized" Balkans did not become Greek again. Although it may follow that if a few hundred years of Slavic rule transforms the region into a Slavic region, then another two hundred years of Byzantine rule might undo this, that is not how this period is perceived.

Rather, this period is seen a kind of occupation by a foreign power, resisted by the assumed homogenous Slavic populations. A number of rebellions in the Western Balkans in the 11th century were led by actors who claim descent from old Bulgarian kings, or who are relatives of living Serbian rulers. In these short-lived moments of rupture, nationalist history has found national heroes and fighters for ethnic liberation, akin to those who resisted Ottoman rule in the region in the 19th century.

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Flourishing imperialism

Quite unlike the Balkan rebels of modernity, many of whom were publicly killed, most of the Byzantine Empire's opponents emerge from or end up in the imperial administration. One such rebel is Delian, who was raised in Belgrade in 1040, and claimed descent form the last Bulgarian king, Samuil. Delian was then joined by his second cousin Alusian, also a supposed relative of a bygone Bulgarian king. But Alusian turned on his cousin and blinded him, thus ending the rebellion and being awarded the high-ranking Byzantine title of *magistros*. Whether these elites were interested in political independence or not, they were willing to work with or against the Byzantine regime to achieve their political goals. Ethnic homogeneity or loyalty was not in their political handbook. Although it is tempting then to find a version of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires of the 19th century in Byzantium, there is a problem with this interpretive framework. It assumes medieval actors had very modern intentions.

It is commonly accepted that empires will oversee many different peoples, languages even religions. Variety is a sign of a strong empire. We know that elsewhere under Byzantine rule a number of other languages were spoken: Armenian, Georgian, Coptic in Egypt, or Syriac in the Near East. The 12th-century Byzantine intellectual John Tzetzes opens one of his compositions by bragging about his language skills. He claims he can greet peoples on the streets of Constantinople in Scythian (Turkic, probably Cuman), Persian (probably Seljuq), Latin, Alan (probably Old Ossetian), Slavonic, Hebrew and Arabic. He actively celebrates the fact that Constantinople, the capital of the empire, has attracted such a diverse group of people, and clearly sees this as the product of a successful, flourishing imperialism.

This was the dominant language of power in the medieval Balkan world. In fact, Byzantine representations of power were commonly adopted and adapted by the political classes on their borders. The earliest surviving medieval Bulgar sources from the eighth century are stone inscriptions written by the Turkic-speaking elite in Greek. These texts clearly show that recording in Greek was seen as a significant act of exercising power. Lead seals tell a similar story: Boris of Bulgaria in the ninth, and Stefan Nemanja of Serbia in the 12th century, both sealed their documents with small metal pendants inscribed in Greek.

Thus, there is no reason to assume that non-Byzantine leaders did not share the Byzantine understanding that domination over a variety of peoples and cultures is the sign of successful imperialism. No medieval ruler believed strictly that people were essentially constituted in nations, that these nations deserved political autonomy and that attaining such autonomy was the purpose of political organization. Rulers of Slavic or other descent were not striving for the equity of political

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and ethnic borders. In fact, in many of their military campaigns medieval Balkan rulers, be they Boris of Bulgaria or Stefan Nemanja of Serbia, were looking to expand their territory by conquering key Byzantine cities, populated with Greek (and undoubtedly a variety of other language) speakers. In fact, Symeon of Bulgaria, on one of his lead seals, calls himself *basileus*, the Byzantine title for emperor, of the Romans as well as Bulgarians. In short, it is very clear that the medieval political landscape was more concerned with imperial expansion than ethnic homogeneity.

Echoes of co-existence

It follows then that non-Slavonic speakers, be they Greek, Latin or Turkic, would have had no specific political reason to disappear: rather their ongoing existence would simply be seen to confirm the supremacy of the current political regime. More recently, evidence is increasingly emerging to show that Greek did continue to be used in the Balkans after the rise of the Bulgarian kingdom, for example. The archaeological work of Kazimir Popkonstantinov in the tenth-century monasteries of Ravna and Chernoglavtsi in the north-western Balkans, has shown that Greek continued to be inscribed on the church walls. In these two monasteries, graffiti survive in Cyrillic, Glagolitic, Greek and, in very few instances, Latin. Of all the scripts Greek made up the largest group of material on the monastic complex walls, at roughly 40 per cent. Many of the texts are scriptural quotations, from the Gospels of Psalter, which suggests Greek may have also been used as a liturgical language.

The region experienced ethnic co-existence for many more hundreds of years than they have experienced border regimes and ethnic hostility.

Too often, the response to such evidence has been to assume that Slavs must be learning Greek, because all the Greeks must have left. Yet is it not just as probable that a Greek-speaking population in the Balkans continued to exist after the migrations of the seventh century? And moreover, that the imperial pretensions of the new rulers in the region, Bulgars and Slavs, saw the existence of this diversity as a sign of their power?

As ethnic and religious tensions in the Balkans are exacerbated by the ongoing refugee crisis, it is important to remember that the idea of Balkan states as homogenous entities is not natural. This is a relatively new idea. It was realized through violence, population exchanges and expulsions that started at the turn of the 20th century and continued into the 1990s with the Yugoslav Wars. We still live in the Balkans that were made by these historically unprecedented events. Yet the Balkans were also made by what came before. The region experienced multi-ethnic

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co-existence for many more hundreds of years than they have experienced border regimes and ethnic hostility.

This imperial co-existence was not necessairly harmonious. There is no need to pretend that life under empire was utopian multiculturalism. Imperial regimes are just as interested in the extraction of an economic surplus and political domination as nationalist administrations. Yet, co-existence was the norm. And it does the region no good to project ethnic distinction and separation into medieval history, when what we might find in the real history of difficult and uncomfortable medieval co-existence and accommodation could teach us some clearly relevant lessons today. EE

Mirela Ivanova is a lecturer in medieval history at the School of History, Philosophy and Digital Humanities of the University of Sheffield. Her most recent book, *Inventing Slavonic Cultures of Writing Between Rome and Constantinople*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2024.

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Multiculturalism in the Balkans

Prospects and perils

MILOŠ MILENKOVIĆ

In the Balkans, multiculturalism has come to represent a defining feature and a cause of conflict simultaneously. The region, shaped by centuries of migrations, conquests, political upheavals and civil wars, with its complex mix of cultural diversity and political instability, serves as a global example of the failure of multicultural policies. Consequently, "Balkanism" and "Balkanization" have emerged as technical terms denoting conflict driven by identity-based fragmentation.

Multiculturalism refers to 1) the coexistence of diverse cultural, ethnic and religious communities within a society, and 2) the social and political theory that promotes cultural diversity. It uses legal and administrative logic that seeks to regulate the coexistence of different cultures within a polity, as well as social theory that addresses the plurality of perspectives on society, the state, science, education and culture itself. It is most commonly understood in two primary ways: descriptively, as a characterization of cultural diversity, and normatively, as a theory asserting that culture plays a significant role in politics and as a practice of granting culturally distinct groups (for instance, minorities) certain special rights. Ideally, it seeks to enable their full equality. In this sense, multiculturalism has captivated

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generations of academic authors, journalists, politicians, NGO workers and human rights advocates.

Anthropology's struggles with multiculturalism

Anthropological studies of human societies and cultures view multiculturalism in its own terms through the lived experience, practice and meanings attributed to cultural diversity. Anthropologists do not solely take up the category of multiculturalism either as policy or theory. Instead, they research concrete and living historical, social and political contexts. Through ethnographic methods, we explore how individuals and groups navigate, negotiate and contest cultural boundaries, both in their everyday lives and through foundational narratives that link their heritage and their identity. Among the oldest anthropological perspectives on cultural diversity is the concept of cultural relativism, which emphasizes understanding cultures on their own terms rather than through the lens of one's own cultural values. A method like this indeed respects cultural diversity and resists hierarchies or ethnocentrism, which are at the root of conflicts in multicultural societies. Anthropologists identify the complex, ever-changing nature of cultural identities and argue that diversity should be a resource, not a threat. Anthropologists examine power and structural inequalities within multicultural settings. We do this by investigating how dominant groups define cultural norms and the ways in which minority groups resist, accommodate, or assimilate under such pressures. For example, approaches to "othering" discuss how dominant discourses marginalize or stereotype minority communities, while approaches to "hybridity" discuss the ways in which cultural exchange gives rise to new, syncretic forms of identity and cultural expression.

Another important anthropological contribution is the focus on commonly assumed but highly contentious concepts of identity and belonging. Multiculturalism is accompanied by questions of inclusion and exclusion – who is considered part of a group, or a society, but more importantly, who is not. Anthropologists study how people construct and perform their identities in multicultural contexts, taking into consideration intersections between ethnicity, religion, language and other markers of difference, such as class and gender. A common theme in our research is how globalization, migration and transnationalism influence cultural identities as individuals and groups negotiate multiple cultural worlds.

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Finally, anthropology critically engages with the politics of multiculturalism and, within it, identity politics and politics of knowledge. Anthropologists study how states and institutions implement multicultural policies, highlighting both their potential and limitations. While multiculturalism is celebrated as a means of promoting inclusivity, anthropologists highlight how such policies reify cultural differences or mask deeper inequalities. By grounding analyses in the lived experiences of individuals, anthropology offers a somewhat dissenting perspective on the misbalance of the ideals of multiculturalism with its complex realities. Our research reveals that, in the context of multicultural relativism, this often justifies internal cultural oppression, colonialism toward weaker communities, and even undermines the very foundations of modern civilization. It allows oppressors – within families, nations, or humanity as a whole (at any scale) – to perpetrate violence "in the name of their culture" and in a "traditional manner" against those who are culturally "prescribed" as their victims.

Contemporary anthropology grapples with the paradox of multiculturalism, as if humanity itself is Balkanized. While we continue to insist on respecting the cultural rights of minorities or stateless peoples, we cannot simultaneously ignore the widespread abuse of the right to cultural diversity. Recent aggression in Ukraine and the Middle East serve as striking examples of violence carried out in the name of history, tradition, ethnicity and religion – in essence, in the name of culture. That is also the reason why many anthropologists, as well as colleagues from other social sciences and humanities, are ambivalent towards multiculturalism.

The Balkans live in a perpetual aporia of multiculturalism

Pre-19th century Balkan identity was greatly shaped by the empires that ruled or strongly influenced the region: the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Russian Empire and several other players. Although these empires established frameworks for ethnic and religious coexistence, they also planted seeds of division by categorizing communities along religious and ethnic lines. Identities involving Islam, Catholic or Orthodox Christianity, the German or Hungarian language, or Slavic origin, were often promoted as the most desirable identities and were sometimes imposed by force. However, this was more often done through tax, employment and other incentives in sectors like education and culture.

The 19th and 20th centuries marked a shift from imperial rule to the creation of nation-states, driven by the rise of nationalism. The dissolution of empires led to the drawing of borders that – as is always the case – failed to align with the region's ethnic and cultural diversity. The Balkan Wars in the early 20th century and

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the subsequent redrawing of boundaries created an explosive environment, with communities competing for dominance or independence up to this day. The 20th century also saw further fragmentation, especially with the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, leading to the worsening of ethnoreligious tensions. The unresolved issue of minority rights to cultural and linguistic distinctiveness in the former Yugoslav republics (federal units), as well as disputes over minority rights in other Balkan countries, testify to the fact that ethnic and religious identification still plays a key role in the Balkans, and that identity-driven conflicts could recur.

The dissolution of empires led to the drawing of borders that failed to align with the region's ethnic and cultural diversity.

The contemporary Balkans remain a mosaic of ethnic and religious identities – multiple ethnic and religious groups living side by side in each country. However, they live in a fragile state due to the close attachment or correlation that ethnic and religious identities have to political power and cultural rights. The response varies throughout the region. Agreements such as the Ohrid Framework in North Macedonia and the Dayton Accords in Bosnia and Herzegovina established legal bases for power-sharing and minority protection. While they have been useful in terms of keeping the peace and ensuring representation, such agreements are generally condemned in academia for their entrenchment of ethnic divisions. The European Union is among the strongest promoters of multiculturalism through the accession process as it encourages respect for minority rights and regional cooperation.

The cultural diversity of the Balkans is, in principle, an asset with its various artistic, culinary and musical traditions. Festivals to mark the different ethnic and religious traditions attract tourism and foster intercultural understanding. The region's diversity provides economic opportunities – especially in tourism and cultural industries – that can help build bridges between communities. Grassroots efforts, like interfaith councils and community projects, gather representatives of various ethnic and religious groups in a process to work out solutions to problems affecting all. Multicultural curricula become part of the learning procedure at schools in an attempt to help young minds appreciate their diversity and common historical experiences. Of course, the response of nationalists, who fail to realize that they are harming their own nations by fighting for the purity of genes and culture, is strong. The European Union's emphasis on diversity and inclusion has encouraged the Balkan states to implement multicultural policies.

The prospect of EU membership is an incentive for governments to settle interethnic disputes within the framework of conforming to European norms regarding minority protection. Progress has been uneven, but the EU's influence remains

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one of the important factors promoting stability and a sense of shared destiny among the region's diverse communities. Occasional bilateral conditions, which divert the EU accession process from technical criteria to identity issues, hinder the easing of tensions. However, it generally appears that, unless a full-scale war breaks out, the region is gradually entering a period of relative political stability and economic development that not even professional ethnic stakeholders – identity entrepreneurs – can disrupt.

Identity-obsessed actors incite or exploit divides to consolidate their power at the cost of marginalized communities.

The occasional resurgence of ethnic nationalism provides a key threat to multiculturalism in the Balkans. Most of the time, identity-obsessed actors incite or exploit divides to consolidate their power at the cost of marginalized communities. Economic inequality additionally fuels ethnic tensions in the Balkans. Systemic discrimination against the Roma, for example, has become so deeply rooted that it has resulted in the Roma having lower access to education, health and employment. These disparities not only deepen interethnic divides but also hinder the region's overall development. Multiculturalism can be pursued only if these inequalities are addressed appropriately.

Barriers to multiculturalism

The collective memory of past conflicts is a key obstacle to multiculturalism – deep scars from the Balkan Wars, World Wars, and particularly the Yugoslav Wars, cause parts of communities to often view one another through the lens of past wrongs. Attempted reconciliations using, for example, truth commissions or even joint history projects, were highly opposed. A myriad of groups have clashed over what could go into a common account of the past. I have also tried something similar with a group of colleagues – to test if we can reconcile opposing communities through the inclusive protection of cultural heritage.

Weak governance and corruption also undermine the multicultural policies in the region. Political instability, combined with the influence of external actors, flare up ethnic tensions and present a major challenge that shows the importance of strong institutions and leadership committed to inclusion and cooperation.

One such issue is the bilateral conditionality of candidate countries by EU member states, who blackmail them in order to set stronger criteria than just economic and political ones for their accession to the EU. Such a process "racinates", "confessionalizes" and "culturalizes" what should be a simple technical extension of

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the EU and goes directly against rational identity management. Identities, being reactive and prone to strengthen in the course of confrontation with other identities, makes the instrumentalization of identity in the present EU accession process both self-defeating and contrary to the relative peace that was luckily attained in this part of the world at the beginning of the 21st century.

A most notable case is that of North Macedonia, where there has been a dispute over identity and language policies. This was firstly seen with Greece, leading to a constitutional change and the introduction of the word "North" to the name of the country. More recently, Bulgarian demands over the status of the Bulgarian minority and language have led to yet another EU integration veto, worsening interethnic relations.

Additionally, the Russian full-scale invasion in Ukraine has only fuelled tensions, especially as voices are being raised in the Balkans calling for changes to state borders and solutions to minority issues with methods obviously contradicting multicultural policies. As history teaches us, there will always be those who believe they have been wronged and will build their "righteous" struggle for new borders on that foundation. Those who need multiculturalism the most – ethnic and religious minorities as well as other groups such as secular and educated, predominantly urban populations – will, as a rule, suffer in such processes if the ever-present tensions are allowed to escalate.

The situation differs in each of the countries of the region, but there is one major similarity among them – multiculturalism is perceived as an exogenous factor, as an imposed ideology that is not homegrown in the Balkans, even though the Balkans has always been anything but ethnically homogeneous. Bosnia's post-Dayton governance model is both a triumph of multiculturalism and its tragedy. The power-sharing arrangement between Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs ensures representation but leads to gridlock and inefficiency. National politics, where nationalist parties still hold much influence, has seen attempts made at moving beyond strictly ethnic identities to regional ones, but the scars of war and nationalist rhetoric continue to be clear obstacles to a unified national identity. The status of Kosovo, which is over 90 per cent ethnic Albanian but with a large Serbian minority, presents unique challenges due to decades-long ethnic cleansing. Serbs and other non-Albanians have also suffered due to failed minority integration and decentralization. While there are examples of the normalization of relations and cooperation, the political tensions between Kosovo and Serbia often eclipse these efforts, making the path toward reconciliation difficult.

Multiculturalism is perceived as an exogenous factor, as an imposed ideology that is not homegrown in the Balkans.

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The case of North Macedonia is peculiar in an opposite way. There are plenty of examples here of a multicultural surplus, with identity-politics-obsessed elites and militants walking a fine line between peace and war. Hailed as a model example of how to successfully bargain with ethnic tensions, the Ohrid Framework Agreement – signed in 2001 among Macedonian and Albanian leaders, including former warlords – granted more rights and autonomy to the Albanian minority, which helped somewhat stabilize the country, rather than sending it into another bloody civil war like Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Challenges do remain, of course, especially with language policies and the proper balance between national and ethnic identity. A prominent failure to apply the principles of equity among communities was presented as part of the Bulgarian-Macedonian identity rift, which was preceded by the dispute between Greece and Macedonia that resulted in constitutional amendments within the framework of bilateral conditionality. Whether North Macedonia will be able to serve as a good example in solving inter-ethnic issues through negotiation and compromise remains to be seen.

New/old challenges (re)emerging

Serbia is generally viewed, and perceives itself, as occupying a central position in the Balkans – geographically and politically – which makes its approach towards multiculturalism important for regional stability. Its diverse ethnic composition, with sizable communities of Hungarians, Bosniaks, Roma, Albanians and others, has led to the implementation of comprehensive policies aimed at the protection of minority rights. Probably the key positive step was the creation of the National Councils of National Minorities, which gave a degree of autonomy to ethnic groups in managing their own cultural, educational and linguistic matters – something that the Albanian minority lacked in 1990s when the Kosovo conflict escalated. These measures, however, are confronted with great difficulties. In regions like Sandžak, there are serious socio-economic disparities and political tensions that can impede integration processes between Bosniaks and Serbs, as well as trust-building measures between them.

The Roma face systematic marginalization with inadequate access to education, health and housing – testimonies to failed policies designed to be inclusive. Furthermore, unresolved relations with Kosovo spilled over to affect Albanians who remained in Serbia's most southern municipalities and added complexity to an already multicultural framework. Nationalist rhetoric, dominant in the political discourse, continues to undermine efforts towards building a more inclusive and cohesive society. Such challenges show that while Serbia has taken some steps to-

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ward accommodations of its diversity, there is a long way to go regarding structural inequalities and the promotion of real multiculturalism. For now, multiculturalism serves as an infrastructure for a sort of nationalist heaven, providing many nations' community leaders with external powers to oppress communities freely outside their respective borders internally. What is particularly concerning is the concept of the "Serbian World", modelled after the "Russian World", which reminds many non-Serbs of the 1990s and the attempt to change state and ethnic borders by force.

Croatia's path to multiculturalism has been much determined by its post-independence history and its relationship with the Serbian minority, who were seen as an obstacle that should be removed. Many Serbs were displaced and discriminated against during and after the Croatian war of independence, just as many Croats were in areas under the control of Serbian forces during the civil war. Memories of the war are still fresh and part of everyday ideology, so reconciliation is slow. Indeed, various international reports commonly refer to the great strides made in minority rights, including legal protections and cultural preservation programmes. Festivals also show promise, since these events allow for Croatian-Serbian cooperation, at least in border areas, although here too old prejudices and political disputes sometimes arise.

Montenegro has long been widely characterized as a model of peaceful coexistence among the Balkans.

Montenegro has long been widely characterized as a model of peaceful coexistence among the Balkans because its population consists of Montenegrins, Serbs, Bosniaks, Muslims, Albanians and Croats, among others. Its constitution specifically recognizes those groups, and its policies emphasize multiculturalism as a prominent part of national identity. However, political polarization between pro-Serbian and pro-Montenegrin factions sometimes boils over into ethnic tensions. Inclusion efforts for the Albanian minority and addressing the needs of the Roma community show how hard the way can be to turning laws into actual inclusion. Montenegro's success lies in keeping this fragile balance while continuing its EU accession process. It seems almost certain that NATO would prevent a civil war if someone tried to provoke it, although there remains a bitter taste as two such closely related nations – Serbians and Montenegrins – who share many cultural traits, have managed to reach a point where they fear war.

Albania is one of the few exceptions, as its population compared to the other Balkan nations is rather homogeneous. Overall, non-Albanian communities are almost completely assimilated. Still, it does have minority groups such as Greeks, Macedonians, Roma and Vlachs, with very few Serbs remaining in the country. Albania has signed many international conventions for the protection of minori-

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ty rights, but their implementation is uneven. Relations with the Greek minority, mainly in southern Albania, long have been tense, but recent steps towards improving bilateral relations with Greece have helped reduce tensions. The case of Albania, in terms of religious tolerance, with its peaceful coexistence of Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Catholics, has often been cited as a model for the region – a potential proponent of multicultural harmony. However, there is a saying: "No one is a prophet in their own village." This underscores how rarely we learn from each other and persist in seeking help from the West, the East, and even farther afield.

New strategies and approaches

Multiculturalism, in principle, offers a clear path towards a more inclusive and prosperous future. However, it also requires us to address the deep-rooted challenges of nationalism, inequality and political instability. Back in the early 2000s there was hope that Balkan governments would embrace diversity and start to transform complex cultural heritage, as well as the conflicts associated with it, into a source of strength and unity. Today, prospects are again gloomy, so a less optimistic and more realistic analysis is needed if we wish to avoid repeating the scenario of the 1990s.

The anthropological approach to multiculturalism is distinct from more typical frameworks, such as legal or political science perspectives, which often focus on standardized models, rights-based policies and institutional structures. Anthropology, in contrast, prioritizes the fluid, dynamic and often contradictory ways in which collective identities are experienced and expressed in everyday life. This divergence is particularly relevant in the Balkans, where the reactive nature of collective identity, shaped by historical struggles against great empires and, at times, against neighbouring states, defines a need for a unique anthropological view of multiculturalism. Unlike political science, which might emphasize state-building or governance, or legal frameworks that prioritize codified protections and equalities, anthropology sees multiculturalism in the Balkans as deeply intertwined with anticolonial and post-imperial narratives, especially including the internal imperialism issue.

A less optimistic and more realistic analysis is needed if we wish to avoid repeating the scenario of the 1990s.

These narratives instil cultural diversity with both a sense of pride and conflict, as identities emerge not in isolation but in resistance and opposition, reflecting the region's complex history of domination, rebellion and fragmentation. This re-

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active and often contested nature of identity makes the anthropological lens especially critical for understanding the peculiarities of Balkan multiculturalism, where shared cultural spaces coexist with tensions born of historical grievances and aspirations for sovereignty.

There are several possible strategies to advance truly multicultural thinking. First, the governments of the Balkans should focus on strengthening minority-related anti-discrimination laws and invest in programmes that encourage the economic and social inclusion of minority communities while, at the same time, ensuring the rights of the individuals within communities themselves. Regional cooperation through cross-border initiatives would also help to bridge divides and foster a sense of common purpose. The role of civil society organizations and media is, in principle, very important for the advancement of multiculturalism if subject to careful management. They should not advance identity-based rifts that usually stem from an emphasis on collectives over individuals who are supposed to "belong".

The NGOs and community groups also, in principle, facilitate interethnic communication, organize cultural events or even lead campaigns for inclusive policies. Although, in the current climate of the great return of the state and identity in our lives, this sometimes may seem counterproductive. The engagement of youth, being the future of the region, in such initiatives is paramount, having in mind that our youth has turned illiberal compared to our generations that believed Eastern, Central, and South-Eastern Europe would save itself from the grip of collectivism.

Additionally, the role of international organizations in maintaining stability and fostering inclusiveness, such as the EU and the United Nations, becomes critical. Transitional justice and historical reconciliation programmes go a long way to address the accumulated grievances fuelling ethnic tensions. Thus, the capacity for implementing multicultural policies will require continuous financial and technical support, but most importantly, the end to an overemphasis on identity issues in the process of European integration and the prompt inclusion of the region in the Union. EE

Miloš Milenković is a professor of ethnology and anthropology at University of Belgrade. He is the author of the book *Intangible Cultural Heritage and Reconciliation in the Western Balkans. An Anthropological Perspective*, which was published in 2024 by Routledge.

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From civic-minded, multinational Vojvodina to patriotic, nationalist northern Serbia

BORIS VARGA

Vojvodina and its capital Novi Sad had been a multicultural region that once enjoyed significant autonomy from Belgrade. Sadly, it became the consolation prize that Serbian nationalists received in exchange for an independent Kosovo. Anything that deviates from the narrow framework of Serbian nationalism is now considered separatism in Vojvodina.

The Serbian region of Vojvodina – once a civic, multicultural and economic phenomenon – is rapidly being destroyed politically. In February of last year, the region remembered 50 years since the adoption of the Constitution of the Socialist Autonomous Province of Vojvodina in the former Yugoslavia. At that time, Vojvodina had its own judicial, legislative and executive authorities. It had its own financial revenues. Like Kosovo, Vojvodina had almost all the elements of a republic, but it was still a part of Serbia. During the 1980s, Vojvodina was one of the most developed parts of socialist Yugoslavia in terms of GDP, after Slovenia and Croatia.

The collapse of socialist Yugoslavia began in 1988 precisely from Novi Sad, when Slobodan Milošević dismissed the leadership of the autonomous province of Vojvodina. These events were called the "anti-bureaucratic revolution" or the

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"yogurt revolution", because state-backed demonstrators threw packages of yogurt at Vojvodina's administrative buildings. However, the ultimate goal of that operation was not only Vojvodina, but control over Kosovo. Two years later, Milošević abolished the autonomy of Vojvodina and Kosovo, which led to the independence of Slovenia and the outbreak of war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The wars in the former Yugoslavia, in which Serbia was largely the aggressor, changed the ethnic picture of Vojvodina during the 1990s. National minorities fled the war and military mobilization.

Takeover

The fall of Milošević in the year 2000 revived the issue of restoring the autonomy of Vojvodina. The region, however, was not handed back the autonomy it once had. Moreover, Serbia's entire authoritarian and nationalist potential was seen in its attitude towards Vojvodina and greater centralization. Shortly after the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) came to power, the constitutional court of Serbia in 2013 challenged two thirds of the new Vojvodina statute, which treated Vojvodina as one large municipality.

Due to false fears of separatism, the Vojvodina office in Brussels was abolished. The government also abolished the renewed regional Vojvodina Academy of Sciences and Arts, which greatly irritated nationalist academic circles in Belgrade. There are now two flags symbolizing Vojvodina – one that resembles the EU flag and the traditional one similar to the 19th century Serbian flag.

Historically, Vojvodina was not just the breadbasket of Yugoslavia – providing wheat, corn and delicious bacon – there was a significant cultural influence from the region as well. The Vojvodina neo-avant-garde in literature, which emerged in the late 1960s and during the 1970s, still has an impact on the literary scene in the region today. The better-known representatives of the Novi Sad neo-avant-garde include Slobodan Tišma, Vladimir Kopicl, Katalin Ladik, Judita Šalgo, Miroslav Mandić and Slavko Bogdanović.

The New Wave in Yugoslav punk and rock music in the late 1970s was represented by the Novi Sad bands "Pekinška patka", "Luna/La Strada", "Laboratorija zvuka", "Obojeni program", as well as the world-famous pioneer of electronic music Mitar Subotić Suba, better known as Rex Ilusivii. The film director Želimir Žilnik from the so-called "Black Wave" of Yugoslav film, the winner of the Golden Bear at the 1969 Berlin Film Festival, still tours the world with his films.

Until the collapse of Yugoslavia, Novi Sad was considered the capital of comics. Zoran Janjetov, Branislav Bane Kerac, Svetozar Toza Obradović and Stevan

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Subić are the most prominent comic book authors from Vojvodina who have been published worldwide.

Novi Sad has even been recognized as a European Capital of Culture in 2022. Citizens, consumers of culture, felt little of all the aforementioned achievements of Vojvodina's culture during that period of leadership of European culture as a whole. New permanent projects remained only on paper, although millions of euros were pouring into bank accounts. The multicultural character of Vojvodina remained invisible, except for a few folklore concerts in the costumes of the nations living in Vojvodina.

Under threat of historical revisionism

The busts and monuments that have been erected in Novi Sad in recent years do not reflect the authority of the people living in Vojvodina. The only recent monuments in Novi Sad that give a multinational image of Vojvodina are the bust of the Ukrainian writer Taras Shevchenko and the translator Feher Ferenc, as well as the sculpture of Hungarian musician (tamburi player) Janika Balas. Far from the public eye in Novi Sad are the busts of the Slovak pan-Slavist Pavol Šafárik and Hungarian writer Sándor Petőfi. Central European Vojvodina would only be enriched by memorials or plaques to contemporary authors such as Julijan Nadj Mitja, Sziveri János and Bada Dada Tibor.

On the other hand, there is now a monument in the centre of Novi Sad to the Serbian nationalist and antisemite Jaša Tomić, which in recent years has served as a gathering place for young neo-Nazis. Nationalists from the Serbian Progressive Party and the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians plan to erect a memorial to the "innocent victims of the 1944–45 war", which would also include the names of those who served in the ranks of the collaborationist Miklós Horthy's army. Historical revisionism is one of the main lines of conflict between the ultra-right and the strong anti-fascist left in Vojvodina.

Historical revisionism is one of the main conflicts between the ultra-right and the strong anti-fascist left in Vojvodina.

In recent years, political representatives of Vojvodina from the ranks of the Serbian Progressive Party have even avoided calling the province Vojvodina, instead calling it "northern Serbia". Why is that? Vojvodina is Yugoslavia in miniature. A test for Serbia's readiness to integrate into the EU. That is why it is the nightmare of every Serbian nationalist. In Vojvodina today, the capacity for civic culture is not recognized, although the language of universal creation is Serbian.

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Vojvodina is the consolation prize that Serbian nationalists received in exchange for an independent Kosovo. Anything that deviates from the narrow framework of Serbian nationalism will be considered separatism in Vojvodina. Yet Vojvodina fits into the new concept of Central Europe ruled by pro-Russian nationalists and populists – Aleksandar Vučić, Viktor Orban and Robert Fico. Novi Sad has become the largest construction site in the Western Balkans when it comes to neoliberal business. Large corrupt and non-transparent contracts and deals in Serbia involving China and Russia can also be seen in Vojvodina.

Origins of change?

The largest greenfield investment in Serbia, worth more than one billion US dollars, is the Chinese tire factory Shandong Linglong in Zrenjanin. It is an environmentally controversial investment in a place that was the leader in the food industry in the former Yugoslavia. After Kosovo declared independence in 2008, Russia bought the state-owned Serbian Oil Industry from Novi Sad (NIS Naftagas) at an extremely low price – just 400 million euros. Moscow therefore took on the role of advocating for denying Kosovo recognition in the UN Security Council.

Two months ago, 15 people, mostly young people, died when a canopy collapsed during renovations at the Novi Sad railway station. The tragedy was caused by corrupt practices and unprofessionalism, and sparked mass protests in Serbia against the Serbian Progressive Party government. Companies from China and Hungary participated in the renovation of the Novi Sad railway station and worked under non-transparent deals.

The protests now led by students have been going on for several months and have spread throughout Serbia, first starting in Novi Sad. The symbol of the protest is a wide-open bloodstained hand with the slogans "Your hands are bloody" and "Corruption kills". The latest anti-regime protests show that the autocratic regime in Serbia is starting to crack and that citizens are ready to fight it on the streets, peacefully and stoically. EE

Boris Varga is a political scientist and journalist. He earned his master's degree from Lviv National University in Ukraine, at the Faculty of Journalism, Department of International Media and Information, and his PhD at the University of Belgrade, at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Serbia. He is an author and a long-term associate of several international and regional media and non-governmental organizations. A more detailed biography with books and publications can be found on the website: www.borisvarga.com.

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Serbia's students deliver a significant blow to the regime

FILIP MIRILOVIĆ

Serbia has been witnessing the largest protests ever in its history in response to the tragic collapse of the main railway station's roof in Novi Sad. The government's response has not been sufficient to meet the protesters' demands, as they continue to blockade universities and major roads. How long either side can maintain its position, however, remains to be seen.

University blockades and protests have been rattling Serbia for the past two months. Dissatisfied citizens, mostly students, are demanding accountability from the government for the tragedy in Novi Sad, which claimed 15 lives and left two others seriously injured. For the first time, the ruling party is facing immense public pressure. However, aside from the populist measures, threats and intimidation, it has offered no meaningful response to appease the masses calling for justice.

As the regime faces its most significant political crisis to date, the ruling party is losing support. Students continue to blockade universities and major roads. Meanwhile, Serbia's opposition remains entirely passive. Plagued by internal disputes, opposition leaders, as in the past, lack concrete strategies to elevate the current public unrest to a higher political level and prepare the groundwork for a serious challenge in the upcoming elections.

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The tragedy which triggered the protests

On November 1st 2024, the concrete canopy at the newly reconstructed Novi Sad railway station collapsed. Fourteen people died on the spot, while several others sustained serious injuries. One person later succumbed to their injuries. The reconstruction of the Novi Sad station had been completed just a few months before the tragedy occurred, after three years of construction work. Immediately after the tragedy, pro-regime media outlets and certain officials from the Serbian Progressive Party launched a campaign to deflect responsibility, attempting to convince the public that the canopy had never been part of the reconstruction.

Five days after the tragedy, a large protest was held in Novi Sad. The government responded by arresting activists, opposition politicians and even ordinary citizens, accusing them of violent behaviour at public gatherings. However, the repression did not have the intended effect. Instead, it further inflamed an already outraged public.

The current Serbian government heavily focuses its political marketing on showcasing an idealized image of progress, highlighted by projects like luxury housing developments, highways, modern stations and grand stadiums. The reconstruction of the railway station in Novi Sad was one of the projects the ruling elite in Serbia took particular pride in. However, much like many others, it turned out to be nothing more than a façade – a Potemkin village with a tragically disappointing outcome. The station was ceremonially opened multiple times for promotional purposes, only to be closed again so that construction could continue. The entire process was highly non-transparent, with the public and media kept in the dark for a long time about the project's total cost. It was later revealed that the entire reconstruction amounted to around 65 million euros, with 16 million euros spent on the station building itself.

The station was also inaugurated during the visit of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to Serbia. In the days and months following the opening, it became evident that the works had not been fully completed. The reconstruction work on this station was carried out by a consortium of Chinese companies called CRIC and CCCC, which hired additional subcontractors, Serbian companies close to the ruling party. Immediately after the accident, they issued a statement saying that no work had been performed on the canopy itself, in accordance with the reconstruction project plan.

