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# Eastern Europe

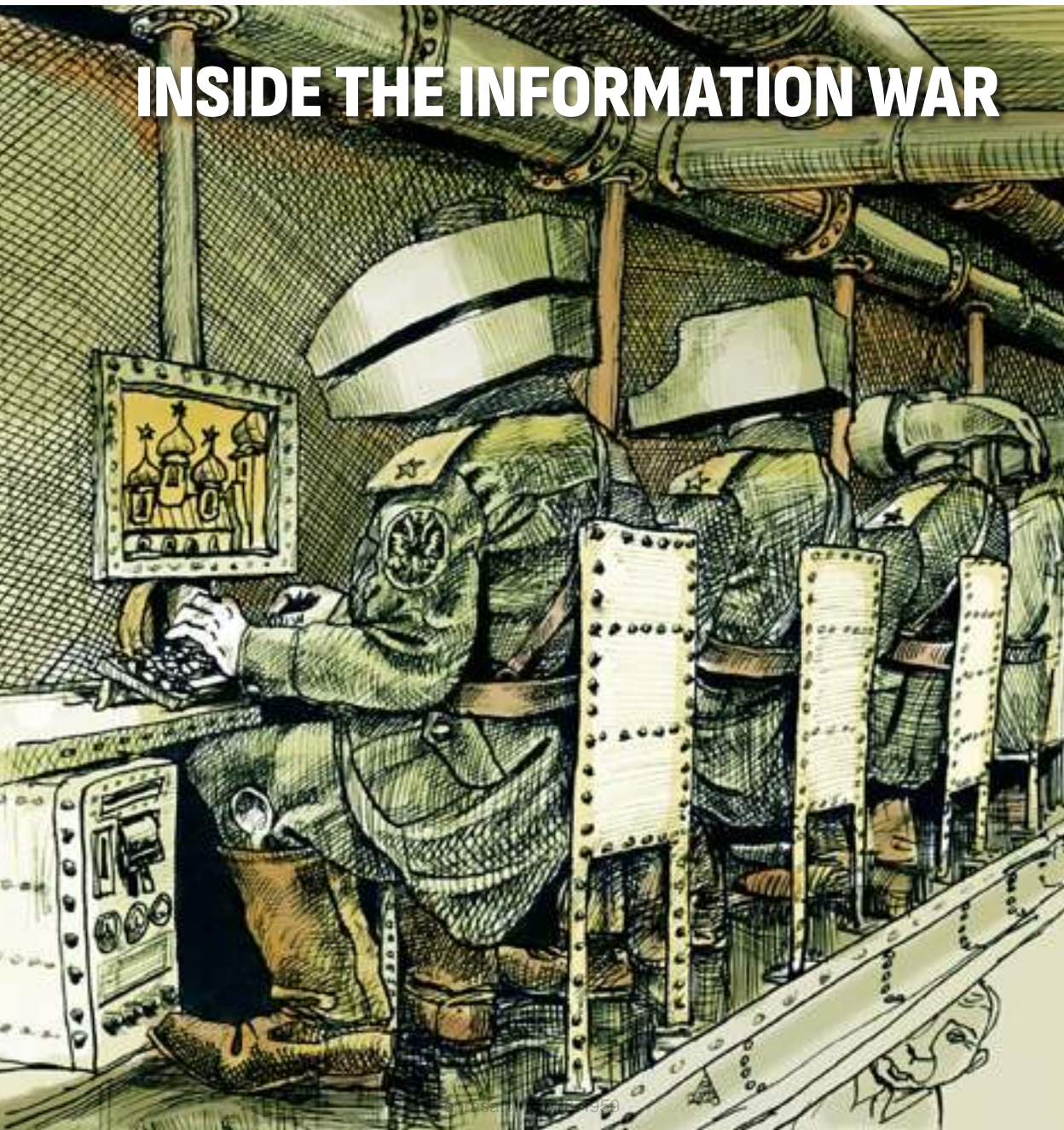
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## INSIDE THE INFORMATION WAR





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DEAR READER,

Can we define the moment of inception of the information war? Should we link it with the invention of the internet or social media? Evidently, historians and political scientists would provide a number of arguments against such a stance. The information war, as we understand it, has in fact been with us for quite some time. The reason for its existence lies mainly in our mysterious human psyche, which is often vulnerable to such phenomena as conspiracy theories, propaganda and disinformation. New technologies only contribute to amplifying the effects of such hazards and make them borderless.

Hence, if we cannot define the moment of inception of information war, can we imagine its conclusion? This is the key question which we asked ourselves while preparing this issue of *New Eastern Europe*. Admittedly, the question remains unanswered. Yet, our authors provide valuable insight into the inner workings and methods of information manipulation and how we can better protect ourselves and our communities. A key conclusion from our authors is that addressing malign online activity aimed at divisions and polarisation takes time and a lot of energy. Meanwhile hostile actors continue to adapt and find new ways to penetrate our societies. While creating a greater awareness is the first step to defend against information attacks, more needs to be done on both the individual and political levels. Certainly, the context of Russia's war against Ukraine is key to better understanding how the information war works.

At the same time, this issue includes a series of texts which look specifically at how Russia has changed as a result of the war. Particular to note is how the culture of violence and patriarchy have found an acceptable place among the mainstream. Equally important is the topic of how Russians who do not support the war cope with the hopeless situation in which they find themselves. Through these texts we attempt to present knowledge from within Russia which is less covered in mainstream media which focuses largely on power politics with less attention to subtle intricacies.

While the spring often heralds a time of renewal, there are signs that the months ahead might be difficult ones. Despite this we remain determined to carry on with our mission to understand the wider changes occurring in our region and beyond. We are grateful for our readers and their support and we encourage you to share your thoughts and feedback via email and social media.

Sincerely,  
The Editors

# Contents

## Can the information war be won?

---

- 7 How effective is Russia's information war?**  
Keir Giles  
*It has been almost a decade since Russia's information operations became widely recognised as a means by which Moscow can reach out to influence western democracies. And throughout almost all of that period, one question that has consistently been raised is whether or not these information operations work.*
- 13 Can we win the information war?**  
A conversation with Mattia Caniglia, Roman Osadchuk and Ruslan Trad  
*"From what we have seen with Russia's actions and approaches, it seems that they perceive the information space as an element of war. And this does not just mean Ukraine."*
- 23 How Ukraine breaks Russia's weaponised propaganda and disinformation**  
Vladyslav Faraponov  
*Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression continues to make headlines around the world. However, what has not been discussed to any great extent is the fight against disinformation and collaborators on the home front.*
- 28 Hostile narratives towards Ukraine in Central and Eastern Europe**  
Adam Lelonek
- 35 The constant struggle of building resilience. The case of Czechia**  
Pavel Havlíček
- 40 Russian propaganda in Poland in the context of parliamentary elections**  
Michał Marek  
*De facto pro-Russian communities are clearly consolidating in the context of the upcoming Polish parliamentary elections.*

- 46 Disinformation can be tackled through everyday habits**  
A conversation with Agnieszka Legucka  
*"After Brexit, when Russia started to influence internal state affairs like the US elections or protests in Catalonia, the EU understood that Russia is a long-term threat to internal processes inside the EU."*

## Interviews

---

- 50 Nagorno-Karabakh. No clear path out of the crisis**  
An interview with Thomas de Waal  
*"There is a lot of geopolitical bargaining, but it is largely about the position of Armenia and Azerbaijan in the region and their relations with each other. I guess this is one conflict where the local is still more important than the geopolitical."*

## Essays and Analysis

---

- 57 The West's rude awakening. Lessons after the first year of war**  
Wojciech Michnik  
*The crucial factor in Russia's war against Ukraine is how to help Kyiv defend itself and win?*
- 67 Iran and Russia. Two pretty best friends**  
Raze Baziani
- 74 From demilitarisation to "satanisation"**  
Wojciech Siegień  
*Putinism has been built as a model of the Russian state envisioned for decades, if not centuries. In this way, Putinism has ended history for all who are subordinate to it.*
- 83 From domestic abuse to Wagner's sledgehammer. War as a product of systemic violence in Russia**  
Maria Domańska

**91 How Putin turned Russia into a failed state**  
Andrei Nikolaev and Anastasia Sergeeva

**100 February lasts a year**  
Victoria Odissonova  
*Despite some popular convictions, there are Russians who do not support their country's war in Ukraine but decided not to leave. Instead, they are creating civil initiatives that help Ukrainian refugees who ended up in Russia.*

**106 The historical advisors of Vladimir Putin**  
Benjamin Looijen

**121 Serbia–Kosovo relations. Old issues and new pressures for an epilogue**  
Filip Mirilović  
*After years of struggle, political corruption and non-compliance with obligations from both sides, the Franco-German proposal for Serbia and Kosovo came as some kind of relief for those who want to normalise relations.*

**128 The human face of Ukraine's reconstruction Veteran reintegration**  
Iryna Dobrohorska

**133 One country, two borders. How Poland differentiates narratives about migrants**  
Givi Gigitashvili

**139 Prospects and challenges for Central Asian states against the backdrop of Russia's invasion of Ukraine**  
Danylo Stonis

*others and to accept the intricacies of history and memory and their influence on the present.*

**157 Bosnia's wartime prime minister on reconciliation**  
Leon Hartwell  
*Haris Silajdžić served as the minister of foreign affairs and then prime minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Bosnian War. Through his experience he understands the horrors and pain felt during the genocidal actions of Serbs at that time and knows what it takes to finally overcome that terrible period.*

**164 Azerbaijan's helping hand to Turkey after the disaster**  
Arzu Bunyad

**169 Ukrainians try to cope after a year of war**  
A photo-story by Wojciech Koźmic

## History and Memory

---

**177 Playing with the past. Does the decolonisation of the history of Ukraine make sense?**  
Gennadii Korolov

**184 Recipe for disaster. Preparations for the First World War on the eastern side of Europe**  
Andrzej Zaręba

**189 The Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–21. Populists and statesmen**  
Oleksii Lionchuk  
*Ukraine's contemporary struggle for independence has a long history going back many centuries.*

## Art, Culture and Society

---

**149 Noch ist Polen nicht verloren! Germany, Poland – and Ukraine?**  
Marcel Krueger  
*There seems to be a widespread inability in Germany to look at oneself from the position of*

# New Eastern Europe

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# How effective is Russia's information war?

KEIR GILES

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It has been almost a decade since Russia's information operations became widely recognised as a means by which Moscow can reach out to **influence western democracies**. And throughout almost all of that period, one question that has consistently been raised is whether or not these information operations work.

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In addition to high-profile interventions of Russian disinformation, such as attempts to influence elections in the United States, there are multiple other targeted campaigns in which Russia has sought to bring about specific outcomes in target countries. This has all been happening alongside long-running operations designed simply to degrade a particular country's societal cohesion or trust in institutions. Despite this, only very rarely have these operations been traced back and examined in sufficient detail to determine with any degree of confidence if they achieved results. As a result, the question still remains of whether it makes sense for governments to put resources into attempting to counter such campaigns.

It is worth looking at specific case studies of Russian information operations with targeted outcomes to illustrate the potential impact of information activities. Here, I look at Russia's campaign of nuclear intimidation, an attempt to influence Amnesty International's International Secretariat, and the long-running efforts to divide western societies and erode trust in their governments and institutions. Pitched at different levels of ambition to achieve change, two of these have been successful and one, fortunately for the overall security of Europe, has failed. But

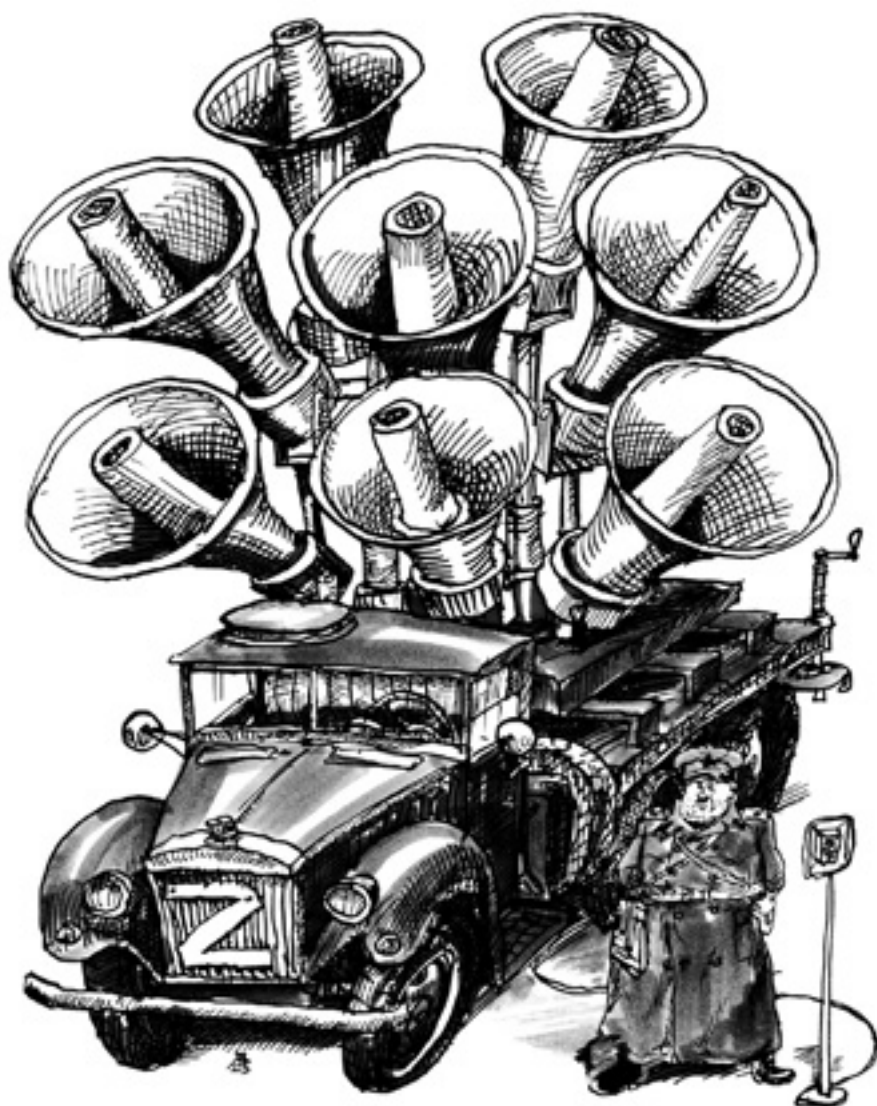
they all lead us to important conclusions about the nature of the threat posed by Russian information warfare.

### **Russia and nuclear weapons**

Russia's successful efforts to constrain western support for Ukraine for fear of triggering a nuclear war have been spectacularly successful. The idea that the use of nuclear weapons by Russia is not only possible but actually probable if Moscow is challenged or threatened, let alone defeated or "humiliated", has been deliberately fostered by long-term Russian propaganda efforts. The six months following Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine saw an unprecedented barrage of threatening nuclear language from all elements of Russia's information warfare apparatus. This high-profile campaign has involved Vladimir Putin, Russian public diplomacy, the country's media commentators and propagandists, agents of influence abroad and even Russia's troll armies on social media. The campaign built on a much more long-term programme conducted through propagandists and influencers over more than a decade to inculcate in western audiences the assumption that Russian nuclear use is likely if it is obstructed or offended, and that "miscalculation" between Russia and a NATO member state would inescapably escalate to a full-scale conflict involving nuclear exchanges. Tireless repetition of the mantra that any event that Russia would dislike would ensure "guaranteed escalation to the Third World War" had its desired effect. By mid-2022, this assumption formed part of the basic starting point for many public and private discussions about how to respond to Russia's onslaught on Ukraine.

This assessment was widespread across western media, which fulfills a key function in disseminating and amplifying Russia's messaging. But this function was reinforced by western politicians and senior officials also responding to Russian nuclear threats in precisely the manner wished by Moscow. This challenge of repeating and validating Russia's messages is not restricted to Europe: senior figures in the United States have also repeatedly amplified warnings of a nuclear response from Russia.

The clearest example of the effects of this long-term Russian campaign has been the successful deterrence of Ukraine's western backers, including the US, from providing war-winning military support. Western powers have been consistently careful not to give the Ukrainian armed forces weapons that could threaten Russia itself. Assistance to Kyiv has been carefully calibrated, constantly looking for Russia's red lines and proceeding only once it has become clear that they are fictitious. Successful deterrence, and the associated fear of a situation where Russia



suffers a defeat, also continues to lead to arguments that a ceasefire in Ukraine is preferable to an outright Ukrainian victory.

In this way, the West's repeated emphasis on its fear of escalation proves to Russia that threats work, irrespective of how implausible they may be or how often they are shown to be empty. Even though the intensity with which they are being delivered has decreased in recent months, Russia's nuclear threats will continue to have their desired effect for as long as western leaders state clearly that they are

effective in preventing Ukraine from being provided with war-winning military support, and even in deterring them from backing Ukrainian victory altogether.

### **Russia and Amnesty International**

Long before Amnesty International triggered international outrage through its flawed reporting from the conflict in Ukraine, which criticised Ukrainian troops for defending populated areas, the organisation had already demonstrated its susceptibility to targeted Russian information operations in a high-profile incident involving the Russian political figure Alexei Navalny.

One successful technique of disinformation that has been updated for the on-line age is “astroturfing”, the term for flooding a conversation with fake supporters to give the impression of widespread popular agreement on a political topic. This can be an effective means of influencing any decision-maker in the West that is sensitive to public opinion. In late February 2021 Amnesty, which had previously been supportive of Navalny, announced it no longer considered him a “prisoner of conscience” following a Russian campaign to discredit him. Perversely, Amnesty officials knew perfectly well that they were being subjected to an “orchestrated campaign”, but even so argued that “we had too many requests; we couldn’t ignore them.”

In doing so, Amnesty confirmed for Russia that the methods of astroturfing and mass trolling work. This has broader political implications than the status of Navalny. Social media is an easy and obvious means of organising campaigns of this kind, which makes the habit of some western governments of giving in to social media outrage campaigns especially dangerous. Any demonstration that public policy can successfully be influenced by Twitter mobs only increases Russia’s incentives to invest resources in this low-cost, low-risk means of intervening in other states’ internal affairs.

### **Russia and Ukraine**

One aspect of Russian campaigning that remains especially open to doubt is its attempts to sow division within western democratic societies, undermine societal cohesion, and in particular erode popular trust in government institutions. This is a set of campaigns, tailored to individual target countries, that have been widely recognised but insufficiently analysed. This is partly due to the fact that western governments consider the extent of analysis that would be required too complex and expensive. At the same time, in some cases this would require the kind

of intrusive insight into popular opinion that in some countries would run counter to social or constitutional norms.

Assessing impact is also made more difficult by the fact that the campaigns are long term and cumulative, meaning that their effects have to be measured over a long period. This is also challenging for western governments constrained by their budgets and electoral cycles. Researchers argue that it can be a mistake to refer to a disinformation campaign as an “information operation”, because it may not be a specific operation, but simply a steady-state daily routine.

But comparison of what is “normal” in the information space in English-speaking countries in 2023 compared to 2013, for example, reveals spectacular change over time. Assisted by the policies and algorithms of social media platforms, Russia has both benefitted from and accelerated trends of fragmentation, distrust and the spawning of alternative realities. It is now joined by a wide range of foreign and domestic imitators, who choose to emulate Russian tactics for their political ends, only amplifying the damage done. The combined result is increased fragmentation in society, with people devolving into alternative realities on a whole range of topics. And the tactics that achieve this are repeated again and again, with Russian and Russian-backed sources in particular generating implausible denials and contradictory versions of the same dramatic or controversial event. Some people among the target audiences even come to believe each of them as they appear. Russia's influencers can then sit back, watch and occasionally stoke the flames further as these different groups attack the facts and each other.

A **disinformation campaign** may not be a specific operation, but simply a steady-state daily routine.

Russia's principles of information warfare offer an enormously long list of people that should be targeted with this aim. As the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service's annual report pointed out in 2021, in effect “this means that the entire world population outside Russia is a potential target”. The aim, according to Russian information warfare theory, is to influence the mass consciousness of the population – directing people so that the population of the victim country is induced to support the aggressor, acting against its own interests.

But the key target that demonstrates the crucial importance of countering campaigns like these is Ukraine. If campaigns of the kind detected across Europe and North America had been successful in Ukraine, and genuinely threatened societal cohesion and trust, and support for government institutions, Ukrainian society might well not have shown the astonishing resilience and unity that has allowed it to survive not only eight years of war, but a full year of unconstrained Russian attempts to invade and destroy the country.

Short of open military conflict, Russia watches for any weakness or vulnerability that it can exploit to inflict damage on western countries and societies because, in its perverse understanding of international relations, anything that weakens them means that in relative terms Russia is stronger. The destructive and irresponsible nature of the campaigns is clear from efforts like boosting anti-vaccination propaganda in the middle of a global pandemic. The example of Ukraine provides a strong argument for looking more closely at the impact of Russia's information campaigns, even in countries that may for the time being consider themselves not at direct risk of Russian invasion. But the other two examples cited here – the local tactical impact of changing Amnesty International's mind, or the much broader strategic success in convincing the West that Russia is untouchable because it has nuclear weapons – also demonstrate clearly how these campaigns can have readily identifiable success, and as such pose a direct threat to the integrity of our societies and institutions. ~~EE~~

Keir Giles is a senior consulting fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House in London. His latest book is titled *Russia's War on Everybody: And What It Means for You* (2022).

# Can we win the information war?

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A conversation with **Mattia Caniglia**, **Roman Osadchuk** and **Ruslan Trad**, disinformation experts with the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Laboratory (DFRLab).  
Interviewers: Maciej Makulski and Adam Reichardt

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**MACIEJ MAKULSKI:** I would like to start by asking you to paint a general picture of where we are regarding this information war and the counter-measures used to address this problem. We decided to go back into history a little and mark Russia's war against Ukraine as a kind of breakthrough point, although we know that all kinds of lines are a bit artificial. But it was actually interesting for me to think about how before that we were rather discussing the problem of post-truth, which was a buzzword at that time, and after February 22nd 2022 I have an impression that a whole industry fighting disinformation has developed even more; that we are in a different place because the answer to the threats is more systemic, coherent and consistent. So, what I would like to ask you first is how you would characterise the position we are in right now and what major trends are worthy of discussion?

**ROMAN OSADCHUK:** If you take 2013 and 2014 as a starting point, a lot

of things have changed, but in essence, some things have not. If we talk about the Ukrainian context, the overall message of Russia to the world was that Ukraine is not a reliable partner, you should not have anything to do with Ukrainians, it is our sphere of influence, actually, you should not engage in any way. Basically, this was the message for the West and the United States and all the allies of Ukraine. I think it is safe to say the Russian narrative was that Ukraine is basically run by "Satanists", "Nazis" or anything you could imagine. All those things began to show up in the information space in 2014 in one way or another. So, in this sense, the overall direction of the messages is kind of the same. What changed are the methods and tools that they use. They are not just focusing on one blog post, but they are simultaneously using Telegram, VKontakte (Russian social media), Facebook, ads, basically every-

thing that they can in order to promote their narrative. Secondly, they are employing some things directly from the people who are fighting disinformation and fact-checking. The notorious “war on fakes” initiative – which presents itself as a fight against “disinformation” – was actually created to spread propaganda on behalf of Russia. The material that they are producing, like denying the Bucha massacre, or denying the hospital bombing in Mariupol, it was widely amplified by the Kremlin, Russian ministries and embassies. Also, the use of Russian embassies to spread disinformation is another thing. If you look at any social media handle of any Russian embassy in any place in the world, you will be able to find disinformation very quickly.

**RUSLAN TRAD:** We can speak for hours on this topic, but I think we should mention that some of the trends in disinformation existed well before the first invasion of Ukraine, before 2014. Generally, the field changed with the illegal annexation of Crimea and after that with the intervention in Syria. So, in that context our field has changed and we have disinformation taking place in other areas like the Balkans and South-Eastern Europe. Some of the narratives we tracked go all the way back to the first mass protest movement in Ukraine in 2004. They just changed some keywords, but they are almost using the same tools. Right now, they have recycled some of the trends that they have been using when supporting forces on the ground.

In many cases spreading disinformation in Europe goes together with forces on the ground. This was the case in Donbas, with the so-called proxy forces. This is one of the first such stories sold by the Russian Federation, that there are “separatists” in Ukraine, which of course is a fairy tale. We know that these forces are directly supported by Russia and even some soldiers are from the Russian Federation. The second story is that of mercenaries and how they developed in other regions like Africa and the Middle East, also in the context of Syria, Libya and Ukraine. So, in general, they use pre-existing tools and trends, some even from the Soviet toolbox, but right now in the current context. This means Telegram, social media and focusing on public opinion in Europe, which is still one of the most important targets of Russian information operations.

**MATTIA CANIGLIA:** These two answers gave a pretty accurate picture. Since 2014 and more recently in the past three years we have seen less big operations and much more smaller operations, across different platforms and using different techniques. I would say that another trend which is important is that sometimes campaigns are much less sophisticated, which doesn’t necessarily mean that they are sloppy. But they are not on the same level of sophistication that we have seen before and the narratives that both Roman and Ruslan referred to show that the Russians haven’t reinvented the wheel when it comes to narratives. They are just reusing narra-

tives. For instance, in the case of Africa they have been using them since the 1960s. It is just that the world is back to a place where these narratives are working again. In terms of counter-measures, I think there are a lot of illusions because of all that has been going on around memes, like Saint Javelin or the Ukrainian farmers picking up tanks, and this gives an impression that the Ukrainians are winning the information war. And don't get me wrong. They do an incredible job, but at the same time if we look at the information space more widely, it is a lot more contested. The counter-measures work, but at the same time we are in a position where we need to do more. In Europe you have two substantial sensitivities and these two sensitivities resulted in two different outcomes. You have countries like the Baltics, Poland, the Nordics, who were ready to meet this challenge. And you had other countries that were just not ready, largely because there is no strategic sensitivity for this, for instance Italy, Spain and Germany. In these countries we see that Russian disinformation campaigns are not always sophisticated, because they do not need to be. In Italy for instance politicians go on state television at 8:30pm and just repeat the narratives that are the same as Russian propaganda, it's simple. One last thing, I think it is worth stressing what Roman said about the role of the embassies. I think disinformation became a much more official affair than before. Interestingly, this is a trend that we observe also with Chi-

nese disinformation operations. This is probably because Russia does not have the resources to play on so many tables at the same time. They try to optimise what they have, and they have been pretty good at that.

**ADAM REICHARDT:** *If I may stick with the counter-measures discussion briefly. Could you explain what counter-measures you think work well in the fight against disinformation? Are you talking about debunking, fact-checking, these kinds of things; or are there other counter-measures that can be taken on an even more broader level to fight disinformation?*

MC: If you look at examples like the pre-emptive approach, this is what has been working well. In this sense the part of the work that we do is becoming more and more important, and we can see this when speaking about the actors within Europe and elsewhere in the world. Efforts like media literacy training on disinformation are super important because this creates the first line of defence. All the other things that we can do like debunking, fact-checking, especially in a crisis situation, are just not enough. Having said that, there are a number of things that are happening in the European information environment also in terms of legislation that will help make our system more resilient to disinformation. But, for me, we should start with key steps like training on media literacy, disinformation and OSINT (open-source intelligence). We need to work towards a world in which, for in-

stance, you want to know how to spot a bot or picture that is generated by artificial intelligence. If you are not able to, you might not be able to be a responsible citizen; and if you're not able to be a responsible citizen, well, we are in danger.

RT: Just to respond to what Mattia was saying, because he has a lot of experience with the bureaucratic efforts, and meetings with decision-makers and I am sure that he has already seen how difficult it is to organise one united European answer with all the difficulties and diplomatic problems, and even internal sabotaging. Unfortunately, in Bulgaria, where I am based, we see the president is an actual actor in sabotaging these efforts. We conduct workshops and training, but the topics are seemingly far removed from society. Yes, we have some journalists trained in OSINT, but they have old information. They are not up to date with the latest trends. And editors and publishers are not trained on content moderation. This is just one story, but last year I realised that I travelled ten times around Europe, flying from one place to another, to speak and meet with my colleagues. And I realised first of all that we are a very small group of people. Maybe me, Mattia and Roman know almost 100 per cent of people in this field. This is a problem because I do not see new faces. And, second, I realised how much funding is spent just on me. Tickets for airplanes, hotels, going to meetings, food, etc. Thousands of euros for just one person, and we are already late in comparison to China and Rus-

sia. So how to solve this? For me right now we have no quick answers. Mattia is right on the direct efforts we can continue right now, because all the others mentioned are for the long term and we have no time for this.

RO: It is absolutely true that education is important, especially in areas like OSINT and media literacy. But basic education which teaches critical thinking is also a great thing. Of course, the Ukrainian context is slightly different. We got a pretty painful "vaccine". In 2014 it was quite chaotic, with the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine and all the disinformation that accompanied that. Since then, NGOs and even governmental institutions began fighting disinformation. One of them is the Centre for Strategic Communication under the culture ministry. Another is the Centre against Disinformation under the National Security Council. But even with that there is not enough because the wider population is not informed about all these things. There are other initiatives, teachers are passing this knowledge on to the kids. But again, it hasn't reached the whole country. Of course, the invasion has changed a lot. When Russia is attacking you and telling you about chemical weapons or other false pretences to explain invasion, you can just open your window and first of all hear or see the explosions and air-raid sirens. That is why not so many people fell for those messages. So, for Ukrainians there is no question about who is attacking who.

But the avalanche of different messages causes confusion. Preparation and an overall system built via education is important. I know that Finland has great experience with school programmes. They have different courses for different parts of the society. In other words, we need a robust approach to build up resilience in the long term.

**MM: I would like to highlight this link between OSINT and technology, because I fully agree with you that all those steps that Mattia outlined mean, in short, education. We need education and it is a time-consuming approach, but also a part of this education might be learning new technologies. Can you talk more about the role of new technologies in fighting disinformation?**

RT: This is an ongoing question. We do not have enough data about how to include such information first in institutions, then in schools, for example. We have ongoing conversations about the role of artificial intelligence because authoritarian regimes are also using such tools. So, it is important to train on these tools to be helpful in spreading democratic values, supporting these values and also implementing them in the fight against disinformation. This is an ongoing debate. In the countries in the Balkans and Central Europe, it will be difficult. Maybe the Czech Republic or Poland are on the right path, but the countries in the region are being left behind by many of the countries in Western Europe. Our school system is a disaster; so yes, many of the young people

already know this trend, but it is useful to think how we can use these new technologies in real life, and how institutions and experts can implement these tools in practice.

RO: I would add that the technologies are like a game of cat and mouse. The tools to debunk something are created only after somebody spotted the disinformation. Let's say if you wanted to see who is behind a website, you could use the "Whois" database, but then there is some kind of shield protection regarding that information and now this tool doesn't work so well. Today, there are things like ChatGPT and AI chat-generating technologies which are also being used to generate disinformation. Of course, there are tools on how to unveil whether this is created by a machine, but again there are some additional AIs which could rewrite the text making it difficult to detect. This is what I mean by saying it is a constant game, where we are trying to catch up and we are on the losing side because we are always behind. That is why the main thing we should actually do is teach a critical approach to the information we consume. The technologies are important and we have to understand how they can be used to create disinformation content. It is a constant struggle.

MC: Roman is essentially suggesting a more humanistic approach to these technologies and that we need to teach human beings to exercise critical thinking, which is absolutely right. But I want to add two dimensions to these reflec-

tions. First is how we change topics according to technological innovation. Sometimes technological innovation also restricts data access, and that is what we are seeing with Twitter. There is also going to be a need to protect that data access and to protect OSINT for what OSINT is. This very much goes together with how much the OSINT environment is becoming competitive in a sense that we have witnessed two milestone moments in OSINT in recent history – the war in Syria and the war in Ukraine. We have seen in these two different moments how much OSINT can do. But the OSINT that was done in Syria and in the Russian war against Ukraine was very much done by journalists, or associations like DFRLab, and also for-profit companies like Bellingcat. But it is always open source, it is always to be published. Now things are changing because governments are understanding that OSINT is a powerful tool that they can use to serve the intelligence scope. They are creating agencies and recruiting people to work for the government. That would mean also a change in the paradigm, that this research by OSINT experts would not be public anymore but would be reserved for certain audiences of decision-makers. This is not necessarily a bad or good thing, but could definitely change the environment. And this also means that access to data may change. Facebook and Twitter are already starting to think that if you want to access data you got to pay. Some technologies will become

paid because the demand is there, and because people will understand the value they will try to monetise data. This could be the start of a new fight while we conduct other fights like the ones we were talking about in the previous question. Technological developments need to maintain accessibility to certain data and that is the core need that we have for conducting our work.

**AR: Roman, could you give us your perspective on what disinformation looks like during wartime. How has the field of disinformation changed in the last 12 months in the Ukraine context?**

**RO:** What actually changed this year is that in the beginning there was quite a lot of chaos and misunderstandings about what was happening – especially the first days, when people were evacuating and nobody knew for sure what was happening. For example, where were missiles falling or where spies were being caught. There was a lot of disinformation around that. After everything began to become clearer, the Russians understood that their explanations for the attack were not accepted. The stories about Russia coming to save Ukrainians from Zelenskyy didn't work. So, they started to discredit the Ukrainian government with a lot of different messages and approaches. They try to promote stories like the Ukrainian government is selling western weapons to African countries. They're trying to discredit Zelenskyy saying that he fled Ukraine, multiple times, in fact I lost count how many



Graphic by: WHYFRAME / Shutterstock

times. They even promoted a story that he was using a green screen while he was filming his video on Bankova Street in Kyiv. They continue to create divisions which is what they did even before 2014, largely between eastern and western Ukraine. They try to portray Ukraine as full of different kinds of people. They try to push the language issue and explain that Russian-speaking people are being attacked, which is not true. They are also spreading information about the reasons for the war, trying to discourage any resistance towards Russians.

This works in the physical realm as well. In Belarus they launch aircraft which trigger an air-raid alert across the whole Ukrainian territory. It is a kind of intimidation – there might be an air strike and there might not be one. They use it constantly. A lot of people stopped

reacting to the air-raid alerts simply because there were too many. They also try to blame the atrocities on Ukraine's armed forces. They try to discredit them as well. Really, there are a lot of things that happened in the last 12 months.

**AR:** Yes, that is a lot. If I could just follow up briefly. I am going to ask maybe a difficult question, but this would be based on your knowledge and your research. As you recall, there was a scandal with Amnesty International which reported that both sides are committing war crimes. A lot of people claimed that this was disinformation without much evidence. Of course, maybe there are some individual cases, but they were not documented. How did you see this case overall? I know it is sensitive...

**RO:** It is sensitive. I guess the main answer why it was received this way is

that it lost proportion. There is huge evidence of what the Russians have done and there is some evidence against the Ukrainian side too. Basically, the report was received so badly because it was out of proportion. It presented the cases as if the Ukrainians were the only ones who were doing most of the horrible things, despite the fact that it is the Russians who are actually erasing cities from the face of the earth. Obviously, that is the main problem. I have not dedicated a lot of time reading the report myself, because it is not my specialisation, but I think that is the reason why it was received that way. There was previously a UN report, months before, and it was much more balanced.

MC: I think it is also a problem linked with the news cycle. As Roman said the report had a problem of proportion and I agree that was the main issue. But it is also related to the news cycle. When the report came out the news was not “the Russians are committing human rights violations,” but the news was that the Ukrainians are committing them too. It gets hyped up akin to the context of conflict in places like Africa. When you have the French shelling 15 jihadists, but five civilians are caught in the crossfire, the headlines will, understandably, report on the civilians. Which is, again, understandable, but leaves out the necessary context of fighting terrorism for an overall safer community. At the same time, the increasing evidence of human rights abuses conducted by the Wagner Group in the Sahel does not necessari-

ly make headlines. So, there is a certain element of double standards in how our media treats this kind of news and information.

MM: My last question might be a little more philosophical, because when we think about war, we usually think about something which has a beginning and an end. So, one big question that we asked ourselves when we decided to have this special issue of *New Eastern Europe*, is can the information war be won? Maybe the maximum that we can achieve is managing the risks, and maybe we are making a mistake by calling it an information war because we are sending the wrong signal. But the question I would like to ask all of you is what are your reflections on this and what does victory in the information war look like?

RT: I will be very brief, because I think Roman probably has a lot to say about this. Just one point, believe it or not, but the so-called “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” (a fake antisemitic text which was created in 1903 popularising the belief in a Jewish conspiracy) is an actual thing right now in Bulgaria. Many people still believe in this fabrication created in imperial Russia. When we speak about the information war and how to counter it, I refer back to Mattia and Roman’s conclusion that education and critical thinking are key. If a forged document from more than 100 years ago is still considered true, the question on education and institutions becomes very relevant. I think in many cases disinformation is successful because of pre-ex-

isting prejudices. This is a question of the principles and values of the audience and people. The question is bigger than this discussion.

MC: On the information war, I think this is partially our fault. I come from the counter-terrorism domain, and that is exactly what has happened with the “war on terror”. When we needed attention from policymakers and stakeholders on terrorism, we inserted the word “war”. I think the real war is what we are seeing in Ukraine, which has been caused by the Russian invasion. The information war is a part of that context. But outside that I am not sure it is a war. I think we call it this way because we want to grab the attention of policymakers and we want to tell them that this is important, and we have to act on it. There is an old saying that “democracy needs constant vigilance”, and that is what is going to happen with the information environment. We will need constant vigilance and I think what we try to say in different ways today is that we need more people to actually engage in this vigilance and we need to equip them with the right tools for them to do so.

RO: I do not know the perfect term for it. But from what we have seen with Russia’s actions and approaches, it seems that they perceive the information space as an element of war. And this does not just mean Ukraine. As we know the

Russians have been active in many information environments, ranging from the Netherlands with MH17, Brexit in 2016, or US elections, especially in 2016. These kinds of things are happening in multiple domains, including cyber. In some senses, it is a constant conflict, a new version of the marketplace of ideas. This is a constant struggle between different contesting ideas, and the information spaces are also very interrelated. Russians may publish something on Telegram and in 20 minutes it will be in Polish on Twitter. In 40 minutes, it will be on Facebook in French and then the next day it will be in the mainstream media in Latin America. There are no defined borders and that is why it feels like a war, and that is what Russia is doing.

Regarding your question as to whether it is possible to win – I do not think so. Instead, it is a constant process. What can be done is to provide the knowledgeable audiences with information about the risks and how they might be better prepared. In other words, education and the skills that we talked about earlier. But that is an ideal state that we cannot reach. We cannot say that 100 per cent of the population is already there. Unfortunately, that is why I think it is impossible for us to say we can win. It is not something that can be won. There might be some relative successes and failures, but not a definitive win or loss. *EE*

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# How Ukraine breaks Russia's weaponised propaganda and disinformation

VLADYSLAV FARAPONOV

Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression continues to make headlines around the world. However, what has not been discussed to any great extent is the **fight against disinformation and collaborators** on the home front. With no end in sight to the fighting, it is clear that such espionage could prove pivotal to the war's outcome.

More than a year into Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine, the fight with Moscow's propaganda is entering another important stage. Despite all the efforts of Ukraine's special and secret services, there are still some pro-Russian Ukrainians or Russian citizens themselves who are spies, trying to provide essential information to the Russian Federal Security Service. First, these people collect information on military movements and military, civil and energy infrastructure. As Russia's military gains have been slowed after Ukraine recaptured territories in the east and south of the country, the fight with pro-Russian informers and collaborators is another important front for Ukraine to win the long-lasting war.

It would be wise to assume that Russia's attempts to recruit collaborators in Ukraine started before the full-scale invasion that started on February 24th 2022. It is, and it will be, painful to acknowledge for Ukrainians, but the number of military forces that were coming to attack Ukraine from various sides could not have been placed as they were without preliminary information gathering. Those events of the first days and weeks of the war are being investigated, and there is no doubt

that Ukraine's civil society will demand accountability for those who committed these crimes. However, more important for Ukraine's survival and restoration of its internationally recognised borders is the fight with pro-Russian informers and collaborators.

### A country-wide danger

First, it is important to clarify that there is no specific number when it comes to "cases of betrayal", as investigations are ongoing every day and they vary from region to region. What is clear as of late February 2023 is that the vast majority of cases of betrayal have been identified in the regions that are the closest to the occupied territories, but not only them.

Several of Ukraine's regions will be described in this article, where the pro-Russian collaborators have been revealed mostly. One aspect to understand is that the Russian forces do not have direct access to territories that Ukraine's army has recaptured, in particular, southern Kherson, the only regional city Russia seized in early March 2022, and a large part of the Kharkiv region in the east, where as of September, the Ukrainian military had freed 388 settlements with at least 150,000 people present there. There is no indication that the Russians will succeed in another attempt to capture Ukraine's capital Kyiv, or seriously advance in the south and east of Ukraine.

Second, the Russians thought that such "eyes" on the ground were necessary to conduct attacks on civilian and energy infrastructure in Ukraine's cities. They

The vast majority of cases of **betrayal** took place in the regions closest to the occupied territories.

try to find a resident, most likely someone who is not so politically educated in terms of critical thinking and cannot recognise the enemy's narratives, so they can offer him/her money for information to use while planning missile attacks.

