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ELECTIONS *without* CHOICE

Is there hope for Belarus?

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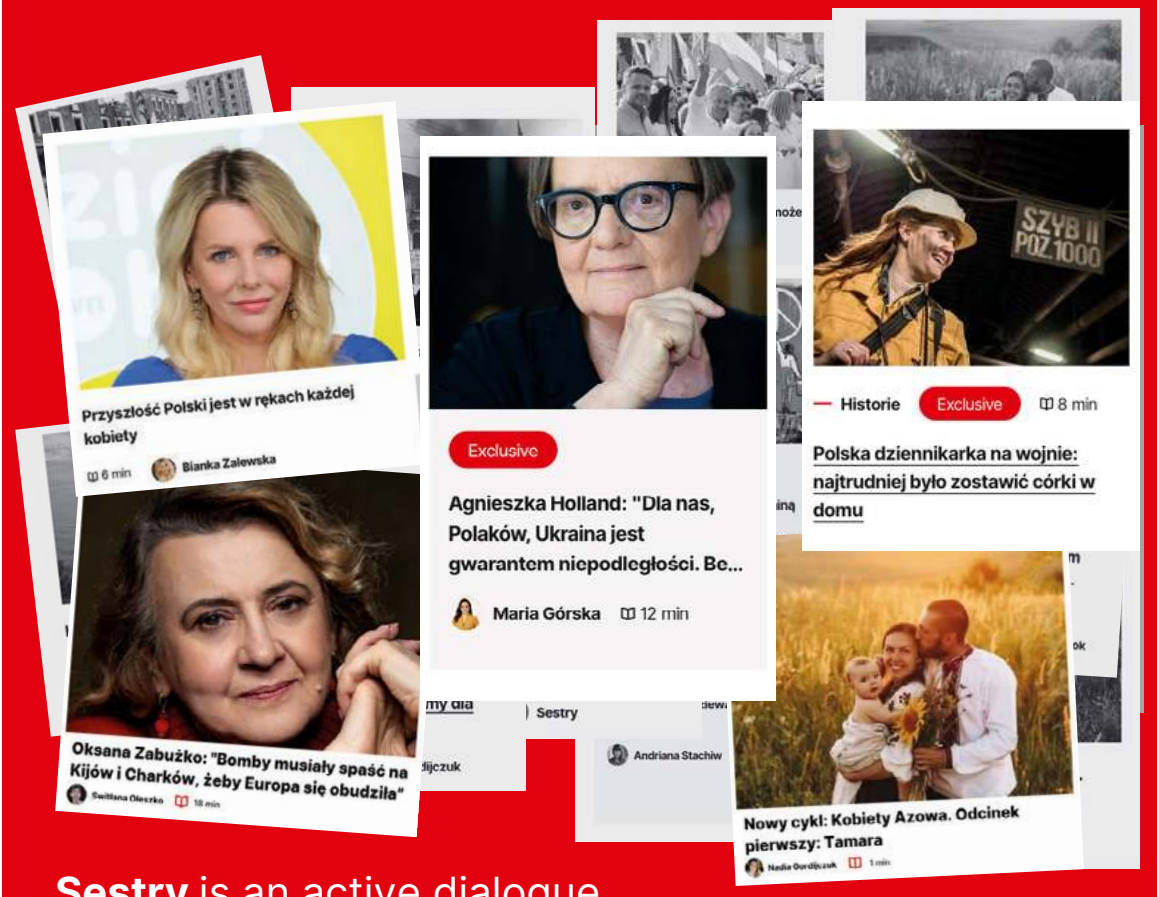

Sestry is an active dialogue about democracy and tyranny, the war in Ukraine, and the world's future. To positively impact the world, we engage in conversations with prominent contemporary figures from around the globe.

READ US!

WE WON'T FORGET

While the new government in Poland is making successful steps to gradually restore the rule of law in our country, our neighbour – Belarus is heading in an opposite direction: the Lukashenka regime is seriously preparing for the February 2024 "parliamentary and local elections".

The Belarusian security forces are currently training in how to forcefully disperse and control mass protests. They have drawn lessons from the last elections, when the world saw the protesting crowds. The authorities have also refused to set up polling stations abroad, meaning several hundred thousand political émigrés will be excluded from the election process. Belarusian authorities have declared that they will not invite observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to monitor the elections. Obviously, they will be held without a semblance of the democratic process.

We, in a free world, must never forget to raise our voices in protest against the Lukashenka regime holding over 1500 political prisoners. They have been arrested and incarcerated for exercising their human rights and fundamental freedoms in pursuit of democracy, for protesting a stolen election, or for opposing Russia's war against Ukraine.

We are shocked by the unexplained deaths of Belarusian activists in Lukashenka's prisons. Every day we are reminded of the suffering of the renowned journalist Andrzej Poczobut, and other political prisoners, including: Viktar Babaryka, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, Mikalai Statkevich, Maryia Kalesnikava, Maksim Znak, Ales Bialiatski, the Nobel Price recipient, Ihar Losik, and many, many more.

Every day we learn about new victims of the Putin and Lukashenka regimes. They must be let free and the perpetrators of their suffering must be held accountable!

Free Our People! Zhyve Belarus!

Aleksandra Dulkiewicz,
Mayor of the city of Gdańsk

DEAR READER,

This year marks the largest number of elections held worldwide in a single year, with over 60 countries holding elections throughout 2024. While the vast majority of these elections will be democratic, some, particularly in our region, may not be so free and fair. In March, for example, Vladimir Putin will undoubtedly remain in office following the "elections" in Russia.

This is also the case for Belarus, which will be holding its first elections since the fraudulent 2020 presidential election which led to massive protests and the regime crackdown. Even though the outcome of these upcoming parliamentary elections will surprise no one – and thus our title for this issue as "elections without choice" – it does provide a context for us to discuss Belarus in depth.

Our authors in this issue describe the trends currently unfolding in the country and the society and help us understand the growing divisions between those inside Belarus and the tens of thousands now living in exile. This includes the pro-democratic forces who are largely based in Vilnius and Warsaw and are continuing to prepare for an eventual change. Yet how that change will look or when it will come, no one is certain. Obviously one of the largest factors related to Belarus's future is the outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine.

Indeed, the ongoing war in Ukraine, now entering its third year, further underscores the importance of the upcoming elections worldwide. With the situation on the frontlines becoming even more tenuous the politics of western countries and elections this year will have significant consequences for Ukraine and the wider geopolitics of the region. Related to that is the ten-year anniversary of Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity which unfolded on the Maidan Square in Kyiv in 2014. The revolution brought huge positive change to the country, but also set off a series events – including Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea.

While challenges loom on the horizon for 2024, maintaining optimism remains a daunting task. As all these elections approach in many of our countries – including for the European Union's European parliament – we can celebrate the fact that our voice matters and we have a say in our future. Hopefully it will also be a strong message to certain autocratic regimes that democracy remains a positive force for peaceful change.

Sincerely,
The Editors

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Belarus between a difficult yesterday and an uncertain tomorrow

HENRYK LITWIN

Building upon the ongoing analysis of the research group "BELARUS-UKRAINE-REGION", which was established at the Centre for East European Studies at the University of Warsaw in autumn 2020, and in cooperation with *New Eastern Europe*, we present a series of sketches depicting the situation in Belarus during the second half of 2023. The region of Eastern Europe has become a stage for dramatic events since the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which predominantly captured the attention of experts. The future of Eastern Europe primarily depends on the resolution of the war in Ukraine, which was caused by Russia's imperial ambitions. Nevertheless, Belarus remains a second key element in the region's geopolitical puzzle. Depending on the scenario that develops, the events in this country can either undermine any positive outcomes for European security resulting from a much hoped-for Ukrainian victory, or through a different evolution, mitigate the negative consequences of the still real threat of imposing a "dirty" peace on Ukraine. The situation in Belarus is evolving and is closely tied to developments in Ukraine. However, it also exhibits its own internal dynamics.

The ongoing reduction of Belarusian sovereignty and the potential disappearance of its last remnants are particularly clear. The hope in past European policies towards the Alyaksandr Lukashenka regime was that striving to stabilize an authoritarian power in Belarus, but one separate from Moscow, would indirectly maintain the effect of an independent state and preserve the habit of sovereignty. Despite this, the last three years have shown an increasing dependence on Russia, diminishing sovereignty and Belarus finding itself in a situation increasingly referred to as "hybrid occupation".

Various examples justify this claim. The system of repression built by the regime works against critics of the authoritarian system, as well as against those contesting dependence on Russia. The historical narrative promoted by "Lukashenka's supporters" dismisses references to the deep historical roots of Belarusian identity, proclaiming its

purely Soviet origins in absolute agreement with Russian imperial theory and the ideology of the "Russian world" (*Russkiy mir*). Russia's policy of creating "immigration crises" on the borders of EU states is more efficiently executed from Belarusian territory against Lithuania and Poland than from Russian territory against Finland. Threats to the European security system arising from the potential evolution of the situation in Belarus are no less relevant than those that an especially adverse scenario in Ukraine could generate.

Russia's strategic course towards annexing lands separating the Moscow "motherland" from Moldova's breakaway region of Transnistria may ultimately be a smokescreen for its aspirations to regain territorial connectivity with the Kaliningrad Oblast. Awareness of such threats was somewhat diffused by the relative failure of the 2022 attack on Ukraine. However, this should lead us to recognize the fact that during the same period Russia managed to deploy significant forces in Belarus, posing a direct threat to the borders of EU states. The ongoing destruction of Belarusian sovereignty necessitates a clear warning – *Hannibal ante portas* (Hannibal is at the gates).

Nevertheless, Belarus still exists, and hope lies in the development of civil society in the country. It demonstrated strength and resilience in 2020, even though the social uprising was brutally suppressed with many of its leaders arrested or forced into exile. The potential for dissent against the use of Belarusians to fulfil imperial interests has not vanished. Belarusian society has been deeply affected by the terrible consequences of wars on its territory and the exploitation of Belarusians as "cannon fodder" (such as during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) in the past. These tragic experiences have not been forgotten. It can be assumed that the Lukashenka regime is aware of this, as indicated by its shift away from active military support for the aggression against Ukraine. What 2024 may bring is difficult to predict today but it is reasonable to expect Belarusians not to remain passive witnesses to events. EE

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Download all the reports of the Analytical Group "Belarus-Ukraine-Region"

Belarus

New elections to preserve a tired dictatorship

DAVID R. MARPLES AND KATSIARYNA LOZKA

On February 25th 2024, Belarus will hold its first elections since August 2020, which resulted in mass protests for several months. How are the Belarusian authorities preparing for this event and what will be the likely outcome?

In the years that followed the controversial 2020 election – a resounding Lukashenka "victory" of over 80 per cent which bore little relation to the popular support for the challenger Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya – the ruling regime has undergone several serious trials to which it has responded ever more harshly. Its recent measures have included the elimination of the opposition's media sites, the shutdown of hundreds of civil society organisations and the dissolution of all opposition and several official political parties. During the post-election period, the regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka has systematically resorted to violent tactics and even transnational repressions to maintain its grip on power. These actions range from the halting of issuing passports abroad and the confiscation of the property of Belarusian activists in exile, to the interrogation and detention of the relatives of Belarusians living abroad. Internally, mass repressions continue, with a daily average of at least 17 detentions in the country. Authoritarian rule is further bolstered by economic and political support from Russia, guaranteeing the immediate survival of Lukashenka but drawing him ever closer to Moscow.

Towards the Russia-Belarus Union

Alyaksandr Lukashenka has remained in power largely through the support of Russia and its President Vladimir Putin, who provided a loan of 1.5 billion US dollars as well as Russian personnel to take over Belarusian media outlets. He also devised a common foreign policy and proposed a unified macro-economic policy, originally scheduled to start on January 1st 2024. However, this has now been delayed.

After Russia started its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th 2022, Lukashenka faced further dilemmas. Russia used Belarusian territory to mount the initial attack on Kyiv, following an ill-concealed military exercise between the Russian and Belarusian armies that allowed Russian troops to take up key positions along the Ukrainian frontier. Though Lukashenka did not order Belarusian troops over the border, he was outspoken concerning the inevitability of a Russian victory and authorized the firing of missiles into Ukraine from Belarusian territory. Accordingly, he was the subject, like his Russian counterpart, of western sanctions.

In June of last year, when Yevgeny Prigozhin began his rebellion against Russia's military leaders and took over the city of Rostov-on-Don with his Wagner Group, Lukashenka assumed a nominal role as a mediator, and agreed that the now dispersed mercenaries should have sanctuary on Belarusian territory. After Prigozhin died in a suspicious plane crash six weeks following the rebellion, together with his chief general, most of the Wagner troops reportedly withdrew from Belarus due to the apparent reluctance of both regimes to finance them. However, a small contingent has stayed to provide training for Belarusian forces.

Though Belarusian troops didn't participate in Russia's invasion, Lukashenka is outspoken on the inevitability of a Russian victory.

The Belarusian authorities have also accepted a decision to locate Russian tactical nuclear missiles in the Republic of Belarus, a process that reportedly has been completed. The missiles are under Russian control, but Lukashenka has already cited them in official propaganda, alleging threats from NATO and specifically Poland.

Belarus and Russia are evidently collaborating in the continuing EU-Belarus border crisis. Flights to Moscow serve as a transit point for migrants from the Middle East, who are then directed to Minsk or Brest with short-term visas before ending up at the Polish-Belarusian border.

Since 2020, Belarus has officially been obliged to promote the union with its larger neighbour, undermining its own sovereignty. Lukashenka in truth has nowhere else to turn other than Moscow. In the second half of 2023, he made several seemingly pointless trips to Africa, signing agreements with countries such as the

Central African Republic, with which Belarus has negligible trading relations. But ultimately his future is tied to Russia. A Russian defeat in Ukraine would likely bring about the fall of the Minsk dictator.

The two states have also developed identical narratives focused on the "Great Patriotic War" over the past three years. Belarus has followed the example of Russia in enshrining into law the concept of a "genocide" of the Belarusian people during the war. Both states view the war as the defining event in the construction of national identity, using the base created in the Soviet period and its memorials and narratives, but building further. Lukashenka, his Chief Prosecutor Alyaksandr Shved, and others have visited schools and kindergartens to ensure that children are being given a "patriotic education". This involves the denunciation of "historical revisionism", the equation of the opposition with wartime collaborators, and even the banning of the familiar slogan *"Zhyve Belarus"* on the grounds that it is a Belarusian version of the Nazi *"Sieg heil!"*

Lukashenka's goals

On the eve of the new elections, Lukashenka's position seems precarious. He will turn 70 this year and has not been in particularly good health. Like all dictators, he is trying to achieve two goals. First, he hopes to remain in power for as long as possible. Second, he needs to ensure that after he steps down from his office, he remains immune from persecution and maintains the high living standards of a de facto head of state. How does he intend to achieve these goals?

In February 2022, a controversial referendum made some fundamental changes to the embattled Belarusian constitution. In tone, it emulated the Russian constitution in its emphasis on family values, with a ban on LGBT "propaganda" and the rejection of the country's long-time nuclear-free status. It introduced changes to the presidency. There is now a minimum age of 40 – rather than 35 – with 20 years of uninterrupted residence in the country and a limit of two five-year terms. Both in office or out of it, the president will have immunity from prosecution, and retain his presidential salary and other perks.

The terms, however, start anew, meaning that, as in 1996 after the referendum, Lukashenka can begin his presidency again and serve a further ten years. Assuming that elections for the presidency run on schedule in 2025, this would mean that his term could be extended to 2035, when he will turn 81.

The first step is the parliamentary elections, where his support is more or less ensured given that there are no seats currently occupied by the opposition in either house. The lower house's 120 members are dominated by the presidential party Be-

laya Rus (68 seats), the pro-Lukashenka Communist Party (11), the similarly docile Republican Party of Labour and Justice (6), and the lone Liberal Democratic Party delegate and close presidential ally, Aleh Haidukevich. A similar situation prevails in the Council of the Republic, where Belaya Rus makes up 46 of the 64 members. The body's speaker, Natalya Kochanova, is also a loyal friend of Lukashenka.

But the 2022 referendum also brought changes to the dictatorship, with the future empowerment of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, or ABPA, superseding the two houses and, it seems, likely the presidency itself. The concept of such

an assembly is not new. Lukashenka has regularly convoked such a gathering after presidential elections, usually made up of handpicked and pampered delegates who endorse the decisions of the president. Alyaksandr Kazulin, former rector at the Belarusian State University and a presidential candidate in 2006, was badly beaten by state militia for trying to gate crash the ABPA that year. In the past, however, like the two houses of parliament, the ABPA had no real power. The amendments to the constitution intend to change that. The assembly must be convened within 30 days after the parliamentary elections. The president and past president are automatic members of the ABPA, and Lukashenka will chair the initial body. It will be comprised of 1,200 delegates who will include members of the newly-elected upper and lower houses, members of the cabinet, local councils, as well as 400 representatives from "civil society".

Once again, the limitations on membership are intended to ensure that no "outsiders" breach the ramparts of the state fortress. The clause that says civil society will be represented is in reality somewhat meaningless now that the authorities have effectively destroyed NGOs and informal associations. The public associations must possess at least 100,000 members, which restricts access to all but a few organizations such as the official trade union, the Republican Union of Youth (sometimes referred to as the Lukamol – a derivative of Komsomol), and the Veterans' Association. Prohibited from the assembly are those with a criminal record which would now encompass virtually all of the opposition, and those with permission to reside abroad. The second group are thus severed from life in their homeland, a fact reinforced by the arrests at the border of over 100 who tried to return last year and who can no longer renew their passports from outside the country.

Signs of succession?

Obviously, the People's Assembly will be far too unwieldy to do much, though in theory it is allowed to make state policy, elect judges to the constitutional court, and remove the president for violations of the constitution. No doubt that in assigning such authority to the ABPA, Lukashenka is disseminating some of his powers. Instead of the security council, real power will be given to a 15-member presidium, which will include the chair of the assembly, initially signifying Lukashenka. Still, it is evident that the successor to the presidency is also intended to be a member of this body, a reliable follower, at least on paper.

The history of the former Soviet Union, however, provides a number of examples of members of the presidium turning on the country's leader, both with Nikita Khrushchev in 1957 and 1964, and Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991. Given a

crisis situation such as economic failure or another popular uprising, much could depend on the harmony within the presidium and the ambitions of its members, as well as Lukashenka's continuing support from Moscow. Given the longevity of the presidential terms with Lukashenka in office, whose rule now spans three decades, the lack of choices he has to forge a future path independent of Russia, and the bitter experience of the 2020 election, it is hard to imagine that the way ahead would be smooth, whatever structures he chooses to create.

There is also the question of his immediate family, specifically his three sons and their respective roles. Viktar Lukashenka, 48, who was formerly a member of the security council during some of its most brutal crackdowns, remains its national security advisor and also currently serves as the head of the Belarusian Olympic Committee. Dzmitry Lukashenka, 42, a businessman, heads the presidential sports club. Both offspring were from Lukashenka's marriage to Halina Lukashenka (née Zhelnerovich), who remains his legal wife though she has lived for many years in Shklou in the region of Mahiliou. Lukashenka's third son Mikalai, 19, possibly the outcome of the leader's relationship with his then personal doctor, regularly accompanies his father on official duties. Though favoured, he is too young to be considered a potential successor.

The opposition

The zenith of the resistance to the dictatorship of Lukashenka took place in the later months of 2020, first of all in the support for rival candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who agreed to run with the support of the leaders of two other campaigns, the philanthropist Viktar Babaryka and former ambassador and founder of the Hi-Tech Park Valery Tsapkala. The wife of Tsapkala, Veranika, and the leader of the Babaryka campaign, Maria Kalesnikava, campaigned alongside Tsikhanouskaya and attracted large crowds, despite official harassment. During the months of protests that followed the announcement of the official results, hundreds of thousands lined the streets of Minsk and other cities, but the defection of the elite to the opposition was limited.