Since the prosecutor's investigation is still ongoing, the cause of the accident has not yet been officially disclosed. However, shortly after the collapse, some engineers involved in the reconstruction process, primarily as independent consultants or supervisors, spoke out publicly. One of them claimed that the canopy col-

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lapsed because a massive steel structure with heavy glass panels was added to it during the reconstruction. Another member of the reconstruction team, a geological engineer, stated that in 2023 he had requested the removal of the marble panels from the building's facade to inspect the condition of the substrate and counterweights, as outlined in the project. He added that the cause of the collapse was either the additional load placed on the canopy during reconstruction or the corrosion of the counterweights. However, his requests at the time were ignored.

Alongside public statements, videos have surfaced on social media showing workers carrying out construction on the canopy during the reconstruction process. It has become evident that the current administration, deeply entrenched in corruption and burdened by a substantial history of opaque projects and related scandals, attempted to deflect responsibility through spin tactics. This time, however, a significant portion of the public saw through their efforts, paving the way for the events that followed.

Students for justice

That same month, across Serbia, fifteen-minute protests titled "Stop, Serbia" began taking place in memory of the 15 victims of the Novi Sad tragedy. Through peaceful demonstrations, protesters are blocking traffic for 15 minutes as a symbolic act of remembrance. During one such event in mid-November, in front of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (FDU), an organized group attacked students and professors from the faculty, while nearby police refused to intervene. Some of the individuals involved in the attack on the students are suspected to be officials of the ruling party.

A few days later, FDU students staged a blockade of the faculty, presenting their demands. They called on the ministry of interior to identify and prosecute those responsible for the attack, ensure criminal accountability for the tragedy in Novi Sad and release the complete documentation regarding the station's reconstruction. FDU students were soon joined by other faculties, and within two weeks, more than 30 faculties across public universities suspended their activities. A majority of professors, along with numerous prominent public figures, publicly supported the students, who organized daily traffic blockades. The list of demands grew to include a significant increase in state funding for higher education. On several occasions there were incidents, when drivers, outraged that they had to wait for the blockade to end, drove their cars into students. A couple of students sustained injuries. However, these attacks only strengthened the resolve of the protesters.

These student protests are the largest in Serbia since the massive demonstrations of 1996 and 1997, when students similarly defied the regime of Slobodan

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Milošević. The faculties are blocked and classes have been suspended. The current government has spent years attempting to bring the faculties of public universities under its control. With some, they succeeded to a greater extent, while with others, to a lesser degree. One of the mechanisms employed was the control of student organizations and, consequently, the students themselves through these organizations. By rewarding representatives of these organizations with government jobs, the authorities managed to pre-empt student uprisings. However, these protests are different.

The current student blockades operate without a centralized structure or individual decision-makers. Decisions are reached collectively in broad plenums open to all interested students at the faculties and are carried out by working groups with designated members. Each university has the autonomy to make its own decisions, and even students' appearances in the media and their speeches at protests are clearly regulated in such a way that an individual can appear only once. This system ensures that no one can emerge as a leader.

Without a defined leadership and political influence from opposition parties, the students have significantly limited the government's room for manoeuvre. Today, the authorities lack a specific target they can approach with blackmail, threats or bribery. In addition to the students, Serbia has been facing strikes by educators and farmers for months. They believe that the government's official policies have pushed them to the brink of survival. Beyond issuing threats and exerting pressure through top state officials, the authorities have failed to provide an adequate response to the protests.

Largest demonstration in Serbia's history

Immediately after the collapse of the canopy in Novi Sad, the president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, urged the relevant authorities to identify those responsible for the incident. His statement was met with scepticism among opposition-leaning members of the society. The 12-year rule of the SNS has consistently demonstrated a pattern where genuine culprits are rarely held accountable. Instead, public outrage is typically pacified through the arrest of scapegoats and media-driven narrative manipulation.

By late November, when it became clear that damage control was not working in the regime's favour, approximately ten people were arrested. Among them were the minister of transport, construction and infrastructure, Goran Vesić, who had previously resigned for moral reasons; the current director of the state company Serbian Railways Infrastructure; the former director of the same company; as well

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as several engineers and consultants involved in the reconstruction project or responsible for oversight. However, no one from the consortium of Chinese companies or their subcontractors involved in the project has been arrested.

In mid-December, the Serbian government announced it would fulfil one of the students' demands – the publication of documentation regarding the reconstruction of the railway station. The documentation, publicly posted on the official government website, was intended to undermine further student blockades. Nonetheless, the students continued their protests, a move that ultimately proved to be both justified and effective. The faculty of civil engineering analysed the published documentation and determined that all key documents related to the segment of the reconstruction suspected of corruption and poor execution were missing.

Therefore, on December 22nd, a massive protest took place in the heart of Belgrade. More than 100,000 people gathered at Slavija Square to demand the fulfilment of their requests. Alongside students, the protest was organized with the active involvement of educators and farmers. This was the largest demonstration in the history of Serbia, surpassing even the historic October 5th protest in 2000, which became a symbol of the fight for democracy and the fall of Slobodan Milošević's regime. The protest remained peaceful, with police refraining from intervention, except for a few isolated arrests earlier in the day. Parallel to these events, certain high-ranking officials of the ruling party publicly issued threats against students, stating that they were "barely restraining party members from grabbing sticks to beat the students". Some students have received threats from unknown numbers or are facing various forms of pressure.

Meanwhile, pro-government media have been running a continuous campaign to downplay the protests and smear students who stand out in any way. During the traditional New Year's visit of Croatian technical university students to their peers in Belgrade, pro-regime outlets published articles accusing the students from Zagreb of being "spies" for the Croatian intelligence services. According to such groups, they were allegedly sent to "organize protests and overthrow the government in Serbia".

Students were followed around Belgrade, secretly photographed, and their names were later published in tabloids. The portal *Novosti* took it a step further by illegally acquiring and publishing copies of Croatian passports belonging to two Serbian students from the Faculty of Organizational Sciences, who hold dual citizenship. Journalists from *Novosti* capitalized on their dual citizenship to frame them as alleged Croatian spies, reinforcing claims of supposed Croatian intelligence meddling in efforts to overthrow Vučić.

From the very beginning of the protests, it was evident that the government lacked an adequate response to the public's discontent. The massive demonstra-

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Photo: Trxiswan / Shutterstock

Students on Slavija Square during a protest in Belgrade demanding justice for the 15 lives lost in the tragic collapse of a Novi Sad station roof.

tion at Slavija further weakened their position, to the point where even Vučić admitted that "a large number of people" had gathered. A few days later, the Serbian Progressive Party organized a counter-rally in Belgrade, purportedly representing students who claimed to want to return to their studies. Pro-government media reported that 40,000 "students" attended the event. However, it soon became apparent that students made up only a small fraction of the attendees, and the event was far less massive than reported, as the congress centre hosting the gathering could accommodate only a few thousand people. Media outlets specializing in debunking fake news confirmed that a significant portion of those present were noticeably older than typical students, with many identified as officials from the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS).

Students' freedom march

The series of protests all over the Serbia continued during January as well. On one occasion more than 50,00 protesters filled the tiny streets around the national broadcaster Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), demanding from its director to enable

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objective reporting from the protests. One of the symbols of this protest became a large cardboard sandwich that the students brought to the director of RTS. In the last 12 years, the sandwich has become a symbol of obedience, as the ruling party distributes it to supporters at its rallies, many of whom are forced to attend.

On January 26th this year, students organized a 24-hour blockade of several streets in Belgrade. Tens of thousands of citizens came to support them during the day and night. Two days before this blockade, students had called for a general strike. Many people responded by not working that day, while a large number of cafés, restaurants and shops remained empty. The very same day Vučić organized a rally in a city called Jagodina, in central Serbia. It was supposed to be a huge counter-rally at which he would announce the establishment of a new movement for the people and the state. The details of the movement are still unknown. Compared to the current protests, the Vučić rally was a total debacle. Despite all the logistical machinery of the ruling party and the organization of transporting people from all over Serbia, Vučić's speech at the rally was attended by just over 15,000 people.

Trying once again to seemingly fulfil the student's demands, Vučić addressed the public and allegedly showed the rest of the documentation on the reconstruction of the station that was missing. Yet again, the faculty of civil engineering formed a team of experts to inspect it. The result was the same – some crucial documents are missing. Also, the experts urged that there is a huge chance that some of the documents had been forged in the meantime.

In the night after the 24-hour blockade, a group of students in Novi Sad stuck stickers on the bins in front of the SNS premises. They were immediately attacked by the group of individuals who came out of the premises. Not long after, there was another attack on a group of students who were nearby. The attackers were carrying baseball bats. One female student was beaten. The next morning brought unexpected news. The prime minister Miloš Vučević addressed the public with a lengthy speech, full of generalities, criticism of the students and speculation about the danger that threatens Serbia from an unknown external enemy. However, in the end he resigned. A few hours later, the mayor of Novi Sad also resigned.

To demonstrate their persistence, a column of student protesters set out on a two-day march from Belgrade to Novi Sad.

Yet, the students' response was clear – the resignation does not change anything, since the demands have not been fulfilled. To once again demonstrate their persistence in the fight against the corrupt system, a column of students set out on a two-day march from the Serbian capital to Novi Sad, almost one hundred kilometres long. Exactly three months after the accident, a large protest was organized there, where tens of thousands of people gathered.

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The fate of the blockades

Student blockades and protests in Serbia have proven that, after 12 years in power, the regime can no longer maintain the same level of control over the society as it once did. Indeed, the collapse of the canopy sparked a wave of dissatisfaction that could not be placated by populist measures. But what is the fate of the blockades?

It is highly unlikely that the Serbian government will ever fully meet the demands, as doing so would entail addressing highly unfavourable questions related to the reconstruction itself. Consequently, this would open a Pandora's box of corruption and incompetence in infrastructure projects, an area on which the regime heavily relies to maintain its support. Whatever the epilogue will be, the student rebellion managed to do something that no other protest in the last 12 years has done – it showed all the weaknesses of the regime, but more importantly that the changes are very possible.

Meanwhile, the Serbian opposition, mired in internal conflict and unprepared to address the social crisis in the country, remains dormant. Public opinion polls indicate that the tragedy in Novi Sad and the ensuing protests have led to a decline in the popularity of the Serbian Progressive Party. However, the votes that the SNS is losing are not transferring to the opposition but are instead shifting to the undecided or political abstainers. While the blockades have dealt a significant blow to the regime, to prevent it from fully recovering once the blockades end, the discontent must be channelled into a political struggle led by the opposition. With the resignation of the prime minister and the fall of the government, Vučić has two options: To give the mandate to someone else from the ruling coalition and form another government that will represent the executive power only on paper, or to call for new elections. In the latter case, he will most probably lose a significant part of the parliamentary mandates. However, it certainly won't be enough for the new opposition government.

Although the students have distanced themselves from any political influence from the very beginning, the opposition's role is not to passively observe such events, but to find a platform to actively engage with the public's discontent. Otherwise, the simmering dissatisfaction of opposition-leaning citizens will remain trapped in political apathy and indifference, even during the next elections. As of the conclusion of this text, the blockades are still ongoing. EE

Filip Mirilović is a freelance journalist based in the Western Balkans. He is a regular contributor to *Vreme* – a weekly magazine based in Belgrade. He mostly covers topics related to security and politics.

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Azerbaijan's foray into "anti-colonial" advocacy

SVENJA PETERSEN

Over the past year, Azerbaijan has increasingly cast itself as a liberating force for the overseas territories under French control. What can Azerbaijan gain from leading the charge against "French colonialism in Mayotte", an island that could hardly be further from its territory?

Relations between France and Azerbaijan have soured dramatically, with a recent series of diplomatic escalations culminating in several controversial conferences organized by Baku. The conference on the "illegal French occupation of the island of Mayotte" is not the first conference they have organized that is dedicated to the subject of the French Overseas Departments and Regions. As early as May 2024, the Milli Majlis, the Azerbaijan National Assembly, hosted a conference entitled "French Polynesia's Right to Decolonization: Problems and Prospects". This was followed by a conference in October 2024 at the invitation of the Baku Initiative Group (BIG), a platform promoting international cooperation and promoting decolonization. The October conference was titled "The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Consequences of French Colonialism" and was promoted as part of the session of the United Nations Human Rights Committee in Geneva.

Even at COP29, which recently took place in the capital of Baku, the Azerbaijani president used the platform to address the French archipelagos in particular.

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Aliyev said: "The so-called overseas territories of France … particularly in the Caribbean and the Pacific, are among the most severely impacted by climate change. The voices of these communities are often brutally suppressed by the regime." With this statement, Aliyev placed the French islands in particular in the foreground, although other Pacific and Caribbean island groups are equally affected by climate change. He proceeded to question both the legitimacy of France's presence and accused the French state of structurally repressive governance on the islands. While the atrocities that occurred under French colonialism are undisputed and the needs of the indigenous populations in the French overseas territories should be addressed, the question arises as to why Azerbaijan, a country that has never been affected by French colonialism, is repeatedly bringing this topic to the fore.

A conference unlike any other

The attendees of the conference on "the illegal French occupation of Mayotte" were treated to a variety of enlightening sessions on topics like "the economic exploitation of Mayotte's natural resources"; "language suppression and cultural erasure"; and "strategies for global advocacy against French colonialism". Guest speakers, largely composed of Azerbaijani state representatives, assured the audience that they were "deeply committed" to bringing justice to the long-suffering residents of Mayotte. Despite the fact that Mayotte voted to remain a French department multiple times, including in a 2009 referendum with over 95 per cent approval, Azerbaijani officials and conference speakers portrayed France's governance of the island as a form of colonial oppression.

The irony is not lost on anyone. Azerbaijan's own record on human rights and minority rights is often criticized, particularly in light of its recent actions in Nagorno-Karabakh, which many scholars describe as an ethnic cleansing of the local Armenian population. Yet, this did not stop the organizers from making an enthusiastic call to "liberate" Mayotte from French clutches – a curious geopolitical pivot that may, incidentally, divert a bit of the world's attention from Azerbaijan's more local issues.

France has consistently condemned Azerbaijan for its recent offensive in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

At this point, it should be reiterated that France's colonial past must be addressed and partially still existing post-colonial practices questioned and overcome. In order to understand the complexity of the French overseas territories and the legacy of French colonialism, it is at least as important to distinguish between the various French overseas territories. Mayotte, for example, has repeatedly voted by a ma-

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jority to remain part of France, whereas in the case of New Caledonia, this matter should be examined more critically in view of the fact that many local Kanak people feel increasingly disadvantaged by a change in voting rights. This new electoral law gives French immigrants to New Caledonia the right to vote there, which many Kanak people question as paternalistic and at the same time influencing possible election results in New Caledonia.

Yet, observers of the conference were left speculating on what motivated Azerbaijan's new interest in the plight of Mayotte. Critics suspect it may be a cleverly crafted geopolitical tit-for-tat in response to France's outspoken criticism of Azerbaijan's policies in Nagorno-Karabakh. France has consistently condemned Azerbaijan for its recent offensive in the territory, accusing it of human rights violations and even advocating for sanctions. So what better way to hit back than to shine a spotlight on France's overseas territories?

Diplomatic repercussions

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a long-standing dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia, has been a flashpoint in the South Caucasus for decades. The situation escalated in 2020 with a brief, but bloody, war that saw Azerbaijan reclaim a significant portion of the territory. The conflict flared again in September 2023, when Azerbaijani forces took control over the remaining parts of Nagorno-Karabakh, effectively ending any Armenian presence in the region. This victory led to the exodus of over 100,000 ethnic Armenians from the area, sparking an international outcry and prompting sharp criticism from France.

> The Azerbaijani foreign ministry accused France of displaying a "pro-Armenian bias" and warned against further interference.

France, home to a substantial Armenian diaspora and a long-standing advocate for minorities threatened by pan-Turkish nationalism such as Kurds, Assyrians and Armenians, has taken an outspoken stance on the issue. President Emmanuel Macron condemned Azerbaijan's actions as a "violation of human rights" and accused Baku of conducting what he described as a policy of ethnic cleansing. The French parliament followed suit, passing resolutions to impose sanctions on Azerbaijan and urging the European Union to review its partnership with Baku. In response, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev accused France of being biased, stating that France's stance ignores Azerbaijani sovereignty and international law.

France's outspoken position has led to strained diplomatic relations, with several political moves fuelling the fire. In early October last year, the French Sen-

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ate voted overwhelmingly in favour of sanctions on Azerbaijan, although these measures are largely symbolic and have yet to be formally adopted by the French government. Additionally, France has lobbied the European Union to reevaluate its energy partnerships with Azerbaijan, which is a major supplier of oil and gas to Europe. In retaliation, Azerbaijan has rebuffed France's mediation efforts in the South Caucasus. The Azerbaijani ministry of foreign affairs issued a statement accusing France of displaying a "pro-Armenian bias" and warned against further interference in its internal matters. Azerbaijan's ambassador to France was recalled for consultations, a diplomatic manoeuvre indicating escalating tensions.

Furthermore, Azerbaijani officials have started courting allies, including Turkey, which has traditionally supported Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Baku has also reinforced ties with other European countries that might take a more neutral stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, signalling that it is prepared to sideline France as a diplomatic player in the region. Azerbaijan and France seem to be increasingly engaged in a tug-of-war over political narratives, accusations of colonialism and influence in Europe. The fact that Azerbaijan is increasingly hosting conferences that question the legal status of the French overseas territories cannot be seen without the lens of France's support for Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh.

A never-ending game

The rupture in Azerbaijani-French relations adds another layer of complexity to the ever-changing geopolitical chessboard in the South Caucasus. The tables are turning faster than ever in the region. Since Armenia's independence in 1991, Russia has been considered the protecting power of the South Caucasus republic. Armenia joined the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Russia opened two military bases in the country, all while supporting its partner logistically and militarily in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (although it did the same with Azerbaijan to a lesser extent). Since the election of Nikol Pashinyan as Armenian prime minister in 2018, Armenian-Russian relations began to deteriorate, especially after the Russians failed to secure the 2020 ceasefire. In Armenia, Russia is now largely seen as treacherous, with Yerevan increasingly withdrawing from formats such as the CSTO. The vacuum that Russia left is now being filled by France, which is now considered the most popular partner country in Armenia according to opinion polls. In view of the large Armenian diaspora in France, France's commitment to the international recognition of the Armenian genocide and Armenia's gradual rapprochement with the EU, this development seems only natural.

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Equally natural thus seems the rapprochement between Baku and Moscow: Russia currently needs Azerbaijan more than ever before to export its natural gas and oil. There have long been suspicions that Russia circumvents western sanctions on its natural resources and continues to sell its natural gas and oil to the EU by transporting relabelled resources through pipelines that start in Azerbaijan. In a sense, Azerbaijan and Russia have found each other to be two players with similar, overlapping interests in the current situation facing global politics.

Over the years, both Azerbaijan and Russia have developed into some of the most autocratically ruled countries in the world. Both states pursue a targeted destabilization of the West for their own purposes. While Russia is primarily concerned with weakening a strong, democratic Europe per se, Azerbaijan's primary goal is, on the one hand, to weaken France due to its policy on Nagorno-Karabakh and, on the other hand, to undermine democracies in Europe in order to advance its own interests. This has been pursued through what is known as the so-called "caviar diplomacy". In geopolitical terms, it would appear as though actors that were meant to find each other have now indeed found each other.

Weaponization of decolonization

What also connects Azerbaijan and Russia is their relatively new interest in the former French colonies and current overseas territories. While Russia has already sent groups of mercenaries to a number of formerly French-occupied African states, such as the Central African Republic and Mali, Azerbaijan has so far been more concerned with expanding its soft power in the French overseas territories, where protesting Kanak activists in New Caledonia have already been observed waving Azerbaijani flags. Both states thus manage to present themselves in a distinct way: as alternatives to the traditional western powers at whose hands the affected states and territories have experienced historical collective traumas.

The crucial point here, however, is that Azerbaijan only attacks France as a supposed occupier in its overseas territories, but not other states such as, for example, the United Kingdom, which also possesses overseas territories but is considered a close partner of Azerbaijan. Therefore, challenging the legitimacy of British Overseas Territories would not be in Baku's strategic interest. The fact that Azerbaijan singles out the French overseas territories once again supports the thesis that Azerbaijan is looking for targeted revenge for France's pro-Armenian stance concerning Nagorno-Karabakh.

Even more striking, however, is the fact that Azerbaijan has recently become a pioneer and advocate for the supposed decolonization of French territories,

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but has not yet critically examined the instigator of its own colonization. While a process of coming to terms with the history of Russian occupation and reclaiming their own identity has been set in motion in many former Soviet republics such as Georgia and Ukraine, and recently also in Armenia and Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan instead prefers to deal with French colonialism. Such a critical reappraisal of Russian imperialism in Azerbaijan and the inevitable subsequent confrontation with Moscow is not in the interests of the power elites in Baku at the moment. From this point of view, Azerbaijani calls for the decolonization of French overseas territories seem more performative than sincere. Azerbaijan's forays into this highly sensitive field of historical collective traumas are therefore driven more by the instrumentalization and weaponization of decolonization.

Azerbaijan is thus not only initiating a very selective discourse of decolonization but also hijacking civil society movements for its own geopolitical interests and goals. The current example is not the first time that Azerbaijan has appropriated civil society movements for its own purposes. As early as the end of 2022, the original siege of Nagorno-Karabakh was carried out by supposed Azerbaijani eco-activists. They described themselves as environmental activists acting independently of the state without any connections to Baku. Of course, this is hard to believe in a state ranked 130th out of 167 in the *Economist*'s democracy index.

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Yet it was precisely these self-declared eco-activists who managed to initiate the complete blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2022 – entirely in line with Baku's geopolitical interests.

Likewise, the Azerbaijani state is currently using its hypocritical commitment to the fight against French colonialism to its own advantage by utilizing valuable civil society processes dedicated to the critical examination of colonialism. What makes the situation so dangerous is that Azerbaijan appears to have the moral high ground. The human, cultural and economic damage caused by European colonialism is real. However, this is being exploited by Azerbaijan for its own vested interests in its opposition to France's legitimate criticism of Baku's questionable way of retaking Nagorno-Karabakh.

From acknowledgement to action

However, Azerbaijan's partial success in causing displeasure in Paris cannot be seen without the problems that have indeed existed for years in some French overseas territories. The dissatisfaction of the Kanak people in New Caledonia has existed for decades, as they feel patronized by the French metropole. Azerbaijan cannot be held responsible for the violent protests in New Caledonia in June 2024, rather it has "jumped on the bandwagon" of discontent among the Kanak population, as the now imprisoned Azerbaijani peace activist and journalist Bahruz Samadov noted. Separatist movements and disaffection with French rule in New Caledonia has existed for decades, but, as he notes, those in power in Baku know how to use it to their own advantage.

> The dissatisfaction of the Kanak people in New Caledonia has existed for decades, as they feel patronized by the French.

The exploitation of this painful chapter in European colonialism by Azerbaijan should therefore remind Europe to seriously and honestly face up to its own responsibility in the context of colonialism. Only an honest reconciliation process with the affected states on an equal footing can stop the self-serving aspirations of authoritarian states.

In order not to leave the playing field to authoritarian states such as Azerbaijan and Russia, which are pursuing their own interests, Europe should consider a new and honest strategy towards the states and territories affected by European colonialism. In doing so, other European state actors than those with a colonialist past could come to the fore, thus overcoming historical presumptions that some European states, such as France, bring with them. Some EU states, such as the Baltic states and Ireland,

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have had to undergo historical experiences of foreign occupation and colonialism themselves. Perhaps these present-day EU member states should take a more central role in these debates on the part of the EU.

In the geopolitical battlefield of disinformation and the exertion of influence between the European democracies and a multitude of authoritarian states, the EU should consider a new strategy to keep up in this battle. The most appropriate strategy would be a critical examination of one of its darkest chapters – European colonialism. In the end, only those actors who promote honest historical reappraisal at eye-level will be successful in the sense of contributing to human reconciliation and bridging divides. EE

Svenja Petersen is a political economist and scholar of Eastern Europe with degrees from Sciences Po Paris, the London School of Economics (LSE) and the College of Europe in Natolin. She currently works in international development cooperation.

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Is Georgia experiencing its own Belarus moment?

GISELLE BOSSE AND WICKE VAN DEN BROEK

Georgia is currently experiencing one of the most significant waves of protests in its recent history. The intensity of the protests, the high stakes involved and the repression by the authorities evoke comparisons to the 2020 protests in Belarus. However, how similar are these protests, and what can be said about the responses from the Georgian authorities, the European Union and other international actors?

The recent protests in Georgia have seen widespread mobilization across the country, with demonstrators employing various tactics to express their discontent with the government's decision to suspend accession talks with the European Union. In Tbilisi, the capital, tens of thousands of protesters have gathered for consecutive nights, waving Georgian and EU flags while chanting slogans like "Russian slaves" at law enforcement officers. The demonstrations have been largely peaceful. The mobilization has extended beyond Tbilisi, with reports of demonstrations in at least eight other cities and towns. In Khashuri, protesters targeted the local Georgian Dream party office, throwing eggs and tearing down the party's flag. In the Black Sea city of Poti, demonstrators took more disruptive action by blocking access to the main commercial port. Protesters have also used social media effectively to organize and mobilize, leading authorities to target individuals managing these online groups.

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Opposition parties and activist groups have played a significant role in coordinating the protests, despite facing police raids on their offices. The demonstrations have grown in scale, with more than 100,000 protesters reported in some instances. Protesters have employed tactics such as setting up roadblocks and using fireworks against police lines. Notably, the ongoing protests represent a significant shift in public engagement compared to previous demonstrations, extending beyond the usual supporters of the opposition. The protests now include people from various segments of Georgian society. Many diplomats and civil servants have resigned from their positions to protest the government's decision, and these officials have openly supported the demonstrators. Some former ruling Georgian Dream party supporters have also joined the protests. This broad coalition of protesters, spanning different social and political groups, demonstrates the extent of public dissatisfaction with the government's actions.

Belarusians demand a democratic choice

In Belarus, meanwhile, protests erupted in 2020 after the authorities announced that the long-serving president, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, had secured a sixth term with an impossible 80 per cent of the vote. The size of these protests far surpassed previous demonstrations against election fraud, such as those from 2006 and 2010, with up to one million protesters taking part at the same time nationwide. Unlike earlier protests, which were mostly limited to the capital, Minsk, this movement spread across the entire country and enjoyed the support of a broad range of people, including those beyond the traditional opposition groups. Even groups that had traditionally backed the president, such as pensioners and state factory workers, began publicly opposing him.

Unlike in Georgia, the choice for the Belarusians was initially not about the country's geopolitical alignment. While Belarus had built closer ties with the EU in the 2010s, EU membership had never been on the table. As such, the protesters' demands were not concerned with joining the EU, as they are in Georgia. Rather, following 25 years of increased authoritarianism, the people rose up to demand a democratic choice, which they had not had since 1994.

Finally, the mobilization of people lasted for many months. From the summer of 2020 to well into the spring of 2021, there were public protests, something unseen in Belarus before. Whether the Georgian people can keep the momentum of protests going or indeed expand on it remains to be seen. In Belarus, harsh repressions eventually quelled the protests. In Georgia, we can see an increasingly tougher response from the security services as well.

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The crackdowns

In Georgia, the authorities' response to these largely peaceful protests has been disproportionate and brutal. Police have employed a range of aggressive tactics, including water cannons, tear gas, pepper spray and rubber bullets. These methods have been used indiscriminately, often targeting protesters' faces or heads at close range, resulting in severe injuries. For instance, a 22-year-old protester was placed in an induced coma after allegedly being struck by a tear gas canister. The scale of the crackdown is significant, with over 500 protesters detained and more than 100 people treated for injuries, including minors, women, and individuals with disabilities. Journalists have been particularly targeted, with over 50 media personnel reporting injuries or harassment.

The case of Guram Rogava, a journalist who suffered facial fractures after being struck by a riot officer during a live broadcast, exemplifies the deliberate assault on press freedom. Protesters have also reported facing administrative charges that could result in jail time or heavy fines equivalent to several months' wages. Police raids on opposition offices, including those of Coalition for Change, Droa, and Unity-UNM, have been conducted without proper warrants, resulting in the seizure of equipment critical for operations. Key opposition leaders, such as Nika Gvaramia, have been arrested and subjected to violent treatment, with others facing legal charges for alleged involvement in group violence that carry sentences of up to nine years.

Additional examples highlight the severity of police brutality, including physical violence (beatings, kicking, punching) and arbitrary detentions. Riot police used batons to beat demonstrators, even those already subdued. For example, one protester was hospitalized with a concussion after being punched and having his belongings forcibly searched, while other protesters recounted being beaten by multiple officers and one losing consciousness several times as a result. The injuries suffered by the protesters have included broken bones, injuries to faces and eye sockets, open wounds and severe poisoning from tear gas and pepper spray. The police have also used chemical-laced water cannons, causing severe burns to protesters. Another example is a video showing a very young protester being kicked in the face by two police officers whilst already on the ground and defenceless.

In Georgia, the authorities' response to these largely peaceful protests has been disproportionate and brutal.

Reports of police brutality extend beyond the streets. Detainees have recounted mistreatment during transportation and in custody, including threats of sexual violence and severe beatings. Detainees have also reported being denied timely medi-

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cal care, denial of access to legal counsel and being subjected to retaliatory charges such as "hooliganism". The Georgian ombudsman has documented numerous cases of ill-treatment, with 80 per cent of detainees noting police violence. One protester, for example, reported being threatened with sexual violence and beaten after his detention, resulting in a head injury and broken nose. The police tactics also appear to have escalated over time, becoming more aggressive as protests continued.

The involvement of unidentified, masked individuals in the crackdown raises serious concerns about accountability. These forces, described by the opposition leader Elene Khoshtaria as "specially trained, large individuals who resemble wrestlers more than police officers", have been implicated in some of the most violent incidents. The human rights lawyer Tamar Oniani argued that the systematic nature of the violence suggests it has the endorsement of the authorities, noting that previous investigations into similar incidents have resulted in little accountability.

In Belarus, the GUBOPiK – security services specifically assigned to political repression – cracked down hard on the protesters. Violently dispersing protests in August, the police used violence, rubber bullets, tear gas and stun grenades against the crowds of peaceful protesters. The video of a group of riot police attacking a car went viral. In four days, 7,000 people were arrested and subjected to systematic torture and degrading conditions. It is estimated that in those early days, at least four protesters died because of excessive violence by the police.

Apart from systematic cases of torture, the regime also forcibly expelled leaders of the protests – such as the presidential candidate and likely winner of the election, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya – from the country. It also cracked down on journalists, civil society organizations and the free media. The internet was shut off, reporters detained, and widespread censorship imposed from September 2020. Many detainees have been deprived of access to a lawyer or necessary medicines in the case of (chronic) illnesses.

From early September, police again began arresting large numbers of protesters. By mid-November, the regime had detained a total of 25,000. Many of the detainees were women, as they were at the forefront of the protests. Gender-specific violence has since been used against women, especially in detention camps.

EU, US and Russia involvement

The EU and the United States have both strongly condemned the violence against peaceful protesters in Georgia. The leaders of the US Helsinki Commission condemned the government crackdown and declared the Georgian authorities "illegitimate". In a significant move, the US announced a reduction in ties by

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suspending its "strategic partnership" with Georgia. In early December, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania jointly agreed to impose national sanctions on those responsible for suppressing legitimate protests in Georgia and later in September Germany halted projects worth €237 million in Georgia, including initiatives in green hydrogen, energy grid, and water infrastructure in Batumi. The EU's foreign ministers, ahead of the 2024 summit on December 16th, said that they would discuss "additional measures" against the Georgian authorities after what they described as "credible concerns" of torture over the previous two weeks against pro-EU protesters. Yet, despite these strong words, the EU could have difficulties coming to a consensus during the summit. On December 11th, the Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said Hungary was "completely against the fact that Georgian government officials should be put on a sanction list", stressing that "If any such proposals are received, we will veto them."

While there is no concrete evidence of direct Russian involvement in the current crackdown in Georgia, some analysts speculate about potential scenarios. For instance, if the situation escalates, the Georgian government might seek support from Moscow, potentially resulting in Russian "security assistance" akin to that seen in Belarus in 2020.

When protests erupted in Belarus, the EU was initially slow to react. However, following human rights violations, as reported by Amnesty International, the EU imposed its first round of sanctions against the regime the same day. The EU subsequently also redirected funding and assistance that previously went to governmental agencies and ministries towards civil society groups and the support of activists.

Similar to how the Georgian Dream party suspended accession talks with the EU, the Belarusian regime stopped participating in the EU's Eastern Partnership programme. However, the EU continues to engage with Belarusian civil society within the programme's framework. Since 2020 the EU has supported Belarusian people within six key sectors (civil society, human rights, independent media, education, culture, and entrepreneurs in exile) with 140 million euros through the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument. The EU has also institutionalized its stance on Belarus with two council conclusions: one from October 2020 and one from February 2024. In Georgia, the latest council conclusions remain from before the parliamentary elections.

Conclusion

The situation in Georgia in 2024 and 2025 shares several similarities with the events in Belarus in 2020, yet there are also important differences. While both

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countries have employed concerning tactics against protesters, the police response in Belarus appears to have been more systematic, widespread and severe compared to Georgia. This analysis is based on the current information available on the crackdown on Georgian protesters.

Both countries used excessive force against demonstrators, but the scale and systematic nature of the violence appear more pronounced in Belarus. The authorities in this country employed a wider range of weapons from the outset, including stun grenades, rubber bullets, tear gas and even blanks from Kalashnikov-type rifles. The police response in Belarus appeared more systematic and severe, with widespread reports of torture in detention, including the use of electric shocks and prolonged stress positions.

The scale and systematic nature of the violence appear more pronounced in Belarus.

The scale of violence also differed. In Georgia, over 500 protesters have been detained (so far), and more than 100 people have been treated for injuries. In Belarus, the numbers were much higher, with over 5,000 people detained in the first two days of protests alone. The systematic nature of police actions was more evident in Belarus. For instance, police vans were observed moving slowly through Minsk, with officers leaping out to detain people seemingly at random. In Georgia, police and special forces in uniform and plain clothes have been reported to show a strong presence but there have not been random detentions (based on what we know so far).

However, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn regarding the road ahead, as Georgia seems to be at an early stage of the type of repressions witnessed in Belarus. The authorities in both countries use intimidation to suppress dissent. In Georgia, activists reported threats against their families and administrative charges that could result in jail time or heavy fines equivalent to several months' wages. Opposition leaders were also detained with their offices raided without valid warrants. In Belarus intimidation extended to random arrests on the streets and brutal public beatings designed to instil fear. Protesters were dragged out of cars or homes by riot police without explanation. Furthermore, both governments have failed to hold the security forces accountable for abuses. In Georgia, investigations into police brutality are ongoing but have historically yielded no meaningful outcomes; no officers have been suspended or charged despite widespread evidence of misconduct. Similarly, in Belarus, there has been no accountability for systematic torture or deaths during protests. The government has consistently denied wrongdoing while continuing its repressive practices.

Finally, the critical question is whether Russia will intervene in Georgia, as it did in Belarus. In the second case, Russia's financial aid, propaganda efforts and

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security forces helped to bolster and sustain the Lukashenka regime. Given that Russia currently occupies 20 per cent of Georgia's territory, further incursions cannot be ruled out.