In that regard, several examples should be analysed. During the very first days of the war, Russians attacked aerodromes all over Ukraine. In particular, they tried to destroy all the airplanes and helicopters parked at the airfields of regional cities. That was the case for aerodromes located in western Ukraine, in particular, in the cities of Ivano-Frankivsk and Lutsk. Such cases highlighted once again the dangers of dual loyalty. For example, a man in Lutsk, with some connections to Russian intelligence agents, betrayed his country and provided sensitive information to the enemy. He used to live close to the aerodrome, thus having access to sensitive information about Ukraine's military capa-

bilities. The same happened in Ivano-Frankivsk, one of the largest cities in Western Ukraine. It is commonly believed that in Western Ukraine, patriotism and self-determination regarding Ukraine's national identity are much higher than in Eastern and southern Ukraine, as these areas used to be part of the Russian Empire before all of modern Ukraine became a part of the Soviet Union. But more importantly, such examples, especially in Western Ukraine, are dangerous too, as they demonstrate that due to the war, everyone's motivation to choose one side or another is different. On the other hand, such news has made Ukrainians treat checkpoints with patience and understanding, as Russian agents and their pro-Russian supporters have been learning to hide inside the nation for years.

In addition, it is necessary to say that after martial law was imposed in Ukraine, the country's lawmakers passed a bill that significantly increased the penalties for individuals convicted of collaboration with enemy forces. The new law raises the maximum prison sentence for collaboration from eight to 12 years and allows for the confiscation of property and assets belonging to collaborators. The legislation is aimed at strengthening Ukraine's legal framework for prosecuting individuals who work with foreign powers to undermine national security.

### **More needs to be done**

However, it has become evident that this is still not enough. In mid-2022, for instance, in Mykolaiv, the city's newly-renovated medical care building was almost destroyed early one morning. Mykolaiv's Mayor Oleksandr Senkevich revealed that this attack was arranged with the help of an "informer", who helped the Russians because his daughter was deprived of her right to study school subjects in Russian. However, the Russian language was only banned in local schools immediately after the invasion started.

In this sense, such attacks were typical from spring till late autumn of 2022, before Kherson's liberation, when the Russians launched those missiles. The most crucial part of such Russian tactics was the fact that Ukraine's air defence systems had not been strengthened enough and the air-alert system could not warn Ukrainians fast enough too. So, those "informers" played a big part in such attacks, which cost Mykolaiv, for example, around one billion US dollars at least in physical damage, not to mention people's lives.

Another example that also happened in Mykolaiv, which devastated many locals, was the arrest of a chair of the local funeral bureau during the local city council meeting. This man handed over to the enemy some data on the number of servicemen in the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the region, employees of law en-

forcement agencies, and lists of dead Ukrainian defenders. He also provided information about defence and fortification structures in the city. It appears that anonymous Telegram accounts were used to communicate and transmit intelligence information. Furthermore, it is clear that the narratives of “defending the Russian language” and, therefore, the population, is used to make Ukrainians cooperate with Russians and harm their cities and villages.

Third, speaking about Kherson, which Russians controlled for more than half a year, and for example, Mariupol, which the Russian occupiers almost destroyed, it is almost impossible to state how many cases of collaboration happened in those territories. What is more, it is also not possible to assess right now how many Ukrainians have been kidnapped and tortured on occupied lands. But Ukraine's liberation of territories has already revealed a lot of cases where people were helping the occupiers.

### **Russia attempts to recruit Ukrainians**

Another aspect of Russian efforts to gain an advantage in the war is the conscription of Ukrainians. Surprisingly or not, even after the war approached its first anniversary, some pro-Russia “activists” hoped to recruit people for the internationally sanctioned Wagner private military company. Ukraine's Security Service exposed a traitor in Vinnytsia, who recruited former prisoners for Wagner in the city. For joining the Russian criminal group and participating in hostilities against the Ukrainian military, the perpetrator offered each “recruit” a monetary reward of 2,000 to 4,000 US dollars per month. In Odesa, a city which Russians like to claim is Russian, as it is believed that the Russian language is very popular there, there have been some particular cases of betrayal too. The Security Service exposed another Federal Security Service agent during large-scale counter-subversive activities close to the seashore of the Odesa region. The perpetrator collected intelligence on the deployment and armament of the armed forces units in the southern region. First of all, he tried to identify the combat positions of the Ukrainian air defence near the Black Sea. In addition, the Russian agent recorded the results of enemy missile strikes on critical infrastructure, including the bridge across the Dniester estuary. This intelligence information benefited the occupiers as it helped them adjust their repeated air attacks on Ukrainian objects.

It may seem like the Russo-Ukrainian War has become a war of attrition, and in some western capitals, this may seem like something Russia favours. So, the efforts of Russian special agents may be intensifying. So far, Ukraine's special services and national police have been doing their best to identify and neutralise such

threats. It could be summarised that the brutal Russian war on Ukraine has proved that real propaganda and disinformation cost lives and that critical thinking and patriotism remain vital features of the civilised world.

In that regard, Ukraine's new minister of internal affairs, Ihor Klymeko, has demonstrated that he knows the risks regarding what can be called dangerous elements in those territories that Kyiv has recaptured with the true heroism of Ukrainian soldiers. On this subject, Klymenko noted that the Ministry of Internal Affairs carried out stabilisation measures for all of the people who lived in these territories. Together with the Security Service of Ukraine and the Prosecutor General's Office, they identify collaborators. According to him, Ukraine's public authorities know who held and organised "elections", who campaigned, who taught "Great Russian History" in schools, and who ultimately wanted to distort Ukraine. ~~EE~~

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# Hostile narratives towards Ukraine in Central and Eastern Europe

ADAM LELONEK

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Identifying, analysing and **countering foreign information interference** and manipulation is one of the biggest challenges that the West will face for the foreseeable future. While it may be considered late, a lot has been done in this field both at the EU and international level. However, as the results of recent IRI research show, the need for further action is still clear.

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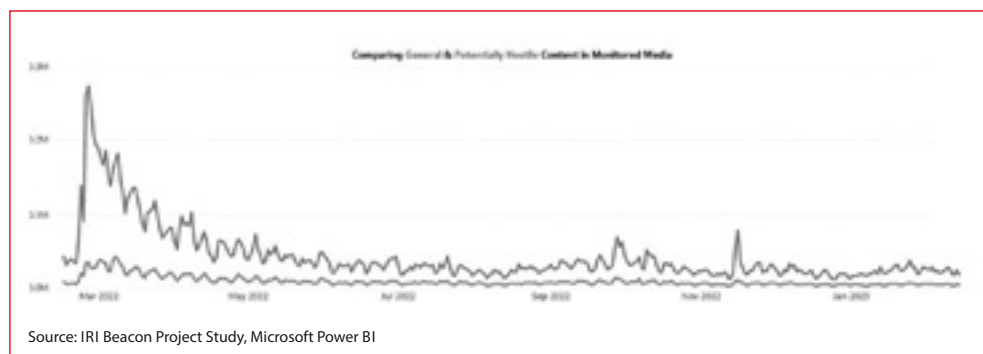
Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th 2022, the International Republican Institute (IRI)'s Beacon Project has been conducting analyses of online media data from multiple Central and Eastern European countries in order to track aspects of key narratives that have the potential to erode support for Ukraine. We have monitored trends in online media from websites, forums, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Reddit related to three primary topics: sanctions on Russia, refugees and NATO. For the period of winter we have added energy security. For a special report on the one-year anniversary of the invasion, we also included three other narratives: biolabs, "denazification" and potential nuclear war. The data was collected between February 2022 and February 2023.

Additionally, a dashboard to monitor the activity of the official Facebook pages of select Russian diplomatic missions has also been established to provide a broader view of potential disinformation hotspots. All these tools, alongside our partners' other project activities, allow us to have a unique insight into data

regarding information spaces in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as each country specifically.

### General overview for hostile messaging in the CEE region

When taking into consideration Bulgaria, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine, the timeline for general messaging and potentially hostile communications regarding all of the narratives combined is illustrated in the chart below. The data results have been automated, based on pre-selected keywords, built on a common template, but adapted for each country individually. A different set of keywords was selected to track the general conversation, and another to identify potentially hostile components.



Potentially hostile content published in these countries is on a slow, downward trajectory. However, it is clear that it is rather consistent. This means that there is also a systematic effort to spread certain kinds of messages. Taking into consideration the trends of the general conversations there are moments, especially in the “calmer” periods of less information intensity, when the percentage of potentially hostile content constitutes a larger part of the discourse in each country’s information space. The detailed country data is presented in the chart below.

From February 15th 2022 to February 14th 2023, the total number of mentions of the four monitored narratives in each country exceeded 18.64 million results. Out of them, the most mentions were seen in Germany (over 8.4 million), Poland (over 4.6 million), Ukraine (over 1.5 million) and Czechia (over 1.3 million), with similar results for Romania (830,000) and Slovakia (710,000). At the same time, the number of potentially hostile messages for each country was: Germany – 1.5 million, Poland – 823,000, Bulgaria – 214,000, Czechia – 183,000, Romania – 135,000 and Slovakia – 113,000. This shows that the countries with the largest percentage

of hostile messaging around those four metanarratives were: Bulgaria, Germany, Poland, Romania and Lithuania – with almost identical results for Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

When we look at the hostile component among the metanarratives, at the level of all of the region excluding Germany (as depicted in the chart below), the most prevalent potentially hostile narratives concerned: refugees – 23.86 per cent, sanctions (towards Russia) – 21 per cent, energy-related topics – 16.88 per cent, and NATO – 8.9 per cent. However, in terms of sheer volume, the most discussed topics were NATO, refugees and energy.

For the whole region, Twitter was the most popular platform to discuss these narratives, with over 5.57 million tweets. Second place belonged to online news sources and the third to Facebook, with almost one million

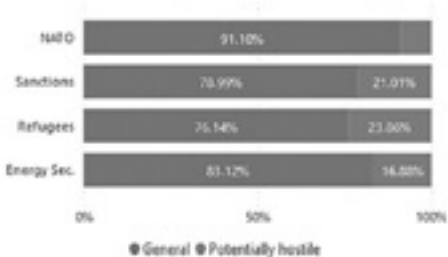
Distribution of posts by country and hostility



| country        | General              | Potentially hostile | Total                |
|----------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Germany        | 6,897,987.00         | 1,506,852.00        | 8,404,839.00         |
| Poland         | 3,838,162.00         | 823,417.00          | 4,661,579.00         |
| Ukraine        | 1,480,547.00         | 97,993.00           | 1,588,540.00         |
| Czech Republic | 1,138,964.00         | 183,353.00          | 1,321,917.00         |
| Romania        | 682,811.00           | 135,416.00          | 828,227.00           |
| Slovakia       | 673,128.00           | 113,803.00          | 786,931.00           |
| Bulgaria       | 497,871.00           | 214,390.00          | 712,261.00           |
| Lithuania      | 154,759.00           | 30,071.00           | 184,830.00           |
| Hungary        | 125,631.00           | 17,172.00           | 152,803.00           |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>15,519,460.00</b> | <b>3,122,467.00</b> | <b>18,641,927.00</b> |

Source: IRI Beacon Project Study, Microsoft Power BI

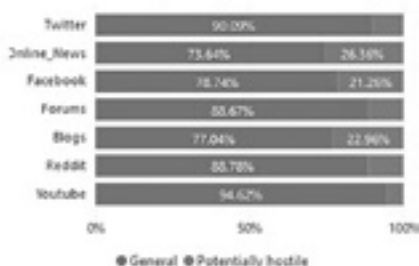
Distribution of posts by topic and hostility



| topic        | General             | Potentially hostile | Total                |
|--------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| NATO         | 3,898,835.00        | 380,664.00          | 4,279,499.00         |
| Sanctions    | 1,811,199.00        | 481,732.00          | 2,292,931.00         |
| Refugees     | 1,488,281.00        | 466,074.00          | 1,928,355.00         |
| Energy Sec.  | 1,443,158.00        | 293,145.00          | 1,736,303.00         |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>8,621,473.00</b> | <b>1,615,615.00</b> | <b>10,237,088.00</b> |

Source: IRI Beacon Project Study, Microsoft Power BI

Distribution of posts by source and hostility

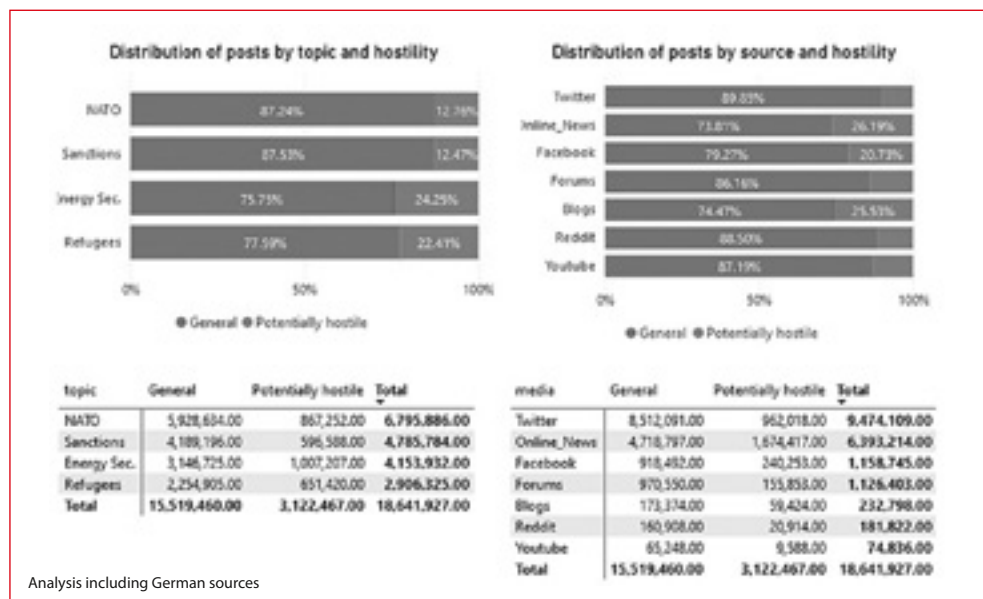


| media        | General             | Potentially hostile | Total                |
|--------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Twitter      | 5,022,535.00        | 552,790.00          | 5,575,325.00         |
| Online News  | 2,084,873.00        | 746,137.00          | 2,831,010.00         |
| Facebook     | 738,041.00          | 198,276.00          | 937,317.00           |
| Forums       | 583,470.00          | 74,525.00           | 657,995.00           |
| Blogs        | 116,086.00          | 34,774.00           | 151,460.00           |
| Reddit       | 54,626.00           | 6,906.00            | 61,532.00            |
| Youtube      | 21,242.00           | 1,297.00            | 22,449.00            |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>8,621,473.00</b> | <b>1,615,615.00</b> | <b>10,237,088.00</b> |

posts. Forums, blogs, Reddit and YouTube were less popular. Across the whole region, news sources online contained the largest per cent of hostile content – almost 24 per cent. At the same time, blogs, while being less significant, were the second most hostile information source, with almost 20 per cent of potentially hostile content. The Twitter case is rather unique, since in most of the monitored countries it is not that significant. Facebook is the only major platform that is influential across the whole region. In countries like Bulgaria, Romania or Slovakia, Twitter plays a marginal role and there is a significantly smaller presence among the general public there.

For comparison, the number of Twitter posts in Bulgaria was 34,292 out of 712,261 pieces of online content in total, while in Poland, where Twitter is much more popular, there were 3,423,254 tweets out of 4,661,579 pieces in total. That is why discussions on Twitter in such countries are in most cases dominated by mainstream and official actors, thus influencing the proportions between hostile and general messaging. In other words, looking only at the Twitter data to analyse the situation may disrupt the true scale and the general picture of information threats in these countries.

However, if we include Germany in the dataset, the proportions change significantly. The most potentially hostile narratives are then related to energy security. Topics on refugees fall to second place and anti-NATO communication surpasses that about sanctions. The data shows that in the German information space alone, there were over three million results related to the energy security topic.



## Response to information threats in Bulgaria, Poland and Romania

The IRI Beacon Project cooperates with partners in Bulgaria, Poland and Romania on countering Russian disinformation by establishing foundations for creating task forces, comprised of state and civil society actors. The project was founded by USAID. Looking from a broader, European perspective, the European Union has also started its multi-dimensional approach to disinformation since 2018. While it may be considered late, a lot has been done in this field both at the EU and international level, as well as on the individual country level. However, the need for further action is still clear.

Identifying, analysing and countering foreign information interference and manipulation will be one of the biggest challenges facing the West for the foreseeable future. At the same time, there are internal actors creating, disseminating and/or amplifying messaging coinciding with Russian propaganda and disinformation. That only increases the required range of tools at the country and international level.

The research from the past year concludes that the three countries of Bulgaria, Romania and Poland have several features in common. First, all three countries need to work on strategic communication for their internal and external audiences. Digital infrastructures and legal frameworks also need to be adapted to the current circumstances of the war. Governments should focus on solutions that are flexible and include civil society. Moreover, the three states have yet to define responsibilities in terms of dealing with information threats at all administrative levels, from the local to central authorities. Similarly, the administrative structures in all three countries are not using their full potential, while institutional capacity needs to be properly assessed, strengthened and developed.

At the same time, there is not enough collaboration between state institutions themselves or with civil society organisations. Governments should find ways to enhance the existing, alongside new, networks of information exchange at the country level (within the administration, but also between the state and civil society). Work is also needed here at the regional and international levels. Finally, integrating media and digital literacy components at all levels of the national education systems should be a top priority.

## Danger from the inside

According to the Facebook data analysed by those working with the IRI Beacon Project, the largest percentage of hostile narratives about Ukraine could be seen in Bulgaria, Czechia, Slovakia and Romania, with Poland being a complete

outlier. Although it does not necessarily reflect the full scope of the trends in the information space for each country, the research does illustrate that potential exists for disruptions and radicalisation. This is especially true when taking into account possible future elections and the populist rhetoric that might be employed. As for geopolitical views present in Facebook sources, the biggest problems can be seen in Bulgaria (37 per cent pro-Russia), the Czech Republic (16 per cent anti-West), Ukraine (26 per cent nationalistic), Slovakia (11 per cent pro-Russian) and Germany (18 per cent pro-Russian). Once again, Poland has a unique information space environment with only 1.6 per cent anti-western, ten per cent nationalistic, and 1.21 per cent pro-Russian sources.

The nationalistic component is particularly demanding. In most of the countries researched, the dominant part of the hostile messaging undermining support for Ukraine comes from internal actors, especially highly ideological media outlets and right-wing, especially far-right, actors. Both of them being the main creators and amplifiers of hostile narratives is one of the few things the whole region has in common in terms of anti-Ukrainian, pro-Russian and/or anti-western content. This includes the use of conspiracy theories and/or populist and divisive rhetoric that too often coincides directly with Russian messaging, disinformation and propaganda.

Despite not being currently analysed in the research, Telegram is one of the most prominent channels for the dissemination of Russian propaganda and disinformation. Most of the media monitoring tools currently do not have the ability to monitor Telegram. However, less automated monitoring is now being conducted by a growing number of entities in the region and globally (since Russia is using both Telegram and WhatsApp in other regions, like South America, India or Asia). A uniquely demanding information environment in this regard is clear in Ukraine, where circumstances surrounding the full-scale war may only facilitate the further proliferation of certain messaging.

The complicated situation on the ground leads to language radicalisation and there is a serious threat that some form of anti-western conspiratorial discourse might have the potential to grow over time in the Ukrainian mainstream. Despite Ukrainians overwhelmingly opposing Russia and supporting the pro-western political vector, there are actors accusing western elites of not being decisive enough and not providing enough support. If this type of narrative takes root and grows, then this would have serious consequences not only for Ukraine, but potentially for its allies in NATO and the EU.

There is a **threat** that some form of anti-western conspiratorial discourse might grow over time in the Ukrainian mainstream.

Taking all the available data into consideration, it seems that Bulgarian and Slovak citizens are some of the most vulnerable to Russian disinformation and propaganda. At the same time, there is potential to use different hostile narratives in every country in the region. One of the biggest challenges in this field will be how to deal with populist and highly ideological rhetoric and actors. Priority needs to be given to creating legal frameworks and capacity-building for countering information threats. Finally, a more effective strategy would be avoiding the monopolisation of countering disinformation efforts by the secret services, especially the military, and engaging with societal organisations at local, regional and international levels. ~~EE~~

Adam Lelonek is a CEE regional coordinator at the International Republican Institute's Beacon Project.

# The constant struggle of building resilience

## The case of Czechia

PAVEL HAVLÍČEK

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While in the region Czechia can be considered a positive case in resisting authoritarian influence, it has been far from perfect, especially when considering its recent turbulence. Nevertheless, there are now a lot of practices **countering malign influence** – including that of China – in Czechia that could serve as examples for both the region and the wider EU.

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Since February 24th 2022, the whole of Europe and the world have been witnessing a new phase in the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which has reshaped the European – and to a large extent also the global – security order. Issues such as the shelling of Ukraine’s nuclear power plant in Zaporizhzhia, often described as “nuclear blackmail”, frightened the global community into fearing a repeat of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe in the Soviet Union. Now, it is Russia that has become the new rogue state and global pariah, isolated and sanctioned by most of the civilised world.

Yet, at the same time, other countries – including prominent global powers such as the People’s Republic of China, Iran or India – have remained more ambivalent on the conflict. This is either due to their own economy, energy dependency and ties, or due to ideological reasons and hatred of the West. This has been demonstrated by some countries that have backed Russia’s position during UN resolutions and refuted the aggression against Ukraine.

## Testing ground

As a reaction to the ongoing terror against the civilian population of Ukraine, the European Union has already imposed ten sanctions packages. Russia has lost its control over energy pricing and access to western markets for most of its goods. It has also been cut off from technologies and so-called “dual-use goods” that could be used in its war against Ukraine. At the same time, Russian propaganda sites have been temporarily banned in the EU information space, bringing an end to the reach of platforms like RT (Russia Today) or Sputnik.

However, these severe measures have not directly affected the Chinese malign information and influence operations that have substantially grown in number over the past year. To achieve this, China made substantial use of its embassies and diplomatic presence in the West, as well as the social media of various proxies and other like-minded groups often recruited from traditionally pro-Kremlin outlets. Beijing has also benefitted from previously established channels that it has systematically cultivated and used for shaping the narrative on China.

Czechia is a case in point in the Central and Eastern European context. Now a country with one of the highest levels of societal resilience regarding both Chinese and foreign malign influence in general, the Czech Republic was in many respects a testing ground for Moscow and Beijing’s influence operations over the past few decades.

Also thanks to elite capture, Russia and China found some prominent allies who have given them privileged access to some media sources. TV Barrandov is a prominent example of a media group which promotes certain narratives friendly to China. Naturally, it has been proven that specific investments into this group were made by China. This was even more the case when pro-Beijing narratives on sensitive topics – such as relations with Taiwan, protests in Hong Kong or the situation of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang – started to appear more often among fringe or less known media, primarily in the online space but also among radio stations. The Chinese intervention in the Czech media ecosystem and the localisation of friendly information coverage (so-called information laundering) have been gradual. However, they have to an extent made an impact on public attitudes towards the PRC over the last decade.

Research carried out by the Association for International Affairs’ MapInfluenCE project revealed that between 2019 and 2021 the coverage of China in traditionally more pro-Russian media sources has been highly manipulative. Despite the fact that China was in a majority of cases presented neutrally, three prominent fringe websites, including Russia’s Sputnik CZ, Aeronet and Parliamentary Post (*Parlamentní listy*), used a number of techniques to disguise pro-Chinese sentiments.

For example, they attributed these ideas to nominally neutral speakers, Czech politicians or other public figures and media representatives.

In a number of cases, often with content from foreign language sources, changes were made to headlines based on traditional clickbait logic or misleading quotes. Czech readers can find this information hard to verify due to the dubious sources of these pro-Beijing narratives.

The fringe sites made frequent use of Chinese experts, officials and representatives of public institutions, most notably the ministries of foreign affairs and defence. They even quoted Chinese politicians directly, even if they were introduced in a neutral manner in the articles. At the same time, the local context and/or the European perspective was too often deliberately omitted.

All of these manipulations were present in a high number of studied cases. This documents the systemic level of infiltration in fringe online media sites, which gradually incorporated topics about China and subsequently became mouthpieces for Beijing propaganda. For example, this could be seen in exclusive interviews with the Chinese ambassador to Prague over a relatively short period of time.

Similar tendencies have been visible across the wider region, not only in neighbouring Slovakia, which has a closely related language and hence also a high level of permeability in the information space. Coordinated efforts to influence certain topics, including perceptions of NATO, have been present in a number of states in the region, where official Chinese channels have even compared NATO to “Voldemort”, the villain in the Harry Potter series. This fact illustrates the profound need to invest more in better understanding Russian and Chinese activities and these countries’ attempts to interfere in the EU’s domestic affairs. The region of Central and Eastern Europe has some first-hand experience with Chinese malign behaviour which could serve as a lesson for the western part of Europe, which has often overlooked the real impact of long-term Chinese influence.

Research has found that the coverage of China in traditionally more pro-Russian Czech media sources has been highly manipulative.

### **Building up resilience**

What is needed right now is a much more comprehensive and common understanding of the potential threat coming from China and how to face it, as suggested by the Strategic Compass of the EU. At a time of war and growing partnership



Photo: Salma Bashir Motiwala / Shutterstock

At a time of war and growing partnership between Moscow and Beijing, the need for a stronger and united position in the EU cannot be more urgent.

between Moscow and Beijing, the need for a stronger and united position in the EU cannot be more urgent.

Even if Czechia has proved that its society is capable of dealing with foreign malign operations and most attempts to influence public discourse from abroad, the picture is much blurrier in the domestic realm. This is typical when it comes to a complex and diverse ecosystem of disinformation sites well known for their anti-systemic nature. Hence, there is still much to be done in terms of building up a coordinated response, closing multiple loopholes abused by those behind disinformation, and promoting trustworthy public communication and a resilient information sphere.

The challenges faced by Czech society are immense but not unique, as shown by the 2021 Disinformation Resilience Index. This study compared ten countries in Central and Eastern Europe and found that most of the CEE countries suffered from weak cooperation between the state and society, including independent media and the civil society sector. Also, the legal and institutional capacity of the state has been identified as weak or generally problematic. Overall, there appeared to be insufficient funding and manpower to run these states in an effective manner.

Thus, it is necessary to finally apply a “whole-of-society” approach and promote much closer cooperation between the state, civil society and independent media. This would not only help the response to crisis situations, but also limit the space for distorted interpretations of events that could be mutually clashing and undermine trust in the system.

While in the regional context Czechia can be considered a positive case, it has been far from perfect, especially when considering recent turbulence in the system of strategic communication. However, the government has clearly spoken out in favour of working harder to counter disinformation and promote the state’s capacity to act. Indeed, there are still a lot of positive practices, such as the demonetisation of disinformation and taking the first steps towards a coordinated state system of strategic communication. This is supported by a strong and active civil society sector, public media broadcaster and independent media, which promote trustworthy content and counter the worst cases of manipulation and disinformation both offline and online in Czech public discourse.

Last but not least, Czechs, like other V4 societies, could benefit from their EU and NATO membership. This could help deliver an additional boost to the agenda, as well as empower cooperation and exchange with social media platforms. Such sites have been identified as a weak link in the whole information ecosystem of the region.

While there are still many problems and challenges, not only for Czechia but the wider region, the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine and the West has helped to promote the fight against disinformation and foreign malign influence. These issues have found a place higher on the agenda and allowed for more investment and new steps in closing disinformation loopholes. Even though we are still far from efficiently countering the problem, some steps have been made to create a more resilient information ecosystem not only in Czechia but in the EU and NATO as a whole. ~~EE~~

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# Russian propaganda in Poland in the context of parliamentary elections

MICHAŁ MAREK

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De facto pro-Russian communities are clearly consolidating in the context of the **upcoming Polish parliamentary elections**. The groups in question are made up of people who have contacts with entities linked to the Russian state. We can assume that the Russian Federation not only supports such groups through the Polish-language sources it runs, but also has influence on the activity of some of the people operating within these communities.

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By mid-2022, the first activities of those promoting pro-Russian statements in the Polish information sphere were clearly perceptible, indicating the growing consolidation of a broad pro-Russian community with political ambitions. The start of 2023, especially the first weeks of the year, only further showed this to be the trend. At that time, there was an intensification of the so-called “grassroots” initiatives, the culmination of which was the announcement of a billboard campaign and a series of meetings under the slogan “This is not our war”. This campaign was led by Leszek Sykulski, a political scientist and historian who founded the “Polish anti-war movement” earlier this year.

As part of these efforts, greater cooperation began between individuals supporting the Kremlin’s message, and those who had previously only occasionally conducted joint initiatives in the Polish infosphere. At the same time, the be-

ginning of 2023 was the moment when these de facto pro-Russian groups clearly articulated their information agenda, which boiled down to themes such as the fight against the “Ukrainisation” and “Americanisation” of Poland and a fight in the name of “peace”. In other words, these groups are lobbying for the suspension of Poland’s support for Ukraine.

### **New activities, old personalities**

Through their activities, de facto pro-Russian groups (officially dissociating themselves from Russia) seek to inspire Polish opposition to Warsaw’s continued support for Ukraine (especially support in the form of military equipment) and opposition to close cooperation with the United States and its NATO allies. These groups have demanded a so-called “deep reform” of the Polish state services – a de facto dismantling of the Polish secret services during a critical moment given the ongoing war in a neighbouring country. They have also stressed the need for Polish citizens to carry out grassroots resistance initiatives.

These concepts and demands basically call for actions of a political nature. Their aim is to convince the largest possible number of citizens that the ruling political party, as well as the other pro-western parties in the opposition, are pursuing a “harmful/anti-Polish/traitorous” policy and that the only alternative (a chance to avoid the “destruction/tragedy” of the war) for Poles is to support the political initiatives of the country’s de facto pro-Russian groups.

The efforts by Sykulski, together with other figures like Sebastian Pitoń (a controversial figure who gained prominence with his opposition to COVID-19 restrictions) and Piotr Panasiuk (known for his anti-Ukrainian discourse), are examples of the growing consolidation within these communities. The joint meetings organised as part of Sykulski’s anti-war initiative clearly indicated the existence of a link between the individuals in question. The meetings they organised included propaganda and disinformation narratives coinciding with the Kremlin’s objectives, such as blaming NATO for the outbreak of the war in Ukraine or portraying the Polish government as seeking to draw Poland into a war with Russia. Their influence online via portals like YouTube and Twitter helped spread these pro-Kremlin narratives as well.

It is worth noting at this point that Sykulski appears to be the leader of one of the pro-Russian circles (for many years he positioned himself as a serious expert and academic, which gave some credibility to his beliefs until he embraced the most radical propaganda narratives). After all, figures such as Panasiuk seem to focus their activities on supporting Sykulski. Generally, these activities take place

largely on social media (mostly Twitter) and take the form of sharing narratives copied from Russian propaganda Telegram channels. These subsequently infect the Polish infosphere with the most radical disinformation messages. Moreover, the people associated with this group try to discredit those who call out their pro-Kremlin views, claiming alleged links to Ukrainian state services. The narrative of “Bandera agents” has existed for many years on Polish social media and is now an integral part of the activities of networks of anonymous pro-Russian accounts present on social networks.

Panasiuk’s social media, for example, is not limited to the repeated promotion of Polish-language discourse and posts from Russian disinformation sources. Sometimes these posts are translated directly from Russian. Panasiuk also promotes with particular vigour posts published by other known pro-Russian accounts. For example, the account of Martin Demirov. Demirov is an online figure who conducts similar activity on Polish Twitter that sometimes resembles the activities of internet trolls. It is possible that these individuals run networks of anonymous accounts operating on social networks, or that their accounts are part of networks coordinated by a single centre. However, there is no direct evidence of this. The second option seems more likely. In addition, Demirov supports the disinformation activities of Panasiuk and Sykulski by broadcasting Polish-language posts, even though he claims he is not a citizen of the Republic of Poland. The *modus operandi* of these accounts is remarkably similar, giving the impression that their activity may be coordinated. These accounts support each other and promote pure disinformation messages.

### Signs of consolidation

Parallel to this group, there is also another circle of de facto pro-Russian activists in Poland who over the years have been associated with, among others, the *Zmiana* (Change) political party, the Polish-language editorial board of the Russian portal *Sputnik*, or the *Myśl Polska* (Polish Thought) portal. One of the most active individuals within these groups is Mateusz Piskorski – a person permanently involved in promoting content that resembles Russian propaganda messaging in the Polish information sphere. In 2016, he was detained by the Polish security services on suspicion of engaging in espionage for Russia. He was released on bail in 2019. Piskorski gives interviews on a regular basis to Russian-language media involved in disinformation.

It is worth noting that while *Myśl Polska*, a portal which regularly promotes pro-Russian narratives, is still active in Poland, the *Sputnik* portal has been shut

down. Nevertheless, people associated with this portal continue their pro-Russian activities by running channels on YouTube.

Thus, we have two leading groups in Poland, which basically carry out activities pursuing the Kremlin's goals. There are, however, signals indicating the consolidation of these groups. One example is the debate between Sykulski and Jarosław Augustyniak (one of the leaders of the *Zmiana* party and a contributor to *Sputnik*), which involved both sides introducing pro-Russian narratives to the discussion.

Another example involves the publications that appeared in the February 2023 issue of *Mysł Polska*, and were authored by Piotr Panasiuk. However, an analysis of the writing casts doubt over this theory. In my opinion, there are fundamental differences between his social media posts and public statements and the way in which thoughts are expressed in these particular articles.

Yet, it should be understood that even if Panasiuk is not the author of the texts in question, he must have given his consent for them to be published under his name. This indicates a gradual fusion of the groups in question or the existence of an entity/person coordinating the activity of these groups. Hence, it is highly likely that in the context of the upcoming parliamentary elections, these groups will undertake more joint initiatives.

It is likely that in the context of upcoming elections in Poland, pro-Russian groups will undertake more joint initiatives.

## Influencers

In addition to these aforementioned circles permanently involved in echoing Russian disinformation, Polish citizens are also influenced by a number of “influencers” and media commentators, whose controversial views often contain pro-Kremlin messages. On the one hand, there is a mobilisation of the so-called independent bloggers who, branding themselves as “alternative sources of information” in order to maintain credibility among their audience, deliberately distort reality so that their message differs from that broadcast by the mainstream media. By broadcasting controversial content (for example, a conspiracy theory) that is diametrically opposed to the messages of traditional media, they capture the attention of the audience. Thus, they are able to use “flashy slogans” and emotive content to strengthen their media position and at the same time make money on social networks.

This type of activity often boils down to promoting unconscious misinformation among citizens, with these influencers driven by ambition and the belief that

they have the right to express any opinion they wish without taking any responsibility for their actions. A key factor influencing the content produced by such influencers/commentators is the need to maintain a fundamental difference in messaging between their content and that of leading media. As far as the issue of the war in Ukraine is concerned, this usually results in points of view that, either directly or indirectly, present an alternative to those already existing in the Polish and western media.

This is one of the reasons why the notion “during war the truth dies first” is promoted by such individuals. This relativises the fact that Russia caused the war and equates the executioner with the victim. Of course, NATO is often viewed as complicit in the war. The messages spread coincide with Russian narratives and are actively distributed by authors of YouTube channels, alternative portals and the so-called influencers who, until February 24th 2022, focused on denying the existence of COVID-19 and promoting the supposed health threat posed by 5G technology. Generally, they support the Russian message to justify the very point of their existence in the media: to present a different vision of reality that is “true” and “uncensored”.

The main groups undertaking these activities are Sykulski and his entourage, as well as the group associated with the *Zmiana* party and *Myśl Polska*. There are at

A number of  
“influencers” and  
media commentators,  
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messages, try to gain  
popularity in Poland.

least two other types of individuals who permanently put forward such messages echoing Russian propaganda. These are those who intentionally or unintentionally disinform for the purpose of financial gain (in the absence of links to the Russian Federation), and those who spread Russian propaganda unconsciously (or consciously) for reasons of political ambition.

It is worth bearing in mind, however, that the “independent bloggers” and “opportunists” in question may in the future become objects of interest for Russian state services, which may transform the motives behind their harmful activities.

Nevertheless, there is one message that is common to all the aforementioned groups disinforming the Polish public and spreading Russian propaganda. This message is the need to “fight for freedom of speech” and “fight against censorship”. These individuals share a common interest – in the event that the Polish state engages in a more active fight against Russian disinformation, these individuals will have to limit or suspend their activities, which will result in a deterioration of their financial status and unmet political ambitions. These personal factors encourage

a serious proportion of such “disinformers” to carry out their activities and shape their message as appropriate.

### Upcoming elections

De facto pro-Russian communities are clearly consolidating in the context of the upcoming Polish parliamentary elections. The groups in question are made up of people who have contacts with entities linked to the Russian state. We can assume that the Russian Federation not only supports them through the Polish-language sources it runs (e.g. Telegram channels, which are, among other things, a form of trend-setting – providing guidelines on current messages), but also has influence on the activity of some of the people operating within these groups.

Currently, the greatest risk is related to the Russian attempt to foster resentment towards Ukrainians and Ukraine in Poland, which is expected to result in a reduction of support for Kyiv, and the risk that people associated with pro-Russian groups may enter the Polish public sphere. In my opinion, there will be attempts by people building their political potential directly on pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian and anti-American propaganda to get into the Polish parliament in the autumn.

If this succeeds, the Russians will have a completely new medium for building influence over Polish citizens. However, it should be emphasised at this point that the pro-Russian activity of these groups is encountering growing resistance among the public. This is indicative of growing popular awareness of the importance of information security. The campaign to restrict the possibility of such groups conducting meetings, and the small number of people attending such meetings, is a good sign that our society will resist the intensification of activities by these groups. ~~EE~~

Michał Marek, PhD, is the founder of the Contemporary Security Environment Research Centre Foundation. He is a scholar of Ukrainian studies and an expert on countering disinformation.

# Disinformation can be tackled through everyday habits

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A conversation with Agnieszka Legucka, an analyst  
with the Polish Institute of International Affairs.

Interviewer: Maciej Makulski

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**MACIEJ MAKULSKI:** Do you see a qualitative difference in Russia's information war strategy in recent times, especially since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine? Or is it rather more of the same?

**AGNIESZKA LEGUCKA:** We are definitely in an information war. On the one hand Russia has been challenged by several blockades, especially in the European Union, of its so-called media like RT, Sputnik, or *60 минут* (60 minutes, a TV show broadcasted on the state-owned Channel One Russia – editor's note). On the other hand, Russia has adapted to this new situation by moving to the “underground”, as seen through closed Facebook groups. Russian trolls have started to be much more active in several different countries. There is evidence that the trolls are very active in countries such as Hungary and Germany, which might be seen as weak spots.

How can we see the impact of the Russian trolls on those societies?

Opinion polls show that people tend to believe in conspiracy theories, such as that Ukrainians are the US's puppets. Information that sanctions on Russia allegedly do not have an impact on Russia is also spread widely in those countries and finds fertile ground among people there. Another aspect showing Russia's adaptation to the new reality is the role of China. After the invasion of Ukraine, China has helped Russia to spread misleading messages and narratives. Interestingly, during the pandemic it was the other way round – it was Russia that helped China to amplify messages about US-owned labs in Ukraine that spread the virus. The two countries changed their roles now. But this type of spreading of false information is not limited to the activity of trolls on social

media, but it has been also present in international debate, even during UN Security Council meetings.

**In this second case, who is the target audience?**

It is a diverse audience. This official state level does not appeal to the hearts and minds of Europeans or Americans, but mainly the countries of the Global South.

**Speaking about the West, one of the main issues for years has been different perceptions of Russia as a threat. Do you see the chance to overcome this now, or is it still a prevailing issue when it comes to the western reaction to Russia and its hostile activity online?**

There are still different approaches to Russia because there are different understandings of Russian threats. The divisions are clear between, on the one hand, Poland and the Baltic states and, on the other hand, Hungary or even Slovakia who, historically speaking, possess a different experience regarding relations with Russia. Therefore, opinion polls show much warmer attitudes towards Russia. Even regarding the war in Ukraine the perceptions are different. And of course, these perceptions differ also in countries like Germany or France. But even if we see these differences, the war in Ukraine has shown that these perceptions were so far beyond logic and rationality that the conflict was a huge shock for the whole western world. From my perspective, there is no way to



return to business as usual with Russia and what we had observed before the invasion. Russian actions are essentially decoupling the country from the West, not only in terms of economic or energy relations but also in terms of the digital information bubble. But I would also point out that from our perspective it is important to think about how we can influence Russian society, because it is becoming much more difficult than it was ever before.

**Do you see any way to influence Russian society?**

The only available channel we have – and it is also becoming very limited – is YouTube. Since the invasion started, Russians have been forced to use VPNs to somehow circumvent restrictions that the Russian authorities imposed (for example, they blocked Twitter and Instagram). YouTube seems to be the only bond left between the West and Russia

in the infosphere. Therefore, it is starting to look like we, as societies, live on two different planets. And it is important to bear in mind that at some point we will not understand each other.