On election night, Tsikhanouskaya was interrogated by members of the security council and fled to Lithuania, fearing for the future of her two children. She created a coordinating council which includes some leading cultural figures, but the authorities quickly arrested all those who remained in Belarus. The remainder moved abroad, including Pavel Latushka, a former minister of culture and ambassador to France, as well as Valery Kavaleuski, a former deputy foreign minister who had been based in Washington, DC. The foreign ministry provided a significant

segment of the defectors, while others included disaffected members of the security forces, who formed the groups BYPOL, led by Alyaksandr Azarau, and BELPOL, created as a result of a split within BYPOL.

For the most part, the elite remained loyal to the regime, while others – academics, business people, workers – appeared reluctant to join a general strike, considering the vulnerable nature of their monthly salaries. In fairness, the situation was unprecedented and the future is unpredictable. Tsikhanouskaya continued to lead the opposition from abroad, despite some reticence among other leaders about her leadership, most notably from the Tsapkalas, the exiled founder of the Belarusian Popular Front, Zianon Pazniak, and others.

The Belarusian opposition also includes the Kalinouski Regiment fighting on behalf of Ukraine against the Russian invaders.

Aside from the Tsikhanouskaya team, the opposition also included the Kalinoŭski Regiment fighting on behalf of Ukraine against the Russian invaders, and comprising between 400 and 800 troops operating under Ukrainian commanders in some of the key military campaigns of the war. The main source for future recruits is the large-scale migration from Belarus since 2020, now estimated by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) at up to 500,000 people.

In August 2022, the opposition formed the United Transitional Cabinet in Vilnius, made up of ten members – originally eleven – headed by Tsikhanouskaya with Latushka and Kavaleuski as deputy leaders. The cabinet established good relations with the leaders of most countries of the European Union, as well as with the United States and Canada. To date, Tsikhanouskaya's links with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy are not clear cut. They have met briefly and exchanged friendly greetings, but Ukraine retains its embassy in Minsk and has not taken the step of severing links with the Lukashenka regime, even though most Ukrainians now perceive Belarus as a hostile state.

A conditional future

Supporters of democracy among the exiled and internal opposition believe that in 2020, the mindset of Belarusians, especially those under 40, changed irrevocably, and that despite the terror and the arrest of more than 1,500 political prisoners, the transformation remains. Ultimately, they believe a free Belarus will prevail. But this will require, even from the most optimistic perspective, several decisive events to take place. These include the defeat of the Russian army and its removal from

Ukraine, a change of regime in Russia and the eventual return of the exiles to a situation that allows them to avoid arrest and repercussions. This all likely requires a fourth factor – the resignation, death or removal of Lukashenka and his cronies and the replacement of the current ruling structure with one that aligns more closely with the original 1994 constitution. Another key element is support from the EU and its allies for such changes, including expedited membership. Conversely, the EU is ignoring entreaties from the current Belarusian authorities to reopen ties.

At present, there are few indications that any of the above changes are likely to happen in 2024, not least because of the stalemate on the military front, and the failure of the 2023 attempt to change the Russian leadership (it was not a clearly demarcated effort to remove President Putin). Thus, it is critical that on the one hand the United Transitional Cabinet should keep the faith and try to unify support, and on the other that anti-Lukashenka activists should cast selfish motives aside and work with Tsikhanouskaya and her team.

For the opposition, persistence and patience are the two main criteria for success. Lukashenka, on the other hand, is serving out his last years and trying to retain his political significance. But it is manifestly fading.

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The new dualism of Belarusian politics

MAXIM RUST

In February 2024, Belarus will hold a parliamentary election, the first contest since the rigged presidential election of 2020. The democratic opposition is barred from participating and has called for a boycott. While the outcome of the election itself is pre-determined, the process is an illustration of the development of a new dualism in the Belarusian political system.

More than three years after the events which initiated a new dynamic in Belarusian political history and significantly impacted changes within the system, the first electoral campaign awaits us in February of this year. While rightfully labelled "elections without choice" by many researchers, it does not mean that they will be devoid of significance. In attempting to analyse and study the Belarusian case, we must agree that the term "Belarusian politics" itself has become dualistic. When discussing it, we often refer to two clearly different dimensions, or at the very least, two different levels.

The first level is the more prevalent view within the international community, looking at Belarus from the perspective of 2020. This involves considering the politicians and the structures that emerged during the wave of protests, which mobilized a significant part of society and forced many to leave the country. This approach still dominates in western research circles. The second dimension is the functioning of politics within the country itself, within the changing system. Although these systemic changes increasingly exhibit authoritarian or even totalitarian characteristics, whether we like it or not, the second dimension is more important in terms

of the real, tangible political agenda for Belarusian society within the country, as well as the social, economic and cultural agendas.

Opposition approach

At the beginning of this year, the stance of the new Belarusian opposition towards "parliamentary elections" is quite clear and specific – they should be boycotted and not recognized. This is a logical and strategic approach. Since 2020, there has been no legitimate authority, and thus, elections cannot be recognized. Added to this is the complete monopolization of the political space within Belarus, where even the declaration of intent to participate by independent candidates can lead to political repression. It is important to note that most structures of this opposition are recognized by the Belarusian state as extremist organizations, increasing the risk of political persecution.

The position of the Belarusian opposition towards "parliamentary elections" is quite clear – they should be boycotted.

Crucial for the new opposition is the institutionalization achieved over the last three years – the establishment of structures which serve as alternative reflections of political bodies. This includes Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office (bureau of the national leader), the United Transitional Cabinet as an alternative government, and the Coordination Council as an alternative parliament. Without sugar-coating reality, serious debates and political misunderstandings occur within these structures, not all representatives of the Belarusian democratic community are satisfied with their functioning, and there is significant internal criticism. However, what distinguishes them primarily from official state bodies is that they operate or strive to operate on democratic principles.

In this dimension of Belarusian politics, the electoral agenda has taken on a clear international dimension, primarily targeting Belarusian migration and the diaspora worldwide. This is unsurprising, especially considering the lack of any possibilities for action within the country. However, it raises questions about the ability to influence the political agenda within Belarus itself.

The second dimension of the Belarusian political concept is the politics within the country. Here, similarly, whether we like it or not, the real power is held by the old ruling elite. Over the past three years, acting as a besieged fortress, they have strengthened their power and eliminated any potential political opponents. Authorities have learned lessons from 2020, making the 2024 campaign the beginning of an important electoral cycle for them.

"Elections" without opposition

In the run-up to voting day, the official Belarusian political system operates under the conditions of three fundamental changes that have affected this dimension. Firstly, the system now operates based on an amended constitution. The top-down amendment of the constitution in 2022 changed the power structure, announced changes in the party system, and, through constitutional amendments, limited the possibilities for potential opponents of the regime to participate in the electoral campaign. An example of this is the effective deprivation of tens of thousands of Belarusians of their passive and active voting rights. Secondly, the Belarusian authorities are conducting this campaign after changes in the electoral law. It is not surprising that the electoral law favours the current authorities. This is evident, for example, in the fact that Belarusian citizens cannot vote from abroad, or there is no minimum voter turnout threshold to validate the "elections".

Thirdly – and this is the most interesting element of this dimension of Belarusian politics – there has been a promised new registration of political parties. The number of parties has decreased from over ten to just four. Importantly, all current legally operating political parties are pro-government parties, and their programmes merely compete in expressing support for Alyaksandr Lukashenka and his governance system. In this puzzle, the question arises again: will the new "Belaya Rus" party finally become a party of power? Interestingly, no nominal party or structure has been created or registered to even create the image of the so-called "constructive opposition". In other words, the system itself officially declared that there is no political opposition in Belarus.

Attempting to analyse the course of the electoral campaign in February 2024, it is reasonable to assume that the dualism of Belarusian politics will become even more pronounced and strengthened in the coming months. Regarding the election results, there seems to be little doubt.

According to plan?

For the new Belarusian opposition, this campaign essentially does not constitute a crucial point of operation because it cannot participate in any way. Therefore, efforts will be directed outwardly to keep the Belarusian question on the international agenda. Simultaneously, there will be a focus on the development and strengthening of the aforementioned "proto" structures. Among other things, elections to the Coordination Council are scheduled to take place around the same time. Despite the non-recognition of parliamentary elections, all democratic lead-

ers will increasingly feel the importance of the issue of influencing the real political agenda in the country.

For the ruling elite in the country, this campaign is very significant, as evident from the intensified propaganda which has been promoted at an unprecedented rate compared to any other parliamentary campaign. Primarily, it will be the first nationwide electoral campaign since 2020. For the authorities, this is a crucial moment to internally demonstrate to both society and themselves that everything is proceeding according to plan and that the current government fully controls the situation. In this dimension, the number of deputies from "new" parties is not essential, as the goal is not only to assert the establishment's monopoly on the state but also to conclusively close the chapter related to 2020. It is important to remember that the parliamentary campaign has structural significance since soon after, a new electoral body, the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, is expected to be constituted.

However, above all, the "elections" of 2024 open a new important electoral cycle for the authorities, and the upcoming combined parliamentary and local campaign is a dress rehearsal for the most crucial campaign planned for next year. In 2025, another presidential election will take place. EE

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The paradox of Belarusian authoritarianism

ANTON SAIFULLAYEU

Parliamentary elections in Belarus have always been a mere formality. Low voter turnout and minimal public attention during parliamentary elections make them safer in terms of legitimizing the system through the electoral model. For the Belarusian regime, the parliament and the elections to it are a kind of initiation ritual in the system's personnel policy.

Why are parliamentary elections being held in Belarus? Despite risks for the regime, elections persist in a country where one person has been president since 1994, and the process of electing members to parliament and local councils seems more like appointments. The next elections will take place on February 25th 2024 and will see members chosen for the lower house of parliament alongside local council deputies. Then on April 4th, elections will be held for the upper house and the All-Belarusian People's Assembly. For the Belarusian regime, it is particularly important to hold elections at all levels, even in such challenging geopolitical conditions. This is a crucial element in the legitimation and initiation of people in power.

Democratic elections came to Belarus, as in all countries of the former USSR, in the early 1990s. However, were the first elections in Belarus genuinely democratic? Despite international recognition, labelling them as democratic is challenging. The challenge lies within the society, and more specifically Soviet society. The first three years of the country's independence were a challenging transitional period from Soviet norms to independence. It is difficult to claim that the society was Belarusian during this time. Speaking about a society understanding the basic

principles of democracy after 70 years under a totalitarian state is impossible. Prior to that, the Belarusian lands were a part of the Russian Empire, which did not particularly distinguish itself with the development of democracy.

Essentially, Belarusians never had the experience of free choice. The society in the early 1990s was more Belarusian-Soviet, with an old set of values and understanding of power. This explains the victory of the Soviet populist Alyaksandr Lukashenka over Stanislav Shushkevich (who was accused of bringing about the USSR's collapse) and the national-populist Zianon Pazniak. Overall, it is clear that Pazniak served as a kind of nemesis for the old *nomenklatura*, as he said that he would put every single communist in jail and make everyone speak Belarusian.

Soviet fundamentalism

Lukashenka's Soviet fundamentalism succeeded. Certainly, society chose the person who communicated in the style of a Soviet *kolkhoz* chairman. However, it should be noted that among all the candidates, he was the one who used the right, nostalgic language to communicate with a traumatized society, for whom the collapse of the empire was a shock.

Lukashenka's Soviet fundamentalism was a success. On the other hand, how were people supposed to know how elections worked at all? How could there be a democratic political culture in a society that had lived behind the Iron Curtain for the last 70 years? Soviet elections were not even a formality. They were a kind of extravaganza organized by the authorities. Subsequently, Belarusian elections became a sort of relic of the Soviet electoral ritual.

Belarusian elections became a sort of relic of the Soviet electoral ritual.

There was a need to make a choice. But how? How to understand who is a good candidate and who is not? Post-Soviet people mostly did not vote according to their own free will. The choice was based on the politician's authority, their involvement in power even in Soviet times, and engagement in the system. New faces and political forces were viewed with scepticism and mistrust. Some were seen as those who had ruined the country, others would sell it to America, the third were bandits, and the fourth were nationalists. A complete set of enemies from Soviet times. In most post-Soviet countries, societies chose former party leaders and representatives of the *nomenklatura*. While in Georgia Shevardnadze (the former Soviet foreign minister) rose to power, there were also local party leaders like Kravchuk, Akaev, Niyazov, Karimov, Aliyev and Nazarbayev. Lukashenka, Rahmon and later Putin all repre-

sented other Soviet leaders of different ranks. All these Soviet party figures knew how to say what people wanted to hear and what they were accustomed to hearing from the Soviet authorities: avoid war, pursue stability, salaries and jobs, and do not sell the country to the West.

The first elections in 1994 brought, as it turned out, disastrous results for the entire society. The choice of Lukashenka proved to be a mistake. After the crackdown on the Supreme Council of Belarus in 1996 and the parliamentary elections that were only partially recognized, the system we know now in Belarus began to take shape. The rest of the story is well known. This involved the physical elimination of all significant competitors, subjugation of the parliament, repression and censorship. In the end, a country bordering the European Union became, as some wrote after 2010, the last dictatorship in Europe. Yet everything is much more complex, and the system itself requires a pseudo-electoral process.

Pseudo-democratic independence

Lukashenka did not abandon elections, although there were and still are many possibilities to do so. For him, elections, especially presidential ones, became the main lever of legitimizing his power. Belarus, much like other examples in the region, embodies an electorally authoritarian regime. In such regimes, as pointed out by the German researcher Petra Stykow, several candidates or parties participate in elections held regularly, but those in power never lose. The old Soviet methods step in to help: intimidation, falsifications, repression, killings and censorship. In the context of pseudo-democratic independence, a political regime of this sort systematically discriminates and represses anyone opposing it.

This occurs at all levels and in public and private settings. Consequently, elections cease to function as genuine choices and the population simply approves who has been chosen to rule. If you wish to avoid trouble, stay quiet and vote for those in power. And even if you abstain from voting, we will falsify the results.

In general, falsifications are the cornerstone of success for electoral autocrats. The Central Election Commission, for example, is a fundamental institution for the Belarusian authorities. Organizing elections, overseeing and orchestrating the victory process for those in power, securing the victory of the desired individuals in parliamentary elections – it is no easy task.

However, as Stykow points out, elections are the Achilles' heel of electoral authoritarian regimes. The legitimacy of the president to wield power is based on their popularity among the people. Thus, presidential elections always serve as a kind of referendum. Even though the numbers may be manipulated and dissent-

Since coming to power in 1994, Belarusian stongman Alyaksandr Lukashenka has developed a strategy to use elections as the main lever of legitimizing his power.

ers suppressed, the level of trust must be publicly acknowledged. Displaying the final figures is a ritual of legitimation. If there are few dissenters, no protests, or if dissent can be quickly and bloodlessly quashed, then legitimacy remains intact. However, if the elections are lost or the victory is not credible, it can lead to mass protests and revolutions.

The example of Belarus in 2020 illustrates this perfectly. Until 2020, even during critical moments, the regime remained stable during elections. During the times of the "colour revolutions" and the potentially dangerous year of 2010 for the regime, internal support for Lukashenka still remained at a fairly high level, and elections played into the hands of the regime. Lukashenka's patrimonial nationalism, in which he defeated all enemies and defended the motherland every five years, helped secure yet another electoral cycle for the system. The ritual always succeeded. But August 2020 disrupted the existing system.

The legitimacy of the system faltered inside the country as never before and cost Lukashenka and the entire regime international recognition. The status quo and dialogue with the dictator were interrupted. The regime's defensive reaction was aggression and the complete dismantling of Belarus's socio-political development model. After the protests of 2020, a complete dependence on Russia ensued and

the regime became complicit in the war in Ukraine. Minsk also accepted thousands of armed militants into the country from Wagner Group and initiated a migration crisis in the eastern part of the EU. This all represents a huge price to pay for another attempt to keep the country in the dark.

Initiation ritual

After 2020 Lukashenka, following in the footsteps of his ally Putin, transformed into an information autocrat. His grip on power now relies heavily on a sophisticated web of disinformation, propaganda and stringent censorship. While these tools were part of his arsenal before 2020, it was rather at the analogue level. The post-protest era witnessed a marked escalation in repression and a more refined manipulation of narratives. Presently, Lukashenka clings to power not by winning over a non-existent societal trust but by asserting his legitimacy to a regime increasingly fragmented after the tumultuous events of 2020. His need to navigate and validate this power has led to an intensified and more insidious use of propaganda, marking a significant shift in his regime's tactics.

Most likely, presidential elections in Belarus will disappear in the form we currently know them. The current elective model of autocracy has proven too perilous for the regime. It is looking increasingly necessary to elect a new "president". The scenario for transferring presidential power through the All-Belarusian People's Assembly is a step towards a more totalitarian system. Minsk is fragmenting democratic instruments to make it easier to control society. The choice will be made by a limited number of people loyal to the regime, who will be selected in a safer manner, alongside members of parliament.

Most likely, presidential elections in Belarus will disappear in the form we currently know them.

In turn, parliamentary elections in Belarus have always been a mere formality. Low voter turnout and minimal public attention during parliamentary elections make them safer in terms of legitimizing the system through the electoral model. For the Belarusian regime, the parliament and the elections to it are a kind of initiation ritual in the system's personnel policy. It serves as a personnel filter, a source of loyalty and political configuration. Being elected to parliament can also be a way of acknowledging someone's merits in relation to the regime.

After 1996, the electoral process in the country ceased to function as a democratic lever but simultaneously became the primary format for legitimizing the system. This gave rise to a distinct understanding within society of western-style

democracy, geopolitical orientations and the formation of a unique political culture of dichotomy. A person cannot simultaneously embody ethno-national identity, democratic values and vote for Lukashenka, just as supporting the opposition and identifying with the system are incompatible. The electoral foundation of the regime consists of individuals who reject any choice other than Lukashenka.

Over the past 30 years, the authorities' de-politicization of society through repression and restrictions on civil freedoms has led to national-democratic discourse becoming extremely amorphous. Essentially, political and civic activity outside the political framework of the authorities has been limited or suppressed as non-normative in the public consciousness. It manifested itself most clearly in the form of civil protests at the end of each electoral cycle from 2001 to 2020. After 2020, the regime now feels compelled to hold elections in order to strengthen its legitimacy. However, by conducting such a purge of the public in the social and political space, it is not reasonable to expect that the 2024 elections will lead to a new attempt to overthrow Belarusian autocracy.

The parliamentary elections in 2024 are an attempt to reboot the political model, introduce new people and make personnel changes. If, however, things do not go according to plan, the army and the security apparatus, having demonstrated their influence and loyalty, will undoubtedly repeat the events of 2020 if necessary to defend the system. Minsk's direct dependence on Russia makes any protest essentially impossible at this stage in Belarus. EE

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Post-Lukashism

Prospects for change in Belarus after regime collapse

PAVEL USAU

The events of 2020 and the conviction that the fall of the Lukashenka regime is inevitable have prompted a number of businessmen to actively participate in the political processes in Belarus. This can serve as a basis for the assertion that in the event of the destruction or destabilization of the authoritarian regime, business groups will play an extremely important role in shaping a new way of life.

At the moment, it is obvious that the prospects for political change in Belarus are postponed indefinitely. At the same time, the probability of a rapid transition from authoritarianism to democracy is still uncertain. The protracted war in Ukraine and the systemic stability of Putin's regime in Russia will contribute to the internal stabilization and consolidation of the authoritarian system of government in Belarus. This process will also be facilitated by relentless repression and political purges, which will suppress any dangerous activities in society, as well as increase the atmosphere of fear and terror. To date, there are no acute systemic internal threats and challenges to Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime.

At the same time, the prolonged and stable existence of the Lukashenka regime will have an extremely negative impact (and this is already evident) on the nature of the functioning of opposition structures located abroad. These structures include Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office, the Coordinating Council of the opposition, and the United Transitional Cabinet. These groups were all formed between 2020 and

2022, yet none are politically or financially ready for long-term operations outside the country. The clear dependence on financial support from western partners and a struggle for structural integrity, which is already being challenged by internal conflicts, scandals and splits, will negatively affect the image of the opposition and its support among Belarusian society.