It is, therefore, crucial for the EU and the US to act decisively to prevent Georgia from facing a scenario similar to that of Belarus. Prompt sanctions against the authorities should be imposed, alongside diplomatic, political and logistical support for the protesters. The EU and the US have significant leverage in Georgia, more so than in Belarus, and it is essential that this influence be leveraged to safeguard the Georgian people's aspirations for EU membership and their security. EE

Giselle Bosse is Professor in EU External Democracy Support and Jean Monnet Chair in EU international relations at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Maastricht University, and fellow at the European Democracy Hub in Brussels. She coordinates the work package on EU democracy support in autocratic regimes in the Horizon 2020 project EMBRACE.

Wicke van den Broek is a PhD candidate at Maastricht University, co-coordinating and carrying out research within the Horizon 2020 project EMBRACE. He graduated from the BA European Studies programme at Maastricht University in 2017 before completing a MA in International Relations in Kraków, Poland and a MA in History at the College of Europe in Natolin.

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The controversy about Tajikistan's history textbooks

KAROLINA KLUCZEWSKA

Among its Central Asian neighbours, Tajikistan's history textbooks still most closely resemble official accounts from the Soviet era. They stress the evils of the Russian Empire's expansion to the region. At the same time, they also remain fairly positive about Tajikistan's Soviet experience, underlining the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic's contribution to the Soviet state. Perhaps as a result, they have been caught in Russia's crosshairs.

School textbooks are telling examples of official interpretations of history. They exemplify the narratives that are taught to children as part of their civic socialization controlled by governments. In countries that gained independence after the Soviet collapse, the shifts in historical narratives have been intrinsically linked to the reimagining of these countries' Soviet past by attributing them with new meanings through the prism of post-Soviet nation-building processes. With Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the debates about history textbooks gained a new momentum, and a new meaning. They became part of epistemic decolonization not only from the Soviet Union, but also from contemporary Russia that has monopolized Soviet heritage – presenting it as Russian, and not as common to all states that participated in its making.

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Unintended controversy

In Central Asia, a serious bone of contention for Russia concerns the changing interpretations of the Russian expansion to the region in the second part of the 19th century. This consequently affects discussion surrounding the Soviet state's establishment following the Bolshevik revolution. In particular, Kazakh and Uzbek historians and political scientists increasingly describe these processes as colonial expansion and point to genocidal processes against the local population as a way of exercising control and ensuring subordination. In turn, a growing number of Russian historians and politicians insist that this is fake history and simply amounts to teaching Russophobia to new generations. To prove their argument, they point to what they see as the economic and cultural backwardness of Central Asia in the 19th century, as well as the benevolent impact of the Russian Empire on local communities – as if without realizing that this narrative per se reveals the colonial mindset characterizing, for instance, European colonial powers' attitudes towards Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Unlike its neighbours, in Tajikistan the decolonization debate has so far been rather muted, with no major announcements and official repositioning on the local impact of the Russian Empire and later Soviet rule. To some extent, this careful approach is typical for the country's government. As their modus operandi since the end of the civil war in 1997, Tajik decision makers have been avoiding controversies in international politics. Moreover, given its dependence on Russia, which is the destination for about a million Tajik labour migrants, the authorities have particularly avoided provoking Russia. But the pro-Soviet narratives in Tajik textbooks are not only an outcome of the country's fragile relations with Russia.

> Unlike its neighbours, the Russian and Soviet decolonization debate in Tajikistan has so far been rather muted.

The recent controversy concerning Tajik history textbooks is rather paradoxical. With relatively minor changes, over 34 years of its independence Tajikistan has largely maintained the Soviet-era anti-Russian Empire and pro-Soviet narrative in its textbooks. However, due to Russia's recent reinterpretation of its history and glorification of the Russian Empire, Tajikistan, like its more actively decolonizing neighbours, has fallen victim to an attack by Russian politicians. In October 2024, a political controversy erupted on Telegram after a provocative post was published by the Russian State Duma Deputy Mikhail Matveev. Matveev is a member of the Communist Party of Russia and, remarkably, one of the country's most vocal anti-migrant politicians. In the previous months, he proposed a bill to deprive natural-

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ized Central Asian labour migrants and their families of Russian citizenship for evading military service in Ukraine. He also called for the establishment of separate "Tajik battalions" as part of the Russian army fighting in Ukraine.

Provocative test

This time, in his Telegram post, Matveev called the Tajik history curriculum "anti-Russian propaganda". This is because, as he wrote, in Tajik textbooks the Russian Empire's expansion to the territory of modern-day Tajikistan is described as an "invasion", "occupation" and "colonization". To further bolster the accusation that Tajikistan's policies are Russophobic, he referred to what he described as the "genocide" of ethnic Russians in Tajikistan during the civil war in the 1990s.

Even if Matveev's announcement came from a personal social media channel, it should not be seen as such. In contemporary Russia, the boundaries between governmental and private statements are blurred. Often, politicians and prominent TV personalities make provocative statements about Central Asia in their own name. It is important to remember that the State Duma could not present them as the official position because they are too controversial. In this way, the officials send shockwaves that exert constant pressure and simultaneously test the reactions of neighbours, pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable in Russia's international relations with Central Asia. This has been the case, for example, with the former President and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who in 2022 questioned the sovereignty of Kazakhstan on social media, calling it an "artificial state" and claiming some of its territories as "Russian territories". In that case, the provocation did not end well. In the face of negative reactions from Kazakhstan, the post was later deleted, and Medvedev claimed that his account was hacked.

Surprisingly, Tajikistan, in contrast to its usual calm and reserved approach aimed at avoiding disputes, especially with Russia, responded to Matveev's provocation. The government did so in a similar way to Russia, without making any direct statement but by relying on a personal social media channel of a high-level politician. A few days after Matveev's post, the press secretary of the foreign ministry, Shohin Samadi, published a reply in the Russian language on his own, publicly accessible Facebook account. Instead of defending the Tajik history curriculum, Samadi pointed to Russia's own history textbook titled *The History of Russia* for ninth graders, which was officially approved for use in Russian educational institutions.

I consulted this source. It is evident that when describing the Russian Empire's conquest of Central Asia, the Russian textbook uses a politically neutral tone. The conquest is ambiguously called an "expansion of relations with Central Asian ter-

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ritories". This passive form of speech is often used to tone down the military character of this event and subsequent governance in the region. For instance, without attributing responsibility to the Russian army for the military annexation of one of the Central Asian polities in the Ferghana Valley, the Khanate of Kokand, and its transformation into the imperial entity called Russian Turkestan, the textbook enigmatically states that "in February [1876], it [the Khanate] was abolished." Still, even despite these linguistic attempts to tone down the historical events that are described, the official Russian textbook in fact describes the processes of conquest, occupation and forceful annexation of Central Asia by Russia – and this is what Samadi pointed to.

Along with the Tajik intelligentsia, most Russians left the country in the 1990s due to fighting and poverty.

In his Facebook post, Samadi also referred to Matveev's accusation concerning an alleged genocide of ethnic Russians in Tajikistan in the 1990s. In fact, the Tajik Civil War between 1992 and 1997 was an interregional conflict of a political nature and involved two fighting blocs. The first one was a pro-government faction of former communists that was dominated by people from the Khujand and Kulob regions. The second was the opposition coalition that gathered liberal democratic reformers from Gorno Badakhshan and Islamists from the Gharm region. At the time of Tajikistan's independence, ethnic Russians made up over seven per cent of its population. Undeniably, like other inhabitants of Tajikistan, they suffered as a result of the civil war, but there was no specific targeting of ethnic Russians. Along with the Tajik intelligentsia, most Russians left the country in the 1990s due to fighting and poverty. Currently, according to the recent census, ethnic Russians represent only 0.3 per cent of the population.

In rebutting Matveev's accusation of genocide, Samadi wrote: "I would like to say the following: this is a real incitement of interethnic hostility and discord. Such statements do not bring anything good, except damaging the Tajik-Russian strategic partnership and alliance." While he used the word "I" rather than speak on behalf of the government, in light of the centralized form of governance in the country, his post should not be seen as an expression of a personal position but rather a carefully agreed statement. In this way, Tajikistan's foreign ministry avoided an escalation, but nonetheless signalled its calm yet firm position of dissent on the matter. In fact, Samadi finished his post by cordially proposing to discuss this case through official diplomatic channels at the next Tajik-Russian inter-parliamentary forum.

Matveev, however, replied furiously. In a series of disrespectful posts, he misspelt Samadi's name and ignored his position in the government, instead calling him "a *certain* Shahin Samadi" and referring to the politician by his first name, which is insulting in Russian. Matveev also announced that he, "a doctor of history

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and professor", could indeed "give a couple of lectures". In his show of ethnic and political superiority, Matveev announced that "our empire in the 19th century was forced to protect itself," and so it conquered Central Asia.

As he continued, back then as now, Russians "invested more in the development of this region than they received". Here, he referred to the millions of Tajik and other Central Asian labour migrants who currently work in Russia, thereby presenting their remittances earned through hard work in hazardous conditions in an atmosphere of widespread xenophobia by the public and state authorities alike as Russia's gift to the region. To these offensive remarks, there was no answer from the Tajik side. There could not be any, given the country's position of vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia in the international arena.

What Tajik textbooks say

What do Tajikistan's textbooks actually say about the country's history? The Russian conquest of Central Asia is described in the Tajik-language textbook titled *The History of the Tajik Nation* by Namoz Hotamov, which since 2015 has been taught in the ninth grade. The textbook is critical of the Russian Empire's expansion into the region, directly pointing to its colonial character, but it also does not praise the previous local governments – criticizing them for feudalism.

Referring to three local polities, the Emirate of Bukhara (which encompassed the territory of nowadays Tajikistan), the Khanate of Kokand and the Khanate of Khiva, the text argues: "the rulers, khans and emirs had unlimited rights. They relied on big landowners, feudal lords and powerful priests, and committed all kinds of tyranny against the peasants, craftsmen and artisans." Against this background, the Russian Empire's expansion into Central Asia completely reshaped the socio-economic relations and even had some positive effects. According to the author, it put an end to slavery; brought about innovations in the banking system, agriculture and production; and, importantly, brought an end to frequent conflicts between local rulers.

At the same time, the Russian Empire followed only its own interests, which were mainly economic. The construction of factories and railways in Central Asia, as well as the start of the cotton production, predominantly served the internal market of the empire. Due to the American Civil War (1861–66), the Russian Empire was no longer able to import cotton from that country and so it decided to grow it in Central Asia. The empire thus did not have any "enlightenment mission" towards the region and the life of peasants did not improve. The textbook even argues that French rule in Tunisia and Algeria was "very liberal" compared with how

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the Russian governors of Turkestan treated the local population. Citing a Russian military historian named Alexey Abaza, the author says that the French system would not be suitable for the "semi-savage people of Turkestan". As a result, the handbook claims that the tsarist government created "a unique colonial system" that was based on a "heavy system of exploitation".

The text also argues that one of the biggest disadvantages of Russian colonial rule in Central Asia was the artificial and long-standing division of Tajik people living in Central Asia along the Panj river. While those living above the river would be incorporated into Tajikistan, the ones below the river became citizens of Afghanistan – which was under British influence. The interests of the local population had no meaning to the colonizer.

It might seem that this clearly negative vision of the Russian Empire outlined in the 2015 textbook results from a rethinking of the past through the prism of current nation-building priorities. This, however, is not the case. As a matter of fact, the book is strikingly similar in its content to previous Soviet-era and post-Soviet history handbooks used in Tajikistan. It largely draws on official Soviet narratives about the Russian Empire, from which the Soviet government wanted to distance itself to show its benevolent impact on Central Asia.

Soviet Tajikistan

The establishment of Soviet power in Central Asia, including Tajikistan, is described in the textbook *The History of the Tajik Nation* by Nozim Hakimov. It was released in 2017 and since then has been used by students in the tenth grade. As for the historical facts, in 1924 Tajikistan became an autonomous part of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic and in 1929 it was "upgraded" to a separate status as the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic. Surprisingly, the foreword of the book seems very critical of the Soviet Union, in particular when it comes to the national and territorial delimitation in Central Asia that took place in the 1920s.

Pointing to a manipulation concerning who would be considered Tajik, and where the territories of Soviet Tajikistan lay, the textbook argues: "Historians and politicians of the Soviet period … loudly proclaimed that the Tajiks, after a thousand years of statelessness, had now obtained statehood during the Soviet era. But they silenced the fact that the official languages of the Turkic and Pashtun governments of Bukhara, Kokand and Afghanistan were Tajik and Dari. Another group of Tajiks living in Iran and China was completely forgotten [in the Soviet project for Tajikistan]. In the 20th century, the history of Tajik statehood was considered only within the territories of Russia and its colonization of Bukhara."

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Yet besides this striking, openly critical remark on Soviet national engineering, the rest of the textbook gives a diverging interpretation of the events by identifying a different culprit. Instead of attributing fault to the central government in Moscow, it mentions the negative influences of "enemies of the Tajik people" – pointing to the pan-Turkic intellectual movement in Central Asia which, presumably, engaged in manipulations against Tajik interests (Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkmen and Uzbek are Turkic languages, while Tajik is related to Persian).

The textbook fiercely condemns the local opposition to Soviet rule, the Basmachi movement. The Basmachi were rebels from the Ferghana Valley who were guided by Muslim beliefs and opposed the Russian Empire and later the Bolsheviks. They were active between the mid-1910s and late 1920s, when the remaining Basmachi groups fled to Afghanistan. While the Basmachi saw themselves as a religious liberation movement aiming to free Central Asia from foreign rule, in Soviet historiography they were portrayed as selfish bandits.

In the same official spirit of the Soviet era, Hakimov's textbook continues to describe them as merciless robbers who "did not hesitate to betray their people and religion to protect themselves". As it is elaborated, "the lives and religion of the peaceful population had no value to the Basmachi … The last morsel of food, clothing, tools and even the peasants' children were considered the personal property of the Basmachi … They used the population as their shields." Consistently referring to a "class conflict", the textbook thus sees the establishment of Soviet power in Tajikistan as a local version of the clash between the socialists representing the working class and the bourgeoisie owning the means of production. In the Tajik case, it was a conflict between Russian and local socialists and the Basmachi, who were attributed with all evils. This interpretation of the Basmachi is perhaps the most striking example of the persistence of Soviet-era narratives in contemporary Tajik historiography.

In the same spirit, the book praises the Soviet Union for improving working conditions, building schools and collectivizing the land to later divide it among the peasants. Overall, rather than reinterpreting Tajikistan's Soviet period, it again largely repeats the narratives from previous local Soviet-era and post-Soviet textbooks.

Changing views

When asked by journalists about Tajikistan's Soviet experience, the country's high-level politicians avoid giving a definite answer. They often reply that it is too early to judge this era. They seem to be unsure what to do about this period of history, as they themselves often identify with it personally. Consequently, they dele-

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gate the interpretation of the Soviet period to future scholars. This overall reflects a positivist, globalizing understanding of history as an "objective" discipline, rather than one that is socially constructed and composed of multiple micro-histories.

The country's scholars, even those of the younger generation born after 1991, remain sceptical of the term "decolonization". They tend to see it as offensive to their country. Arguably, this reflects an underlying pride in Tajikistan's contribution to the Soviet state. According to this logic, calling the Soviet period colonial would deprive Soviet Tajikistan of agency and strip it of ownership as part of the Soviet project. In multiple conversations that I have had with the Tajik intelligentsia over the last few years, Tajiks' active participation in the Soviet army during the Second World War to stop Nazi Germany was often mentioned to me as an argument in favour of the Soviet Union. Here, personal family histories of grandfathers participating in anti-fascist mobilization serve as powerful examples.

Overall, Tajikistan remains fairly loyal to its Soviet experience and this is visible in school textbooks. This, however, does not mean that no reassessment of contemporary Russia has been taking place. If previously relations with Russia were viewed by many politicians and the population alike as an extension of the Soviet idea of brotherhood between two nations, this has been slowly changing over the last three years. This is due to a wave of forceful conscriptions of Tajik migrants to the Russian army; an uptick in social xenophobia and discrimination in Russia; a state-led anti-migrant campaign; violent police raids; and illegal deportations. Of course, all of this has helped to serve as a powerful eye opener.

Meanwhile, the controversy about Tajikistan's history textbooks is far from over. In January 2025, the topic was raised again, this time officially in the Russian State Duma. In his speech, the Deputy Sergey Mironov from "Just Russia" expressed his outrage that in Tajik textbooks the Russian Empire's expansion to Central Asia is described as an occupation. He has also unfoundedly claimed that these textbooks are printed with Russian taxpayers' money and, concluding, announced: "Of course we need to put things in order here." EE

Karolina Kluczewska is a research fellow at the Academy of International Affairs NRW in Germany, and a visiting research fellow at United Nations University-Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies in Belgium.

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Russia and Iran

Tactical alignment or strategic alliance?

TIZIANO MARINO

The growing alignment between Moscow and Tehran represents an extraordinary development in the history of their relations, which for centuries have been characterized by intense conflicts and profound rivalry. While it is reasonable to assume that Russia and Iran may grow even closer in the short term, the uncertain nature of their relationship means that their ties could still follow unexpected or unpredictable trajectories.

In recent years, relations between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran have deepened significantly, indicating an apparent shift from mere tactical alignment to a broader strategic convergence. Specifically, since the late 2010s, the two countries strengthened their economic and political ties, transforming mutual diplomatic support from sporadic to systematic. In this respect, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a significant qualitative leap in bilateral relations. Since then, in fact, Russian-Iranian cooperation has expanded in key areas such as defence, technology transfer and nuclear energy, as well as in international relations, which have been strengthened through collaboration in multilateral fora such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS Plus. In addition, a free trade agreement between Tehran and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) has been formalized, highlight-

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ing a shared commitment to boosting trade, particularly in response to the pressures of international sanctions.

However, this process of progressive alignment was not driven by the evolution of respective national strategies. Rather, it was imposed by the changing international landscape, the increasing isolation of both countries and the changes that occurred within their respective institutional structures. This last aspect has been particularly evident in Iran, where traditionally more sceptical factions towards Russia have been largely sidelined. As a result, several issues remain on which Tehran and Moscow continue to hold differing views, despite the prevailing tendency within their diplomatic and military spheres to avoid clashes at this delicate juncture characterized by strong confrontation.

Growing alignment

While it is reasonable to assume that Russia and Iran may grow even closer in the short term, the uncertain nature of their relationship means that their ties could still follow unexpected or unpredictable trajectories. The recent strategic defeat suffered by the two actors in Syria, for instance, may have a detrimental impact on the future of their cooperation in matters of security and intelligence sharing. The Islamic Republic's focus on its regional rivalry with Israel, coupled with the weakening of its proxy network in the Middle East, could furthermore slow down the transfer of weapon systems to Russia, while simultaneously raising the level of demands from the Kremlin, including assistance in the development of its nuclear programme.

> Russia has already largely diversified its supply sources by turning to North Korea for the transfer of weapons and manpower.

Fearing that it would not receive the military assistance needed to sustain the war effort on the Ukrainian front, Russia has already largely diversified its supplies by turning to North Korea for the transfer of weapons and manpower, and to China for dual-use materials. These recent developments underscore that the trajectory of Iran-Russia relations, far from being deterministic, has the potential to exert a significant, both direct and indirect, influence on the strategic outcomes of various conflict areas, spanning from Ukraine to the Middle East and the South Caucasus.

The growing alignment between Moscow and Tehran represents an extraordinary development in the history of their relations, which for centuries have been characterized by intense conflicts and profound rivalry. In particular, the year 1979, with the Islamic Revolution taking place in Iran and the onset of the Soviet

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invasion of Afghanistan, marked the height of mistrust between the two countries, a tension that would only begin to ease with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. During this period, a gradual and incremental rapprochement between Moscow and Tehran began. This was driven primarily by pragmatic considerations and a shared desire to break free from the isolation imposed by the Euro-Atlantic bloc.

The gradual convergence of interests between Iran and Russia only strengthened with the American decision to invade Iraq in 2003. It became more and more entrenched from 2011 onwards, when the two countries decided to support the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria following the outbreak of the Arab Spring. During these years, a genuine Russian-Iranian military partnership had emerged, predating the Russian invasion of Ukraine, yet subsequently strengthened and solidified by it.

From the economic perspective, Iran and Russia have accelerated their cooperation on strategies to circumvent sanctions. Notably, Iran's extensive experience in this area has proven particularly valuable both to the Russian authorities and businessmen. In addition, the two countries shared information on the sea routes in the Indian Ocean needed by their respective "shadow fleets", namely tankers carrying sanctioned oil bound for ports in South-East Asia, where it is rebranded before being sold to third countries. However, despite the good level of cooperation, Iran and Russia as nations are heavily dependent on energy commodity exports. They also continue to compete for access to markets, most notably China.

Differences but cooperation

From the political point of view, cooperation between Iran and Russia has grown over time, forging a friendship that has, however, never developed into a true alliance. Mutual support at the international level, which emerged both at the UN and in alternative fora to the western-led ones, such as BRICS Plus and the SCO, never went beyond supporting each other's anti-US narratives. In other words, despite the material support provided to its Russian partner, Iran has long maintained a low diplomatic profile on the Ukrainian issue in order not to completely undermine its prospects for dialogue with the United States and the European Union, particularly regarding its nuclear programme.

For its part, Russia has also refrained from launching vigorous attacks against Israel, a country with which it shares ancient ties, not only of a demographic nature. Moreover, Iran and Russia hold contrasting views on US politics. This is evidenced by the recent elections, in which the Kremlin hoped for a Trump victory, while Tehran feared the prospect of a new Republican administration as these governments have been traditionally harsh towards the Islamic Republic.

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A further example of Russian-Iranian tactical alignment in trade and connectivity is their joint participation in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a multimodal network of ships, railways and roads to transport goods between India and Central Asia via the Iranian port of Chabahar. Even in this framework, however, differences persist between them concerning, for example, the Russian choice to impose the passage of the corridor through Azerbaijan and not Armenia, an option preferred by both the Iranians and the Indians. Another dossier pits the interests of Moscow and Tehran against each other. This is namely the issue of the creation of a corridor (called by the Azerbaijani government as the "Zangezur corridor") along the Armenian-Iranian border, with the aim of connecting the Azerbaijani Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan with the rest of Azerbaijan. Finally, even on the Iranian nuclear programme itself there have been frictions. Despite existing cooperation on the development of the Bushehr nuclear power plant for civilian purposes, part of the Russian strategic community fears that Iran may develop a military nuclear programme that would undermine national interests, especially in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. This has contributed to a slowdown in assistance.

A key factor that has facilitated the gradual alignment between Moscow and Tehran in recent years, despite persistent divergences in their broad strategic goals, is the gradual marginalization on the domestic front of those strategists and politicians promoting the development of relations with the Euro-Atlantic bloc. Illustrative of this dynamic is what has happened in Iran, where following the withdrawal of the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2018, the hardline front linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) has gained more and more influence and importance in the *nezam* (the system). The main effect of this sort of "militarization" of the Iranian regime has been precisely the development of relations with Russia, which has been viewed with scepticism by reformist sectors that are now scarcely influential.

Evolution and prospects for relations

The Russian invasion of Ukraine fostered the development of relations between Moscow and Tehran, especially from a military point of view. Within the framework of bilateral defence cooperation, Iran has provided the Russian military with drones of various types: from the Shahed-136 and Shahed-131 to the Mohajer-6. At the same time, Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles have been showcased at Russian military exhibitions, as in the case of the long-range Mohajer-10 drone, which has been developed thanks to lessons learnt on the Ukrainian front. Between October

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and November 2022, while the military leadership of Russia and Iran were meeting to work out the details of their cooperation, Moscow allegedly used around 400 Shahed-136 drones against targets in Ukraine, causing massive damage to civilian and military infrastructure.

Iran's drone deliveries intensified in 2023 in parallel with Russia's decision to proceed with the production of Iranian-made drones on its own territory. The military partnership has allowed Russia to launch over 8,000 Iranian-made drones over the skies of Ukraine from the second half of 2022 to September 2024. Since

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then, in April 2024, the Ukrainian Armed Forces began attacks near buildings in the Alabuga Special Economic Zone in the Russian region of Tatarstan, where Iranian drone production facilities were located. Later, the CIA and MI6 began disseminating information about Iranian ballistic missiles being sent to Russia in summer 2024. However, probably due to the failure to send launchers, the missiles did not appear in the skies over Ukraine for months despite the supply. In return for this support, Russia appears willing to send Tehran fighter jets, attack helicopters, trainers and radar systems, all of which are likely to prove valuable in the long-distance conflict with Tel Aviv.

Russia's partnership with Iran has led to the launch of over 8,000 Iranian-made drones over the skies of Ukraine.

Iranian support for Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine has been driven mainly by hardliners in the IRGC and the Supreme National Security Council, and is linked to three main reasons. First, there is a need to break international isolation and find partners in critical areas such as defence. Second, Tehran hopes to overcome the unsuccessful dialogue with the Euro-Atlantic bloc that has not produced any sanctions relief as desired. Finally, the country hopes to ensure profits for those in the establishment involved in the buying and selling of arms to Russia.

However, this foreign policy approach is not shared by large parts of the Iranian establishment and this seems to reflect its essentially pragmatic nature. This feeling also emerged during the conversation I had with a delegation led by Iran's former foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, on the sidelines of the 2022 Tehran Dialogue Forum, when relations with Russia were presented as tied to contingent interests rather than a broad strategic vision. A relationship based on contingencies, however, lends itself to shifts when circumstances change.

Pragmatic and business-oriented

The strong bond created between the IRGC and the Russian establishment has already suffered a severe blow following the recent events in Syria. These threaten to partially change the nature of the alliance. It was precisely in this Middle Eastern country, in fact, that the military partnership that we also saw at work in Ukraine had been consolidated between 2015 and 2016. The sudden fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, however, has exposed all the limitations of cooperation in several respects: the lack of (or inaccurate) sharing of intelligence information; the lack of political and military coordination; and the rush to engage in dialogue with a common enemy (i.e. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham) to secure interests.

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In such a complex context and despite the difficulties that have emerged, Iran and Russia signed a Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in January 2025, covering the areas of economy and trade, as well as security, defence and intelligence sharing. However, far from constituting a military alliance, the document once again denotes the absence of a sharing of broad strategic objectives. Therefore, Russian-Iranian bilateral cooperation appears destined to remain essentially pragmatic and "business-oriented", with relatively mild impacts on the various contexts of conflicts in which the two countries are engaged.

However, if excessively weakened and isolated by the ongoing conflicts, the two actors may agree to cooperate in the development of the Iranian nuclear programme for military purposes, a decision that would have disruptive consequences. Such move, which would likely be followed by Russian protection of Iranian strategic assets against potential external attacks by Israel and the US, could transform the partnership into an alliance with unexplored prospects. Nevertheless, this scenario does not appear to be on the agenda in the short term, although a shift in the international context could create the conditions for such a development in the future. EE

Tiziano Marino is the head of the Asia and Pacific Desk at CeSI – the Center for International Studies, in Rome.

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Brussels and/or Beijing?

Moldova's opening holds promises and risks

ANDA BOLOGA

Moldova's recent turn towards Europe has helped to put the local economy on the map. While the country continues to pursue western integration, there is also an opportunity to benefit from stronger links with China. However, such engagement comes with as many risks as rewards.

On a crisp autumn afternoon in Moldova, a Yandex cab driver drives his BYD car through the streets of Chișinău. "It's as good as a Lexus," he said, nodding toward the car's clean lines and smooth handling. BYD, the Chinese electric vehicle manufacturer, has rapidly expanded its global footprint and its presence in Moldova tells a compelling story. Affordable, efficient and durable, BYD cars are outpacing western rivals in emerging markets. For Moldova, where Soviet Ladas still populate the roads, the growing sales of BYD and other Chinese EV brands are a sign of how China's economic revolution reaches to the edges of Europe. While Moldovans have just confirmed their European Union aspirations, the country is also increasingly courting economic opportunities from China.

Economic growth versus environmental sustainability

This summer, the first Moldova-China Trade and Investment Forum underscored this ambition. With the presence of the largest Chinese business delegation

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in Moldova's history, the forum explored potential collaboration in infrastructure, information technology, agriculture and tourism, highlighting the growing allure of deeper economic ties with China. A second edition of the Moldova-China Trade and Investment Forum was held in early December, and further cemented this bilateral dialogue. Participants discussed leveraging Moldova's geographic location to enhance trade routes connecting Asia and Europe.

Speaking at the inaugural forum, the Chinese ambassador to Moldova, Yan Wenbin, underscored the importance of these burgeoning ties: "China encourages and supports Chinese enterprises to invest in Moldova." He also noted that such efforts aim to "strengthen cooperation in fields like new energy, information technology, infrastructure, and agricultural processing".

Moldova is grappling with the challenge of balancing economic growth and environmental sustainability.

The Moldovan prime minister, Dorin Recean, presented Moldova as a key destination for investors, highlighting its pro-European government's efforts to create a business-friendly environment. "Moldova offers a safe and efficient setting for business, free from bureaucracy and obstacles," he stated, encouraging Chinese enterprises to explore opportunities in the country. The energy minister, Victor Parlicov, promoted Moldova as a "space for testing new energy technologies", inviting Chinese firms to participate.

Like many emerging markets, Moldova is grappling with the challenge of balancing economic growth and environmental sustainability. Pioneer projects like the 2.8 MW solar power plant in Criuleni demonstrate how Moldova could harness Chinese investment to advance its renewable energy ambitions. As elsewhere, China is keen to present itself as a provider of solutions for decarbonization. This is reflected in the evolution of Beijing's broader strategy to solidify its economic influence in Central and Eastern Europe through projects under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Moldova has been a formal member of the BRI since December 2013.

Moldova's growing interest in its trade relations with China must be seen in the context of its historical dependence on Russia for energy and trade. As recently as 2006 nearly 40 per cent of Moldova's exports went to Russia. Now, over 65 per cent of Moldovan exports are directed towards EU markets, reflecting the country's alignment with European standards and its commitment to integration. In 2023 the EU accounted for 53.7 per cent of Moldova's total trade, followed by Ukraine at 13.1 per cent and China at 8.1 per cent. Trade with Russia has dwindled to just 3.7 per cent of the total. While China today accounts for less than ten percent of Moldova's trade, the government wants to see this grow considerably.

This interest is not new: negotiations for the Moldova-China Free Trade Agreement began in 2017, but progress has remained limited since then, in part because

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the Sandu government wanted to focus on EU relations first. This is now shifting, as demonstrated with the investment fora and the first Moldovan-Chinese political consultations in 12 years. These were held in Beijing in December, where Moldova reaffirmed its commitment to the "one China" principle while China emphasized its respect for Moldova's territorial integrity – significant diplomatic victories for both parties.

Pragmatic approach

These steps could set the stage for reinvigorating negotiations on the free trade agreement. Trade between Moldova and China remains deeply asymmetrical. In 2022 Moldova exported 80.8 million US dollars worth of goods to China, including garments, electrical wire, wine, nuts and fruits, marking a sharp rise from 39 million US dollars in 2017 with a 15.7 per cent annual growth rate. These are however swamped by Moldova's 950 million US dollars in imports from China, which are made up of largely electronics and sophisticated industrial products. A free trade agreement, if done properly, could help Moldovan exporters overcome the challenges they face, including logistical hurdles and adjusting to the demands of Chinese consumers.

The Moldovan government certainly sees an opportunity. In a 2024 interview with Xinhua, Moldovan Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mihai Popsoi stated, "China is a huge market. For Moldova, strong cooperation with one of its regions, or even one of its big cities, means an important step forward." Moldova's capital, Chișinău – the nation's largest city and economic hub – has actively embraced opportunities to strengthen ties with China. This year, Mayor Ion Ceban travelled to Beijing to meet with the vice president of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries. With existing partnerships in Beijing, Xi'an and Qingdao, Chișinău's engagement underscores a pragmatic approach to leveraging China's global influence. It is worth noting that the popular Ceban is emerging as a strong contender in Moldova's next presidential elections.

Another attraction of cooperation with China are loans and construction investments, in particular in Moldova's failing infrastructure, where the needs are staggering. This includes addressing the incompatibility of Moldova's Soviet-era broad-gauge railway network with Europe's standard-gauge tracks, a major obstacle for trade with EU countries. Experts estimate that modernizing the country's roads, railways and energy systems would require investments of at least five billion US dollars over the next decade – a sum far beyond the capacity of Moldova's budget. High levels of corruption, weak institutional capacity and limited access

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to global capital markets have long hindered the country's development. These weaknesses make Chinese financing – often seen as less conditional than western aid – particularly appealing.

As one Moldovan scholar, Sorin Șclearuc, observes, the BRI offers promising opportunities for Moldova to modernize its transport and logistics infrastructure. "Beijing's expertise in building and modernizing railways could be instrumental in transforming Moldova's outdated transportation networks." As part of the BRI, Moldova has already benefited from enhanced container transport services via the Giurgiulești Free Economic Zone at the country's sole port upon the Danube. Since 2015, agreements with Chinese shipping companies have facilitated smoother logistics, reducing transportation costs and enabling Moldovan exporters to reach Asian markets more effectively.

Moldova's first Chinese-led infrastructure project, signed in 2019 with the China Highway Group and China Railway Group Limited to build nearly 300 kilometres of roads, including a Chisinau bypass and a connection to Ukraine, was promised to be completed by 2022 at an estimated cost of 400 million US dollars. However, as of 2024, no significant progress has been made, leaving the project stalled.

Link between China and Europe?

Relying on such instruments, however, comes with other risks that perpetuate these very vulnerabilities. One recent example can be found in Montenegro's reliance on a massive Chinese loan to fund the construction of the Bar-Boljare highway, which has burdened the country with unsustainable debt and annual repayment obligations, something Moldova's government is determined to avoid. Yet, Moldovan officials remain optimistic about the prospects for Chinese investments. Well aware that China is now only a minor source of foreign direct investment, Dumitru Braghis, Moldova's ambassador to China, presented over 20 projects worth one billion dollars in sectors such as IT, agriculture and pharmaceuticals.

"Moldova has a favourable tax system and platforms like free economic zones, industrial parks and IT parks that make it attractive to foreign investors," Braghis remarked, highlighting the country's strategic potential to act as a "link between China and Europe" within the Belt and Road Initiative. Increasing Moldova's geopolitical relevance by positioning it as a logistics hub for Central and Eastern Europe could be a strategic goal that aligns with both Chinese and European interests. However, the broader challenge lies in ensuring that Moldova's burgeoning relations with China align with its European trajectory. Good governance as well as good economics suggest Moldova should remain focused on its EU ties, despite

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the siren song of China. Comparatively, any announcements of Chinese investments remain modest in scale. For example, the 400 million US dollars proposed for agricultural and logistics infrastructure represents less than ten per cent of Moldova's total requirements, while the Growth Plan for Moldova, which the European Commission just adopted, is a financial package worth 1.8 billion euros that will support infrastructure investments among other priorities. Moldova must at the very least make sure that any new foreign investments complement rather than jeopardize European funding. Environmental sustainability remains a priority for the EU. Meanwhile, Chinese investments in infrastructure and agriculture could carry environmental and social risks for Moldova. Rushed large-scale infrastructure projects could lead to deforestation, strain water resources, or disrupt local ecosystems. In a nearby example, in Serbia, Chinese-backed factories have been criticized for polluting local communities.

Chinese investments in infrastructure and agriculture could carry environmental and social risks for Moldova.