**You described Russia's adaptation to this changing reality. Is the West adapting too?**

I see evolution regarding the approach of the European Union, which can be traced back at least to 2015, after Russia attacked Ukraine for the first time and when the EU established the East Stratcom Task Force focused exclusively on fighting Russian disinformation (FIMI, Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference). After Brexit, when Russia started to influence internal state affairs like the US elections or protests in Catalonia, the EU understood that Russia is a long-term threat to internal processes inside the EU. In 2018, the EU initiated an Action Plan against Disinformation and the team East Stratcom Task Force has grown as well. After the pandemic the EU understood that European External Action Service researchers need to also malign activity of other actors, including China. The activity of this project does not end with research but it also encompasses recommendations and training for people on how to strengthen the resilience of societies against disinformation inside the EU, as well as in the Eastern Partnership countries. This last aspect is very important because the EU is trying to share good practice with countries outside the bloc, and at the same time learn from those

countries, especially Ukraine, which possess a lot of experience concerning these battlefield realities. Of course, Ukraine has been very successful in fighting Russian disinformation and Russia's information war.

**Indeed, Ukraine has gone through many steps much earlier than other countries...**

Ukraine has been on the front lines of the cyber-battlefield and was the first in blocking Vkontakte (Russian social media) and other Russian platforms and channels used for propaganda purposes. I still remember discussions in which people asked why Ukrainians are imposing these blockades, arguing it is not a democratic measure. But now everyone understands that there are no other options – Russian channels and platforms are not media by any means, but instruments in the information warfare.

**Let's talk about the countermeasures to the information war. What is the best way to strengthen social resilience?**

There is no silver bullet that will resolve all the problems related to resilience. Resilience itself is a nice buzzword but everything it embraces like education, codes of conduct, good practices, cyber hygiene and fact-checking needs to be adopted by countries and spread throughout societies. This is the most difficult part.

**Why is it so difficult?**

Positive messages are difficult to spread. Disinformation spreads quick-

ly because it is built on negative emotions. Messages based on emotions appeal to us more effectively than, for instance, fact-based information without any emotional component.

**A fact-checked message never reaches the same audience as a misleading message does...**

Exactly, this negative information is much more clickable and the truth is perceived as boring.

**That does not sound so encouraging...**

I always argue that no one wants to be manipulated. We can put it in the context of an election in any country. I want to be sure that a man or a woman who represents me was chosen by me and that my choice was not manipulated by someone else. That is the kind of motivation that I have to fight propagandistic messages. I also compare fighting disinformation with a diet.

**In what way?**

We can look at what we see and watch on social media in the same way as different products we consume. If we consume rubbish food, it does not make us healthier or thinner. So disinformation is like rubbish food. We need to think that consuming it is not good for us. So, to stay healthy we need to be careful regarding what we consume and what we share on social media.

**What other practices are effective?**

I think the most effective resilience occurs in those societies in which critical thinking exists. It means – and research confirms that – the higher your readership the higher level of critical thinking among citizens you have. So, it is not only about how much training you conduct to inoculate people against disinformation. It is also about how many books you read. So it is about basic habits and general education. ~~EE~~

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Maciej Makulski is a contributing editor with *New Eastern Europe*.

# Nagorno-Karabakh

## No clear path out of the crisis

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An interview with **Thomas de Waal**,  
a senior fellow at Carnegie Europe. Interviewers:  
Adam Reichardt and Agnieszka Widłaszewska

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**ADAM REICHARDT:** Before we go into the most recent developments, I would like to start with a brief summary and reminder of how we got to the current situation surrounding the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh. What is the essence that lies behind this dispute?

**THOMAS DE WAAL:** This conflict is the oldest ethnic and territorial conflict from the late Soviet era which began in 1988. In fact, its roots lie in the early 20th century when the South Caucasus was a part of the Russian Empire, which was not wholly divided along ethnic lines. The highlands of Karabakh, a beautiful region which is geographically a part of Azerbaijan, had a centuries-long, Armenian majority population, with Armenian monuments and churches. It is in fact quite an important place for Armenians, but also plays an important role for Azerbaijan. The region is very much within Azerbaijan economically, geographically and also has

an important Azerbaijani town right in the middle of it called Shusha. Generally speaking, it was a place where during the Russian Empire or Soviet times, the Armenians and Azerbaijanis coped more or less together under Russian rule. Both in 1918 and in 1988, as soon as imperial rule was weakened, the two sides began to fight for control of this region. In 1988 the Karabakh Armenians tried to vote to secede from Soviet Azerbaijan and join Soviet Armenia. Then a kind of low level inter-Soviet civil war erupted between the two sides, leading to full scale war in 1991. That war lasted for three years and 20,000 people died. The Armenian side won a military victory, more than a million were displaced, mostly on the Azerbaijani side, and for years Azerbaijan had to put up with Armenian occupation of a fair chunk of its territory. In 2022 Azerbaijan, fuelled by oil wealth and Turkish weapons, went back to war and inflicted a humiliating

military defeat on the Armenians in just six weeks. After nearly three decades of Armenian dominance, the situation suddenly flipped into one of Azerbaijani dominance. For two years, it has been the Azerbaijanis who have been dictating to the Armenians and this is the new context in which this very old dispute is now situated.

**AR:** The ceasefire that was negotiated in 2020 was Russian-led, even though there is an official OSCE Minsk Group which is meant to mediate the conflict. It seems that Russia had really taken a lead role in terms of mediating. Is this because Russia has close ties with Armenia or is it more related to Russia trying to maintain some sort of influence in the region?

Well Russia has been traditionally the most active mediator even when there was the Minsk Group co-chairmanship with the United States and France. In 2020 Russia was the party which was ready instantly to commit boots on the ground, putting Russian peacekeepers in Karabakh. This obviously fitted the Russian agenda, but it also stopped the war from spreading into an even more dangerous phase with a direct conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. But having said that, Russia is no longer the only or indeed the main mediator. Since 2021 the European Union has stepped in as a mediator in many ways, more of a facilitator, facilitating contacts between the two sides. So, we have these parallel tracks with the Russians, who obviously have their own agenda both in Arme-

nia and Azerbaijan, and the EU being a facilitator that is more trusted by both sides. Obviously, the EU has an agenda as well, but by no means is it such an aggressive one as the Russians. However, there have been no negotiations since December 2022 since this new crisis with the Azerbaijanis blocking access to Karabakh, so at the moment there are no negotiations to speak of since then.

**AGNIESZKA WIDŁASZEWSKA:** This blockade of the so-called Lachin Corridor, as you said, began in December 2022. The official narrative from the Azerbaijani side, at least, is that there is a group of Azerbaijani citizens who claim to be environmental activists and they blocked the route, which is the only route linking Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, because they are accusing Nagorno-Karabakh of illegal and strongly polluting mining activities in the region. Are there any grounds for these environmental claims? And what might be the other reasons for this blockade?

First of all, that claim is highly dubious. Azerbaijan is basically an autocracy, it does not have a civil society which goes out and protests freely, so these are clearly government-sponsored protesters blocking the road. This does, however, give the Azerbaijani government an element of deniability and an element of manoeuvrability to use these so-called activists, rather than military forces, which would involve also a direct face-to-face confrontation with Russian peacekeepers. This was a clever way to close this road, the only road that links Karabakh

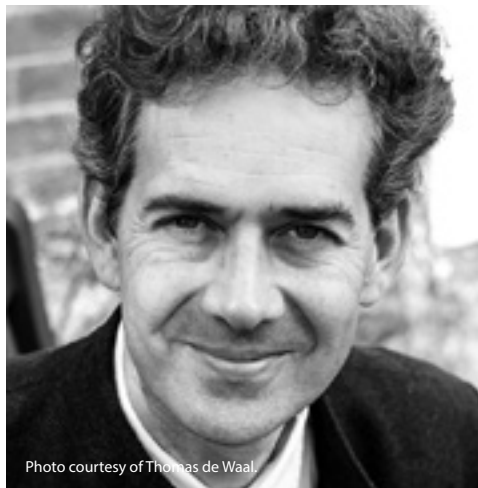


Photo courtesy of Thomas de Waal.

Armenians to Armenia. The Azerbaijanis do have some fairly plausible and serious allegations, about what that road is being used for. There have been some fairly serious claims that land mines have been transported on that road for the Armenians to lay. There has been very little transparency about who or what goes into Karabakh and certainly Azerbaijan is concerned that there is basically a little local army there, which has been there for more than 25 years and it is not disarmed. Hence, the road can be used to resupply the army. We cannot verify that, but no one can really verify it because the only people who have been checking the road are the Russian peacekeepers. Having said that, by blocking the road, Azerbaijan is creating a serious humanitarian issue for the tens of thousands of Armenians in Karabakh. Schools and kindergartens have closed, fresh food has pretty much run out and there were major disruptions in the gas supply during the winter months. The

local Armenians fear that this is a prelude to an Azerbaijani attempt to fully drive them all out of their homeland.

**AW:** You already mentioned the practical effects of the blockade on the inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh. You also mentioned the Russian peacekeepers, as well as the Azerbaijani activists. Presumably there are forces on the Nagorno-Karabakh side. What is the military setup there?

There was a deadly clash recently in which three Armenians and two Azerbaijanis were killed, so there are Azerbaijani and Armenian forces around. But I think the main actors are the Russian peacekeepers, and this is where the big debate is: are they unwilling or unable – or a bit of both – to reopen the road? No written mandate was ever agreed upon with Azerbaijan, so they are obviously not going to forcibly disperse civilian protestors to reopen the road. At the same time, Armenians are saying that Moscow is deliberately using the crisis to put pressure on them. The Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is a bit too western-looking at the moment and he needs to be reminded who his main ally is. Even Belarus's Alyaksandr Lukashenka said that Armenia should join the Union State with Belarus and Russia. My guess is that the Russians are simply too distracted and too weak to react. They do not have professional officers in Karabakh since most have already been redeployed to Ukraine. At the same time, Moscow does not want to pick a fight with Azerbaijan, so they

are mostly negotiating behind the scenes to try and find a way out of this crisis.

**AR:** In your assessment what is Azerbaijan's aim in all this? Is it to cut off this region completely from Armenia in order to create some dependence on Azerbaijan?

Azerbaijan is in the driver's seat and they see an opportunity to coerce Armenia into signing an agreement to withdraw all claims on Karabakh and a peace deal which recognises Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. Azerbaijan also wants the Karabakh Armenians not to have any claims on autonomy within Azerbaijan. This is a difficult situation for the Armenians, who are in a weak position. The worry here, however, is that Azerbaijan will push and push and at some point there will be some backlash, there will be some kind of violence. Perhaps Pashinyan will stop negotiating, or Azerbaijan becomes convinced that they can get an agreement entirely on their own terms, though I do not think that would be sustainable. Clearly Azerbaijan is going to get a good deal, but the question is will it get everything it wants.

**AW:** In terms of recent developments, the International Court of Justice recently ruled that Azerbaijan should "take all measures at its disposal to ensure the unimpeded movement of citizens, vehicles and cargo along the Lachin corridor in both directions", which reflects the provision in the November agreement from 2020. Another thing that happened recently is that Ruben Vardanyan – a Russian/Armenian business-

man who up until recently held the post of state minister in the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and with whom Azerbaijan refused to negotiate – was dismissed from his position. This is treated by some as a potential opening or starting point for some further discussions. What is your take on these two developments, is either of them likely to somehow contribute to the end of this blockade?

Personally, I expected that with those two developments the crisis would have been resolved by now and the road would be open again, but I clearly got it wrong. The ICJ verdict called on Azerbaijan to keep the road open, but Azerbaijan seems to have ignored that and clearly it is an international court which has no implementation capacity. In terms of Vardanyan, who also renounced his Russian citizenship, he has quite good links in the UK and US, and is a very interesting character. Azerbaijan had worried that he was sent by Moscow and that this was the first step to build Nagorno-Karabakh into a territory with Russian troops and a Russian-backed leader, a kind of second South Ossetia. There is no evidence that he was directly sent by Moscow, but clearly he was a powerful figure who had links in Moscow. The Armenians are not happy with him either, because he is seen as a potential opposition figure to Pashinyan. So there was this common interest in wanting him out. He was removed from his position and that actually means a third thing happened, which is direct talks between Baku and the Karabakh Armenians for

the first time in three decades. This is probably a good development, but obviously one within a rather bad context.

**AR: The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh has been around for over 30 years already and with two serious wars, the last being in 2020. At the same time, it seems that the war in Ukraine seems to overshadow all this, and the situation with the Lachin Corridor does not get much international attention. Do you think that there is an important geopolitical element to this and that we should be paying more attention to what is happening in Nagorno-Karabakh?**

The geopolitics of the situation are not as clear cut as they are elsewhere, in Georgia or in Ukraine. There are geopolitics, clearly Turkey is with Azerbaijan and Armenia has a formal alliance with the Russians, but the Armenians are also trying to get western support, as they also have a close relationship with France. There is a lot of geopolitical bargaining, but it is largely about the position of Armenia and Azerbaijan in the region and their relations with each other. I guess this is one conflict where the local is still more important than the geopolitical.

**AR: What about the role of Iran in the region?**

Indeed, Iran borders both countries and has interests there. It has a particularly difficult and deteriorating relationship with Azerbaijan, but I think it is more interested in the status quo. Iran has its own problems with sanctions and

with developments in the Middle East. It would like to be a big player in the Caucasus, but it isn't. I think Turkey is a much more active player here than Iran and I think Turkey's support for Azerbaijan is an important reason why Azerbaijan is now in a much more dominant position.

**AW: And you mentioned several times the EU's engagement in the peace talks. There is also a new EU mission that was launched in Armenia in late January of this year – the civilian mission under the Common Security and Defence Policy. Could you tell us a bit more about the prerogatives of this mission and its aims, and how it has been received by the different actors in the region?**

It is something quite unprecedented that the EU has a mission in a CSTO country. The Russians are clearly unhappy about it and the Azerbaijanis are unhappy but in a different way. Basically, the conflict spread to the Armenia-Azerbaijan border (beyond Karabakh) which was never demarcated at the end of the Soviet Union. Last September, Azerbaijan basically crossed the border and is still camped inside what most people think of as Armenian territory. There was a serious outbreak of violence and 300 people died. So, in this context Armenia appealed to the CSTO for support and did not receive any positive response; and to its credit the EU stepped up when the Armenians said they wanted an EU monitoring mission and deployed the new mission relatively quickly with about a hundred unarmed

monitors. I think it provided a psychological and political boost for the Armenian side and Baku was clearly frustrated. At the same time, they would rather have an EU mission than a Russian one.

**AR: If we look at the overall progress, or lack thereof, of the peace negotiations since the end of the 2020 war, where do you think things stand and where are things heading? What do you see as the political positions of Pashinyan and Ilham Aliyev and do you think there is a chance for any sort of meaningful, peaceful and stable relationship in the near future?**

No one really knows how it is going to develop and no one really knows if this road is going to be fully open, which is a prerequisite for any return to the peace process. This year could see a peace agreement or it could see the two sides go back to conflict, probably not full-scale conflict, but some kind of serious violence. We cannot really tell which at the moment. I think Aliyev and Pashinyan are committed to dialogue and negotiations, which is good, but their ap-

proaches are different. Pashinyan is out on a limb and I do not think he is supported by many other people in Armenia for actively negotiating with Azerbaijan, or even with Turkey. A lot will depend on the calculus of Aliyev, whose recent rhetoric is extremely aggressive towards the Armenians. He is getting some pushback now from the EU, US, the Russians, etc. They got most of their land back and maybe do not need to keep on pushing. They are definitely still in a strong position, but obviously Aliyev wants something to show to his public. In a best-case scenario this could be some sort of bilateral state-to-state Armenia-Azerbaijan agreement that also creates a separate process on the Karabakh Armenians. But there are plenty of spoilers out there: Iran could actually be one of the spoilers; the Russians for sure do not like the way the EU is taking a lead in this. So basically, this year could see potentially a peace agreement but it could also be a nice piece of paper that the two leaders sign, but then is not sustainable and breaks down. ~~It~~

*This interview is also available as a podcast on Talk Eastern Europe – the official podcast of New Eastern Europe, available at: [www.talkeasterneurope.eu](http://www.talkeasterneurope.eu).*

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# The West's rude awakening

## Lessons after the first year of war

WOJCIECH MICHNIK

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The crucial factor in Russia's war against Ukraine is how to help Kyiv defend itself and win? There should be a straightforward answer: as Europeans, we should do everything in our power to assist the Ukrainians in **stopping the Russian war of conquest** and that Ukraine should decide the conditions of victory and the subsequent peace. Yet, unfortunately, there still is no consensus among the western partners of Ukraine on the war's endgame.

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It has been more than one year since Russia launched its full-scale invasion and over nine years since Moscow started its war in Ukraine. After the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea, the Euro-Atlantic community made several attempts to recalibrate its security and defence policies. However, it was only after the shock of February 24th 2022 and its aftermath that most western states and societies experienced a rude awakening. It was only then when the transatlantic partners realised that not only Ukraine but also a majority of the European continent was being put in danger by Russia's war of conquest.

The united response from European states, the US and Canada must have shocked Vladimir Putin, who most likely counted on Ukraine being left to fend for itself as the West would push for another wave of appeasement. This miscalculation, one of many Russian political predictions made with regard to this war, cost

Russia dearly, as the Euro-Atlantic allies responded to the full-scale invasion by providing economic and humanitarian assistance and military support to Ukraine. And even though its record of support for Ukraine could be evaluated as mixed, the collective change in western perceptions of Ukraine and Russia are impossible to ignore. Yet, as the war is still raging on, instead of congratulating ourselves for a job well done, perhaps it is useful to take a closer look at the lessons we have learnt and what these mean for Ukraine and the rest of the Euro-Atlantic community.

### **Shocked, not awed**

In the face of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Europe's security architecture changed drastically. As the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept – the single most important document defining NATO's vision for the next decade – stated: “the Russian Federation poses the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security.” For many Europeans, particularly those who live far away from the battlefield and bombed cities, this assertion had to come as shocking. The opening sentences of the concept especially did not leave much room for optimism: “The Euro-Atlantic area is not at peace. Euro-Atlantic security is undermined by strategic competition and pervasive instability.”

This assessment differs enormously with previous threat perceptions among a majority of European nations. In 2003 the European Union released its European Security Strategy titled “A Secure Europe in a Better World”. Whether this was a statement about reality back then or wishful thinking is a different story. What is relevant is that the groupthink belief that Europe was peaceful and free once and for all gained momentum on the continent, and even Russia's war in Georgia or annexation of Crimea did not seem to shake this dominant assertion. Even the way Russia's war in Ukraine was often referred to in the West, as a “Ukrainian crisis” or “conflict”, might have suggested that either we did not see or chose not to notice the real danger of Russian policies for Ukraine and the rest of Europe.

As the first weeks of the full-scale intervention passed, the collective shock subsided as ordinary people, societies and nations from all corners of the transatlantic realm made an impressive effort to host Ukrainian refugees and assist those who stayed in Ukraine. Meanwhile, contradicting many sceptics and analysts, Ukraine and its society have shown impressive resilience and a continuous ability to defend their homeland against Russian occupants. And against some expectations, the immediate and mostly unified response of the transatlantic community has helped Ukrainians to wage their defensive war. As a result, member states of NATO and the EU have been trying to agree on the common agenda that would

guide them in their efforts to support Ukraine and ensure that peace will eventually come back to Europe.

Three goals have been often mentioned as essential ingredients of this agenda. First, there must be a sovereign and independent Ukraine and the western states should support Ukrainians in winning back their territory. Second, helping Ukrainians to win cannot put NATO or any NATO member state in direct military conflict with Russia. Third, Russia should not only pay an economic and political price for instigating the war and destroying Ukraine, but it should emerge from the war as weak as possible, so it will not be able to attack its neighbours and destabilise European security in the foreseeable future. Since these three goals – though articulated many times – can entail some disagreements and competing interpretations among western allies, we should treat them more like a wish list rather than a consensus among the allies in this decisive year of war.

### Whose war is it?

Just days before Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's president, tried to convince an audience at the Munich Security Conference that the Russian attack was more than imminent and that Ukraine would need all necessary assistance and help to survive the assault. His warning fell partly on deaf ears. The debate among conference participants was mostly divided between those who thought the risk of war was significant and those who dismissed the likelihood of its outbreak. Since February 24th 2022 there has been no question about who was right back then. Yet, even after Russia launched its brutal full-scale war, the division between the two groups endured. Those who claimed before February 24th that Russia was seriously planning a war, immediately turned into strong supporters of Ukraine's fight for survival, understanding that the Kremlin's victory was not guaranteed. Those who earlier thought that the chances of Russia's full-scale invasion were minimal then believed that western military support would not help Ukraine.

Russia's war against Ukraine constitutes an **existential threat** both to Ukrainians and other Europeans.

This difference in interpreting the situation could not be seen more clearly than in the following diplomatic responses of some European leaders. For example, in April 2022 the presidents of Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and Poland travelled to Ukraine to meet Zelenskyy in a demonstration of support for the Ukrainian president and his country. Meanwhile, France's president and Germany's chancellor held joint telephone conversations with Putin about possi-

bilities for a ceasefire. This showed not only a symbolic difference in western (European) approaches to Russia's war against Ukraine but also a potential rift in interpreting what is at stake in this war and what kind of costs we are willing to bear.

Nevertheless, there are also instances that indicate that diverging perspectives on Ukraine, Russia's war and the role of Europe in the war are changing. "We are defending ourselves against the most anti-European force in the modern world," Zelenskyy said during an address to the European Parliament earlier this February. This is not only the Ukrainian perspective but increasingly a pan-European one. Russia's war against Ukraine constitutes an existential threat both to Ukrainians and other Europeans. After all, this war is not only about Ukraine or Russia but about our way of life. Unfortunately, this transformation is taking a lot of time and definitely not irreversible as there is still no consensus among western political leaders and societies about the urgent need for a steadfast response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

### **Peace, if you survive it**

One of the issues Euro-Atlantic partners have been struggling with for at least a year is the question of the war's endgame and the results they wish to achieve with their military and non-military support of Ukraine. This question is intimately connected with the previous one regarding whose war it is. The West does not always agree about whose war it is – some argue that it is mostly a Ukrainian war and some claim that the war is basically already "owned" by the entire transatlantic community. At the same time, the West differs on the perception of the very nature of this war. Some see this war as an event that started on February 24th 2022, while others see it as a very long process which dates back to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Russian war with Georgia, or even to Ukrainian independence in 1991.

The difference in perception of the war is crucial for understanding reactions to the conflict in the West and also the war's expected outcomes. Those within NATO or the EU who assume that the war only started a year ago subsequently argue that in order for the war to end, Ukraine just needs to strike a "peace agreement" with Russia so everyone can "get back to business as usual". Yet, those leaders and societies who think about this war in terms of a long process tend to understand that this war can possibly be frozen (and unfrozen) but will not end without either a Ukrainian or Russian victory.

From this perspective, a prospective peace settlement to end the war would be impossible unless one of the sides loses, preferably Russia. This understanding



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If we do not see Russia's war against Ukraine, for what it is and has been – a war of conquest and ethnic annihilation – it will be next to impossible to build a long-lasting European response to the war.

of the war and its expected outcomes is commonly shared among Central and Eastern European allies but not necessarily by all Western European states such as France or Germany. Interestingly, most of the European frontline states (from Finland in the north to Romania in the south) which have experience with Russian or Soviet-inflicted traumas, have been on the same page since the first day of Russia's invasion. In addition, one expected outcome of this war is a weakened Russia to the extent that Moscow will be too preoccupied with its own weakness to wreak havoc beyond its borders. As Yulia Kazdobina correctly observed: "Europe whole and free will remain impossible until Russia is either changed domestically or stripped of its capacity for further aggression. Before that, Europe needs to have a realistic defence plan." Unsurprisingly this is the scenario that Russia and Putin strongly oppose. More notably, many politicians in the West also remain sceptical about this scenario as they fear that a "cornered Russia" may decide to escalate the conflict by directly confronting NATO and its member states.

### **Different readings of history**

Two other observations that can serve as another lesson that the West has been trying to learn for the past year, should be made here. First, Ukraine is and has

been an independent state in the heart of Europe. Therefore, Ukraine should not be treated as a part of Russia's imperial ambitions but as an objectively independent entity with its own agency and equal right to coexist among other European nations. These are self-evident truths among the societies of Central and Eastern Europe, yet constant debates about what Russians would do (instead of what Ukrainians would do) are still present in Western European intellectual circles.

These different perspectives might stem from a different reading of European history and the role of Eastern Europe, including Ukraine and Russia; or even from the Cold War divisions between the West and the East. They might also be a

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by-product of the cosy way of life that most Western European societies have been enjoying for years and the accompanying idea that peace in Europe is now here once and for all and does not require military preparedness.

More importantly, these differences also stem from a misperception of Russia in the West, that Moscow is a former great power in transition that needs to be accommodated and brought into the European political and economic orbit at all costs. This thinking has been heavily emphasised for years by Russia's disinformation campaigns that targeted Euro-Atlantic societies, "explaining" to them that Russia wants nothing but peace but is encircled and provoked by NATO's eastward enlargement (in Russia's rhetoric labelled in more aggressive language as "expansion").

Second, there is no question about the fact that Russia is and has been a colonial power. It was a colonial power during tsarist and Soviet times when it stripped nations of independence, committed genocide (i.e. Holodomor, a man-made famine engineered by the Soviet regime in 1932–33, recognised as a genocide by the European Parliament in 2022) and ethnically cleansed nations by relocating them across the vast Russian empire. Finally, it has once again become a colonial and imperial power during its latest iteration as the Russian Federation under Putin and his clique.

In this context another lesson emerges. As long as we collectively in the transatlantic realm fail to acknowledge the agency of Ukrainians who have been invaded and attacked by an imperial power, we will not be able to agree on a viable and long-term answer to Russia's war. If we do not see Russia's war against Ukraine, for what it is and has been – a war of conquest and ethnic annihilation – it will be next to impossible to build a long-lasting European response to the war. After all, one of the lessons the West ought to have learnt from the war is that Russia's revisionism goes beyond Ukraine and threatens NATO allies. As the 20th cen-

ture history of Europe has shown, annexing states' territory and denying nations the right to exist independently present a slippery slope that leads to human suffering on a massive scale and leaves European regions in pieces. In the absence of any peace prospects, the alternative is to enhance European security by establishing even stronger connections with Kyiv and bolstering defence capabilities across Europe instead of engaging in negotiations with Moscow over post-war regulations. There are no rules or "post-war" settlements that the Kremlin would not be ready to break or ignore.

### **Beyond tanks and jetfighters?**

The crucial question here – and at times a point of disagreement among the Euro-Atlantic allies – is how to assist Ukraine to win the defensive war against Russia? There should be a straightforward answer: as Europeans, members of the EU and NATO, we should do everything in our power to assist the Ukrainians in stopping the Russian war of conquest. It also ought to be fairly simple to understand that it is up to Ukraine and its people to decide what are the conditions of victory and the subsequent peace.

Yet, as the never-ending debates about sending military assistance and equipment to Ukraine have shown, there is no consensus among the western partners of Ukraine on the war's endgame. For almost a year there have been talks about what kind of military equipment the West should send to Ukraine and what would constitute the so-called "red lines" (deemed as potentially too escalatory). Even half a year ago, Patriot surface-to-air missiles (one of the world's most advanced air defence systems) were not cleared to be sent to a non-NATO ally such as Ukraine. Now they are labelled as adequate. The same can be said about tanks, as the debate around German-made Leopard 2 tanks also seemed at one point to represent another uncrossable "red line". Some governments (including Berlin) fiercely opposed the possibility of providing them to Ukraine, only to change their minds and green light them in January 2023 as a weapon Ukrainians should receive to fend off the Russian occupants. Discussions are now related to fighter jets and as the previous "red lines" have indicated, Ukraine will probably receive them too. The bottom line is, that it would have served Ukraine and its western partners well if these decisions about delivering all these defensive weapons to Ukraine were made half a year ago or earlier.

Yet the above-mentioned dilemmas about sending weapons constitute only a part of the larger issue that we face in the West. Do we want Ukraine to win or do we just not want Ukraine to lose the war? There is a significant yet subtle dif-

ference between these two. Victory for Ukraine – defined by Ukrainians on their own terms – would most likely entail Kyiv regaining control over all Ukrainian territory in line with the pre-2014 borders. A Ukraine that does not win is probably one that loses a part of its territory and is forced to strike a premature peace deal with Russia that significantly hinders its sovereignty and almost certainly heralds an “unfreezing” of the war in the future. If the Euro-Atlantic partners of Ukraine wish for this second option – as it appeared from the behaviour of some Western European leaders in the early months after the full-scale invasion – then the delayed weapon deliveries and “salami tactics” of providing Ukraine only the weapons necessary to survive (but not win) is a desired course of action. After all, indecisions and delayed weapons supplies are slowing down or even preventing a potential Ukrainian victory.

If, however, the West could agree on the more positive first approach, then the whole debate about weapon supplies to Ukraine is nothing but redundant. Instead, the West should be supplying Ukraine with all necessary weapon systems and military equipment to ensure Kyiv's victory in the defensive war against Russia. Unfortunately, another problem right now is that some NATO states are facing shortages of munitions, while others are calculating how to send enough weapons to Ukraine without weakening their own defences.

Paradoxically, the argument of sending maximum military assistance to Ukraine should also be embraced by the self-proclaimed peace party that is quite influential in Western Europe. Why? Because by not sending weapons to Ukraine on time or by sending them in unordered batches, we are prolonging the war, as it allows the Russians to adjust and prohibit the Ukrainians from undertaking a decisive counteroffensive. The alternative, often advocated in frontline states (from the Baltic states to Poland), is to stop Russia, not appease it, by assisting Ukraine in its efforts to win the war on its own terms. Assisting Ukraine by sending all necessary economic and military help would allow the Ukrainians to push Russia out of Ukrainian territories. This point was masterfully summarised by President Zelenskyy's advisor Mykhailo Podolyak, when in January 2023 he wrote on Twitter: “Realize: there is no other way to end the war than the defeat of the Russian Federation. But today's indecision is killing even more of our people. Every day of delay means the death of Ukrainians. Think faster.”

### **Standing up to the bully**

Transatlantic political leaders – including US President Joe Biden – have repeated that NATO is not looking to go to war with Russia; and that supplying

Ukraine with arms is not an offensive but purely defensive move. Interpreting it as “provoking Russia” is basically turning the argument on its head. It is similar to a real-life situation in which we help our neighbours fight off an intruder during a home invasion, only to be accused by this very perpetrator of encouraging him to break into our homes too. Therefore, the West should not only carry on its support but also intensify its efforts to help Ukraine win the war. It is Ukrainians that bear the direct cost and burden of the struggle that is measured in the loss of human lives and the enormous destruction of the Ukrainian homeland.

As cynical as it may sound, the majority in the West have been willing to fight the war to “the last Ukrainian soldier” even though the stakes of the war go beyond the future of Ukraine itself. This is echoed by the US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell’s remark that “continuing our support for Ukraine is morally right, but it is not only that. It is also a direct investment in cold, hard, American interests.” We in Europe should also understand that ensuring a Ukrainian victory is directly connected to our security interests and the future of our common European project.

During this year’s Munich Security Conference, US Vice President Kamala Harris singled out Russia as responsible for a “widespread and systematic attack” against Ukraine’s civilian population, citing evidence of execution-style killings, rape, torture and forceful deportations. She stated that Russia has not only committed war crimes but also – as the United States has formally determined – crimes against humanity. Unfortunately, this should not surprise any student of Russia’s way of war, as Soviet and Russian soldiers in the Second World War, Afghanistan, Chechnya and Syria have not been known for their humane approach to the civilian population or captured soldiers.

Tragically, Ukrainian cities from Bucha to Mariupol have become shocking examples that such mass atrocities are still being committed in 21st century Europe. In this context it would be fair to acknowledge that we in Europe (and collectively in the West) have failed to recognise contemporary Russia and its aggressive behaviour for what it really is: a ruthless bully. Yet, now we know, as the mask is gone and we can no longer pretend that we do not see it. Although we are late in our response to assist Ukraine; it is not too late to help save it as the fate of Ukraine is intertwined with that of Europe and its well-being. Hence, the best strategy to face any bully, including one in international affairs, is to stay united and not to back down.

Clearly for years Moscow has been bullying not only Ukraine but other states that it deems part of its sphere of influence or “near abroad”. From this perspec-

Russia’s assault on Ukraine is a shocking examples of mass atrocities still being committed in 21st century Europe.

tive, it may appear that Russia is strong. Yet its strength comes mostly from the weakness of European responses and the naivety of political elites towards Russia. It is worth stressing that a potential lack of European solidarity could make Russia stronger, not Moscow's inept conventional army or old nuclear arsenal. Therefore, the sooner we enable Ukraine to win the war, the sooner we will be able to return to a more stable security situation in Europe. It is an illusion to expect in the long run, that we could enjoy living in a peaceful Europe without a victorious and independent Ukraine.

If there is any final lesson that the Euro-Atlantic community should learn, it is that it should not trust Russia under the current leadership. Despite being accused otherwise the West has actually devised a strategy after a year of war. This strategy is centred on holding Putin accountable for the failure of the war until the political climate in Moscow becomes too intense for him and his supporters to bear, thereby compelling them to alter their course of action. But to expect that the change will come swiftly or that it will bring a much better outcome for European security, would be a folly that the West should avoid at all costs. As long as the West fails to understand that this war is a part of a long process that started way before February 24th 2022, it will not be able to prepare its societies for the long-haul resilience and necessary (economic) sacrifices that are certainly to come. ~~EE~~

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# Iran and Russia

## Two pretty best friends

RAZE BAZIANI

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Iran is one of the largest and most influential countries in the Middle East. Given the protests of recent months and **Iranian involvement** in the Russian war in Ukraine, it is necessary to bring Iran back into the spotlight of geopolitical analysis.

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Since mid-September 2022, people in Iran have been demonstrating against the regime. The protests were triggered by the death of a 22-year-old Kurdish woman named Jina Mahsa Amini. She was arrested by Iran's morality police for allegedly violating Islamic dress codes and died in police custody. The incident sparked mass protests across the country. According to international human rights organisations, over 500 people have died as a result of the brutal crackdown on protests, including over 60 minors. Most were killed by gunshots to the head. Several people were hanged for participating in protests. Close to 20,000 people were reportedly arrested. It is likely that the number of unreported cases is higher.

### **Structural disenfranchisement**

Iran was a monarchy until 1979. Since the revolution, Iran has been an "Islamic Republic", where strict rules of life apply. The Iranian regime's policy of disenfranchisement is particularly evident when it comes to the issue of female self-determination. A woman's decision-making power in Iran is vested in men in all important areas of life, first in her father and later in her husband. From the age

of nine, women must adhere to a lifetime of veiling regulations in public spaces. They are considered ready to get married two years before boys, as early as their 13th birthday, and encounter mandatory control throughout their lives. Men can always divorce in Iran, women only under certain conditions. They automatically lose custody of their children in the event of a divorce. The reality of such practices is decided in Iran not only by discriminatory legislation, but also by the composition of the judiciary. The ability to judge is reserved for men only. In family law matters alone, women are allowed to serve in an advisory capacity. In court, a woman's testimony is worth only half as much as that of a man.

Structural disenfranchisement in Iran, however, does not only affect female gender identity. The fate of Jina Mahsa Amini illustrates the intersection of different dimensions of oppression in Iran. As a Kurdish woman, the young woman was part of an ethnic and religious minority that, according to many international human rights organisations, is structurally discriminated against and exploited in Iran. Ethnic and religious minorities, such as the Bahai or the Baluch, are labelled different and inferior in Iran, and their legitimate claims to social and political participation are negated. Disadvantaged groups live in neglected regions that lack basic infrastructure facilities such as hospitals.

Even though Iran regularly describes itself as a multi-ethnic state, Persian nationalism and Shiism have always dominated the country. In Iran, the "land of the Aryans", minorities enjoy cultural freedoms, but they cannot implement them in decisive structures, although they would have the legitimate right to do so as an indigenous population. For example, they can speak their own language but cannot teach it in schools. In 2019, a 28-year-old woman was sentenced to five years

Even though Iran regularly describes itself as a multi-ethnic state, Persian nationalism has always **dominated** the country.

in prison for teaching Kurdish on a voluntary basis. Time and again, people who work to assert the rights of ethnic or religious minorities disappear. Not infrequently, they are hanged in show trials. This is just one case of a puzzle whereby the identities of many social groups are criminalised to justify a racist state doctrine.

Living in poverty and exclusion does not allow one to "buy one's way out" of administrative or police injustice, as Tehran's high society can. Rather, minorities in Iran are overrepresented in crime statistics, and receive higher and harsher sentences on average. They can rarely afford legal counsel because of their poverty. The brute force crackdown on protests therefore unsurprisingly hit areas inhabited by minorities particularly hard in recent months. While people in Tehran are happy to be able to walk around partially without headscarves, the danger to the lives of members of minorities in Iran remains acute.

## Iran and the South Caucasus

If Iran treats its own population in this way, the question arises as to how it deals with others. In fact, the Iranian regime is not only taking a hard line in its own country. Let us look at the South Caucasus, a region that is actually the geopolitical focal point for Russia's policy in the post-Soviet space. Here, too, traces of Iranian influence can be found.

In north-western Iran lies the province of Western Azerbaijan, home to the largest ethnic minority in Iran, the Azerbaijanis. Both present-day Azerbaijan and Iranian Azerbaijan were controlled by Persia for a long time until 1828. Accordingly, there are close cultural similarities between Iran and Azerbaijan. For example, the majority of the population of both countries is Shiite and they share a common history. However, Soviet restrictions on emigration cut off many Azerbaijanis in the former USSR from their relatives in Iran. Shortly after the Republic of Azerbaijan declared independence in 1991, its then president called for a "Greater Azerbaijan". This was to include parts of Iran and also Armenia. Nothing persistent really came of these ambitious visions. But because of this, among other things, Iran is constantly concerned about Azerbaijani irredentism.

In response to this fault line and Azerbaijan's deepening relations with Iran's arch-rival, Israel, Tehran has in turn grown increasingly close to Azerbaijan's regional rival, Armenia. And yet, this is not enough for Iran to provide substantial support to the Armenians, who have been plagued by invasion and political violence. Despite this, Armenia's deputy foreign minister credited Iranian statements with preventing a major conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in September 2022. In fact, Iran is taking a fairly passive role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, regularly promoting only symbolic policies. For example, Iran has failed to do anything about the Azerbaijani blockade of the Lachin corridor since mid-December 2022, which completely cuts off Armenians in Karabakh from the supply of essential goods. Conversely, Armenia repeatedly covers Iran's back in an international context. Most recently, for example, it voted on whether to establish an independent UN commission of inquiry into Iran to investigate human rights abuses committed in recent months during the revolt. Armenia was one of only six countries on the Human Rights Council to vote against. The Council is composed of 47 countries.

While Armenia's position is rooted in its geopolitical isolation, its proximity to Iran appears to make it of strategic importance to Tehran. Overall, it is difficult to explain why Iran is leaving the Armenians hanging by a thread. However, the Iranians' passivity could also be due to the fact that they do not want to undermine the Russians' predominance in the South Caucasus. Iranian-Russian relations are therefore particularly relevant at this point. The relationship has changed quali-

tatively, not least since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Moscow does not like to talk about its relations with Tehran. Hence, it is time to take a closer look at it.

### **Destabilisation as a business model**

Last July, Vladimir Putin met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Tehran to announce their new geopolitical stance to the world. Moreover, they also wished to demonstrate that they are not isolated, despite the strongest international criticism. In a statement, the three rulers “reaffirmed their determination to continue their ongoing cooperation to eliminate terrorist individuals, groups, companies and entities once and for all”. On his following trip through Iran, Putin sought to solidify the bilateral alliance. It has since become a counterweight to efforts aimed at containing western adversaries.

It is undisputed that Iran is providing military support to Russia in the war in Ukraine. In particular, the supply of combat drones is a key issue. The arms cooperation between the two states has existed for some time. Indeed, Moscow has supplied air defence systems to Tehran in the past. In the future, Iran hopes to receive battle tanks and fighter jets in return. Conversely, Moscow sees itself dependent on Iran’s drones because they cannot access other deliveries due to sanctions. According to experts, Iranian drones cannot compete with those made in America or Turkey. However, Iran has been continuously developing its drone programme since the 1980s. It has also been able to gain operational experience. The drones have already been tested by Hezbollah in Lebanon, for example, and proved to be effective. Hezbollah are a radical Islamist militia founded in the early 1980s after the Islamic Revolution in Iran by a group of about 500 fighters from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Classified as a terrorist organisation by many states, Hezbollah has been responsible for numerous terrorist attacks. Experts describe it as an Iranian proxy. The Houthis, who rebelled against the Yemeni government in 2015, triggering the civil war in the country that continues to this day, are also supported by Iran. They have used Iranian drones to attack targets in Saudi Arabia on several occasions. These are just two examples in which Iran’s influence is enforced militarily beyond its own borders. Overall, the list of Iranian activities is long.

Adding to the operational capability of Iranian drones is the Iranians’ experience with sanctions and evading them. For a long time, Iran was the most sanctioned country in the world. It has since been overtaken by Russia. Despite strict sanctions, Tehran has managed to consolidate power and accumulate capital, albeit only for its political elite. The system of opaque evasion of sanctions offers a wealth of experience that the Russians could also access. After all, the Iranians

have succeeded in developing powerful weapons systems in isolation in recent years. In particular, the Iranians' continuous uranium enrichment should not go unmentioned at this point, despite great international opposition. According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran is about to cross the nuclear threshold. This means that they could soon have enough uranium to build a nuclear bomb. Unlike some other states, Iran does not seem to see its arms industry merely as a business model. Rather, it is geostrategic interests that Iran is trying to achieve. The business model is thus much more about promoting political instability in border regions with political rivals while at the same time asserting itself as a regional player. In Eastern Europe, Ukraine is thus currently becoming a new arena for indirect Iranian power projection.