Challenges for democratic transformation

In fact, the opposition structures are now converging inward, succumbing to the emergence of an authoritarian culture. They openly dismiss critical reactions not just from Belarusian society but even from the Belarusian diaspora. The situation will worsen in 2025, when the formal status of the conditional political representation received by Tsikhanouskaya after the 2020 elections expires. Updating this political representation based on the electoral campaign in 2020 will require a number of actions from opposition structures to confirm some kind of legitimacy and Tsikhanouskaya's political leadership. It will be extremely difficult to do this, due to the growing scepticism and distrust on the part of Belarusian society both inside and outside the country.

Based on the fact that the Lukashenka regime will be able to survive for more than one year, as well as the possible disintegration of the opposition, the democratic forces will most likely cease to be a key factor in political changes in Belarus, even if such occur in connection with the death of the dictator.

Many analysts and experts are trying to determine possible scenarios in Belarus and sketch out certain directions of change in the country. The most common scenarios, which are also promoted by the Belarusian opposition, are ideal and optimistic options. They are based on the conviction of the inevitability of the collapse of the Lukashenka regime and the natural transition to democratic rule with the direct and fundamental participation of existing opposition groups and figures, including Tsikhanouskaya. The most popular possible scenarios are considered to be dialogue/round table, a peaceful revolution or the collapse of the system under external pressure. All these scenarios provide for an active and leading role for the opposition in political changes and in the subsequent change of government in Belarus.

The democratic forces will most likely cease to be a key factor in political changes in Belarus.

At the same time, the current events inside the country, the general geopolitical situation and crises within the opposition make it necessary to focus on a number

of pessimistic scenarios related to the destruction of the Lukashenka-centred regime in Belarus. These include the assertion that political changes in Belarus may begin with the death of Lukashenka or his or physical and/or mental inability to govern the country. These circumstances create the prerequisites for power in the country to remain in the hands of the ruling class.

Among the most likely scenarios not conducive to the democratization of the system are: the establishment of external control by Russia (the most negative one); the transfer of power to Lukashenka's "political successor", for example, one of his sons; or the establishment of oligarchic rule. All these scenarios (except the Russian political intervention) could lead to the formation of such a political phenomenon as post-Lukashism. Post-Lukashism is a possible state that could exist in society and among political elites (consisting of representatives of the former government) that slows down the process of forming a democratic and stable system. This could ultimately preserve the previous mechanisms and practices of government in order to ensure the interests of the authoritarian ruling group. This scenario may likely be associated with the establishment of oligarchic rule in post-Lukashenka Belarus. Moreover, it does not exclude the controlled participation of the opposition in political processes.

A state of post-Lukashism could ultimately preserve the mechanisms which ensure the interests of an authoritarian ruling group.

The super-political class

Unlike Russia, Ukraine and other countries of the former Soviet Union, a classic oligarchic regime – when extremely rich people directly participate in the management of the state or determine domestic and foreign policy – has not formed in Belarus. Nevertheless, a fairly representative stratum of wealthy people has emerged in the country. Some of these people were and still remain close to the ruling circles. In 2023, despite sanctions and economic isolation, there were more than 100 millionaires in Belarus.

During the collapse of the USSR, power in almost all the republics ended up in the hands of representatives of the former communist nomenclature and the so-called "red directors", who ensured the establishment of authoritarian or mixed (hybrid) regimes. Oligarchy began to form after the decline of the communist system. Unlike the USSR, the Belarusian authoritarian regime created conditions for the economic enrichment of a considerable number of people, many of whom also

helped ensure the overall financial well-being of the ruling elite. Among the most famous and directly connected with Lukashenka's family are Aliaxandar Shakutin, Mikalai Varabyou, Aliaxandar Aleksin, Aliaxandar Zaycau, Aliaxandar Mashensky and Pavel Tapuzidis. It is clear that by the time of political changes in Belarus, the structure of the group of the most influential businessmen may look different.

Revolutionary changes do not always lead to a situation where power passes into the hands of the democratic opposition.

As in the period of the Soviet collapse, part of the top management nomenclature, the power apparatus (*siloviki*), as well as large businesses close to power will strive to ensure that the country is under their control. By the time the current authoritarian regime collapses, these three political groups will possess key resources: state management, information (*kompromat*) and finance. In fact, these three groups will constitute the oligarchic essence of the new government. Moreover, big business will play a significant role in the process of transformation and the structuring of the new government.

Even revolutionary changes, as the events in Ukraine in 2004 and 2014 showed, do not lead to a situation where political power completely passes into the hands of the democratic opposition. Big business, fearing the loss of its assets, will be more motivated to ensure that democratic rule is not established in Belarus. Autocracy or oligarchy will not only contribute to the preservation and protection of capital, but also provide an opportunity for the additional redistribution of the republic's economic assets.

It must also be kept in mind that after several years of repression, the complete destruction of civil society institutions, independent media and the expulsion of the most active representatives of society from the country, there simply will be no other political actors capable of coming to power. The political initiative at a critical moment will be in the hands of the oligarchy, since all democratic structures will still be abroad by that time, unless they have completely disintegrated by then. Thus, a weakened and disintegrated democratic community will be limited in resources in resisting the influence of a new, sufficiently consolidated political class and will be forced to play by their rules.

Legitimization and controlling the opposition

The crisis of 2020 and the post-crisis period in Belarus have shown that Belarusian business will play a significant role in the political transformation and governance of the country in post-Lukashenka Belarus. Probably, for the first time in

the history of the confrontation between civil society and the Lukashenka regime, financial groups and individual businessmen will play a direct role in the ideological and financial support of the opposition. Examples include the actions of the IT company EPAM and the Russian oligarch of Belarusian origin, the owner of Uralchim, Dmitry Mazepin. During the 2020 protests, he proposed the creation of a National Salvation Committee, saying that "Lukashenka needs to stop violence against civilians, recognize the obvious facts of protest tension and sit down at the negotiating table with the opposition. This opportunity may soon become the only one, so it should not be missed."

The events of 2020 and the conviction that the fall of the Lukashenka regime is inevitable have prompted a number of businessmen to actively participate in political processes in Belarus. This can serve as a basis for the assertion that in the event of the destruction (destabilization) of the authoritarian regime, business groups will play an extremely important role in shaping a new way of life and will be able to easily use the opposition for this.

Of course, the oligarchic class will strive to ensure the legal conditions for its rule, using democratic procedures and democratic opposition, but maintaining full control over the functioning of the system. The key mechanism of legitimization will remain elections, which, in conditions of maintaining power in the hands of the oligarchy, will remain a tool for manipulation.

With the necessary resources (information and finances), the oligarchic class will strive to blackmail opposition representatives through compromising materials, and thus put them under direct control. They will directly test the integrity of opposition leaders in order to provide support for their own actions, interests and political positions. This process could be initiated long before the moment of any political changes and, if necessary, provide financing for the oligarchs' own new parties and movements during election campaigns to bring parliament under their control. Oligarchs could also finance opposition parties in order to extend their influence over different political actors.

The business class is waiting and ready

In conditions that encourage material insecurity and a weak political culture among representatives of opposition structures, it will not be difficult to implement such manipulations. An example would be the recent scandal involving Volga Kavalkova, a member of the opposition Coordinating Council and once a close associate of Tsikhanouskaya. She was offered 500,000 US dollars on behalf of some Russian oligarch in order to start her own political activity and push Tsikhanous-

kaya out. As it turned out, it was a provocation by Lukashenka's secret services. Nevertheless, it demonstrates how easily members of the Belarusian opposition could be corrupted.

It is also necessary to take into account that a number of figures who joined the opposition in 2020 have been in Lukashenka's system for a long time. Apparently, they had and probably continue to have contacts with business representatives. In the case of changes in Belarus, it will be easy (if necessary) to co-opt such people from the opposition into a new political order to create the illusion of democratic transformation.

All said, during the years of Lukashenka's rule, a political and financial class has developed in Belarus. This group has significant material resources that can be quickly transformed into political capital during the destruction of the authoritarian system. The existence of this class and its active participation in the struggle for power and its retention may become one of the most important challenges for the democratic transformation of Belarus. EE

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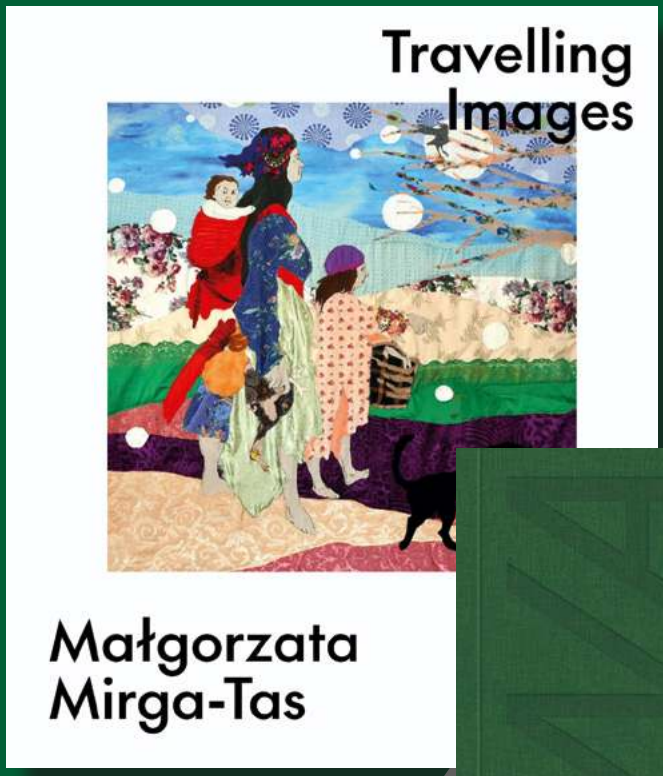

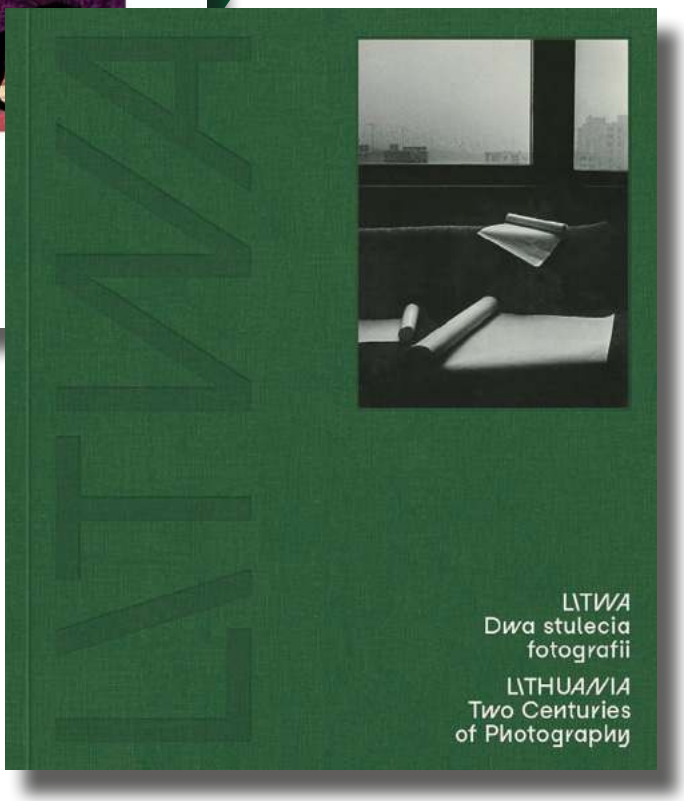

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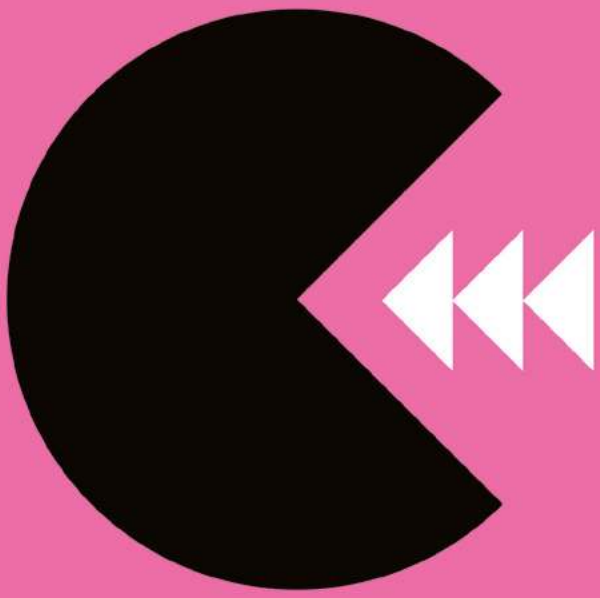

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The world according to BelTA

JUSTYNA OLĘDZKA

The use of propaganda tools by non-democratic regimes is not new or particularly sophisticated. For years, the Belarusian Telegraphic Agency has been a broadcaster that has not even pretended to be objective. As a result, it is commonly perceived as a means of spreading Belarusian and pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation.

On December 27th 2023, thanks to the service of the Belarusian Telegraphic Agency (BelTA), the world learned that Alyaksandr Lukashenka had opened a New Year's Eve ball for youth at the Palace of Independence in Minsk. The group also reported that the participants of the event danced the traditional caddy and mazurek dances, alongside the styles of modern rock and roll, mambo, boogie-woogie, lambada and twist.

On that day, a global audience could also learn about the declaration that was published on the portal of the Belarusian minister of industry, Alyaksandr Rogozhnik, stating that "there is practically no doubt that the growth rate of industrial production in 2023 will exceed 112 per cent." Similar optimism was expressed by Olga Kuntsova, the head of the commercial department of Belkoopsoyuz (a multi-industry state organisation), when she stated that in December alone, her enterprises had produced: over 40 tonnes of confectionery products such as themed cakes and gingerbread products; over 62 tonnes of processed products and semi-processed culinary products (such as meat roll-ups and stuffed cabbage rolls); over 20 tonnes of sausage and meat products (lard, cured meats, salami, etc.); as well as about 150 tonnes of canned and pickled products. In the same vein, the Bela-

rusian Cement Company proclaimed huge success with plans to build a large production and logistics hub in the Moscow region. Finally, the Belarusian National Library announced that it had already received 100 books in donations from the Turkish presidential library.

Bitter ointment in a barrel of sweet honey

BelTA also did not fail to mention the visit of Belarus's defence minister, Viktar Khrenin, to an integration and educational centre in Orsha, which was part of a larger charity project called "Our Children". During the visit, the minister said that if someone wants to make a child happy, they should surround him or her with "care and love".

As if there were not enough occasions for celebration, on the very same day BelTA reported that in Brazil the association of journalists called "Abrajinter" awarded Sergey Lukashevich, the ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary of Belarus to Brazil, with the title of "Ambassador of the Year". Lukashevich received this title for his efforts to strengthen media cooperation between Belarus and Brazil.

BelTA, the largest Belarusian news agency, has been in operation for more than 100 years now.

Among these aforementioned reports, as well as many other "success" stories and expressions of optimism that can be found on BelTA's website, careful readers can yet notice that there is a spoonful of bitter ointment in this barrel of sweet honey. Somewhere between the stories of the international successes of the representatives of Belarus and promises of the country's better future, are also the words of the spokeswoman of the Russian foreign ministry, Maria Zakharova, who stated that Ukraine was preparing a provocation and will spread toxic substances to accuse the Russian Federation of using chemical weapons. With these words, it was suggested that Ukraine could attempt "a provocation similar to the one that took place in Bucha".

The above examples published in just one day can be treated as puzzles of one larger set that depicts the world according to the propagandists of BelTA. After all, the largest Belarusian news agency has been in operation for more than 100 years now. It was established on December 23rd 1918 as a branch of the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA). In 1921 it was transformed into the Belarusian Office of the Russian Telegraph Agency (BelROSTA) and in 1924 into a branch of the United Commercial Telegraph Agency (BelKTA), which finally became the Belarusian Telegraph Agency (BelTA) in 1931. Since 1935 the agency's structure was

unified with the structures of other news agencies of the Soviet republics. Arguably, until 1991 BelTA, although legally an independent organization, was a part of the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS). Although independent Belarus began the process of reforming its news agency, all efforts to democratize it ended on October 10th 1995 with the decree of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. According to this declaration, the agency had its Soviet-era name and purpose restored in the state media system.

Today, BelTA's motto is "Fast, solid, efficient!" Indeed, in line with this, fast, solid and efficient state propaganda is swiftly flowing to audiences inside and outside Belarus. Every day BelTA distributes 150 to 250 news announcements and publishes hundreds of photos, which are grouped into 20 to 25 thematic threads. Needless to say, the agency is the owner of the country's largest photo database. The agency's dynamic activity is made possible by its offices and regional correspondents, who operate in different parts of Belarus and Russia. In March 2023 the agency announced plans to expand its cooperation with the Chinese state news agency – Xinhua.

In March 2023 BelTA announced plans to expand its cooperation with the Chinese state news agency – Xinhua.

Official estimates state that the agency's portal ("belta.by"), is visited by around two million users per month. More than 80 per cent of them come from Belarus. On Instagram, the agency's official profile is observed by 27,900 users, while on X/Twitter, its account has more than 37,000 followers. A large audience is found on Facebook, where the agency has 89,000 fans of the Russian-language version and 4,400 fans of the English-language version. BelTA's profile on Vkontakte, the Russian social media site, has more than 44,000 subscribers, while its Telegram channel has over 60,000. On "dzen.ru" – a Russian news aggregator by Yandex – it also has almost 29,000 observers. The most impressive numbers are yet to be found on the agency's YouTube platform, where @beltavideo has 1.46 million subscribers, the result of an increase of about 800,000 over the past year. Through this video platform, BelTa has published more than 13,000 videos.

Get to know Belarus better

BelTA's international expansion was accompanied by the launch of the international *Radio Belarus* in Minsk and Polish versions of Belarusian TV programmes on YouTube. In October 2023 the agency's website also started publishing content in Polish. This was the sixth foreign language edition of the site, after Russian, Be-

larusian, English, Spanish and Chinese. According to official declarations from the Belarusian authorities, it was created so that Poles could "get to know Belarus better".

The agency's director general, Iryna Akulovich, defined the goals of the initiative in this way: "The Polish version of BelTA's service is an opportunity to convey to our neighbours, ordinary Poles, what their own government is trying to hide from them. Belarusians stand for peace, we don't want war and we don't intend to attack anyone. We want Belarusians and Poles to travel freely, to visit each other, especially since so many people have family ties in the neighbour country … we are also for tourist trips – after all, there are many interesting things in our countries, we are for business contacts, because you cannot be neighbours and wage trade wars at the same time. Working on the introduction of information in Polish, as well as the introduction of a visa-free regime for Poles, will help them get to know our country better and get to know the initiatives that are proposed by the Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka."

The tone of this statement is indeed quite unusual, given the state of current Polish-Belarusian relations. At this point, it should also be mentioned that it was BelTA that was the first to publish photos from the courtroom in which Andrzej Poczobut – a Belarusian journalist from the Polish minority – was placed in a cage in handcuffs.

Ostensibly, the Polish-language edition of the agency's portal includes Belarusian propaganda that promotes the country's economic success and the effectiveness of Minsk's activities on the international stage. Yet truth be told, all these pieces of news serve only as background in the constant promotion of the most important figure – Alyaksandr Lukashenka. The president of the republic is always presented, through all channels of the state propaganda machine, as the father of the nation, a politician, a protector of immigrants and refugees, a statesman, a negotiating partner, a harsh but fair judge and a practicing "Orthodox atheist". Seemingly he is one leader, but with many different guises and appearing in countless places: at a factory, in the fields, at a concert hall, in the parliament, in Africa, in Sochi, in a sauna. In other words, Lukashenka is shown to have been everywhere, which for a large number of Belarusians who were born after 1994 has become the reality.