Technology is another critical frontier. Europe has largely come around to viewing network infrastructure solutions offered by Chinese firms like Huawei as potential security risks. While these firms may offer the most affordable upgrades for Moldova's digital infrastructure, their involvement raises concerns about cybersecurity and potential conflicts with EU standards. Transparency will be key to ensuring that foreign investments, regardless of their origin, support Moldova's long-term development priorities. Non-transparent deals and opaque financing mechanisms could undercut Moldova's efforts to combat corruption and build stronger democratic institutions.

Balancing EU and Chinese cooperation

Events surrounding Moldova's recent elections have shown once more that the country's economic and geopolitical future hinges on its ability to navigate competing pressures from the EU and Russia. In a best-case scenario, Moldova will manage to leverage Chinese investments to modernize its infrastructure and diversify its economy, all while adhering to EU standards and maintaining its European trajectory. In the worst-case scenario, poorly negotiated deals could lead to unsustainable debt, environmental degradation and increased political influence from Russia and China, derailing Moldova's EU aspirations.

The most likely outcome lies somewhere in between, with Moldova making incremental progress but facing continued challenges in balancing its foreign part-

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nerships. Thoughtful planning and strategic policymaking will determine which path the country ultimately takes. While the rhetoric around Moldova's engagement with China may raise eyebrows, the EU remains its most significant partner. To counterbalance Chinese influence, Brussels should scrutinize the sectors in which its significant financial and technical support to Moldova could be made even more targeted. Enhanced pre-accession funding, fair loans for infrastructure projects and streamlined access to the EU market could help Moldova solidify its alignment with European standards. Technical assistance towards an improved business environment could draw more EU businesses to integrate Moldova into their supply chains. EU initiatives such as the Global Gateway, designed to offer alternatives to Chinese investments, could play a crucial role in Moldova's development strategy. By clearly demonstrating the benefits of closer EU integration, Brussels can help Moldova resist external pressures and remain on its European path.

While Chinese investments offer opportunities for growth, they also pose risks that could jeopardize Moldova's EU ambitions. To thrive, Moldova must deftly manage these competing pressures – securing its European trajectory while reaping the benefits of a well-calibrated global strategy. EE

The author sincerely thanks Sebastian Holz for his helpful comments and contributions. The author is also grateful to Peter Chase for his valuable input and edits.

Anda Bologa is a fellow with CEPA's Tech Policy Program and a recognized "35 under 35" tech leader. She has driven high-level negotiations on AI and digital governance at the United Nations. She holds advanced degrees from Fordham University and the College of Europe, has passed the New York State Bar and was a Fulbright Scholar. Her work focuses on AI and tech governance.

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Moscow's tool of confrontation in the Baltic Sea region

MIŁOSZ CORDES

Nearly three years since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, the Kaliningrad Oblast has been fully incorporated into Russian's belligerent and quasi-imperial rhetoric. The Kremlin has used its exclave's past to portray Kaliningrad as a battleground of civilizations and a special place for Russian collective memory.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the hopes were high for the Kaliningrad Oblast's future: foreign investments, the creation of a free trade zone and even a certain degree of autonomy were all on the table. Most of them, however, remained unfulfilled as Moscow was never ready to give up its dominating authority over the region even in the face of deep economic and political crisis. The centralization processes intensified when Vladimir Putin became president for the third time in 2012. Anton Alikhanov, the governor of Kaliningrad Oblast from 2016 until May 2024, is a prime example of this tendency. Seemingly a technocrat, he built his political career almost entirely on family connections and sought to advance his career into Moscow at the expense of the region's interests. This finally happened along with the recent reconstruction of the federal government, when Alikhanov became minister of industry and trade. His successor, Alexey Besprozvannykh, is an example of movement in the opposite direction. In Moscow he was made deputy minister of industry and trade in 2017 but was later demoted to Kaliningrad's new governor. As a result, Kaliningrad Oblast is completely dependent on Moscow

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and its population feels the consequences of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine more acutely than the rest of the country.

Constant pressure

During Alikhanov's term in office, the regional government turned into a structure focusing on swiftly implementing instructions from the federal centre. The regional legislative assembly became a body with no actual influence on the oblast's political life, representing different interest groups that often had connections to the main oligarchic factions in Moscow and St Petersburg. All local, regional and federal elections in the oblast over the past decade have reduced the scope of political pluralism. In Kaliningrad city, opposition candidates were denied the opportunity to run and were even imprisoned on dubious charges such as tax evasion, corruption, or engaging in unfair electoral campaigns.

Outside Kaliningrad city, the use of the so-called "administrative factor" to influence the electoral process means pressuring local constituencies, as jobs and social welfare are largely dependent on state institutions. It also involves access to substantial financial resources and preventive and repressive control concerning the judiciary. In the near absence of independent media, the state also wields tight control over the population's everyday lives and political choices. As of early 2025, the actual potential for political protest or social upheaval in Kaliningrad Oblast was close to zero. The last major demonstrations took place in early 2021 when Aleksei Navalny was arrested and accused of corruption. They were limited to Kaliningrad city and involved a few thousand participants.

Since the 1980s, one of the distinctive elements of the social and cultural reality of Kaliningrad Oblast has been a grassroots interest in the region's pre-war history. Kaliningraders indulged in it to escape from the pains of *perestroika* and the post-collapse shock. Gradually, the interest in local history evolved into a variety of tourist products, with regional history books and spontaneous initiatives emphasizing the slightly different hues of residents' cultural identity compared to their compatriots from other parts of Russia.

Starting from 2012, however, the historical and cultural reality of Kaliningrad Oblast as the northern part of former East Prussia, dominated by western influence since the late Middle Ages until 1945, was gradually put aside. Grassroots movements and research projects that did not embrace the official interpretation of history were deprived of financing and criticized in the media. Any initiatives perceived as reminders of the German or western civilizational influence in the region were disregarded. Authorities in Moscow and St Petersburg, assisted by Kalin-

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ingrad-based journalists, authors and academics, forged a comprehensive counter story about the exclave's past, connecting it closely with imperial Russian history.

The Kremlin put a specific spin on the presentation of Russian and Soviet military victories across the centuries. The conquest of Königsberg was an act of moral justice and a modest territorial compensation to the Soviet Union for defeating the Third Reich. Today, Kaliningrad Oblast acts as Russia's bulwark against the West, just like Crimea after 2014. Both regions are seen as being in some way separate from the mainland and both had to be fought for to become part of Russia. They host Russia's Baltic and Black Sea Fleets. Both are threatened by Russia's adversaries, such as the so-called "regime" in Kyiv and pro-US governments in Warsaw and Vilnius. In addition, Kaliningrad is the place where holders of Russian passports in Moldova's breakaway region of Transnistria officially vote. In this imperialist narrative, Kaliningrad is a source of pride for all Russians, showing the country as a "besieged fortress" in a nutshell.

Political tool

The performative use of Kaliningrad's political and historical themes was further exposed in September 2022, when Vladimir Putin introduced a new school subject called "talks about the important things". Since then related topics have largely been replicated by the state-controlled media on a daily basis. During the "talks", high school students familiarize themselves with the official take on current international developments, the history of Russia and of its neighbours, as well as traditional Russian values such as Eastern Orthodoxy and the heterosexual family. The curriculum makes the subject yet another propaganda tool, this time directly incorporated into the compulsory education system. Putin launched this initiative at the newly established Museum Complex in Kaliningrad, which symbolizes the linkages between the history of Rus', Russia and the oblast.

Today, Kaliningrad Oblast acts as Russia's bulwark against the West, just like Crimea after 2014.

The sensitivity of Kaliningrad Oblast's non-Russian history was revealed when Czech and Polish activists organized an internet prank. When Vladimir Putin announced the annexation of four Ukrainian regions after illegal referendums organized by the occupation authorities in September 2022, a "petition" was put forward to unite the semi-exclave with Czechia and Poland. The authors argued that medieval Königsberg was founded by the Czech King Přemysl Otakar II and that the vast majority inhabitants of the oblast voted for the change of borders. The

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authors altered the names of the main cities and towns, bringing to life *Benešov nad Baltem* (instead of Baltiysk) and *Zelenského-hrad* (instead of Zelenogradsk).

The phrases "*Královec je český*" [Královec is Czech] and "*Königsberg is ours*" were meant to highlight the absurdity of the referendums and the brutality and illegality of Russia's actions in Ukraine. This was met with a serious and fierce reaction from some Russian media outlets. They accused the authors of Russophobia and depicted the initiative as a rebirth of Nazism.

Since the very beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, Kaliningrad Oblast-based units have taken an active part in military actions. The 11th Army Corps from Kaliningrad was engaged in fighting for over three months and suffered serious losses. On average, the number of casualties in corps was higher than for other Russian units in the area around Kharkiv.

Another role assigned to Kaliningrad Oblast was to transfer mid- and high-level officials to the occupied regions of Ukraine. This confirms that Moscow perceives the semi-semi-exclave's separation from mainland Russia is an asset in pursuing belligerent foreign policies. The oblast's authorities, upon instruction from the federal government, have taken part in managing the occupied territories of Ukraine. Alikhanov came to Kherson in August 2022, officially to bring humanitarian aid and sign agreements with selected municipalities. Alikhanov's deputy, Sergei Eliseev, was tasked with overseeing much of the Russia-annexed Kherson Oblast.

Transit problems

For the Kremlin, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has underlined the importance of securing the unimpeded land transit of people and goods to and from Kaliningrad Oblast. Historically, it became an issue in the early 2000s, when the European Union was about to enlarge by Lithuania. While the EU sought to accommodate Russia's expectations during the negotiations, the transit question remained a way for the federal authorities to question Lithuania's credibility. For Vilnius, the transit scheme always represented a tangible threat, as Moscow could violate its rules by transporting weapons and dangerous materials.

After the 2022 invasion of Ukraine began, the subsequent sanction packages limited the scope of goods that could still be exported to Russia and/or conveyed by rail to Kaliningrad. Based on decisions the EU made in mid-June 2022, the Lithuanian authorities restricted the transport of certain goods, mostly raw materials, from Russia and Belarus across Lithuania to Kaliningrad. The fierce reactions of Russian officials subsequently led the EU to allow the transit of goods while obliging all member states to counter the circumvention of sanctions. Moscow also started

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to hint at the vulnerability of the so-called Suwałki Gap, the 60-kilometre-wide Polish-Lithuanian border that is the only land connection between the Baltic states and their EU and NATO allies.

Controversies over the railway transit have been a smokescreen for the insufficient number of ferries operating between the ports of Kaliningrad and mainland Russia. Before the invasion, there were only three units in operation, which were obsolete and with limited capacities. The flow of critical products into the region has been limited by using civilian ferries to transport military cargo. Units deployed in the oblast have been receiving the bulk of petrol brought by rail and later by ferry. As the consecutive sanctions packages made the former channel unavailable, Kaliningrad suffered from growing fuel shortages and growing prices: 92 octane petrol rose by five per cent in 2022 and by 7.3 per cent in November 2023 (year-to-year), while diesel oil rose by 8.8 per cent in 2022 and by 11.6 per cent until November 2023.

The regional authorities seem to have no clear understanding of how many and what types of new units the oblast needs to compensate for the losses. This is also due to the fact that this element has been neglected for many years. In March 2022, Alikhanov declared that the region would need ten such vessels. A few months later he increased this estimate to twenty. Whenever such estimates are made, it is unclear whether the ferries are supposed to substitute all transit via Lithuania or to provide extra bandwidth to the logistically easier and economically more viable railroad connection.

Security around the Baltic, ever close to Bornholm

The Russian government has been strengthening Kaliningrad's destabilizing capacities and potential for carrying out special operations. Some activities target the balance of collective security in the Baltic Sea region. As Russia's strategic position in the Baltic is worsening, with Finland and Sweden joining NATO, Moscow is likely to engage in a series of relatively small operations of a destructive and disruptive nature.

The competent Russian agency in this field is the Main Directorate of Deep-sea Research (GUGI). It is an independent branch of the federal ministry of defence, outside of the Russian fleet's chain of command. Located in St Petersburg, the directorate has had strong ties with Kaliningrad Oblast. Both Kaliningrad and Baltiysk were the main bases for fishing and exploratory expeditions to the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans already in the Soviet times. GUGI has the necessary experience, infrastructure and political backing to perform destructive underwater operations.

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In addition, the aerial component of the Baltic fleet has been extensively used in small-scale provocations around the Baltic Sea, usually including brief airspace violations. In June 2021, the political message carried by the incident was evident, as a Russian strategic bomber and two fighters entered Lithuanian territory while the BALTOPS 2021 naval exercises were taking place.

Russia's aerial and naval presence around Denmark's Bornholm has increased since the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Ukraine. In September 2022 its presence was observed close to Danish territorial waters, approximately where the explosions that affected the Nord Stream gas pipeline took place on September 26th. This was followed by three other explosions in the Danish and Swedish exclusive economic zones. A major investigation by Scandinavian journalists proved that the Russian authorities had been using fishing boats and other civilian ships to perform surveillance and other intelligence gathering tasks in the North Sea and in the Danish straits.

> The Russian government has been strengthening Kaliningrad's destabilizing capacities and potential for carrying out special operations.

This pattern is also apparent in the southwest Baltic Sea basin, with Bornholm being a particularly sensitive location. In addition to affecting marine mammals and fish, the four explosions took place close to a site in the Bornholm Deep where around 11,000 tonnes of chemical warfare agents and munitions were disposed of in 1947. The total amount of chemical and conventional weapons deposited in the Baltic Sea is estimated at 300,000 tonnes. On top of the strategic or tactical gains from sabotage of underwater infrastructure, such as power grids or gas pipelines, the possible exploitation of the sea-dumped weapons for similar purposes is yet another factor in the security of the Baltic Sea Region. In all such activities, Kaliningrad Oblast occupies or has the potential to occupy a central place.

Uncertain prospects for the future

Kaliningrad Oblast is the most significant remaining territorial gain of the Russian state since the Great Northern War and the establishment of St Petersburg in early 18th century. Kaliningrad is as close to the core of NATO and EU territory as contemporary Russia can get. For these reasons, the oblast is a blueprint for the way in which Russian elites perceive the West and its actions towards Russia. Today, the tightly interconnected Baltic Sea is almost a NATO and EU pond; Yet *almost* makes a big difference as nine West-affiliated countries in the region need to take into account the security challenges posed by the two Russian coastal foot-

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holds: Kaliningrad and St Petersburg. The former will remain predominantly a military base and assume an increasingly hostile posture. This one-dimensional role excludes perspectives for meaningful cooperation with the neighbouring states regarding cross-border trade, cultural exchange, common initiatives or selective joint security-related efforts over matters related to seabed explosives or energy infrastructure. All indicators are thus pointing towards a further development of Kaliningrad Oblast as a predominantly negative and even disruptive factor in the Baltic Sea region.

Within a possible next-level escalation in the ongoing Russia-West confrontation, the politically and militarily delicate railway transit arrangements will immediately return to both sides' operational attention. This is where the sensitivity of the Suwałki Gap is likely to be exploited by the Russian authorities should it decide that it can put additional pressure on the Baltic states and Poland. Kaliningrad is also destined to remain a security issue for Denmark and for other Nordic states. The islands of Bornholm and Gotland are the closest and most obvious potential targets for destabilizing or disruptive activities.

As a result, the rapidly integrating nine EU and NATO member states around the Baltic Sea will be unable to take full advantage of their cooperation. In the long run, this absence of common goals poses serious questions in a number of areas where hybrid threats are especially visible, such as environmental protection, seabed explosives and the creation of secure transport corridors. The West needs to prepare for the Kaliningrad Oblast becoming a real nuisance, which at first sight only has a regional dimension. In reality, however, it has the potential to affect security in the whole of Europe, becoming an even more important part of both the EU and NATO's relations with Russia in times of growing geopolitical tensions and ruptures. EE

Miłosz J. Cordes is a research fellow at the Danish Foreign Policy Society and the Casimir Pulaski Foundation. He teaches U.S. students at DIS – Study Abroad in Scandinavia. He is the author of a report titled "Kaliningrad Oblast 2024. Russia's vessel of havoc on the Baltic Sea", published by the Danish Institute of International Affairs in May 2024 and available on www.diis.dk. This article is an updated summary of that report.

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What is wrong with Latvia?

Why the middle Baltic state lags behind

WILL MAWHOOD

Latvia has often been overlooked when it comes to the socio-economic advancements made in the Baltics. While neighbours such as Estonia and Lithuania have promoted themselves as technological hubs, the middle Baltic state has lagged behind overall. This position appears to be due to a variety of factors.

The cover of the Latvian weekly current affairs magazine *Ir* for the last week of November 2024 struck a tone hardly unfamiliar in this neck of the woods: "Why are the Estonians paying less for Rail Baltica but getting it done faster?" Close observers of the nation's mood, aspirations and insecurities over the three-and-a-bit decades since it restored its independence will have seen comparable sentiments expressed many times. Latvia, geographically the middle Baltic state, has been outpaced economically by Estonia more or less consistently since both restored their independence in 1990. It is not only a question of wages either. In terms of educational scores, healthcare outcomes, digital proficiency and unemployment rates, Latvia comes off worse – looking enviously north has become almost a national pastime.

Above the main headline, though, there is a small box of text, advertising another, shorter feature in the magazine. This might well have come as a slight surprise to

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anyone who stopped paying close attention, say, 15 years or so ago – "Lithuanian economist recommends recipe for growth."

Everything is bad?

Latvia may now be confirmed in its status as the poorest of the Baltic trio, a cause of much angst in Riga. But the country to its south, Lithuania, nosed notably ahead only after the financial crisis of 2008 – severe in all three of the Baltic countries, but especially devastating in Latvia. It is likely that this stings more on a psychological level. This is the first time in centuries, if ever, that Lithuania has been a richer country than Latvia The land directly to the south of Latvia was an overwhelmingly agrarian economy well into the 20th century, with a GDP in 1930 that was barely half of more industrialized Latvia and Estonia, and with strikingly lower rates of literacy. Indeed, in the interwar period, Latvia saw significant numbers of seasonal agricultural labourers arriving from comparatively impoverished Lithuania and Poland. By the outbreak of the Second World War, by most estimates, Latvia's GDP topped that of Estonia and rivalled Finland.

Latvia may now be confirmed in its status as the poorest of the Baltic trio, a cause of much angst in Riga.

Yet in recent years, this dynamic seems to have reversed itself – at least in the deeply deprived eastern Latvian region of Latgale, where workers are increasingly commuting over the border to towns like Visaginas in north-eastern Lithuania in search of better salaries and conditions. This has long been the case in Latvian towns along the northern frontier, where locals take advantage of the considerably higher wages on offer in Estonia.

All this has provided ample fuel for a very Latvian trait: bemoaning the pervading state of things and accentuating the gloom. Latvians criticize their own country, frequently comparing it to the situations in neighbouring countries to the north and south, so much so that it has become a subject of humour. Search on X or other social media platforms for "*vissirslikti*" ("everything is bad" written as one word), and you will find hundreds of posts making use of the hashtag, mostly mocking those perceived to be over-egging the levels of doom. A trendy fashion retailer even sells hoodies bearing the legend *vissirslikti*, accompanied by the explanatory text "a typical Latvian mindset". This references an ongoing trend for clothes bearing dictionary-style definitions (in English) of characteristically Latvian idioms.

Of course, not everything is bad. In fact, by the standards of most post-Soviet states, Latvia is – in common with the Baltics as a whole – a striking success sto-

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ry. National wealth is steadily encroaching on Western European figures (GDP per capita has grown from 60 per cent of the EU average to 70 per cent over the last ten years). At the same time, life expectancy has jumped since the restoration of independence. In terms of media freedom, the country ranks high, placing 12th in the most recent Press Freedom Index. Still, the gap that has opened up in infrastructure and wealth with its Baltic neighbours is very noticeable, and something for which there is little historical parallel. So what has gone (comparatively) wrong? Why has Latvia fallen behind in its peer group?

Closer than Switzerland

Bartosz Chmielewski, a Warsaw-based analyst covering all three of the Baltic states, places the blame primarily on an economic strategy going right back to the 1990s: "The country aimed to gain growth from logistics between the East and the West. Latvian ports transferred products produced in the east or were import windows for Russia and Belarus. Next to these, another important factor was that Riga was chosen to be a centre for financial services."

With three major ports and convenient railway links to Russia, Latvia was in an optimal position to profit as a transit country for exports from the east. Some did indeed profit, with the oil terminal city Ventspils in particular flaunting the significantly higher standard of living brought by fossil fuels. But with Russia aiming to reduce its dependency on foreign terminals through the development of its own Baltic port at Ust-Luga, this was a deal which, however lucrative, was time-limited. Even before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, trans-shipped consignments in Latvian ports had seen a steady decline, dipping from 80 per cent in 2011 to just 47 per cent in 2021.

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Yet, as Chmielewski indicates, it was not just via the transportation sector that Latvia leveraged its familiarity and easy accessibility for clients from the east. The country also became known (and in some quarters, infamous) for its dozens of commercial banks – the number of which peaked in the 1990s at 62, over double the total in either of its Baltic neighbours. Some of these energetically solicited deposits from foreign clients, especially from former Soviet countries where Latvia had name recognition. The most notorious example was Parex, which ran adverts in Russia in the 1990s with the suggestive slogan "we're closer than Switzerland," hinting that conveniently few questions would be asked of the suddenly wealthy.

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Construction works at the Riga Central Station for Rail Baltica – the self-described "project of the century" that aims to link Berlin with Tallinn via Warsaw, Kaunas and Riga. With costs ballooning, the EU has declared itself unwilling to commit to further funding, meaning the Latvian government must now somehow come up with the vast outlay required.

Parex was taken into state hands in late 2008 amid fears it was about to collapse. This was a time when the Latvian economy had already begun to contract sharply following a dizzying property boom. The country was plunged into the deepest crisis in its post-Soviet history, and within months, Latvia was forced to take a 7.5-billion-euro rescue package from the IMF and EU, committing to swingeing austerity measures.

But non-local deposits in Latvian banks still made up 53 per cent of the total in 2015. Relevant regulations in the sector were only seriously tightened after 2018, when US authorities accused the ABLV Bank of illicit activity. This included facilitating transactions linked to North Korea's ballistic missile programme, with such controversy prompting a bank run and subsequently its forced liquidation. Threatened with being frozen out of international flows as a money laundering hub, Latvia scrambled to clean up the sector. The following year, the head of the financial regulator declared that henceforth Latvian banks would focus on the domestic market.

Both sectors were clearly dependent on a relationship with a neighbour which was at best unpredictable and often openly hostile to Latvia. It is striking too that the country has developed no next-generation calling card to compare with Esto-

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nia's championing of e-services, or Lithuania's attempt to transform itself into a fin-tech hub (now the largest in the EU by licences issued). Why did Latvia place so many of its eggs in one, very unsteady, basket?

Politics and business

Whether a cause or consequence of the above, Latvia's political culture has seen business interests often become intimately intertwined with governance. While none of the three Baltic countries saw the industrial-scale graft and vicious battles for spoils that took place in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Latvia came, by some measure, the closest. By 2001, Latvia was ranked 59th in the world for corruption, in a completely different league from Estonia in 28th. A World Bank study in the late 1990s referred to it as displaying high levels of state capture (by contrast, both of its Baltic neighbours received an assessment of "low" in this regard). A 2010 report on the country referred to a general consensus on the principal reason for this status: "the weakness of party financing legislation. Thus parties are entirely financed by private funds placing them under the control of wealthy patrons".

Latvia's political culture has seen business interests often become intimately intertwined with governance.

By the late 1990s, two camps had formed among associates of the country's "oligarchs" (within a Baltic context, a term widespread only in Latvia): one tightly linked with the transit industry and Ventspils Mayor Aivars Lembergs, seen as being close to the party Latvia's Way; and another centred around the People's Party leader Andris Šķēle, who had extensive interests in the food sector. Despite these parties – the two largest around this time – having strikingly similar political platforms, personal friction and feuding over privatization frequently precluded effective collaboration. The rise in the early 2000s of parties defining themselves first and foremost as anti-corruption added further splits within the political scene, contributing to the churn and instability that characterized the country. In the 35 years since its independence was restored, Latvia has had 23 governments, 12 of which came in the first 15 years.

In Estonia, the Reform Party has come to take the position of the natural party of government, spending just five of the past 25 years out of the governing coalition. It has typically faced off against the somewhat more left-wing and Russia-sympathetic Centre Party, with established greens, nationalists and social democrats presenting generally more modest challenges – a pattern only substantially shaken up by the rise of the far-right EKRE party in the late 2010s.

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In contrast, Latvia's parties – even ones that make it into governing coalitions – tend to be temporary phenomena. The oligarch Ainārs Šlesers has founded six since the late 1990s, and even the recently dominant party New Unity can trace its roots back only as far as 2011. Not only are they in most cases ephemeral but political parties as institutions have very shallow roots in society. Latvia has long drawn attention for having the lowest rates of party membership in the EU. The Latvian political scientist Daunis Auers explains that the very low legal membership requirement to stand for national elections "allows the political entrepreneurs that have founded the party to maintain control over the structure and avoid 'hostile takeovers'".

Impermeable structures and a heavily personality-centric political scene, where ideology has often been an afterthought, cannot help but hamper accountability and shut out the concerns of ordinary Latvians. Alienation and a lack of faith in the state is indeed troublingly high in the mid-Baltic. A study released in 2024 found that only 12 per cent of Latvians believe that the political system allows people like them to have a say in what the government does (18 points below the OECD average). This has worrying correlates: in Latvia in 2021, according to a World Values Survey, just 35 per cent believed it was essential to live in a democratic state – the lowest rate in the Baltics. A 2016 study unsurprisingly concluded that Latvians who had a low estimation of state institutions were far more likely to be open to propaganda messages from the Kremlin.

Starting from the back?

Questionable decisions can easily be highlighted but there are areas where Latvia has simply been dealt a challenging hand given the realities of modern economies. The Lithuanian economist interviewed by *Ir*, Marius Jurgilas, observes that "compared with Latvia, population density in Lithuania is much more balanced, and regional politics has been more successful."

Kaunas, Lithuania's second city, has over half the population of Vilnius, and two other cities have over 100,000 inhabitants. In contrast, Riga is approaching ten times the size of its nearest rival, Daugavpils. The capital dominates in economic terms (69 per cent of the nation's GDP is generated in or immediately around Riga), and maps show average wages dropping precipitously the further away one gets from the city. There are examples of relatively successful regional development, such as the northern Latvian city of Valmiera, known for hosting one of the leading worldwide fibreglass manufacturers, Valmieras Stikla Šķiedra. But even an article highlighting the wider region's achievements forlornly observes that it ranks

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only 19th among local governments in the Baltics: "a region which in a national context is among the leaders, at the Baltic level is merely average." If the more distant provinces are neglected and treated as a dead weight, resentment and social problems can only grow further.

With Latvia itself having slipped from its position as Baltic leader in the 1930s to Baltic laggard now, some observers have trained their attention on the changes that took place during the intervening occupation by the Soviet Union. The onetime Finance Minister Edmunds Krastiņš, author of a 50-page essay *Kāpēc Latvija nevar labāk* ("Why Latvia Can't Do Better"), has placed stress on its greater "Sovietization" in comparison with its Baltic neighbours. Not only did Latvia see by far the highest level of immigration from other Soviet republics, after the Moscow-directed demotion of thousands of supporters of the "national communists" – a faction led by Eduards Berklavs that in the late 1950s advocated policies to stem Russification – membership of the "titular nationality" in the local communist party remained markedly lower than in Estonia or Lithuania.

A lack of governing experience may partially explain Latvia's relatively confused course since restoring its independence.

A lack of governing experience may partially explain Latvia's relatively confused course since restoring its independence. However, something as abstract as mindset is no simple matter to quantify. Still, some of the observable results of Soviet policy have evidently contributed to Latvia's inertia. Voting largely breaks down along ethnic lines, and the long-standing policy of most "Latvian" parties to erect a *cordon sanitaire* around politicians seen as amenable to Russia has meant distant and often confrontational relationships between central government and certain local councils, primarily in the east of the country (as well as, between 2009 and 2020, the capital). This has also further complicated the formation of coalitions at the national level, leading to fragile governments that often bring together rather disparate groups.

Moreover, it is anecdotally noticeable that much of the frustration directed at state structures is due to rigidity, arbitrary goal-setting and excess bureaucracy, which are all perceived as archetypally "Soviet" qualities. Daunis Auers observes that "the key cause of Latvia's high level of bureaucratisation … is a lack of trust. The state doesn't trust citizens and vice versa."

Aigars Pētersons, the rector of Riga Stradiņš University, recently spoke to Latvian Radio about the government's target to allocate 1.5 per cent of GDP to research and development by 2027 (all of Latvia's universities currently trail Vilnius and Estonia's premier institution Tartu in the international rankings). He stated that "we set, for example, the objective of being among the best ten in the world, or in

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the top 300 or top 500, but, you see, there's no evidence, no base, no grounding for how we can get there." Prime Minister Evika Siliņa has announced cutting bureaucracy will be among her four priorities for 2025.

Room for optimism?

The last year ended in somewhat gloomy fashion, as the magazine cover reflected, with a flurry of bad news about Rail Baltica, the self-described "project of the century" that aims to link Berlin with Tallinn via Warsaw, Kaunas and Riga. With costs ballooning, the EU has declared itself unwilling to commit to further funding to the degree expected, meaning the Latvian government must now somehow come up with the vast outlay required. The sudden dearth of cash means that the main line will now likely bypass Riga, with access to the capital provided via existing rail links. However, considerable progress had already been made on station infrastructure in the centre of Riga and at the airport nearby, which have been prioritized over track construction and now risk becoming "white elephants". As well as prompting intense squabbling between different ministries and placing further question marks over Latvia's planning culture, it has provided considerable ammunition for the *vissirslikti* crowd. Riga itself is on the brink of losing its perennial position as the largest Baltic city to fast-growing Vilnius.

Riga is on the brink of losing its perennial position as the largest Baltic city to the fast-growing Vilnius.

Are there reasons to be optimistic about Latvia's trajectory regardless? Latvia's corruption scores have greatly improved since their lowest point around the millennium, and oligarchs have struggled to rebuild their influence since the catastrophic performance of their sponsored parties in the extraordinary elections called in 2011. The then President Valdis Zatlers called those elections warning of the approaching "privatization of democracy", after parliament refused to sanction the police searching the home of the oligarch Ainārs Šlesers.

The government formed by Krišjānis Kariņš in 2019 became the first in Latvian history to complete the full four-year term. His party New Unity handily topped the subsequent poll. Recent OECD studies indicate trust in the state has been slightly increasing, albeit from a very low base.

Successful Latvian start-ups have emerged, in particular in the print-on-demand sector. In Emerging Europe's annual "Future of IT" report for 2024, the country was placed second, leapfrogging Lithuania and ranking first for IT infrastructure. And with Estonia's economy continuing to sputter (it was the worst performing

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EU economy in 2023), and alarm among business in the wake of the government announcing a two per cent profit tax to fund defence spending, it is possible that Latvia may be a net beneficiary in terms of investment.

Still, by far the most pride and joy in recent years has come from the remarkable sporting performances of various national teams, which have made the small country a neutral's favourite. Early this year, FIBA declared Latvia's basketball squad "the hottest team in the world" after an extraordinary winning run. A bronze medal in the 2023 ice hockey world cup, defeating the US and Sweden en route, prompted a late-night vote in parliament and a spontaneous national holiday the next day, drawing amused articles from the international press. Perhaps one day Latvia will have further superlatives to put alongside the frequent acclaim they receive for having the most passionate ice hockey fans in the world. EE

Will Mawhood is an English writer and translator based in Latvia. He is the editor of the website *Deep Baltic*.

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Ukraine after the war

Lessons of resilience

ROKSOLANA IVANOVA

Ukraine's journey through war and into the complex terrain of post-conflict recovery is a testament to the enduring power of human resilience and institutional determination. The scars of war are undeniably deep, but they also carry with them the seeds of renewal. Ukraine now stands at a pivotal moment in its history – a chance to not just rebuild, but to reimagine its future as a resilient, democratic and adaptive nation.

Following the Russian invasion in February 2022, the wounds inflicted on Ukraine by the invading forces have become eternal. They have shaped the country in a way that has changed all aspects of life, including socio-economic issues alongside politics. The war has also provided valuable insights with regards to the strategies that should be utilized in order to overcome challenges and build a sustainable future. The strategies of adaptation that have emerged as a result of the current, slower period of the conflict demonstrate how these changes are taking place.

It is impossible to exaggerate the impact of the war, for it has completely altered Ukraine's position on the international stage. It has also influenced the country's civil society, characteristics of rule and national mentality. Along with the grim estimates of human and material losses, the conflict also speaks to the incredible strength of the Ukrainian people and institutions as they face a fight for sovereignty, independence and survival as a nation. Yet, this resourcefulness must now be put to constructive use. This will help create intentional reforms and reconstruction that will allow the country to achieve recovery and stability in the long run.

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Redefining and restructuring

The path to rehabilitation in a territory that has experienced conflict is never straightforward. A careful approach that deals with the urgent humanitarian situation, prepares the economy for growth, and encourages social unity is fundamental. For Ukraine, problems include internally displaced persons, serious damage to physical infrastructure, and psychological and societal trauma. These only make the task of recovery more difficult. However, Ukraine has been witness to a spectacular demonstration of human inventiveness and adaptability in the face of various challenges. This has given an invaluable insight into how governments can cope with post-conflict recovery issues.

The geographic position of Ukraine, whereby at one point it is situated in both Europe and Eurasia, adds another dimension to the country's rebuilding. As the nation strives for strong integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions, it has to balance its desires for development with the needs for reconstruction. This dual problem provides a chance to turn Ukraine into a paradigm of a resilient country after a conflict – a nation that shows how governments can respond through encouraging innovative economies and empowered societies in order to reconstruct a country.

The notion of resilience, which describes the capability to withstand adversity, can be found at the centre of all these existential journeys. Admittedly, resilience stands as a hallmark of Ukraine during the war. However, in the current context a new aspect is required and that is namely an "adaptive" aspect. Adaptive does not only imply restoring what is wiped out, but redefining and restructuring society around the realities of a new world. It involves building institutions that are adaptable, economies that are enabling and societies that are cohesive.

> Ukraine has been witness to a spectacular demonstration of human inventiveness and adaptability in the face of challenges.

By focusing on the core aspects of rebuilding Ukraine after the war and emphasizing the need to adapt to a new reality, Ukraine's experience can be instructive for many when it comes to dealing with the repercussions of violence. The combination of local creativity, international assistance and collaboration in action can help achieve a meaningful recovery that is underpinned by a vision of the future that is not just free from war but rather characterized by the potential for full restoration.

As the time of Ukraine's recovery approaches, it will depend not only on the historical context of the country but what the society hopes for the future. Through a commitment to creativity, inclusiveness and strength, Ukraine has the potential to not only restore what has been taken away but aim at establishing a flourishing,

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free and resilient society. In turn, not only will the country prosper but the rest of the world will be able to draw inspiration. This is because the country's story would be based on determination and striving.

Institutional adaptation

As evidenced by community solidarity and grassroots mobilization during the war, Ukrainian society can be credited for its outstanding collective efforts. Humanitarian initiatives were instrumental in terms of providing basic aid and services to internally displaced people as well as supporting national defence. This reinforces the potential for community-based solutions during reconstruction and its subsequent management.