In the past, all domestic structures in Iran that could challenge the regime were also destabilised. While much of the Iranian population lives below the poverty line, wealth accumulates in the hands of a few. Inevitably, economic cooperation with Iran flows into the hands of the kleptocrats. This is because large parts of the Iranian economy are nationalised. Estimates put the figure at between 70 and nearly 90 per cent. The economy is largely controlled by the government, military conglomerates and religious foundations. Raisi, the current president, was also involved in these structures. Before he became president, he was head of the country's largest religious foundation for several years. The "Astan Quds Razavi" foundation is Iran's largest landowner and, like all other foundations, is tax-exempt, providing a tax loophole.

These structures reinforce the assumption that Iran is not a reliable partner. After all, the country regularly ranks in the bottom quarter on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. In 2022, the country ranked 147th among the 180 countries listed, with even Russia ten places ahead of the Iranians at 137th.

Despite sanctions, Tehran has managed to **consolidate power** and accumulate capital, albeit only for its political elite.

### **From common conflict axes to new geographic routes**

Russia's rapprochement with Iran is largely motivated by economic interests. It is not only since the developments of the last year that Moscow has been seeking new allies. A milestone in this development was the first transport of Russian goods via the so-called "North-South Corridor". This is a 7,200 kilometre network of shipping lanes, railroads and roads for freight transport between India and Russia via Iran, among other countries. Through this corridor, travel time between Russia and India is reduced to almost half, saving not only time but also resources.

Even more significant than the economic benefits are the geostrategic advantages that the corridor offers. Especially since the start of the war against Ukraine and the imposition of severe economic sanctions, Moscow has been particularly interested in a trade corridor over which the US cannot exert any influence. There are neither NATO countries nor US allies along the North-South Corridor. The Central Asian states bordering the Caspian Sea belong primarily to the Russian sphere of influence. And last but not least, Iran is also a geopolitical rival of the US which has suffered from American sanctions for years. The route may also play a role in the context of increasing Eurasian integration. Moreover, it could play an important part in China's plans for the "New Silk Road".

Iran, meanwhile, is implementing further plans for economic rapprochement with Russia and also China. As a result, it should be taken quite seriously as a regional and global player. The country has the second-largest natural gas reserves and the third-largest oil reserves in the world. Even though global trends are moving away from fossil fuels, there is still a great dependence on fossil resources internationally. The fossil fuel industry is a good example of the politicisation of the Iranian economy. For example, the Revolutionary Guard owns the "Khatam-al-Anbiya" conglomerate, which is active in the oil and gas industry, construction, banking, agriculture and heavy industry. So it is not surprising that all economic decisions in Iran are at the same time political-strategic in nature.

In February of this year, Raisi ordered the implementation of the law on Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), whose members include China and Russia. Free trade agreements are also already in place with the Eurasian Economic Union, which Iran considers a key player. Even if the trade volumes are still small, it is predicted that they will gradually increase in the coming years. And it is likely that strategic-economic relations will deepen. The states involved will probably not stand in each other's way. After all, they themselves do not think much of upholding the civil and political rights of the people of their own countries. It is therefore unlikely that they would sanction each other for human rights violations. Rather, at a SCO summit in 2021, the Chinese ruler Xi Jinping called on SCO members to ally against sanctions and attacks by other countries.

### **Nothing is for free**

There is another side to the coin. The two states' pretty much best friendship comes at a high international political price. Even if states like Iran or Russia repeatedly frame their projects as a supposed contribution to multilateralism and as a counter to "western dominance", the veracity of these statements may be doubt-

ed. Although both states do not openly show their cards, they have repeatedly demonstrated through their political performance that they themselves are striving for power expansion and hegemonic dominance. In doing so, they do not shy away from committing the most serious human rights violations – even against their own people. Of course, these actions have consequences.

The already limited international trust in these regimes is unlikely to recover quickly. This will certainly affect possible economic as well as political cooperation in the future. The question remains, however, as to what the new realities arising from this relationship will mean for international peace and human rights. The outlook is not rosy. There is, however, one small glimmer of hope. In Iran, the civilian population has proven that it is willing to pay a high price to free itself from the brutal regime. And in Ukraine, it is also the civilian population that is demonstrating in an exemplary way that the fight for freedom against the Russian invasion concerns everyone.

If we want to write positively about this tireless effort in the history books, it is up to the international community to focus more specifically on the concerns of civil society in the future. After all, conflicts and catastrophes are likely to happen and do not simply fall from the sky. This raises the question of whether we should merely stand by and watch new friendships between autocratic states, or whether we should find a decisive strategy with which we not only react to grievances, but also anticipate and prevent them. ~~EE~~

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# From demilitarisation to “satanisation”

WOJCIECH SIEGIŃ

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Putinism has been built as a model of the Russian state envisioned for decades, if not centuries. In this way, **Putinism** has ended history for all who are subordinate to it.

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“The collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century,” said Vladimir Putin in 2005. These infamous words were a sign that a political change had taken place in Russia. It marked a departure from the not so successful attempts at democracy building in the 1990s towards the path of authoritarianism. In that very same speech, however, Putin also declared the responsibility of the Russian Federation to protect Russian-speaking populations outside Russia, which was later used as the key argument to start aggression against Ukraine.

This political U-turn was again stated by Putin in 2007 during his speech at the Munich Security Conference, where he criticised the hegemony of the United States and its supposed goal to build a unipolar world. Ironically from today’s perspective, Putin also used his speech to criticise the West for engaging in senseless wars.

## **Death at the price of an automobile**

Today we know all too well that by calling the collapse of the Soviet Union the greatest catastrophe of the 20th century, Putin articulated Russia’s imperial ambitions. These first appeared during Russia’s war against Georgia in 2008. However, while in 2007 the political elite gathered at the Munich Security Conference was listening to Putin with shock and awe, the period that followed demonstrated

how not many truly understood his words. In the decade that followed, we would hear expressions of great concern, which essentially summed up the West's reaction towards Russia's military aggressions. Arguably, this could be interpreted as a continuation of a policy of appeasement.

After February 24th 2022 it has become crystal clear that Putin's second term, or possibly his whole rule, is better reflected in a different statement. This one was made at a meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club in Sochi in 2018. At that time, when answering a question on the consequences of a nuclear confrontation with the West, Putin said the following: “We would be victims of an aggression and would get to heaven as martyrs, while those who initiated such aggression would just die and not even have time to repent.” This aggressive response was then awarded with a huge ovation.

While analysing these statements we should remember that they are more than just the rhetoric of an aging satrap. They all return to the fore later, such as in the 2018 documentary *World Order 2018* produced by Kremlin propagandist Vladimir Solovyov, which is based on interviews with Putin. In the film, Putin shares his catastrophic interpretations of the consequences of a nuclear war. Namely, the end of human civilisation as we know it. Indicatively, through these statements Putin has drawn the following conclusion: what use would the world be without Russia?

This shift within Putin's official narrative is more of a shift from the geopolitical thinking that exploits the concepts of alliances and domination towards a sort of political mysticism. This means that for over 20 years of Putin's rule, he and his associates have undergone an evolution from perceived genius strategists (especially by some western politicians and analysts) towards martyr-like mystical figures. This language allows Putin to be more like the biblical prophet Elijah, who, according to scripture, entered heaven alive, “by fire”.

However, Putin's prophecy remains somewhat problematic. It remains quite unclear what the purpose of this martyr-like death would be. Thus, there is an “ontological vacuum” which is best seen in the attempts to define the elusive and volatile purpose of what Russia calls a “special military operation”. Speaking directly, neither the Kremlin, nor the soldiers of the Russian army, the so-called mobiks, know why they are fighting in Ukraine. Putin and his associates change their rhetoric about the purpose of this war every fortnight. This is happening to the point that even the most loyal Kremlin commentator cannot keep up with the changes in the argumentation.

Vladimir Putin and his associates have undergone an **evolution** from perceived genius strategists towards martyr-like mystical figures.

Truth be told, in this quasi-mystical reality of the military operation, the most rational and pragmatic behaviour appears to be displayed by the Wagner Group – the private military units led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, made up largely of inmates. These convicts know all too well that in Ukraine they are fighting for their personal freedom. It has been promised to them, should they survive the battlefield where they are used as pure cannon fodder.

Equally paradoxical is the fact that for many of the mobilised Russians the only rational purpose of this war is not survival but death. Only the families of the fallen (in Russian popularly known as “Cargo 200”) whose bodies will not be left behind on the steppe or buried in some nameless ditch, will be able to receive financial compensation and purchase something such as a much desired car – perhaps a white Lada Granta. To put it simply, the brutal reality faced by the Russian soldiers (in Ukraine derogatively called “orcs”) is that of an upside-down world. Namely, criminals are the ones who are promised freedom, while others are offered death – not at any price, but at the price of an automobile.

### **Good vs Evil**

Even a cursory analysis of the official Russian discourse explaining the causes and purpose of Moscow’s military aggression in Ukraine shows the complete unpreparedness of the Russian military and political command for a long-term military campaign. Instead, a situation has emerged in which the authors of propaganda messages are starting to believe their own lies. All of this, combined with a great amount of corruption, which is an integral part of Russia’s political system, has led to the breakdown of the official interpretation of the war and an urgent need to create new fictional explanations regarding the situation on the front line. Like a kaleidoscope rotating at high speed, there have been many new, often contradictory, interpretations of the causes of the war since February last year.

The natural first choice of the Kremlin was to use old Soviet propaganda and present the war against Ukraine as a war with (neo)fascists and “Banderites”. Arguments like “denazification” and demilitarisation were made to Russian society, which was at that time still spectating the war comfortably in front of televisions. However, it quickly turned out that these concepts were not enough to build an efficient wartime marketing strategy. Even the propagandists on air were quite often getting lost in their own arguments.

To reduce the damage, the Russian propaganda machine switched into attack mode, which is unquestionably its favourite state of being. This entails complete semantic chaos spiced up with irrational conspiracy theories. As a result, Russian



Photo: Oleg Elkov / Shutterstock

Neither the Kremlin, nor the soldiers of the Russian army know why they are fighting in Ukraine. Putin and his associates change their rhetoric about the purpose of this war every fortnight.

media consumers were offered an indigestible stew. With a lack of military success on the front line, the Russian propaganda machine adjusted its arguments for the intervention and replaced them with arguments for the defence of the Russian Federation.

This new rhetoric also reflected a change in role for the recipients of Russian propaganda. At first the war was presented to Russian society as a form of illusion. It was limited to the television screen with performances by the authorities, with citizens serving as spectators and experiencing some kind of ecstasy connected with the “triumph”. However, as time passed, these performances turned into some kind of immersive show in which the spectators had no choice but to become a part of the events. To make things worse, these events increasingly turned out to involve real death. This happened in the autumn of 2022 when Putin introduced mass mobilisation (officially called “partial”). The reality of this upside-down world is no longer just the experience of those who are fighting and losing their lives in Donbas, but is shared with those who now live in the Russian Federation.

In fact, it was the massive number of fallen Russian soldiers that forced a change in the propaganda rhetoric. Once the bagged corpses of mobilised men, be they factory workers, miners, or IT specialists, started returning to Russia, any interpretation of the war as a simple defensive operation against a weak opponent simply stopped working.

The decision was then made to reformulate the purpose of the war, which since then has turned into an existential confrontation of good versus evil. This argumentation is based on the most ultimate and rudimentary assumptions. It is a Manichean vision in which the Russian state, embodied by its ruler (Putin), is on the good side and fights against evil, which is embodied by the collective West and its Ukrainian “slaves”. In this existential fight only one solution is possible – good must prevail. This thinking derives from a historical, even biblical, logic, which allowed the special military operation (in Russian called by its abbreviation “SVO”) to turn, at least semi-officially, into a holy military operation (which in Russian can also be expressed through the SVO abbreviation).

### End of history

In his 1959 book titled *Critique and Crisis*, the German historian Reinhart Koselleck analysed the process of the development of the early modern state. In his view it was driven by the conflict between representatives of absolute power and those of emerging bourgeois society, often operating secretly through networks such as the Freemasons or Bavarian Illuminati. These pro-Enlightenment forces, as Koselleck argued, profited from a new approach to history which began to be perceived as a process. What is important here is that the challenge to absolute power in the Enlightenment period allowed people to start distinguishing between the past and present, as well as to think about what was still to come. This new approach to history, directed at the future, created the foundations for a utopian faith in progress, which became characteristic of modern times.

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Koselleck’s theory proves useful in the analysis of the structure of political discourses in Putin’s Russia. When looking at 2022 we can say that for Russia it was a time of accelerated “demodernisation”, caused by unprecedented western sanctions. Yet, it was also a time of cementing the dictatorial structure of power, which was best expressed in the words of Vyacheslav Volodin: “There is Putin, there is Russia, there is no Putin, there is no Russia.” Keep in mind, though, Volodin said that in 2014 when Putin’s approval rating was at its highest with 86 per cent of support. Nonetheless, in 2023, when we are already one year into the war in Ukraine, these words have also not lost their power. The only difference today is that social support for the political system no longer matters in Russia. Dictatorial power has already become fully consolidated around Putin, who is the sole pillar of the system.

The “demodernised” dictatorship system which is now in place in Russia should thus be seen as a mutation of absolute power. Putin is the absolute, lone leader. To use Dmitry Peskov’s words from 2018, “[Putin] is sitting on Europe’s political Olympus.” Koselleck shows that the consequences of such a state of affairs include a conflict of interest that is created by the absolute power. This is naturally opposed by civil society. In Putin’s Russia, just like in 18th century Europe, this conflict is presented through the prism of a fight between good and evil, even though this is actually a purely political conflict.

Internally, the only real opponent in Putin’s system was Alexei Navalny. Here is another paradox: Navalny, imprisoned for the last two years, is the only real politician and regime opponent who stayed in Russia. This of course does not belittle the courage of others like Vladimir Kara-Murza and Ilya Yashin, who have also been detained by the regime and are now behind bars.

**Putinism** has built a model of the Russian state envisioned for decades, if not centuries.

The regional structures created by Navalny, that is the social movement outlawed by the authorities that is now underground, turned into a group of clandestine organisations united by an imperative to fight the corrupt dictatorship and act against the war. As stated before, the Enlightenment forces were different from the absolutist regimes because of their future orientation. In Russia we see something similar: Navalny and members of his movement call for a Russia without Putin. They call it “a great Russia of the future”, meaning Russia without corruption and violent authorities – a Russia with social justice and prosperity for all. Like centuries ago in European monarchies, in today’s Russia dictatorial authorities are being confronted by a futuristic utopia that is envisioned by civil society.

The other side of the barricade is occupied by the regime forces, which voluntarily entered the path of demodernisation. This process started much earlier than February 2022. Vladislav Surkov’s 2019 manifesto titled “Putin’s long state”, for example, talks about a “deep nation” to counterbalance “the deep state”. A deep nation entails a kind of popular folk mass that potentially has its origins all the way back to prehistoric times. These mystical people supposedly proceed the establishment of state structures and at the same time define them. Surkov sees them as the core of what constitutes Russia and what attracts proponents of all political projects. Regardless of whether Russia will be a socialist, liberal or conservative state – it will always be a result of the triumph of the nation.

The core of this thinking is the assumption that this process has been in place and its result is already here: it is called Putinism. Surkov’s manifesto can thus be seen as the best characterisation of the Putin regime’s supposed virtue, presenting its structure as complete, politically effective and definite. Consequently, there is

no more need to create futuristic utopias about a brave new world. Putinism has built a model of the Russian state envisioned for decades, if not centuries. In this way, Putinism has ended history for all who are subordinate to it.

### The real end

Surkov’s text should indeed be treated as a kind of post-modernist manifesto. At the same time, it is difficult not to notice the author’s intuition in catching the trajectory of an ageing dictatorship. Already after three months of war Putin moved from a game of rhetoric on the end of history to a real and cruel end for those who are fighting on the battlefield. However, as mentioned earlier, a change also took place in the discourse of the authorities and their propagandists. This started when they began to define the war as an existential confrontation. For the most radical believers in Putinism, demodernisation has since turned into “depostmodernisation”.

Specifically, such key figures of Kremlin propaganda as Solovyov, Dmitry Kiselev and Margarita Simonyan have all been creating messages directed at millions of passive recipients. For quite some time their activities have ceased to be solely a game and have turned into concrete calls to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine. Such calls are made despite their authors’ full awareness of the consequences of a nuclear confrontation with the West, which would mean nothing else but an end of history for all people.

It turns out, however, that in the framework of the logic of the existential confrontation between good and evil there is acceptance regarding the destruction of the world. This is the case because Putin is not only at war with Navalny and his movement. His regime is ready for a total confrontation. This outlook is based on the assumption that one side belongs to Putin, while the other is that of the rest of the world. This second force is naturally seen as evil. That is why quasi-religious language has started to be seen in the Kremlin’s public discourse. This includes references to the special military operation as a holy war (but not only).

Putin’s comparisons of Russians to martyrs have led to a redefinition of the concept of an enemy. As a result, throughout 2022 Ukrainians, or even more broadly the whole collective West, were presented in Russia as “demons”. Maria Zakharova, the spokeswoman of Russia’s foreign ministry, said that the decision of Volodymyr Zelenskyy to deprive 13 Orthodox priests who support the Russian aggression of Ukrainian citizenship was “satanic”. In fact, references to Zelenskyy as the “devil” are commonplace on Russian propaganda TV programmes.

When listening to the radio or reading articles online, Russians can come across the statements of Roman Silantiev, a sociologist at Moscow State Linguistic Uni-

versity. He claims outright that a new religion, called “Ukrainism”, is being born in Ukraine now. In his view, it is a mixture of neo-paganism and Satanism, which is something that resembles exoteric Nazism with a dash of Viking culture. Examples of this neo-pagan Satanism are reported to include rituals involving burning the faces of “brothers in arms” among members of the Azov Battalion. These propaganda slogans are immediately transmitted to the population at large, such as claims that the soldiers who are fighting in Ukraine are Russian saints “fighting Satan”.

Traditionally, Satan is also said to be hidden in products which are sent to Russia from the West, like in the “Huggy Wuggy” plush toys. Thus, acts of burning these toys became very popular in Russia and are presented as the burning of demonic creatures brought to Russia from the rotten West. This image of the enemy through the prism of Satanism has been created also thanks to a plethora of conspiracy theories, which show that today’s Russia has reached the point of delusional paranoia on a mass scale.

When Zakharova once falsely accused Margaret Thatcher of supporting a coup aimed at reducing the Russian population to 15 million, we could sense it was manipulative rhetoric designed to influence the thinking of Russian society. However, the situation is now different. Today, those who publicly express their discontent with the war are called “foreign agents”, who – just like the Illuminati centuries ago – are said to be secretly promoting cosmopolitan values within society.

In the same vein, Putin himself has made numerous public references to the “golden billion theory”, which suggests that Russia’s economic troubles are the result of an international conspiracy. This explanation is now also used as a geopolitical argument, as in the case of Grandpa Vanga (*Дед Ванга*), apparently a former KGB officer and a clairvoyant. Vanga is presented to millions of Russian viewers on the main TV channels as a military expert who foresees oncoming changes on the front line. He also reassures society that there will be no “Third World War”. However, when Vanga “predicted” that Zelenskyy would run away from Ukraine on September 17th or 18th 2022 and this “prediction” did not take place, he was fired from the NTV station.


Once the Satanic conspiracy theories settled in society, we could notice that the level of cynicism also went down. This is because many people simply believe what they hear and see. The situation seems to be the opposite for those who create the propaganda content. Some of them, like the former president and prime minister, Dmitry Medvedev, have undergone a huge transformation and are now among the most ardent political commentators on Twitter. Medvedev, for example, wrote in one of his tweets

One year of military conflict has resulted in the **transformation** of Putin’s rhetoric from geopolitical games to mystical thinking.

that the Ukrainian authorities are now open enemies of Jesus Christ and Eastern Orthodoxy and should be reminded of the words from the Book of Ezekiel: “for the disgusting things you have done, so that you will know that I am the Lord”.

Medvedev is not yet a religious fanatic but has not yet subjected himself to depostmodernisation but plays with its forms. Just like Jules in *Pulp Fiction* who before killing his victims would also quote from the Book of Ezekiel: “And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy My brothers. And you will know I am the Lord.”

Putting these tweets aside, as deplorable as they are, it appears that the Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has served as a catalyst for Russia’s depostmodernisation. The changes in the Russian discourse show a dynamic mechanism by which meanings of words and concepts are now shifting. One year of military activities has resulted in the transformation of Putin’s rhetoric from geopolitical games to mystical thinking. In this framework, the fictional and fluid purposes of this war, which included the demilitarisation of Ukraine, suddenly turned into an existential transformation of good versus evil. This transfer created a new eschatology of the Russian regime, in which life is overestimated and all that matters is martyrdom and death while fighting with the devil.

We can say that this totalitarian power has created a totalitarian war. The essence of depostmodernisation lies in a shift in discourse, which has been caused by a radical return of reality in the form of war and the subsequent failures of the Russian army and its mercenaries on the battlefield. Thousands of dead and wounded – with the same perspective for the next thousands – have narrowed the field of discourse from “anything goes” to simple terms: us versus them, good versus evil, life versus death. In the 21st century the Russian regime, through the mouth of its lead propagandist Solovyov, shouts: *viva la muerte!* 

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# From domestic abuse to Wagner's sledgehammer

## War as a product of systemic violence in Russia

MARIA DOMAŃSKA

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Russian war crimes in Ukraine and the terror against people in occupied territories will go down in the history books. In a sense, the Russo-Ukrainian War is a clash of civilisations. Wartime politics has exposed the long-known yet startling truth about the **low price of human life in Russia** – a product of a deeply entrenched culture of violence. There is a direct link between the war in Ukraine and the political disempowerment of Russian society.

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Both Ukrainians and EU citizens have been shocked by Russian war crimes, but equally shocking may be how Russia's politicians and military leadership treat their soldiers. They are nothing more than cannon fodder, utilised in the name of Putin's neo-imperial ambitions. Even more perplexing is the fatalism and the lack of resistance from conscripts sent to be slaughtered on the frontline, as well as from their families. However, the images of Russia's war that circulate around the world are only a piece of a bigger puzzle. They are the most brutal manifestation of the patriarchal culture of violence, deeply rooted in the Russian political system and social relations.

## Violence warping the Russian political system

Violence is inherent in the “traditional” system of values which the state apparatus and the Orthodox Church actively promote. The culture of violence is based on the cult of toxic (“hegemonic”) masculinity, which refers to hierarchy, control and legitimisation through force – the principles supposed to organise the social order. These all appear at different legislative, political and economic levels. Aggressiveness, rivalry and domination are appreciated and usually combined with xenophobia, chauvinism, misogyny and homophobia. An overwhelming amount of state propaganda employs hate speech as one of its essential tools. For years, propagandists and top state officials, including Putin, have extolled the destructive power of Russian weaponry, including the state’s nuclear arsenal. As philosopher and culturologist Oksana Timofeyeva has noted in January in her article for *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, the authorities offer the nation a rich “menu” where everyone will choose something for themselves. “If you don’t want to hate Ukrainians, you can hate Asians or gays. The main thing is to feel hatred towards the enemy.”

The patriarchy is accompanied by paternalism: those in power infantilise citizens and expect them to surrender their rights and freedoms and put their lives in the hands of the political leadership. The model of state governance also reveals the colonial-imperial mentality of the rulers. Russia is formally a federation, but in fact, it is an overcentralised unitary state where Russianness (*российскость*) is often equated with belonging to the Russian ethnos (*русскость*). The government’s ostentatious emphasis on Russia’s ethnonational diversity

Russia’s culture of violence is based on the cult of toxic masculinity, which refers to hierarchy, control and legitimisation through force.

only masks discrimination against non-Russian ethnic groups. This can be seen in both everyday interpersonal relations and state policies. The languages of ethnic and national minorities in education are downgraded while their cultural heritage is ignored. Ultimately, Moscow replaces these groups’ historical memories with a unified narrative of a “good Russian empire”.

Anti-colonial discourse is increasingly popular among non-Russian intelligentsia and activists. It is not rare to hear the opinion that eradicating minority identities has much in common with the officially declared goal to “de-Ukrainise” Ukraine. This allegation is stoked by the disproportionately high percentage of non-Russian conscripts forced to join the army (Buryats, Kalmyks, Bashkirs, Dagestanis and others). Even more alarming is the forced military mobilisation that targets small indigenous groups threatened with extinction, which calls into question their survival over the next few decades. This has affected, among

others, the Vepsians living in the north of Russia (their numbers have fallen below 5,000) and the Udege (living in the Far East and numbering below 1,500).

The way the ruling elite does politics largely matches up with the model of leadership that prevails in the criminal world. It is based on intimidation, the demonstration of strength, contempt for the weak, and the readiness to take revenge for real or perceived insults. This model has also entered the canon of Russian diplomacy and the broader political culture, thus making it fundamentally different from the western political culture founded on dialogue and compromise. The illegal military recruitment of prisoners by the mercenary Wagner Group is a quintessential illustration of the political and criminal spheres becoming tightly intertwined. It also demonstrates the ultimate unravelling of the judiciary and the link between crime and punishment.

Also, the state monopoly on violence has been, in fact, “outsourced” into the hands of criminal groups. Information on the mercenaries executing recruits who refused to follow orders or continue in military service was widely publicised in 2022. One of the executed, a former prisoner Yevgeny Nuzhin, was bludgeoned to death with a sledgehammer in November 2022. The video-recorded execution was a punishment for his voluntary surrender to the Ukrainian army. The sledgehammer has now become a peculiar symbol of Russia's fight against “traitors”. The authorities also introduced the cult of fallen criminals as national heroes, who have “redeemed their guilt” by shedding blood in the fight against the so-called Ukrainian Nazism. This “banalisation” of crime is intended to make the whole population complicit in the war and sow moral chaos to prevent anti-government protests. The cult of crime, violence and hate speech is supposed to “zombify” the audiences, making them obedient and susceptible to propaganda manipulation.

### **Slaves to traditional social roles**

The patriarchal family, school, army and interactions with the oppressive state have perpetuated the cult of hegemonic masculinity for generations. Interestingly, both men and women are equally responsible for bringing up young people in the culture of violence. As one of Russia's leading sociologists, Alexei Levinson, pointed out in an interview in February 2023, while women tend to support the war less often than men, there is no simple male-female divide with regard to the attitude towards “genuine maleness”.

A domino effect of oppression emerges where violence reproduces itself at various levels of socio-political organisation. As psychologist Stanislav Khotskiy wrote for the independent portal “Verstka” in May 2022, the socialisation of boys

and men in Russia (especially in the provinces) involves affirming strength and aggression; men should never show weakness or let anyone “humiliate” them. In contrast, relatively little attention is paid to critical thinking and intellectual reflection, leading to emotional infantilisation and fatalism.

In this way, a form of Social Darwinism is promoted: if one does not want to be attacked or humiliated, one should attack or humiliate others first. To feel safe, one joins those who seem stronger, and the rules of ethics or morality boil down to quasi-tribal thinking: they apply only to one's group. The “outsider” does not need to be taken into account. This approach excludes dialogue as a principal instru-

Under wartime conditions, service in the army is presented as the only effective and praiseworthy path to social advancement.

ment for building social relations. At the same time, it justifies “pre-emptive” aggression that must be accompanied by a deep belief in one's moral superiority and rightness. These principles are also reflected at the level of state propaganda. According to the official narrative, Russia was allegedly forced to invade Ukraine for the purpose of pre-emptively defending the Donbas population and Russia's security.

A Russian male can therefore only function in two roles. Either he dominates (and is then a “real” man), or he submits (which leads to a sense of humiliation and frustration). It is no coincidence that the motivation of many men going to the front, despite their full-fledged lack of support for the invasion, is the fear of violating the patriarchal canon of masculinity. In recent years, the belief that “a real man should do military service” has noticeably solidified in Russian society. According to a survey by the independent Levada Centre, between 2015 and 2019, the percentage of supporters of this opinion rose from 42 to 60 per cent. Moreover, under wartime conditions, service in the army is presented as the only effective and praiseworthy path to social advancement. It is to be assumed that a new social stratum, made up of those who have participated in the “special military operation” and their families, will underpin the further militarisation of public discourse.

In many cases, even the fear of death turns out to be weaker and more abstract than the embarrassment of violating a social norm, or the fear of state authorities in the case of refusal. People generally do not believe they can break out of the paradigm of social roles imposed by the system, especially in the provinces. Although traditional notions of masculinity are increasingly contested, particularly by young people in the big cities, the state propaganda machine and law enforcement agencies discredit this contestation as “hostile to the Russian civilisation”.

A key figure in the Russian patriarchal system is Vladimir Putin, who is surrounded by a growing personality cult. He exudes a loutish, criminal vocabulary and

presents himself as an “alpha male” in contrast to weak western leaders (Western democratic culture is sometimes explicitly referred to as “gay”) and “vulnerable” women. While Ukraine, including its armed forces, increasingly possesses the face of an empowered woman, Russian women appear in propaganda discourse in three ideal types, and they are always portrayed as subjugated. Firstly, the women’s job is to give birth to cannon fodder (according to a saying attributed to Marshal Zhukov that there is no need to worry about losses among soldiers because “women will give birth to new ones”). Secondly, women send their loved ones to the front: their sadness and fear must be dutifully accompanied by obedience to authority and pride in heroes. Thirdly, female clerks and propagandists are supposed to glorify the leader’s wisdom on TV screens and propagate hate speech against his enemies.

A powerful tool of the cult of violence instilled from above is the education system – from kindergartens to universities. It is not uncommon in Russian schools to see psychological and sometimes physical violence used against pupils by teachers (educators, in turn, are subject to political and psychological pressure from officials). Still, symbolic violence plays the most significant role in this context. It boils down to the authorities’ imposition of selected ideas and values to perpetuate their political domination. They are presented as the only legitimate ones with no alternative. Patriotic education classes are often reduced to promoting hatred against the “enemies of the fatherland” and the affirmation of war as a way to resolve disputes in foreign policy. The curriculum promotes the idea of the state’s primacy vis-à-vis the individual, as well as the cult of armies, territorial conquests, and strong, authoritarian power. Political repression – a particular manifestation of the state’s monopoly on institutionalised violence – is in fact presented not as a violation of the social contract but as an act of restoring order. Honesty requires mentioning that some teachers still attempt to boycott the government’s guidelines. However, the repressive apparatus and the administrative machine monitor the loyalty of teachers and students. Minors and their parents are harassed or persecuted by law enforcement bodies for expressing anti-war views. Among recent cases, in February 2023, school authorities in Yefremov (Tula region) called in the police and FSB because of an anti-war drawing by a sixth-grader, Maria Moskalova. The case was considered serious: her single father is facing prison for discrediting the Russian army, and the girl may be sent to an orphanage.

### **From the cradle to the grave: violence entrenched in Russians’ lives**

It is not an exaggeration to say that violence accompanies Russians throughout their lives. Moreover, Russian history has not witnessed any other model of state

organisation than the rulers' oppression of the ruled, reproduced in various dimensions at the lower levels of the social ladder.

Citizens experience humiliation, threats and direct physical violence in their contact with the state machinery, represented by officials or officers of the security services. According to research by the independent Levada Centre, in 2019, around ten per cent of Russians were subject to "torture" (serious physical or psychological violence) by state security bodies. Also, around a quarter of the population came into conflict with law enforcement agencies in one way or another and became victims of broadly defined harassment. Stunning as they may seem, these figures – according to sociologists – may be underestimated, as much of the violence is not perceived as a norm violation.

As the former director of the Levada Centre for Sociological Research, Lev Gudkov, put it, "violence has become part of the everyday norm." Violence committed by the authorities, a part of Putin's revived totalitarian legacy, is generally not met with opposition. Citizens passively adapt to rules set by the oppressive state; as they see no possibility of effective resistance, they accept the existing model of relations as natural and lacking any alternative. According to Gudkov, this attitude has become so entrenched that attempts by third parties to break this paradigm often provoke a feeling of discomfort and resentment. People who suffer from a nagging sense of injustice and lawlessness and, more importantly, realise that the injustice cannot be redressed, often vent their frustration on the vulnerable: women, children, subordinates, customers at state offices, and others.

Feminist organisations regularly complain about frequent violations of patients' rights in maternity wards. They are often objectified and suffer from physical and psychological violence during delivery, and medical staff ignore WHO recommendations. Patients in other wards are also objectified; the situation is particularly alarming in psychiatric hospitals. It is worth noting that the so-called repressive psychiatry (political abuse of psychiatry) has once again been promoted in Russia under Putin's rule and it has become one of the tools for persecuting the regime's opponents. According to the "Human Rights in Mental Health – FGIP" organisation, between 2014 and 2021, more than 30 people were victims of repressive psychiatry, among them the best-known case is the Yakut shaman, Alexander Gabyshev.

In a 2019 Levada Centre survey, a quarter of respondents announced that they had encountered domestic abuse in their immediate environment. Often, the official data on its scale are severely underestimated as many cases are never officially registered. According to calculations by women's organisations, between 2020 and 2021, more than 70 per cent (2,680) of all women killed during this period died as a result of domestic violence. In many cases, the tragedy could have been avoided if law enforcement agencies had responded to victims' pleas for help.

There are formidable systemic barriers to domestic violence prevention, among them a lack of adequate training and elementary sensitivity regarding the police and officials. A relevant law has never been adopted. Instead of properly targeting this issue, the Russian parliament did the opposite. In 2017 it partially de-penalised domestic violence (now the first beating is punishable only by an administrative penalty, most often a small fine), and the situation in this area has significantly deteriorated. The statistical data on female convictions also speaks volumes about the scale of the problem: in most cases, women convicted of homicide committed it in self-defence against domestic violence. Meanwhile, the repressive apparatus frequently persecutes organisations that help victims.

In 2021, prisoners' rights activists from the *Gulag.net* initiative publicised proof of systemic torture in Russian penal colonies (the acts of torture were perpetrated or organised by the Federal Penitentiary Service and FSB employees). Moreover, the prison experience is relatively familiar to a significant proportion of Russians. Historically, it has been one of the factors forming the Russian cultural code. During the Soviet period, around eighteen million people went through the Gulag system. Prison culture is not only popular (among some social groups, time in prison is still a typical part of male biographies), but also often romanticised. Prisoners are sometimes perceived as noble rebels, pursuing popular notions of justice. Moreover, the rules governing the criminal world (*понятия*) and prison jargon have permeated state politics and business. Vladimir Putin has been using them as elements in his leadership image for years.

In Putin's Russia, the number of prisoners per 100,000 of the population is one of the highest in Europe and the conditions in prisons are often deplorable. Also, prisoner rehabilitation remains at a very low level. According to a Council of Europe report from early 2020, the percentage of prisoners per 100,000 of the population in Russia was three times the average for member states (356 versus 103.2). The average mortality rate was around 70 per cent higher than the average, and the expenditure on prisoner maintenance was the lowest among the organisation's members. This results, among other things, in the dire state of medical care in prisons. At the same time, the average length of imprisonment was four times higher than in Europe, where it was around eight months. Moreover, there is widespread awareness that an innocent person can end up in prison at any time and that those responsible (corrupt officers, prosecutors and judges) will probably never be punished. According to Russian Supreme Court statistics, the percentage of acquittals in courts has for years remained below 0.3 per cent.

In Putin's Russia, the number of prisoners per 100,000 of the population is one of the **highest** in Europe.

## Society and war

For decades, historical propaganda, great-power rhetoric, and geopolitical revanchism have served as compensation for Russians' lack of political agency, deepening economic difficulties and lack of vision for the future. The acceptance of violence and war, however, is mainly passive and fatalistic. A large part of the public is used to being subordinate to the state and does not believe that individuals can influence the course of events. In other words, people often perceive the government's decisions as an unavoidable natural disaster.

Russians have been severely poisoned by the culture of violence, which they widely perceive as a norm. One aspect of this intoxication is their indifference towards the Kremlin-sponsored propaganda that spreads genocidal, anti-Ukrainian hate speech. Many question the basic facts related to the war and the very existence of objective truth. The hysterical hyperbole that officials and propagandists employ in their rhetoric has ultimately led to a severe erosion of language as a tool to describe reality. It is also worrying that, under wartime conditions, Russia's traditional contempt for human life has evolved into an open cult of death propagated by the state apparatus. Death for the fatherland is presented as a desirable alternative to a poor and meaningless life. Vladimir Putin and his leading propagandists have made such suggestions, and this message is also contained in social advertisements encouraging people to go to the front.

The "banality of evil" will remain a serious social problem in the long term. The massive influx of weapons and traumatised war veterans from Ukraine will only exacerbate it. There is a severe risk that Russia will witness increased violence unseen since the 1990s, both in the public and private spheres. Regardless of how and when the war ends, its long-term social consequences will likely prove disastrous for the Russian population. The legacy of the war will remain for decades to come. Russians will not be able to confront this legacy unless they regain their political agency. Only political liberalisation can become a cure and a vaccine against the culture of violence that has prepared the ground for today's aggressive war. ~~17~~

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# How Putin turned Russia into a failed state

ANDREI NIKOLAEV AND ANASTASIA SERGEEVA

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In 2014 Vladimir Putin and his propagandists did everything to convince the public that Ukraine was a failed state. By the end of 2022 the **situation appears to have reversed**. Over the last year, Putin has turned Russia into a failed state.

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On August 6th 2022 a programme on the YouTube channel BesogonTV featured a story about a prisoner who died in Ukraine during the “special military operation” while he was simultaneously serving a sentence in a federal correctional facility in Russia. The next day, Russia-1, a state-sponsored TV channel, aired his story as part of its daily news programme. As a result, the Presidential Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights sent a written request to Igor Krasnov, the prosecutor general of Russia, asking to provide this news story with a legal assessment. They informed him that thousands of prisoners had been released and sent to Ukraine to fight, even though they had not entirely served their sentences, including for grave crimes.

In mid-September 2022, a video confirming this information went viral. It shows a person offering prisoners the chance to join the war in Ukraine as part of Wagner Group, a private military company. The event took place in Correctional Facility Number Six in the republic of Mari El. The person who introduced himself to the prisoners as a representative of the group bore a clear resemblance to Yevgeny Prigozhin. In this video, this person claims that prisoners who had not yet served their sentences entirely were taking part in hostilities in Ukraine and killing Ukrainians. According to him, some of the inmates had died but those who survived six months of combat received presidential pardons “for their heroism”.

## Outside the law

This video and the written request of the Presidential Human Rights Council contain information about large-scale crimes and gross violations of Russian law. According to the Russian Criminal Code, such violations should be immediately registered and passed on to the authorities for investigation. However, on September 29th 2022, the prosecutor general informed the council that their request had been redirected to the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service. It is important to note that Krasnov redirected the request to the body, which is supposedly a subject of the investigation. This means a direct sabotage by the prosecutor general. The prosecutor did not file any charges and as a result, the mercenaries of Wagner Group continued to commit crimes on both Russian and Ukrainian territory.

On February 22nd 2022, “Decree no. 35-SF of the Federation Council of the Federation of the Armed Forces” allowed Putin to use the Russian army outside Russia on the basis of the universally recognised principles and norms of international law. The legislature gave its consent to the president to use only the armed forces, which are a state military organisation. As of February 24th 2022, in accordance with the same law, non-state military structures were not supposed to be involved in carrying out tasks for the armed forces outside Russia. Consequently, Putin exceeded his authority as commander-in-chief. He could not legally use non-state structures in combat abroad. Despite that, since February 24th the mercenaries of several commercial structures identified as private military companies, with Wagner Group being the largest, have participated in hostilities as combatants. Nevertheless, in his response to Moscow’s Deputy Mayor Yevgeny Stupin, the head of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov stated the following: “The organisation, which you call the Wagner Group, is not a part of the structure of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.”

Further activities by Putin and his circle aimed at avoiding criminal responsibility not only confirm that their decisions have been intentional, but also that they have been aware of the illegal nature of using non-state military structures in direct combat in Ukraine. They took conscious actions to conceal these crimes once information about the Russian prisoners in Ukraine were broadcast and the videos of the prisoners being recruited by Wagner Group went viral.

Thus, on September 21st 2022, Putin instructed the government and defence ministry to “define in full and as soon as possible the legal status of volunteers [fighting in Ukraine]”. On November 4th he finally signed a federal law which permitted volunteers of non-state military units to participate in combat with the armed forces. This law specifies that its provisions extend to situations that emerged after February 24th 2022.

Nevertheless, the Federation Council gave Putin permission to use the armed forces on the basis of universally recognised principles and norms of international law. Yet, neither the commander-in-chief nor the leadership of the Russian armed forces have complied with the norms and principles of international law. In fact, the use of mercenaries on Ukrainian territory contradicts these rules. The Geneva Convention makes it clear that contractors from private companies are not combatants but mercenaries. It is an international crime to send irregular or mercenary forces to carry out acts for the armed forces against another state.

### Complicit actors

There are numerous pieces of evidence online that confirm that the representatives of Wagner Group have been using mercenaries recruited from among Russian citizens and non-citizens who are serving criminal sentences in prisons. On November 14th 2022, for example, the Zambian foreign ministry stated that one of its citizens who was serving a criminal sentence in a Russian prison was killed in Ukraine. This person was named as Lemekani Nathan Nyirenda. He was a 23-year-old student. He was killed in Ukraine on September 22nd 2022.