Anti-Ukrainian and anti-western

The use of propaganda tools by non-democratic regimes is not something new or particularly sophisticated. For years, BelTA has been a broadcaster that does not even pretend to be objective. As a result, it is commonly perceived as a means of spreading Belarusian and pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation. It was

more than a decade ago when the European Council decided on October 15th 2012 to impose sanctions on then BelTA director general, Dmitry Zhuk. This act was a part of the punishment imposed by the EU on Lukashenka's regime for suppressing opposition protests after the 2010 presidential elections. At the time, the Council emphasized that Zhukov was responsible for transmitting state propaganda through state media, supporting and justifying repressions of the opposition and spreading disinformation about the situation in the country.

BelTA is increasingly used by the Belarusian authorities to expand the areas of information that they want to control.

Evidently, since the stolen 2020 elections and the mass protests, BelTA has been increasingly used by the Belarusian authorities to maintain, or even expand, the areas of information that they want to extensively control. It has also been used by the regime to respond to the policy decisions taken by some social media owners and administrators that allow for restricting the dissemination of posts, videos or photos generated by BelTA and other government-controlled media. Specifically, this policy allows for labelling posts that have been published by Belarusian state broadcasters as an expression of the position of a non-democratic regime.

Such actions, as well as the limiting of the number of results that are linked to Belarusian propaganda and disinformation in internet searches, are meant to support the activities of the Belarusian opposition and war-affected Ukraine. Namely, these are attempts at counteracting the narrative of the Belarusian authorities, which since 2020 has clearly been in line with the rhetoric of the Kremlin and since 2022 also explicitly anti-Ukrainian.

Such shifts are of course a natural consequence of the political changes that have taken place within the Union State, which – first and foremost – include the gradual loss of information independence by the Belarusian state. According to BelTA, Russia and Belarus are united by a special and unique relationship. This means that, on the one hand, they can operate as two separate states, but, on the other hand, they exist as one civilizational unit which promotes similar values and applies a common interpretation of the past. The union also has a unified way of presenting and justifying the war in Ukraine, and a negative assessment of western (especially US and NATO) involvement in the affairs of post-Soviet states. In the past, Russia and Belarus indeed have shared many things but it is possible that they will share even more in the future.

The cloning of various versions of BelTA's portal or its social media profiles is a method of globalising the tools that are used to promote Belarusian and pro-Russian narratives. To achieve this, a growing number of foreign "experts", "analysts"

or "specialists" are invited and broadcasted by these outlets. The voices of these people, with strong anti-western messages, are published not only in the materials that are distributed in Belarus and the Union State but also in the news aimed at non-Russian-speaking audiences. They are meant to give an impression of objectivity and reinforce the power of the narrative that is being put forward. At the same time, it is hard not to notice the strong emphasis on the promotion of these anti-western messages.

Following the best working neo-Soviet propaganda patterns, BelTA has prepared and implemented a special project called "Now we are Belarusians". In its framework, the agency spins stories (obviously saturated with authoritarian newspeak) that present people who emigrated to Belarus because they found "a paradise on earth" there. This idyllic picture ignores one grim fact, nonetheless. This is namely the fact that, as of writing, there are 1,427 political prisoners in Belarus. BelTA has not mentioned them, not on December 27th 2023 and not on any other day. EE

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Ukraine's limited dialogue with Belarusian democratic forces

OLEKSANDR SHEVCHENKO

The onset of dialogue between the Ukrainian authorities and the Belarusian democratic forces began in autumn 2022. However, it did not continue so strongly in 2023. This can be partly explained by the difficult situation on the battlefield in the Russian war against Ukraine, which is naturally the priority for the authorities in Kyiv. At the same time, Ukraine has maintained its diplomatic relations with the authorities in Minsk.

In February of 2022, Russian tanks used Belarusian territory to invade Ukraine through the north to try and install a puppet government in Kyiv. After Alyaksandr Lukashenka recognized Crimea as Russian at the end of autumn 2021, the question of warming relations between Kyiv and the Belarusian dictator was finally eliminated. Nevertheless, diplomatic relations remained between Ukraine and Belarus. They were not torn apart even after the outbreak of the full-scale Russian aggression with the participation of Belarus, so a certain official level of dialogue was still ongoing.

By the end of the year, Ukraine was conducting dialogue on multiple fronts with the people of Belarus, both continuing the conversation with Minsk while building its relationships with the Kalinoŭski Regiment (the group of Belarusians fighting on the side of Ukraine) and the United Transitional Cabinet (led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya). How does Ukraine maintain such a tricky diplomatic balance,

Photo: DarSzach /Shutterstock

Leader of democratic Belarus and the United Transnational Cabinet, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, has sought to build dialogue with Kyiv since February 2022. Yet, the Ukrainian leadership has been reluctant.

especially when Belarus remains in the hands of Lukashenka, perhaps the most eccentric and mercurial leader on the European continent?

Forging relations anew

It has been well documented that the Ukrainian leadership has been reluctant to conduct any active dialogue with Tsikhanouskaya's entourage. Despite these hurdles, Kyiv's relations with the Belarusian opposition did expand at some level after Lukashenka's rigged elections of 2020. In 2021, at the invitation of the Ukrainian foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, Tsikhanouskaya took part in an online meeting of the Lublin Triangle format (a joint platform of Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania). At the beginning of September 2022, Oleksiy Arestovych, then advisor to Volodymyr Zelenskyy, met with Tsikhanouskaya. In fact, this can be considered the first direct contact between the Ukrainian president's entourage and the leader of the Belarusian democratic forces. In October 2022 representatives of the Belarusian Transitional Cabinet met with members of the Verkhovna Rada (Ukraine's parliament), including Bohdan Yaremenko from the ruling Servant of the People party. This meeting was also seen as a breakthrough moment and the start of dialogue between Ukraine at the state level and the United Transitional Cabinet.

Meanwhile, the dialogue format between Ukraine and the Kalinoŭski Regiment as political representatives of Belarusian society was proposed in October 2022 by Yaremenko. Between October and December 2022, a number of meetings involving the regiment's representatives were held with Ukrainian and Lithuanian MPs, as well as Ukrainian local authorities, including Vitaly Klitschko, the mayor of Kyiv. In this way, the topic of Belarus in Ukrainian political life was "unfrozen" after almost a year of "freezing", which occurred after Lukashenka recognized Crimea as Russian and Belarus's subsequent participation in the Russian aggression against Ukraine. In the first month after the beginning of the aggression, Ukrainian politicians appealed directly to the Belarusian people with calls not to allow the Belarusian army to go to war, but there were no considerations or attempts to undertake any political dialogue from November 2021 to October 2022. In 2023, the intensity of dialogue decreased slightly compared to the end of 2022, but in one form or another contacts are still developing.

Dialogue with the Minsk authorities, on the other hand, is still taking place formally via diplomatic relations, although the diplomatic rank of these relations in 2023 has significantly decreased. In June 2023 Zelenskyy dismissed Ihor Kyzym, the Ukrainian ambassador to Belarus, and in October Lukashenka sacked Igor Sokol, the Belarusian ambassador in Kyiv. Formally, both countries are currently represented at the level of chargé d'affaires. The chargé d'affaires of Ukraine on the website of the embassy in Minsk mentions Olga Timush, but her biography and photo are not on the website. However, on the website of the Belarusian embassy in Kyiv, Igor Sokol is still indicated as the ambassador.

In mid-June last year, a group of deputies of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine introduced a draft resolution recognizing Belarus as an aggressor state and calling for the severance of diplomatic relations. The justification for the bill demands that the Ukrainian parliament recognize Belarus as an aggressor state and calls on the governments of other countries and international organizations to do the same. In addition, the resolution includes a call to "immediately resolve the issue of breaking diplomatic relations between Ukraine and the Republic of Belarus". However, this bill is still being reviewed by committees of the Verkhovna Rada.

Keeping the channel open

The Ukrainian government still adheres to the principle that as long as the Belarusian military does not participate in the Russian war against Ukraine, then Kyiv will maintain diplomatic relations with Minsk. The reason for Kyiv's political line is generally understandable – even when reduced to a minimum, diplomatic

relations do remain a channel through which it is possible to maintain contact (and this means the possibility of influence) with the Lukashenka regime. Ukraine wants to leave the Belarusian dictator the opportunity to manoeuvre even in the conditions of a full-scale war. Another reason for maintaining diplomatic relations is the ability to defend the rights of Ukrainian citizens on the territory of Belarus, which was especially mentioned by Kyzym when he was still ambassador in Minsk. In the current conditions, it is difficult to say how effectively Ukraine uses this opportunity, but formally it will remain as long as diplomatic relations are open.

On the one hand, any dialogue between the representatives of the Ukrainian authorities and the United Transitional Cabinet (and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya) has not intensified. But on the other, it has slowly become, in a sense, a "working routine" and part of normality in the political life of both countries. This in itself is progress, considering that almost half a year after the events of August 2020, Ukraine had no contacts with Tsikhanouskaya's circle at all – until the aforementioned online meeting of the Lublin Triangle, where Tsikhanouskaya was an invited guest. Kyiv has maintained contact in various ways ever since. After the Ukrainian political elite "unfroze" the Belarusian issue last autumn, the situation changed dramatically. Ukraine is now becoming a place for meetings and cooperation between various representatives of the democratic forces of Belarus. For example, on February 8th last year, a roundtable was held in Kyiv titled "Belarusian Platform: public conversation about the future". The event was attended by, among others: Ukrainian and Belarusian researchers of bilateral relations, representatives of the Kalinoŭski Regiment, the transitional cabinet, and the Ukrainian ministry of culture and information policy.

In mid-May 2023 Zelenskyy met Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya for the first time. Although it was widely promoted on social networks by Tsikhanouskaya's circle and Belarusian free media, in fact it was almost a forced formality. During the presentation of the Charlemagne Prize in Aachen, Zelenskyy greeted other invited politicians, including Tsikhanouskaya. The formal handshake is a positive symbolic gesture after so many years of obscurity, but it does not indicate any greater interest in developing further dialogue at the highest level.

A forum for new projects

On September 1st 2022, Mykhailo Podolyak, head adviser to Zelenskyy, gave an hour-long interview to Anatoly Lebedko, Tsikhanouskaya's adviser on inter-parliamentary cooperation and constitutional reform. During the interview, Podolyak discussed the prospects for the development of Belarusian-Ukrainian relations,

the situation in Belarus and the legal problems of Belarusians in Ukraine. At the end of November, the "Road to Freedom" conference was held in Kyiv, initiated by the Kastus Kalinoŭski Foundation, and a keynote speech was delivered online by Tsikhanouskaya. Representatives of the United Transitional Cabinet also participated in the conference.

The intensity of the political dialogue between representatives of the Ukrainian authorities and the Kalinoŭski Regiment as a political unit decreased significantly in 2023 compared to autumn 2022, when meetings between the representatives of the regiment and Ukrainian politicians of various levels were held almost every week. Moreover, not all projects agreed upon during this period were implemented. For example, in October 2022, during a meeting involving regiment representatives and the parliamentary group "For a Free Belarus", agreements were reached to initiate a draft resolution in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine to recognize Belarus as an occupied state. The draft was introduced, but since then (over a year now), no progress has been made on the matter.

At the end of November 2023 the "Road to Freedom" conference was held in Kyiv, initiated by the Kastus Kalinoŭski Foundation.

Generally, in 2023 the regiment was focused more on the military part of its activities. The political part in this respect receded into the background. The main political project of the year, implemented by the regiment, was the aforementioned "Road to Freedom" conference. This event became a forum which united over 100 representatives of various circles of Belarusian civil society. After the conference, a joint declaration and an appeal to the free nations of the world were signed. On the Ukrainian side, the forum was attended by, among others, Yaremenko, as one of the initiators of the regiment's political activity. Most importantly, Ukraine acted here as a forum where Belarusian democratic forces and representatives of Belarusian civil society were able to meet, talk to each other, propose new projects and develop a strategy of action. Moreover, a separate panel of the conference was devoted to the role of Ukraine in the future democratization of Belarus. In their theses, the representatives of the regiment emphasized that Kyiv should become the priority strategic partner of the national liberation movement.

Prospects for 2024

So what will happen next? The intensive onset of dialogue between the Ukrainian authorities and the Belarusian democratic forces in autumn 2022 did not continue so strongly in 2023. This can be partly explained by the difficult situation on the

battlefield in the Russian war against Ukraine, which is naturally the priority for the authorities in Kyiv.

Ukraine has maintained its diplomatic relations with the government in Minsk. This is facilitated by, among others, the fact that the Belarusian army was not directly involved in the war, and shelling from the territory of Belarus has not taken place for over a year. The deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus and the establishment of the Wagner Group fighter base in Belarus have not changed Kyiv's position.

Despite Tsikhanouskaya's formal meeting with Zelenskyy in Aachen, top-level Ukrainian authorities have not yet sought to develop dialogue at the highest level, leaving contacts with Tsikhanouskaya, her office and the United Transitional Cabinet at the level of advisors and parliamentarians. Tsikhanouskaya did not come to Kyiv in November for the "Path to Freedom" conference, which she explained was due to the lack of an invitation from the Ukrainian government. Nevertheless, Ukraine has become a venue for organizing dialogue among the Belarusian democratic forces at least twice in 2023 (in February with the roundtable "Belarusian Platform: public conversation about the future", and in November with the "Path to Freedom" conference). It seems that this role on the part of Ukraine will continue to develop.

At the level of the Ukrainian parliament, many laws and resolutions regarding Belarus remain in draft form, some of them even for over a year. In this regard, the failure to implement the projects agreed with representatives of the Belarusian democratic forces hinders further concrete dialogue.

Currently, the Ukrainian ruling team believes that the only Belarusian democratic organization with real power is the Kalinoŭski Regiment, thus dialogue should primarily be conducted with them. What is more, if Belarusian civil society becomes dispersed and divided, the regiment may truly remain the only force with which the Ukrainian authorities can actually conduct dialogue and organize joint projects. Yet, if the international recognition of the United Transitional Cabinet and the Coordination Council is added to the real strength of the Kalinoŭski Regiment, the political weight of Belarusian civil society in dialogue with Kyiv may increase significantly. Thus, it appears that dialogue between the Ukrainian authorities and representatives of Belarusian civil society this year will largely depend, first and foremost, on the further development of the Russo-Ukrainian War, and secondly, on the ability of the Belarusian democratic forces to remain united. ЕЕ

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Remote grieving

How Belarusian refugees face the death of someone close

DARYA GRISHCHUK

The number of Belarusians in exile continues to grow following the crackdowns and repressions after the falsified elections in 2020. Most of those who leave cannot return until a major change in Belarus. As seen in the experiences of three young Belarusian activists, the emotional toll can sometimes be a high price to pay following the decision to escape.

It has been more than three years since the 2020 election in Belarus and the subsequent protests following the falsified victory of Alyaksandr Lukashenka. During this period, thousands of people have faced political persecution and currently there are nearly 1,500 political prisoners in Belarus. People continue to be arrested for disagreeing with the regime, and since February 2022 for supporting Ukraine.

The massive repressions provoked an unprecedented wave of migration. According to the European Network for Belarus, since 2020, about 145,000 to 170,000 Belarusians have emigrated to Poland, Germany, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia alone. Some of them have decided to never come back, or at least remain abroad until the regime changes. Visiting their homeland can be dangerous for them since people get detained right on the border.

The stories of three Belarusians who left the country for political reasons and, while abroad, lost their loved ones who stayed behind represents some of the huge challenges faced by those in exile. We spoke to them about remote loss, their decision not to return, and their experience in resisting Lukashenka's regime.

"The first place I'll go to if I return to Belarus is my mother's grave"

In August 2021 Nastya suddenly realized that she was alone. She did not have a companion to go for coffee with. All her friends had left Belarus for safety reasons. Nastya stayed in Minsk hoping for the best. The situation, however, was getting worse and people from her circle kept getting arrested. At the same time, Nastya's background indicated that she could also become a target for the authorities. Nastya was actively participating in the protests in Belarus. In October 2020 she was arrested and spent 13 days in prison. This meant that she was already in the police databases.

"At some point I realised that all the people with whom I was involved in political activism either had left Belarus or were imprisoned. If I was arrested, there wouldn't be anyone around who could help me or pass something to me in prison. I only had my mother with her weak heart. I thought she wouldn't have survived if I had been arrested. So I decided to leave."

Nastya moved to Wrocław, Poland in October 2021. She planned to find a job and continue her activist work. At the time, COVID-19 regulations were still in place in Poland, so she had to quarantine for the first ten days. During this period her mum became infected with the virus.

"She did everything possible to stay safe. She got vaccinated and never brought groceries inside, leaving them by the house. First, she took off her clothes, washed them, cleaned herself, disinfected the groceries and only then put them in the fridge. Despite that, she still got sick." Nastya's mother was hospitalised. Nastya called her a couple of times but it was hard for her mother to talk since she was connected to a ventilator. So they mostly exchanged messages.

"At some point, my mum started responding less frequently. She sent just one message during the day, asking about how I was doing and if I found a job – classic parental questions. One day I sent her a text where I said that I was very proud of her, that she was my heroine and I admired her. It turned out I sent it about half an hour before her death." Nastya's mother died aged 58. Her friend called in tears and delivered the bad news. Several hours later Nastya started getting calls from relatives. When will she come? Where should they bury her mother? What coffin should they buy?

"I wasn't ready for such questions. I also understood that there was no guarantee that I would come to the funeral. I could be detained at the border. I also understood that all those people who asked me when I would come, they weren't there when I was in prison. So if I got arrested they wouldn't support me. It was difficult, but I decided not to go. People were surprised, saying 'How come? This is your mum.' But I didn't feel guilty. Once I made a decision, I let it go."

Friends of the family helped Nastya to organise the funeral. One of them called Nastya from the morgue, so she could say some last words to her mother. "She turned off the microphone and directed the camera to my mother's face. It was a weird experience of saying goodbye via video call. But I think I said everything I wanted. Later I had a couple more calls right from the funeral. The first place I'll go to if I return to Belarus is my mother's grave. I don't have anything else in Belarus. But this is a place of power for me despite the fact that I am not a religious person. I could not even imagine myself in a situation where I couldn't go to my mother's funeral."

"I wouldn't be useful if I'm in prison"

Artsiom left Belarus during the second wave of migration in 2021. However, he started preparing for it half a year earlier, gathering the necessary documents and discussing details with his partner and employer.

"I find it so naïve now, but back then we truly believed that we would manage to overthrow the regime. Yet, despite my faith, I always had a 'Plan B'. I had the *karta Polaka* (a document confirming an affiliation with Poland that allows holders to travel to and work in Poland. It is usually granted to people who have Polish heritage – editor's note) and I knew that I could leave."

Artsiom was actively participating in the protests. In 2020 he came to vote with a white ribbon on his arm, which was a sign that the person intended to vote for Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. On August 9th he was among other people awaiting the results of the elections when the police began their first detentions. That night Artsiom and his friends managed to hide.

"I was really lucky that I wasn't arrested. Not a single time. It is really weird. I went to Lenin's square every day. This place is full of cameras. They installed them after the infamous 'social parasite' [protests] law. People, including myself, were gathering there to protest against this law. In August 2020 I went there every day for two weeks. I was wearing a mask. We all were. But one day I found out that a guy who was with us was arrested right outside his house."

Artsiom explains his luck by the illogical nature of the regime – anyone could and still can be arrested any day for anything. In the autumn of 2020, the protests subsided and almost disappeared from the global agenda, but the regime continued to imprison political opponents.

"I didn't feel like staying, no matter what. I understood that these monsters in uniforms exist because I pay taxes. With my girlfriend we decided to leave. It was a slow-moving plan. But everything changed after the plane carrying Roman Protasevich (the editor-in-chief of a popular opposition Telegram channel – editor's

note) was forcibly landed in Belarus and he was detained. After that, in August 2021 we moved to Poland."

Artsiom describes his migration experience as smooth and painless. He didn't lose his job and continued working for an American start-up from Warsaw. He was accompanied by his girlfriend and their cat. Many of his friends also moved to Poland, others could visit him often. His friend Vanya visited Artsiom several times a year. The last time he came was two weeks before his death.