An aspect that is typically overlooked but goes hand in hand with rebuilding in post-war states such as Ukraine is institutional adaptation. After a war, the fabric of a state begins to deteriorate and undergoes serious damage as existing trust is lost. This is coupled with crumbling infrastructure or even a change in social and political affairs. Thus, institutions require significant reform along with a renewed focus on innovation so that they are able to align with society during the rebuilding phase.

The use of advanced monitoring tools in Ukraine has led to agile governance structures that have proven to be vital in overcoming the issues introduced by the Euromaidan Revolution. These challenges required innovation in service delivery, policies and systems.

An example of institutional adaptation can be seen in how municipalities began providing faster solutions to challenges around infrastructure repairs, medical care and economic stimulation. The national government achieved this by giving more power to local governments, which further promote decision-making closer to the areas that are impacted by problems.

Anti-corruption frameworks are an absolute necessity for ensuring that there is faith in the public domain.

Also, given the fact that the reconstruction of an area usually comes with huge inflows of financial assistance from international agencies, anti-corruption frameworks are an absolute necessity for ensuring that there is faith in the public domain along with the support of other nations. Modifications in political mechanisms are essential to maintaining territorial integrity in order to repair the state's democratic structures, such as the inclusion or alteration of how areas are represented in elections. Ukraine has already shown substantial progress in moving towards e-governance. As a result,

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advancing these initiatives will improve service delivery and lessen red tape while increasing overall openness.

Finally, resources spent on enriching and reskilling civil servants are also a great help in these trying times of changing governance. This also allows state workers to deal with crises and other traumatic situations.

Building trust

Crime prevention will be one of the most significant parts of the recovery effort that will also promote accountability, reconciliation and societal trust in the system. The reconstruction of the judiciary in a post-conflict environment should help promote key strategies. First, the state will need to piece together frameworks that focus on property disputes, human rights infringements, war violence and crime. Truth and Reconciliation Commissions foster a commitment to peace and could serve as an avenue for some degree of recovery here. In the context of enhancing national security, policy reforms that allow for judgments without bias will help strengthen the independence and availability of a functioning judiciary.

In addition to this, restoring the economic component of the recovery will also help build societal trust. There is a need to have stronger regulatory frameworks to assist in reintegrating war-affected regions with the national economy. This will help stimulate investments while encouraging innovations. Public-private partnerships should promote collaboration between state institutions, civil society and private actors for the purpose of reconstructing key economic infrastructure and boosting economic activities. Adaptive tax policies need to encourage extra business activities in post-conflict areas while still ensuring adequate revenue for the state.

Institutions will also need to focus on rebuilding social cohesion by creating inclusive policies and programmes designed to respond to the needs of women, minorities, displaced people, etc. This includes participatory decision-making and educational reform. Changes in the second sphere should prioritize civic education, tolerance and an understanding of post-conflict society.

Ukraine's aim of joining the European Union provides a chance for the institutions to seek out best practices from well-established democracies in terms of implementing such reforms. Joint projects and activities with several international organizations can enhance building the required capacity to strengthen institutions. This can be done by adopting EU standards, such as in governance, trade and environmental regulations. While reforming the country's legal framework sounds like a technical exercise, it will be a key political and social resource that requires significant effort and investment. In this regard, Ukraine's priorities ought to be

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focused on forming strong institutions aligned with EU values, which will be resilient and adaptive in the pursuit of a democratic future.

Ukrainian institutions have already demonstrated the potential to change and meet circumstances that change at a great speed. International cooperation, emergency governance strategies, and the digitalization of public services all helped to respond to the short-term needs of national defence. These show the critical role that adaptive governance mechanisms can play during not only emergency situations but also during recovery.

Ukraine has made great strides over the last decade in its economy but unfortunately, it is now at a standstill as its economy requires rebuilding. There are several factors such as a decimated infrastructure, broken supply chains and a significant lack of human resources that have left the economy in disarray. Currently, the major challenge is fulfilling both the short-term recovery and the long-term development of the economy.

Social harmony will only begin to take shape when appropriate housing, education and employment are made available to internally displaced people and veterans. There needs to be a robust mechanism to support their needs. The increasing need to have a trusted society for people to develop a sense of belonging is crucial in ensuring effective governance and international assistance. Active and accountable institutions will thus be decisive in ensuring and rebuilding trust and social cohesion.

Finally, green and eco-friendly architecture can take Ukraine in new directions towards sustainable development. The reconstruction period provides a unique opportunity to invest in renewable energy, green structures and climate-smart agricultural practices. This will all help ensure the prosperity of future generations.

Looking forward

War or the absence of war will in many ways shape Ukraine's framing as a nation. Over the past few years Ukrainians have displayed an adaptive edge and a constant resilience. It is worth noting that hardships, mistakes and speaking up will ensure that lessons are properly converted into sustainable strategies. However, the future remains uncertain. United as one, the country will put in all efforts, backed by a strong will and strong leadership, to build a country that can flourish even in times of crisis.

Ukraine's journey through war and into the complex terrain of post-conflict recovery is a testament to the enduring power of human resilience and institutional determination. The scars of war are undeniably deep but they also carry with

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them the seeds of renewal. Ukraine now stands at a pivotal moment in its history – a chance to not just rebuild, but to reimagine its future as a resilient, democratic and adaptive nation.

The lessons learnt from Ukraine's experiences in resilience during conflict must inform its adaptation strategies for the future. This involves addressing the multifaceted challenges of rebuilding physical infrastructure; fostering economic revitalization; healing societal divides; and encouraging a culture of democratic governance and institutional flexibility. Importantly, the process of recovery is not simply about replacing what was destroyed but constructing something better: new systems, institutions and communities that are more inclusive, robust and capable of weathering future challenges.

The lessons learnt from Ukraine's experiences in resilience must inform its adaptation strategies for the future.

Institutional adaptation will be key to ensuring a sustainable recovery. The war has underscored the need for governance systems that are agile, transparent and inclusive. Ukraine's commitment to reforms – whether in decentralization, anti-corruption measures, or aligning with European standards – provides a solid foundation. However, these efforts must be deepened and expanded to address the evolving needs of a post-conflict society. Stronger institutions will not only rebuild trust between the state and its citizens but also attract the international support necessary for long-term development.

Equally important is the role of international partnerships and solidarity. Ukraine's recovery cannot occur in isolation. The global community has a vital role to play in providing financial aid, technical expertise and political support. This collaboration must be rooted in mutual respect and shared values, ensuring that Ukraine's recovery aligns with its aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration while preserving its unique cultural and historical identity.

The societal dimension of recovery is no less critical. Rebuilding communities fractured by displacement, trauma and loss requires fostering social cohesion and inclusivity. Education, healthcare and community-driven initiatives will play a vital role in ensuring that no segment of society is left behind in the recovery process. A focus on youth empowerment and civic engagement will ensure that Ukraine's next generation inherits not just a rebuilt nation, but one that is thriving and forward thinking.

Finally, Ukraine's recovery must be sustainable. Environmental considerations should be integrated into reconstruction plans to ensure that economic growth does not come at the cost of ecological degradation. The war has increased awareness of Ukraine's vulnerabilities, including energy dependence and climate risks.

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By prioritizing green technologies, renewable energy, and sustainable urban planning, Ukraine can position itself as a leader in climate-conscious development.

The road to recovery will be long and challenging, but it is also an opportunity to set a new standard for post-conflict transformation. Ukraine's ability to emerge stronger from the devastation of war will depend on the collective will of its people, the effectiveness of its institutions, and the unwavering support of the international community. By leveraging the lessons of resilience and embracing the principles of adaptation, Ukraine can not only heal from the wounds of war but inspire other nations facing similar challenges.

In the broader context, Ukraine's journey holds universal significance. It is a reminder that even in the darkest moments, the potential for renewal and transformation exists. The resilience demonstrated by Ukraine is a beacon of hope, while its commitment to adaptation offers a roadmap for building a more equitable, democratic and sustainable future. Ukraine's story is one of pain and perseverance, but above all, it is a story of possibility – a testament to the indomitable spirit of a nation determined to rebuild, renew and rise again. EE

Roksolana Ivanova is a professor of international and European law.
She is a lawyer and head of the NGO "Rise of Innovations".

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The refrigerator and the television

Sanctions as war by other means

GREG MILLS, RAY HARTLEY, LUIS RAVINA
AND HRYHORIY NEMYRIA

Sanctions are always a kind of double-edged sword. In order to be effective and prevent bypassing, they have to be comprehensive and include as many countries as possible. Changing elite behaviour depends on increasing the kind of pressure that pushes parties off the battlefield and to the negotiating table. Sanctions can therefore help to tip the balance.

Sanctions regimes aim to change elite behaviour by raising the costs and stakes of their choices, both directly in terms of diminishing their personal comfort including travel and access to finance, and indirectly by increasing popular pressure against their rule through economic hardship. This highlights one of several problems with sanctions. These elites are usually uninterested in popular welfare, explaining their attitude towards democracy and its wider benefits. They are more concerned with maintaining their own power and funding their lifestyle, whatever the cost to their people. But there are ways and means, direct and indirect, of raising the costs of such choices. Some of these new means have been developed following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Economic sanctions are a tool of coercion on the softer end of a spectrum that starts with diplomatic isolation and voluntary boycotts and ends with physical

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blockades. It can even include softer measures, such as a more careful calibration of aid. While many – usually those against whom they are applied – are quick to claim that sanctions do not work, history suggests that, at least in some instances, with the right amount of political will, they can. But an over-reliance on sanctions is likely to deliver little except a measure of self-satisfaction. A focus on this alone only obscures other non-violent possibilities for encouraging and, in fact, facilitating, changes in regime behaviour.

With a little help from our friends

The circumvention of sanctions is made easier by a lack of diplomatic support for the cause behind their imposition, reflecting self-interest. Russia's war in Ukraine is a case in point. Governments representing about 60 per cent of the world's population, including India, China, South Africa and much of the Middle East, did not at the outset of the conflict accept the Ukrainian or western narrative of the war in 2022 for various reasons. These included self-interest and perceptions of a western double standard. Such perceptions, legitimate or not, were actively seeded and promoted by Russia on social media, to reinforce the idea of NATO as the aggressor and Russia as the victim.

In response to Russia's 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine, the West has imposed an unprecedented raft of economic measures against Moscow. The European Union has, by mid-2024, adopted 14 packages of sanctions, targeting over 2,200 individuals and entities, and covering a wide array of sectors, goods and services. In turn, the United States has imposed over 14,000 sanctions, more than those on Iran, Cuba and North Korea combined, targeting 10,173 individuals, 4,089 entities, 177 vessels and 100 aircraft. In total, Russia has been subjected to more than 14,000 sanctions. Such measures had the intent of weakening Moscow's ability to wage war by depressing its income and limiting access to critical technologies for its war machine. Yet, even though this regime has undoubtedly made it more difficult for the Russians, and the full extent of the impacts are not known, despite a decade of conflict and the "most extensive sanctions regime in history", little appears to have changed.

The idea was, at the outset, that western sanctions would slowly but inexorably bite, making the conflict a "struggle between the refrigerator and the television", as one Ukrainian colonel commented at the start of the 2022 phase of the war. Rhetoric may make a full heart, he said, but seldom fills the stomach.

There have been some tangible results. According to a study published by the joint US–Ukrainian International Working Group on Russian Sanctions, such re-

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strictions have shrunk Russia's surplus of its current balance of payments. Overall, this was estimated to be down 60 per cent in 2022–23. The rouble also depreciated, driving up inflation and, in the process, creating social effects worsened by the diversion of funding to the war from Russia's National Welfare Fund. Receipts from the oil and gas trade – responsible for nearly half (some 230 billion US dollars) of export income in 2021 – reportedly fell by around 50 per cent in 2023 as the loss of "stable and solvent markets, the technology gap, and the multiplier effect [affecting] the supply chain (tanker transportation, port services, pipeline transport)" all began to bite.

Weathering the storm?

Yet, for every indication of the success of sanctions, there appears to be contradicting evidence. Despite the range of sanctions, Russia's economy has repeatedly defied the predictions of its imminent doom, including of financial collapse, recession, runaway inflation and a shortage of skills and technology. As *The Economist* noted in August 2024: "Despite sanctions and pariah status, Russia's economy is growing strongly. It turns out that bacchanalian spending, at a time of war, really gets things going." If anything, busting sanctions has also juiced the economy, with formerly western-owned businesses picked up cheaply by those in Russia. Supply chains have also been set up with friendly countries (for this read China, Iran, India and North Korea among others), initially to diversify Russian oil exports and ensure technology flows for high-tech arms inputs. However, this is increasingly being pursued for consumer goods as well. Thirty months after the invasion, *The Economist* reports that half of goods imports come from China, twice the share from before the invasion. Russia's GDP is expected to grow by more than three per cent in 2024, its fastest growth spurt since the 2010s.

Among the strategies Russia has reportedly deployed with success is the use of third-party trading firms out of Dubai, which distribute its petroleum products in West Africa. Russian oil is dumped at below market prices in countries such as Burkina Faso and Mali, where it has helped keep malignant military rulers in power, as well as states keen to benefit from cut price oil such as Ghana, Ivory Coast and Benin.

Given the closed accounting and secrecy of Putin's state, it may be difficult to determine the real, longer-term effects of the sanctions regime. Certainly, it is likely to have made military production and rearmament costlier and complicated, given the supply of componentry at a premium especially from North Korea, China and Iran. Officially, Russia has increased military spending from 2.7 per cent

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of GDP in 2022, to 3.9 per cent in 2023 and six per cent in 2024, or just under one-third of its government budget. By the start of 2024, however, it was estimated that Russian defence expenditure may account for as much as 40 per cent of its budget because the war in Ukraine is costing more than its combined spending on health and education. By comparison, the US spent 11 per cent, while the NATO average was 4.3 per cent.

The pressures imposed by external sanctions, however, have not been intense enough, certainly from a Ukrainian perspective, and were not imposed quickly or harshly enough to ensure that the refrigerator trumped the television. Russia has been adept at both accelerating its own military production, after a slow start, perhaps in anticipation of a rapid victory, and acquiring materiel from its allies. By activating its own axis, Moscow has obtained at least three million rounds of heavy artillery from North Korea since August 2023 (and perhaps as much as six million), and 300,000 from Iran in 2023. Russia itself is producing about 250,000 artillery shells per month, or three million annually. The US and Europe together have a capacity to produce about 1.2 million shells annually, while the US has set itself a goal to produce 100,000 rounds of artillery a month by the end of 2025. Russia is reported to be running artillery factories 24/7 on rotating 12-hour shifts, with an estimated 3.5 million Russians now working in the sector. This is up from around two to 2.5 million before the war. Moreover, critical western goods and components continue to find their way to Russia's war machine.

Sanctions remain intrinsically limited because they seldom target foreign actors. Instead, they target domestic actors, such as US firms or those operating under US jurisdiction. Even so, the workarounds are usually one step ahead of the sanctions regimes. As one illustration, the largest source of supply of high-priority battlefield items necessary for Russian weapon systems is reportedly the American firm Intel. The market also quickly finds a new equilibrium, factoring in the upset to pricing. A rise in interest rates has driven up the value of the rouble. Sanctions also do not work when there is a lack of ties. The United States is, for instance, not a significant trade partner with Russia.

Tightening the screws

In response to these weaknesses, two big changes have occurred to sanctions regimes in this century: the willingness to go after select individuals and to sanction the financial systems that prop up rulers. Named after the tax lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, who was allegedly murdered in a Moscow prison in 2009 for exposing corruption by Russian officials, the US government's Global Magnitsky Act is

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a far-reaching, targeted, human rights and anti-corruption sanctions programme aimed at government officials as well as private citizens. The 2012 Act authorizes the US government to sanction foreign government officials worldwide who are human rights offenders, freeze their assets, and ban them from entering the United States. In the first ten years of its history, Magnitsky cited 450 individuals. The great strength of the programme lies in its deliberate attempt to cut off corrupt and tainted individuals from the global financial system.

Additionally, while targeted sanctions against Russia started feebly in 2022 (there were exemptions for luxury goods, for instance, in the EU sanctions package, to placate Italy), they soon extended to the Russian banking system. Despite fears of the impact on western banks, Russia was prevented from using the SWIFT international payment system. By cutting off seven Russian banks from the system, the West significantly raised the cost of banking, despite resistance from European banks. In addition to the weaponization of the dollar in this manner, the freezing of Russia's currency reserves was an unprecedented use of extraterritorial jurisdiction. The call to seize more than 300 billion US dollars held by western banks and employ it for Ukraine's relief was similarly met with alarm by commercial banks. As Bill Winters, the head of Standard Chartered bank, said in response to this suggestion, the financial community's response to seizing the profits of Russian frozen assets would be "mixed" amid fears of "weaponizing" central banks and currencies.

While targeted sanctions against Russia started feebly in 2022, they soon extended to the Russian banking system.

Such fears of a politicized and weaponized US dollar are partly responsible for the dollar's share among global reserves falling from 70 per cent to just under 60 this century, as countries seek to sanction-proof their reserves. Coupled with trade friction with China, the weaponization of the US's control of the international financial system will most likely change the conduct of non-western powers and lead to rival architectures, which may gain significant support. This explains why Beijing has developed its own international payment platform – the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS). This is independent of SWIFT and is accepted in Russia and by banks in Brazil and elsewhere. But changes to this system may take a long time, given the dollar's continued primacy as a reserve currency.

Sanctions are always a kind of double-edged sword. In order to be effective and prevent bypassing they have to be comprehensive and include as many countries as possible. Yet this is difficult to achieve when there are different depths of dependence on Russia in the economic and trade spheres; a limited willingness to suffer too much; strong vested interests; "sacred cow" sectors like nuclear fuel or plants;

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the availability of strategic spoilers who have benefitted most from the western sanctions on Russia; as well as the tactical spoilers who did not join sanctions and were instrumental in re-exporting goods. This is compounded by the existence of many loopholes and the insufficient enforcement of secondary sanctions. All this has granted Russia a long time to adjust and make alternative arrangements.

In the face of the economic united front from the West, Russia has fought back using parallel markets, dual-use technology, and third-country conduits. But there are limits. There is a premium, as South Africa learnt under apartheid, to buying smuggled technology. Suppliers are expensive and wary about losing access to richer markets. And technology cannot make up for the loss of skilled workers from the "brain drain" that usually accompanies sanctions. The longer war drags on and sanctions remain in place, the tougher things will get, not least because war is an expensive business.

Work smarter for regime behaviour change

Several notable individuals have called for the distribution of frozen Russian funds, including Bill Browder, a long-time foe of Vladimir Putin. But, as is highlighted above, there are grave concerns with this approach, some driven by a concern for profits, others by the impact on the global financial system, and some by both. This suggests a need for fresh tactical thinking on how to employ frozen Russian funds. Given Ukrainian needs, international authorities could be requested to use seized Russian assets as collateral for the issuance of new Ukrainian bonds. The interest on seized assets could be used as of now to reinforce the message on collateral and, at the same time, bring the interest bill down for Ukraine, particularly to pay for the ongoing penalties on IMF loans.

The funding would be useful. The danger of creating great fanfare about sanctions is that there is an opportunity to cast the sanctioning party as the bad guys in a sort of perverse moral equivalence. This is worsened by the inevitable leakage of the very items supposedly under sanctions, just as the findings of the Kyiv Scientific Research Institute of Forensic Expertise remind us. There is another approach, less founded in the moralism that accompanies sanctions than on engaging with the problem in a manner aligned with a more careful calibration of the benefits of external engagement regimes.

For example, in North Africa and the Sahel, for those seeking to undo Russian-led destabilization, given that the most effective enemies of the Russians are likely to be Islamists, any assistance or intelligence that western states (including Ukraine) give them is best kept under cover. There may be some more useful long-term out-

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comes, not least through rebuilding connections and mending relationships in the region that have been badly strained by western over-engagement.

These new forms of assistance should involve far more than kinetic action or even military equipment and training. Given that Russia-aligned regional regimes are by definition undemocratic and thus highly factional, unstable and vulnerable, these cracks can be widened by limiting their income streams; supporting internal opposition forces through financing along with media and civil society; and helping regional states to limit their influence.

> International authorities could be requested to use seized Russian assets as collateral for the issuance of new Ukrainian bonds.

The same menu of choices exists in Russia itself, including the following measures: providing information on the financial transactions of leaders direct to the public; the training of journalists, accountants and engineers; support for civil society organizations; support for opposition politicians and academics, in the second instance by commissioning work to ensure a basic income free from state controls; fostering networks of opposition politicians; publishing online resources in local languages, especially on how to mount a political campaign and win an election; the training and equipping of cyber-activists; and supporting local investigative journalism. The means to undermine Russia's war machine – and constrain those allies which, wittingly or otherwise, support it – goes beyond attempts to impose embargoes and sanctions.

Unless such measures are applied with consummate regulatory precision, they can provide a fig-leaf of respectability to a failing policy, and will always be mitigated by the role of business in seeking profit, or by fears of over compromising the integrity of the global financial system. Rather, sanctions should be seen as part of a continuum of state action, at one end of which is a more careful calibration of benefits to undo authoritarianism and, at the other, a stricter application of measures, specifically targeting individuals. This is a capacity that exists today in unprecedented forensic detail.

Strengthen forensics

War usually visits poor places, making them even poorer. The cost of turning a blind eye to Russia's wanton destruction of communities across Ukraine lies not only in the costs to property. After all, it puts the interests of the state above – and seemingly beyond – those of the individual, the opposite of the very premise of the human rights regime that followed the Second World War where, in the es-

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teemed Nuremburg jurist Hersch Lauterpacht's words, "the well-being of an individual is the ultimate object of all law."

Lauterpacht was born close to Habsburg Lemberg, now Lviv in modern-day Ukraine. Other Ukrainians have taken up the same struggle, not least the Nobel laureate Oleksandra Matviichuk, whose Center for Civil Liberties has documented more than 78,000 war crimes so far. Digital technologies offer huge advances in tracking perpetrators, from soldiers to commanders and even the chips and production lines responsible for the missiles and drones raining down on Ukrainian cities.

The Achilles heel of sanctions remains their (lack of) implementation, driven by political differences or financial advantage, and enabled by a lack of consequences. The efficient implementation of sanctions could and should be strengthened through both legislative and non-legislative means at the national level. There is a need to increase the analytical capacity of institutions to ensure that they are properly staffed. For instance, the variance in sanctions monitoring capacity ranges across Europe in departments made up of five to 150 people. Similarly, limiting money laundering via flow-through (transit) accounts is important to cut corrupt practices. One means of enabling this is to implement without further delay the EU Confiscation Directive by all EU member states and to incorporate it into the national legal framework of all member states. Also on a legislative level, more countries should amend their respective criminal codes to introduce or strengthen the punishment for violations of international sanctions.

But sanctions should not be a pretext for presenting options as ratcheting up isolation and nothing else or more. On a spectrum of coercion, there has to be a carrot with the stick. For example, the binary choice of sanctions should not obscure the much more difficult and complex business of engaging with oppositions forces, parliamentary and non-governmental, including business, to build constituencies for change. That is probably the lesson from apartheid South Africa, which is most often overlooked, despite the power and impact of this role. This is because it was not a dramatic action from outside that brought change, but rather the support of those fighting for change from inside. South Africa did not change because it was cut off. It changed because the regime did not want to be cut off and those that remained connected had gained all the advantages and strengths of so doing.

> Digital technologies offer huge advances in tracking perpetrators and production lines responsible for missiles and drones.

Sanctions remain critical in reducing government capacity in part by increasing cost and complexity for regime survival, and ensuring that elites in particular are not immune to the implications of their actions. Changing elite behaviour de-

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pends on increasing the pressure that can push parties off the battlefield and to the negotiating table. Sanctions can help to tip the balance, not least in changing perceptions of elite impunity.

Whatever the workarounds developed by the apartheid regime in South Africa and the businesses operating there, ultimately the military, economic and social costs outweighed the benefits, and the regime changed. But this demanded a coherent approach, including a wide range of sanctions with (almost) global support as well as various carrots, not least the prospect of global inclusion. At its core, it required a rational regime, which was prepared to concede political power if the costs of hanging on outweighed the benefits of letting go. Contrary, then, to the enthusiasm for sanctions as a measure short of war, they do not promise instant change, nor are they effective without a comprehensive approach. They can, if so devised, help to change the direction of travel. EE

This article draws, in part, on Greg Mills and David Kilcullen's book title *The Art of War and Peace* (Johannesburg: Penguin Random House, 2024).

Greg Mills is the director of the Brenthurst Foundation. Ray Hartley is the research director of the Brenthurst Foundation. Hryhoriy Nemyria is a member of Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada and deputy chair of the parliamentary committee on foreign affairs. Luis Ravina is a professor at the University of Navarra.

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All for one and one for all against disinformation to protect democracy

ANNA BEITANE, STEFANO BRAGHIROLI,
CÉCILE DOLBEAU-BANDIN AND CAROLINE DUFY

Democratic politics has a key responsibility to prevent extreme societal polarization and divisive culture wars, which create fertile ground for malicious interference and deception. While Russia and China actively spread disinformation to undermine open societies, what should a European response to the deadly threat of disinformation look like?

In government communication, media and public discourse, references to disinformation are increasingly frequent. While fact-checkers and public warnings against the misuse and manipulation of information are becoming part of our daily life, the first step to cure a disease is to understand what exactly it is. Disinformation refers to intentionally false or misleading information crafted and spread to deceive, manipulate or sway an audience. It typically involves a mix of deliberate intent, emotional appeal and strategic targeting while often using sensationalism, manipulative tactics and the targeting of specific groups.

Disinformation is often designed to erode trust in individuals, institutions or processes and is disseminated by sources that conceal or distort their identity and intentions. It spreads quickly and, once in circulation, can continue to have harmful effects even after being disproved. While disinformation adapts to its specific contexts and targets, its goals, dynamics and consequences remain relatively constant

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across societies and countries. No nation is immune to its effects, making disinformation a global challenge on par with climate, pandemics and organized crime.

A virus against democracy

Disinformation strategies are intentionally crafted to serve two primary purposes: fostering societal discord and division, and eroding our ability to distinguish truth from falsehood, often by presenting a misleading equivalence between them. The rapid growth and proliferation of artificial intelligence, combined with the dynamic and increasingly fragmented information environment shaped by social media, do not change the fundamental aims or nature of disinformation. Instead, they broaden its scope and magnify its effects. As Umberto Eco put it: "Social media gives legions of idiots the right to speak when they once only spoke at a bar after a glass of wine, without harming the community … but now they have the same right to speak as a Nobel Prize winner. It's the invasion of the idiots."

This phenomenon poses particular risks in complex, diverse, liberal-democratic societies. Such societies, characterized by pluralism, are especially vulnerable to foreign interference and domestic populists who exploit openness for their own ends. At the same time, efforts to combat disinformation must remain grounded in the rule of law and uphold the freedom of information – core values of these open societies.

Ironically, undesired information is far less threatening to autocratic regimes, which are often the leading perpetrators of foreign interference. In these systems, the absence of pluralism and a state monopoly on media allow such regimes to swiftly suppress any unfavourable narratives.

France and Estonia: so different yet so similar

At first glance, Estonia and France might appear to share little in common. Estonia, a small nation of 1.3 million people on the EU and NATO's Eastern Flank, carries the historical weight of foreign invasions and an independence recovered after Soviet occupation only in 1991. France, by contrast, is one of Europe's largest countries, with a legacy as a great power and a history of global influence. However, both nations are profoundly impacted by disinformation, which is often driven by similar perpetrators employing comparable techniques.

Estonia emerged as a leader in countering disinformation in the mid-2000s. This was the result of a major Russian cyberattack in 2007, following the relocation of the Soviet-era Bronze Soldier statue from central Tallinn. France, on the

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other hand, has contended with a series of disinformation campaigns during recent presidential elections and, more recently, around the Paris Olympics. These threats, frequently linked to far-right groups with Kremlin ties, highlight the shared challenges faced by both nations in addressing this evolving threat.

In response to this shared challenge, the "France and Estonia – Together Against Disinformation" (FREETAD) project was launched in 2024 with funding from NATO's Public Diplomacy Division and coordinated by the University of Tartu in Estonia together with French higher education institutions and think tanks. The timing could not be more apt: 2024 marked the 20th anniversary of Estonia joining NATO and was the year of the European Parliament elections, a period when the threat of disinformation and foreign interference by hostile actors was widely anticipated to undermine European democracy.

Inspired by the French Ambassador to Estonia, Emmanuel G.F. Mignot, the project aims to raise public awareness and foster cross-border collaboration among Estonian and French academia, public institutions and civil society. By countering malicious interference and disinformation, the initiative equips the Estonian and French societies to respond more effectively to these growing threats, while also strengthening democratic resilience by uniting their efforts.

While disinformation is a widely discussed topic and numerous initiatives are already in progress, the uniqueness of the FREETAD project lies in its comparative approach and ability to engage multiple target groups under a single framework. As part of the project, Estonian and French university students received training to identify disinformation and develop collaborative initiatives. Additionally, French and Estonian experts participated in the 2024 Normandy for Peace World Forum in Caen, where they engaged with young people and policymakers. French experts also travelled to Estonia to meet key stakeholders in government and academia, fostering an exchange of best practice in tackling disinformation and strengthening cross-border cooperation.

The context for Franco-Estonian collaboration could not be more significant given the evolving strategic landscape following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has significantly intensified disinformation campaigns targeting European societies. Moreover, the differences between the two countries enhance their complementarity and make their collaboration particularly fruitful. Estonia's status as a pioneer in e-governance and cyber-awareness, exemplified by the Tallinn-based NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, complements France's increasing commitment to European security and NATO's Eastern Flank, particularly in the wake of Brexit and the recent US elections. Together, these strengths form a robust foundation for addressing shared challenges and strengthening democratic resilience in Europe.

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Manipulating the narrative

In summer 2024, following her selection as the future EU foreign policy chief, Estonia's then prime minister, Kaja Kallas, became the target of a Kremlin-led disinformation campaign. Russian propaganda distorted a family photo of a young Kallas, fabricating false claims of privilege and hypocrisy alongside family collaboration with both the Soviet and Nazi regimes. The campaign began in late June, just one day after Kallas's nomination as EU High Representative was announced. Russian outlets like Sputnik and Kremlin-linked VKontakte accounts spearheaded the smear. This coordinated effort sought to discredit Kallas and undermine her candidacy on the international stage.

Investigative journalists from Estonia's *Delfi*, along with local fact-checkers, quickly debunked the incident, revealing how the photo – taken in the mid-1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union – was deliberately manipulated and distributed through Kremlin-aligned media, social media accounts, bots and trolls. The swift reaction and effective response are directly linked to Estonia's approach to combating disinformation, which is recognized as a hybrid threat to the country's security. A guiding principle in Estonia's national security strategy is the concept of "total defence", which ensures that all major state authorities contribute to national defence by integrating military forces with non-military capabilities. Countering disinformation is a vital component of this strategy, which is aimed at safeguarding Estonia's internal security.

A key pillar in Estonia's strategy for addressing disinformation lies in providing comprehensive training and education to the general public, starting as early as primary school. This proactive approach has propelled Estonia into the top five countries on the Media Literacy Index, alongside Finland, Norway and Denmark. This achievement is particularly notable given the higher levels of vulnerability and exposure to fake news faced by other Baltic and Central and Eastern European countries. Beyond educating the public, Estonia balances its disinformation countermeasures through a two-pronged approach. On one hand, it restricts and counters disinformation through governmental and grassroots initiatives, such as "Propastop". On the other hand, it supports media outlets that produce high-quality journalism and engage in fact-checking.

A notable example of this supportive strategy was the establishment of ETV+, a state-funded TV channel launched in late 2014. While this move might seem counterintuitive following Russia's annexation of Crimea, it was part of Estonia's broader strategy of integration and social cohesion. Recognizing the heightened vulnerability of Russian-speaking minorities to Russian state-controlled propaganda, ETV+ provides high-quality news and content about Estonia in the Russian

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language. This ensures that Estonia's Russian-speaking population has access to reliable information, fostering social cohesion and resilience against disinformation.

Portal Kombat

In February 2024, a viral video began circulating on French social media, falsely attributed to France24, claiming that Ukraine was planning to assassinate the French president, prompting him to cancel a planned visit to the country. Shortly after, it was uncovered that approximately 200 fabricated and ad hoc French "information portals" had been set up and were being used to spread pro-Russian propaganda aimed at undermining French support for Ukraine. This network, known as "Portal Kombat", disseminated false narratives, including claims about French mercenaries fighting in Ukraine.

The plot was exposed by VIGINUM, the French agency responsible for monitoring and countering foreign digital interference. Established in 2021, VIGINUM is a national technical and operational service dedicated to safeguarding digital public debate from information manipulation campaigns orchestrated by foreign actors with the intent to harm France and its fundamental interests. This agency represents a particularly compelling and actionable example of how Paris is addressing the challenge of disinformation in a strategic and proactive manner.

The service champions open public communication and works horizontally with all the relevant state administrations. It also involves a very diverse team ranging from legal experts and IT analysts to specialists covering ethics and cultural studies. One key aspect of the agency's tasks is that it is not responsible or concerned with re-establishing the truth or correcting "inaccurate" information, but rather detecting the source of any massive circulation of false information and whether it is the result of foreign interference. The idea is that in a democratic society this function of "correction" should be carried out by democratic institutions and informed public debate, not by a government agency.

> To encourage an informed public debate, teaching critical thinking is key, especially among young people.

In an era where fact-checkers and top-down debunking efforts face growing criticism for perceived politicization, and as major online platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook increasingly shift away from these practices in favour of community-driven approaches such as community notes, this presents a promising alternative. By placing informed citizens at the centre of the process, it avoids the pitfalls of being accused by demagogues and critics of censorship of curtailing

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free speech. This ultimately helps foster a more inclusive and participatory method for combating misinformation.

To encourage an informed public debate, a cornerstone of the French approach is promoting *esprit critique* or critical thinking, especially among young people and less politically engaged citizens. French educators integrate critical thinking into school curricula, teaching students how to analyse media content, recognize biases, identify *infox* (the French term for fake news), and differentiate credible information from manipulation. This approach views critical thinking both as a method and as a practical toolkit for assessing the likelihood and veracity of news, as well as the credibility of sources. It equips citizens with the means to understand how information is produced and disseminated, all while emphasizing the importance of verifying sources to navigate today's complex information landscape.

How can Europe increase its resilience and better protect its democracy?

Democratic politics has a key responsibility to prevent extreme societal polarization and divisive culture wars, which create fertile ground for malicious interference and deception. To drain the swamp in which disinformation thrives, mutual toleration between political adversaries and societal awareness are the best antibodies against hostile actions. While Russia and China actively spread disinformation to undermine open societies, and Elon Musk pursues an extraordinary *Blitzkrieg* against liberal democracy by weaponizing social media, what should a European response to the deadly threat of disinformation look like?

In the short term, the idea is to set up an effective firewall. Rapid-response measures are essential for countering disinformation quickly. Scaling fact-checking services and providing them with an EU or NATO-wide framework of coordination, as well as enforcing the EU's Digital Services Act while collaborating (when possible) with media platforms to flag and correct false claims can limit the immediate spread of disinformation. Accountability initiatives like "naming and shaming" promote transparency and responsible reporting, though care must be taken to avoid sensationalism that could undermine public trust.