Russian law declares that a mercenary is someone who participates in combat for the purpose of receiving a material reward. They are neither a citizen nor a permanent resident of the state participating in hostilities, nor a person sent there to perform official duties. Thus, according to Russian law, Nyirenda was a mercenary and his actions contained elements of a crime. Moreover, according to Russian military doctrine, a “military conflict” is a means of resolving interstate or intrastate contradictions through the use of military force (the term covers all types of armed confrontation, including large-scale, regional and local wars and armed conflicts). Thus, the so-called “special military operation” is a military conflict. The use of mercenaries, such as Nyirenda, qualifies then as a crime.

On November 29th Prigozhin confirmed that Nyirenda was a member of Wagner Group and took part in combat operations in Ukraine. There is no open-source documentation related to his release or terms of leaving prison. There was also no information about the thousands of other prisoners recruited by Wagner Group. This means that staff in correctional facilities helped these inmates leave prison in violation of the law. This, in turn, makes the officials of the Federal Pen-

Significant evidence online confirms that the Wagner Group has been recruiting mercenaries among Russians serving criminal sentences in prisons.



itiary Service accomplices in committing the crime. In addition to this crime, there have been at least 50,000 similar cases over a period of more than nine months. There is an abundance of information about these cases, which is available in open sources.

On November 12th last year, another video went viral. It showed the execution of Yevgeny Nuzhin by members of Wagner Group. Nuzhin, who was convicted for murder and sentenced to a 24-year sentence in 1999, had been taken as a prisoner

of war by the Ukrainian side. He confessed that he had been recruited in a correctional facility. He was then swapped and sent back to Wagner Group, which publicly executed him without any trial. On November 15th, Prigozhin allegedly appealed to Krasnov to investigate the case. According to Russian criminal law, such appeals must be considered within 30 days. However, to this date, the results of the preliminary investigation have not been published, and no criminal proceedings have been initiated.

Prisons and detention centres have intentionally provided Wagner Group with the possibility to recruit prisoners and illegally transfer them to a war zone in Ukraine, where they commit hideous crimes. The Russian authorities are certainly responsible for monitoring the correctional facilities and are not only aware of these crimes, but also involved in them by means of inaction, making them accomplices. Their complicity is possible thanks to Putin. Among those who are directly responsible for these crimes are Prigozhin, other Wagner Group members, the Redut private military company, and the military command of the Russian armed forces, which directs combat operations in Ukraine. The consistency of their criminal actions is evident because out of at least seven private military companies fighting in Ukraine, only Wagner Group was allowed to openly recruit prisoners. Redut and Military Unit 08807 use prisoners in the Luhansk region covertly, but, of course, they follow the instructions of the Russian military leadership, headed by Putin.

### **Presidential pardons**

Only on January 13th this year, the Russian Ministry of Defence reported that “volunteers from the Wagner Group assault troops” took part in the storming of Soledar in Ukraine. This was the first time the Russian authorities explicitly admitted to the involvement of mercenaries in combat missions. The illegal use of prisoners in combat, particularly on the territory of another state, undermines the foundations of Russia’s constitutional order. It destroys the protection of the rights of Russian citizens from criminal infringements, as established by the criminal legal system, and creates a threat to their lives, health and fundamental values.

In January 2023, a BBC correspondent asked Dmitry Peskov – the spokesperson for Putin – on which grounds prisoners are being sent to the war zone. He did not get a direct answer, but was told that this was arranged by secret presidential decrees. As mentioned above, there are videos from Russian prisons which confirm Putin’s involvement in making these mercenary activities possible. In one video, a man who is acting on behalf of Wagner Group, tells prisoners that while death is the only legal way for them to get out of prison ahead of schedule, he is offering them

a chance to get out alive. Those are not empty words. Due to Putin's unsubstantiated secret clemency decrees, tens of thousands of prisoners have been fighting in Ukraine, contrary to court-imposed sentences. When survivors return to Russia six months later, they are no longer prisoners but pardoned people.

In February 2023 a photo of a certificate of release from prison which belongs to one Wagner Group contractor was published in the media. The certificate was issued on August 29th 2022, in accordance with a presidential decree. The prisoner (or already a released person) was sent to war in August. But he received the document only in February 2023, after being wounded during combat operations. This certificate can serve as evidence that the pardon promised by Prigozhin was used by the private military companies as a means of forcing prisoners into committing crimes and assignments that unreasonably threaten their life.

If prisoners who agreed to a contract with a private military company were pardoned by Putin before they were sent to war, then the concept of clemency has been discredited in an unprecedented manner. Over the past two terms, Putin granted pardons to an average of five convicts per year. They were granted upon the request of state bodies, such as clemency committees in the regions, and issued by presidential decree. In 2021, six convicts were pardoned. In 2022, according to the lists of the criminal Wagner Group, about 50,000 of the "pardoned" prisoners were sent to war. Their certificates of release were based on a "presidential decree on pardon".

According to the ruling of the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation on July 11th 2006, the right to clemency is a direct expression of the constitutional principles of respect for the dignity of a human being, humanism and justice. Every convicted person has a right to seek mitigation of their fate, regardless of the nature of the crime committed, the penalty imposed, and the conditions of its execution. However, many mercenary prisoners did not have a chance to mitigate their fate. At least 4,000 dead and 10,000 wounded are the result of 50,000 presidential decrees. Each of them had a constitutional right to life.

### **Dysfunctional system**

The BesogonTV YouTube channel describes one case of a prisoner-turned-mercenary. Konstantin Tulinov was convicted seven times, including for attempted murder. Tulinov was sentenced to death for none of these convictions. In 2021, a court sentenced him to five years and eight months in a strict regime correctional facility. On July 14th 2022 he was killed in Ukraine, after having been used in hostilities by Wagner Group. Despite Tulinov's persistent anti-social behaviour, he had a constitutional right to live, which was something he was illegally deprived

of. The employers at the penitentiary, who were obliged to protect Tulinov, were involved in his case too.

Instead of preventing convicts from committing new crimes, a group of officials and persons in charge of private military companies, ignoring court sentences, enabled prisoners to commit new offences, i.e. they enabled people with a criminal record to commit intentional crimes again. Viktor Belkin, sentenced to 21 years in prison for the murder of four people, left his prison colony just one year after his trial. He was sent to Ukraine as a mercenary of Wagner Group where he certainly committed more murders.

Instead of correcting the behaviour of convicts, private military companies turn them into professional criminals and killers. At training bases, criminal skills are upgraded. Inmates are trained to kill with modern firearms and explosive devices, work in large groups and commit mass murder in organised groups. They are trained to become professional killers who lack a sense of accountability for their actions. In addition, they are financially rewarded for committing crimes: according to Idel.Real, convicts fighting in Ukraine receive 100,000 roubles (around 1,200 euros) per month plus an allowance for their participation in the hostilities. In this way, a person's dangerous criminal predisposition is stimulated and reinforced.

This shows that in Russia the system of criminal law does not function. Instead of providing security guarantees to citizens, it has been transformed into a system for training participants of organised criminal groups to fight in Ukraine. These individuals, including public officials, illegally form dangerous private armies of convicts without a high level of military training. Despite this, such groups are of value to the criminal community due to their persistent anti-social behaviour and willingness to commit crimes.

Russia's criminal justice has been transformed into a system for training organised criminal groups to fight in Ukraine.

On December 20th 2022, the Russian Duma passed amendments to the law on "Countering Corruption". This law was adopted to conceal corruption crimes by Putin and his associates. Under this law, the president is solely granted the right to determine if restrictions, prohibitions, requirements and professional performances comply with counter-corruption efforts. By means of this decree, he annulled legal anti-corruption mechanisms in relation to persons who participated in the war in Ukraine and their spouses. According to the decree, participants in the "special military operation" and their spouses are exempted from submitting obligatory income statements. They are also allowed to receive "remuneration and gifts of a humanitarian (charitable) nature from individuals and legal entities for participation in the special military operation".

This confirms that there is no rule of law in Russia. Its legislative “authorities” adopt laws and introduce bills aimed at concealing the criminal activities of the president and other authorities. Moreover, these actions have elements of complicity in the form of enabling grave crimes.

### **Mafia rule**

According to Russia’s criminal code, a criminal organisation is a structured and organised group or an association of organised groups which operate under a single leadership, whose members are united in the pursuit of grave crimes in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.

During a meeting with human rights activists on December 7th 2022, Putin publicly acknowledged the invasive, self-serving purpose of the “special military operation”, stating: “It may be a long process, but the emergence of new territories is a significant result for Russia. It is very serious. It must be confessed – the Azov Sea has become an internal sea of the Russian Federation.”

Thus, what are formally considered in Russia state authorities are in fact a criminal organisation – an association of organised groups of officials acting under the single leadership of Putin for the purpose of committing crimes for material gain. These actions are undertaken with the president and commander-in-chief of the Russian armed forces at the top, together with the prosecutor general, the defence minister, the commander of the Russian forces in Ukraine, officials of the Russian armed forces, officials of the Federal Penitentiary Service, and the management of private mercenary companies involved in the recruitment and use of prisoners in combat operations in Ukraine. At the same time, the actions of members of the Russian Federal Assembly in drafting “laws” facilitate crimes and contain elements of criminality under the criminal code.

In Russia we are now witnessing a process in which state power, including the judicial branch, the armed forces and the bodies responsible for internal security, have merged with private economic interests, including criminal interests. As mentioned at the beginning, the Russian constitution states that the sole source of power in the Russian Federation is its people. There was no mechanism for taking such powers away from Russian citizens. The attempts by certain social institutions to clarify the situation were blocked. In this text, we have argued that the case of Wagner Group demonstrates that the Russian constitution has been violated in the most fundamental way possible.

All the members of the Presidential Council of Human Rights who signed the statement to the prosecutor general were expelled a month and a half later by Putin’s

decision. This not only indicates his desire to cover up the traces of his crime. It also demonstrates that he is going to further usurp power in the country and destroy any possibility of control over his actions. State and public institutions serve as a cover up for the fact that all the power is held by him and his criminal network. In fact, Putin has passed the state monopoly on violence over to private hands. State authorities no longer control the use of violence in the Russian Federation, nor are they in charge of the fighting in the war in Ukraine. The monopoly on violence is one of the key powers of any government. If this power is lost, the state becomes a failed state, and this has now occurred in the Russian Federation. ~~EE~~

Andrei Nikolaev holds a PhD in law. He worked for the prosecutor's office of the Russian Federation. He held positions as an investigator at the district prosecutor's office, subject prosecutor's office and prosecutor general's office. Due to his refusal to assist in the usurpation of power by Putin's regime, he was prosecuted in a trumped-up criminal case. He is currently on an international wanted list in Russia. This is the reason for using a pseudonym instead of his real name.

Anastasia Sergeeva is a political scientist and the former chairwoman of the board of the VOT Foundation. She is one of the co-founders of the Association for a Free Russia (Poland), and a leader of Russian civil society. Currently she is the international secretary of the Civic Council – an independent initiative of the leaders and activists from Russian regions, who sustain a creation and development of the Russian military units in the range of the International Legion of Ukrainian Armed Forces.

# February lasts a year

VICTORIA ODISSONOVA

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Despite some popular convictions, there are Russians who do not support their country's war in Ukraine but decided not to leave. Instead, they are **creating civil initiatives** that help Ukrainian refugees who ended up in Russia. They also support their fellow Russians who are against the war and need assistance.

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To attend a protest in Russia is today almost akin to suicide. This is especially true since the new law on discrediting the Russian army was passed last year. It stipulates punishment in the form of imprisonment for up to three years for those who dare criticise the ongoing war in Ukraine. In addition, another new law on spreading false information or fakes about the Russian army or volunteers who signed up for the war states that a person accused of such an act might get up to 15 years of prison. Today there are several punishments prepared even for people who come out on the street with a white sheet of paper with nothing written on it. A similar fate may befall those who express their opinions about the war on social media and networks. A report about an anti-war post can be filed even by friends or family.

Through these laws, the Russian state sends a clear message to its citizens: if you do not agree with our decision to wage war, either leave or stay silent. However, not everybody can leave. And while some cannot leave for numerous different reasons, there are also people who are anti-war but choose to stay. They believe that they can be more useful in their own country than abroad. From the beginning of the full-scale escalation, most of these people have joined different civil society initiatives or created new NGOs and foundations.

## Lighthouse

The main driving force for many of those who stayed was to help refugees from Ukraine who ended up in the territory of the Russian Federation. According to data published by the United Nations, over 2.8 million Ukrainians crossed the border into the Russian Federation. Many of them were taken by force, but some did so voluntarily. Many of these refugees need assistance fleeing Russia for Europe, however, they also seek legal advice or look for accommodation and financial resources when they opt to stay in Russia. These people usually have relatives in Russia or, which is more often the case, do not know any foreign languages that would allow them to find a job in Europe or establish a life over there. Consequently, assistance initiatives which have been created as a response to these needs turned out to be one of the few ways for Russians in Russia to express their support for the Ukrainian people and oppose the war. Yet, by doing so they put themselves at a very high risk.

A small four-storey building in the centre of Moscow is decorated with a sign that has a small lighthouse with a bright orange roof. This is the symbol of a children's hospice called the Lighthouse, which was established here ten years ago by Lida Moniava. Lida, 35, has for many years been championing a humanistic approach to palliative care in Russia. To mainstream her vision of patient assistance she has been using her Facebook page. There she tackled such topics as the quality of life of disabled people, accessible medical services and dignity in death and dying. In Russia many of these issues remain taboos until today.

Since February 24th 2022 Lidia has started using her Facebook to write about the war in Ukraine. "It is impossible not to call this war a war just for the sake of preserving the hospice," she says in interviews, explaining why she does not call what is happening in Ukraine a "special military operation", as it is officially required by the new Russian legislation. She has been doing this fully aware that her foundation, which is helping terminally ill children, may suffer as a result of her publishing these opinions.

Also, the inability to remain indifferent to what has been taking place in Ukraine has pushed Lida to create a volunteer project which mobilised her hospice staff during nights and on weekends to help Ukrainian refugees who lost their homes, their belongings and have no relatives and friends. Overall, they had no choice but to leave their homeland and ended up in Russia without work, accommodation or any means to live. In March 2022 Lida and her fellow volunteers began to look for housing for them, started arranging medical consultations for those who were in

The main driving force for many who stayed in Russia was to help refugees from Ukraine who ended there.

need, offered help with paperwork, provided clothes and food, and even searched for jobs. Six months later, the project turned into its own independent foundation with the same name – the Lighthouse.

Overall, in 2022, the Lighthouse has helped 12,000 refugees who arrived in Moscow and the Moscow region. The organisation has now 41 employees and involves over 1,000 volunteers. Its structure is based on a system of curators who help refugee families from two to six months by being constantly in touch with them and reacting to their needs. Indeed, many refugees require assistance for only a short period of time.

Such was the case of a refugee woman who left Ukraine in her late stage of pregnancy. She moved to Russia with an aim to reunite with her relatives in Europe. Due to medical reasons, however, she was advised to stay in Russia until she gave birth there. Only then was she able to continue her journey to her final destination. To assist her, the Lighthouse volunteers looked for an OBGYN doctor and helped her with finding temporary accommodation. Yet there are also refugees who need help for longer periods of time, such as a single mother who fled the Kharkiv region with her two children. Her youngest son is two years old, while the eldest one is 12. They now stay with friends in Russia as they have no money to rent an apartment on their own. They decided to stay in Russia also because they have nowhere else to go. The mother has been struggling to find a job because her younger son often gets sick. She is trying to make a living by doing manicures, but the income she receives from this is not enough to feed the family. Thus, the Lighthouse volunteers have been collecting money to buy her some food.

As expected, many people who find out that the foundation has been helping Ukrainian refugees in Moscow ask why these people chose to come to Russia and not any other country, especially in Europe? “People who ask such questions do not understand the behaviour of a person who has not eaten for several days and was in mortal danger,” explains one of the foundation’s coordinators. “They do not care where they run. They do not have the pride that people sometimes imagine. They just want to live – and be somewhere where bombs do not explode over them.”

### **Civil assistance**

“There is no excuse for what is happening now. This is complete madness and we are made accomplices of this madness. It is impossible to put up with this,” said Svetlana Gannushkina in an interview she gave a few months after the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Svetlana is a Russian human rights defender and the head of the Civil Assistance Committee, which was created in 1990 as an

NGO that helped the first refugees of the *perestroika* era and later after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Over the past 33 years of its existence, the organisation has developed many areas of assistance. Last year a new area, namely assistance to Ukrainian refugees, was added to their work.

Even though the committee was recognised by the Russian authorities as a “foreign agent” and evicted from the building where it had been operating for many years, the Civil Assistance Committee continues to provide legal, psychological, medical and financial assistance to Ukrainian refugees who arrive in Russia. Its volunteers help refugees obtain official status, which allows them to obtain a residence permit and entitles them to apply for financial and legal support from the Russian state. According to statistical data on migration issued by the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, which was recently published by the Civil Assistance Foundation, only 12 foreigners received refugee status in Russia in 2022. This is the lowest number in Russia’s recent history. At the same time, according to the organisation’s report, as many as 98,632 foreigners have received temporary asylum in Russia over the past year. Out of them 97,591 are citizens of Ukraine. In December 2022, the organisation was accused of “discrediting the armed forces of the Russian Federation” even though posts on its social networks since February 2022 “have never mentioned the army in any of the statements related to the events in Ukraine”.

## Networks

If you wonder whether it is dangerous for Russian NGOs to help Ukrainian refugees in Russia and at the same time publically display their anti-war position, the answer to this question is yes. That is why many initiatives that engage in such assistance officially operate in dispersed locations. For example, while the founders of an organisation are usually abroad, from where they provide information and financial support, volunteers, who for personal security reasons are acting anonymously, remain in Russia, where they offer material help. A good example of such a network organisation is Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAS). It was established in late February 2022 to coordinate anti-war protests. Already in the first month of the war in Ukraine FAS became “one of the fastest growing anti-war campaigns in Russia” and gained over 26,000 subscribers on its Telegram channel. Thanks to their work, people who wanted to do more than political activism and truly help Ukrainian refugees in Russia joined FAS.

Since then, FAS has developed four areas of work: legal support related to labour issues, psychological assistance, assistance to Ukrainian refugees (deported and voluntary migrants), and assistance in evacuation for Russians who want to

leave their country. As part of FAS, several dozen volunteers and coordinators have been working in Russia and abroad. When abroad, they mostly carry out anti-war actions that cannot be done in Russia for security reasons. In Russia they work underground. They distribute anti-war leaflets and newspapers as well as help Ukrainian refugees. When refugees decide to leave Russia, FAS searches relocation options for them. Yet, if they opt to stay it provides them with legal and financial

Many anti-war initiatives in Russia operate in dispersed locations. Founders are abroad, providing support, while volunteers act anonymously in Russia.

assistance. FAS sees itself as a decentralised horizontal movement. This means that all areas of its work are independent of each other, people make decisions by themselves and do not affect each other's work.

A similar decentralised scheme can be seen in Kovcheg, another anti-war initiative that has arisen after the outbreak of the full-scale invasion. Its aim is to help Russians who have left Russia in protest of the war. The organisation's website and online chat rooms allow those who left Russia to search for new acquaintances abroad, as well as to find work in the new place and affordable housing. In several cities, Kovcheg has created co-living opportunities for those who need

them. Its website offers practical information not only for those who have left Russia but also for those who remain in the country. In its initiatives section, there is information not only about anti-war associations formed by Russians who have left the country, mostly heading to different countries in Europe or to Georgia, but also about regional projects which are now being organised in Russia. It includes a team of volunteers from Tula, which is a small town in Russia and the birthplace of gingerbread, but also a tank production site (what an unusual neighbourhood indeed). These volunteers help refugees who are staying in temporary shelters. They bring them all the necessities and help with finding more permanent housing. Another example can be seen in Yakutia, where several organisations have called for safe anti-war protest actions. Unfortunately, their peaceful protests against mobilisation last autumn resulted in the detention of participants.

### Self-help

One of the main questions that many of the Russians who have left their country hear is: "Why are you here? Go back to your country and change something there, go out to protest there, not here." It is very difficult to answer this question as those who are asked it know all too well that in today's Russia, protests change

nothing. Those who stayed in the country also understand that sad truth. That is why instead of risking going to prison for several years, they know that sometimes it is better to grit your teeth and keep silent. At the same time, you can always try to do something useful. That is why they choose to help refugees who suffer from the aggression of their own country. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that those who stayed need help. First of all, they need legal assistance.

Such aid is provided, for example, by the OVD-info project, which is an NGO created in Russia about ten years ago. It provides legal assistance to people who were detained at protests and innocently convicted. Last year most of their cases were related to the earlier mentioned law which stipulates punishment for discrediting the Russian army. As a result of this legislation, around 447 people are being prosecuted in criminal anti-war cases now, about 128 have been sentenced to prison, and one person died during an investigation. Seven defendants in anti-war cases are under 18 and more than 15 people reported torture by policemen during interrogations.

OVD-info offered even more help after the start of mobilisation in Russia, which took place on September 21st 2022. After its announcement, hundreds of men were sent to the front line without prior training. Most importantly, mobilisation was also directed at those who did not support the war and did not want to go to war. To help them, some of the existing NGOs started to offer new kinds of aid. One project called Support Service, which was established in the spring of 2022, has provided practical legal information on how to escape mobilisation. There is also a new volunteer project called Go by Forest. It is the only initiative in Russia which helps those who are liable for military service by instructing them on how to avoid conscription or escape from Russia.

One may ask: why do these projects aimed at psychological and legal support for Russians matter? Does it matter what happens to people who may die in the war because they participate as a part of the Russian military? Would it not be better to think just about Ukrainians? “Our task is to help the maximum number of people: the fewer of them pulling the trigger, the better,” explains Grigory Sverdlin, head of the Go by Forest project and former director of the Nochlezhka Foundation, which helps homeless people in Moscow and St Petersburg. “That is why we will help people to hide from mobilisation in Russia, to leave the country illegally, to desert. Life is the highest value: both the life of a person who is made to go to war, and the lives of Ukrainians on the other side. They can stay alive when the mobilised Russians do not come to Ukraine.” ~~EE~~

Victoria Odissonova is a Russian journalist and photojournalist. Her work, including articles and photos, frequently appear in the independent Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*.

# The historical advisors of Vladimir Putin

BENJAMIN LOOIJEN

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The decision to invade Ukraine was made by a tiny circle of people within the Kremlin. However, as it turns out, Vladimir Putin's "advisors" have something unique in common with one another: they have been **dead for hundreds of years**. What does it mean for Putin, the war in Ukraine and the Russian standoff against the West, when the Russian president lets his actions be inspired and driven by historical precedent?

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How many individuals does it take to decide upon invading a neighbouring country? After February 2022, the world learnt that you apparently do not necessarily need to consult a whole lot of people if you are intent on taking what is not yours. For sure, one could suggest that the fear of any leaks concerning your invasion plan could very well mess up your plans in the first place. Therefore, secrecy is a prime matter of recourse. As many found out in the early hours of February 24th last year – even within the Kremlin – the decision to invade Ukraine was taken by a very small circle of individuals, consisting of Vladimir Putin and his closest entourage of confidants.

This is surprising, for sure, certainly for those who consider themselves part of the *crème de la Kremlin*, and therefore entitled to any discussions related to decision-making of such magnitude. But it becomes even more surreal when, according to eyewitnesses described in a recent article by the *Financial Times*, these same members of the Kremlin elite confronted the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and asked how Putin could have planned such an enormous invasion among

such a tiny circle of confidants. Lavrov replied that Putin “only has three advisers: Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great and Catherine the Great.”

Regardless of the fact that it is difficult to verify if this story is true, and the fact that Lavrov is most likely using a figure of speech to convey a certain message to his stunned audience, he refrained from offering further explanation on this matter. Nevertheless, we can still ask ourselves the question of what it all actually means to a leader like Putin, the war in Ukraine and the Russian standoff against the West, if he takes heed of these historical individuals, as opposed to listening to the advice of other persons around him who might be a bit more grounded in reality and, not wholly unimportant, not dead? To do this, we would do well to consider these three characters from the pages of history and assess why Putin would be so particularly interested in exactly these three. For as it turns out: history is casting its shadow over Russian actions, and the outcome of the current conflict will have tremendous implications for the future.

### Ivan IV, the “not-so Terrible”

History has accorded to Ivan IV (1530–84) the dubious moniker of “the Terrible”. Although somewhat lost in translation in English, the Russian original was meant to mean something akin to awe-inspiring or formidable. Apart from a chaotic fire which consumed parts of Moscow early in his reign, he started off by modernising and reforming several aspects of Muscovite society. Among other things, he established a standing army of *Streltsy*, ordered the introduction of the first printing press in Muscovy, improved ecclesiastical regulations within the Orthodox Church and initiated the first gathering of the Muscovite feudal estates in the so-called *Zemsky Sobor*. He also made attempts to affirm local self-government in rural regions away from Moscow and established trade relations with western countries such as England. Ivan was aware of Muscovy’s relative weakness compared to the more developed countries to the West and as such set out on a path to strengthen Muscovy.

Putin attaches a high value to **history**. It features in his public speeches on a regular basis.

However, this is not what Ivan is remembered for. Indeed, Ivan’s conquests of Kazan and Astrakhan in the 16th century – the first cities which did not bear any relation to ancient Rus’ lands – are often seen as one of the first crucial steps in the development of Russian empire-building. In addition, as Ivan was raised in an environment of deadly court intrigue and noble boyar quarrels, and as tragedy and illness befell him and his wife, his paranoid, repressive and authoritarian ten-

dencies were strengthened. In addition, years of war pursued by Ivan strained the economy, through which famine and epidemics ensued. Furthermore, he implemented a unique form of repression in the shape of the infamous *Oprichnina*, a systematic policy of repression made effective by thousands of *Oprichniki* – loyal strongmen of Ivan who implemented mass repression of the boyars, confiscating their land and executing them. In hindsight, Ivan left his people and his land in the most unfavourable conditions for what was still to come – the “Time of Troubles”, which would cast a dark shadow over the country well into the 17th century.

Taking into account all of the above, it is difficult to see how exactly Putin could take any lessons from this idiosyncratic character of history. But perhaps Putin takes a whole different perspective on the matter. In general, Putin attaches a high value to the subject of history, so much so that it features in his public speeches on a regular basis. However, Putin does seem to take a revisionist view from which most historians shy away. For instance, on the subject of Ivan IV, Putin has in the past disputed facts surrounding Ivan’s life and actions. In this regard, he is supported by people such as Vladimir Medinsky, the previous minister of culture and current chairman of the Russian Military-Historical Society, who argues that the West was fighting an information war against Russia already in the 16th century. According to Medinsky, that which has made Ivan “terrible” in a negative sense, was concocted or fabricated by Europeans, who wrote slanders about Russia to please their masters. This view is further supported by some members of the Russian Orthodox Church, such as Metropolitan Tikhon (rumoured to be Putin’s confessor) and the late Ivan Snychov, who see in Ivan a bastion against the depraved norms and values of the West.

By turning Ivan IV into a victim of western disinformation and downplaying his own repressive actions, Ivan turns out not to be the man who left Russia weakened and impotent, but a wise and devout albeit troubled leader, who had to do what had to be done in order to save Russia from foreign influence and treacherous boyars. He is a man who stands at the beginning of Russian imperial conquest, thereby laying the foundation of Russian empire-building. The lesson to Putin then, is to continue down the imperial path, regardless of the human cost that might entail. For only in this way can he protect and strengthen Russia.

### **In pursuit of Tsar Peter**

Peter I (1672–1725), known in Russian historiography as “the Great”, left behind a different legacy in Russia which, in many ways, continues to resonate today. It is with Peter that the cultural divide originated between those oriented toward the



West and the Slavophiles. As the founder of Russia's cultural and erstwhile capital of St Petersburg, he transformed Russian society on many levels, with his reforms having a lasting impact on the land. He was a moderniser, to be sure, but was based on autocratic rule, as his modernisation efforts were built on the lives of thousands. Yet, his legacy is controversial in contemporary Russia to the extent that his rule inaugurated the cultural identity confusion which to this day still captivates Russia – the question of whether it is part of Europe or Eurasia, West or East.

It is with Peter that the empire truly began to take form. Just as Ivan IV did prior, Peter too endeavoured to strengthen Russia through the acquisition of territory and land, and thereby enter the European political arena as a great power. He, too, was keenly aware of the fact that western states were more developed than Russia. To rectify this, he set forth to engage the Swedish, who at the time were the predominant power in and around the Baltic area. Thus, the Great Northern War (1700–21) between Russia and Sweden shaped a large part of his reign, the result of which ensured that Russia became the predominant power in the east of Europe and secured for itself a place within Baltic trade.

The lesson which Peter might offer to Putin is of all three historical figures described here the most obvious and straight forward. We need not to look far to see how Putin assesses the importance of Peter. Quite recently, Putin has spoken favourably about Peter and his contribution to Russia's development. Rumour has it that Putin most clearly associates himself with Peter as his prime historical reference, even comparing himself to the historical ruler to the extent that he embodies him in a modern-day setting. What advice, then, does Putin receive from Peter? As Putin argued during the celebration of the former tsar's birth in 2022:

“Peter the Great waged the Great Northern War for 21 years. It would seem that he was at war with Sweden, he took something from them. [However] he did not take anything from them, he returned [what was Russia’s].”

Besides arguing that Peter took what is rightfully Russia’s to begin with, Putin even makes a direct comparison to the current conflict with Ukraine: “Apparently, it is also our lot to return [what is Russia’s] and strengthen [the country]. And if we proceed from the fact that these basic values form the basis of our existence, we will certainly succeed in solving the tasks that we face.” This is a blatant acknowledgement that the purpose of the war in Ukraine is to return that which has been lost, in order to strengthen Russia. The advice Peter gives to Putin, then, is that he should engage in the further “gathering of the Russian lands”, thereby fortifying Russia in the process.

### The wisdom of Catherine

The last advisor of the three is Catherine II (1729–96), also known as “the Great” in Russian historiography. As Peter I spent a large part of his life fighting and acquiring territory in the north and west, Catherine focused on the south. It is during her reign that Russia conquered modern-day Ukrainian lands, such as Crimea, through wars with neighbours such as the Ottoman Empire, and oversaw the partitioning of Poland in addition to suppressing rebellions. An admirer of western philosophy and Enlightenment ideals, she positioned herself as an enlightened monarch, equal to the monarchs of Europe. She too felt that Russia needed to develop itself further to catch up to the western powers.

Catherine the Great positioned herself as an **enlightened monarch**, equal to the monarchs of Europe.

However, various displays of autocratic power ensured that western philosophers distanced themselves from her actions. In her time too, the building of empire through conquest continued unabated.

Putin himself has spoken most admirably about Catherine and her deeds. Already in 2012 he argued that Catherine was one of the most effective rulers Russia has ever had. She was, in the words of Putin: “more effective than Peter I – less bloodshed, but more business”. He further emphasised that “under Catherine, Russia acquired the most land” when compared to other Russian rulers. In 2022, on International Women’s Day and after the start of the invasion of Ukraine, Putin took a moment to congratulate women in Russia by putting forward an example of a woman he admires above all: Catherine. “Her sculpture is placed here, in the Kremlin. She was not Russian by birth, but she was proud that she became Russian.”

Furthermore, Putin cites the wisdom of Catherine which for him still rings true today: “These lines: ‘I will defend my homeland with tongue, pen and sword, as long as I have enough life’ ... and in our time, the words homeland, mother and beloved, for us, are in the same row. It will be this way forever.” As Putin considers Ukrainian lands as historically part of Russia, once lost but now to be returned to the fold, he follows in the footsteps of Catherine. Russia’s rulers have always felt a sincere insecurity vis-à-vis their western neighbours and Putin is no different. Perhaps, in this regard, the lesson which this particular advisor gives to Putin is the oft-cited quote of Catherine that “I have no way to defend my borders but to extend them.”

### Continuing history

The lessons that Putin takes from his historical “advisors” made sense in their times and ages. Overall, the conquest and expansion of territory at the cost of others was a favoured tool of attaining power for monarchs and leaders worldwide hundreds of years ago. In this case, Russia certainly did not differ from other European powers. Furthermore, one could argue that these three aforementioned historical rulers all have one thing in common: the feeling of insecurity with regards to the West, and the building and strengthening of Russian empire as a countermeasure. However, this is an extremely costly and outdated endeavour in the 21st century, especially after 1945. In this regard, Russia has become an oddity, and seeks to return to a time when “might makes right” by ruthless geopolitical hard power play, inspired by historical rulers of the past which exemplify martial qualities.

The glorification of these martial rulers makes sense for those in the Kremlin, who are obsessed with history, and who try to justify to their own people the idea that Russia’s greatness lies in its historical past. However, for every single one of these historical leaders, one could just as easily describe their faults and folly, as Russia’s expansion externally did not necessarily strengthen it internally. Indeed, sometimes it even weakened it, through the economic, social, political and human ruin and fallout it brought about. All three of these rulers left behind complex legacies, the results of which in some ways continue to influence the thinking within the Kremlin today.

Putin’s conspiratorial view on history and world politics ensures that he and his entourage hold fast to a vision in which Russia has always been surrounded by enemies, which in turn has a substantial effect on the mental paradigm of those within the Kremlin. Although the West might see the invasion of Ukraine as a war of aggression initiated by Russia, Moscow operates from a historical sense of insecurity vis-à-vis the West. The war then, for Putin, suddenly becomes a defensive one,

aimed at preventing further western encroachment on Russian “historical” lands and the possibility that western influences might penetrate the motherland itself.

As his historical predecessors would advise, he only sees one way of countering that supposed threat: through the application of hard power. This is partly why the war is portrayed as such an existential and even religious struggle within Russia, as Putin sees it as the continuation of a long historical rivalry. As history casts its shadow over Russia today, the war in Ukraine is absolutely historic in scale, and so too will be its result. For depending on the outcome, it could mean the return and legitimisation of hard power rule in Europe, and a vindication of Putin’s historically inspired vision of the past, and with it, the future. ~~EE~~

Benjamin Looijen has a BA in History and MA in Russian and Eurasian Studies. He mostly writes on the history of Central and Eastern Europe. His research is particularly focused on how the past influences the present and vice versa, in addition to memory politics, and the history of international relations.



GDAŃSK

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# IT HAPPENED IN GDAŃSK

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**MACIEJ BUCZKOWSKI**

## **Declaration for the restoration of peace in Europe signed on behalf of Polish and Ukrainian local government service providers**

A delegation from the Polish city of Gdańsk travelled to Ukraine in November 2022. The main purpose of the visit was to donate a septic tanker to the city of Borodyanka, a locality that was particularly affected by the barbarism of the Russian aggression.

In Gdańsk, we work to assist Ukraine not only by hosting refugees. Our municipal service providers, such as Gdańskie Wody (Gdańsk Water Utility) or Gdańska Infrastruktura Wodno-Kanalizacyjna (Gdańsk Water-Sewage Infrastructure) have actively been participating in the campaign to support the reconstruction of key infrastructure in Ukrainian cities and provide them with the necessary assistance in crisis management.

Municipal services are crucial to the well-being and everyday life of local communities. This is why the Russian aggressor has been targeting them with such determination and cruelty.

Our representatives also visited Kyiv, where a declaration was signed to ensure the security of the people of Ukraine and restore peace in Europe. On the Polish side, the document was signed by the Deputy Mayor of Gdańsk – Piotr Grzelak – who was also representing the Union of Polish Metropolises and the Union of Polish Cities. The Ukrainian side was represented by the mayor of Kyiv – Vitalii Klitschko, acting also on behalf of the Union of Ukrainian Cities.



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Deputy Mayor Grzelak summarised the reasons behind the signing of the declaration as follows: “There is a need for regular and concrete dialogue between Polish and Ukrainian municipalities. We want to make this happen through closer cooperation for the sake of ensuring the safety of residents, on the one hand, and enabling Ukraine’s membership in the European Union on the other. Concluding this agreement in the heart of free Ukraine has thus a very symbolic meaning.” Grzelak also mentioned the moral imperative for Poles to support their Ukrainian friends: “In these dark days of human history, we pledge to maintain the friendship and close cooperation between our cities. It is our daily duty to ensure decent living conditions for all residents, regardless of their origin; therefore, we declare intensified efforts to meet these responsibilities. In particular, we will make every

effort to ensure that our cities remain a safe haven for women and children forced to flee the horrors of war.”

### Power generators and special tents

In December 2022 Gdańsk sent 19 power generators and four special heating tents to Ukraine. They were shipped to Lviv, Kherson and Kharkiv. This donation was made possible thanks to the openness and support of Gdańsk residents and Gdańsk municipal companies. The transfer of additional equipment to Ukraine was possible thanks to the support of residents, who contributed large sums of money to a city-based initiative called “Gdańsk Helps Ukraine”, but also thanks to the generosity of Gdańsk municipal companies, as well as a joint action of Polish local governments called “Polish cities for Ukraine”.

This shipment was the tangible result of an agreement signed in Kyiv in November 2022.

The Russian rocket attacks targeting energy infrastructure deprived large areas in Ukraine of access to heating and electricity. Assistance from Gdańsk was thus aimed at providing what Ukrainians lacked the most during the winter period. The heating tents that were sent to two frontline cities, Kherson and Kharkiv, made it possible for residents to warm up, charge electronic devices and use the internet.



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## Michałowó – Recipient of the second edition of the Paweł Adamowicz Award

The Paweł Adamowicz Award is granted annually for courage and excellence in promoting freedom, solidarity and equality. It was established by the European Committee of the Regions in cooperation with the International Network of Cities of Refuge (ICORN) and the City of Gdańsk to honour the late mayor of the city of Gdańsk, who was assassinated on January 13<sup>th</sup> 2019, while performing his public duties.

The award promotes Paweł Adamowicz's achievements in defending democracy at the local level and pays tribute and recognition to those who courageously and honestly stand against intolerance, extremism, hate speech, oppression and xenophobia. The recipient of the first edi-

tion was the mayor of Cologne, Henriette Reker.

By the decision of the jury, the recipient of the second edition of the award is a town called Michałowó, which is located on Poland's eastern border. Through its decision the jury showed its appreciation to the exceptional courage and solidarity that Michałowó's authorities and residents offered to refugees who are caught up at the Polish-Belarusian border.

In addition, the jury's special award was granted to Oleksandr Babych who is the mayor of a Ukrainian town called Hola Prystan and who was imprisoned and tortured by the Russians.

The winners of this year's edition were announced on January 13<sup>th</sup> 2023 at the library of the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk.

Michałowó's candidacy was submitted by two cities, Kraków and Wrocław,

which are also UNESCO Cities of Literature and members of the ICORN network. Robert Piaskowski, who is Kraków mayor's plenipotentiary for culture, read the declaration in honour of the recipients, justifying the decision of the award in the following way: "This is a nomination for the residents of the Polish-Belarusian border region – the municipality of Michałowo (...) We nominated a small town, a small municipality, or rather a collective hero: the residents and their mayor. The example of Michałowo shows how a human community can function at a certain time. We thank you for your civic courage, European solidarity, sense of justice and unwavering honesty. For fighting against fear, ignorance, stereotypes and anti-immigrant populism."

It is worth noting that Michałowo was not left alone by other Polish local governments. Gdańsk, for example, financed the so-called Mobile Assistance Centre which operates in the border zone. The centre had medical equipment, clothing, blankets, provisions and basic hygiene items. It was also adapted to serve hot meals.

The Paweł Adamowicz Award Ceremony was held in Brussels, on February 8<sup>th</sup> 2023, during the Plenary Session of the Committee of the Regions.

### **Ukraine Working Group meeting in Gdańsk**

On the anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a meeting of the Ukraine Working Group was organized at the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk. This is, at the moment, the most special-

ized team operating within the framework of the European Committee of the Regions, which aims to support Ukraine. The group is chaired by Aleksandra Dulkiewicz, the Mayor of Gdańsk. When organizing the meeting, Dulkiewicz wanted to ensure that a clear and coherent message was sent from Gdańsk to the outer world: Europe was, is and will be displaying its solidarity with Ukraine. The Committee of the Regions is an ideal place for such a message and a guarantee for its embodiment.

Participants who joined the meeting from Brussels included all members of the Group (13 altogether) as well as the so-called Conference of the Presidents of the Committee of the Regions which is composed of the organization's president, first vice-president and heads of all political factions in the committee. Other participants included members of the Polish delegation to the Committee of the Regions and representatives of the Alliance for the Reconstruction of Ukraine (including, for example, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Council of Europe, CEMR, Eurocities).

The first item on the agenda had an extremely symbolic dimension. On the anniversary of the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine and to honour its victims, the delegates lit candles at the Square of Heroic Mariupol in Gdańsk. The group was led by Vasco Cordeiro, the president of the European Committee of the Regions, and Gdańsk Mayor Aleksandra Dulkiewicz. The delegation of the European Committee of the Regions met at the square with a large group of war refugees from Ukraine who are now living



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in Gdańsk. They shared dramatic stories of the fate of their relatives, friends and residents of Ukraine.

From the Square of Heroic Mariupol the delegation of the Committee of the Regions went to St. Mary's Basilica where they paid tribute to the memory of their long-time colleague Paweł Adamowicz, who is buried there. As an active member of the Committee, Adamowicz always supported the European aspirations of Ukrainians, but also Belarusians, Moldovans and Georgians.