"Vanya was one of my best friends. We knew each other for 20 years. He was one of those who woke up later than everyone in his circle. He worked in a government company and wasn't really into politics. But in 2020 he opened his eyes. He started reading the news, watching YouTube channels. He even participated in some marches."

It seemed like Vanya wanted to leave Belarus as well, but it was complicated. This would entail a career change, job hunting and adapting to a new environment. He preferred to stay at home and visit his friends as often as he could.

"I was with my friends when I found out that Vanya died. We were going to walk with our friend's dog, putting on our shoes and I got the message from my friend Stas. It said "My friend, Vanya died." I sat and looked at my phone for some time, not being able to understand what was going on." Vanya died aged 34. He was cycling with his cousin when he felt a pain in his chest. He died immediately and was buried a couple of days later. Artsiom made a decision not to go to the funeral almost instantly.

"I resolved this inner conflict very quickly. A person who passed away isn't too concerned about whether you attend their funeral or not. If you are a religious person it might be important for you. I'm not. And all these rituals only evoke disgust in me. I was processing it in my own way. I was talking to my friends, crying, looking at photos." Although Artsiom wrote down the coordinates of Vanya's grave, he is not going to visit it. Moreover, he has already answered the question that bothers many Belarusians: should I go if something happens to my family?

"I wouldn't go. The reason is the same. It's my safety. I wouldn't be useful if I'm in prison. Neither to my family, nor myself."

"I was thousands of kilometres away not being able to help"

Yulia worked as a journalist during the protests in Belarus. She covered almost all of the demonstrations and was lucky enough to not get caught. However, some of her colleagues ended up in the notorious Okrestina jail, where prisoners were tortured for attending the protests.

"In 2021 the situation became worse for journalists. The accreditation of our outlet was revoked [by the Belarusian government]. Work was getting more challenging. But I didn't think about migration." Everything happened spontaneously. In June 2021 Yulia and her colleague were sent on a business trip to Warsaw for a month. While they were there the repressions against journalists intensified. Returning to Belarus became even more risky. Yulia decided not to go back.

"It was hard for me to cope with it. I didn't say goodbye to my family, my friends and my homeland. I didn't terminate my rental agreement. I only took summer clothes with me." In August 2021 Yulia moved to Malaga, Spain. She was still hoping to go back home. But in December the police came to her parents' house and conducted a search there. It turned out that criminal charges were brought against Yulia.

"The reason was fabricated, supposedly linking me to the Telegram channel *Karateli Belarusi* (which had been recognized as extremist in Belarus – editor's note). After that I realised I won't come back soon." A month later Yulia got a call from her parents. Her grandmother had died.

"She wasn't ill, on the contrary, she was very active. Cycling around a village, managing a household. I was shocked. The relatives were busy organising the funeral while I was thousands of kilometres away, not being able to help. The feeling of helplessness was probably the most difficult."

Yulia decided not to attend the funeral. The family supported her – better if she's far but safe than close but imprisoned. Yet the distance made facing the death of her grandmother more complicated. Yulia believes it is important to be able to go through all the farewell rituals.

"I don't know if I've fully grasped her death. I feel that seeing my mourning family, the body, and going through all the rituals – I should have done that to understand my loss better. I visited a church here, looked at photographs and reminisced about the good times. But I still don't entirely comprehend it."

Two years later, Yulia experienced another loss – her uncle passed away. "We had a truly warm relationship. I think he was the funniest and most cheerful person in my family. For me, the biggest tragedy is not being able to say goodbye. This is the most difficult bit in processing death from abroad. And communication with the family is difficult. You're a thousand kilometres away, but you want to be there, hug and support your family, help. But you can't be there. You have to wait until the funeral is over to say what you wanted to say via phone. But not a single call can convey your feelings."

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Andrei Kureichyk's stubborn insistence on freedom

DANIEL EDISON

The story of Andrei Kureichyk is a good reflection of the story of Belarus itself. The playwright turned political activist, who has been in exile since 2020, believes that the idea of an independent and free Belarus cannot be abandoned. His most recent project, *Voices of the New Belarus*, serve as testimony to this belief.

Once or twice a week, throughout April and May 2023, the Belarusian playwright, filmmaker and political activist Andrei Kureichyk walked down several flights of creaky stairs into the dusty basement of a building in New Haven, Connecticut. The basement, belonging to Yale University's School of Drama, had been converted a number of years earlier into a recording studio, and Kureichyk was joined by an audio engineer in training as well as a different voice actor each visit. Some were student or professional actors; some were intellectuals or professors. They had been recruited for Kureichyk's project *Voices of the New Belarus*, a multimedia adaption of his play of the same title. In the play, as well as the art installation composed of voiceovers and video art depicting Belarusian protests, he had compiled testimonies of activism and repression from the 2020 Belarusian uprising into a real-life narrative examining the dreaming, suffering and perseverance of the Belarusian opposition to dictator Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Some of these testimonies are household names among politically active Belarusians, including musician-turned-activist Maryia Kalesnikava, journalist Marina

Zolotova and blogger Ihar Losik. They are all currently behind bars in Belarus. Others are ordinary Belarusians like Vitaly Marokko, who was beaten and shot by security forces in front of his son when he decided to protest against the election's blatant falsification, and furniture maker Pyotr Kirik, who was thrown into a van and arrested while walking home in 2020. Among the professors who participated in the project, which premiered at the Oslo Freedom Forum in 2023, was historian Timothy Snyder, known internationally for his support of Ukraine since 2014. He voiced the testimony of Nobel peace laureate Ales Bialiatski, who is currently serving a ten-year prison sentence in Belarus.

Search for authenticity

Andrei Kureichyk, once a screenwriter in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine who was celebrated for his comedies and thrillers, has not always been a political writer. The focus of his work on Belarusian civil and political society developed only with Lukashenka's gradual tightening of repressive laws and disappointing political choices since 1994. Kureichyk's repertoire, which ranges from blockbuster Christmas movies to Belarusian independent cinema, had few indications of a political turn, much less a radical one. Today, however, he finds himself living as a political refugee, a recipient of death threats, and has a case against him in Belarus which ensures that he would be arrested upon returning.

Kureichyk was born in 1980 in Minsk, after his parents moved to the capital from a rural village. His mother was a math and computer science teacher, while his father was an accountant for the police. Kureichyk was no dissident as a child, joining the Young Pioneers enthusiastically, and embracing the late Soviet ideological universe in its emphasis on collective patriotism. The main exception in his ideological comfort was an interest in foreign films, which he consumed eagerly when they visited Minsk theatres. Indian cinema was the most widely available in Soviet Belarus in the 1980s and 1990s, but the occasional American movie would find screen time as well. For Kureichyk it was *King Kong* and *Star Wars* that especially captured his imagination, as they seemed to be more important, or at least more authentically human, than the news. This search for authenticity would only grow during the political crisis of the Gorbachev era.

Andrei Kureichyk finds himself living as a political refugee, a recipient of death threats and has a case against him in Belarus.

The inklings of Soviet uncertainty that emerged for the young Kureichyk during the *perestroika* and *glasnost* years after 1985 – marked in Belarus by the difficult

domestic legacy of the Afghan war and growing momentum for political liberalization – became, following the fall of communism and the Soviet dissolution in 1991, a cultural and socio-economic freefall. Self-reflection came quickly and uncontrollably with newfound social and intellectual freedom, and was accompanied by hardship. Marketization, as well as the disintegration of state institutions, was violent in the early 1990s, bringing new goods to Soviet streets in abundance, but making them more expensive than most could afford. By 1994 many Belarusians sought the comfort of a strong, authoritative voice, which they saw in Lukashenka, a career anti-corruption communist who presented himself as an "honest Belarusian man" from the political centre who would create stability. He was voted into office in 1994's free and fair elections.

Confusion and discovery

The post-Soviet 1990s were years of confusion, but this confusion created space for creative identity formation, often in the form of self-discovery. For Kureichyk, this came by way of a literature teacher who opened his horizons to Belarusian, as opposed to Russian or Soviet, literature, a tradition to which Belarusian students had scarcely been exposed in the 1970s and 1980s. He remembers that as he grew into a young adult, his Soviet identity dissolved into a Belarusian identity, as he increasingly read Belarusian poetry and literature in Belarusian, learning to love a language that was taught in earlier years as an inferior form of Russian.

The post-Soviet 1990s created space for creative identity formation, often in the form of self-discovery.

In the spirit of this self-discovery and national engagement, Kureichyk enrolled in the law programme at the Belarusian State University. He had been pushed to law by the same impulse which pushed Belarus towards Lukashenka: the yearning for decency and order in a world where any social footing had vanished. Yet, Kureichyk's time as a lawyer was short. As a student he was invited to take part in a production of a Pushkin play in Minsk, an experience which sparked an interest in writing for the stage.

His first plays, primarily on religious and moral questions in the spirit of re-evaluating social ideas amidst the country's newfound freedom of discussion, were written while he still worked for a law firm. One of these, *Pyemontsky zver*, was picked up by a renowned theatre in Moscow, and would be awarded the Russian Ministry of Culture Award for Best Modern Play in 2002. The play explored, parallel to Soviet disintegration, the process of transition between moral worlds. It depicted

Andrei Kureichik at the World Press Freedom Conference in 2020.

the daughter of a medieval noble, trained as a soldier, who enters a convent in a desperate attempt to find safety amidst war, but struggles to adapt to the values of religious austerity. The question was one of understanding continuity and change between cultural worlds, one emerging, the other gone forever.

In 2005, towards the end of Lukashenka's second term, Kureichyk got a call from a Russian film studio, and was soon summoned to the famous Café Pushkin in Moscow, speaking to a producer surrounded by a team of bodyguards. The producer asked to buy the rights to one of Kureichyk's plays, a comedy, to which Kureichyk agreed, on the condition that he would write the screenplay himself. Kureichyk spent three weeks in Moscow where he wrote what would be released in 2007 as *Lyubov Morkov*. The film, a typical Russian box-office hit of the 2000s, was a light-hearted story of two spouses with a struggling marriage who solicited the help of a mystical marriage counsellor.

Lyubov Morkov performed exceedingly well, becoming one of the most successful comedies of its year in Russia, and led immediately to the planning of a sequel. It also catapulted Kureichyk from playwright to screenwriter and film producer. He began working through dozens of commissions, primarily big-budget projects

from Russia and Ukraine. While they were far from the arthouse films celebrated by international critics, these projects established his name as one of the most successful screenwriters in Belarus. The most widely appreciated included *Yolki*, a Christmas movie which promoted a family-oriented message of friendly cooperation in which six degrees of separation connect a bullied child with the Russian president on Christmas Eve, and which developed into one of Russia's most popular film franchises. He would also work with then-comedian Volodymyr Zelenskyy in *Nashi Vremya*, an office-romance comedy from 2011.

Simultaneously, however, Kureichyk had entered the realm of cultural writing. In 2006, drawing from a now established reputation in Russian-language theatre, he had begun publishing a column for the independent news agency BelaPAN, (which several years ago was searched and shut down by Lukashenka's security force) called "Letters to a friend", in reference to a Josef Brodsky poem. The column discussed cultural life and policy in Belarus and at times even put forth political commentary, which still remained possible, although it was increasingly risky.

The first turning point came with the election of 2010 and the repressions and crackdown which followed. Kureichyk responded with an outspoken edition of "Letters to a friend" which criticized the rigged elections and the ensuing cruelty, particularly pointing to Lukashenka's arrest of opposition candidates. He was soon told by Pavel Latushko, at the time Belarus's minister of culture, now an émigré opposition organizer, that Lukashenka had read the article and was ready to take action against Kureichyk if more followed. The threat (and reality) of personal and social violence was shocking.

In pursuit of freedom

His work after 2010 increasingly, though far from exclusively, became focused on questions of Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian identity, drawing heavily from history and occasionally touching on politics. Having become successful enough to make more creatively challenging decisions, Kureichyk also began to focus on independent filmmaking, often aiming to support fellow Belarusian artists rather than rely on well-financed studios in Moscow.

Indeed, the urgent question of political freedom had become ever clearer with Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity in 2014 which, for liberal Belarusians, was a template for their own situation. When Kureichyk wrote *Obizhennyye. Rossiyaa* in 2016, any full-blown crises had been avoided since the elections of 2010, but the Belarusian elites had been experiencing a gradual ratcheting up of dissatisfaction. This was especially true among young people in the IT sector, which Lukashenka

had helped create. As had long been the case, this dissatisfaction was not explicitly political, but a matter of – as in Ukraine in 2014 – dignity.

Throughout the 2010s, the idea of freedom only continued to grow in significance for Kureichyk. He pursued this at the end of the decade in his most artistically challenging film to date – *Liberté*. The film explores the relationship between a mother and son, living alone in isolated exile due to political repressions against the child's father. Much slower and dialogue-heavy than any of his other films, it returned to his dramatic roots, philosophically examining what methods of escapism are justified – and which are not – in trying to deal with traumatic violence, and in trying to guard freedom. While it was finished in early 2020, *Liberté* would never be officially released, as the Belarusian situation soon reached a boiling point.

By the spring of 2020, it seemed clear to those who had awakened to a desire for tolerance, dignity and respect, that something had to change. This urgency would only be exasperated by COVID-19, to which Lukashenka had an essentially non-existent response (besides his infamous suggestion to poison the virus with vodka). As the August presidential election approached, there was momentum among the opposition, with a number of popular and well-known candidates emerging. In the months before the election however, Viktar Babaryka, a banker and philanthropist, and Siarhei Tsikhanouski, a youtuber, were both barred from running despite (or because of) their widespread popularity. Tsikhanouski was also arrested. By the end of the year, Babaryka would be in prison as well. However, in the meantime he scrambled to move forward, agreeing along with Valery Tsapkala and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Tsikhanouski's wife, to unite their campaigns behind a single candidate – Tsikhanouskaya herself. Her campaign was also merged with that of Maryia Kalesnikava, after Lukashenka claimed that Belarus needed a man as president, in a strong move of women's solidarity which would become a central axis of organization in the following months. Kureichyk soon began to work as a speechwriter for Tsikhanouskaya, and gave a speech of his own to a crowd of 200,000 in the last rally before the August election. The turnout for Tsikhanouskaya was massive, reflecting the demand for a fresh start in Belarus, a re-set of national values away from Lukashenka.

The film *Liberté* explores the relationship between a mother and son, living alone in isolated exile due to political repressions.

On the day of the 2020 election, cooperation throughout civil society became impossible. The internet was shut off, and those working at polling stations were harassed by police, if not arrested outright. International voting commissions were prevented from observing the election procedures, but the few activists who managed to set up limited methods of independent polling found quite convinc-

ing results in Tsikhanouskaya's favour, despite Lukashenka's claim to have won in another landslide. Tsikhanouskaya was soon threatened with violence and fled to neighbouring Lithuania to organize an opposition government ready to peacefully take power from Lukashenka. This became the Belarusian Coordination Council.

Belarusians who remained in the country took a stand, heading to the streets in the largest anti-government protests in Belarusian history, which began on the evening of the election. The protests were soon met with force from the authorities. It was during one of these protests that Kureichyk decided to write the second part of his *Insulted. Belarus*, in solidarity with those among him who succumbed to wounds inflicted upon them by police. Soon Lukashenka intensified his existing censorship, making it, within several months, essentially impossible to maintain any independent journalism, political activity or free expression. The Belarusian Coordination Council in particular, of which Kureichyk was now a part, was targeted.

Kureichyk got a call from his lawyer in September amidst Lukashenka's counter-offensive after the most intense protests of August had quietened down. He was told that he had to be out of the country by the next day, or he risked ending up in prison, as tens of thousands already had. He found immediate refuge in Ukraine, staying with a fellow playwright and managing to put on a production of *Insulted. Belarus*, before moving on to anywhere else in Europe.

Unable to continue his political or artistic work, Kureichyk turned to video blogging, speaking weekly, often daily, in videos on YouTube which have slowly amassed substantial viewership. They became a means to maintain contact, through one of the only social media platforms still accessible in the country, with those at home. In his videos, he insisted that the Coordination Council and fellow oppositionists – who by the end of 2020 were either all imprisoned or in exile – still had hope. Kureichyk would eventually find himself in the United States, spending an academic semester at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, before ending up at Yale, where he remains as a fellow at the time of writing.

Voices of the New Belarus

While at Yale, Kureichyk began the production of his multimedia installation concerning the English translation of *Voices of the New Belarus*, a play which he had written while in Bratislava in 2021 by sifting through hundreds of public testimonies of those who risked or lost their lives in the 2020 protests. Included were the testimonies of Maryia Kalesnikava, the politician who, first part of Viktar Babaryka's team, had merged her efforts with Tsikhanouskaya's campaign. She is now serving an 11-year prison sentence, parts of which have seen her hospitalized in

a critical condition. Another of these activists, whose words are also recorded in Kureichyk's *Voices*, is Polina Sharedno-Panasiuk, also serving a prison sentence for insulting Lukashenka. Kureichyk included excerpts from one of her appearances in court, in which she asked her judge regarding her falsified charges, "How can one come up with this, and what lack of conscience must one have to qualify it all this way?" Yet another of Kureichyk's *Voices* is the imprisoned Roman Zmorich, who ruminates on the 1994 election of Lukashenka that unwittingly set the course for contemporary Belarus: "People were given the right to choose, but they did not know how fateful that choice could be. They didn't have the experience. And they chose what they chose. The trick is that freedom is not free. I think now we will appreciate this."

Interestingly, Kureichyk's decision, in *Voices of the New Belarus*, to weave together ground-level perspectives of national trauma, besides creating a play like few others, drew from a rich tradition in Belarusian literature. Ales Adamovich was an anti-Stalinist Soviet Belarusian writer who brought to life a style of writing which involved the recording of individual perspectives towards historical events in order to craft a supra-individual narrative which places the reader in a time, place and philosophical crisis like no other. Adamovich's greatest work, the collaboratively written *I am from the Fiery Village*, began with interviewing hundreds of survivors of the German occupation of Belarus in the Second World War. Inspired by Adamovich was the Nobel Prize-winning Svetlana Alexievich, who has sought in her works similar mixtures of oral history, journalism and narrative writing. This was done in order to become an "historian of the untraceable" and to "reduce history to the human being", by weaving fragments of interviews and real testimonies into coherent, but emotionally devastating experiences of suffering.

Preserving the Belarusian idea

I met Kureichyk at Yale. I found his self-confidence and belief in the political mission of him and his colleagues, a free Belarus, was so unshakable that one would be surprised at the turbulent road it had put him on since he left in 2020 for what he thought would only be a couple of weeks. This self-confidence, the absolute certainty that they can and must succeed, is built on a tragedy particular to the Belarusian opposition's genesis from an apolitical generation given a taste of tolerance, civil liberties and daily freedoms between 1991 and 2020. This is that Lukashenka, in building his typical authoritarian bargain, trading meaningful political and social freedom in exchange for basic economic security and a decent standard of living, relied on a complete dependence on Russia.

Today, at least 1,500 political prisoners remain behind bars in Belarus, although many reject the official statistics, estimating that the real number may be as high as 5,000. Many of these prisoners are routinely denied medical assistance or legal help – some of them, like Polina Sharedno-Panasiuk, who was transferred to a psychiatric hospital after renouncing her citizenship in protest of her charges, go months at a time without being able to contact their friends or families. As Sviatlana Kurs has written for *Eurozine*, these repressions, replacing popular support or national identity with a Moscow-backed police regime, force Belarusians "to become the kind of people that Russia wants to see".

Indeed, Lukashenka's human rights violations are intertwined with his abdication of Belarusian sovereignty. As is the case with Ukrainian values, there was never an inherent need for a potentially democratic Belarus to exist in conflict with Moscow. Lukashenka, however, found that he could only maintain his power by submitting to Putin in exchange for the economic favours which initially made him popular in Belarus. Recently, this has meant being dragged not only into passive support for Russia's war in Ukraine, but, if a recent report from Pavel Latushko's National Anti-Crisis Management team is accurate, the active perpetration of war crimes in its re-settlement and re-education of Ukrainian children.