This should go hand in hand with fostering public engagement and pluralism as a way to build societal resilience. Experiences like FREETAD prove that media cafés and community spaces can encourage critical dialogue and interaction with verified information, while preventing the emergence of confined echo chambers and insular digital spaces. Strengthening connections between citizens and democratic institutions can empower individuals to critically assess information rather

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than passively consume it, all without losing trust in the media. Transparency about journalistic processes further bolsters trust and media literacy.

In the long term, as the French and Estonian examples show, robust media literacy education, beginning in early childhood, is fundamental to long-term resilience. Teaching critical thinking skills helps future generations distinguish credible sources from manipulation. As highlighted by the 2020 European Democracy Action plan adopted by the European Commission, at the systemic level, promoting a strong journalistic culture grounded in transparency, ethics and accountability helps build a trusted media ecosystem that supports democratic resilience.

In a time in which Europe is increasingly insulated, by working with each other we prove that disinformation, like other global threats, is better addressed by means of cross-border cooperation and the international exchange of experience among like-minded democratic nations. This is especially true given the scope and scale of the shared danger and its transnational nature, which is only amplified by online communication and digital tools.

Many years ago, the late Belgian Prime Minister Paul Henri Spaak famously remarked: "There are only two kinds of states in Europe: small states, and small states that have not yet realized they are small." In light of recent developments, including Russia's war against Ukraine and the West, China's growing global ambitions, and an increasingly isolationist and unpredictable America under Trump, this statement rings truer than ever. EE

This piece was written within the framework of the project "France and Estonia: Together Against Disinformation" (FREETAD), which is (co)sponsored by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of NATO.

Anna Beitane is head of digital education projects at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies at the University of Tartu in Estonia.

Stefano Braghiroli is an associate professor of European Studies at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies at the University of Tartu.

Cécile Dolbeau-Bandin is a lecturer in information and communication sciences at the University of Caen in France.

Caroline Dufy is a professor of sociology at Sciences Po Bordeaux.

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The contradiction of the female figure in Belarusian politics

NASTA ZAKHAREVICH

In the months leading up to the 2020 elections, Alyaksandr Lukashenka's remark that the "constitution is not written for women" sparked significant public outcry. Operating within a deeply patriarchal paradigm, he rarely shies away from such sexist comments. Yet, he continuously underestimates the role of women and their potential in politics, as seen in recent Belarusian history.

Since 1994 Alyaksandr Lukashenka has held an unyielding grip on Belarus, often referring to himself as a "women's president". This characterization is not without purpose; he strategically appeals to specific demographics within the electorate, many of whom find themselves in vulnerable positions reliant on state social support – predominantly women. One might wonder why he still seeks voter loyalty when elections are routinely manipulated and international observers repeatedly report ballot stuffing and significant violations in vote counting. The reality is that genuine support from even a fraction of the electorate simplifies his task. It allows for less money and administrative resources to be spent on falsification and for mitigating the impacts of dishonest elections. The mass protests of 2020 arose precisely because the scale and transparency of the fraud were too blatant to ignore.

What has been the outcome of these protests for Lukashenka? He was compelled to turn to Russia for assistance, consequently losing a portion of both his personal independence and that of the nation. The ongoing repression within the country,

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four years following the election, indicates that Lukashenka does not feel entirely secure. According to Henadz Korshunau, a senior expert at the Center for New Ideas and a sociologist, a new wave of repression began in Belarus at the end of 2023 and was expected to persist at least until the end of the 2025 electoral campaign, when new presidential elections were to take place. However, both opposition leaders and western politicians refuse to regard these elections as legitimate.

Kenneth Yalowitz, the former US ambassador to Belarus, labelled the January 2025 elections as yet another farce, while opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya insisted that the repressions must cease, political prisoners be released, and all citizens be allowed to vote regardless of their country of residence. Furthermore, she emphasized that elections must occur under independent observation and adhere to OSCE standards. She also asserted that Belarus must guarantee freedom of assembly and equal access to media. "If these requirements are not met by the regime, we consider what will transpire in 2025 to be an imitation of a democratic process."

All this raises an intriguing question: what role have Tsikhanouskaya and other women played in Lukashenka's political career and in Belarusian politics at large? Is Lukashenka justified in calling himself a "women's president"? The answers to these questions reveal the intricate dynamics of power and representation in Belarus, highlighting the paradox of a regime that claims support from those it simultaneously suppresses.

Victory in elections by women's hands

For 25 years, women have reportedly supported Lukashenka more consistently than men. However, this loyalty cannot be attributed to a biological predisposition to favour authoritarian leaders or populistic rhetoric. Instead, it stems partly from gender socialization within a patriarchal society. From a young age, girls are encouraged to recognize the positive and to overlook instances of deception and manipulation. Politics has traditionally been viewed as a "man's domain" despite women holding a significant presence of one-third of those in the House of Representatives.

Lukashenka has skilfully utilized statistics to boost Belarus's rankings in various international indices – a skill he has developed over the years. Nevertheless, the mere presence of women in parliament holds little value if that body is entirely under Lukashenka's control and consistently upholds his initiatives.

According to the independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, women tend to hold a more optimistic view of the economic model in Belarus. For

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instance, during the height of the economic crisis that began in 2011, more than 40 per cent of women believed that the worst was behind them, while only 28 per cent of men felt the same. This inclination towards optimism has often led women to overlook the harsh realities of their circumstances and to place their faith in the "strong hands" of the president, whose competence they were taught to accept without question. The structure of the electoral system itself has further facilitated women's role in securing Lukashenka's victories. Voting takes place mostly in schools, where most members of the electoral commissions are women employed in these institutions.

In Belarus, schools are state-funded, meaning that the salaries of female staff, including teachers, are drawn from the public budget. These salaries are typically significantly lower than market averages, rendering these workers, particularly teachers, vulnerable. Many live paycheque to paycheque, lack savings and cannot afford to lose their jobs, especially with the possibility of a poor reference. Those higher up in the hierarchical structure exploit this vulnerability, coercing schoolteachers to falsify election results or obstruct independent monitors from accessing polling stations. One schoolteacher anonymously recounted her experience of refusing to sign a fraudulent vote tally. The school principal, serving as the head of the electoral commission, responded with threats: "She screamed that I should not just be fired, but executed. She said I did not understand what I was talking about and that it was my duty to do as she commanded." This troubling dynamic illustrates how Lukashenka's regime has manipulated societal structures and gender roles to maintain power, revealing a complex interplay between authority, vulnerability and complicity in electoral processes.

"Our constitution is not written for women"

In the months leading up to the 2020 elections, Lukashenka's remark that the "constitution is not written for women" sparked significant public outcry. The business owner Ksenija Fiodarava filed a complaint with the Central Election Commission, referencing Article 32 of the constitution, which asserts gender equality in Belarus. The politician Volha Kavalkova also responded: "Such statements reveal a man who, bearing the significant powers granted by the constitution, has failed to address the issues facing our country. Clearly, it does not matter whether a man or woman is in power." Former presidential candidate Tatsiana Karatkevich added that only a weak and dependent person could make such claims.

This was not the first time Lukashenka made derogatory remarks about women. Operating within a deeply patriarchal paradigm, he does not shy away from sexist

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comments or from neglecting to amend discriminatory laws. In Belarus, there is still a list of professions prohibited for women, many of which are not only physically demanding but also well-paying. Conversely, physically arduous jobs with minimal pay are typically viewed as traditionally female roles, such as hospital orderlies. Certain professions are restricted for women under the pretext of protecting reproductive health. Lukashenka attempts to position himself as a patriarch who knows what is best for women and the nation as a whole. In his worldview, women should remain under male guardianship, which includes shielding them from specific professions and the "burden" of leadership, such as the presidency.

This discriminatory paternalism is prevalent in Belarus not only in the workplace but also in reproductive rights and freedoms, which are constrained by the state at various levels. For instance, doctors may refuse to perform abortion procedures for their own personal reasons, leading to at least one city having no available abortion services. In Lahoisk, all gynaecologists declared they would not conduct these medical procedures. Additionally, one week every October is designated as a "week without abortions" in celebration of Mother's Day. State control extends beyond those seeking abortions to women who are eager to have children. A married woman must obtain written consent from her husband to undergo in vitro fertilization (IVF). Elective caesarean sections are not performed upon request. According to the "Radziny" initiative, from 2016 to 2019, only 24 per cent of women giving birth in hospitals were granted informed consent during labour, while the remaining 76 per cent experienced procedures performed without their consent or awareness. Obtaining more recent data is impossible due to the political crisis in the country and the widespread crackdown on NGOs after 2020.

The state monitors women's reproductive health not only during pregnancy or when seeking to conceive but also during unexpected circumstances. For example, women are required to undergo gynaecological examinations to obtain medical certificates for driver's licences. Medical commissions for jobs involving food or children also necessitate a visit to a gynaecologist and an examination in a gynaecological chair. Yet, despite the prevalence of obstetric violence and discriminatory laws, the societal response has been muted, with little noticeable protest. Women remain perceived by the authorities as structural units intended to enhance the country's demographic situation rather than political subjects.

A desperate housewife

For 24 years leading up to the fateful 2020 elections, Belarus's electoral process was controlled by a woman – Lidziya Yarmoshyna, a tough and authoritative fig-

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ure. It was her responsibility to ensure that the final, official election results would please Lukashenka. Women who succeed in patriarchal systems often oppose the idea of others having the same opportunities. Despite her successful career within the power structure, Yarmoshyna believed politics was a male domain. In 2010 during her first late-night press conference after the presidential elections, when tens of thousands of protesters had already been brutally dispersed by the security forces, she remarked that women who came out to protest "had nothing to do". "They should have stayed home, cooked borscht, instead of walking around the squares. A woman should be ashamed to participate in such events."

For 24 years leading up to the 2020 elections, Belarus's electoral process was controlled by a woman – Lidziya Yarmoshyna.

Yarmoshyna's longstanding loyalty to Lukashenka and the vertical power structure she helped build, where many women ensured his repeated victories, dulled his vigilance. So when, in 2020, an ordinary housewife decided to run for president, Lukashenka underestimated the situation's danger and allowed her to join the race. A woman had already run for president before – Tatsiana Karatkevich in 2015. Those elections passed quietly, with no significant protests, which once again lulled Lukashenka into a false sense of security. He is often called a political animal because of his instinctive ability to navigate situations to retain power. But in 2020, during the height of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, his sense of smell failed him. The most popular opposition candidates, Siarhey Tsikhanousky and Viktar Babaryka, were arrested, while another prominent contender, Valery Tsepkala, was denied registration. However, Lukashenka did register Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya – a woman who until recently was unknown and who ran in place of her arrested husband.

"Are you planning to collect signatures and actually run a presidential campaign, or are you registering as a sparring partner?" asked Yarmoshyna, then the head of the Central Election Commission.

"I've dreamed of becoming president my whole life," replied Tsikhanouskaya.

The feminine face of protest

By the time Lukashenka realized he had underestimated women, it was already too late. Three electoral campaigns merged and a famous female trio emerged – Tsikhanouskaya, Mariia Kalesnikava, and Veranika Tsepkala. At their main rally in a park near Bangalore Square in Minsk, 63,000 people gathered according to the Viasna Human Rights Centre.

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Before this, women in Belarus had often remained in the shadows when it came to political struggle and political activism. They were involved, and there were many of them, but the most prominent and well-known figures in these processes were always men. Women's leadership in society was not particularly supported, and outspoken women in journalism and activism were often threatened with having their children taken away. In 2017, for example, police visited the parents of journalist Larysa Shcherakova, warning them that her ten-year-old son would be taken by social services if she did not stop working as a journalist. According to Volha Karach, the leader of the civil campaign "Our House", there were around 15 cases between 2006 and 2013 where the authorities used such methods to pressure politically active women.

The gender researchers Iryna Salamatsina and Viktoriya Schmidt wrote that, until 2020, women were relegated to the role of "the legs of the opposition". But in 2020, a separate mass women's protest emerged. It began with an action near the Kamarouka Market in central Minsk on August 12th, three days after the elections, when about 200 women, dressed in white, formed a "solidarity chain". In the first few days after the elections, the security forces exhibited unprecedented brutality – people were tortured in police stations, vehicles and isolation units. Over 30 people were crammed into four-person cells and denied food and water. People were beaten, suffocated, sexually assaulted and threatened with death.

This was not the first women's protest in Belarus, but it was the first to be this large in nature. In the past, women whose children were sentenced to long prison terms under harsh drug laws formed the "Mothers 328" organization, demanding leniency in drug legislation and a review of their children's cases. However, this was a small group of protesters, and their demands were relatively personal.

In 2020 women protested for the whole country, not just for their families. One man, whom I spoke with after being taken to a hastily organized detention camp on the first night after the election, told me that the first women's protest saved his life. He said that at first, the treatment of detainees was extremely harsh, and he feared he would never leave, but when the guards learned of the women's protest, they became much softer. For several months after the election, a general protest march took place in Minsk every Sunday, while every Saturday featured a women's march. Protesters used behaviours stereotypically seen as feminine to protect themselves, and it often worked. For example, security forces were thrown off balance when crowds of women began to scream loudly.

For a long time, the authorities tried to identify the organizers of these protests. They detained female journalists and activists, threatening long prison sentences and the removal of their children. In autumn 2020 the journalist Yauheniya Douhaya was almost charged with inciting mass unrest, with the authorities citing a

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Radio Free Europe stream she had shared on her Telegram channel as evidence. "They tell me, 'Do you understand you'll be sent away for 15 years?' and then added, 'your daughter won't see you for a long time. I don't know how your fate will unfold. Maybe it will be fine, maybe not.'"

In November 2021, activist Volha Harbunova, who had spent many years running a shelter for women and children affected by domestic violence, was detained on suspicion of organizing women's marches. While she was in pretrial detention, censors blocked almost all her letters – only one letter from her daughter arrived and that was only because the girl pretended it was written by a friend of her mother. However, the censors allowed through a letter in which the ex-husband of one of Volha's former clients threatened to kill her daughter.

A war with women

In October 2021, one year and two months after the elections, when the active phase of the protests had long been suppressed, Lukashenka claimed that he was not at war with women. By that time, more than a hundred female political prisoners were being held in detention centres and prison colonies, some of whom were mothers of multiple children. Even in prison, the pressure on mothers continues. This issue is rarely discussed publicly, and to avoid causing further harm, I will not name specific individuals, but the fact must be known: some female political prisoners are stripped of their parental rights, and they are informed of this only after the fact. In some families, older children become guardians of their younger siblings, and while their mother remains imprisoned due to political reasons, they are raising their brothers and sisters.

Conditions in women's prisons in Belarus are harsher than those that house men. There is no clear explanation for this, but human rights defenders suggest that prison staff fear an uprising among men, which is why they offer them more freedom. In Women's Colony Number Four in the city of Homel, where the vast majority of female political prisoners are held, they are given little free time. The administration is highly focused on ensuring that the internal grounds look perfect, so during the winter, women clear snow and ice from the roads to ensure that only bare asphalt remains. After it rains, they wipe up the water from the puddles with cloths, and in the spring, they clean the fountain with toothbrushes.

Almost all political prisoners spend some time in a punishment cell (SHIZO), where during the day they can only walk around their cell and sit on a stool. At night they sleep on a cot leaning against the wall. In violation of the law, they are not provided with a mattress, blanket, pillow and bed linen. Books, extra clothing

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and their own food are not allowed in the SHIZO. In the summer, the heat is unbearable, while in winter, the cold is extreme, making women sick. However, they are often denied medical care. Women who have served their sentences and been released report that many will never be able to conceive or carry a child due to the health damage inflicted in prison. As additional punishment, prisoners are deprived of the legal right to make phone calls, receive visitors or get parcels. The former political prisoner Asya Bulybenka shared that a prison officer came to her before New Year's Eve and asked what she wanted for the holiday. She said she wanted a long visit with her family, but she was denied both the visit and the phone call because she refused to write a petition for pardon to Lukashenka.

Furthermore, in Women's Colony Number Four, there is a punishment cage, reminiscent of medieval torture. Located between the residential and industrial zones (in the women's colony, prisoners sew clothes for law enforcement and, in 2022, they also made stretchers for the Russian military), the cage is a real metal enclosure, two by one and a half metres in size. Prisoners are most often placed in the cage during both summer and winter, in extreme temperatures that make the experience even more unbearable. Detainees spend from one to four hours in the cage.

The Belarusian Union of Women, which claims 162,000 members, shows no interest in these women or in the violations of their rights, nor does it support the families of political prisoners. The union's website states that its activities are aimed at defending the rights and legitimate interests of women, families and children; ensuring the respectable position of women in society; and enhancing their role in the public, political, socio-economic and cultural life of the country. In reality, however, it is an organization focused on supporting the current regime. The union's current leader, Volha Chamadanava, formerly worked as a press secretary for the ministry of internal affairs. This autumn, she announced that she would run for president in the 2025 elections, but later withdrew her candidacy.

"We understand perfectly well that no one but our President Lukashenka can today provide the security we are experiencing, the security of our country, and, of course, the steady development of our state. We are the team of our president," declared the head of the Belarusian Union of Women. FE

Nasta Zakharevich is a Belarusian freelance journalist. She collaborates with the Belarusian environmental online media *Zialiony Partal* (Green Portal), Current Time TV and blogs on Radio Svaboda.

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Sandwiched between elections, Moldova's indie artists are planning new futures

KATIE TOTH

Moldova's government and its independent art scene are tussling over competing visions of the country's European future. As artists create for themselves a messy, participatory democracy with room for criticism, the country's leaders appear more focused on maintaining their image.

The five-hectare ruins of Chișinău's Republican Stadium, once a Cold-War era football arena in the centre of Moldova's capital, were overgrown and degrading when the US embassy stepped in, offering to pay. The space was perfect for a new embassy location: historic, central, and huge, with ample space for security. But artists and civil society groups wanted it to be made into a public park – a space for everyone that would pay homage to the city's past. In the end, however, Moldova's legislature struck a deal with the Americans with, according to detractors, little to no public consultation. It was promised that proceeds from the sale, would go to refurbishing the old state Universul print studio, making it into a centre for independent artists, culture workers and civil society. All that was left was the question, as Rusanda Alexandru Curca recalls, "how many square metres do you want?"

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Serious divide

When Curca, a rural DJ, is not spinning music in her village of Hirtop, she hops on Zoom or takes a *marshrutka* bus into the capital to discuss the fine points of government policy: she is also a director of two arts NGOs. When it came to Universul, she and others in the independent arts scene could have taken the win. Instead, they pushed back. The artists asked for transparency about how and why this piece of public land was given away to a foreign government and what kind of procedures would be in place to allow artists to maintain their independence in any forthcoming space.

They did not get an answer, but they did get a promise from the US embassy to set aside some of its space for a public park. In Curca's retelling, this looks like a galvanizing moment for artists and civil society: a welcome reminder that pushing for their goals together in the public sphere could actually work. "Generally, Moldova lacks participation from citizens in democratic processes," she says. "The only tool they are invited to … is the voting process."

In October, Moldova had a high-profile referendum and presidential race that included serious allegations of pro-Russian meddling and revealed a serious divide between Moldovans in-country and in the European diaspora. Several people in Moldova's independent arts scene contacted by *New Eastern Europe* were not interested in talking about the last election. Curca, for her part, did not vote. But that does not mean that she and her community are not engaged. Instead, many artists are creating new political futures from the ground up, cultivating terrain for orchards that can withstand the storms of party politics. The day before the EU referendum, several artists met to discuss what they should push for locally and how to support each other, no matter the outcome.

In October, Moldova had a high-profile referendum and presidential race that included serious allegations of pro-Russian meddling.

"Circumstances can change very quickly due to elections," says Vladimir Us, a curator and arts administrator who organized the talk. But the question of how to create a lasting, critical art community that can "provide a sustainable perspective," he adds, does not go away.

As Moldova's presidential election hung in the balance between the first and second rounds, independent artists were showing off their work at a weekend arts festival called Alternative Cultural Spaces. In Casa Zemstvei – a ragtag space for DIY and alternative art – music spilled out from studios into the hallway. People picked up sponges of paint and smashed them into posterboards to make pattern-driven, dramatic statements about bike lanes

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and ecology. A drumming troupe known for enlivening local protests with their bright Samba rhythms danced and beat their way through an open rehearsal, the sounds reverberating through the walls. At one salon, artists debated the merits of projects like Universul, how to properly harness institutional support, and how to work together to promote each other's art. Forums like these where ideas are bounced back and forth and refined by the people who put them into practice – this is where artists like Curca see democracy happening.

Collective art

That weekend the artist Maxim Polyakov went from room to room in Casa Zemstvei with incense, blessing the spaces with good vibes between stretches of holding court in the 3rd Space Studio – a room full of zines, posters, and leftist literature from the likes of Walter Benjamin. In the room, Polyakov and others make art, tea and soup as a loose network called the Druzhba collective. Drawing on their different contexts, artists from Romania, Transnistria, and Moldova each made their own posters, he explains. They then pulled them together into one, trying to answer the question of "how to make a frame where you can make something not as one artist but as a collective of people … dissolving authorship into this collective mosaic."

The studio just got a risograph machine, he tells me, and that has also been shaping their work. What does it mean to create an image knowing it will be repeated and redistributed on a (somewhat) mass scale? "I take from Marxism … its attention to material conditions and means of production," says Polyakov. The machine itself shapes the kind of art that is possible – the work interacts with the impact of its echo.

Much of the collective's work evokes images from the rise and fall of the Soviet Union, including the underground *samizdat* handed out by dissident thinkers. Eschewing art capitals like Paris, London, or Moscow, another collective zine he co-wrote calls on people to learn from their own corners of the land to build something that draws from the overlooked: "periphery knows, periphery will teach."

For Polyakov that corner is Tiraspol, where he was born when it was part of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic – today, his hometown is the capital of the unrecognized separatist state of Transnistria that broke away from Moldova after the fall of the Soviet Union. So perhaps it is inevitable that questions about the dark side of utopia are embedded in his practice. "You try to create utopia, but it comes together with dystopia. It's never separate," he says. Trying to build a small-scale community – wrestling with how to make it means trying to make a utopia, and

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the little dystopias that pop up along the way – is both a tool for collective art and is itself an artistic act. "You reuse, recycle ideology for your personal purpose," he says. Maybe that looks like DIY gatherings, parties, a tiny "table of culture" full of zines in homage to grand "houses of culture" of an earlier time – but it is all about building links and community at a small scale.

He is not alone. Casa Zemstvei itself is an act of constant collective maintenance and organizing. Artists started renting part of the building 12 years ago from the country's national ethnography museum, which uses it as a second storage space. They are constantly haggling for more time there from the museum, which wants them out to rebuild a new site. The building is falling apart. It has no central heating, a leaking roof, and constant plumbing and electric problems: the artists fix what they can themselves.

Culture and politics

As Moldova heads towards a parliamentary election that could be much more influential for the country's daily realities but far less covered by international press, these kinds of DIY-ish sensibilities and sharp, idea-driven critiques will be critical. Western governments seem to be well aware of this: Denmark and Canada have both increased their support to Moldovan civil society institutions since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, Moldova's governing party still seems to find critical artistic voices inconvenient at best.

One example from 2023 arose after a national theatre company suddenly buried its planned production of a play about Moldova's endemic corruption. Cultural Minister Sergiu Prodran was quick to call the fallout "a very well thought out and planned action … deliberately turned into a political scandal." He also brushed off concerns about censorship, and alleged they were conveniently timed to derail October's European referendum and presidential election.

But the play-by-play of events that led to the play's demise raises troubling concerns about government interference in the arts. The Romanian documentary theatre director, David Schwartz, who creates plays based on interviews with real people, had been invited to create a guest piece about corruption for the Luceafarul theatre company. However, the premiere of his show was put on indefinite hiatus after a phone call from the president's culture advisor to the organizer of the theatre.

This is where the story becomes a bit more complicated. Schwartz released his script and said the show's indefinite postponement was because it was unflattering to the current government. The theatre's artistic director and actors disputed this, saying that they blocked the piece not because of the government, but because they

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Photo: Valery Zatolochny (CC) commons.wikimedia.org

A bird's eye view of the five-hectare ruins of the Chișinău Republican Stadium, once a Cold-War era football arena in the centre of Moldova's capital.

were uncomfortable with how easy it would be for Moldovans to de-anonymize Schwartz's interviews. They also said that some moments in the show were Russian-friendly talking points about corruption in Ukraine, even though they wanted to focus on Moldovan corruption.

A definitive account of what happened remains elusive. Schwartz's piece still has not run. Nonetheless, just the documentarian's invitation to try something here (and even the claims from the actors that they were fighting him to keep the focus on Moldova) shows how Moldova's art scene has matured over the years – and is using that maturity to draw attention to issues at home, exploring difficult topics with more self-awareness than in the recent past. This approach is a vast improvement from the early 2010s, when after being denied a visa to London, the contemporary Moldovan performance artist Tatiana Fiodorova took a crinkly plaid plastic bag often associated with migrants and poverty and pasted a circle of EU yellow stars on it. She then included the bag in various performative interventions, including painting her skin black and dressing up in traditional African dress to protest how, as she phrased it at the time, the EU-Moldovan dynamic made her "feel like a slave".

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Where art could have been used to foster solidarity with the Global South, instead caricatures of African and black bodies came off not like a call for equality but a demand to be treated as a member of the exclusionary in-group. In an email, Fiodorova says that her goal at the time was to protest injustice across socioeconomic and racial barriers and express solidarity: "Today I realize I could have approached the theme more delicately."

About a decade later, as a Büchsenhausen Fellow in Austria, Fiodorova recently explored the fluidity of identity on the edge of Europe by making art about two plants that are food staples in rural Moldova: corn, introduced to the country from global trade, and nettle, a native plant with medicinal benefits. And at Alternative Cultural Spaces this autumn, this more nuanced approach to social engagement was also on display in an exhibit she curated about the invasion of Ukraine. In the project, "Seeds of Distortion," Ukrainian-Moldovan photographer Ramin Mazur gave violent pictures of war the colour-drenched glow of a hazy 1990s television set. Set up against visuals of huge eyes and fascinated children, Mazur's work grappled with what it means to try and reach his family members still in Russia, who are continually sucked in by the soothing glow of the state channel. The art evokes the tension that ensues when faraway loved ones are lured into propaganda not for its big ideas but just because having a voice around (no matter how strident) is less lonely.

Finding a place for Moldova's art scene

Mazur's photos lined the "Humanitarian Corridor" Fiodorova has cultivated since 2022, a literal corridor of Casa Zemstvei devoted to work supporting Ukraine.

"In our space … there is no established structure for contemporary art to function," says Fiodorova. So she is filling in the gaps, curating shows to highlight new voices, like a 2023 photography exhibit at the national museum, where many artists played with modern environmental problems and post-authoritarian baggage.

Moldova's creative scene remains small, but new commercial galleries have been opening such as Lunita and Iusty. In February 2024, the country also established a state fund for independent culture. Nonetheless, Curca says many independent art workers like her are still accused of causing harm to Moldova's European ambitions or even being "Putinists".

In fact, she finds the idea of Moldova being rolled back into Putin's fold "terrifying". However, as Moldova strives for a European identity, she sees her role very differently than the politicians she critiques. "It's always pissing me off when I am speaking to a minister and he's speaking to me like I am from the village. I *am* from

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the village! Yes! But I have … higher education in the arts, international experience, traveling a lot, exchanging a lot, and they are not seeing this value."

The European Union's stated values include human rights, free expression, and democracy – Curca says she is fighting to see those play out in practice. "You are there to coordinate us, but not to take decisions instead of us," she says, speaking to Moldova's current government. That is why she hopes "a credible pro-European opposition" will play a part in the next elections. Although she does not want Russia to make geopolitical gains in Moldova this summer, she believes it is critical for the current party to face some accountability.

Meanwhile, Curca believes art can help build a more resilient democracy at a grassroots scale, not just by spotlighting problems within Moldovan society, but also by building community. Art, she says, can create a "universal horizon of expectation," and bring this multi-ethnic, multicultural country together in fragmented times, like techno beats pulling people to the dance floor at her next DJ set. EE

Katie Toth is the producer of *Things That Go Boom*, a podcast created by Inkstick Media and distributed by PRX about war and security. She reports on the human impact of geopolitics.

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On the traces of Migjen Kelmendi, rock icon and Kosovar intellectual

ERIK DA SILVA

Kosovo's identity remains highly contested in spite of its declaration of independence all the way back in 2008. While many still hold on to an ethnic conception of the state, people like the musician and intellectual Migjen Kelmendi want a new country with new values. This aim can be traced back to a cultural milieu that overcame the divisions of Yugoslavia.

I met the journalist and writer Migjen Kelmendi in the Charlie Brown café near Bill Clinton Boulevard in Pristina, Kosovo. Forty years have passed since he founded the band Gjurmët, but the thin smile of the first Kosovar Albanian rock icon is still there. In the 1960s, Yugoslavia welcomed rock-n-roll, organized festivals and promoted Yugoslav artists via the Yugoton label. An unprecedented rock scene emerged during the following decade: Zagreb, Belgrade, Ljubljana and Sarajevo became vibrant centres where punk and new wave flourished. Often mobilized by the state apparatus, the youth used rock to voice new aspirations.

Kosovo, still a mere region of Serbia, demanded greater autonomy, which the constitutional reform of 1974 eventually granted. A few years earlier, in the wake of demonstrations in Pristina in 1968, the University of Pristina had been founded in 1970 and Kosovo's future elites no longer needed to study in Belgrade. In 1974, Radio Television Pristina (RTP) was launched. The birth of a Kosovar sense of identity had not waited for this development, however, as in the case of Migjen Kelmendi's

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father, he was "one of the bards, one of the icons of literature and journalism in Kosovo, he was one of the names of that generation that began to reinvent Kosovar Albanian, it was a very benign nationalism, they were rather romantic nationalists". Kelmendi's son studied law in Pristina, "to please my father".

Revolutionary loophole

Kelmendi and his friends formed Gjurmët, the first Albanian rock band, during the 1981 Pristina protests, which the Serbian authorities condemned as counter-revolutionary and aimed at creating a Kosovar Republic.

"Everything that had to do with Albanians started to become dangerous for the regime," the musician recalls. But they found a loophole: "We rockers were part of a more universal cultural phenomenon. They said 'we ban nationalist music, but not modern music'; so we capitalized on this position and found our own space. I started composing 32 songs. There was only one TV station. In those days, you had to ask for permission to record songs. We managed to get permits and began recording there [at Radio Television Pristina (RTP)] because it wasn't possible anywhere else." These songs paint a portrait of Kosovo and the energy of Pristina's youth, and affirm Kelmendi's belief that "the world can be changed through music, and more precisely by articulating forbidden truths."

Quickly censored, the band's first song denounced the omnipresence of bureaucracy through the metaphor of chairs ("Karrigat") in a rock register that disconcerted editors and censors, including official poets, who denied the song any poetic or musical character. A second song, "Mikrofoni" ("Microphone"), slipped through the net of censorship in 1982, proclaiming: "A microphone, yes, I've got it now / I've got something to say … / I know you've suffered a lot … / But it's not too late – break it off once and for all / Anyone can take it."

Kelmendi and his friends formed Gjurmët, the first Albanian rock band, during the 1981 Pristina protests.

Kelmendi recounts that this is the best symbol of Gjurmët's ambition: "to denounce the control and surveillance of microphones, against ideological control and lies. It wasn't about dancing, it was about something else, delving into its roots in rhythm and blues, in the true stories of suburban African-Americans, in the sounds of these real lives."

In 1984, Gjurmët recorded their album at RTP. Kelmendi's idea of an eagle-shaped traditional dance was rejected, and the cover was revised to show the band leader staring at his watch, symbolizing the 1985 release delay. Gjurmët sings about life in

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Pristina, where the river was diverted and channelled underground ("Hero i qytetit pa lum", or "Hero of the city without a river"), a changing city because of the rural exodus ("Të gjitha rrugët të çojnë në Prishtinë", or "All roads lead to Pristina"). In a patriarchal society, young women in Pristina started going out, smoking, drinking Rakia and wearing make-up, a phenomenon celebrated in "Grimi cfare shije ka" ("What does make-up taste like"). The group also wrote the famous love songs "Mendoja Çdo Gjë Merr Fund Pa Ty" ("I thought it would all end without you") and "Era" (Wind). Pristina youth got a taste of freedom and Gjurmët performed at youth festivals in Serbia. All the songs composed by Gjurmët were compiled on an LP album, which was released in 2002 and is available on Archive.org.

The leaden years

Tito's death in 1981 marked Yugoslavia's gradual collapse, with worsening Serb-Kosovar relations far from the regime's slogan of "unity and brotherhood". In 1987, Slobodan Milošević delivered a provocative speech at the symbolic Field of Blackbirds, claiming the Albanian majority oppressed Serbs and posed a demographic threat. That same year, Kelmendi organized the Boom Festival in Kosovo. All Serbian bands were invited, except the well-known rock band LED, one of whose members supplied the amplifiers for Milošević's speech. The story was covered by a leading Croatian journalist and went national.

Progressively, Kosovo saw its autonomy within Serbia disappear. Albanian schools were closed and Kosovars lost their jobs: "We entered a kind of ghetto," Kelmendi told me. "No one could work anymore. We were expelled from RTP, which had 1,500 employees at the time. Milošević's police entered the premises without warning and ordered the interruption of programmes. We found ourselves in a semi-apartheid society in which entire spaces were off-limits to us." The Kosovars were reduced to clandestine activities. "We had to build parallel institutions. We started holding art exhibitions in cafés on the outskirts of Pristina out of reach of these great overseers," Kelmendi recalled.

Now technically unemployed, Kelmendi was sent by the director of RTP to Albania, after the collapse of the regime, to film a documentary on the camps and prisons. The shock was harsh, as Albania had until then been a reference point.

Kelmendi remembered: "It was a bunkerized state that we couldn't get into, we projected all our expectations onto Albania, we didn't know what was going on in that prison. They were cursed by the communism exercised by Albania against the Albanians. It was a monumental disappointment. My father had been able to visit the country as a journalist and had never spoken of what he had seen. On my

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return, I confronted him with reality, and he replied 'I was afraid you'd give up on the idea of Albanian unification.'"

After a stint with the *MM* literary magazine in Pristina, Kelmendi moved to New York in 1996 to manage a community TV station in the United States. In 1997, the prime minister of Kosovo in exile appointed him editor in chief of two film crews in Tirana and Pristina. The Kosovar news programme broadcasted daily for 30 minutes on Albanian satellite TV. Kelmendi's freedom of tone enabled him to tackle the subject of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), a taboo topic for the pacifist LDK party led by Ibrahim Rrugova.

"They were suspicious of everyone, but they knew me, and they also knew my father's name." In 1998 he managed to contact the insurgents of the liberation army and obtained exclusive images for the Reuters, AP and WCN agencies right from the start of the war.

Exile and return

Kelmendi lights up a cigarette, saying to me: "Everyone anticipated the war as something inevitable. Like Croatia, everyone knew the Serbs would attack Kosovo. What Milošević had decided was not to massacre us, but to deport us. There were 900,000 of us and I was one of them [in Macedonia in 1999]." From Tetovo, Kelmendi described Kosovo's plight to international media. He returned to Pristina after NATO's 1999 intervention. He takes a sip of coffee and adds: "It was an incredible experience to finally obtain freedom, we had succeeded, whereas nobody could imagine Kosovo one day without the Serbian army."