The session of the Ukraine Working Group was held in the library of the European Solidarity Centre. The meeting was chaired by the group's chairwoman, Aleksandra Dulciewicz. Representatives of European cities and regions not only summarized the assistance provided to Ukraine thus far, but also discussed plans for assistance in the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine.

Participants stressed how important the European perspective is for Ukraine. "The decision last year to grant Ukraine a candidate status to the European Union was of great symbolic importance. Although the accession itself is a long and political process, the reforms carried out on the way to it, will bring unquestionable benefits to the country. The basic criterion in this case is the rule of law with an emphasis on transparency and the fight against corruption," said Aleksandra Dulciewicz.

The head of the Committee of the Regions shared a similar view: "Ukraine is a European country that has been attacked and is in a state of war. The Committee of the Regions has condemned this invasion from day one and stands with the Ukrainians. Today's working group meeting brings an additional dimension to our relations with Ukraine, as it refers to its accession process. This process is



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being carried out at the regional and local level, and we – as the Committee of the Regions – are making commitments to this process (...) We want to help build a Ukraine that is sovereign, independent and integral, one where there is local democracy and respect for the rule of law, tolerance and freedom. And one that is a member of the European Union.”

Andriy Sadovyy, the mayor of Lviv, also participated in the meeting, joining the group via online. He pointed to the enormous wounds that Ukraine has suffered as a result of this war and is experiencing every day: “Lviv is now the largest medical hub in Ukraine, if not the world. Our hospitals have already received 11,000 people who are injured and wounded. These are our soldiers, these are women, these are children, these are the elderly. That is why we are now setting up a rehabilitation centre in Lviv. We are still won-

dering where to locate all those in need, where are we going to work, where are we going to get prostheses and medical supplies, because we should provide a good life for all these people.”

Ukraine, as an EU candidate, needs support in economic development, but also in the development of local self-government. This was very strongly emphasized during the meeting at the European Solidarity Centre. It also needs to tackle the remnants of the oligarchic system, which includes corruption. Ukrainians understand this need very well and, even at the time of the current aggression, are changing their country for the better.

After the meeting at the European Solidarity Centre, representatives of the Ukraine Working Group visited the UNICEF point which was set up for war refugees as well as the Gdańsk Water Utility’s warehouse from where another

shipment of infrastructure support was being prepared to be sent to Ukraine.

The final point of the Working Group meeting was the European Rally of Solidarity with Ukraine. Inspired and initiated by the Marshal of the Pomorskie Voivodeship and the Mayors of Gdańsk, Gdynia and Sopot, it was held on the evening of February 24<sup>th</sup> at a place symbolic of the struggle for freedom, dignity and democracy – the Solidarity Square. Hundreds of people demonstrated their solidarity with Ukraine. The theme of the evening was a message of European unity with Ukraine.

“The courage, bravery and steadfastness of the heroic Ukrainians are worthy our greatest respect. There are no words to condemn the evil carried out by the aggressor. However, we can give hope to the people who are affected by the suffering. Europe has passed the test of solidarity this year. This is our common merit. (...) Ukraine will be free and democratic, we will not leave you alone, and you will soon become a member of the European community and NATO,” Mayor Dulkiewicz said at the rally.

“For us, it is very important that you are together with us in these very difficult times,” said a visibly moved deputy head of the Ukrainian diplomatic mission to Poland, Olena Tsybukh.

“On behalf of the Committee of the Regions and cities across Europe, I would like to very strongly emphasize and send a message of solidarity, because we are with you. No matter what it takes, no matter how long it takes. You will never be alone,” declared Vasco Cordeiro, President of the European Committee of the Regions.”

Extremely emotional and moving was the speech by young representatives of the Ukrainian community: Olena Losovska and Anna Hryshakova. “Throughout this year, we all experienced a swing of emotions: pain, despair, pride in our army, paramedics, those who fight for the life of every Ukrainian, those who fight against the aggressor – Russia. This year has changed our lives forever. Ukraine needs, more than ever, the support of each of us,” Anna Hryshakova said. “This year has changed us. We found a new home in Poland, a place of strength, a zone of safety. Gdańsk has helped us and continues to help. Thank you to the women’s support centres and psychologists for treating the souls of those who were kidnapped, robbed and battered. It was also hundreds of tons of humanitarian aid, everything that has saved lives. We are grateful to Gdańsk residents for everything you do for Ukraine, for your open hearts.”

At the rally there were also musicians performing, including: Ukrainian rapper Skofka, the Baltic Opera Choir and the Music Everywhere Choir. A native of Rivne, aged 28, Skofka is a popular Ukrainian rap singer. His song “Hear the Anthem” has received over 35 million views. He creates music that talks about the drama of the war. Since his debut in 2019, he has become one of the leading artists on the Ukrainian rap scene. In 2022 he was nominated for the YUNA 2022 Award in the “Debut of the Year” category.

*Translated by Iwona Reichardt*

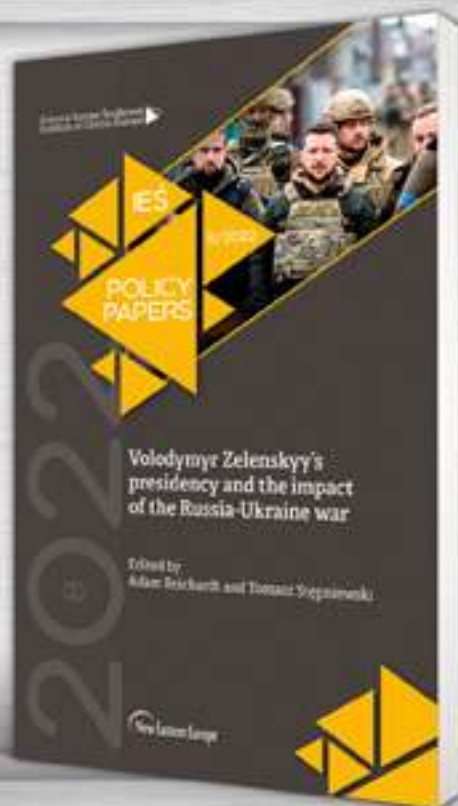
Maciej Buczkowski is the deputy director of the office of the mayor of the City of Gdańsk, Poland



POLICY  
PAPERS  
8/2022

## Volodymyr Zelenskyy's presidency and the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war

Edited by  
Adam Reichardt and Tomasz Stępniewski



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# Serbia–Kosovo relations

## Old issues and new pressures for an epilogue

FILIP MIRILOVIĆ

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After years of struggle, political corruption and non-compliance with obligations from both sides, the Franco-German proposal for Serbia and Kosovo came as some kind of relief for those who want to normalise relations. It can be seen as an **ultimatum for the political elites**, but also an opportunity for extremists on both sides to blame their opponents for “treason”.

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On the evening of February 27th 2022, the day-long meeting in Brussels between Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti, the European Union’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, and the EU Special Representative for Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue Miroslav Lajčák, finally came to an end. The public from both Serbia and Kosovo waited anxiously with a touch of legitimate concern for their leaders to address them. The meeting was a certain step forward, but still without a final agreement.

Nikola Burazer, the executive editor at *European Western Balkans*, stated for *New Eastern Europe* that the meeting went “exactly as expected”, explaining that “there were no conditions for some major breakthroughs due to there being many unresolved issues.” However, he added that it did represent an “important milestone, as both sides have agreed on the proposal in principle”, further saying that “the road is now clear, despite several obstacles remaining.”

Despite the proposal not being adopted formally, officials from Brussels stated that both sides unofficially accepted the agreement, after the meeting concluded. The relationship between Kosovo and Serbia is one key issue in Europe which must eventually be solved but remains baffling and without a productive agreement for many years. Yet, in order to understand the problem's complexity, it is crucial to start from the beginning.

### Lost hopes

Serbia – or more precisely the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – lost the war over Kosovo in 1999 and according to United Nations Resolution 1244, Yugoslav forces withdrew from this territory. In 2008, Kosovo proclaimed its independence unilaterally, which resulted in a series of protests in Belgrade, including the burning of the American embassy. The government in Belgrade immediately appealed to the International Court of Justice, demanding it review the legality of the declaration, but in 2010 the court decided that it did not violate international law, nor the UN Security Council resolution adopted 11 years earlier. The first stage of the following dialogues in 2011–12 was referred to as “technical dialogue” and led to many technical agreements addressing the most pressing issues of concern, though most were never fully implemented.

Four years after Kosovo proclaimed independence, the current ruling party in Serbia, the Serbian Progressive Party, came to power with the strong support of the EU and generally western countries. The political gossip at that time was that

The relationship  
between Kosovo  
and Serbia is  
one **key issue** in  
Europe which must  
eventually be solved.

the reason for providing such backing for former war propagandists was probably some kind of informal promise that relations with Kosovo would be normalised. And indeed in 2013 the new government took the first steps forward, signing the Brussels Agreement, formally known as the “First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalisation of Relations”. The EU was again the mediator in this process.

Although the recognition of Kosovo as a sovereign state has not been on the table, the agreement was already criticised as an informal recognition of Kosovo's independence. Certainly, it was the beginning of the process of normalising relations, creating ground for other processes, and compelling Pristina to officially form the Community of Serb Municipalities with delegated authority in such areas as economic development, education, medical care, urban and rural planning, etc. The community was also meant to have its own

president, deputy president, parliament and council. However, due to the decision of the Kosovo constitutional court in 2015, the Community of Serb Municipalities has not been formed to this day and remains one of the greatest obstacles for further negotiations, the so-called red line on which Serbia is not ready to relent. On the other hand, the same agreement led to the formal abolishment of Serbian institutions in Kosovo.

The process of normalisation stalled in November 2018 when the Serbian government made it clear that it would block Kosovo from becoming a member state of the United Nations, Interpol and the Council of Europe. After this crisis, Kosovo imposed a 100 per cent tax on all imported Serbian goods, which was only withdrawn in 2020 when both governments agreed to improve economic ties under an agreement brokered by the United States, known as the Washington Agreement. Serbia also agreed to suspend its efforts to encourage other states to either not recognise Kosovo or revoke recognition for one year, while Kosovo agreed not to apply for new membership of international organisations for the same period.

In 2022, the French and German governments drew up a draft proposal which was forwarded and introduced by the EU at the EU-Western Balkans summit in Tirana, last December. In the same month, Serbs from the northern part of Kosovo barricaded the main roads in order to stop Kosovar special police units from entering the territory where the Serb majorities live. Even some shootings occurred but thankfully without any casualties. Some believe that these kinds of incidents were orchestrated by criminal groups close to the Serbian regime, without actual support from the ordinary citizens, but it is important to emphasise that these same groups, which are currently on the US blacklist of sanctions, used to have very close ties to Pristina itself. The barricades were removed with the mediative help of the NATO KFOR peacekeeping mission, as well as US and EU representatives. There was once again some hope that the Community of Serb Municipalities would finally be formed.

### **The Scholz-Macron proposal**

The specifics of the 2023 Franco-German proposal were quite unclear for some time and remained the subject of speculation until the EU finally published them. However, it seems that both parties expected too much from just one meeting, no matter how important it was. The Kosovar public expected Kurti to come back with signed Serbian recognition, which is still quite beyond Serbia's current diplomatic red lines. On the other hand, Belgrade stated that no further or final agreement can be made without finalising the 2013 obligations from Brussels and forming the



Photo: European Commission

Albin Kurti, Kosovo's prime minister, on the left, meets with Aleksandar Vučić, Serbia's president, on the right in March 2023. The meeting was facilitated by the European Union and took place in Ohrid, North Macedonia. The issue of normalisation of relations is high on the EU agenda, however expectations on both sides remains a challenge.

aforementioned association for the Serb minority. Kurti, who still refers to the decision of the constitutional court, has still not given any promises that this is going to happen in any form. His official position is that some kind of association could be formed, but with far fewer jurisdictions than the original one, alluding more to traditional and cultural authority, instead of political and economic influence.

Andrej Ivanji, a journalist and editor with the weekly magazine *Vreme*, and a correspondent for various German media groups based in Belgrade, stated that Vučić alone said that this proposal is an “ultimatum” given to Belgrade and Pristina, “without the possibility to negotiate it”; and that it is effectively “unchangeable”.

“A rejection of such a plan would have led to the termination of the EU integration process and a withdrawal of foreign investments,” Ivanji repeated Vučić's words from national television. Further, this means a decline in living standards and a drastic increase in unemployment rates.

The Franco-German proposal consists of 11 articles. Despite the fact that the proposal does not mention the word “independence” explicitly, when looking at some articles it becomes obvious that signing it would lead to recognition in the near future. Article two states that “both parties will be guided by the aims and principles laid down in the United Nations Charter, especially those of the sovereign equality of all states, respect for their independence, autonomy, and terri-

torial integrity...” Further in article four it is written that “the parties proceed on the assumption that neither of the two can represent the other in the international sphere or act on its behalf,” as well as that Serbia “will not object to Kosovo’s membership in any international organisation”. The next one obliges both parties to neither “block, nor encourage others to block, the other party’s progress in their respective EU path”.

Burazer, the executive editor at the *European Western Balkans*, explained that this agreement is based on the “two Germanies agreement from 1972, which immediately gave both states widespread recognition and opened the door to them for joining the UN.” Ivanji explained that independence was de facto established on several points since they are referring to the equality of parties in negotiations. He added that placing a signature on that agreement would oblige Serbia not to block Kosovo from becoming an equal member of international organisations. Vučić said that such a condition means that Serbia is not opposed to Kosovar membership in the UN.

Albin Kurti said after the meeting that he was ready to sign the agreement, but that Vučić refused. Meanwhile Vučić told the public again that allowing Kosovo to take a seat in the UN would be a red line which he is not going to cross. So, according to him, Serbia will not accept the proposal.

Ivanji further notes that “If we are taking Vučić’s words seriously” and if the EU, US, France, Germany and Italy “do not give up their demand that Belgrade and Pristina sign that agreement”, then “Vučić on behalf of Serbia will renounce its EU perspective.”

Vučić’s trustworthiness in his manner of addressing the public is questionable, having in mind his previous statements about this proposal. In the autumn of 2022, his first reaction to the still mysterious proposal started with “it doesn’t exist,” and his explanation was that he did not see it, and that he will not even be taking it into consideration. After some time, Vučić changed his tone, stating that Serbia will accept it, but that nothing will be signed before the creation of the Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo.

The Kosovar public expected an agreement with Serbian **recognition**, which is still well beyond Serbia’s current diplomatic red lines.

### Noose around the neck

However, Vučić’s pro-western promises given back in 2012 turned into turmoil, with completely opposite propaganda aimed at the Serbian public, resulting in record low support for the EU integration process. Although the negotiations

between Belgrade and Pristina are being treated with a carrot-and-stick approach from Brussels, it seems that Vučić has ruined the opportunity to glorify the talks' positive effects given his previous anti-European narratives and propaganda. This threatens to cause some kind of political crisis in Serbia, turning the other right-

With the **resolution** of the long-standing issue with Kosovo, Belgrade will have many less reasons to rely on Russia.

wing parties against him, alongside a significant part of the population which shares the same ideological views.

Even the significant financial resources, scheduled for both sides if the agreement would be signed, as some kind of a prize, will probably not be enough for him to justify himself in the political climate he created in Serbia. Ivanji thinks that Vučić is in an “unenviable situation” due to the fact that he, alone, is responsible for forming the “pro-Russian and anti-western collec-

tive feeling in the society”, based on the “Kosovar battle myth”.

Right-wing parties which he effectively created are breathing down his neck and becoming stronger every day. On the other hand, pro-EU opposition parties are hiding, completely lost in the political arena which has little space for them. Ivanji stated that Vučić's final decision will probably depend on public opinion research and estimations regarding which move will threaten his position less.

### **Why is Kosovo important?**

The flame of war burns in the East and by all indications the war in Ukraine will not be over for quite some time. However, at some point, the time for negotiations will come. There is a reason why the matter of Kosovo is so important for the international environment to deal with as soon as possible. First, the pressure to resolve the status quo is inevitable in order to prevent any kind of potential conflict in the Western Balkans. Second, there shall not be any more open questions in Europe regarding secession, if Serbia directly or indirectly recognises the independence of Kosovo. After all, the Kremlin will not have any other cases to refer to in its own arguments. Lastly, with the resolution of the long-standing issue with Kosovo, Belgrade will have many less reasons to rely on Russia and the Kremlin would progressively lose its stronghold in the Balkan region. In the end, even if the final agreement has not yet been signed, some victories and defeats have been experienced on both sides.

One of Vučić's victories is the Community of Serb Municipalities. The EU and the US are pressuring Kurti to form it in order to finalise the agreement. The other is the non-existence of the term “independence” in the proposal. On the other hand,

within Kosovo, Kurti's defeat lies in not coming back with a signed agreement and creating a situation in which he will hardly be able to avoid forming the community.

When asked about the EU perspective on Serbia and Kosovo, Burazer, who specialises in the EU integration process in Serbia, explained that reaching an agreement on normalisation is “indeed a prerequisite for joining the EU, or in Kosovo's case, even getting candidacy status. But that the actual EU perspective”, he argued, “will depend on many different factors”. However, he does believe that “some kind of acceleration of the process might occur as a reward for making steps in normalisation.” ~~EE~~

Filip Mirilović graduated in political science and international relations and is currently enrolled in an international security master's programme. He regularly contributes to *Vreme* – a weekly magazine based in Belgrade, Serbia. He mostly deals with topics such as security and politics.

# The human face of Ukraine's reconstruction

## Veteran reintegration

IRYNA DOBROHORSKA

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With the full-scale invasion still underway and the number of defenders on the battlefields growing, the need for a revised comprehensive state policy on veteran reintegration is imminent. A holistic, coordinated and **human-centred approach** recognising the relevant combat-related experiences of this sizable population group will be the essence of any post-war recovery.

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Recently, Russia's full-scale invasion marked its one-year anniversary. While the end of the ongoing armed conflict is currently unclear, many international partners have already initiated discussions about post-war reconstruction. While the frontlines may still be shifting and the length of the war may be determined by western-supplied arms and the success of Ukraine's counteroffensive, there are some principles of social cohesion that tend to be slightly overlooked in narratives concerning Ukraine's recovery. The main reason is that Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction efforts are often tackled from a purely economic perspective, with GDP loss projections taken as the central piece of the narrative. While these are the indicators considered by international partners in determining economic aid and assistance, a more holistic approach focused on Ukraine's human capital should dominate the narrative.

The importance of human capital and social cohesion efforts should be integrated into the discourse on Ukraine's reconstruction for many reasons. Martial law enforced in Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion resulted in a series of unannounced waves of mobilisation in the Ukrainian military. Many men and women joined the Ukrainian army voluntarily, without having any prior combat experience. The Armed Forces of Ukraine comprised about 260,000 men and women before February 24th 2022. This figure naturally grew following Russia's full-scale invasion. According to different projections by the economics ministry, as well as the ministry of veteran affairs, between one and two million veterans after demobilisation will return from service. Some may desire to continue capitalising on their experiences gained in combat, whereas others may prefer to return fully to their civilian lives.

The strategy for the integration of Ukrainian defenders into the employment market, and the vision for their role in the Ukrainian state, is one critical discussion point which state and non-state actors should pay attention to. The ability of the state to offer a sound approach to veteran reintegration is also likely to determine Ukrainian society's level of appreciation for veterans, as well as its acknowledgement of combat-related issues and consequences which will require a cohesive and immediate response. A human-centred approach recognising the relevant combat-related experiences of this sizable population group will be the essence of any post-war recovery.

### **Who are the veterans and how to approach them?**

Since 2014, with the start of the armed conflict in the Eastern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, the role of Ukrainian defenders was elevated, given the importance of their contribution to maintaining the country's territorial integrity. In response to the ongoing armed conflict, the Ukrainian authorities established the ministry of veteran affairs, an executive body responsible for shaping state policy on demobilised soldiers and veterans. Being one of the newest ministries, veteran affairs has led efforts in passing legislation and fine-tuning the term "veteran" in contemporary Ukraine. The ministry was equally responsible for creating the system of social benefits to which the newly created group of Ukrainian defenders would be entitled to from the Ukrainian state.

The combatants who gained active and non-active experiences in the anti-terrorist operation, later renamed as a joint forces operation, were considered veterans in line with the newly developed policy of Ukraine. Prior to the full-scale invasion, about 460,000 veterans were overseen by the state as part of its policy

response. Healthcare support, housing, psycho-social support and employment were tackled since then by the state.

With the full-scale invasion still underway and the number of defenders on the battlefields growing, the need for a revised comprehensive state policy on veteran

The Ukrainian authorities need to lay the groundwork for acknowledging the efforts of the Ukrainian military ahead of demobilisation.

reintegration is imminent. As there are new defence structures involved in combat (e.g. territorial defence units) as part of Ukraine's armed forces, there is a need to revise the legislative definition of "veterans". In May 2022, the Verkhovna Rada (Ukraine's parliament) voted on legislation expanding social guarantees for veterans to members of territorial defence units.

While there have been initial efforts by the Ukrainian state to expand the term and consider new groups with combat-related experiences, the current legislative framework requires further attention. With the full-scale invasion, the frontlines around Ukraine stretched across multiple additional regions, from north to south beyond the eastern Donetsk and Luhansk areas. Respectfully, additional units in these areas play critical defence functions, from border guards to the national police and territorial defence.

The structures and capacities of the Ukrainian military equally expanded as a result of the western response regarding military supplies and training. While this is the general context, developments that are likely to continue evolving, it is critical for the Ukrainian authorities to lay the groundwork for acknowledging the efforts of the Ukrainian military ahead of demobilisation, as well as determine whether the other groups involved in border protection will be entitled to veteran status and will receive necessary state support.

### **Veteran reintegration ahead of reconstruction**

Pre-emptive measures led by the Ukrainian government are vital at this stage when national and international partners are launching multiple discussions about Ukraine's reconstruction. The Ukrainian government shall optimise the national legal framework and be considerate of ongoing contextual developments on the frontline where Ukrainian defenders serve. Revisiting the approach as who can be considered a Ukrainian veteran and laying the groundwork ahead of demobilisation would be an essential expectation of the Ukrainian state. Securing social guarantees for the defenders who protect Ukraine's borders ahead of their return to civilian life will equally serve as a sign of the vitality of the service in the wake

of the full-scale invasion. In 2023, the Ukrainian veteran affairs ministry launched a digital tool for the online registration of veterans, allowing the government to quantify the number of Ukrainian defenders, project the amount of wounded and sick, and align state policy initiatives accordingly. The digitalisation of veteran reintegration is only one of the tools which the Ukrainian state uses in responding to veteran reintegration.

Communication of the importance of the service carried out by the Ukrainian defenders shall be accompanied by actionable evidence-based awareness of issues that will require addressing. While the general employment market in Ukraine is likely to shift in the aftermath of the full-scale invasion, with millions of citizens relocating to peaceful countries, the discussion on Ukraine's reconstruction led by the state shall not impose the expectation on Ukrainian veterans to immediately participate in the economic reconstruction. Without a proper psycho-social support system, professional and educational training and an illustrative recognition of the efforts of Ukrainian defenders, a narrative suggesting the immediate engagement of veterans in the economy is unlikely to meet its goal.

### **Social cohesion comes first**

Ukrainian and international partners shall prepare the fundamental groundwork in the realm of social cohesion first. This will entail a comprehensive demobilisation process upon the return of veterans from the frontlines, in which Ukrainian defenders will not face bureaucratic challenges but enjoy comprehensive state support. Engaging competent groups of psychologists, psychotherapists and physical health professionals, as well as career guidance and social support systems, may be one way in which a human-centred approach to veteran reintegration in Ukraine is promoted. While in response to the armed conflict in Ukraine, the responsibility for overseeing the policy on veteran reintegration was assigned to the ministry of veteran reintegration, the modern-day contextual changes require much greater attention on the part of Ukraine's national and international partners. The president, EU and the US, as well as other ministries and legislators, shall demonstrate their commitment in recognising the priority of veteran reintegration.

A holistic and coordinated response across governmental bodies shall prioritise the importance of veterans for many reasons. Ongoing military service for many Ukrainian defenders is only growing in duration, with rotations lasting only a few days. Seeing family members for a limited period of time and facing health challenges as a result of combat experiences are likely to result in possible subsequent changes in mental and physical health. Addressing these issues will require not only

new rehabilitation centres but will necessitate a systemic approach to welcoming these defenders back into civilian life, studying their combat-related experiences and subsequent expectations for their civilian lives.

This is why strategic thinking involving not only the national parties but also the international community in post-war recovery experiences will be essential in developing a responsive system for veteran reintegration. War imposes many challenges and priorities for the state, which range from the prosecution of war crimes to the restoration of destroyed housing. Yet, the social cohesion dimension in the overall reconstruction framework will allow for the integration of the needs of this critical social group in modern-day Ukraine.

Whether the Ukrainian state will succeed in reassessing the needs of the veterans using their available tools and stressing the importance of veteran reintegration will equally determine the response from Ukrainian society. Upon a return from military service, a prevailing heroisation of the efforts made to defend Ukraine's territorial integrity may be overshadowed by a number of issues which are likely to float to the surface, ranging from traumatic episodes and an inability to adjust to the new reality among veterans. In even more aggravating scenarios, a possible rise in criminal activity and militarisation may equally be the case. Therefore, it is critical to start with reconstruction through the understanding of the needs of Ukrainian defenders, creating a responsive support system and promoting the smooth psycho-social and employment integration of these veterans. ~~EE~~

Iryna Dobrohorska is the Veteran Reintegration programme manager at IREX.

# One country, two borders

## How Poland differentiates narratives about migrants

GIVI GIGITASHVILI

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Poland used various discursive practices to shape diverging social perceptions about **two groups of migrants/refugees entering Poland**: those crossing from Ukraine, on the one hand, and those crossing from Belarus on the other. The Polish government's portrayal of the crisis on the Poland-Belarus border as a hybrid war, whilst helping Ukrainian refugees, was presented as being in line with Poland's national interests.

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Poland has been witnessing two very different waves of migration on its eastern border: the arrival of millions of Ukrainian refugees since February 2022, and the arrival of people, predominantly from the Middle East and Africa, through Belarus since June 2021. These two groups are quite different in their nature and origin and arouse different reactions both on part of the Polish authorities and broader society. While those fleeing Ukraine have been warmly welcomed, people trying to enter Poland via Belarus have been predominantly denied the right to apply for asylum and pushed back into Belarusian territory. From the very beginning, the Polish authorities have been stressing that the different treatment of those entering the Polish territory from Belarus and Ukraine was related to their different impact on national security. Given this, it is worth examining how the Polish government utilised strategic communication in response to the two crises on its eastern border.

As put by Christopher Paul, strategic communication is a series of “coordinated actions, messages, images and other forms of signalling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives”. The end goal of influencing the attitudes and opinions of target audiences is to shape their behaviour. The Polish authorities have been using national security rhetoric to both substantiate assistance provided to the Ukrainian refugees and to justify their refusal to do the same for those attempting to cross the Polish border via Belarus.

The government’s strategic communications aimed at creating favourable public attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees, and unfavourable attitudes towards people coming through Belarus, were driven by quite similar topics: national security, public security and economic security. The Polish example demonstrates that governments can use identical themes in their strategic communications to shape positive public attitudes towards one group of foreigners, while simultaneously trying to shape negative attitudes towards another group of foreigners.

### **National security above all**

The strategic communications during the Poland-Belarus migration crisis were largely driven by an attempt to present the situation on the border not as an ordinary migration crisis, but as an element of hybrid warfare being waged by Belarus and Russia against Poland. Without considering their cases and allowing them to apply for protection, the Polish authorities argued that people stuck on the Belarusian border were not refugees but economic migrants and that their arrival at the border was a state-orchestrated act. Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the ruling Law and Justice party, argued that Belarus was waging a hybrid war in retaliation for Poland’s support for the opposition forces in Belarus. At the same time, Polish President Andrzej Duda dubbed the crisis on the border with Belarus a “planned, provoked action” on part of the Belarusian authorities. Attempts to cross the Polish border from Belarus were described as “attacks” by Mariusz Błaszczak, the Polish minister of defence. Labelling the crisis as a “hybrid war” and the people on the Belarus border as “instruments” of this war can be understood as an attempt to dehumanise the migrants and trigger negative public attitudes towards them.

In contrast, since February 24th 2022, the Polish government has been calling people entering Poland from Ukraine “refugees fleeing the atrocities of war” and has been portraying assistance provided to them by the Polish people as a matter of national security. The Polish prime minister emphasised that “A safe Ukraine is also the Polish and European *raison d’état*” and that “the defence of Ukraine is also

the defence of Poland. Ukrainians are fighting for us [and so] we owe them gratitude.” He stressed he was therefore glad that “almost all Poles welcomed war refugees who needed support with open hearts.” Along similar lines, President Duda stressed that “Ukrainians are fighting not just for their, but also our freedom” and underlined that Poland should support Ukraine not only through supplying arms but also by accepting Ukrainian refugees.

Interestingly, the dichotomy in the treatment of both migration crises has been very clearly visible in communications by the Polish border guard, which publishes daily statistics on Twitter on how many “illegal crossings” on the Polish border from Belarus they prevented during the previous day and how many people crossed the Polish border from Ukraine. Their daily tweets about crossings on the Ukrainian border contain the hashtag *#Pomagamy* (“we are helping”), information on the number of people that have crossed the Poland-Ukraine border since February 24th 2022, and the number of those that arrived in Poland from Ukraine the day before a given tweet was published. The tweets about movements on the Poland-Belarus border contain information on how many “illegal crossings” were prevented, the nationality of the people who tried to cross the border, and the number of people arrested for assisting in the “illegal crossings”. The contrasting messages are a clear attempt to attach distinct labels to people arriving from Ukraine on the one hand and Belarus on the other. This is likely to induce different threat perceptions related to both groups within Polish society.

The **dichotomy** in the treatment of both migration crises has been visible in communications by the Polish border guard.

### **Public security is a priority**

In September 2021, Błaszczak and Mariusz Kamiński, the interior minister, asserted during a press conference that photos found in the mobile phone of one of the migrants stopped at the border with Belarus indicated sexual disorders of paedophilia and zoophilia. Based on it, they claimed that people who “stormed” the Polish border posed a danger to Poles and to Poland, adding that some of them were directly linked to the Taliban or the Islamic State. Polish government representatives also stated repeatedly that people who were trying to cross the Poland-Belarus border were mainly young men. The deputy head of the interior ministry, Maciej Wąsik, claimed that people on the Polish-Belarus border were “mainly men, young, military conscription age, strong”, and that there was no indication that they are threatened with anything bad in their country.

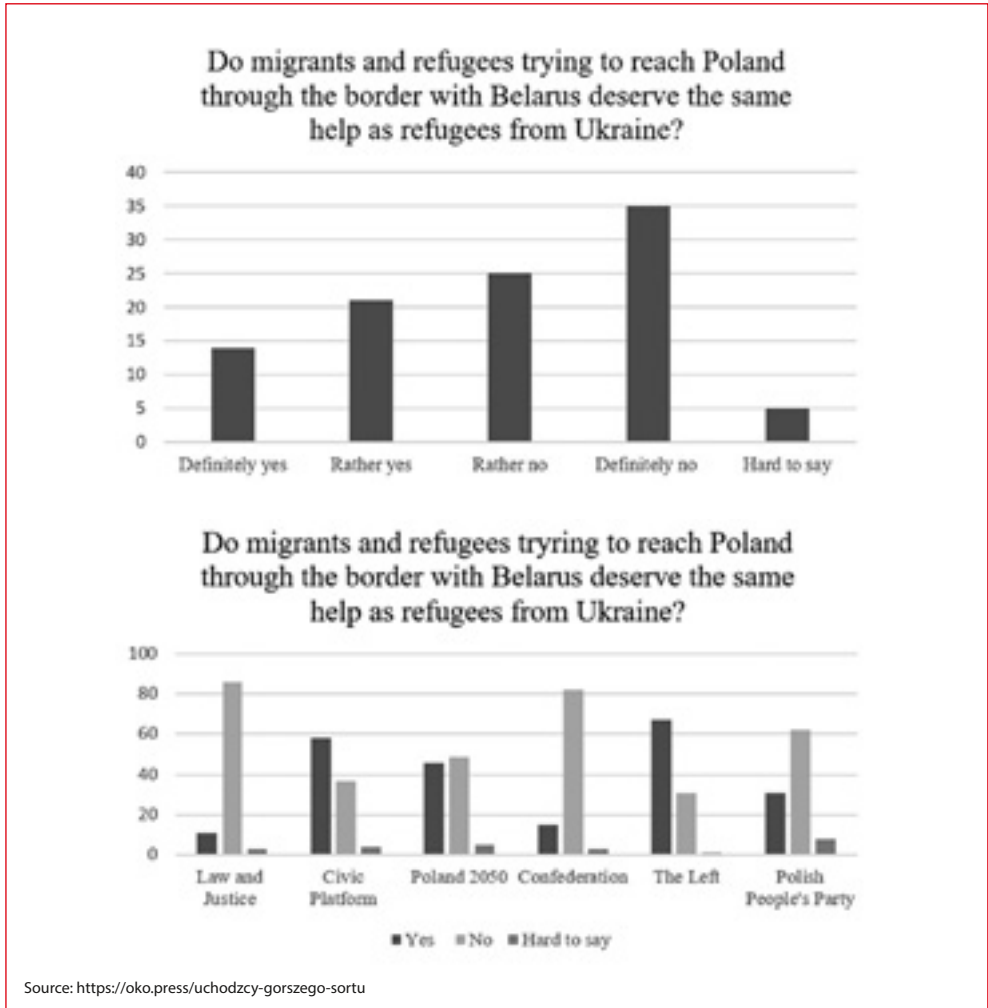
In contrast, Polish officials and state-controlled media have been stressing that the majority of refugees coming from Ukraine were women and children. The state-controlled TV channel, TVP, published an article with the headline “Shocking report from Ukraine. The drama of thousands of women with children and great help from Poland”. The prime minister argued that “out of the millions of Ukrainian refugees, women and children constituted the vast majority.”

On February 27th 2022, the official account of the Polish Territorial Defence Forces published two photos on Twitter with captions “refugees” and “migrants”. One photo with the caption “migrants” depicts young men trying to break a fence at the Polish-Belarus border. The second photo with the caption “refugees” depicts two old women sitting and receiving help from a person in Polish military uniform. The text of the tweet reads: “the difference between a migrant and a refugee? These pictures say more than a thousand words.” On the same day, the official account of the Law and Justice party branch in Brodnica posted two photos, one with young Ukrainian women on the border with the caption “these are refugees,” and another with aggressive men on the Polish-Belarusian border with the caption “these were not refugees.”

It is worth noting at this point that as the Polish state does not accept applications from people who crossed the border through Belarus, Poland does not have official statistics to prove that the majority of people on the Belarus border were men. Moreover, women and children also try to cross the border which is confirmed by the fact that the Polish border guard pushed at least eight children and their families back to Belarus from the Polish border town of Michałów. As for the photos presented during the aforementioned press conference, Polish journalists found out that some of them were screenshots of an old video available on the internet and therefore it is unlikely that they were personally taken by the person on whose phone they were allegedly found.

### **Economic security**

Polish politicians actively tried to portray people on the Belarusian border as “economic migrants” who wanted to enter the EU for economic benefits. Duda stressed that migrants “could afford plane tickets” to fly to Belarus and were coming in search of a better life in the EU. According to the Polish authorities, those trying to cross into Poland from Belarus were not “poor people who were fleeing from some danger”, but rather economic migrants “pretend[ing] to be refugees”. Błaszczak claimed that their motivation was “a drive to the European Union, a longing for luxury, a longing for places where you can live, receive benefits and not work”.



In contrast, Ukrainian refugees were presented as hard-working people potentially having a positive impact on the Polish economy. As the prime minister argued in May 2022, Polish entrepreneurs desperately needed a labour force and “the work of Ukrainians living in Poland can be a great added value to our economy.” On a similar note, Wąsik stated that the Polish agricultural sector was lacking in its labour force and the government would try to convince Ukrainians to move to smaller towns. Back in May 2022, the authorities were stressing that one in four Ukrainians who fled to Poland were already legally employed in the country, which was “unique on the global scale”.

Strategic communications conducted by the Polish government about Ukrainian refugees and people arriving through Belarus were reflected in the results of

public opinion polls. In May 2022, Ipsos conducted a survey asking Poles whether migrants and refugees trying to reach Poland across the border with Belarus deserved the same help as refugees from Ukraine. The majority (60 per cent) of respondents answered negatively. This opinion was most prevalent among supporters of the ruling PiS party (see the chart below). While it is beyond the scope of this text to investigate what was the exact role of government strategic communications in the formation of such attitudes, available evidence shows a significant correlation between them. This assumption can be confirmed by the results of an earlier survey conducted in November 2021, before Russia attacked Ukraine. Back then, the politicians from the ruling party and state-owned media channel TVP Info had already been conducting campaigns portraying migrants and refugees attempting to enter Poland through Belarus as a threat to Polish security. When asked how the border guards should behave towards those illegally crossing the Polish border, the majority of the viewers of TVP Info, as well as the Polsat TV station (which is also mostly aligned with the ruling party's line), were in favour of pushing them back to Belarus.

The Polish government has used various discursive practices in their strategic communications to shape social perceptions about two groups of migrants/refugees entering Poland: those crossing from Ukraine on the one hand and those coming from Belarus on the other. The Polish government's portrayal of the crisis on the Poland-Belarus border as a hybrid war legitimised certain measures against the second group, including pushbacks and rejection of their right to apply for protection, whereas helping Ukrainian refugees was presented as being in line with Poland's national interests. The key messages conveyed by the Polish authorities tried to portray the acceptance of people entering via the Belarusian border as a potential threat to the national, public and economic security of Poland, while welcoming Ukrainian refugees was presented as having a positive impact on these three domains. *EE*

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# Prospects and challenges for Central Asian states against the backdrop of Russia's invasion of Ukraine

DANYLO STONIS

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Central Asia has been known as a region that was for a long period of time incorporated into the Soviet Union and therefore influenced by Russia. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has undermined its **reputation and presence in the region**, and the emerging gap in trade and security is slowly being filled by China. How do these states manage such new shifts in geopolitics? And what trends may shape their outlook for the future?

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine has become a serious challenge for Central Asian states, which tend to consider Russia as their reliable partner in the security and economic spheres. However, Russian foreign policy treats Central Asia as an extension of its sphere of influence, which should be maintained by two international organisations led by Russia: the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Hence, Russia does not remain indifferent to the reaction of Central Asian states to the aggression against Ukraine. In the first months after the Russian invasion the expectations of CSTO member states to engage were high, but ultimately did not pan out.

However, Russia now intends to use the Central Asian states to bypass EU and US-imposed sanctions. These intentions are corroborated by the ongoing rapid relocation of Russian businesses to that region and attempts to find workarounds for conducting activities, such as re-exporting goods. For example, there have been US-imposed sanctions placed on Uzbekistan-based Promcomplektlogistic Private Company for supplying electronic components such as microcircuits, and Radi-oavtomatika, a Russia-based company which procures items for the Russian defence industry. Moreover, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were identified in a suspicious activity report issued by the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network as trans-shipment points, through which restricted or controlled exports have been known to pass before reaching destinations in Russia or Belarus.

### **Prospects and risks of regional cooperation for Central Asian states**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine created numerous challenges for Central Asian states. These challenges vary from operating in conditions of an economic downturn in the Russian Federation and its possible military weakening, to dealing with complications caused by excessive economic and security dependence on Russia, not to mention the need to diversify supply chains.

Under these conditions, a chance for closer regional cooperation between the five countries of the region is likely to emerge. The fourth Consultative Meeting of the Central Asian heads, which was held in Cholpon-Ata in Kyrgyzstan on July 21st last year, became an important platform for discussing urgent regional issues and challenges, such as border conflicts, the diversification of supply chains and water management. The council took place against the backdrop of social unrest in the region, such as the January 2022 Kazakh unrest, anti-government demonstrations in the Tajik Badakhshan Mountainous Autonomous Region, and the Karakalpak protests in Uzbekistan.

The internal issues of the region are exacerbated by an external threat from Taliban-led Afghanistan. An international conference on security and economic development in Afghanistan was held in Tashkent, to which a Taliban delegation was invited. The conference marks an attempt by Central Asian states to build relations with Afghanistan and advance their own interests, thus mitigating the threat to the region.

However, it is important to keep in mind that issues in Central Asia are not solely limited to security factors. The dependence of Central Asian economies on Russian imports, as well as labour migration from Central Asia to Russia, add to the spectrum of challenges. The gap created by the weakening of Russian influence

in the region would likely be filled by the Chinese. The People's Republic of China is the most significant and vital rival to Russian influence in the region. Yet, China's reputation as an alternative economic and security partner in Central Asia is threatened by regional anti-Chinese sentiment, which is driven by China's debt-trap policy and establishment of re-education camps for Uyghur, Kazakh and Kyrgyz Muslims in Xinjiang.

As a result, a desire among Central Asian political elites to strengthen regional cooperation may arise. Such an approach could contribute to the economic development of the region, as well as reduce vulnerability to external challenges and internal conflicts. Yet, the abovementioned meeting of Central Asian states demonstrated a severe lack of adherence to any forms of regional integration. The states' foreign policies would likely be focused on manoeuvring between Russia and China, rather than on the creation of a strong regional community. The signing of the Agreement on Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century in Cholpon-Ata forms the initial basis for building mutual trust in a region not devoid of inter-ethnic and border disputes. Nevertheless, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan refrained from signing the document under the pretext of the need for "domestic consultations".