Lukashenka's human rights violations are intertwined with his abdication of Belarusian sovereignty.

What these decisions, and the spectre of anti-Ukrainian "Rashism", which has been seen in the re-education of orphaned or separated children from the illegally annexed portions of eastern Ukraine, have meant for some, like Kureichyk, is that their politics have come to take the form of national salvation, building off of the fear that the Belarusian idea as such is at risk. As Latushko suggested in a 2023 interview, "today it is a question of the existence of Belarus as a state, and it is a question of the existence of Belarus as a nation." There is a growing fear that Putin might seek to turn his already extensive influence over Lukashenka into a complete annexation similar to that faced by the former puppet governments in the Donbas. This would be followed by a process of Russification emblematic of Rashism.

For Kureichyk, Ukraine is a barometer for the Belarusian future. Indeed, many of his milieu share the belief that only if Ukraine succeeds militarily, and if Putin falls, will Belarus free itself of Lukashenka. Fighting with Ukraine are thousands of Belarusian military volunteers, and some hope – either secretly or openly – that following a Ukrainian victory, these military units will liberate their own country. Kureichyk went so far as to tell me that "we are already at war." However, this national framework, epitomized violently in the prospect of clashes within Belarusian borders, while a natural consequence of Putin's chauvinistic imperialism,

risks contradicting Western European integration. Such integration is founded on universalism and a compromise between national and collective interests.

There seems to be no middle ground for Belarus between either Putin or national liberation, despite the fact that politics based on the second option may not lead smoothly towards the cosmopolitan integration with Brussels demanded by the horrors of the first. An understanding that a national framework of liberation for Ukraine and Belarus might be, and perhaps must be, compatible with universalist values of European democracy, will require a broadened understanding of how these values are put into practice by countries which, unlike much of Western Europe, have been on the receiving end of imperialism. These challenges are not easy, as seen in conflicts over the compatibility of nationalist frameworks and international norms in Hungary and Poland.

In the meantime, however, the Belarusian opposition in exile sees its mission clearly: maintain the Belarusian idea and the hope of a free Belarus which has never existed, apart for perhaps a few brief moments between 1991 and 1994, to ensure that when the time comes, it can be realized. The key must be to have faith, as seen in Ales Bialiatski's words included in *Voices of the New Belarus*: "I believe because I know that the night ends and then the morning comes with light. I know that what pushes us forward tirelessly is hope and a dream." EE

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Why Putin is the product of Russian democracy

GEORGE HAJIPAVLI

As we find ourselves less than two months away from the Russian presidential election, this analysis offers a timely and direct rebuttal that Putin's downfall will arise from Russia's democratisation. Instead, Russian democracy enabled Putin's climb to power in the first place, while his protracted popularity constitutes a core factor that enables his regime to propagate at present.

The impending Russian presidential election, set to take place in a few months' time in March 2024, constitutes an exceptional opportunity to reveal and discuss the discord in commentary on the current state of affairs in Russian politics. This cacophony in the analysis of Russian politics has emerged following the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Recent commentary has revealed two widespread narratives on the source of power in Russian politics, which are highly contradictory. On the one hand, there has been widespread chatter about the necessity of building a future democratic Russia. Indicatively, this constituted the theme of a discussion hosted by the Henry Jackson Society, a London-based think tank, last November, under the title of "Creating a Future Russia Now". Far from constituting an isolated instance, similar events have shared the same narrative, such as one hosted by a leading European political party, in June 2023. This event discussed how "democracy in Russia is key to a sustainable peace on the European continent."

Competing narratives

Certainly, this narrative ties in well with the image of Vladimir Putin as a 21st century tsar, to borrow from the headline of an article published in *The Economist* in 2017. This is because this narrative assumes that power in Russia rests with Vladimir Putin and his *vertikal*, and toppling the regime will be sufficient in empowering the currently powerless Russian people, who will construct a free and democratic Russia.

On the other hand, directly contrasting with this viewpoint is the assertion, often shared by the same commentators, that the Russian people are accomplices to Putin's decision to wreak havoc in Ukraine. This follows the argument that this is "Russia's war, not Putin's", which has been propagated widely since February 2022. This strand of thinking relies on several polls, which demonstrate that Russians are overwhelmingly in favour of the war in Ukraine, even if their appetite for peace appears to sporadically peak.

The issue with these two narratives, especially when fielded by the same individuals, is that they are ultimately at odds with each other. They assume, at once, that the same individuals propping up Russia's war in Ukraine and the current regime will constitute the social base for liberal democracy to flourish once Putin is gone.

Underlying this contradiction is a false understanding by the first strand of commentary that heavily resembles the rationale evident in the "End of History" paradigm. This paradigm, which borrows its name from the famous book by Francis Fukuyama, reflects conventional understanding in the 1990s at least among a certain segment of political scientists. To briefly recap, the "End of History" paradigm posits that the deposition of totalitarianism, signalled by the Soviet Union's collapse at the time of the book's publication, will lead to the "final stage" of human development – the End of History – which will be dominated by liberal democracy. Fast forward to 2023, authoritarianism appears to be surging across the globe, though the "End of History" narrative appears to have no end.

With the above said, I must clarify that this article's purpose is not to assign culpability to any actor for the ongoing Russian invasion. This would be a philosophical exercise on whether passivity can qualify as complicity. That has been conducted repeatedly with little universal agreement, not just in the context of war in Ukraine, but most notably in the aftermath of the Second World War, as evident in the debate stirred by Hannah Arendt's argument on the "banality of evil". Instead, my intent is to inform sober and long-sighted policy in the western world, based on grounded evidence.

An additional purpose of this analysis is to provide an answer to a set of crucial questions. With the incumbent Russian President Vladimir Putin set to triumph in

the upcoming election, having already declared his candidacy in December 2023, is his defeat likely in the near future? Or will he extend his tenure to 2030, by which point he would have ruled Russia for an astounding 26 years? In the unforeseen scenario where Vladimir Putin is deposed from power, what can we expect Russia to look like thereafter? Is what is sustaining Putin merely brute force or also genuine popularity? If it is the latter, what is the source of Putin's popularity?

Roots of power

To meet the above objectives and to provide sufficient answers, this article traces Putin's popularity to the inner psyche of the Russian people. Contrary to the argument fielded by the first strand of commentary, democracy in Russia is not the solution to the "Putin problem", but a critical factor that has led to the rise of Putin. To clarify – by democracy, I am not referring to the current whooping popularity of Vladimir Putin. Talking of Putin's current popularity, it is worth noting that the most recent Levada Centre poll, conducted in November 2023, places Putin's approval rating at 85 per cent. Dispelling suggestions that such polls are inaccurate is the focus of an article by the renowned Russia scholars Timothy Frye, Scott Gehlbach, Kyle Marquardt and Ora John Reuter. This convincingly argues that such opinion polls provide an accurate representation.

Instead, I contend that Putin's rise to power was enabled, to a significant extent, by the strongman successfully appealing to certain values and preferences held dear by most Russian people. This process, which the article will retrace by going back through history, took place before Putin had consolidated his rule. This was a time when a fledgling Russian democracy was well-defined and stable, even if unconsolidated and flawed, to paraphrase the famed scholar Valerie Bunce. In a nutshell, what occurred was that Putin hijacked core elements evident in Gennady Zyuganov's highly popular "socialist-patriotic" agenda. These had been tried and tested, with Zyuganov's platform enabling the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) to become Russia's leading parliamentary party only two years after the presidential order banning it was lifted. Namely, the CPRF succeeded in accruing the most votes and seats in the 1995 and 1999 State Duma elections, with Zyuganov's platform being a significant reason for this accomplishment.

Before explaining my argument, it is worth briefly revisiting the historical context. When Zyuganov was elected against the odds as general secretary of the Communist Party in February 1993, he fielded a minority position that, to the initial dismay of his party, contrasted with conventional Marxist-Leninist beliefs. His platform, which he dubbed "socialist-patriotic", was only formally embraced by his

own party following a compromise brokered by Zyuganov at the Communist Party's third national congress, held between January 21st and 22nd 1995 in Moscow. This deal entailed differentiating between "party" and "public" ideology. While the first would define the party's internal strategy, guided by Marxist-Leninist beliefs, the second would promote Zyuganov's popular socialist-patriotic platform.

Despite its communist credentials being dubious at best, Zyuganov's platform was compelling in that it was the best chance for the communists to survive in Russia's new democratic system. Having been defeated in two armed standoffs, this approach also constituted the only viable option for the communists to return to power.

While we must credit Zyuganov with engineering this approach, he was not the one to be attributed with inculcating these values in the minds of the Russian people. Evidence tells us that these preferences were espoused prior to the establishment of the CPRF. Namely, an analysis utilising 1992 survey data shows a remarkable affinity between supporters of communist/left and nationalist/right parties. The same case is made by identifying the considerable appeal of a composite nationalist-socialist position, based on 1993 survey data.

As the analysis will show, Zyuganov's popularity in the 1990s, like that of Putin thereafter, has rested on fielding an ideological platform which resonates with the inner desires of most – but in all fairness, not all – Russians.

While more work is needed in decoding the Russian psyche, I present in this analysis four interconnected pillars that I argue are championed by a significant segment of the Russian electorate and which Putin, following Zyuganov, has tapped into. In other words, Putin and Zyuganov have not only shared the same advisors who arguably shaped their ideological thought – like Aleksandr Dugin, Aleksei Podberezkin and Sergey Glazyev – but also pretty much the same polity that they have had to impress.

Security above all else

The first pillar is that of security provision over political and individual freedoms. While modernisation theory would posit this is due to Russia not having graduated from the industrial to the post-industrial stage, in many ways, this constitutes a continuation of the Soviet social contract that society would surrender individual rights with the state offering protection in return. Consider the fact that a nationwide survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Public Opinion in 2000 indicated that approximately 75 per cent of Russians prioritise security to democracy, even if democratic procedures must be violated to secure it. Not much of this has changed in recent times, with a mere seven per cent of Russians reporting democracy to be a priority in another nationwide survey conducted in December 2015 by the Levada Centre.

Russia's longstanding innate fear of the West and liberal democratic values can be traced back to Soviet propaganda.

In addition, when participants in the largest public challenge to Putin – the 2011–12 Bolotnaya protests – were questioned, they revealed that most of them rejected democracy, dispelling a popular myth that Russian protests are driven by desires for liberal emancipation.

Consequently, liberal democracy cannot be expected to take root in the absence of a commitment to political and personal freedoms as a priority. Undoubtedly, Putin's greatest success in offering Russians security has been with restarting the crumbling Russian economy after the undeniably traumatising 1990s.

Ideationally, however, Putin's greatest contribution toward Russian security has come with fending off the evil and decadent West, which constitutes the second pillar. This approach plays to a longstanding innate fear of the West and the liberal democratic values it represents, which can be traced back to Soviet propaganda. Using Soviet-era language, the 1995 manifesto of the Communist Party lamented and promised to rectify "the subordination of the country to the interests of the West, the illegal, violent dismemberment of the Soviet Union, the loss of strategic

allies". Following suit, Putin has never failed to miss an opportunity to lambast the West, having recently suggested that "the western elite does not conceal their goal, which is to inflict a strategic defeat on Russia."

I must acknowledge that surveys indicate the desire of some Russians to integrate with the West up to 2012. Then, we must remind ourselves that Putin echoed this sentiment. The caveat here is that Russia desired an alternative post-Cold War European security architecture that would be premised on great power prerogatives, similar to the United Nations Security Council structure that awards Russia and the remainder of the "permanent five" veto rights. An illustrative example of Russians' suspicions of the West is the popular stance towards the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Assembly and its subsequent amendments. This legislation was introduced by the CRPF, on the Orthodox Church's behest, forcing Boris Yeltsin to sign it on September 26th 1997. The law's purpose was to re-establish the Orthodox Church as *primus inter pares* amongst Russia's traditional faiths of Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and Islam. Concurrently, the initial law and subsequent amendments have heavily restricted the activities of denominations not belonging to any of the above groups. The provisions of this amendment have gone as far as necessitating that non-Russian clergy has to undergo mandatory state-provided retraining to engage even in basic activities, like leading a church choir. Evidently, this core pillar stands antithetical to the prospect of liberal democracy flourishing in Russia given its perceived western origin.

Perceived Russian value system

Critically, the aforementioned rejection of western axioms is not merely passive but coincides with a firm belief that Russia should champion its own value system. This commitment to "Russian values" constitutes the third dimension.

Despite having remained undefined for a long period of time, Putin formalised 17 of these values in a recent presidential decree, signed in November 2022, and called upon the state to protect them. Before these were set in stone, they were mentioned in abstract, such as the 1995 Communist Party manifesto which stipulates the need to "protect the national cultures and languages of the peoples of Russia, traditional beliefs from foreign domination". In essence, these traditionalist and conservative tendencies of Putin, as they have been named by scholars, have long been an essential aspect of Zyuganov's agenda.

Elucidating the convergence between Zyuganov and Putin on the issue of Russian values is the cooperation of the two in supporting the passage of a constitutional amendment that stipulates that "Russia is united in belief in God" (now Article

67.2 of the Russian constitution), which was requested by the Orthodox Church. A majority of Russians (around 66 per cent), including Communist Party voters, placed themselves in support of this amendment in a nationally representative survey of Russia that I commissioned and was conducted in December 2021. This is unlikely to represent the religious devoutness of this 66 per cent but rather a commitment to the perceived Russian value system, in which religion and tradition are important. Interestingly, even the Soviet Union's nominally progressive intentions appeared to waver by the end, with Brezhnev favouring a much more conservative outlook than his immediate predecessors, let alone those applied in the heyday of the October Revolution's aftermath.

This brings us to the fourth and final dimension, which relates to a conviction that not only Russian traditional values must be protected but also Russia's great power status (*velikaya derzhava*). Perhaps most symbolic of this desire is Yevgeny Primakov's decision to turn the plane around, en route to Washington DC on March 24th 1999, upon finding out Russia was not consulted on NATO's decision to bomb Yugoslavia. The decision was likely motivated by the perceived affront to Russia's great power status, instead of Primakov's expectation that Moscow would have been able to block NATO's decision. In a similar fashion, the passage of a resolution by the Communist Party and patriotic allies which called for the annulment of the Belovezha Accords (the agreement which basically accepted the end of the Soviet Union – editor's note) seldom intended to end Russia's existence. Instead, it formed yet another opportunity to protest the perceived attempt orchestrated by the West to bring down the Soviet Union by puppeteering Mikhail Gorbachev in a bid to deprive Russia of its deserved great power status.

Even the Soviet Union's nominally progressive intentions appeared to waver by the end.

It is important to note that Russians connect great power status with "making Russia strong again – both domestically and internationally", while they also perceive the states that sprung up out of the Soviet Union – the near abroad (*blizhnee zarubezhe*) – as enjoying limited sovereignty that renders Russia's entanglement with these states somewhere between an international and domestic affair. Thus, Russian primacy over this region not only serves to reaffirm Russia's zone of influence, that goes towards its great power credentials, but also connects with the first pillar, in that control over them is critical for Russian security. This demonstrates how great power status and security are interconnected in accordance with the Russian understanding.

Hence, with Russia increasingly casting itself as a pole against perceived hostile western aspirations, there is little hope of Russia converging toward extant western

ideas. These four pillars have come together in the context of the war in Ukraine. Often in the same breath, Russia calls for a pushback against western expansion and "aggressive western values", respect for its zone of influence as a great power, and a fight against "Satanism" that seeks to erode traditional values in a territory many Russians consider to be an inherent part of their own core. It is likely for the same reason that, since the start of the war in Ukraine, the number of Russians identifying with the Soviet Union has surpassed those identifying with Russia, with these statistics derived from a report by Paul Chaisty and Stephen Whitefield. Even if longing for more stable times contributes to the equation, it is more likely that the Soviet Union symbolically stands for these four pillars.

Implications

To pre-empt comments, the above discussion does not intend to negate the fact that brute force and manipulation are an important part of the equation in Putin's Russia. I have myself witnessed the extensive state security apparatus, consisting of agencies like the *Rosgvardiya*, OMON and the notorious FSB. I am equally aware that the electoral commission is often subverted to invalidate opposition candidates where deemed important and unlikely to result in widespread backlash. Nor do I negate that Russian media is extensively one-sided, even though several studies argue that the mass media simply amplify espoused beliefs.

What I seek to outline is that, when he set out to rule Russia, Putin did not enjoy the benefit of relying on anywhere near an extensive authoritarian toolkit like the one he possesses today. In fact, Putin only sufficiently co-opted Russia's mainstream informal elite networks in 2006, with the regional ones coming largely under his control in 2010. In addition, he was only able to incentivise the Russian elite to commit to this party of power project later on, such as in the aftermath of the Beslan school massacre in 2004, which enabled him to alter gubernatorial and electoral law. In essence, Putin's invasion of Ukraine was driven by the same desire to project an image of strength and control that motivated his military campaign in Chechnya in 1999. Unable to rely on the coercive apparatus he currently commands, he sought to bolster his flagging popularity and shore up his grip on power through military aggression.

In his early years, Putin did not enjoy the extensive authoritarian toolkit like the one he possesses today.

Simply put, Putin's popularity, in the past like the present, has been predicated upon him taking advantage of Russia's rejection of liberal democracy and the desire

to safeguard Russian traditional values, Russian's fear of the West and the values it stands for, the desire to safeguard Russia's security as a priority and to preserve their great power status. Consequently, we can infer that even if the security apparatus that defends Putin defected, and media and party pluralism were introduced, it would take several decades of intense and orchestrated activities to alter the above values that I argue form part of the Russian median voter's psyche. And, in the meantime, we would constantly run the risk of backsliding that could occur at any moment.

Russia's inability to democratise rests on deep rooted convictions that are antithetical to liberal democracy.

Given the above, what are the implications of this analysis? Firstly, democratisation in Russia is nowhere in sight and this is not merely because Russia and its people lack the necessary democratic experience and institutions. More fundamentally, Russia's inability to democratise rests on deep-rooted convictions that are antithetical to liberal democracy. Even if Putin was to be deposed, a democratic leader would face an uphill battle against popular opinion. After all, less than ten per cent of the population believes in liberal democratic norms. As Hannes Adomeit eloquently argues, Boris Yeltsin was forced to abandon his initial "Westernist" or "Atlanticist" stance because of unfavourable public opinion, more than any shortage of resources at his disposal. An even greater problem is that no single member of the Russian political elite genuinely believes in, let alone advocates for, liberal democracy. Even Alexey Navalny's credentials can be doubted, given the shadow of his well-known past remarks. In any case, he is unlikely to be released any time soon.

In fact, Putin maintains the strongest incentive to refrain from a considerable authoritarian slip, as it would compromise his regime's stability. Given that hybrid regimes, like that in Russia, place themselves at the midpoint between democratisers and those with dictatorial tendencies, they converge around the median voter and sustain a stable compromise with the entire population.

Secondly, due to a combination of genuine popularity that rests on a successful appeal to these fundamental convictions and an elaborate coercive apparatus, Putin's demise is unlikely. Scholarship tells us that regime change in post-Soviet patronal presidential states, like Russia, is most likely to come through elite defection ahead of a perceived critical juncture, like an electoral loss or the incumbent stepping down. The reported fissures amongst Russia's elite – at least those who have not fallen out of a window – are wishful thinking at best. Coupled with the reports of a stalemate on the Ukrainian battlefield and the failure of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, Putin not only stands to triumph in the upcoming election but enjoy a secure position for the foreseeable future.

Considering the above, what is to be done with Russia? If western commitment towards Ukraine continues to falter at the same pace, which appears likely, we must focus at the very least on protecting vulnerable countries, such as the Baltic states, Poland and Finland. This is not to suggest that a second Russian offensive is even intended, let alone feasible, but Russia's capabilities will likely increase in the near future. Armed by a pivot towards Asia, regardless of the cost it entails, a built-for-purpose military and an industry capable of sustaining prolonged wartime operations, it is not unlikely that the war in Ukraine will serve as a wake-up call to Russia, transforming it into a credible threat, which it currently is not.