The UN placed Kosovo under a protectorate. RTP became Radio Television Kosovo (RTK), with Kelmendi as its first director. He resigned after a year, worn down by the pressure of the new political parties and the errors of the international administration.

Inexhaustible, he launched *Java* ("Week"), a weekly newspaper in Gheg, a dialect of northern Albania and Kosovo. The standardization of the Albanian language in 1972 in Albania led to the disappearance of Gheg and other dialects in favour of Tosk, the majority language in southern Albania, from which the regime's executives originated.

On this subject, he opposed his father, for whom the dream of unifying Greater Albania justified this reform. They even ended up debating it on TV in the early 2000s. Kelmendi puts down his coffee to tell me the story.

"It was a bombshell for public opinion here, how dare a son publicly contradict his father. It was a very patriarchal society, and still is to a large extent." He sums up:

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"The debate raised the issue of the standardization of Albanian on the one hand, and the emancipation of relationships within the family on the other." He continues on the place of the Gheg dialect: "Urban people don't have this problem, they're very well aware of who they are. Today, as soon as young people are educated and cultured, they speak in Gheg. Tirana is crazy about Kosovar rappers. [Their way of expressing themselves] is so different and fresh for them. It's like the language of African-Americans in the US for white people in New York." He concludes, "Tirana is a castle of 'glotophagy' that eats up other languages. This goes against Albania's project to be a European country. It's a flaw in Tirana's ambitions. In Europe, you can't eat up other languages; on the contrary, you have to cultivate them."

In search of values

In 2007, Kelmendi received a Reporters Sans Frontières award for promoting press freedom, notably through his 2001–04 publication of essays by the Kosovar elite on the theme of "Who is Kosovar", which tried to define an identity whose frames of reference remained difficult for the Kosovars themselves. Kelmendi defends a vision of Kosovo's civic identity rooted more in the institutions of the republican state than in purely cultural origins: "Being Albanian in Kosovo during the time of Yugoslavia didn't mean living in isolation; we were influenced by the major cultural centres such as Sarajevo, Zagreb and Belgrade. We didn't live in a bunker; there's a profound cultural difference with Tirana. We were nourished by the other cultures of the Yugoslav Federation, which helped us to define our identity, interacting with languages, music and art."

Kelmendi defends a vision of Kosovo's civic identity rooted more in the institutions of the republican state than in purely cultural origins.

After a heated debate about the hijab in public spaces, Kelmendi tried to launch a final discussion around the KLA war memorials. He leans over from the sofa: "These monuments started appearing everywhere like a disease, these people were imposing their narrative on others. I wanted to debate them because I had the legitimacy of having given visibility to the KLA during the war. When the debate opened, no one wanted to contribute. They were too afraid to get involved. We asked the question: 'Should a society be founded on blood and soil, or rather on values?'"

Many years later, the deputy prime minister congratulated Kelmendi on the occasion of the declaration of independence ceremony in 2008: "the deputy prime minister said to me, 'it happened as you wished,' and I replied 'no, I tried to warn

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everyone that the only way for the international community's efforts to succeed was to constitute an independent state for our society. All I did was reproduce the terms of the debate.'"

Kelmendi takes a drag on his cigarette, and his gaze becomes lost in space, as if absorbed in his reflection: "There was no possibility of building a nation-state in the context of international intervention. These are ideas from the 19th century. Kosovar society had to be built on values such as the free market, respect for human rights and gender equality."

Rrokum TV and a move into politics

In 2008 Kelmendi left the *Java* editorial team to focus on his cable TV channel Rrokum TV, which was launched in 2006. Although during the war Kelmendi supported the KLA as a journalist, after the war he became one of the most prominent critics of the government and Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi, denouncing certain aspects of their management of public affairs. Later, in 2019, he joined the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) as a member of the executive committee. Kelmendi was co-opted into the party's 30-member presidency with the aim of contributing to the PDK's reforms. A year and a half later, he left the party after its leaders, Thaçi and Kadri Veseli, were indicted by the Special Tribunal for Kosovo in The Hague for alleged misdeeds during the 1997–99 Kosovo conflict. Kelmendi then devoted himself to writing.

From his point of view, Serbia has never been willing to give up its claims and let Kosovo become a civic state in accordance with its constitution. He argues: "Belgrade is trying to keep the idea of ethnic differences alive, the Serbs are afraid of the concept of citizenship and are not ready for supra-nationality and a society of values and principles," while acknowledging in substance that the situation is not brilliant for Pristina. The economy is in decline, the process of international recognition is frozen, meanwhile Tirana is talking about unification while voices evoke a possible confederation. He concludes: "We must not base ourselves on a society of blood and soil, but on the foundation of law, principles and values. Otherwise, I'm afraid we'll soon be faced with disastrous developments, especially in the north."

The second challenge, in his view, is the "proliferation of the Islamic narrative in our society, with which Kurti [Kosovo's prime minister] is particularly complacent, to the point of letting his entourage support the idea of allowing the hijab to be worn in public schools". Kelmendi stubs out his cigarette, saying, "I'm afraid Kurti will be the last [secular] civilian in government," and foresees the possible imminent risk of an Islamic or pro-Islamic government. "This was not the objec-

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tive of my father's romantic nationalist generation, nor of mine, which is European. The proliferation of the Islamic narrative dominates the public sphere. It opens the door to something that was never contemplated before. This possibility is on the table, even if it's not inevitable. The international community must act quickly to facilitate dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade and help find a solution."

Gjurmët's legacy remains vibrant, with recent concerts and cultural influence. Young concertgoers sing along to covers by the band Asgjë Sikur Dielli, while the modern rap scene adapts its melodies, like MC Kresha's "Era" and Oborri & Taste2's "Karrigat". Kelmendi's reflections shaped Kosovar identity beyond Albania's shadow. The musician, journalist and writer managed to find his own way and innovate in the face of the difficulties of a life intimately linked to that of Kosovo.

Kelmendi is now devoting himself to writing. He had already been published in Tirana (*Carere Patria*, 1997) by Çabej publishing house. After publishing a novel in Gheg called *Gorges of Time* (*Gryka e Kohes*) in 2022, Kelmendi brings through fiction the events of the spring of 1999 and the start of the NATO bombing in his book *Dinner under the bombs* (*Darka ndër bomba*) published in 2024. The publishing house's name alone evokes the direction in which Albania and Kosovo are still looking: Europe University of Tirana. EE

Erik Da Silva is an independent researcher. He obtained his MA degree in Innovation and Digital Transformation from Sciences Po Paris (2020). He writes regularly for *Le Courrier des Balkans*.

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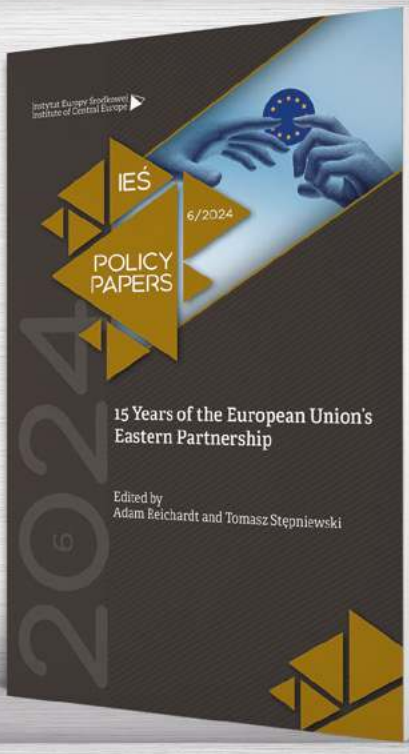

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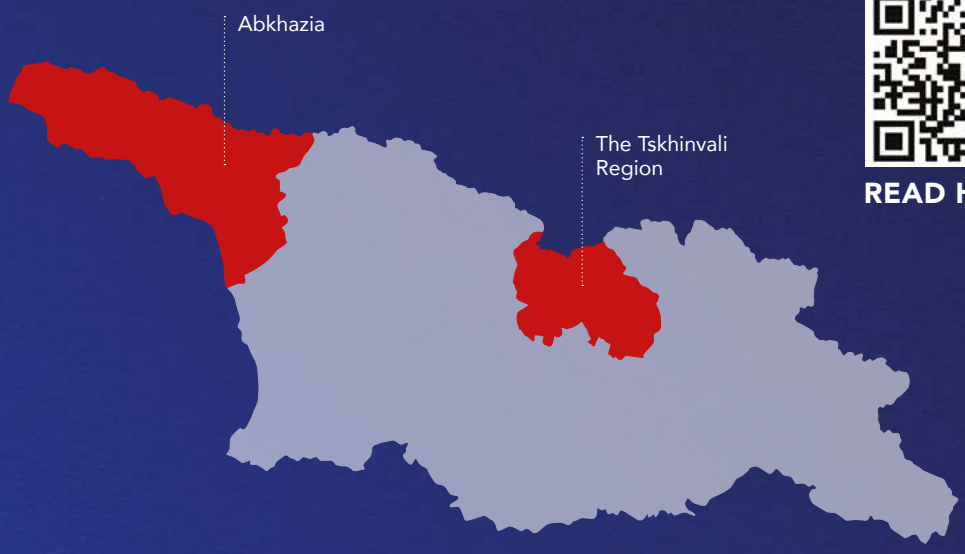

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Life on the exhale

KRZYSZTOF CZYŻEWSKI

Life on the exhale is like knocking on a door, it carries an echo, and wakes up the dormant. People to whom it is written, like Victoria Amelina, transcend what we usually can, and what in Ukrainian is expressed by the word *mohty*. In truth, Vika, seeking justice, a home and a future, bore witness to the path to victory, in Ukraine's destiny fulfilling itself through *pere-mohty*, doing more than our strength and imaginings would allow.

The last inhale was Canada, a good job in the IT industry, studying creative writing in the United States, literary residencies in the West, vacations with her family in Egypt, the safety of her son Andriy in Poland. Vika (short for Victoria) crosses the Polish-Ukrainian border on February 26th 2022. In the evening she reaches Lviv, where her mother, a history teacher, lives. As soon as the Kyiv region is liberated, she moves east. On the train to Kyiv, she meets three women writers, as well as activists from the Revolution of Dignity, human rights activists and the journalists Larisa Denysenko, Svetlana Povalayeva and Olena Stiazhkina. They are united by a common fate, a Ukrainian sisterhood awakened by the Maidan and maturing resistance to the *Russkiy mir*. Its mystery is captured by Vika in a poem written a month before her death. Even then, on the train to Kyiv, they had all the air in their lungs, aware that all that remained was to exhale: "*…testify on the exhale… go on the exhale to our own*".

Still in early April, Vika enrols in a training programme for war crimes documentation and soon joins the Truth Hounds team – a Ukrainian civic organization tracking down the truth about violations of international law. She becomes a field documentarian, right on the front line, right after the crimes are committed. She lives life at full exhale.

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Justice

This is how I met Victoria Amelina. In wartime, all it takes is one meeting, just a few days of acquaintance or a conversation stretching long into the night, for a cordial bond to form, to see the other in all its brightness. Vika had a clarity and the kind of subtlety that on the surface seems to indicate fragility, but is in fact a symptom of indomitable strength and courage. There was a shadow of tragic stigma on her plunging face. She was one of those who knows.

Her stay at the Kharkiv Writers House *Slovo* (Word) was no ordinary literary residence for her. In the 1930s, the Stalinist regime martyred more than 80 per cent of its residents. For Vika, it was not just history, but the realization that her generation was joining another link in the chain of poets of the "Executed Renaissance".

"Stay in Krasnogruda!" I proposed, encouraging her to join us at our cultural centre. But my incantations were weak. We both knew that I was throwing them to the wind. She was sleepless, tireless in action, hospitable to the wronged, sharply angry in the face of evil, boundless in friendship, and created for work in the garden of the soul. Vika learned the various names of love, but the war called her to the service of love bearing that one name she often uttered in conversation: justice. Important to her was the tradition of expanding the understanding and enforcement of justice in the face of modern forms of violence. This was initiated by the Lviv-educated thinkers Raphael Lemkin and Hersch Lauterpacht, who introduced the concepts of genocide and crimes against humanity into international law.

There is a photo of Vika – in the background you can see the flag and symbols of Ukraine, she is standing on the border of the Donetsk region, upright, wearing a blue coat, with bright yellow hair, flowing freely over her shoulders and breasts. In my imagination, I put a scale and a sword in her hands. I see her as a priestess of the goddess Nemesis, preserving the oldest affinity with Aphrodite, dating back to the origins of Greek spirituality, erased over time by a culture seeking expressions of revenge and envy. Giving people exactly what was due to them, she remained amorous and watched over, ready to reach for the sword at any moment, the just balance of good and happiness.

Vika took in "*full lungs of air / full sails of blood / full stretchers of love…*" She believed that the air would be renewed, that there would still come a time when it would be possible to "*carefully take a breath of life*". She was not destined to live to see that moment. She lived on the exhale, until the end.

"carry
shoot
speak"

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Future

Tuesday, June 27th. Bad news from Ukraine – a Russian rocket hit a restaurant in Krematorsk, full of people. Subsequent reports say 13 people have died, including four children. Among the many injured is Victoria Amelina.

Vika should have been in France by now, on a year-long writing residency, where she intended to finish her book *War and Justice*. At the Arsenal of Books festival in Kyiv, she meets writers and journalists from Colombia. Moved by their solidarity action "*Aguanta Ucrania!*" (Hold on, Ukraine!), targeting the lies of Russian propaganda spread in Latin America, she decides to show them more of the reality of war than the festival can offer. On Monday at dawn they leave for Krematorsk, located 40 kilometres from the front line in Donbas. On the way, they pull up to a house from which the Russians took and then tortured and shot Volodymyr Vakulenko, a writer, children's book author and father of a disabled son. Vika miraculously found the diary he had buried in the garden, which, along with the poems and her introduction, became one of the most harrowing testimonies of the war. They also visit a Jewish cemetery on the outskirts of Kharkiv.

Her earlier Facebook posts came from the Kherson region, already affected by a hydroelectric power plant dam destroyed by bombing. She reached Kherson to write down the testimony of the wife of the murdered conductor Yuri Kyrpatenko. In early June, she posted a Truth Hounds report on Russian war crimes in Kachovka on social media. Since the beginning, I did not give credence to the randomness of the tragedy in Krematorsk. The missile whose shrapnel hit Vika was a high-precision-directed Iskander ballistic missile, thermonuclear, with a range of more than a thousand kilometres, and an accuracy radius of ten to 30 metres.

Waiting always carries a seed of hope, but the incoming news from friends in the following days clearly tried to prepare us for the worst. A miracle did not happen, and the operation in the hospital in Dnipro did not bring Vika back. It is July 1st 2023. Half the life of the one born on January 1st. On the same day, two years earlier, a bill by Ukrainian parliamentarians restored the town in Donbas to its former name of New York. In a few months, Vika was to board a bus with a Lviv-New York sign to bring guests to a literary festival she was organizing. If she had survived, if she had been given the chance to live to see *peremoha* (victory), it is not out of the question that she would have tied the second part of her life to this other New York, which, more than an overseas megalopolis, embodied the future for her.

A miracle did not happen, and the operation in the hospital in Dnipro did not bring Vika back.

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The Colombian writer Hector Abad Faciolince described the last moment of Vika's life when she was conscious: "I was sitting on the terrace of the restaurant across from her. Since alcohol was prohibited there, Victoria ordered a non-alcoholic beer. Sergio Jaramillo filled my glass with ice and something that resembled apple juice. 'It looks like whiskey,' she said and smiled. At that moment the Iskander fell on us, hell fell from the sky. Victoria now has a home in heaven. Not in the Christian or Muslim sense. In that immaterial heaven, the heaven of the mind, the very human heaven we call memory."

Vika was convinced that the future was hostage to justice. Meanwhile, the regimes and tragedies that followed kept Ukrainians from dealing with finding out the truth about guilt and implementing it for too long. In Krasnogruda, she told me that the first words of Czesław Miłosz that registered in her memory came from his Nobel speech: "In a room where people unanimously maintain a conspiracy of silence, one word of truth sounds like a pistol shot." She believed that in a room teeming with the ghosts of the past, the light must be turned on. And that means confronting the covering up of history, naming and punishing the guilty, restoring dignity to the victims, working on a culture of remembering, wisely, in the spirit of Nemesis – a goddess implacably immune to self-love. Smiling slightly, she recalled an advertisement she had seen in Kharkiv's Freedom Square: "Live in the centre of the future." The developer's slogan, in Vika's imagination, evoked the shifting new centre of her struggle – the future – from the despair of past wrongs. She saw the real *peremoha* of Ukraine not only in the protection of territory, but also, and perhaps most importantly, in the de-occupation of the future.

For the exhale of living, the question about *maybutnie* (future) became essential: "*…I started to see a little / "tomorrow", then – nothing, dark*," she noted in her poem "Word in the Dictionary [Future]" dated April 14th 2022. She asks about the future, do you see it? And she answers "I see it," but in order not to seem as gullible as "Ukrainian Suspilne Radio" to the friend with whom she walks in Kyiv, and to top it all off, she adds:

"I'm not sure if the russians
won't hit us with iskanders now right away."

Home

Before my eyes I have a 15-year-old girl invited to a TV studio in Moscow. She is the winner of a Russian literature contest for young people from the former Soviet republics. She feels like a star, until a journalist throws her a question about

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how the Russian-speaking residents of Lviv are persecuted. She then realizes why she was really invited to the studio, and why this investment had been made by the crumbling empire in her Russian-language school and the Russian TV seen in her home, in internationalist youth rallies, in an amateur theatre named after Pushkin, in trips to Moscow.

"They probably invested more in us than they did in the education of children in rural Russia: those who were already conquered did not need to be tempted with summer camps and excursions to the Red Square." This is what she wrote in an essay prepared for a seminar in Krasnogruda. And she immediately added: "Hopefully I have turned out to be one of the Russian Federation's worst investments."

This was one of the turning points in Victoria Amelina's life. Its centre would begin to shift from Moscow to Kyiv. Instead of Russia's fabricated lie, an awakened awareness of who one is and a new sense of belonging started to appear. The choice of truth becomes a choice of identity. She must have realized early on that boundlessness is a virtue of imagination and sincere interpersonal relationships, but appropriated by the empire, it becomes a tool of conquest and enslavement. Soon she will realize how difficult it is for residents of western nation-states, advocating for a world of open borders, to understand the emancipating Ukrainian woman, for whom the border with Russia becomes a need for survival. The words of the Scorpions song "Wind of Change" were sung at the time of the demolition of the Berlin Wall: "*The world is closing in / and did you ever think / that we could be so close, like brothers.*" These words that she knew by heart have taken on a completely different meaning since the annexation of Crimea. Now she is much closer to Hannah Arendt, who writes in *The Human Condition* that what made the Greeks defend the inviolability of borders was not "respect for private property as we understand it, but the conviction that without owning a home, man could not participate in the affairs of the world, because he did not really have his own place in it".

Vika came from a family with the trauma of the Holodomor and a Russification complex, as a result of which she did not inherit the Ukrainian language from her grandparents. She had to do great inner work to free herself from the feeling of "being out of place" in her own country. For a person thrown out of the nest of the *Russkiy mir*, for an expatriate and writer in various languages, for the Ukrainian patriot and nomadic lifestyle activist, the question of home became fundamental.

Vika is from the generation of those who had to reclaim their home for themselves in Ukraine. Even more so, they had to take up the struggle to save it, with their lives at stake. She also felt at home wherever, as a Ukrainian, she was shown help and understanding. In Prague, where she found herself just after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as well as Poland, wider Europe, and the United States. But solidarity with Ukraine alone was still not enough for her. Im-

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mediately, after expressing gratitude, she inquired about what was happening on the Polish-Belarusian or US-Mexican borders, feeling a community of fate with migrants from every part of the world.

Home for Vika was the "homework" to be done, i.e. to start repairing the world starting with oneself. This could be done by reviving a space of trust in one's own country, and by building a civil society that can claim justice, but also takes responsibility for the fate of the weakest, for the rights of minorities, for fighting exclusion. The social activism and critical patriotism of the generation of Ukrainians of which Vika became one of the leaders, was combined with pronouncing out loud the truth. Living on the exhale brought with it the need to shout one's own name, to enforce the right to be oneself and to be at home, which had been suppressed for many years: "…silence creates cracks so deep that it is hardly possible to feel at home."

The December 2013 Maidan was a turning point for Vika to find a home in Ukraine. "To go to the streets of Kyiv, we had to take the risk of trusting each other." She will express the most important lesson learned from the Revolution of Dignity in words that echo the universal form of establishing community: "Home is not a magical, perfect place, but a place where, if you are being beaten, you can be sure that your neighbours will show up to take a stand for you." The experience of civic solidarity in Vika's homeland is followed by graffiti with the word "HOME", with the inside of the letter "O" filled with a map of Ukraine. "I'm impressed by it," she confides in an interview with Natalia Kornienko.

New York

On November 7th 2021, two New York City marathons were held for the first time in the world: first, the traditional one, for the 50th time, through the streets and bridges of the American metropolis; the other almost at the very front line in a small town in Donbas, where there was a war the world did not want to hear about. The first marathon was done without pacemakers, which meant that the competitors were more on their own, thus providing more excitement for observers. For the second, there was a lack of peacemakers, which the world, cowering like a hare, chose not to bring into the zone of the growing threat of armed conflict. It was accompanied by the slogan "The marathon that no one wants to run", and participation consisted of running any distance anywhere on Earth in the spirit of protest against Russia's aggression against Ukraine and against the war turning into a marathon itself. More than 35,000 people joined the run in the Ukrainian city of New York, more than in the city overseas, in addition to a small handful of par-

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ticipants on the spot. This is how Ukrainians tried to draw the world's attention to the crimes of Moscow's regime, to which the West was still selling arms at the time. For Victoria, something else mattered in the whole affair: the town itself and its inhabitants. Just a month earlier, she had organized the first New York Literary Festival there.

Vika was convinced that the literary festival was the leaven of a long-term programme, that it should be followed by year-round action, organic work with the local community. She was keen to recruit Russian-speaking residents, a large number of whom had not yet found a home in Ukraine. She knew that not only Russian propaganda but also the Ukrainian state's omissions were to blame for this. She attached great importance to working with the youngest generation, with teachers, with leaders of civil society. This is evident in the very way she organized the festival – literary and artistic events were preceded by a Teacher's Day for educators from the Donetsk region, during which guests, including Olena Stiazhkina and Serhiy Zhadan, gave lectures on history or discussions around poetry. Children also had their own creative space where they could take part in workshops and read books. There was even an essay contest announced for young people.

Vika was keen to recruit Russian-speaking residents, a large number of whom had not yet found a home in Ukraine.

I try to imagine the town of New York from Vika's stories and photographs, including those she posted on Facebook. The central axis runs along Garden Street. Along it, there are red brick houses with reddish tile roofs and blue shutters. Not coincidentally, these two colours will become the visual symbol of the New York Literary Festival. The brick factory was built by Germans, settling here in the late 19th century. Before that, the settlement was homesteaded by Cossacks and merchants from the Balkans, seeking refuge after the fall of the Zaporozhian Sich. Where on the borderlands of the Ukrainian steppe the name of *Novy York* came from remains a mystery to historians, as it was marked on the map as early as 1846, long before the arrival of settlers from Germany. A local legend tells of a dignitary in love who, bringing his beloved one from the West, wanted to build for her here a city with a bright future.

While preparing the festival programme, Vika asked Serhiy Zhadan to read his translations from German of Bertold Brecht's poems to the people of New York, accompanied by the famous jazz double bassist Mark Tokar, soon to be an officer in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Everything she did resonated strongly with the ethos of borderland people close to me, with the revival of "connective tissue" and the creation of a culture of memory in communities experiencing the tearing down of bridges. She had an excellent feel for the borderland, not only as a hotbed of

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conflict, but also as a space for communing with the "Other", a connection which can help to revive the world.

New York is a strategically important place on the Donbas front line, the site of a defensive fortification on Ukraine's own "Mannerheim Line". There is constant fighting here, as a result of which its material form is inexorably disappearing from the face of the earth. Russian bombs have annihilated its economic potential. Many people died, and whoever could, left. Earlier, after the historical turmoil of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Second World War, the town came back to life again and again. There is no doubt that it will also recover from these wounds, the deepest in its history to date, although it will certainly be a long and difficult process.

Through Victoria, New York has become a symbol of the de-occupation of the future. It is not military or economic issues that will prove decisive for its real realization, although their importance neither Vika nor her allies have ever questioned. But instead of the hard factors of geopolitics, with no regard for life, the environment and the needs of the people must become part of the civilizational ecosystem of the small centres of the world. They are the ones that will have the power to change reality, caring for the spiritual and physical health of their residents, for good neighbourliness with other people and nature, countering the monopolistic power of the big centre with the solidarity of many smaller but equal, bringing out universal values. The New York of the future, to which Vika gave her life, will be reborn with the power of David leaving a defeated Goliath on the battlefield.

Return

Life on the exhale is like knocking on a door, it carries an echo, and wakes up the dormant. People to whom it is written, like Victoria Amelina, transcend what we usually can, and what in Ukrainian is expressed by the word *mohty*. In truth, Vika, seeking justice, a home and a future, bore witness to the path to victory, in Ukraine's destiny fulfilling itself through *pere-mohty*, doing more than our strength and imaginings would allow. On the exhale, the song turns into a scream. I can still hear it. It keeps coming back and shouting out the world, turning the dead words "never again" in its mouth. It keeps trying to shout out the conformism of new forms of appeasement that are as old as the world's ways of bending the knee to tyranny.

"Into the spring blue field
out comes a woman in a black dress
to scream the names of the sisters
like a bird into an empty sky"

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A woman screaming the names of her sisters, sowing the field with pain, she finds her name in *poesis*, in doing with words. As a poet, Victoria was born during this great war. Before that she wrote novels, children's books. In a conversation with Natalia Kornienko, she will leave a trace of her own understanding of being a poet in a liminal situation: "Poems began to appear when I wanted to say something, but was unable to write a prose text or even a banal Facebook post. I have long been convinced that writing fiction is not so much a special ability as a special incapacity, an inability to express myself directly as other people do. When I lost the ability to express myself in prose, it was time for poetry." She elaborates the rest in the poem

"No poetry:
bits of tongue
resemble poetry
but it's not her

and it's not her either
she is in Kharkiv
as a volunteer"

In our house in Krasnogruda there is a custom that whoever visits the house for the first time rings a bell suspended under a frog carved in metal at the entrance. We believe that this sound carries a promise to return. Vika rang the bell. And the next evening in Sejny's Old Yeshiva, during the Café Europa meeting, she read "The Story of Return", ending the poem with the words:

"And what did you take with you?
I just took this story
on the return
I have now brought to light
She is growing"

Krzysztof Czyżewski is a Polish public intellectual and essayist.
He is the founder and director of the Borderland of Arts,
Cultures and Nations Centre in Sejny (Poland).

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What "Travels with Pozner and Urgant" says about Russian society

JAMES C. PEARCE

For one evening in London last November, audiences left behind the weight of geopolitics to reconnect with two iconic figures, Vladimir Pozner and Ivan Urgant, whose humour and nostalgia offer a glimpse of life before 2022. Yet beneath the laughter and stories lies a deeper reflection on Russia's society today, its divided sentiments and the struggles of cultural figures navigating a war-torn world.

Could a prominent Russian act or theatre troupe no longer dream of filling a 3,000-seat London theatre? In a word, yes. Several Russian performers, shows, and acts have, in fact, sold out theatres up and down the United Kingdom since Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine in 2022. *Slava's SnowShow* will be touring Britain this year after remarkable success in Russia's regional theatre scene. Ahead of this, in 2024, were two of Russian television's most recognizable faces: veteran journalist Vladimir Pozner and TV personality Ivan Urgant.

The duo stopped off at the Troxy Threatre in Limehouse, east London last November to a sold-out theatre. And tickets were not cheap, either (ranging from 70 to 400 pounds a head). The show was described as an evening with the two men, who co-hosted several travel shows, as they reflected on stories from their trips around the world. The week before, they had been in Belgrade, and had previously made stops in Zurich, Berlin, and Dubai, selling those theatres out, too. Every seat

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was filled with Russian speakers of different shades and walks of life who came to the theatre and set politics aside for a night.

Being back in London for a while, we jumped at the opportunity to go. Pozner is one of my great heroes, and it is rare to see the two men in public anymore. It seemed that was why everyone else came too. There was a looming sense of nostalgia for life before 2022 in the Troxy Theatre. More so, the show's content was a direct reflection of Russia today, and where society currently is, not to mention the challenges of its entertainment industry.

The show must go on

Billed as an apolitical event, politics overshadowed the show from the get-go – and I do not mean the Donald Trump jokes they both made. When the tour began in Amsterdam in early 2024, a small group of pro-Ukrainian protesters gathered outside the theatre. The protestors slammed the theatre for supposedly giving a platform to Russian propagandists. The signs read things like "Russians go home" and "stab in the back".

That characterization, however, was non-factual and unfair. Urgant has lost a lot by speaking out against the war. On the first day of the invasion, he posted a black square to his Instagram account with the caption "Fear and pain. No to war." Hardly a pro-Kremlin message. His prominent show, *Vechernyi Urgant*, was taken off the air immediately, and he has remained silent about the war ever since. Some within Russian society wish he would speak out more. Many believe he has an obligation to use his position to criticize the war and hold those in power to account. Why does he not? We will get to this later.

Pozner is a different case. He rose to fame in the late Soviet era when he explained the Soviet Union's positions to a Western audience – in a New York English accent and French Parisian. He admitted this role was "propaganda" – as all journalism was in the USSR. But his renowned interview show was also removed from Channel One, the main federal channel in Russia. Pozner claims this was to provide more coverage of the war. Moreover, unlike Urgant, Pozner has remained silent about the war. In one online talk, he appeared to suggest the West was responsible by refusing to rule out NATO membership for Ukraine. However, he also said in the very same talk that his personal opinion "doesn't matter" and declined to give it.

Moreover, he told Forbes in an interview in 2024 that "it is my right" not to speak out and repeatedly refused to answer certain political questions. He also noted that he had received offers to work abroad if he denounced President Vladimir Putin and spoke out on Russian politics. He declined these offers, stating that such ac-

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Photo by James C. Pearce

tions "are not journalism, but something else entirely". Personal bias aside, Pozner is not exactly wrong about any of that.

Much ado about nothing?

The show's format is fairly straightforward. Urgant comes out for a monologue, cracking jokes about Pozner and the local area before announcing the veteran journalist on stage. The two men sit in comfortable chairs, with wine at hand, and the discussion persists with the aid of PowerPoint slides. Billed as four hours in London, the theatre doors opened late, and the show ended at least 35 minutes early.

Although it was great to see the duo, it was hardly an unmissable and rousing performance – nor was that their intention. The jokes often fell flat and were often corny, and only one section of the audience laughed. The two reused material from their documentaries and books, and the audience knew it perfectly well. But they did not care. They were just happy to be there and see the two men. They gained a lot of comfort and enjoyment from the evening.

On Urgant's Instagram ahead of the show, the comments and replies to his posts were telling. He posted, "We missed you, London." His followers back in Russia re-

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plied, "We miss you too. Why not come to Kaliningrad?" But this show would not work in Russia. For one, Russians back home would have higher expectations of the duo. They would want to see something new and expect them to talk about certain topics beyond what the pair are limited to. For another, and not unlike most Russian citizens, the two men are not looking for controversy. Pozner will return to Channel One for a docuseries on Turkey this year. At 90 years old, after a decorated career, the last thing Pozner needs at this stage is problems. Urgant is also not keen to alienate the powers that be. At just 46 years old, Urgant still has a long career and life ahead of him. It is not inconceivable that he may return to Russian television one day, and like Pozner, it is something he clearly wants to do. He certainly has an audience waiting.

Yet, London's audience was not seeking controversy either. They wanted a nice night out in London, to see familiar faces and forget about the problems of the modern world. Any political talk would have unquestionably alienated half the audience – not to mention have made headlines the very next day. From a business perspective it also would have made little sense. More and more Russian speakers, wherever they are from, increasingly do not want to talk about the war now. Marketing an event to the militant anti-war emigres would not be financially viable, much less be a particularly enjoyable event.

Back inside Russia, meanwhile, most are no longer paying attention to the war. Nobody would remember if it were not for the news coverage, national or local. It has completely faded into the background of people's lives. They want to live in the moment with those nearest and dearest. There is an overwhelming desire for things to return to how they were before the war. People do not like publicly associating with the war, much less discussing it. They did not start it, and most did not clamour for it. The Z signs have mostly gone from people's cars and buildings. Most are not craving victory because what it would mean is unclear. What they are craving is a return to normality. However, they do not want to feel humiliated or be made to feel guilty for things they were not personally responsible for. This is shared by Russian citizens abroad. They were in London for Urgant and Pozner as much as they were for the better days of the recent past. Urgant and Pozner seem to realize that better than most observers. Questions of guilt aside, what would getting the audience riled up have achieved?

The view of the silent majority

Leading up to 2022, those familiar with Pozner will know he often expressed scepticism about the West's dealings with Russia and Putin personally. Pozner

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has often said that the West willingly misunderstands Russia and that its expectations for the country to turn into a liberal democracy in the 1990s were severely misguided. After all, Russia had no historical experience of it. He was also critical of the knee-jerk negative reaction to anything "Russian". Yet, on his interview show, he was often critical of the state, government policy and Putin – and one of the very few who could get away with it. He made Dmitry Medvedev look foolish on his Channel One show. He actually did speak truth to power – albeit not in the way most of the liberal opposition would have liked. Pozner admitted in a debate with Alexey Navalny on TV Rain that censorship exists but that it should not prevent him or others from speaking truth to power by whatever means they have available. Complaining to like-minded people is one thing; speaking truth to power from inside that bubble is another. But this, of course, is forgotten by those who live in a world of unquestioned and unlimited support for Ukraine to keep fighting the war at whatever cost.

The average Russian's view is not a million miles away from that of Pozner. Many are very critical of the state and have been so for some time. Ahead of 2022 many were dissatisfied with the decline in living standards and the inaction of the government to enact laws that improved their lives for the better. Today, they still distrust the Kremlin and its statements about the war. Yet, there has long been a distrust and suspicion of the West as well. Many Russians have a deep-seated fear that the West and its governments want nothing more than to see the country fail, no matter who makes up the government. Even the most liberal and anti-Kremlin Russians, like Masha Gessen, accuse the West of being hypocritical and condescending towards Russia.

What will this mean when the war ends, and Putin is no longer in power? We should not assume that democracy and a government comprised of liberals like Ilya Yashin and Vladimir Kara Murza would magically fix Russia, nor is their hypothetical takeover a guarantee that democracy can survive. Russia's future will depend on the views and actions of its silent majority, who prefer watching Urgant and Pozner instead of reading Gessen's *New Yorker* column. That is who western governments should be reaching out to.

For all the recent academic research on Putin and Russia's obsession with the past, it seems the past most want to return to is the last decade. This could not have been more obvious in the theatre that November night. Like every mythical golden age, returning to the 2010s is also impossible. The show made that crystal clear as well. 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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Memory politics in Ukraine and Russia as a component of modern warfare

OLEKSII LIONCHUK

As Ukrainians took their first steps in exploring their own history, they began uncovering a wealth of previously forbidden topics and figures. Following the country's independence, the exchange of academic research between Ukrainian and western historians became possible. This significantly contributed to shaping Ukraine's historical policy, which was also in many cases in direct opposition to the Kremlin's interpretation of history. Unsurprisingly, history and memory are key components of Russia's war against Ukraine.