The gap created by the weakening of Russian influence in Central Asia will likely be filled by China.

### **Kazakhstan: facing a challenge from the north**

Unlike other Central Asian states whose security threats stem from their southern borders, in Kazakhstan the risks are emanating from the north. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has exposed tensions in relations between the two long-time allies. Territorial threats, which occasionally come from Russian officials and state media, are perceived in Astana not as hypothetical, but as real. During his speech at the St Petersburg Economic Summit, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev noted that his country will not recognise the quasi-state entities in Donbas. Shortly after Tokayev's speech, on July 6th, the Novorossiysk district court ruled for the suspension of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC), a pipeline which pumps two-thirds of Kazakhstan's oil exports via Russian territory to the EU.

The suspension of the consortium took place the day after Tokayev discussed with EU representatives the possibility of using Kazakhstan's hydrocarbon potential to stabilise the situation in the European and global markets. According to Central Asia expert Bruce Pannier, the decision to suspend the CPC is evidence

of worsening relations between Russia and Kazakhstan following the outbreak of war in Ukraine. The suspension of the major oil pipeline urged Kazakhstan to take measures in response. On July 7th Tokayev held a meeting on the development of the country's transport and transit potential, during which he stressed the need to work out alternative routes for communication and delivery of goods by railway, as well as the diversification of oil supplies via the Trans-Caspian route. On July 11th, the Krasnodar court considered an appeal against the decision of the Novorossiysk court to suspend the work of the CPC and changed it, replacing the suspension with a fine.

### **Kyrgyzstan: balancing on a tightrope**

Considering Kyrgyz-Russian relations, it should be noted that they are overall a mixed bag. Kyrgyzstan is probably one of the most Russia-dependent states in the region. Kyrgyzstan is a member of the Russian-led international CSTO and EAEU blocs. The Kremlin has effectively patronised Kyrgyzstan by writing off Kyrgyz debts and allocating ten million US dollars to support the Kyrgyz budget. A majority of Kyrgyz view Russia as a destination for work migration. The accession of Kyrgyzstan to the EAEU in 2015 only stimulated this trend. It is estimated that as of October 2022 around 830,000 to one million Kyrgyz citizens are working on the territory of the Russian Federation. It is expected that Kyrgyzstan will support Russia and further deepen relations with the country.

However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was met with a backlash from the Kyrgyz authorities. Kyrgyzstan demonstrated its disapproval of Russian foreign policy by cancelling CSTO military exercises which were to take place in the country in October 2022, as well as suspending the service for bank cards of the Russian payment system Mir. This followed similar actions by banks in neighbouring countries such as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. At the same time, Kyrgyzstan has expressed greater interest in China's Belt and Road Initiative. At the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the president of Kyrgyzstan held a meeting with Chinese leader Xi Jinping, during which cooperation on the construction of a China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan rail project was discussed. Xi also named several priority tasks facing the two states within the framework of bilateral cooperation. In particular, these involved the implementation of the programme for medium and long-term development of trade and economic cooperation between Kyrgyzstan and China, and the increase in trade between the two states.

Nevertheless, while it seems that Kyrgyzstan envisions Russia as its largest trading partner and investor, as well as a top priority country for work migration,

most major infrastructural projects in Kyrgyzstan are financed and constructed by China. This balancing, however, is challenged by recent domestic and external factors, such as a return to the presidential form of government in 2021 and last year's clashes on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. China might view the changing form of governance in Kyrgyzstan and the frequent border conflicts as undermining its reputation as a reliable and stable country worthy of foreign investments.

### **Tajikistan: Russia as the security guarantor**

The situation in the region is becoming even more complicated against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine because Moscow has positioned itself as the main guarantor of security against terrorism, extremism and separatism in Central Asia. Tajikistan, for example, where the Russian 201st military base is located with the goal of protecting Tajik independence and constitutional order, faces the question of whether Moscow would be able to fulfil its obligations. In light of claims that Russia withdrew some of its military personnel from the territory of Tajikistan to participate in the invasion of Ukraine, the Tajik authorities decided to develop economic and security cooperation with Iran as a new potential security guarantor. In January 2022 Tehran hosted a forum titled "Prospects for relations between Tajikistan and Iran", which was dedicated to the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The forum served as a precursor for strengthening cooperation between both states. In June 2022 a joint meeting of Tajik and Iranian military forces was held in Dushanbe, during which the Iranian side expressed its readiness to provide support of any kind in the security sphere. Tajikistan also pledged to strengthen cooperation in combating terrorism, organised crime and contraband during this event. The establishment of a new security partnership did not receive any backlash from Russia and China, on which Tajikistan depends financially and economically. This is likely due to the fact that Iran is under sanctions imposed by the US and EU and therefore any rapprochement between Tajikistan and Iran is not considered by Beijing and Moscow as a drift towards the West.

### **Turkmenistan: in search of a customer for natural resources**

Russia-Turkmenistan relations present particular interest due to Turkmenistan's declaration of neutral status. Turkmenistan abstains from joining major international organisations in Central Asia, such as the SCO or the EAEU, instead sign-

ing bilateral treaties with other states. In 2017 Russia and Turkmenistan signed an agreement on a strategic partnership. The first official foreign visit by the new Turkmen President Serdar Berdimuhamedow was made to Russia, during which a declaration on deepening the strategic partnership between the two countries was signed. The major points of the declaration include greater cooperation in the field of countering terrorist and extremist ideology and propaganda, as well as money laundering and the financing of terrorism. The exploration and development of oil and gas fields was also discussed.

Despite profitable cooperation with Russia, Turkmenistan also established close economic ties with China. At the 2022 SCO summit, where Turkmenistan participated as a guest attendee, the Chinese and Turkmen presidents held a meeting. During this event, Xi Jinping stressed the need to increase the volume and scale of gas supply cooperation, as well as stimulate the links of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative with the Turkmen “Revival of the Great Silk Road” strategy. Turkmenistan-China relations further developed during negotiations between heads of both states in January 2023. After the negotiations, documents on cooperation between Turkmenistan and the People’s Republic of China within the framework of the One Belt and One Road initiative in the fields of green development, digital economy, healthcare, culture, sports, information and media, as well as gas cooperation, were signed.

Both Russia and China are interested in Turkmen gas supplies and therefore continue cooperation in the economic and security spheres. This state of affairs may change due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The concentration of Russia on the invasion provides an opportunity for China to become a major trading partner with Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan can also decrease its dependence on China by completing the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India Pipeline, which would allow Turkmenistan to bypass China and Russia. The possibility of constructing the Trans-Caspian Pipeline, which aims to transfer gas from Turkmenistan across the bottom of the Caspian Sea to the pipeline network in Azerbaijan and eventually to Europe, would also provide an opportunity for Turkmenistan to deliver natural gas to the continent, bypassing Russian territory. This would challenge Russia’s influence and help build the country’s position as an independent player in the region.

### **Uzbekistan: Playing its own game**

Uzbekistan, a double landlocked country located in the heart of Central Asia, possesses relatively powerful economic, demographic and military potential.

However, Uzbekistan-Russia relations present a mixed bag. On the one hand, Uzbekistan was distancing itself from economic and political unions with Russia. In 2008, Uzbekistan suspended its partnership in the Eurasian Economic Community, refusing to participate in the EAEU and, in 2012, in the CSTO. According to Frederick Starr, these withdrawals were based on the assumption that Russia would dominate the newly formed EAEU and use the CSTO as a tool for installing a military base in the Kyrgyz sector of the Ferghana Valley, therefore making the true goal of both organisations political instead of economic.

At the same time, Uzbekistan is interested in the development of economic cooperation with other post-Soviet countries. In 2013 the president of Uzbekistan signed a law to join a free trade zone with other members of the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), signifying the more active involvement of Uzbekistan in trade between CIS member states. The rapprochement between Russia and Uzbekistan was renewed under the leadership of Shavkat Mirziyoyev. In June 2019 Mirziyoyev stated at the 20th plenary session of the senate of the Oliy Majlis that 70 per cent of Uzbek trade is tied to Russia and the EAEU and that Uzbekistan needs new markets, hinting at the need to develop trade relations with other countries in Central Asia. In 2020 Uzbekistan was granted observer status in the Eurasian Economic Union. In 2021 Uzbekistan participated in the council for industrial policy of the EAEU, thus demonstrating interest in economic cooperation with other member states.

China also plays a significant role in the Uzbek economy. China sees Uzbekistan as a cornerstone logistics hub in the Central Asian part of the Belt and Road initiative. A portion of the China-Central Asia Gas Pipeline passes through Uzbek territory and China also invests in the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project. The implementation of the railway would give Uzbekistan access to sea and international trade routes which, according to Zilola Yunusova, an expert at the Information and Analytical Centre for International Relations in Tashkent, is one of the priorities of Uzbekistan's foreign policy.

China is also investing in Uzbek energy and telecommunications. China's Eximbank offered Uzbekistan a 65 million US dollar loan to build new hydroelectric plants as well as renovate several existing ones. Huawei, the largest telecom provider in Uzbekistan, also signed a 150 million US dollar loan agreement to upgrade the country's existing cellular networks to 3G/4G country-wide and to 5G in select regions by 2023.

China sees Uzbekistan as a **cornerstone** logistics hub in the Central Asian part of the Belt and Road initiative.

The current Uzbek government is actively working on the improvement of the business environment and investment attractiveness of the state. In order to achieve this quite ambitious goal, Uzbekistan needs to develop economic relations not only with Russia and China but also with other Central Asian states. Due to its geographical isolation and lack of direct access to the sea, Uzbekistan is interested in the development of road transport infrastructure and the diversification of international transport routes.

### Geopolitical challenges and changes

Central Asia has been known as a region that was for a long period of time incorporated into the Soviet Union and therefore influenced by Russia after the collapse of the USSR. Central Asian states even after their declarations of independence were led by former first secretaries in the local communist party. And for the most part, Central Asia remained part of Moscow's sphere of influence. Russia

Major geopolitical changes are causing a **profound impact** on the future of the economies and security of Central Asia.

built its reputation as a protector from the forces of terrorism, extremism and separatism, as well as a reliable trade partner and major buyer of oil and gas in the region.

Today, this region witnesses major geopolitical changes that are causing a profound impact on the future of the economies, societies and security of Central Asia. A new generation of Central Asian leaders and elites have come to power who are interested in the diversification of markets. Central Asian states now attempt

to establish trade and economic relations not exclusively with Russia but with other regions as well, such as South Asia, East Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

In order to successfully enter these markets, Central Asian states require the formation of new supply chains, which should be accompanied by modern infrastructure, sustainable energy sources and proper security. In this case, China is eager to satisfy the interests of Central Asian states, since they are considered to be a vital part of the Belt and Road initiative, opening the pathway for Chinese goods to European markets. Therefore, China invests in Central Asia by providing loans for the construction of new railway routes in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and pipelines in Turkmenistan. Another portion of Chinese investments is aimed at the development of the renewable energy sector in Central Asia. As a result, China is increasing its presence in Central Asia and becoming an influential player in the region, ousting Russia.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused dramatic changes in Moscow's image as an influential and patronising player in Central Asia. The prolonged invasion forced Russia to decrease its military presence in the region, leaving it susceptible to terrorist, extremist and separatist movements. At the same time, the partial mobilisation declared by Russia caused an influx of Russians who wanted to escape the military draft, thus further exacerbating Russia's relations with these states. The non-recognition of the Russian-created Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics by Kazakhstan, the refusal of Kyrgyzstan to participate in CSTO-organised joint military exercises, and the appeal of the Tajik president for Russia not to pursue a policy towards the countries of Central Asia like the former Soviet Union during the 2022 Central Asia-Russia summit, serve as key signs of regional disagreement with Russian policy. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan consider Russia as a potential market for their goods but refrain from joint initiatives due to the risk of Russian influence in the security and economy of the region, as well as the potential dependency of Central Asian states on Russia.

While the prolonged Russian invasion of Ukraine undermines Moscow's reputation and presence in Central Asia, the emerging gap in trade and security is slowly being filled by China. China prioritises Central Asia as a vital link in the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative. Yet despite the potential benefits stemming from cooperation between Central Asian states and China, this partnership is prone to security, social, economic and political challenges that are likely to increase. Niklas Swanström and Pär Nyrén identify four challenges and pitfalls in China's engagement with Central Asia: an inefficient international commitment to bolster security in the region and to assist in state-building; Beijing's engagement only with the central governments of Central Asia; China's style of management regarding its state-owned enterprises; and challenges in policy coordination between China's central governance structures and the periphery. These potential challenges reflect China's lack of engagement with the region and its capacity to provide security. The aforementioned gaps in China's Central Asian policy open a window of opportunity for Russia to restore its decreasing presence in the region by promoting the image of regional patron and security guarantor.

Yet, Russia's decline and the impact of EU and US-imposed sanctions are major factors that have also contributed to the rise of China's influence in Central Asia. The presence of China in the region will increase as China intensifies the Belt and Road Initiative. However, China will not solely dominate the Central Asian states. Russia will remain an influential actor in the region as a major market for oil and gas from Central Asia and a destination of labour migration, albeit not a primary one. Membership in the SCO and CSTO groups remains a pillar of infrastructural development and security stability in Central Asia. Central Asian states themselves

have started to act independently on the international arena by developing relations not only with each other but also with Turkey and Iran in the Middle East, as well as with Pakistan and India in South Asia.

The meeting of the Organisation of Turkic States in Samarkand and the consultative meeting of the Central Asian heads in Cholpon-Ata signify the first steps towards cooperation in the economic and security spheres and coordinated efforts to counter modern challenges and threats. The development of Central Asia will help to mitigate risks connected with China's debt trap policy and Russia's political pressure on the region. In order to solidify the position of Central Asia as a powerful and stable region in the international arena, there has to be an internal harmonisation of interests between the states within the region, a maintenance of relations with Russia and China and an implementation of domestic reforms, which are crucial for establishing peace, security and freedom in Central Asia. ~~EE~~

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# Noch ist Polen nicht verloren!

## Germany, Poland – and Ukraine?

MARCEL KRUEGER

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There seems to be a widespread inability in Germany to look at oneself from the position of others and to accept the **intricacies of history and memory** and their influence on the present. But it is not only the perception of place in the past that is the problem. For some in Germany everything east of the Oder river today is still lumped together as “Eastern Europe”.

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February 24th 1940, the concentration camp of Hohenbruch in East Prussia: on the eve of his 50th birthday, the Polish publisher, writer and activist Seweryn Pieniężny Jr. is beaten up, forced to dig his own grave and then, in his underwear, shot by Nazi guards. According to the writer Eugeniusz Tryniszewski, who published a short biography of Seweryn in 1987, his last words, shouted in German so his executors would understand, were “Noch ist Polen nicht verloren!”, Poland has not yet perished – the first line of the Polish national anthem.

The place where Seweryn’s defiance and resistance played out before his arrest and murder was not on the world stage of, say, Berlin, Warsaw or Moscow, but instead on the periphery. Always immaculately dressed, Seweryn, the son of the publisher of the Polish-language *Gazeta Olsztyńska* newspaper, which was founded in 1886 in the Prussian provincial town of Allenstein (today Olsztyn), was a prolific

activist for the rights and self-determination of the Polish minority in his small, conservative German hometown.

### Unfamiliar histories

Seweryn took over his father's business in 1918 and continued to publish the newspaper, which also operated a Polish-language publishing house and bookshop. He wrote regular columns in the Warmian dialect in the *Gazeta* and was a founding member and leader of the local branch of the Union of Poles in Germany, the main minority organisation of Poles before 1939. Seweryn also became active in the underground resistance after the Nazis rose to power in 1933. Together with the consul of the 2nd Polish Republic in Allenstein, Bohdan Jałowiecki, Seweryn recruited a group of young men from the Union of Poles, my grand-uncle Franz among them, to become spies for the military intelligence of the Second Polish Republic. Today, he is remembered throughout Warmia-Mazury and Poland, even though his legacy was first monopolised by the communist Polish authorities after 1945. Interestingly, they were seemingly happy enough to use a bourgeois figure that had published a Catholic-conservative newspaper as an example of Polishness in the so-called "recovered territories".

In Olsztyn today, the former German "Wilhelmstrasse" carries his name, as do streets in Koszalin, Ostróda, Iława and Kętrzyn. The red-brick publishing house of *Gazeta Olsztyńska*, destroyed in November 1939 as a so-called "eyesore" by the Nazi authorities and replaced with a public toilet, was rebuilt in 1989 as a museum, and the former town of Mehlsack (literally "bag of flour") carries his name: it is Pieniężno today.

In Germany, to which he addressed his last words, Seweryn and his actions are virtually unknown. This seems to be symptomatic when you look at German-Polish history and the relations between the two countries today. Many Polish places and their shared history are unfamiliar to a wider German public, and if they are ever featured in the media their story is often oversimplified or branded into something that will appeal to the German mainstream.

As Arkadiusz Łuba, a journalist and critic who also hails from Olsztyn but has lived in Berlin for the last 17 years, told me, "Olsztyn, a provincial town after all, plays no role in Berlin. There was once a seasonal flight between Berlin-Tegel and Olsztyn-Szymany airport, but it was more about bringing Polish migrants or the former German inhabitants and their descendants back as visitors to Mazury. Olsztyn is located in Warmia and was not the main focus even of this flight connection. In German reporting, whether in print or on the radio – I rarely watch

TV as I don't even own one – there is actually very little about Olsztyn. If there is, then there is nostalgic reporting about Mazury [the German “Masuren” is often branded as a romantic getaway and place of longing].”

“That can also be applied to the whole of Poland in Germany,” Łuba adds. “When it comes to European tourism and culture, Germans are more orientated towards the west and the south. You can see that best now with the Ukraine boom, which is big now as interest has risen with the war. As if there hadn't been Ukrainian films, theatre, literature and music before. In that process, Germany is squandering the chance to truly and openly take an interest in Central and Eastern European culture, to open itself up to it. Because of the war, it is only Ukraine. But there is also Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Lithuania and so on. It's a pity, really.”

### Asymmetry

Together with other writers and academics from Germany and Poland, Łuba has dissected German-Polish relations in a recent issue of *Osteuropa* (“Eastern Europe”), a longstanding scientific journal, one of the few if not the only German-language scientific publication dedicated to Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. The general sentiment is that there is an asymmetry, or maybe even an imbalance, in German-Polish relations today, an imbalance expressed both in language and the (perceived) lessons learnt from the past. German has remained the lingua franca for German-Polish relations, from basic communication between partner cities to political statements, to the language used in applications for cultural funding from Germany. For many in Germany, especially some political leaders and public intellectuals, their country has learnt from history thanks to its *Erinnerungskultur* or culture of memory: Germany has comprehensively “come to terms” with its National Socialist history and can now act from a position of moral superiority (blinking out the fact that right-wing violence across Germany is increasing constantly and that with the AfD a nationalist party with fascist members is now in the German parliament).

The general sentiment is that there is an **asymmetry**, or maybe even an imbalance, in German-Polish relations today.

This sense of moral superiority, combined with the tendency to only ever look inward and overestimate the importance of Germany culturally, politically and economically, does not only mean an imbalance in the interactions with its direct neighbour to the east, but also widely influences public discourse. This is not only



Photo from the Polish National Archive.

Seweryn Pieniężny (left) at work at the *Gazeta Olsztyńska* newspaper.

considering historical topics like the recent call for reparation payments for the Second World War from the Polish government, but also themes like LGBTQ+ and women's rights, abortion access, the treatment of refugees, and the backing of Ukraine. The full and continued support that Poland offers to Ukraine and its people – which has albeit slightly decreased in recent months also due to pressure on the housing market in Poland – seems baffling to those in Germany, who lack an understanding of the long history of Eastern European countries that have experienced first Russian and then Soviet occupation.

In addition, the constant, hysterical anti-German rhetoric that politicians from the Law and Justice party (PiS) and aligned Polish media have adopted recently only adds to such an imbalance and provides plenty of justification for those who want to argue for German moral superiority. It is often only these ideas and topics that are reported in the German media and these subsequently influence the view of Poland as somewhat backwards, as Łuba highlights in his analysis of German and Polish political cartoons in *Osteuropa*. The myriad examples of excellent German-Polish dialogue and continued cultural interaction and collaboration that happen on smaller, local and cross-border levels are hardly ever reported on. This brings me to a third layer of imbalance, one that I encounter often in my work: an imbalance in locality.

For over 30 years, the Borussia Foundation in Olsztyn has successfully promoted German-Polish dialogue on an ultra-local level. Borussia is a group of writers,

artists and teachers founded in 1990 and dedicated to the research of German East Prussian heritage and cultural dialogue. Since 2013, they operate from the former Jewish Tahara house, the first ever designed by famous local architect Erich Mendelsohn (1887–1953), which is now a centre for intercultural dialogue and named the Mendelsohn House. Borussia not only engages with the German past but also organises a variety of contemporary cultural activities. The Mendelsohn House hosts free readings, concerts and exhibitions and Borussia also organises youth camps, bringing together young people from all over Europe for workshops around the themes of peace and reconciliation. The foundation has been recognised for its work widely on both sides of the Oder, but even here the current public debate in Germany is a cause for concern. As the Director Kornelia Kurowska told me: “I wonder what damage the rhetoric of those in Germany who express simplistic positions of pacifism without acknowledging Russian aggression has on German-Polish relations. These positions are often adopted by those who have no knowledge of the realities in Poland and Ukraine, but of course the constant repetition of their positions in the German media is noted here in Poland, with bafflement and frustration.”

### Misreading

There seems to be a widespread inability in Germany to look at oneself from the position of others and to accept the intricacies of history and memory and their influence on the present. The fact that many of the German-Polish interactions and dramas of the past, like the fate of Seweryn, played out in places that are a part of Poland today, seems to mark these events as internal Polish affairs. But it is not only the perception of place in the past that is the problem. For some in Germany everything east of the Oder river today is still lumped together as “Eastern Europe”.

When I was a writer in residence in Olsztyn in 2019, many friends and family visited me there, often making it their first visit to Poland. All of them expressed surprise about the amenities and progress of Olsztyn with its old town, modern trams, shopping centres and the University of Warmia and Mazury, with its 45,000 students and staff. It seemed to me as if the stereotypes that have long survived in Germany, stereotypes of the so-called “Polnische Wirtschaft” or “Polish management”, a euphemism for mismanagement and bribery, or of former communist countries being dominated by bad infrastructure and pre-cast concrete buildings, still influenced how my visitors viewed the city of Olsztyn – and Poland overall.

That misreading of the locality does not only apply to Poland, but to Germany itself. As opposed to the mostly unified response of former Warsaw Pact states to

Russia's aggression and imperialism, states that have experienced Soviet oppression in the past and where there is no doubt as to who is perpetrator and who is the victim, support for Russia is extremely high among the population of German federal states on the territory of the former GDR. Here, decades of Soviet-German *Freundschaft* (friendship) propaganda, followed by decades of tales of *Wandel durch Handel*, "Change through Trade", and the very real jobs created thanks to the Nord Stream pipeline and terminals, have seemingly widely erased the memory of the NKVD camps that existed here between 1945 and 1950 where over 40,000 people perished.

I miss the big gestures that would allow more positive headlines in both Germany and Poland and provide an incentive to understand each other's places and history better. To mark the 60th anniversary of the Élysée Treaty between France and Germany, 60,000 free tickets will be made available in the summer of 2023 for young people from Germany and France to explore the neighbouring country. For the time being, while stories of "Polish joggers" and the "Fourth Reich" are being told in Berlin and Warsaw, grand gestures like this will not be possible, and positive interactions between Germany and Poland will remain on the periphery. But here, they flourish.

Far away from all the "Mazury romanticism", German and Polish rail operators DB and PKP have recently announced more trains on the Berlin-Warsaw route and even introduced a second intercity line from Berlin to Przemyśl via Wrocław and Kraków. Since 2016 there is a "Culture Train" (which can be used with regular tickets) between Berlin and Wrocław, which engages passengers through bilingual readings, music, performances, an on-board library, and visual arts exhibitions. The

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German translation of Karolina Kuszyk's non-fiction book *Poniemieckie* (Former German), which explores the Polish views and experience of the so-called "recovered territories" of Pomerania, Silesia and East Prussia, remains in the book charts of the German *Der Spiegel* magazine for its sixth week at the time of writing. This clearly shows that there exists an interest in Germany in the intricacies of the other bank of the Oder.

In Olsztyn, where the stern face of Seweryn stares at passers-by from his monument in front of the Olsztyn Graphic Works building, members of Borussia, like historian Robert Traba or Kornelia Kurowska, are regularly consulted by the city administration. The same administration has recently created a small memorial park for a former German Protestant cemetery that was discovered during the construction of a new urban train station. The people that were interred here are listed on memorial walls and the few headstones recovered were set up again – an

outstanding fact considering that headstones and grave enclosures of abandoned German cemeteries were often used as building materials immediately after 1945.

If small gestures like this are possible in the periphery, I hope that Germans will, encouraged by Russian aggression and the response of Poland and other countries to that aggression, be able to move from an inward view to a much broader one. They might be surprised at what they can find on the periphery, for good or bad, but it will definitely help them understand that not everything revolves around Germany. Besides cultural and historical reconciliation, there are even indicators for further, future-proof collaborations here that would have completely flabbergasted Seweryn: the Polish city of Zamość, one of the main gateways from Poland to Ukraine, has since early February been defended by a battery of German Patriot anti-aircraft systems. In a recent interview with the main German news channel *Tagesschau*, the commander stressed the excellent collaboration with the Polish forces on the ground. ~~EE~~

Marcel Krueger is a German non-fiction writer and translator living in Ireland, who explores themes of memory, identity and migration through family history and his own existence as an emigrant. He is a former fellow of the German Culture Forum for Central and Eastern Europe and in 2019 worked as the official writer-in-residence of Olsztyn in northern Poland, a region to which he remains closely linked.

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# Bosnia's wartime prime minister on reconciliation

LEON HARTWELL

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Haris Silajdžić served as the minister of foreign affairs and then prime minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Bosnian War. Through his experience he understands **the horrors and pain** felt during the genocidal actions of Serbs at that time and knows what it takes to finally overcome that terrible period. Today, 30 years after the Bosnian war started, he still dreams of a reconciliation between different identity groups.

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A few months ago, in Sarajevo, I met up with Bosnia and Herzegovina's wartime prime minister, Haris Silajdžić. He has a certain squint in his eyes that gives the impression that he has witnessed a lot during his lifetime, which is in fact true. He lived through the collapse of the former Yugoslavia and occupied high office during the Bosnian War and in its aftermath. To this day, the septuagenarian's mind is still razor sharp and he has the ability to dive into political issues taking place halfway around the world. Even in his old age, Silajdžić possesses that charm and charisma that I read and heard about in earlier years. When I visited Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country that is more unstable today than in the past two decades, some of his supporters pressured him to run for president again, a position he held in the post-war period, but he refused. He pontificates that it is up to Bosnia's youth to transform the country (and he is right about that!).

## Revisiting horror through poetry

When he was a young man, Silajdžić left Yugoslavia to conduct research in the United States. He told me a few interesting stories about his encounters with race and racism in Washington DC. At the time, he made sure he stayed close to the Library of Congress and the National Archives in order to access their extraordinary collections. Those years in Washington helped prepare him for his future role when he had to encourage Americans to provide support to the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war. He recounted to me how, during the

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Bosnian War, David L. Phillips helped him – a Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) – to get in touch with a Jewish lobbying firm and secure an interview on *Larry King Live*. Being on the premier talk show of its time went a long way in helping Silajdžić to present the Bosnian government's plight to the world.

For the most part, Silajdžić likes to be left alone. He spends his days writing poetry, meditating and studying metaphysics. One of the poems that I happened to stumble across is entitled "Srebrenica Forgiveness". The poem struck a chord with me because it has several elements in it about transitional justice. He lost his hardcopy of the poem, so he seemed rather pleased when I told him that I have a soft copy on my Kindle. After a Balkan dinner in the basement of a prominent hotel in Sarajevo, Silajdžić allowed me to record him while he recited "Srebrenica Forgiveness". The first part of the poem is about genocide denial, a national sport in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkan region, and it paints a bloody picture to the reader about the experience of the Srebrenica genocide from the victim's perspective:

*That bloodstain  
on the forehead of posterity  
with bloodied palms  
you want to erase  
hope bloodied you gave them  
in bloodied nightmares to suffocate  
Through bloodied soil you trudge  
in the dark  
your tired fingers grope  
feeling for the light  
where tears should be  
in your eyes blood sweat*

The poem then alludes to the fact that “those who put [their victims] on the path of blood” were “[hiding] behind God”. Indeed, the Serbian Orthodox Church frequently gave its blessing to those who committed genocide against Bosniaks.

Later in the poem, Silajdžić appeals to perpetrators to come forward with the truth about their crimes, not only to those whom they brutally murdered, but also to the other victims of the war: the family and friends of the dead who continue to endure great suffering. He writes, “Let the truth emerge,” but then he ponders whether it is possible to ask for “forgiveness”. His answer is an unwavering “yes”, but it is a complicated endeavour nevertheless:

*Asking for forgiveness?  
Behold  
there it is  
in the eyes of a mother  
still mourning her children,  
in the graves of Srebrenica  
it may be  
There and there only  
it may be  
There and only there  
your salvation must be*

In the poem, Silajdžić also makes a reference to a “bridge”, which symbolises reconciliation. Half of the bridge, he says, is built when perpetrators tell the truth about their crimes and ask for forgiveness, while the other half is constructed once the victims grant forgiveness to those who harmed them and their family members.

Further along the poem, a shift in roles occurs as he moves to the perspective of the perpetrators, who finally ask for forgiveness from those whom they have murdered:

*Raise your hand  
you whom I have killed  
raise both hands  
raise both hands  
with wire tied  
in the hour of death  
Place them on my heart  
Bless  
with pure water  
to wash my hands  
that bloodstain to erase  
posterity their head to raise*

But the statesman-turned-poet is not done yet. Silajdžić implores the perpetrators once more to ask for forgiveness, and tells them to completely expose the brutality of their deeds to the public:

*Shout then  
Top of your lungs:  
Yes  
I am the henchman  
I am the killer  
I am guilty  
For nothing I have killed but  
their voracious hate-pit to fill  
Forgive me  
if you can  
I have shed your blood  
for your mercy now I beg  
I have built half of the bridge  
may your forgiveness  
the other half build  
And, who knows...?  
Merciful is the soul of Bosnia!*

### Healing through truth

After he recited “Srebrenica Forgiveness” to me, I asked Silajdžić to provide me with more details about the context in which he wrote his poem. He responded, “I wrote it because I felt that what the victims really need, and want to hear, is an apology. We cannot return the dead, but the victims, the mothers, want to hear, ‘I am sorry I did it, please forgive me if you can.’ Only that can bring peace to the victims and catharsis to the perpetrators. Only that can bring peace to these parts of the world.”

Silajdžić’s response shows that he believes in the importance of truth-telling as a form of healing, but despite the atrocities that he has witnessed, he is still somewhat optimistic as he believes he can still appeal to the human side of some of the monsters who have tormented his kin. Of the approximately 100,000 people who were killed during the Bosnian War, nearly 90 per cent of them were civilians, not soldiers, and of those, most of them were Bosniaks.

Still, when I asked him what he thought about the general state of reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Silajdžić responded without blinking: “Well, I do

not think that we have made any progress there.” He admits that “we ... are still in denial.” At the time, I found it interesting that he used the collective noun “we”, but I shall return to this point later. For the former statesman, worse than the individual denial is what he calls the “official denial” by “the regime in Belgrade”.

His reference to Belgrade is important because once Yugoslavia collapsed, Serbia in effect took control over what was left of rump Yugoslavia. Belgrade also supplied its proxies – Bosnian Serbs – with substantial military support. Furthermore, Silajdžić is correct that Serbian officials at the highest echelons of government continue to deny that Serbs committed acts of genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1990s. According to the latest Srebrenica Genocide Denial Report, between May 2021 and May 2022, there were 693 acts of genocide denial identified in public and media spaces in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkans, an increase from the previous year.

Official acknowledgement and an apology from Belgrade are imperative given government-sanctioned complicity in committing major atrocities across Bosnia and Herzegovina and also because the Bosnian Serb entity – Republika Srpska – continues to act as a proxy of the Serbian government, thereby allowing Banja Luka to ride on the fumes of Belgrade’s denialism. A lot of the genocide denial and destabilising propaganda polluting the information ecosystem in Bosnia and Herzegovina emanate directly from Belgrade. Until Serbia recognises the role it played in Bosnia and Herzegovina, says Silajdžić, “there is not peace”.

The idea of Greater Serbia, which in the minds of Serb nationalists justified so much killing and large-scale displacement, is not dead yet. Silajdžić opines that “[radical Serbs] still hope they can get a part of Bosnia – that part where they cleansed the non-Serbs of the population on the false narratives of history.” Those who promote Greater Serbia – a form of apartheid advocating that all Serbs should live in one state beyond Serbia’s current boundaries – pose an imminent threat to the stability of the Balkans. This idea will naturally generate tension between current and future generations of people across the region.

According to Silajdžić, “The Greater Serbia ideology perpetrated by the leaders and intellectuals, and the church leaders, is ... a crime to their population, [especially] the next generations. So I said something which I will repeat for you, because they have this ideology of territorial expansion like everything is Serbian. Do not expand horizontally, expand your horizons, that is your debt to the new generation. Expand your horizons. They don’t even have enough people for Serbia, so why are they doing this? They are doing this for their own place in history,

Those who promote Greater Serbia pose an imminent threat to the stability of the Balkans.

their own greatness – so their own personal needs – and [effectively] punishing the next generation, and the generation to come after that.”

### Carrying the burden

For Silajdžić, the deafening silence about past atrocities from Belgrade is painful, despite countless verdicts by the Special Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia verifying the systematic killing and destruction of non-Serbs. Yet, he says, the Serbian government is “trying to somehow circumvent the facts” and their representatives are “not ready yet to say ‘Yes, we did it. They did it in our name. We are sorry.’ They are not prepared to do that, and that is why, we do not have real peace here. They still covet our lives.”

For context, Serbia's current president, Aleksandar Vučić, was a journalist and “warmonger” during the Bosnian War. He later became Slobodan Milošević's minister of propaganda when his regime committed large-scale displacement and genocide in Kosovo. In other words, it would be the equivalent of Joseph Goebbels taking over from Hitler. It is thus unsurprising that today's government in Belgrade is eager to promote genocide denial. Accordingly, in the absence of an official apology by Belgrade, Silajdžić thinks that “these [new] generations have that blood stain on their head, but they did nothing wrong. So this generation of politicians have to apologise in order to set free the new generations and the generations to come.”

As he relayed his thoughts to me, I told him that his idea of reconciliation sounded a lot like *ubuntu*, a concept that was popularised in the 1990s in South Africa following the country's transition from apartheid to democracy. It is a Zulu and Xhosa noun which describes “a quality that includes the essential human virtues; com-

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passion and humanity.” In more simple terms, *ubuntu* means, when you are hurting, I am hurting. When I perpetrate a crime against you, both of us become victims because our humanity is closely intertwined with one another. While he was puffing on his cigarette, I asked Silajdžić whether he is familiar with the term. Unsurprisingly, he knew about *ubuntu* and how it was used in South Africa to promote transitional justice.

Belgrade's inability to acknowledge its atrocities during the Bosnian War means that there is now an entire “new generation [that has to] carry that burden on their backs,” says Silajdžić. He is adamant that Serbian and Bosnian Serb leaders “are punishing their own people, their own future”. The way out, the only way to break the pattern, according to Silajdžić, is to recognise past atrocities and “to apologise”,

which will allow Bosnians internally – that is, among Bosniaks, Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats – and bilaterally – between Sarajevo and Belgrade – “to build a new future”.

Silajdžić's disappointment regarding the perpetrators cuts deep. At first he says, “they killed civilians for nothing,” but then quickly corrects himself by describing the culprits as bureaucratic *génocidaires*: “Actually, [they committed those atrocities] for some guys sitting in their armchairs [in Belgrade and Banja Luka] wanting for their names to be great names in history.”

He blames high-level officials for sacrificing the lives of their own children, peace, and the reputation of their identity group, simply for their own glory. In Silajdžić's opinion, “that is so wrong, and there is only one way to make it right, and that is to apologise. Recognise the fact and apologise. There is a salvation, but you have to recognise it.” ~~EE~~

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# Azerbaijan's helping hand to Turkey after the disaster

ARZU BUNYAD

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The earthquakes that took place in Turkey on February 6th 2023 caused a massive amount of death and injury. In response, Azerbaijan has made moves to help the Turkish people by supporting them in every way possible. The **Azerbaijani assistance** has only encouraged greater cooperation, and relations between the two countries have now been taken to the next level.

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February 7th 2023 is a day that will forever be etched in the memory of the people of Kahramanmaraş and Hatay in Turkey's Anatolia region. This was the day when two tragic 7.7 magnitude earthquakes struck the region, causing massive destruction and loss of life. The world watched in horror as images of the devastation and despair filled our screens. At the time of writing, the earthquake has claimed the lives of half a million people in the affected cities. Yet, in the midst of this tragedy, something remarkable happened.

Azerbaijan, a country with a longstanding history of strong fraternal relations with Turkey, showed unwavering support for its neighbour in such challenging times. As soon as news of the earthquake broke, Azerbaijan sent a rescue team of 420 personnel to Kahramanmaraş, followed by another 227 personnel from Baku's ministry of emergency situations to assist in the search and rescue operations.

Azerbaijan's rapid response was unsurprising given the close ties between the two countries and many years of cooperation. Deep historical roots and common

national values have connected these two countries, with mutual cooperation and support in many spheres, including security and defence. During the Second Karabakh War of 2020, for example, Turkey supported Azerbaijan by providing military equipment, including Bayraktar drones. Turkey also played a significant role in the post-war period and opened a military centre in the Nagorno-Karabakh region that is used to monitor the delicate ceasefire with Armenia.

### First to arrive

The international response to the Turkish disaster was impressive. According to the Turkish governmental disaster management agency operating under the interior ministry, around 11,302 personnel from 90 countries were deployed to help with the earthquake rescue efforts. Turkey's foreign minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, stated that offers of assistance came from 102 countries and 16 international organisations. Search and rescue teams from across the globe flocked to the region to assist in the recovery operations.

The Azerbaijani search and rescue and medical teams were the first of the international teams to arrive and begin operations with 867 personnel. According to Turkish sources, Azerbaijani personnel rescued 53 people alive and retrieved around 1,000 bodies in the Kahramanmaraş and Hatay regions. The teams carried out their search and rescue operations in tandem with Turkish coordinators in the hope of rescuing people trapped under the collapsed buildings. Among the international teams, the teams from Azerbaijan were not only the first there, but also the last ones to leave the earthquake-hit region.

One team of 236 people from the Azerbaijani search and rescue and medical groups were sent to the affected city of Adana. It turned out that one of the Azerbaijani workers, Aliev Nur, broke his leg as a result of concrete falling during the rescue operations and remains in the earthquake zone. The governor of the city, Süleyman Elban, shared his appreciation for the wounded soldier and said, "He is a hero just like his other brothers who rushed to help. Heroism does not only happen in war and the rescuers showed a great example of heroism during a time of disasters."

The aftermath of the catastrophe saw an outpouring of aid and support from countries around the world, with aid campaigns initiated after the earthquake. Two key Turkish agencies received donations from Turkish and international donors. These are the NGO called AHBAP, which is managed by Turkish musician and activist Haluk Yüksel, and the public organisations AFAD and Kızılay. On February 15th, the Turkey – One Heart social aid campaign organised a joint broadcast

on 213 television channels and 562 radio stations for earthquake victims affected by the disaster. Azerbaijan state television participated in this aid campaign organised in Turkey by streaming it live. When the broadcast was completed, around 5.6 billion euros were collected cooperatively including more than nine million SMS donations. The Turkish interior ministry stated that over 13 million euros was provided to Turkey by public institutions, private companies and individuals from Azerbaijan alone. In addition, Baku provided 6,872 tents, four field kitchens, 899 generators, 12,790 heating devices and countless medicines, food and clothing. The humanitarian aid was delivered to Turkey by planes and by railway.

Two mobile field hospitals provided by the Azerbaijani emergency ministry to support the Turkish response continue to operate to this day in the Kahramanmaraş district, which was severely affected by the earthquake. Approximately 2,000 people were provided with high-level medical care and treated in the mobile field hospitals.

### Individual initiative

The humanitarian aid from Azerbaijan was largely collected by the citizens from all over the country who donated different goods for the victims of the earthquake, including food, sleeping bags, generators and clothes. In some cases, individual Azerbaijani responses were very touching. One symbol of the country's response which went viral on social media was the picture of an old red car, burdened by the weight of almost a dozen mattresses on top and almost bursting with humanitarian aid. The boot of the car could not be closed due to the amount of goods. The driver flew a Turkish flag pinned on top of one of the mattresses as a sign of solidarity.

This picture demonstrates the power of individual initiative. Even people with limited resources did what they could to contribute even a small share to the overall donations. The driver of the car, Server Bashirli, was later identified and interviewed. "We know the feeling of being homeless in the winter," he said.