Building capacity will further be critical in brokering a lasting agreement with Russia if one is desired. In other words, dig in, prepare and gain leverage to negotiate. At the very least, if we are to face the facts, as this analysis makes the case for, then we must accept that imagining Russia without Putin, let alone as a liberal democracy, does not constitute a credible scenario for the foreseeable future. EE

With thanks to Balint Pongracz and Anniki Mikelsaar (Oxford, History) for discussing these ideas with me. With that said, I do not claim that the views contained herein necessarily represent them, and I acknowledge any errors and omissions that may be present to be entirely my own.

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From dignity to victory

MARIA GORSKA

Six months after Russia's invasion started, I gave birth to my child and breastfed her for the first time in a bomb shelter, to the sound of sirens. I moved from Ukraine to Poland with my baby and despite the joy of motherhood I had never felt so much loneliness and darkness as I did there, far from home, when my country was fighting the enemy, and I was not. But soon I joined the fight for victory.

It all started for me at night on Cathedral Square in Vilnius. There, there was not a single soul, snow was gently falling from the sky and a flash was shining dimly on the camera of the Lithuanian cameraman who was also my driver and guardian angel. An hour ago, I had flown in from Kyiv. The city was sleeping and the streets were quiet. Yet in a few minutes it would be six o'clock in Kyiv and I had to join the morning news – the first broadcast of the new Ukrainian TV channel Espreso, the launch of which our young team had been preparing all autumn. It was an important day for me, but even more important for Ukraine.

"Good morning, studio! This is Maria Gorska reporting live from Vilnius. This is where the historic signing of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement is expected today. The city is hosting high-profile guests from all over Europe, including Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych. Will he sign the agreement? This is the main event of the summit, and Ukraine's European future depends on this moment. Civil society is waiting with anticipation for positive news!"

As I was speaking on the dark square in Vilnius, I still believed that my youth could be spent in Ukraine as a part of the EU. But on my face, stubbornly falling, were either tears or flakes of wet snow.

Not without a fight

That day brought us nothing good. At the Eastern Partnership Summit in 2013, Yanukovych announced a dialogue with Russia and sat next to the Belarusian delegation. In the evening, on the way back to Ukraine, the entire Vilnius-Kyiv plane plunged into a gloom of horror, watching the Maidan protests on streams on their mobile phones. On the streets during the night, Berkut forces were brutally beating students and journalists with batons, and then hunting down those who managed to escape.

In the morning, everyone went to the "Million March" and Espreso began broadcasting around the clock from the Maidan while holding parallel discussions with the movement's leaders in the studio. Activists of the revolution came to the show wearing sweaters that smelled like Maidan fires, and the hosts ran to the Maidan after the programmes, taking a few tyres and some petrol with them. There was no longer fear – because journalists, leaders, civic activists, and ordinary people stood shoulder to shoulder to fight the gloom and hopelessness that the corrupt president and werewolves from the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) were trying to plunge Ukraine into. We, Ukrainians, know how to make revolutions and fight – because, no matter what anyone says, some of us remember history and can draw parallels with our own lives. As a historian by training, I know this for a fact. Back in 2004, during the Orange Revolution, professors at my own Kyiv Shevchenko University told us students: "Children, go to the Maidan, fight for your freedom!" We went then, and now we have gathered again.

> Ukrainians know how to make revolutions – we remember history and draw parallels with our own lives.

In 2013 a cameraman with a black eye named Ihor worked with me in the Espreso studio. He was beaten by Berkut while filming a report on the Maidan. But Ihor, like us, was ready for new clashes. Everyone expected that one day the armoured door of our studio, situated in a former bomb shelter, would be smashed in, and we would all be taken out by the police, forced into cars and taken away in an unknown direction, as was happening every day back then. But there was no place to be afraid when Levko Lukyanenko, an 85-year-old Hero of Ukraine, was sitting in the studio. Sentenced to death in the Soviet Union, he spent 25 years in Soviet camps for his fight for Ukraine's independence. So, we could not back down in those days either.

Espreso was broadcast on the Maidan and we gave people the feeling that they were not alone and that the realisation of the Ukrainian dream – the European development of the state – was close at hand. And then the killings began. I will

never forget the wax faces of the Heavenly Hundred heroes in their coffins on the Maidan as the whole country was saying goodbye to them. A sea of people carried the coffins and cried, and the mournful song *"Plyve Kacha"* echoed across the capital:

Hey, swims the duckling, on the Tysa,
Oh, dear mother, don't scold me so,
Hey, you will scold us, in this, evil hour,
Myself, I do not know, where I will perish.

When the unthinkable happens

This was our first heavenly army, whom we will never forget, even though the death toll from the Russian war in Ukraine will be a thousand-fold greater. Ukrainians did not surrender. Berkut could not kill us all. We did not allow Russia to turn Yanukovych into Lukashenka and Ukraine into Belarus, where there are two security force agents for every citizen. The Maidan won. But Russia occupied Crimea and Donbas.

And yet, over the next five years, we managed to build an army, reform institutions, develop culture and gain independence for the Ukrainian church. Despite Russia's efforts to drag us into the black hole of its influence – lawlessness, homelessness, forgetfulness and barrenness – Ukraine was steadily turning into a successful, independent, developed country, conscious of its past and future as part of a great European family.

On February 19th 2022, in the studio, we talked with Vitaliy Portnikov about how to perceive the forecasts of a full-scale Russian attack on Ukraine, which were being reported by the world media. The German tabloid *BILD* published information about the plans of the Russian special services and Putin to create concentration camps for Ukrainian patriots (i.e., us). Bloomberg accidentally published a headline about Russia's attack on Ukraine. The *Washington Post* printed maps of Russia's offensive against Ukraine, with plans to capture Odesa and Kyiv. It all looked ominous, and for several weeks I had a large suitcase packed in my apartment with me and my child's belongings, two fire extinguishers in case of fires from a missile attack, and a backpack with canned food, medicine, instant food and a tourist gas stove with spare cylinders.

Portnikov and I talked in the beautifully lit studio about a possible Russian attack on Ukraine, which could be a humanitarian catastrophe for the continent. We talked about millions of refugees in the European Union, bombs and missiles that could fall on our cities, and Russian tanks on our streets. I was wearing a beautiful dress, with impeccable hair and TV make-up, and I could not imagine that in less

Reporting during the full-scale warcan be an exhausting and taxing task for Ukrainian journalists.

than a week, sleep-deprived and angry, I would be standing in a 500-kilometre traffic jam from Kyiv to Lviv, with my baby, my mother and the suitcases in which our entire lives were packed. In addition, I was pregnant.

Over the next six months, I hosted a war telethon from Lviv. On the air, our journalists, who had been urgently evacuated to western Ukraine from different cities of the Kyiv region, dressed in clothes from IDP centres, were reporting on the atrocities of the Russians in their hometowns – Bucha, Borodyanka, Irpin, where civilians were shot in the streets and their corpses left to decompose on the sidewalks like in the Middle Ages. We commented on the Russian bombing of the Drama Theatre in Mariupol, where mothers with children were buried alive under the rubble; the air raids on Azovstal, where there were also children and pregnant women, like me, who were later captured and subjected to inhuman torture; the missile attack on the railway station in Kramatorsk, where children were killed and a woman younger than me had her leg blown off; the attack on a shopping centre in Kremenchuk, where the victims, burned alive, could not be identified by their relatives; and the war crimes of the Russians in the Kharkiv and Kherson regions, where babies were abused and where entire tortured families were found in mass graves.

Mutual support towards victory

As scary as it may sound, I was glad that my grandmother, Tetiana Shevchenko, did not live to see this war. Born in 1923, she survived collectivisation and the Holodomor (the Stalin-imposed famine against Ukraine in 1932 and 1933 – editor's note) and knew from her parents about Katyń and Sandarmokh, where Poland and Ukraine were decapitated through the execution of our elites. She escaped from the Germans as a young girl during the Second World War when they wanted to send her to a forced labour camp, and then was exiled to Sakhalin as a young woman. She returned to Ukraine in her old age. She died happy right after the victory of the Euromaidan. Her heart would not have survived the missile attacks on Kyiv!

Six months after the invasion started, I gave birth to my child and breastfed her for the first time in a bomb shelter, to the sound of sirens. After Amelia's birth, I moved to Poland with my baby and my older child. Despite the joy of motherhood and the generous hospitality of our neighbours, I had never felt so much loneliness and darkness as I did there, far from home, when my country was fighting the enemy, and I was not. But soon I joined the fight for victory. Together with other women who were also war migrants, with the support of Polish journalists, we founded an online magazine called *Sestry* – for Ukrainian women scattered around the world because of the war, and for those fighting for our freedom at home.

Together with women who are war migrants, we founded an online magazine called *Sestry*.

Among us are Tanya with a baby, whose husband, a soldier of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, died during the de-occupation of the Kherson region, Olena, a TV presenter from Mykolaiv who worked as a security guard at a construction site in Warsaw, and Anna from Bucha, a film producer whose house was occupied by the Russian military. There are also many other women involved in the magazine.

We managed to rent an office in an old building that survived the Second World War at a low cost. Our newsroom is a large room where, according to the owner, activists gathered on August 1st 1944 for the "W" hour, the agreed time to launch the Warsaw Uprising against tyranny. Here, we plan materials and coverage of political events important for Ukraine, and we also grow flowers and drink coffee together. Olena also fries delicious potatoes in the kitchen. The platform we founded is necessary to keep us together – to breathe with the same goal and help each other in our everyday lives. We share our advice and stories and remind each other that Ukraine's victory means the security of the whole of Europe and the world. With our children in our arms, we are shouting for weapons, technology and funds for Ukraine from the pages of the world's media and all possible platforms.

The way home

Only in the European family, reliably protected by security guarantees and the nuclear umbrella of NATO, can Ukraine be a home whose doors are securely closed against invaders who want to pillage everything, kidnap our children, rape our women and kill our men. *Sestry*'s slogan is "The Way Home" – the safe European home for which Ukrainians have been fighting for these past ten years since the beginning of the Revolution of Dignity, the previous hundred years, and before. A home where there is law, love and choice.

For all our relatives who died from repression during the Soviet occupation of Ukraine, the Holodomor, the Second World War, those shot at Babyn Yar and those who died of cancer after Chernobyl, we will win and return to rebuild our country – just as my courageous Ukrainian grandmother once returned with four children from halfway across the world to build a house and raise her grandchildren on her native land.

I believe that our forefathers will see the victory from the sky and rejoice with us – and I will stand next to Vitaliy Portnikov on the Maidan with a microphone in front of the camera, smile and say: "Good morning, studio! Ukraine has won, and we are home." ЕЕ

Maria Gorska is a Ukrainian journalist, programme director with the Espreso TV channel, and editor-in-chief of the Ukrainian-Polish portal *Sestry.eu*.

War, inflation and central banks

KACPER WAŃCZYK

The people who head the central banks of Belarus, Ukraine and Russia are usually regarded both in the West and in the expert circles of their countries as the most liberal or technocratic in the economic governance structures. They are all well-read, experienced and have contacts abroad. However, the institutional reality of Belarus, Russia and even Ukraine is that all three central banks remain heavily dependent on the presidential centres.

In many economic analyses of the countries involved in the war on the borders of the European Union, little attention is paid to the role of the central banks of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. However, a look at their functioning allows us to gain not only a better understanding of the current economic policies of Kyiv, Minsk and Moscow but also an insight into the peculiarities of these countries' economic systems.

Ukraine – inflation, stabilisation and recovery money

Since the end of July 2023 the National Bank of Ukraine (NBU) started to cut the base interest rate. The rate was kept on the level of 25 per cent since March 2022, the beginning of the Russia's second stage of invasion. After the last decision taken in December, the rate was established on the level of 15 per cent. In Ukraine, decisions like these are taken by a committee composed exclusively of senior bank officials, with no external actors involved. The NBU notes that inflation in Ukraine

is finally slowing, which allowed monetary policy to be loosened. Inflation for the full year of 2023 was registered on the level 5.1 percent, slightly lower than the expected 5.8 per cent. For the whole of 2022, inflation remained at 20.2 per cent, lower than that in 2015, the first full year of the Russian aggression, when it rose to 48.7 per cent.

The inflation that has been building up since the beginning of the Russian invasion in February 2022 has thus been brought under control. However, the head of the NBU Andriy Pyshnyi faces two long-term challenges. The first is maintaining the stability of the external financing of the Ukrainian budget. From January to November, this amounted to 37.4 billion US dollars, which accounted for more than half of budget receipts. This problem does not look as bleak as Pyshnyi sometimes claims. He publicly emphasises the instability of foreign support, but more and more aid tools for Ukraine are taking on a multi-year character. This includes the EU's Ukraine Facility, which would provide 50 billion euros over the period of three years (planned for 2024–27 but probably would not be implemented before 2025), or the 15.6 billion US dollar IMF support project over four years awarded in March 2023.

However, the real issue that matters for Pyshnyi in the long term is control over future funding streams for Ukraine's reconstruction. The head of the central bank took office in October, following the resignation of Kyrylo Shevchenko, who was accused of bank fraud. According to Ukrainian media, Shevchenko was also in conflict with the Ukrainian presidential office – and that was the real reason for his departure. Meanwhile, Pyshnyi, although he denies it in media interviews, is considered a close associate of the head of the presidential office, Andriy Yermak. Pyshnyi was part of the group led by Yermak preparing draft anti-Russian sanctions. Previously, he had worked with him on the election staff of former Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, among others. The change in the head of the NBU preceded a series of changes of officials, who were responsible for overseeing the implementation of infrastructure projects in Ukraine. These positions were taken by people close to Yermak.

Russia – either invasion or lower prices

Meanwhile, the Central Bank of Russia (CBR) conducted an opposite policy. For most of 2023, the basic interest rate was kept on the level of 7.5 per cent. Since July the rate was risen – initially slowly, but in August, the rate spiked from 8.5 to 12 per cent. The year 2023 was closed on the level of 16 per cent. As in Ukraine, the decisions in Russia are also made by members of a body of CBR staff.

The bank's head Elvira Nabiullina said that business inflation expectations remain high, which will keep up strong upward pressure on prices. In line with her predictions the inflation in Russia for the whole of 2023 reached 7.4 per cent, higher than the inflation target which was set up at the level of four per cent. Nabiullina stressed that no reductions are expected soon. In 2022 inflation reached the level of 11.9 per cent, still lower than 2015 when it reached 12.9 per cent.

High inflationary pressure is an obvious consequence of the militarisation of the economy. It has three dimensions. Firstly, this is the consequence of ever-increasing public spending on armaments. Secondly, it is the result of business support: the Russian authorities are pursuing a programme of subsidised loans in important sectors of the economy. Thirdly, the Kremlin is also supporting mortgage lending to the public. However, this last impact will diminish. Since September, the Russian authorities have started to reduce the programme.

Nabiullina was delaying the resolution to raise the interest rates as long as it was possible. She knew that it would have a negative effect. The CBR's decision will lead to a further increase in the already high cost of living for Russians. It will also make it more difficult for key industrial companies, for whom this change means an increase in the servicing of previously taken loans. The car manufacturer AvtoWaz estimates that annual debt servicing will increase by 70 per cent. Following the interest rate hike, Russian state-owned enterprises have demanded further support from the Russian authorities regarding debt reduction. The Russian authorities will likely opt for further support, which – again – will increase inflationary pressures.

Belarus – the phantom of low inflation

Meanwhile, in Belarus, inflation in September remained at a historically low level of two per cent. However, since October its level started to rise and reached 5.8 per cent by the end of the year – still below the target inflation corridor, which was set on between seven and eight percent. The financial side of the economy seems to suggest that there has been no direct impact from the aggression against Ukraine on the Belarusian economy. Since the beginning of the year, the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus (NBRB) has cut the interest rate five times, to 9.5 per cent. As in Russia and Ukraine, the decision in Belarus is taken by a body made up entirely of full-time employees of the central bank, chaired by the head of the bank – Pavel Kalaur.

The low level of inflation is not the result of the NBRB's interest rate policy or monetary interventions. It is a direct effect of the administrative price controls maintained in Belarus. The reduction of interest rates since the beginning of the

year was aimed at reducing the cost of credit, which is expected to stimulate domestic demand and, as a result, increase GDP dynamics. Data from household polls, conducted by the Belarusian independent analytical centre BEROC, shows that the levels of consumer borrowing are growing.

In addition, the official inflation rate does not reflect the real increase in prices of, for example, food products. According to data from the end of October, the prices of some of these products had increased by 20 to 40 per cent compared to the previous year. This is particularly true of fruit and vegetables (mainly imported, but also Belarusian) and, to a lesser extent, Belarusian dairy products.

Belarusian analysts estimate that inflationary pressure from the end of 2023 will begin to build up in 2024. This is influenced by growing domestic demand, as well as rising prices in Russia, with which Belarus has strong economic ties. The question remains whether the manual control of prices will be enough to control the situation.

The centralism of central banks

The people who head the central banks of Belarus, Ukraine and Russia are usually regarded both in the West and in the expert circles of their countries as the most liberal or technocratic in the economic governance structures. Before the start of the second stage of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, Nabiullina was regularly rated positively in the international rankings of central bank heads.

This overview is probably true. They are all well-read, experienced and have contacts abroad. However, the institutional reality of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine is that all three central banks remain heavily dependent on the presidential centres. They are part of the hierarchical economic management system of their countries, not independent agencies. The fact that the decision on the level of interest rates is taken by a group of experts directly subordinated to the head of a central bank is a confirmation of the existence of a pyramid-like structure in macro-economic governance.

Only the width of their room for manoeuvre differs. The Belarusian bank is under direct presidential control. The Central Bank of Russia can pursue an independent policy but on condition that the Kremlin's political objectives are met. Pyshnyi probably has the greatest level of independence but must look after the financial interests of those linked to the president's office. ŁE

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The South Caucasus after Nagorno-Karabakh

JENNIFER S. WISTRAND

In September 2023 Azerbaijan regained control of Nagorno-Karabakh, prompting more than 100,000 Armenians who had been living in the territory to flee to Armenia. This development marks a significant change for the South Caucasus, and while it adds to existing tensions, it may also result in the long-term in a more stable region that is less dependent on Russia.

The South Caucasus countries of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia rarely make the headlines in western news sources. However, that changed in autumn 2023. On September 19th, Azerbaijan launched an unexpected 24-hour military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh that resulted in the region's de facto government surrendering to Azerbaijan. Those who have followed the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh for decades know that the outcome of September's military offensive has the potential to upend security in the South Caucasus. It also has the potential to transform the region's political and economic relations, though they were already beginning to change prior to the September events. In the essay that follows, I will discuss the prospects for a lasting peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and what that means for security in the South Caucasus. I will also discuss some of the political and economic transformations that are taking place in the South Caucasus, focusing on the signs that Azerbaijan intends to become the region's leading voice and dominant player.

Peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia

Azerbaijanis and Armenians have disagreed over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh since the region was officially incorporated into the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic, rather than the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, in the early 1920s. Feelings hardened over the next 70 years as the Soviets formed and encouraged distinct national identities that took root among successive generations. People could no longer be Persian speakers or Turkic speakers from the Ferghana Valley, or Christians or Muslims from Nagorno-Karabakh. Instead, they had to be Tajiks from Soviet Tajikistan, or Uzbeks from Soviet Uzbekistan, or Armenians or Azerbaijanis with allegiances to Soviet Armenia or Soviet Azerbaijan, respectively. Soviet national identity policies created problems for areas such as the Ferghana Valley and Nagorno-Karabakh, which had ethnically, linguistically and religiously heterogenous populations. Some of these problems persist 30 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, as the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh demonstrates.