History and memory regarding the events of the past have always been, and still are, powerful tools in relations between Ukraine and Russia. While Russia has tried to shape its historical policy since the late Middle Ages, when Moscow declared itself the "third Rome" and pursued "the gathering of Russian lands", modern Ukraine, which was without statehood for a long time, began to develop and restore its true history after independence in 1991. It would also develop its own historical policy.

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Following 1991, Ukrainian historical policies were for a long time in an embryonic state. During the first decade, despite little state support, activities were limited to a paradigm shift away from the Soviet method of studying one's own history to an approach centred on Ukraine. There was a very large number of topics that over the previous decades, and even centuries, of Russian occupation that were deliberately concealed, distorted and falsified. As a rule, efforts and research were solely based on the enthusiasm of researchers and without stable state support. As difficult as it was, the National Academy of Sciences and its structural units, including institutes dedicated to historical sciences, were preserved.

Russian historical policies are based on the simple appropriation of someone else's history, especially when it is a success story of a neighbouring people, state or person. Sometimes this contradicts obvious facts and common sense, but Russian propaganda stubbornly claims that this is all "common heritage" – we are one nation and so your success is ours. Thus, over the long period of Vladimir Putin's rule, the memory policy of Russia has gained clear institutional forms. Yet, the main tasks of these institutions were not to support scientific research on the true history of the nations who make up the Russian Federation, but rather the battle against historical facts that do not correspond with the main political line. This can be seen in the sad fate of the non-governmental organization Memorial, which despite all the difficulties it faced, attempted to report the truth about the crimes of the Soviet party-state.

While there is not enough space here to highlight all aspects of the memory policies of both states, key issues will be examined, including the remembrance of the Holodomor; the Second World War; the Orthodox Church; and the ideology of *Russkiy mir* (Russian world).

Holodomor and its consequences

I will start with one interesting case that a friend from Kharkiv told me about. His friend has a family, a husband and daughter. They are happy, but when she sees her daughter, she had a strange desire to kill her. As a result, this lady began to visit psychologists for help. Finally, it was revealed that during the Holodomor famine of 1932–33, in order to survive, this woman's grandmother killed and boiled her own child and saved the rest of her family from imminent death through this terrible act. Scientists claim that this is post-genocide trauma, which can appear through generations, as in the above case.

The older generation, which miraculously survived those terrible times and the crimes of Stalinism, forever remembered them and never had any good feelings

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about the past. In official Soviet textbooks there is no mention of the 1932–33 Holodomor in Soviet Ukraine. This surprised the elderly people because they remembered the truth. They recalled it and remained silent, because it was the only way to avoid persecution by the Soviet government. Moreover, when the threat of hunger appeared again, after the Second World War in 1946–47, residents from Dnipro fled en masse to western Ukraine, where there were no collective farms yet.

Russia's new war against Ukraine, which has been going on for 11 years, also has a food dimension. Despite its terrible post-genocide heritage, Ukraine during all the years of its independence increased and restored its agricultural lands, on which it has cultivated grain not only for its own needs but also for exports. After the beginning of the full-scale invasion in 2022, Russian troops began to massively export the captured grain and sell it as their own to the countries of the so-called Global South. At the same time, they were threatening to withhold the food exports, which could have created a famine in other parts of the world. This was a cynical move, as the previous crime against the Ukrainians as a nation was not punished by the international community. Moscow brazenly denied it in the 20th century, just as it does so now.

The Holodomor crime was revealed thanks to the study of this terrible page of Ukrainian history. Research began in the 1980s in the United States and Canada via the Ukrainian diaspora. As a result, the US House of Representatives created an appropriate investigative commission. The late American historian James Mace and his British colleague Robert Conquest began to actively deal with this issue (Conquest's book *Harvest of Sorrow* published in 1986 was made available in Ukraine only in the mid-1990s). The historians' works have left the world shaken. Later, at the end of Gorbachev's *perestroika*, the results of research by Ukrainian academics, in particular Professor Stanislav Kulchytskyi, began to pop up. The most recent research on this issue belongs to the Japanese researcher Gioraki Kuromiya and the American-British researcher Anne Applebaum. Despite all the documentary evidence and conclusions of demographers and reports of western journalists from that time period, the Russian leadership and its fifth column in Ukraine – in the form of the Party of Regions, Communists and other political and public organizations – continue to deny the fact that an artificial famine took place on the territory of the Ukrainian SSR.

> Russia's denial of past crimes became even more aggressive after Vladimir Putin came to power.

This policy of denial became even more aggressive after Vladimir Putin came to power in Russia. The objection to this history intensified after the victory of the opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko in the Ukrainian presidential elections

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of 2004. Of course, this took place following the Orange Revolution. Yushchenko, who Putin despised, was directly involved in promoting the international recognition of the Holodomor as a genocide against the Ukrainian nation, which annoyed the Kremlin even more.

Second World War – two views, two memories

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, nostalgia for past greatness and international respect grew in Russia. The turbulent 1990s, especially in the early years, were marked by chaos across the post-Soviet space. Stability, something that most people in the former Soviet republics had been accustomed to, was in short supply. Russian citizens, in particular, felt this instability acutely, as they lost their dominant geopolitical status. Their president, Boris Yeltsin, appeared weak, especially on the international stage, evoking a sense of national humiliation rather than pride. Furthermore, Yeltsin's critical stance on the Soviet past, highlighting repression and poverty, only deepened such discontent, particularly since economic hardships had not disappeared in post-Soviet Russia.

Amid this uncertainty, one historical narrative remained untouchable: the mythos surrounding the Soviet-German war of 1941–45 (known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War). After Vladimir Putin became president, the state's approach to historical memory shifted. Stalin's image gradually underwent rehabilitation – portrayed as an "effective manager" whose brutal policies, while acknowledged, were justified in pursuit of the grand objective of building up a superpower. Once again, as in the late Brezhnev era, May 9th, the day commemorating the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, took on a near-sacred significance. Large military parades in Red Square became a way of showcasing Russia's military might as the rightful heir to the Soviet Union's legacy.

At the same time, the early years of the Second World War (1939–1941) and the controversial Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact – including its secret protocols – were reinterpreted by Russian propaganda and pro-Kremlin historians like Aleksandr Dugin. They argued that the pact was a necessary measure to protect the Soviet Union from western aggression. This narrative helped fuel a creeping emphasis purely on the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, downplaying the contributions of the Allies in the anti-Hitler coalition.

By 2010, then as prime minister, Putin reinforced this revisionist narrative, claiming in a televised speech that the Red Army would have defeated Nazi Germany even without Ukrainian participation. This was yet another attempt to instil in Russians a belief in their nation's exclusive role in the victory. Putin also sought

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to rehabilitate Stalin's legacy by referencing his famous post-war toast to the "great Russian nation". Meanwhile, Russian propaganda repeatedly accused Ukraine of collaboration with the Nazis – sometimes citing real cases, but often fabricating or exaggerating them. Particular focus was placed on nationalist movements such as those led by Stepan Bandera and Andriy Melnyk, while conveniently omitting the existence of the Russian Liberation Army (RLA), led by the former Soviet General Andrei Vlasov. This was also the case regarding numerous other pro-Nazi Russian paramilitary units, including Cossack formations.

To justify the Soviet Union's joint invasion of Poland with Nazi Germany in September 1939, Putin recently claimed that Poland had provoked Hitler's aggression by refusing to meet his demands, thereby "forcing" Germany to act. This revisionist argument serves not only to rewrite history but also to rationalize Russia's own modern aggression against Ukraine – using pretexts strikingly similar to those employed by both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union against interwar Poland. Increasingly, Putin's regime draws ideological inspiration from both Soviet totalitarianism and elements of Nazi rhetoric. As early as 2017, fringe circles in Russia began discussing an ideology blending Orthodox Christianity, communism and fascism. After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this concept became widely known as "rashism".

Following Ukraine's 2014 Revolution of Dignity, the country began observing May 8th as a Day of Remembrance for those who perished in the Second World War. May 9th remained Victory Day, but public discourse around these dates evolved. Efforts were made to educate the public on their differing historical meanings, while emphasizing that May 9th is also Europe Day. This was a clear signal of Ukraine's shift towards European integration and a rejection of Russia's historical narratives.

Orthodox Church and Russkiy mir

It is worth recalling that the temporary subordination of the Kyiv Metropolis to the Moscow Patriarchate in the second half of the 17th century occurred with significant violations of canon law. Kyiv Metropolitan Sylvestr was sceptical of the alliance between the Cossack Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky and the Tsardom of Moscow, formed in 1654 at Pereyaslav, as he foresaw the dangers this posed to the autonomy of the Kyiv Metropolis.

Throughout the 20th century, Ukrainians made repeated efforts to restore an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church free from Moscow's control. This movement gained momentum in the final years of the Soviet Union. In 1990, Metropolitan Mstyslav (Stepan Skrypnyk) returned to Ukraine from the United States and

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Photo: paparazzza / Shutterstock

The memorial to the victims of the Holodomor famine in Kyiv.

was elected Patriarch of Kyiv and All Rus-Ukraine at a church council. This moment marked the beginning of an intense struggle between Kyiv and Moscow – not only for the religious allegiance of believers but also for control over church property and financial resources. Both sides engaged in historical debates and, at times, the blatant manipulation of facts.

As a result of these disputes, three Orthodox institutions were officially registered in Ukraine, each incorporating the name "Orthodox Church": the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) – which remained in unity with the Moscow Patriarchate; the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP); and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC).

According to Orthodox canon law, the UOC-KP and UAOC were considered non-canonical by the broader Orthodox world, a status reinforced by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which worked actively to prevent their recognition by other local Orthodox churches. To justify its influence over Ukraine's religious sphere, the ROC, alongside the ideologist Dugin, promoted the concept of *Russkiy*

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mir (Russian world). This ideology asserts that despite political borders, a shared "Russian spiritual and cultural space" exists, which is reinforced by religious unity. The Russkiy Mir Foundation was even established and before Russia's aggression against Ukraine, its branches operated successfully within the country.

The history of Crimea further illustrates how religion and historical revisionism have been used to justify Russia's expansionism. During Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, both Putin and representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church repeated pseudo-historical claims about Crimea's supposed historical belonging to Russia.

A key element of this historical manipulation revolves around the Christianization of Kyivan Rus'. Since 1988, Ukraine has celebrated the anniversary of the Baptism of Rus', which took place in Kyiv, specifically in the waters of the Pochaina river (a tributary of the Dnipro). However, Moscow sought to challenge Kyiv's historical primacy by emphasizing that Prince Volodymyr (Vladimir the Great) himself was baptized in Chersonesus (modern day Sevastopol, Crimea), which at the time belonged to the Byzantine Empire. By promoting the idea that the "true" baptism of Rus' occurred in Crimea rather than Kyiv, Moscow laid an ideological foundation for its later annexation of the peninsula – making Crimea the first victim of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014.

Despite strong opposition from Patriarch Kirill and the Kremlin, Ukraine successfully advanced its push for ecclesiastical independence. In December 2018, a historic Local Council was convened at St Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv, bringing together representatives of three Orthodox Churches. While almost all hierarchs of the UOC (Moscow Patriarchate) boycotted the event, two metropolitans – Simeon (Shostatskyi) and Oleksandr (Drabynka) – did participate. The UOC-KP and UAOC were fully represented.

At the council, Metropolitan Epiphaniy (Serhiy Dumenko) was elected as the primate of the newly unified Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). On January 6th 2019, in Istanbul, he received the Tomos of Autocephaly from Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, officially granting the OCU independence from the Moscow Patriarchate. The process of promoting the international recognition of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine continues, despite ongoing resistance from the Russian Orthodox Church and its political backers.

Rediscovering lost history

As Ukrainians took their first steps in exploring their own history, they began uncovering a wealth of previously forbidden topics and figures. Ukraine rediscov-

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ered its own writers, such as Ulas Samchuk, Ivan Bahrianyi, and the authors of the "Executed Renaissance", along with the works of Vasyl Stus. Omeljan Pritsak, who had founded the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University, returned to Ukraine from the United States and brought with him decades of scholarship on Ukrainian history.

Following Ukraine's declaration of independence, the exchange of academic research between Ukrainian and western historians became possible. This significantly contributed to shaping Ukraine's historical policy. While initially chaotic, this effort later became more structured and institutionalized. Scholars began publishing the works of the historian Ivan Krypiakevych without censorship; reprinting Mykhailo Hrushevskyi's ten-volume *History of Ukraine-Rus'*; and translating and publishing *Ukraine: A History* by the Canadian historian of Ukrainian descent Orest Subtelny.

Following the Orange Revolution, during Viktor Yushchenko's presidency, Ukraine's historical policy and memory politics began to take shape. However, much of the society did not fully grasp the president's initiatives, expecting him to focus instead on economic development and improving living standards. Many citizens did not take the time to read the constitution, which outlines the president's actual powers. As a result, Yushchenko prioritized historical policy as a key aspect of Ukraine's international strategy.

To support this effort, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory was established, which was modelled after Poland's Institute of National Remembrance. However, the development of the Ukrainian institute was slow, and it only became fully operational after the Revolution of Dignity under the leadership of Volodymyr Viatrovych. Despite its importance, the institute has faced chronic underfunding. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, its activities nearly came to a halt, as its current chairman, Anton Drobovych, joined the Ukrainian Armed Forces to fight on the front lines.

To address gaps in Ukraine's memory and historical policy, young scholars launched an initiative called the Open School of History.

To address gaps in Ukraine's memory and historical policy, young scholars launched an initiative called the Open School of History. This educational programme, described as a "historical front", has been supported by young Polish researchers from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków and the University of Warsaw, who have helped organize public lectures in various Ukrainian cities.

Why does memory politics matter so much to the Kremlin? Historically, the Romanov dynasty sought every possible means – legitimate or otherwise – to link the origins of the Russian Empire to medieval Kyivan Rus' and its rulers, such

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as Prince Volodymyr and Prince Yaroslav. However, when Catherine II ordered that all ancient chronicles from monasteries across the empire, especially those in Ukrainian lands, be sent to St Petersburg, scholars found no solid historical evidence of Moscow's connection to Rus'. After these original documents disappeared, new "copies" of the chronicles mysteriously emerged, now featuring references to Moscow, Vladimir, and other elements that conveniently aligned with Russian imperial narratives. In the Ukrainian online space, there is a popular joke that Moscow, officially only 850 years old, is desperately trying to convince Kyiv, a city with over 1,500 years of history, that it is actually part of Russia's original homeland. EE

Oleksii Lionchuk is a historian and teacher. He has a PhD from the Institute of History at the Jagiellonian University (Poland) and graduated with a master's degree in history from Rivne State University of Humanities (Ukraine).

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On fascism

ENGELBERT BESEDNJAK

This text is a reprint of Egelbert Besednjak's 1922 analysis of fascism after its rise to power in Italy. The text is not only a solid analysis of the process of the rise of fascism over 100 years ago, but also a reminder how the reins of power can swiftly shift in a dangerous direction, even in a democracy.

In the fall of 1922, Engelbert Besednjak, a young Slovenian lawyer and journalist from Gorizia, published an analysis of fascism, a movement that had just seized power in Italy. His article was published in the monthly magazine Social Thought (Socialna misel, vol. I, no. 11/12), edited in Ljubljana by the Christian-socialist thinker Andrej Gosar. Besednjak (1894–1968), a member of the Slovenian minority in the newly annexed regions of Italy, was an eyewitness to the rise of fascism and a victim of fascist intimidation. However, as he stressed in a footnote, his article was intended to be "an objective analysis of the movement without subjective value judgments". A political science analysis, as we would say today. He sought to understand fascism in terms of its role in Italian society, beyond its peripheral manifestations along the "eastern border". The result was one of the most insightful contemporary analyses of fascism that has not lost its relevance. To mark the centennial of Fascism's rise to power, the magazine Razpotja, published in Nova Gorica, decided to republish the article.

In April 1924, in the last multi-party elections in Italy before the Second World War, Besednjak was elected to the Chamber of Deputies on a joint list of the Slovenian, Croatian and German minorities. Here he made a name for himself as an advocate of minority rights: on several occasions he clashed verbally with Mussolini himself. In 1929, he went into exile to Vienna, where he worked at the Congress of European National Minorities. After the Anschluss, he moved to Belgrade, where he remained during the war. In 1950, he moved to Trieste, where he became an active member

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of the Slovenian Christian Social Union (Slovenska krščansko-socialna zveza) and sought to improve the relations between socialist Yugoslavia and the non-communist wing of the Slovenian minority in the Free Territory of Trieste, and later in Italy.

In November 2024 the Municipal Council of Gorizia, led by a centre-right coalition, rejected a petition to strip Mussolini of the title of honorary citizen of Gorizia, granted in 1924. As the twin towns of Nova Gorica (Slovenia) and Gorizia (Italy) share the title of European Capital of Culture for 2025, the controversial decision offers a glimpse on the current state of public discourse in Europe, and shows that understanding the dynamics of the rise of fascism is more relevant than ever.

Introduction by Luka Lisjak Gabrijelčič,
Editor of the Slovenian journal *Razpotja*

Understanding fascism

The victory of the Fascist Party in Italy has attracted the attention of all of Europe. Any country that enters into relations with Italy today is in fact entering into relations with the Fascist Party, the unlimited and total ruler of the country. Italian foreign and domestic, economic and social policy is dictated in every detail by Fascism and its program. Anyone who wants to understand today's Italy should understand fascism. Therefore, it seems to us appropriate and necessary to talk about the origins, conceptual content and goals of the fascist movement.

Fascism emerged when Italian socialism was at the height of its development. It was born in 1919, when the Italian Socialist Party had more than 150 deputies [out of 508], and all of Europe awaited the communist revolution in Italy. The socialists were the rulers of the street, threatening the existing state with constant strikes, frightening all parties opposed to them, breaking up their meetings, stifling their organizational freedom, forcing all workers to join unions en masse, and using rather brutal means to do so. Whoever was not with them was a capitalist and subjected to the most severe pressure.

The government was in an indescribable dilemma, it didn't know how to behave on both the left and the right, it appeased the socialists with various concessions and gave in to their demands. The socialists forced the government to halt its march into Albania as an armed rebellion broke out in Ancona*. In the fall of 1919, revolutionary metal workers occupied the factories, sacked the directors and

* In January 1920, at the Paris Peace Conference, the great powers decided to divide Albania between Yugoslavia, Greece and Italy. The decision sparked an uprising by the local population against Italian troops, who had been stationed in southern Albania since 1916 to protect Albanian independence.

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owners and took the plants into their own hands. The state organization seemed close to collapse at any moment. This was all the more likely because the government could no longer rely on the military, and even the armour manufacturers refused to cooperate.

There was no salvation anywhere, the law no longer applied, the parliament had no power. Officers who appeared on the street in uniform were robbed and beaten by the crowd, their medals ripped from their chests. When they turned to the government for help, the government advised them to change into bourgeois clothes. Displaying the Italian national colours at the time was dangerous. The exchange rate of the lira was plummeting, and Italy's prestige on the international stage was shrinking rapidly.

First appearance

By this time, resistance had emerged in the ranks of nationalist youth. The bourgeois intellectuals, who had previously gone to war with enthusiasm, believed that Italy was headed for destruction. The fruits of victory were lost, all the sacrifices were in vain, the war was pointless. The sons of the bourgeoisie formed militant alliances (*Fascio di combattimento*). As the government remained unmoved, they began to fight for their demands on their own. They confronted the socialists with guns and clubs. All over Italy, workers' homes were set on fire, the printing presses of socialist newspapers crumbled into dust, there were casualties on the roads. There was practically no province in the country where the blood of fascists and communists was not shed.

The outcome of the fascists at this time was met with much sympathy in Italy. The fears of the Socialist Party were overcome, the non-communist workers breathed a sigh of relief and the parties began to operate and organize freely again. In public sympathy, the fascist movement found terrific moral support. Material aid was provided to the fascists from three directions. First of all, they had the support of the high-ranking military elite, which did not want to accept a powerless government, and even thought at the time of a military dictatorship. The generals and officers were well aware that a workers' revolution would overthrow and destroy everything superior in the army. Their survival was at stake and the future was dark. So, the officers provided the fascists with firearms, bombs and trucks.

The revolt by Italian soldiers in Ancona, which spread throughout central Italy, contributed to the insurgents' victory. The fighting, known as the War of Vlora, ended with the recognition of an independent Albania and the withdrawal of Italian troops.

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The fascists received help of a different kind from the government. [Giovanni] Giolitti (a pragmatic liberal politician and a major player in Italian politics in the decades leading up to the First World War) saw the ground collapse beneath his feet as the state apparatus crumbled more and more. He did not know how to help himself. The emergence of the fascists was very welcome to him. To destroy the revolution, he gave secret orders to the armed forces and prefects to leave the fascists alone. The fascists were thus safe from this side. This was support of inestimable value.

Most valuable, however, was the help of the capitalists. The proletarian revolution threatened not only the political system, but the entire social fabric of Italy. The economic power of industrialists and capitalists coming from the landed gentry was crumbling. The socialization of industry was being resisted and land reform promised to expropriate all landowners. A difficult and dark future lay ahead for the ruling classes. The government could not and did not know how to protect their property. When fascism arrived, the owning classes saw their saviour in it. So they blissfully approached fascism and offered it their help. They wanted to use the movement, which had started from idealistic motives, for their own economic purposes. They reached deep into their pockets and overnight fascism gained rich support. The ruling classes preferred it all the more because they benefited directly from it. Every strike that the fascists suppressed by force brought the capitalists hundreds of thousands [of lire in profit].

Thus, the wages of the workers did not have to be raised, while the money saved was shared between businessmen and fascists. This was a time when fascism seemed to be a bastion of capitalism. In Italy, strikes suddenly stopped, entrepreneurs were emboldened and spoke with great confidence. Everything pointed to the fact that fascism would fill capitalist liberalism with young forces, unite with it and completely renew it.

Independence

It happened differently, however. The fascists unscrupulously accepted the help of the capitalists but used their power for their own ends. It soon became apparent that the fascists were shaking off the influence of their supporters, that they were growing beyond their strength. They broke out of the grip of the capitalists and began to attack the government with increasing vigour. Instead of killing the capitalists outright, they threw themselves into organizing the workers and peasants. They became serious rivals of the Socialist Party. As soon as they set fire to the workers' halls, they immediately invited workers to join their trade unions.

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Newspapers increasingly reported that whole sections of workers were defecting to the Fascist Party. It wasn't long before the first fascist-led strikes took place. The capitalists were stunned and could not stop it. The fascist strike was always effective because the armed fascist troops were behind it.

The fact that workers defected en masse to fascism had a fourfold reason. First, the Italian Socialist Party began to split in two. First, the socialists split into communists and socialists, and then the socialists split into two more parties! Today, the former Socialist Party in Italy is split into three separate parties. Internal struggles and splits completely confused the workers, took away their self-confidence, the proletariat lost faith in its previous organizations. This mood of the workers was exploited by the fascists for their own purposes. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the socialist and communist organizations found themselves in this situation because fascism prevented them from carrying out any successful strike. The worker believed that he was deprived of the protection of his organization. On the other hand, fascism defended him with the greatest energy. It is also very important that Mussolini came from the Socialist Party. Indeed, he was one of the most revolutionary leaders of the Italian labour movement until the World War! The chief secretary of the Fascist Party, Michele Bianchi, was also a socialist. In general, the most influential leaders of fascism were disciples of Marx.

The fourth reason why workers turned to fascism en masse was the fear of violence. Thus, the workers' organization of fascism grew and spread throughout Italy. The last general assembly of their labour organizations had about one million members. In parallel with the industrial workers, the peasantry was organizing. Between 20,000 and 30,000 organized peasants repeatedly marched in front of Mussolini. The fascists used the time of the anti-socialist struggle to organize their own armies. Each soldier takes an oath and submits to unconditional discipline. The fascist army has its own uniforms, its own rank, decorations, its own generals and officers, cavalry, airborne divisions, military police, courts, etc. Anyone who does not respond to mobilization is considered a deserter and is tried according to military law. The fascist army was organized by reservists and active Italian officers. Several active Italian generals played a leading role in it.

Coup d'état

Thus fascism became independent across the board. It became independent of the capitalists, independent of the government, it grew beyond the existing state. Only one thing remained: to seize state power and take Italy into its own hands. Preparations for the revolution had begun in earnest. The communist threat was

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long gone, the socialists and communists were no longer threatening, they had become meek and docile. Despite this, the fascists continued their attacks. They occupied city halls, overthrew mayors, increasingly mobilized their troops and sent them to fight individual prefects.

On the surface, it all seemed pointless. Why mobilize 20,000 men when it was often a minor dispute that could be easily resolved? These were armed manoeuvres of the fascist army. They were preparations for a coup d'état. It was necessary to see how the apparatus worked and how much resistance the government still faced. A month before the coup, a final attempt was made; the fascists began to occupy government offices. They seized the main civilian commissariat in Trident and occupied the headquarters of the regional government.

The government surrendered and its fate was sealed. A few weeks later, overnight, the fascist army occupied all post offices, railroad stations, prefectures, police offices in almost every city in Italy, severed telegraph connections with Rome and began a three-way march toward the capital. The coup was entirely successful. Mussolini got his hands on the reins of Italy.

Ideological content and goals

What programme does fascism intend to bring to Italy's political life? What is the ideological background of this great movement? What goals are pursued by the country's new rulers? The rise of fascism itself reveals to us some of the basic ideas of the fascist movement.

Militarism

Fascism arose in the struggle against the Socialist Party, which opposed the war, belittled the Italian victory and demanded the punishment of many officers and generals. The Socialists incited the army to disobey its superiors and lowered its reputation. The fascists came to the army's defence. For the fascists, the army is the noblest expression of Italian national life. The army, they claim, has awakened all the latent moral forces in the Italian nation and prepared it for a glorious future. It is in the spirit of the army that the entire nation must be reborn. Out of the world war should arise a brave and heroic Italy. The basis of all culture and all progress is the army. That is why fascists are militarists.

Italian empire

The fascist movement put up the most determined fight against the socialists, who wanted to deprive Italy of all the fruits of military victory. The fascists attacked

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[Francesco Saverio] Nitti (left-liberal politician, leader of the Italian Radical Party and prime minister during the height of the "red years" of 1919–1920) and Giolitti for their inability to defend Italy's interests at international conferences. They unnecessarily gave up Rijeka, Dalmatia, Albania and made too many concessions to France and England. Thus, Italy squandered a great opportunity to expand its colonies. Italy was entitled to a share of German colonies in Africa and the Indian Ocean. In Asia Minor, Italy was completely cheated. Italy's future lies in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Balkans. Italy must expand, must extend its power far beyond the borders of the peninsula. This is the foreign policy of fascism.

Against centrism and bureaucracy

Italy is one of the most centralist countries in Europe. Their constitution is modelled on the French constitution. The Roman government consolidates powerful authority in its hands. From the centre, multitudes of bureaucrats run the entire country. Even minor local issues are decided by Rome. A struggle against centrism has been going on in Italy for 50 years. The fascists have adopted as their programme the principle that the centralist state must be stripped of more than half of its previous activities. On September 20th of [1922] Mussolini gave a programmatic speech in Udine and declared on behalf of his party: "We want to deprive the state of all its economic activity. What remains is the police, to protect the honest from the attentions of thieves and criminals, what remains is teaching and education for new generations, what remains is the army, to guarantee the integrity of the fatherland, and what remains is foreign policy." The government has just announced in parliament that the railroads, postal service and telegraph are to be outsourced to private companies. The railroads alone cost the country half a billion a year.

The fascists have adopted the principle that the centralist state must be stripped of more than half of its previous activities.

Against liberalism

Fascism does not mean leaving all other affairs of state to private individuals. The fascist party strongly opposes liberalism (understood as liberal capitalism). Fascists claim that liberalism is to blame for all the misfortunes that have befallen the Italian people over the past half century. For them, liberalism is the source of corruption and decay. The fascist coup represents the complete and final failure of Italy's liberal parties. The issues that the state is abandoning have not yet been entrusted to anyone by the fascists. Their programme in this regard has not yet been fully developed.

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Statutory organization

The fascists firmly and resolutely reject class struggle. They accuse socialists of breeding class egoism through class struggle. Today's working class thinks only of the interests of its own stratum and forgets the interests of the whole. The class struggle has alienated the workers from their homeland and excluded them from the psychic community of the Italian people. The fascists want to replace the class struggle with an organization of all states. The state must recognize the organizations of the rank-and-file workers and give them a legal basis. Every stratum essential to national production must have legal representation. Negotiations and agreements between representatives of the productive states replace the class struggle. How the states are to organize themselves is a question on which the fascist programme does not yet have definite principles. Nor does the fascist programme yet say how the states will intervene in public administration.

Cultural programme

Fascists accuse socialism and communism of materialism. They stress at every opportunity that the entire value of a nation lies in its psyche. A nation without ideals is not a nation, but a herd. The Socialist Party has educated a working class devoid of all mental values and humiliated it in its human dignity. Intellectual interests must be at the forefront of social life. Fascism has set itself the task of restoring Italian idealism. The greatness of a nation does not depend on its numbers, but on its ability to develop all its mental powers within itself.

Attitude to religion

Fascism does not like to fight against religion and the Church. The regulations of the fascist army even state that "the fascist militia serves God and the Italian homeland". Every fascist who joins the party army must swear: "In the name of God and Italy, in the name of all who have fallen for the greatness of Italy, I swear to dedicate myself completely and forever to the good of Italy." Mussolini ended his first speech in parliament with the words: "May God support me so that I may bring my difficult effort to a victorious conclusion."

Attitude toward the Catholic Church

Fascism shows a friendly face towards the Catholic Church. Mussolini repeatedly spoke in parliament about the spiritual strength of Catholicism and stressed his respect for its cultural mission. As prime minister, he declared in parliament that "the government will protect the freedom of all religions, and above all the reigning Catholic religion." Some circles in Italy believe that Mussolini will resolve the dispute between the Vatican and Italy. However, it would be a mistake to conclude

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from this that the Fascist Party is Catholic. The Fascists claim that their movement is also a religious movement; but their journals reflect a huge contradiction of various declarations with regard to religion. Their followers, for example, must adhere to the principle: "Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, hand for a hand, foot for a foot, wound for a wound, bruise for a bruise!". Anyone who does not observe this rule against the enemy is placed among the "unclean". Enthusiasm for the Catholic Church also serves nationalism. For fascists, the Church is an organization that has spread and is spreading the glory of Rome and Latin culture throughout the world and among all nations. If you erect a chapel of the Catholic Church in a distant country, you are erecting a monument to Rome and its culture. There is only one soul of fascism, and it is driven by only one thought and one force, and that is nationalism.

This text appeared in Razpotja magazine (No. 49, 2022), and is published with the permission of the editors.

Note from the translator – Nikodem Szczygłowski

The Slovenian minority in Italy, living in what is now the province of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, but also in the areas of Primorska and Goriška, which today are already within the borders of the Republic of Slovenia, actually became the first victim of fascism in Europe as early as the mid-1920s. The contractual date for the beginning of the widespread repression against Slovenian citizens can be considered to be 13 July 1920, when fascist militias called the "Blackshirts" set fire to the Slovenian National House in the centre of Trieste. After Mussolini's rise to power, Slovenians in Italy gradually lost almost all their civil rights – the Slovenian language was expunged from school, church and all forms of public life, Slovenians were forbidden to practice free professions and dismissed from state and local government offices, names and surnames were forcibly changed to Italian, and coercive measures ranging from beatings and kidnappings to murder were used against the unruly. Finally, there were concentration camps on karst hills one of which operated, for example, at the famous tourist attraction, the Grotta Gigante near Trieste. The struggle of the Slovenians against fascism was most extensively described in his works – including 'Oberdan Square' – by Boris Pahor (26.08.1913–30.05.2022), a Slovenian writer from Trieste, with his experiences of harassment, forced conscription into the Italian army for the Libyan campaign, fascist Italian and Nazi German camps.

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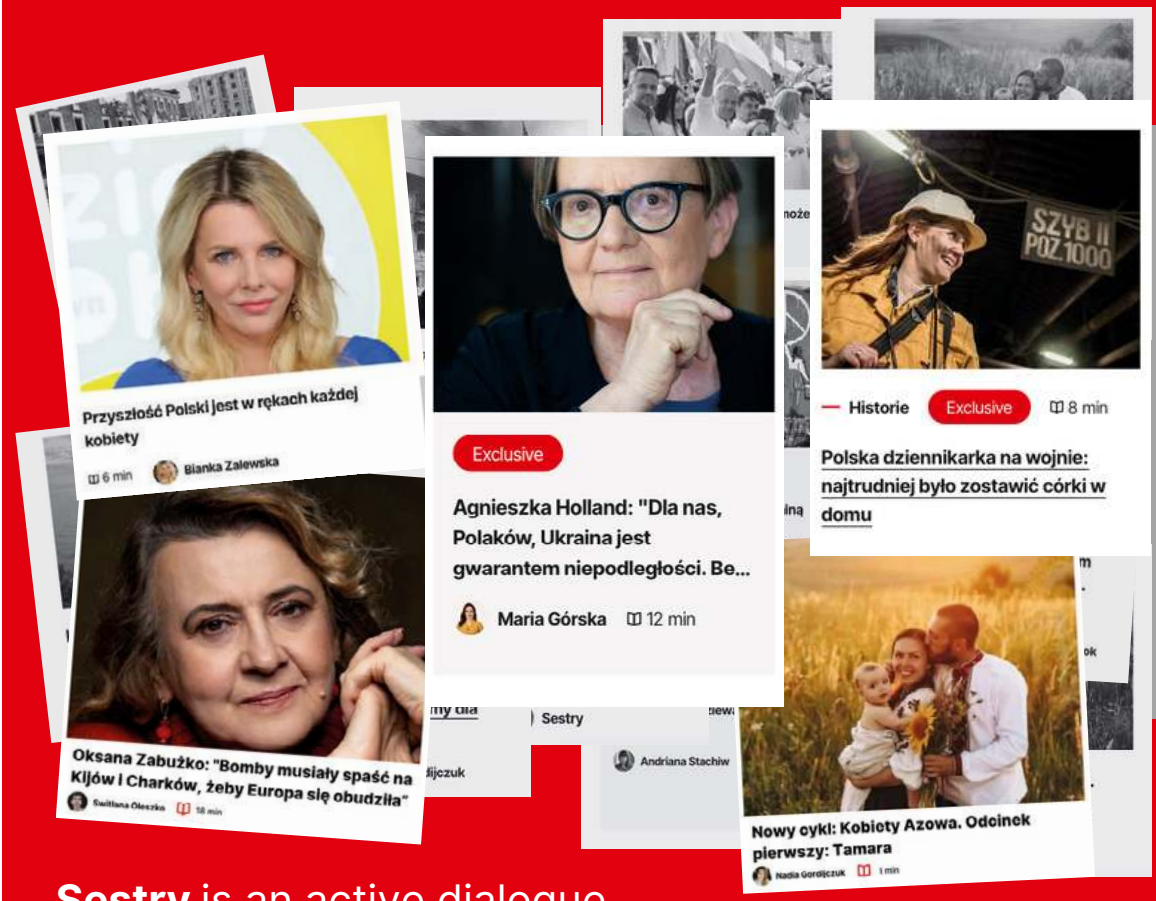

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