The donation campaigns in Azerbaijan continue through different governmental and non-governmental organisations. The Union of Azerbaijani Writers, a public organisation made up of Azerbaijani writers and poets, organised a charity event titled "One fist, one heart, one soul" at the International Mugham Centre on March 4th 2023. Many Azerbaijani intellectuals, authors and poets participated in the event and contributed their works. Donations were collected for the people who suffered from the terrible earthquake.

As news of the earthquake in Turkey spread, the Azerbaijani embassy in Ankara also worked to ensure citizens in Turkey were provided for. A hotline for Azerbaijanis living in the affected regions was set up and within a day, the embassy had



Photo: Twitter

The image of Server Beşirli and his car full of aid became a symbol of the solidarity between Azerbaijan and Turkey in the aftermath of the earthquake.

started evacuating affected Azerbaijanis and their relatives. Hundreds of Azerbaijani citizens and their families were sent to Azerbaijan via Georgia with the help of embassy employees and military attaches.

However, despite efforts not everyone could be saved. Four Azerbaijani students studying in Malatya were reported missing after the earthquake. Their names were shared across social media platforms and their families and friends naturally hoped for a miracle to happen. The Azerbaijani embassy conducted investigations and searched hospitals for any sign of the missing students. Days went by and the search continued, but they were not found among the rescued or the dead.

As operations continued for days, Chinese rescue workers worked tirelessly to find them. Sadly, their bodies were found a week later on February 14th. The students had tried to escape during the earthquake. It was a heart-breaking loss for their families and a tragic reminder of the power of nature.

### **Debt of brotherhood?**

Amidst the tragedy, volunteers from Azerbaijan joined the search and rescue teams. Agha Mehdiyev was one such volunteer who travelled to the Kahramanmaraş and Hatay regions to help in any way he could. He captured various moments of the operations by Azerbaijani rescuers and filmed the people they rescued. As the

days passed, more and more Azerbaijanis joined the efforts to help their Turkish neighbours. They knew the pain of losing everything and being left homeless during the cold winter days. But they also knew the power of resilience and hope, as well as sharing a friend's grief.

Some Azerbaijanis view their material and non-material support to Turkey as a "debt of brotherhood". However, this phrase itself does not reflect the real motivation behind Azerbaijan's helping hand. The prominent Azerbaijani novelist

The earthquake in Turkey was a stark reminder of the importance of coming together in times of crisis.

and politician Nariman Narimanov, in his 1921 letter addressed to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding father of the Republic of Turkey, wrote that "a brother does not lend to a brother, a brother always holds his brother's hand ... we will hold each other's hand at all times and under any circumstances. What we are doing today is an act that is inherent to brotherhood."

The earthquake in Turkey was a stark reminder of the fragility of life and the importance of coming together in times of crisis. It was a test of human will and determination, and the people of Azerbaijan stood by their friends in need. During and after the earthquake, Azerbaijanis did everything they could to show their sincere friendship. They showed compassion, courage and strength, and in doing so, proved that even in the darkest of times there is always hope. Hopefully, with the support of Azerbaijan and all other individuals and institutions from around the globe, Turkey will be able to heal its wounds in the nearest future. ~~EE~~

Arzu Bunyad is a graduate of Hacettepe University's department of International Relations in Turkey. She is also an editorial assistant at *New Eastern Europe*.

# Ukrainians try to cope after a year of war

A photo-story by Wojciech Koźmic



Cemeteries in Ukraine are covered with the graves of thousands of fallen soldiers. Hundreds of Ukrainian flags, while beautiful and lofty looking in the wind, testify first and foremost to the dramatic situation in which the Ukrainian state and its society find themselves, but also to the scale of the challenges Ukraine has faced since 2014.

Photo: Wojciech Koźmic





**СТАРЧЕНКО**  
Павло Олександрович  
1947-2013

**БІЛОУС**  
Ірина  
Костянтинівна  
1948-2013

**Ищенко**  
Васи́лий  
Васи́льевич

29.08.1954  
16.04.2016

«Пам'яті, любові,  
спокій»

The fallen soldiers are heroes for Ukrainian society, thanks to whom Ukraine can still believe it will win the war. The intensity of the conflict and the predictions of what will happen next make us reconcile with the thoughts that many more defenders of Ukraine will sacrifice their lives to defend their country and their families.

Photo: Wojciech Kozmic







Life in areas that have been or are being affected by warfare is often still very difficult. Many people face a lack of safe shelter and inadequate supplies of food and other essential products.

Photo: Wojciech Koźmic



News of those killed as a result of the war is now a daily occurrence for Ukrainians. Although news of more casualties is becoming common, the loss of a loved one is always a great tragedy for friends and immediate family.

Photo: Wojciech Koźmic



# Playing with the past

## Does the decolonisation of the history of Ukraine make sense?

GENNADII KOROLOV

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The current approach to decolonisation as a topic represents a significant problem. In many cases, this issue stems from **politicisation and ideological calls to decolonise** the history of East Central Europe, which have nothing to do with a methodological, or academic discussion. Usually, the term East Central Europe has been replaced by Russia, Eastern Europe, or the ideological term Eurasia. In general, the rhetoric of decolonisation has been based on the assertion that Russia and the Soviet Union were colonial empires.

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The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas recently stated that the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War is a moral crusade that can help the European continent redeem itself. However, this redemption has not yet been acknowledged by the European elite. On the contrary, the constant intellectual arrogance expressed toward Ukraine by Europeans has expanded, particularly in the field of history. In this respect, British historian Adam Tooze has suggested that today's Russo-Ukrainian War dramatically reconceptualises Europe. However, Tooze understands Europe as a continent and community without Ukraine, which has been perceived as a foreign body and not truly party to European culture and values. Such assessments, which are based on pathos and the instrumentalisation of knowledge, determine the distortion of the contemporary and historical image of Ukraine.

As an object of study, Ukraine has been subjected to many prejudices and stereotypes regarding the history of Central and Eastern Europe. Certainly, Ukrainian history is neither isolated nor unique, but historical misrepresentations have addressed only the national grand narrative about Ukraine. This treatment has been applied not only by western academia, but also by Ukrainian historians themselves. This raises two important questions. First, to what extent is the discrediting of history as a science reflected in the perception of Ukrainian history? Second, does Ukraine still require historiographical legitimisation?

### The decolonisation fad

After the Russian invasion in February 2022, the rhetoric of decolonisation concerning Ukraine among American, British and German scholars, intellectuals, and especially journalists, has been directly linked to the necessity of decolonising East European, Russian and Eurasian studies. In March 2022, the authoritative academic journal *Slavic Review* published reflections by historians, political scientists, and slavists on the decolonisation and prospects of Ukrainian, Russian and East European studies. Some of the forum's participants cited the necessity of abandoning national-imperial fantasies and deconstructing the "*Russozentrische Optik*", while other participants stated that Ukraine-centred history was important to Central and Eastern Europe and used the comparison of Ukrainians to David confronting Goliath. Decolonisation has become a kind of trend surrounding Ukraine. One author in *Yale Daily News* even wrote that American universities still view regional history as a discipline through a Russian or Russophile lens.

Russia's 2022 invasion made Ukraine a suitable object and tool for the rhetoric of decolonisation regarding the history of Russia and Eastern Europe. Once again, as participants in this debate have stated, although explanations and interpretations of Russian and Eurasian history might be found in Ukraine, the subjects of Ukrainian history will remain a source and laboratory for such explanations, rather than being perceived as an independent discipline. In other words, in discussing decolonisation, most historians have failed to consider Ukraine and instead looked to Ukraine's theoretical and empirical potential to enhance Eastern European, Russian and Eurasian history.

Against this panoply of ostensibly correct statements, a relevant question has arisen: what has prevented the study of Ukrainian (as well as Belarusian and Moldovan) history through a different lens? These calls for decolonisation are even more cynical in that they have come only after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Recall that after 2014, when the war between Ukraine and Russia truly began, studying

topics related to Ukrainian nationalism, multi-faceted ethnic irredentism and the politics of memory became popular in western academia. The whole of Ukrainian history has been explained through the complex phenomenon of Ukrainian nationalism, which has been perceived disdainfully through Hans Kohn's assessment of Eastern European nationalism as ethnic, aggressive and illiberal.

Ukraine remains in the category of "bad" nationalism, as prominent American historian Mark von Hagen has explained. By marginalising the experience of a revolutionary Ukraine and the nation-state's creation in 1917–21, as well as the history of the 1932–33 Holodomor, western studies have demonstrated an arrogant mindset and sometimes lack of knowledge, distorting the public understanding of Ukrainian history by suggesting that it can be viewed through anticolonial, post-colonial and civilisational approaches.

Today, western historians often recall one of the most important articles on the Ukrainian history of the last century, "Does Ukraine Have a History?"\*, opportunistically instead of scientifically. The article's author, von Hagen, stated without embellishment that giving Ukrainian history full historical legitimation was important and he called for a revision of the established paradigms of Eastern European, Russian and Eurasian history. Consider, however, von Hagen's warning that in the West, as well as in Ukraine, there lacks an intellectual organisation of professional historiography, so this infrastructure must be created.

Calls for decolonisation by western academics have been voiced differently by historians from East Central Europe, who have asked more specific questions and not offered ephemeral formulations. For example, Polish historians have especially discussed overcoming Russia's imperial complex and de-imperialising Ukraine's history. Recently, the Polish historian Jan Jacek Bruski wrote insightfully that "the imperial logic followed by the USSR [as well as the imperial] authorities often worked against their own long-term interests. This was also the case with efforts to solve the Ukrainian question." Meanwhile, Andrzej Nowak has explained to a wider audience in even more detail that "Ukraine is a daughter of Rus', raised in the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, rebelling against her stepmother Moscow." I should note that some isolated, reasonable voices have emerged from western academia. Recently, Serhii Plokhii stated that Ukraine helped build the Russian empire and now stands in the way of its resurrection. But this type of analysis is an exception, rather than a widespread trend.

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\* von Hagen, M. "Does Ukraine Have a History?" *Slavic Review* (Autumn, 1995), 54 (3), pp. 658–673.

### Alternative notions of Ukrainian history

The current approach to decolonisation as a topic represents a huge problem. In many cases, this issue stems from politicisation and ideological calls to decolonise the history of East Central Europe, which have nothing to do with a methodological, or academic discussion. Usually, the term East Central Europe has been replaced by Russia, Eastern Europe, or the ideological term Eurasia. In general, the rhetoric of decolonisation has been based on the assertion that Russia and the Soviet Union were colonial empires. Furthermore, this discussion has not included Austria-Hungary or even the history of the medieval Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which some scholars have defined as an empire. Interestingly, the Austria-Hungary case has undergone significant “de-imperialisation”, as studies that have referred to the state as “the Habsburg monarchy” have shown. In Ukraine’s case, other interpretations are common. More important, however, is understanding the extent to which and how Ukraine, as a region and as part of East Central European history, has been considered a true part of East Central Europe. Alternatively, has Ukraine been marginalised and perhaps decolonised in this respect? I have many doubts as to the answers to these questions.

The issue concerning modern Europe’s real and imagined borders, as well as the development of Ukraine’s historical grand narrative, occupies a rather provocative place in the contemporary debate on decolonisation. After the Second

The issue concerning modern Europe’s real and imagined borders occupies a provocative place in the **debate** on decolonisation.

World War, the vision of politicians and intellectuals from East Central Europe was based on the idea of an internal, historical division of Europe.

In Ukrainian intellectual and historical thought in the 20th century, Ukraine was regarded as belonging to Europe through a geopolitical and civilisational choice. However, Western and Central European intellectuals and politicians considered this issue differently. Ukraine had not always been conceived as part of East Central Europe, and it had been treated as part of Eastern Europe, which was historically associated with Russia and perceived as Russia’s sphere of influence. Academic and public discourses on East Central Europe have remained a kind of political statement emphasising civilizational differences from Russia and Eurasia and an attempt to scientifically delineate a geopolitical and geographical location in the East from Berlin. For these reasons, the concepts of Central Europe and East Central Europe (including geopolitical visions of the Intermarium and a Third Europe) are territorially identical and based on the geographical location between Germany and Russia.

Central Europe and East Central Europe have not been considered geographically real but, rather, political and historical entities. The notion of East Central Europe was considered conditional and metaphorical, like most definitions of historical divisions and geographical spaces. However, during the Cold War, that very term included Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, while some historians also added Austria. Today, East Central Europe should be redefined by including Ukraine, Belarus and possibly Moldova. This redefinition would imply considering Ukrainian and Belarusian history as part of East Central European studies. Tellingly, today's Ukraine is not seen as part of either East Central Europe's common history (in Poland and Czechia, Ukrainian subjects are mostly a core body of Eastern studies at the university level) or Russian and Eurasian studies. Most scholars automatically situate Ukraine in East European studies, which are understood as part of Russian studies, and not vice versa.

In general, the dichotomy between Germany and Russia has been important in Ukraine's history and in the development of its national grand narrative, as well as for other countries of East Central Europe, particularly Poland. The aforementioned von Hagen referred to Ukraine as a place in studies from the English and German-speaking worlds; importantly, however, Ukrainian topics have now been considered an eminent part of the region's history. Contributions by several generations of Polish historians are well known to have been among the most important – if not the only important – elements of this historiographical transformation. These contributions have included the plotting of Ukrainian history in the narrative of East Central Europe because the old Rus' lands were part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, while Moscow did not belong to Ruthenian history. According to Polish historian Oskar Halecki, this region's conventional and geopolitical borders ran along the Dnipro river and even further onto the East.

### **Does Ukraine still require historiographical legitimisation?**

In the current academic discourse, Ukraine and East Central Europe's decolonisation primarily involves the recast of Russian and other (post)imperial interpretations that justify Ukraine's cultural and political discrimination and annihilation as a nation. In examinations of East Central Europe's historical potential, Ukraine is usually considered a multi-ethnic and multi-religious region but not a political or cultural entity. This is very evident in the field of historical memory and the contemporary politics of history. While Ukraine is considered part of Europe's Polish identity, on the contrary, Russia is not. This approach means that Ukraine is an important element in the thinking on and perception of Europe in contemporary

Poland. Ukraine's role differs in German, French and British historical memory, where Russia occupies one of the central places in the European identity and is seen as part of a common European history and culture. However, in these understandings of Europe, Ukraine is instead marginalised.

Visible competition has arisen between national grand narratives and national historiographies within the framework of decolonising East Central Europe's history. In this respect, any call for a transnational approach or an entangled history, is perceived as an attempt to violate the integrity of the historical process's teleological understanding – an attempt to destroy the correct national vision of history. To some extent, paradoxically, the interaction between national narratives has reinforced the asymmetry in historiographical assessments and historical memory, when common historical episodes are seen as competing options. For instance, consider the ongoing, heated discussions between Polish and Ukrainian historians about assessing the occupation or incorporation of Eastern Galicia into the revived Poland in 1918–23 and the horrible events in Volhynia during the summer of 1943 (the “Volhynia massacre” in Polish historiography, and “Volhynia tragedy” in Ukrainian historical understanding). The discussion on decolonisation has largely ignored the competition and confrontation between national narratives in East Central Europe. The region's history has been concerned with identifying which elements transcend national boundaries to promote desired perceptions of the past. Therefore, in my opinion, the path to historiographical legitimisation is not through decolonisation models but through transnational history, which offers similar approaches to investigation without relativising the historical process. Compared to most of its neighbours' pasts, Ukrainian history has been discontinuous in the wider history of East Central Europe, or, rather, this conditional discontinuity has been questioned due to historical and cultural permeability, as von Hagen noted.

Only one axiomatic truth applies in this context: Ukraine has no historical ties to either Poland or Russia, but it has had historical relations with them. The same is true for Belarus, Romania, Moldova, Slovakia and Hungary. Hence, certain attitudes emerged about the Europeanness of Ukraine and Ukrainians, which constituted the fundamental approach to demonstrating differences both between Ukrainians and Russians and between Ukrainians and Poles. Ukrainian history could be recast by overcoming this narrow eurocentrism in thinking about East Central Europe. Adopting such a historical perspective would make understanding political, cultural and social hierarchies and their inversions in a very heterogeneous East Central European space easier, as well as the experiences of violence, mass murder, genocide, and the spread of populist ideologies in the region.

Therefore, I do not believe in and feel uncertain about all the discussions of decolonisation with regard of Ukraine that have been initiated in former imperi-

al states, and characterised by an updated yet (post)imperial language of analysis and self-description. These discussions are currently based on political calculations, and they have not yet proposed a constructivist approach. Ukraine needs new historiographical legitimisation, but not on the basis of decolonisation, which requires Ukrainian history to be understood through a broad Russian and Eurasian historical paradigm.

Finally, after communism's collapse, the American and Polish historian Piotr Wandycz noted that East Central Europe sometimes "has resembled a laboratory in which various systems are being tested". Wandycz expressed this remark in his book *The Price of Freedom: A History of East Central Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present* (1992), which he dedicated to Halecki and Hugh Seton-Watson. Similarly, von Hagen, in his aforementioned article, called Ukrainian history "a veritable laboratory" for considering processes of state and nation-building. This laboratory metaphor is among the most dangerous for historical analysis because it rejects a global perspective and cultivates intellectual conjuncture. In this respect, I fear that Ukraine will again be treated as a laboratory in which to recast Russian and Eurasian studies in the context of decolonisation rhetoric, rather than part of East Central Europe. Thus, Ukraine could be perceived once more as an alien country that lacks any connection to European history. ~~EE~~

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# Recipe for disaster

## Preparations for the First World War on the eastern side of Europe

ANDRZEJ ZARĘBA

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Much is known about the infamous alliance system that led to the First World War. Ultimately dragging in all of Europe's military powers, these agreements would lead to great battles typically associated with the Western Front. Despite this, the Eastern Front would prove to be **equally bloody and conspiratorial**, with the lands of modern Poland playing a central role.

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Our imagination of past times is often influenced by cinema. This is probably the case as all topics we read about are preceded by cinematic imagination, which rules our thoughts and provides us with key visions of past events. This is especially true regarding the iconic topics of our European history, one of which is the formative event of the 20th century: The Great War of 1914–18.

Unless one is engaged in meticulous study of the First World War in various aspects, it is quite likely that your imagination will be influenced by recent productions such as the impressive *1917*, or the brilliant German film *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Both depict this war accurately, portraying the very important moment of attrition during the western battles of the war. This aspect of the war is exemplified by the period of February 1916, with the epic Battle of Verdun.

## Habsburg woes

In our previous story about the activities of the female scouts in the Polish volunteer troops, who fought against the Russian Empire in 1914 (published in the last issue of *New Eastern Europe*), we tried to portray the story's events and personal drama without focusing too much on the general aspects of the war's beginning on this side of the continent. Back at the beginning of the 20th century, the future Eastern Front consisted of land belonging to three empires. This involved the northerly bounds of the Habsburg monarchy, the western province of the Russian Empire, and the eastern side of the German Reich. The whole area is known in German military jargon as *Ost Kriegsschauplatz*. This generally flat land is characterised by natural obstacles such as the Baltic Sea and great lakes districts in the north, which are open and uncultivated in the industrial sense. There are also a few rather poorly developed towns, scarce railways and a few rivers flowing from south to north. At the same time, the meandering Vistula cuts across the region, distinctly dividing it between east and west. The river was also a natural border between the Habsburg's province of West Galicia and the tsarist domain, which meant that both empires could avoid the prospect of a sudden attack.

Kraków was the main pivot point in the western part of Galicia, and the main field army camp. The city was permanently covered with field works as early as late 1849, when it was incorporated into the lands of the Austrian crown after the Hungarian uprising of 1848. That uprising was pacified with the utmost difficulty and only with the helping hand of the Russian Empire, whose troops paraded solemnly on the Błonia meadows in Kraków, soon returning home after the special operation. The northern parts of the Habsburg empire, which were guarded by men from among the ranks of the highland populace (around Zakopane and Nowy Targ), were difficult to maintain from a military point of view. This is because the Carpathian Mountains were difficult to cross and all transportation by land had to traverse these slopes. As a result, a close and cordial relationship with Russia regarding transport was needed.

Kraków was the main pivot point in the western part of Galicia, and the main field army camp.

Nevertheless, the military engineering section of the Habsburg army, given a traditional and realistic pessimism, treated Russia with limited trust. Military investments slightly changed the local economy, which was based still on small manufacturing, with no big industry. The development of Kraków continued well into the 20th century, with three main periods connected to major changes in the fields of military technique and weapons development. Meanwhile, the social changes in the

region also began to speed up. The 1848 unrest backed discreetly by the Austrian administration caused a tragic peasant uprising, which left deep wounds in Polish society. This society at the time was still founded on feudal principles.

The divided society inhabiting the land was easier to manage and the cost fell on the romantic and patriotic gentry, which instead of conspiring against the foreign administration, had to ask for protection from hostile military contingents. The peasants showed their ability to revolt and then praised the central administration in Vienna and the emperor as their saviours from their own oppression by the local elites. A bloody shambles therefore marked the beginning of modern society in this part of Poland, as the price of the uprising was high and the consequences far reaching and tragic.

### Twisted history

On the other side of the border in the Russian Empire, an autocratic grip was closely married to the Russian dream of gathering all the Slavs under the Romanov crown. The elites were afflicted by repressions after the November 1830 uprising. There was also a sudden end to the idyllic cooperation with Alexander I – an admirer of social liberalism and cofounder of the Polish state under the governing hand of Great Duke Constantin, who dreamed of becoming the Polish king. This abrupt and dramatic change in 1831 brought about another great social exodus from Poland. Autonomy was revoked, no reforms were introduced, and the local system of administration stagnated. This caused a second, even more tragic attempt to fight off the Russians. Learning quickly from experience, they prepared a decisive response regarding this uprising not only in the field of military matters.

The January uprising of 1863 promoted modernity in the empire, when the tsar introduced the cancellation of serfdom first in the western province. Thus, like 20 years earlier in Austria, peasants were freed from total dependence on the upper class. The grace shown by the tsar made him popular among the peasantry in the so-called Russian Poland. This popularity would create a major issue for fighters in the independence movement when the war finally broke out.

The third empire, the newly born German Reich under the Hohenzollern crown, emerged on the political scene of Europe after France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. Prussia appeared as the successor to the eastern Germanic states and the German church state of the Teutonic Order, which after decades of war with its neighbours, finally paid homage to the Polish king in Kraków in 1525. The state would emerge in the 17th century as a deeply militarised society ruled by the descendants of the last Great Master of the Teutonic Order Albrecht Hohenzollern.

The aggressive king of Prussia, known as Frederic the Great, was one of the most active players in the disintegration of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This was done in cooperation with Russia and, to a lesser extent, Austria.

The German (Prussian) border in the second half of the 19th century lay quite near Kraków – almost the whole Silesian industrial region neighbouring western Galicia was taken by force during the long rivalry between the three powers in the 18th century. A part of the Silesian coal basin named Zagłębie was under Russian rule, alongside one of the most important Catholic spiritual centres – the city of Częstochowa.

The history of the region tends to be difficult to understand for novice observers. In the years preceding the events of 1914, Prussia usually behaved much more hostile towards the Habsburgs than the tsarist regime. During the war of 1866, the two powers fought a fierce, even if partly forgotten, battle at Oświęcim, where cavalry units were mainly used. According to the battle plan of 1914, the Germans prioritised quick decisions in the West, considering France more dangerous than Russia, which was recently humiliated by the Japanese in their 1904–05 war. For the Austrians, the war was a major gamble, in which the military management hoped most of all to pacify Serbia at all costs, quickly and decisively.

For Austria, the clash with Russia appeared to have added value, and was a risk worth taking. Analytical offices gave the staff planners hope of success due to the commonly believed inability of the Russian army to mobilise forces on time, before France and Serbia were completely crushed. The Eastern Front was officially viewed as a sideshow and after several weeks of fierce battles would have left Russian engagement pointless, after France was finished and Belgrade occupied. The Russians – with their vital strategic points completely secure, pretended to act very cautiously. Prior to 1914, they had decided to openly withdraw their troops eastward, risking the creation of a political vacuum in the traditional Polish lands with a long tradition of armed conspiracy, revolutions and uprisings.

### **The time to strike**

This newly created vacuum provided an opportunity for Józef Piłsudski and his followers within his revolutionary movement. If the core of the national instinct could be awoken in line with previous uprisings, then the lower classes exploited by the Russian regime would join the movement. This time, they would be supported openly by the local Polish patriotic manor houses. For the first time, external political affairs were aligned to make such a situation happen. Nevertheless, what Piłsudski did not know, and what was covered up by the main figures in their war

planning, was that as a whole all the European military alliances were conceived as a means of fooling each state's closest ally.

The most consistent were probably the French, who needed assistance in the inevitable German invasion and thus gave the Russians resources, war bonds and industrial investments. The French believed that the Russian army – a so-called “steam roller” – was ready to squash any obstacles, crush the enemy through sheer weight of numbers, and punish the dominant German Reich, relieving the grip on France and ending the war through the occupation of Berlin. This simply meant getting the “roller” started as soon as possible when hostilities commenced, while the French army would try to stand firmly against another German invasion.

However, the steam roller was not designed to work in that direction. Another great war (following the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05, which almost finished the Romanov regime in a single blow) during the reign of Tsar Nicholas II was too much of a burden for the regime. Ultimately, it would prove difficult to get the Russians to obey the “decadent” democratic republic in the “rotten West”. Instead, Russia's eyes were set on the Bosphorus Straits. And in fact, there was hardly anyone among the Russians who believed that France would last long faced with the full might of the attacking Germans.

Thus, military planners emptied the western provinces of Russian Poland. This fact came to be warmly noted by Emperor Wilhelm II himself, who wrote a letter of thanks to his Romanov cousin personally. The Austrians had to choose between what was real and where their dreams lay, since simultaneous attacks in the north and south (against Russia and Serbia) were enormously risky. Despite this, the risk did not prevent the clever Austrian general, Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, from gambling. Believing the Serbians to be “uncivilised shepherds”, he decided to direct almost 40 per cent of the manpower under his command there. As a man of modernity, all the plans of movement were based on using seven railway lines connecting south and north. Through effective timetabling the soldiers would be concentrated right on time to crush and defeat the “shepherds”, allowing them to raise the imperial flag over the Belgrade citadel. After a victory parade, they would quickly send the troops back at full speed north, ready for a second attack, this time from the Russians. It appeared that Russia would be unable to mobilise within two weeks. However, their military planners refused to play the tune Franz Conrad had written for them. ~~EE~~

*The story will be continued in the next edition of  
New Eastern Europe, available in June 2023.*

Andrzej Zaręba is the illustrator for *New Eastern Europe*.

# The Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–21

## Populists and statesmen

OLEKSII LIONCHUK

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Ukraine's contemporary **struggle for independence** has a long history going back many centuries. The period towards the end of the First World War proved to be a particularly decisive time in this regard, with its historical memory influencing Ukrainian conceptions of history to this very day.

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The short 20th century was highly tumultuous and unpredictable. It began in 1914 with the outbreak of the Great War on the European continent, which spread throughout the world. The Ukrainian lands, divided between the rival Habsburg and Romanov empires, became the scene of hostilities on the Eastern Front of the First World War. But the year that was a turning point in the history of Eastern Europe was clearly 1917. Realising the difficulty of waging war on two fronts, Germany sought ways to force the Russian Empire out of the war, yet its first attempt during February and March 1917 failed. Although Tsar Nicholas II abdicated, the new provisional government declared its readiness to fulfil its obligations to the Allies (primarily England and France) in the war. When the news of the overthrow of the autocracy reached Kyiv and other parts of the empire, revolutionary changes and decentralisation trends began to take hold.

In Kyiv, a number of public figures, including Serhiy Yefremenko, Dmytro Doroshenko, Volodymyr Vynnychenko, Symon Petliura, Mykola Mikhnovsky, and

others, gathered and decided to create the Central Council of Ukraine (CCU or Central Rada) as a body that would represent the interests of Ukrainians before Petrograd. Most of them had left-wing and centre-left views and were members of the Russian (later Ukrainian) Social Democratic Labour Party (R(U)SDLP) or the Socialist-Revolutionaries (SRs), with the exception of a small group the of so-called *samostiynyky* (editor's note: independents) who gathered around the author of the famous essay *Independent Ukraine* – Mykola Mikhnovsky. The independents began their activities before the outbreak of the First World War in 1912–13. At first, they worked underground, spreading the idea of independence among the population by all available means.

The founder of the Brotherhood of Independents was the Ukrainian activist Valentyn Otamansky, and among his associates were the poet and writer Vasyl Ellan-Blakytyn and the aforementioned lawyer Mykola Mikhnovsky. Among the achievements of this group was the founding of the Vernyhora publishing house, where they were able to print their appeals and brochures. During the tumultuous events of 1917–18, the independents took an active part in the formation of military units.

### **Achievements and failures at the first stage of the revolution**

After the overthrow of the monarchy, political and social chaos appeared in Petrograd. The peoples once subjugated by the empire began their journey to liberation and the restoration of their states. Ukrainians were no exception, although they had been part of the Romanov empire for perhaps the longest period, since 1654. The Ukrainian Central Rada was proclaimed on the night of March 3rd/4th 1917. A well-known scholar and historian, Mykhailo Hrushevsky, who had returned to Kyiv from exile in Moscow, was elected its chairman in absentia. He was seen as a compromise figure for everyone, with unquestioned authority. It was under Hrushevsky's leadership that an appeal to the Russian provisional government was adopted, declaring the CCU the representative body of Ukrainians and taking over power in Kyiv.

A characteristic feature of that time was also mass demonstrations that covered all imperial territories. Ukrainian committees and representative offices were active not only in Petrograd, Moscow and Kyiv, but also in Siberia and the Far East, the Kuban, Odesa, Kharkiv, Poltava, Yelisavethrad (modern Kropyvnytskyi) and Chernihiv. All these Ukrainian organisations declared their loyalty to the Central Council of Ukraine in Kyiv. There is a myth that the Ukrainian movement was inferior to the Russian movement in terms of activity and numbers, but

this is far from true. Yes, at the beginning there was some confusion and misunderstanding about the situation, but by mid-March Ukrainian national committees and organisations were active. Demonstrations were held under yellow and blue flags, and the Ukrainian national flag was even raised on the flagship of the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea.

Under these circumstances, the Russian provisional government, headed by Prince Georgy Lvov, hosted a Ukrainian delegation that came with cultural proposals. However, Petrograd initially refused to recognise the authority of the Central Rada in Kyiv. Eventually, a delegation of the provisional government led by Alexander Kerensky, Irakli Tsereteli and Mikhail Tereshchenko arrived in Kyiv and brought their proposals in the form of the provisional government's temporary instruction to the Central Rada.

One may ask here: what made the Russian side make concessions and actually recognise the real state of affairs in Ukraine? First, the Central Rada issued its first universal declaration on June 23rd 1917, which proclaimed the autonomous status of Ukraine. This was welcomed by virtually all the All-Ukrainian congresses, committees, etc. Unexpectedly, even the All-Russian Congress of Workers and Soldiers' Deputies in Petrograd expressed support for this declaration. Second, it was necessary to slow down the growth of decentralising tendencies. Third, the First World War was still ongoing, in which Russia continued to participate and it was necessary to have confidence in the front line neighbourhood. Discussions between the parties lasted for two days and resulted in a compromise: the Central Rada withdrew its declaration and the provisional government recognised it and gave it powers, which was enshrined and published in the Second Universal of the Central Rada on July 16th 1917. Despite all the ambiguity, this compromise should be considered one of the successes of the CCU of that period.

At the same time, the vast majority of the political parties of the time supported the position of Ukraine's autonomous status in a future federal democratic Russia. This idea had significant practical implications, in particular for the question of building Ukraine's own armed forces. The army of the Russian Empire, like the state itself, was multinational. According to the first all-Russian census conducted in 1897, only 43 per cent of the military personnel considered themselves Russian. It can be safely assumed also that the situation in the army was not in favour of Russians in terms of numbers. It is known that there were about two million Ukrainians in the army, including officers. Among the top commanders, General Pavlo Skoropadskyi is worth noting. He came from an ancient Cossack foreman's

The year that was  
a **turning point**  
in the history of  
Eastern Europe  
was clearly 1917.



Photo: public domain. Source: Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine / Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies

The first General Secretariat of the Central Rada of Ukraine in 1917. Volodymyr Vynnychenko (in the middle, seated) was the head of the secretariat. With Symon Petliura (seated, right) as the head of military affairs.

family, a descendant of Hetman Ivan Skoropadskyi, who was elected after the Battle of Poltava in 1709. He was a respected authority in the military and in April 1917 he sent 40,000 experienced and battle-hardened troops to defend Kyiv. However, the CCU and its leadership did not see the need for their own armed forces, so the soldiers sent by General Skoropadskyi were simply sent home. This had tragic consequences less than a year later.

### Rivalries and disputes

According to the text of the Second Universal, the CCU created the General Secretariat (a prototype of the future government), headed by Volodymyr Vynnychenko, with Symon Petliura appointed secretary for military affairs. Petliura was known to be openly wary of Pavlo Skoropadskyi's authority in the army. Still, Hrushevsky played a key role in the first period of the revolution. He was the only one during that chaos who had the authority to consolidate the young and inexperienced, but extremely ambitious figures, who gathered in the Central Rada.

At the initial stage, Hrushevsky managed to politically and tactically outplay Petrograd, but internal competition, especially between Petliura and Vynnychen-

ko, for power was becoming increasingly difficult for him to contain. The main problem was that despite the considerable support from the country's society and national minorities of the time, the Central Rada failed to resolve most acute social issues. Ukraine remained largely an agrarian country, most ethnic Ukrainians lived in villages and if it were not for the war, most of them would not have likely left their villages. It was a Ukrainian world in which land was of great value and those who had the means gradually bought land, even during the turbulent years of the war. At the same time, the rest, which was the vast majority, waited for the government, no matter which one, to finally resolve the land issue.

The CCU, on which most peasants had pinned their hopes, proved unable to make any appropriate decision. Hrushevsky distanced himself from this difficult issue and often locked himself in his office, picking up the phone and continuing to work on his scientific monographs. Timothy Snyder claims that he was impressed by this chosen approach. But in those extraordinary circumstances, it was extremely short sighted and dangerous to leave the solution of complex social issues to the literary writer Vynnychenko and the journalist Petliura. Therefore, in my subjective opinion, the Central Rada chose the path of populism rather than solving important issues of state-building and the formation of relevant institutions.

While the villages were Ukrainian, the towns around them were predominantly Russian, Polish, Jewish and German. It was extremely difficult to hear Ukrainian in the towns even in the early 20th century. And here the most important task was to maintain that extremely fragile balance between different ethnic groups. The general secretariat and the Central Rada achieved some success here, as well as in the field of education.

The idea of federal relations between equal peoples in a democratic Russia was finally buried after the Bolshevik revolution. As it was aptly characterised, power was simply lying on the pavement of Petrograd, and Lenin and his associates were the first to pick it up and were not going to let it go without a fight. The CCU met the new government in Russia with reservations. But it is worth paying tribute to the strategic thinking of the Bolsheviks, as the first decrees of the new government were the "Decree on Land" and the "Decree on Peace". The new Russian leadership declared that it was withdrawing from the war and that the land now belonged to the peasants and the factories to the workers. After the publication of these decrees, Ukrainian peasants began to align themselves with the Bolsheviks, while workers in industrial centres were already under their influence. Although at the beginning the Bolsheviks were a rather small political force, numbering about

The idea of federal relations between equal peoples in a democratic Russia was **finally buried** after the Bolshevik revolution.

30,000 people, while various types of socialists had hundreds of thousands of members, the situation later changed significantly in the opposite direction.

The relations between Kyiv and Red Petrograd were extremely tense. The Don Cossacks were returning to Kuban through the territory of Ukraine, and upon their return, they went to fight the Bolsheviks. In order to stop this flow of opponents, the Council of People's Commissars (Bolshevik government) sent an ultimatum to Kyiv demanding that it should block the passage of the Don Cossacks and other military units through its territory. The ultimatum was rejected and the Bolsheviks' first attempt to seize Ukraine by force began.

### **Geopolitical choice without choice**

Under pressure from the Bolsheviks and their formation of parallel power structures, first in Kursk and later in Kharkiv, the CCU was forced to issue the Third Universal. At its core was the proclamation of the Ukrainian People's Republic, but as an autonomous part of democratic Russia. What the Bolsheviks were effective at was propaganda and agitation. They used all kinds of methods to get their agitators where they needed to go, including in military units that were loyal to the Ukrainian People's Republic. There, the agitators told soldiers that the Bolsheviks had given the peasants land and that when they took power in Ukraine, they would also have their own land, which no one would take away. And since most of the soldiers were from rural areas, they willingly believed this and left the military units.

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Therefore, between December 1917 and January 1918 there was practically no capacity to even defend the capital. And because of its essentially populist ideas and short-sightedness, the young republic found itself in extremely grave danger. Students and final-year pupils of the gymnasium stood up to defend it, and this unit was called the "student kurin". It was sent to Kruty in the Chernihiv region, which was soon attacked by General Muravyov's army of 6,000 soldiers. They were

opposed by 300 students who bravely defended the settlement. To their credit, it should be noted that despite the retreat and the subsequent tragedy of the capture of the Ukrainian capital, these men fulfilled their duty with dignity: 4,000 Red Army soldiers reached Kyiv, while 2,000 were killed. Consequently, the captured Ukrainians (32 people) were shot, and Kyiv was subjected to the Red Terror.

Before the evacuation from Kyiv, the CCU proclaimed the Fourth Universal on January 22nd 1918, which declared the Ukrainian People's Republic free and inde-

pendent. This was done for a specific purpose. The German command, with the permission of the Kaiser, began negotiations with the Reds in Brest-Litovsk, Belarus, to conclude a separate peace. Ukraine, in turn, needed protection from the Bolshevik threat and, in order to have a separate delegation at the negotiations, had to become a full-fledged actor in international relations. The Germans and Austrians agreed to negotiate with both delegations and demanded that the Russians leave Ukrainian territories, among other things. In exchange for their protection, the Germans demanded that the Ukrainian delegation supply one million tons of grain and other food for the needs of the German and Austrian troops at the front. Realising the gravity of the situation, the Ukrainian delegation, headed by Vsevolod Holubovych, accepted the German terms, and on March 3rd, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed, according to which the Bolsheviks recognised the Ukrainian People's Republic and the Central Rada, with the government undertaking to provide German troops with all the necessary food.

However, when the German generals who were sent to Kyiv to monitor the implementation of the agreements saw the complete mismanagement of the Ukrainian government and the CCU, they proposed a coup d'état. Two candidates were considered for the new leader of Ukraine – Wilhelm von Habsburg and Pavlo Skoropadskyi. At the end, they chose the second option. And when the Central Rada was adopting a constitution for the Ukrainian People's Republic, according to which Hrushevsky became president of the republic, German soldiers came and closed the meeting. As Harvard historian Serhii Plokhly rightly argues, General Skoropadskyi was a child of the monarchist past, who quickly "Ukrainianised" himself and his military units and supported the idea of Ukrainian statehood. As a true statesman, he offered his predecessors a chance to build the Ukrainian state together. But socialists of various stripes refused this offer and went into hiding, and Hrushevsky left the country altogether. Although the general, who was proclaimed hetman, and the representatives of the Central Rada had a lot in common, as both sought to revive and continue the traditions of the Cossack past and build an independent Ukrainian state, their methods were different. This proved to be the main reason for the impossibility of cooperation.

### **Short-lived statehood**

As a military man, the hetman understood the importance of his own armed forces, so he devoted a lot of time to their development. He also actively developed state and educational institutions. Ukrainian was introduced as the official language in all state institutions and former tsarist officials were forced to learn and speak

it. Trains ran exactly on schedule. Many noble families fled from the Red Terror to Kyiv, though they did not like the absence of the Russian language. During the reign of Hetman Skoropadskyi, the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, the National Library and two universities were established in Kyiv and Kamianets-Podilskyi. The hetman also pursued an active international policy. It was during his rule that Ukraine was recognised internationally, with diplomatic missions in Berlin, Vienna, Istanbul and several other European capitals. In 1918 the first attempt was made to revive church autocephaly (independence) for the Orthodox Church in Ukraine.

The relationship between the hetman's regime and the peasants became a serious problem. There were several important reasons for this, the first being that Skoropadskyi was supported by large landowners who did not want to lose their property to the peasants. The second reason was the need to supply the Germans with provisions, and for this purpose, German representatives and the hetman's officials often took away the harvest from the peasants by force. The peasants responded by organising armed groups to defend their villages from punitive German units. This is how the period's notorious *otamanshchyna* and anarchy were born, and it was impossible to curb them for a long time.

Thus, at the first stage of the February 1917 revolution, Ukrainian leaders united in the Central Rada and achieved recognition from the provisional government in Petrograd, primarily due to the skilful actions of Mykhailo Hrushevsky, who headed the CCU. However, the personal ambitions and short-sightedness of some leaders put the young republic in an extremely difficult situation, especially after the Bolshevik coup and the Red Army's offensive against Kyiv in early 1918. The refusal of the Ukrainian leaders to cooperate with General Skoropadskyi, who was proclaimed hetman of the Ukrainian state as a result of the coup d'état in Kyiv, led to tensions in Ukrainian society at the time, especially in the countryside. This, in turn, resulted in the spontaneous creation of armed groups and the so-called *otamanshchyna*. These tendencies led to a situation in which the Ukrainian People's Republic could not withstand the Bolshevik military onslaught and disappeared as an independent state from the world map for another 70 years. ~~EE~~

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