That said, peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia is possible. Maps from the Library of Congress, that were produced by cartographers from Imperial-era Russia, Germany, France and other places, who did not have a reason to prove that Nagorno-Karabakh was "more Armenian" or "more Azerbaijani", show that Nagorno-Karabakh has been inhabited by both peoples. Historically, the region has been majority Armenian, while certain towns within the region have been predominantly Azerbaijani. Historians have also shown that Armenians and Azerbaijanis have co-existed in the same territory. In 1805, following the transfer of the Khanate of Karabakh from Persian to Russian control, the former khanate's Armenian and Azerbaijani populations came into greater contact with one another and developed greater dependence on one another, including dependence on the area that would eventually become Soviet Azerbaijan.

It is still premature to think that a comprehensive peace agreement can or should be developed.

Since Azerbaijan's September 2023 military offensive, which definitively reversed the outcome of the 1992–94 war, where Azerbaijan lost not only Nagorno-Karabakh but also parts of seven adjacent Azerbaijani regions, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia have been seriously discussing the conditions necessary to achieve a lasting peace. It is still premature to think that a comprehensive peace agreement can or should be developed. Yet, a series of pre-negotiations, or partial agreements which focus on specific issues, would serve to lay the necessary groundwork for the two sides to

Photo: Rzaev / Shutterstock

New homes and developments erected in the village of Zabukh in the Nagorno-Karabakh region after Azerbaijan retook control.

be able to eventually develop a comprehensive peace agreement that could be accepted by both countries' elected officials and among everyday Azerbaijanis and Armenians.

Overcoming resentment

Some of the immediate issues that need to be addressed include: the exchange of all Azerbaijani and Armenian prisoners; mutual recognition of all territorial boundaries between Azerbaijan and Armenia; support for Armenians who left Nagorno-Karabakh as refugees following the September 2023 military offensive who would like to integrate in Armenia; support for Azerbaijanis who became internally displaced persons (IDPs) following the 1992–94 war who would like to return to Nagorno-Karabakh; protections for Armenians who would like to remain in or return to Nagorno-Karabakh (i.e., ethnic, linguistic and religious minority rights); protection of Armenian cultural heritage sites in Nagorno-Karabakh; and shared official terminology for all administrative units in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Once these issues have been addressed, a mutually acceptable mediator can help Azerbaijanis and Armenians learn to trust one another and, hopefully, live among one another again. This will be a difficult task, since both peoples have been taught to believe over the last 30 years that "the other" is their existential enemy.

Data from my earlier research helps to illustrate this point. When I was in Azerbaijan in 2006–08, conducting 22 months of ethnographic research for my PhD dissertation in anthropology, I assumed that those who had fought in the 1992–94 war, or lost family members and friends in the war, would harbour the greatest resentment against "the other". On the contrary, it was my discussions with young Azerbaijanis who had grown up never knowing an Armenian – who had only ever learned about Armenians through the medium of their post-Soviet history textbooks, political speeches, the media and pop culture – who demonstrated the greatest degree of resentment when compared to the attitudes of older generations. The advent of social media and disinformation has only compounded this problem in both countries.

Peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia would greatly reduce the possibility of the arms that the two countries have stockpiled over the last 20 years falling into the wrong hands. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, in 2020, Azerbaijan allocated 5.4 per cent of its gross domestic product for military expenditure, while Armenia allocated 4.9 per cent. Both figures were higher than the global average of 2.4 per cent. According to the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies' 2020 Global Militarisation Index, Armenia and Azerbaijan were the second and 16th most militarized countries, respectively, among the 151 countries surveyed.

Peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia would also help loosen Russia's grip on the South Caucasus. Since 2008 Russia has occupied 20 per cent of Georgia's territory in the regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia). This situation is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon since Georgia's current government leans towards Russia. Warming relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, however, and a united front among Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia against Russia with respect to security in the South Caucasus, would be a very positive development – not only for the region but also for the West.

Political and economic transformations

Building on the above points, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and especially Armenia, have been overly reliant on Russia for arms and security guarantees. This has tended to dictate the terms of political and economic alliances across the greater region. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, between 2011 and 2020, Russia was the leading supplier of arms to both Armenia and Azerbaijan, with Armenia importing 94 per cent of its arms from Russia and Azerbaijan importing 60 per cent. Additionally, Armenia hosts a Russian military base, and the

two countries are bound by the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a NATO-like agreement among Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where the CSTO's Article 4 is akin to NATO's Article 5.

Russia's failure to intervene on behalf of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, however, left Armenia feeling betrayed and caused it to question its dependence on Russia. Armenia has skipped most CSTO training exercises and high-level meetings in recent months, and in November 2023, it ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which obliges Yerevan to arrest Vladimir Putin should he step foot on Armenian soil.

Armenia's decision to re-evaluate its reliance on Russia is fairly recent, while Azerbaijan's resolve to diversify, and thereby strengthen, its alliances has been going on for years. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, in addition to importing arms from Russia, Azerbaijan also imports arms from Israel, Belarus and Turkey. While Russia accounted for 60 per cent of Azerbaijan's arms imports between 2011 and 2020, Israel accounted for 27 per cent, and that figure rises to 69 per cent if one looks at the time period of 2016–20, indicating that Azerbaijan began to shift away from buying Russian munitions nearly a decade ago.

China and Azerbaijan are not major trading partners. However, China and the European Union are. According to the World Bank, the European Union is China's most important trading partner, and China is the European Union's second most important trading partner after the United States. Azerbaijan is very interested in supporting China's decade-old Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), because the BRI has the potential to significantly increase trade through, and foreign direct investment in, Azerbaijan. For its part, China sees Azerbaijan as a means to access European markets without needing to pass through Russia. In 2015 President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan and President Xi Jinping of China signed a Memorandum of Understanding with respect to the BRI, following which Azerbaijan pursued a number of infrastructure projects, such as a new port in Baku and several highways across western Azerbaijan, with the intent of supporting China's BRI.

The Turkish factor

Azerbaijan is located at an important crossroads between Turkey and Central Asia, which it was not able to begin to develop to its advantage until recently. Many – though not all – of the peoples who inhabit the large swathe of territory from Turkey to western China (Xinjiang) are linked by Turkic languages and Islam. Notable exceptions to this are the Tajikistanis, who are majority Tajik (Farsi) speakers. In the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkey was

quick to enter the former Soviet Turkic- and Muslim-majority states of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan by way of its Turkish Schools. The Turkish Schools were based on the philosophies of Fethullah Gulen, a Turkish Muslim public intellectual and entrepreneur. The schools were generally private, often residential, and often all-male. They were known for their rigorous course of study which emphasized maths and the sciences. Local governments and populations generally respected the schools' academic programme.

Turkey has been a steadfast supporter of Azerbaijan during its 30-year conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Turkish Schools offered some of the better, if not the best, education in the aforementioned states. They were also an excellent form of Turkish public diplomacy. The schools fell out of favour in Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states in the 2000s and 2010s, however, and especially following the 2016 purported coup attempt in Turkey. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan blamed the purported coup on Fethullah Gulen and pressured the states to close the schools. Turkish influence proceeded to wane in Central Asia, though less so in Azerbaijan.

Turkey and Azerbaijan have always had a closer relationship than Turkey and Central Asia. Many of Azerbaijan's school classrooms display a poster with side-by-side pictures of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (the founder of the modern Republic of Turkey) and Heydar Aliyev (the late president of Azerbaijan and the father of the current president) which reads, "We are two states, One nation!" (*Biz iki dövlət, Bir millətlik!* in Azerbaijani). Turkey has also been a steadfast supporter of Azerbaijan politically, economically and militarily during its 30-year conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Popular opinion of Turkey in Central Asia has regained ground since the mid-2010s. According to a bi-annual survey that the Central Asia Barometer has been conducting across Central Asia since 2017, which is titled "Public Perception of Turkey in Central Asia", Turkey generally ranks higher than Russia, China, Iran and the United States when respondents are asked to assess each country on "favourableness" and "friendliness".

At the same time, regional cooperation and integration between Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states reached a milestone last year when Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev, was invited to attend the Fifth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia – the only outside head of state invited to do so. Between Azerbaijan's cultural ties and political-military relationship with Turkey, and Azerbaijan's shared Soviet past and growing post-Soviet alliances with the Central Asian states, Azerbaijan is in a position to act as a mediator *and* a leader across the greater South Caucasus region, especially if Azerbaijan and Armenia normalize relations.

The future of the South Caucasus

Regaining Nagorno-Karabakh, and enabling Azerbaijani internally displaced persons (IDPs) to "go home", has been a central part of Azerbaijan's post-conflict national narrative for the past 30 years. This message has been repeated by the president and the media and in schools. Indeed, in public, this message has been repeated by almost everyone (even if in private some have thought or felt differently).

In war, both sides commit atrocities, and both Azerbaijanis and Armenians have harmed "the other". Under international law, however, it was Armenia which occupied Azerbaijan's sovereign territory, and not vice versa, just as Russia has occupied Ukraine's sovereign territory, and before that Georgia's. The West has forcefully responded to Russia's breach of international law in Ukraine – which is right. The West did not similarly respond to Russia's breach of international law in Georgia or Armenia's breach of international law in Azerbaijan. Georgians and Azerbaijanis have not forgotten that. I was repeatedly reminded of this while conducting research in Georgia in July 2023 and I have been repeatedly reminded of this by Azerbaijanis going back to 2006. Azerbaijan's resolve to not only reclaim Nagorno-Karabakh and resettle Azerbaijani IDPs, but also to become the region's leading voice and dominant player, has been driven in large part, I believe, by the humiliation it has felt over the last 30 years.

If Azerbaijan continues to develop political alliances and economic partnerships with the various partners in East Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East and elsewhere that it has already pursued, and if Azerbaijan and Armenia normalize relations, this will be a meaningful win for the South Caucasus. It will give the countries in the South Caucasus greater ability to chart their own destiny. It may also enable the region to exert leverage with respect to its larger, more powerful neighbours, even in the absence of western support. EE

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Serbian drug scandal exposes deep-seated ties between crime and security services

FILIP MIRILOVIĆ

The biggest drug case in Serbian contemporary history reveals a tangled web between the criminal narcotics industry and security services in the country. The case has truly become a representation of one corrupt regime divided into many centres of power, all fighting for their own interests.

On November 13th 2019, the head of the department for narcotics of the Belgrade police, Slobodan Milenković, and the chief of operations of the same unit, Dušan Mitič, were driving on the highway, when a black Audi with the cross markings of a Serbian Orthodox church, equipped with police lights, cut off their path. They decided to stop him, without knowing that this would be the beginning of their worst nightmare.

There were two people sitting in the car – the driver and a passenger, who immediately stepped out of the vehicle and greeted the two inspectors. The man informed the inspectors that he is also working with the interior ministry. His badge looked authentic. However, he had a beard, which is unusual for people working

in this ministry – actually among the thousands of employees, only a few are exempted and have a right to have it. The beard and the combination of both police lights and church markings on the car caught the inspectors' eyes and raised their suspicions. The alleged colleague from the interior ministry was businessman Predrag Koluvija, already known to the police, but from the other side of the law. After notifying their superiors, the inspectors made a decision to arrest him and search his property.

Organic food, politicians and drugs

Predrag Koluvija was a well-known man, at least in some circles. Despite his criminal past and ties with drug trafficking, for certain political and business communities he had a reputation as a successful businessman, a patriot and supporter of the Serbian Orthodox church. He was even a donor to the Serbian security intelligence agency (also known as BIA).

Located only 50 kilometres from Belgrade, Jovanjica was Koluvija's agricultural property, allegedly known for the production of organic fruits and vegetables, as well as industrial hemp for medicinal purposes. At least, that is how it was promoted – not only by him but also by some high-ranking members of the ruling party in Serbia as well. The director of the anti-corruption agency visited this property. At organic food seminars, along with Koluvija, there was inevitably one particular member of the main and executive board of the ruling SNS party – the Serbian Progressive Party. The biggest devotee of organic tomatoes from Koluvija's farm was Aleksandar Vulin, who until recently was the director of Serbia's security intelligence agency. Vulin was seen planting seedlings in front of the cameras in Jovanjica in 2015. At the beginning of last year, Vulin was placed on the US sanctions list for his ties to organized crime.

When the police seized Jovanjica they found marijuana plants as well as about 600 kilos of the drug ready for sale.

Yet, as stated in the indictment, when the police seized Jovanjica, instead of finding organic tomatoes they found only marijuana plants, as well as about 600 kilogrammes of the drug ready for sale. In the greenhouses at Jovanjica, according to the indictment, a cannabis plantation was being developed in nine hangars, while an underground city flourished beneath them. Basically, ten state-of-the-art marijuana laboratories and two dryers were discovered in the underground section of the property. During the search, jammers related to communication with mobile phones, weapons and rifles for taking down drones were also found on the property.

According to the indictment and testimonies of the two inspectors, immediately after the seizure, different people working for the security intelligence agency and military intelligence came to the property to inquire about what was happening. One of them asked the inspectors to refrain from informing the public about the investigation. Experienced investigators often say that those who first come to sniff about at a crime scene (and have no reason to be there) are usually involved themselves. This turned out to be true.

Powerful contacts

The Serbian ministry of interior was silent for ten days, which later turned out to be an order from the top. The public was only notified after a press conference was organized by the opposition People's Party. However, the success of the police action was tainted by the fact that the opposition leader made a connection between the accused Koluvija and President Aleksandar Vučić's brother. This information turned out to be false, but it served its purpose. It was dust in the eyes of the public for some time, placed by certain security structures that wanted to divert attention away from themselves – primarily by the head of Belgrade's security department Mirko Skero, a confidant of the then director of the Serbian secret service, Bratislav Gašić.

According to testimonies of the two inspectors, people working for the security intelligence agency and military intelligence came to inquire about what was happening.

Indeed, investigators found that Koluvija and Skero were often having lunch together in one restaurant in Belgrade. After every meeting, Koluvija's subordinates were given new tasks. However, no matter how powerful Skero was, he was not at the top of the pyramid. According to the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network's (BIRN) reporters, Koluvija used to meet with one more high-ranking security service officer – Brigadier General Zoran Stojković, director of the military intelligence agency. Skero and Stojković were never summoned for a hearing.

Jelena Zorić, an investigative journalist with BIRN and the weekly magazine *Vreme*, was the first to reject the allegations made against the brother of Vučić's alleged involvement. Instead, she pointed the finger at Bratislav Gašić, former director of the security intelligence agency.

Jovanjica blew up into a huge scandal in Serbia. Not only was it the biggest drug seizure in the history of this region, but it was also a true representation of one corrupt regime divided into many centres of power, all fighting for their own in-

terests. Evidence collected over the last five years clearly shows that Jovanjica was developed under the state's patronage.

Jovanjica I

The Jovanjica case can be divided into two separate indictments – Jovanjica I and Jovanjica II. The first indictment focuses on the illegal production of narcotic drugs on the Jovanjica property, where, as the prosecution claims, 1.6 tonnes of marijuana was found. Predrag Koluvija is the first accused as the leader of an organized criminal group, while eight more people are accused alongside him. His past is quite interesting. Born in Germany (his family members were supporters of a Chetnik commander from Knin during the Second World War who collaborated with the Nazis, so they fled the country), Koluvija already had a criminal record in multiple countries. He was convicted as a multiple fraudster in his native country, before arriving in Serbia. In Italy, he was convicted of illegal possession of weapons.

Investigative journalists with *Vreme* found that one of the key pieces of evidence was Koluvija's diary – the so-called "Lady Green", which was found in the basement at Jovanjica. The prosecution states that the diary contains data on the time, quantity and type of marijuana that was produced in Jovanjica under the names "Red Dragon", "Silver Skunk", "CIA BIA", "Pain Killer", "Gorilla" and "Sugar Pop".

The defence claims that industrial hemp was found on the property and not marijuana. However, after the initial chemical findings showed that the THC concentration in seized plants was far higher than in industrial hemp, the court ordered three more independent expert analyses. They all confirmed the first results.

Zorić, the investigative journalist who has been following this case since the very beginning, tells *New Eastern Europe* that the indictment is flawed since it does not tackle drug sales. As she explains, there are separate cases in which it is known that marijuana originates from the Jovanjica laboratory, plus the mobile forensics found messages in the phones of the accused regarding this drug trafficking. Further, Zorić adds that no financial investigation was ever ordered by the prosecution, which is quite unusual when it comes to criminal cases involving organized crime. And the international context of the whole case was never investigated – despite it being known that Koluvija had companies in North Macedonia, as well as contacts with some high-ranking political officials there.

Zorić is one of the journalists who has received threats from Predrag Koluvija since the beginning of the Jovanjica case. His first attorney Svetislav Bojic delivered her a message that Koluvija "is warning her and sending regards". The trial for Jovanjica I began on October 7th 2020. It is still far from over.

Jovanjica II

The indictment for Jovanjica II accuses individuals from the security services of covering up the drug production operation and of being a part of Koluvija's "protection ring". The defendants are members of both the security and military intelligence agencies, the interior ministry, as well as two civilians. The main antagonist of this story, Predrag Koluvija, had a special security circle in charge of protecting him, his property and his business – a team of different people working for the aforementioned state agencies. They communicated through the encrypted application "Razgovor", which was designed specifically for Jovanjica. These communications were intercepted after the discovery of the application's servers at Jovanjica.

Dividing Jovanjica into two separate indictments was criticized from the beginning by both public professionals and the state prosecutor leading the case. In this way, there is a huge chance that Jovanjica II could be dismissed at some point in time, in order to cover up the trail of the involved high-ranking officials. After more than two years and twenty postponements, the preliminary court hearing for Jovanjica II was finally held.

In 2021 Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić said on national television that it was "pretty strange" that Koluvija spent two years in detention "since he only had a tonne of marijuana, he didn't kill anyone, he didn't have 10 tonnes of cocaine or anything like that." This statement was one of the many made by the political top brass in order to defend Koluvija and try to criminalize the inspectors who arrested him. This does not mean that the Serbian president was directly involved in the Jovanjica drug production, but he is responsible indirectly – for allowing the creation of different centres of power within a corrupt and undemocratic regime, which ultimately annihilated independent institutions over the years.

The power fights back

The pro-regime tabloids played an important role in Koluvija's decriminalization. These unfortunately have a large readership. The main tactic was, and still is, to attack the police officers who arrested him, stating that they were allegedly drug dealers. This campaign mostly started after Koluvija changed his lawyer and chose Vladimir Djukanović to lead his defence. This move was one of many indicators that Jovanjica has close ties to certain political circles within the ruling party.

Djukanović is a member of the main board of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, as well as the chairman of the committee for justice, state administration and local government. He is also a member of the committee for the control of the security

services and sits on the high council of the judiciary. Once a member of the Serbian Radical Party, Djukanović never renounced his right-wing views and is still infamous for representing the most conservative political current in the ruling party.

However, his positions in the high council of the judiciary and the committee for the control of the security services place him clearly in a conflict of interest while defending Koluvija, especially since his first position gives him the opportunity to influence the selection of judges and the disciplinary punishment of prosecutors. The Court of Appeal in Belgrade terminated Koluvija's detention in 2021 and placed him under house arrest. Soon after that, the first accused in the biggest drug scandal in Serbian history was a guest on a TV show presented by his own lawyer, Djukanović.

The court never summoned any high-ranking officials for questioning, despite the evidence provided by the police.

Attempts to defend Koluvija, both by his lawyer and pro-regime media outlets, are focused in a way to present Jovanjica as a false affair, an attack on the Vučić family which has allegedly been organized by "corrupt police officers, opposition parties, and western secret services".

Former state secretary in the ministry of interior, Dijana Hrkalović, who is on trial for influence peddling in another case tied to organized crime and the notorious Belivuk gang, accused the inspector, Slobodan Milenković, of selling drugs. She is also represented by Vladimir Djukanović.

Interestingly, the court never summoned any high-ranking officials connected with Koluvija for questioning, despite all the evidence provided by the police. Instead, the judge immediately summoned Inspector Milenković to make a statement regarding the accusations made against him by Hrkalović on TV.

Bullets instead of decorations

Court testimonies by Inspector Dušan Mitič show that the police had evidence of involvement by Bratislav Gasič, the former intelligence agency director, in Jovanjica. The inspector stated that there was a plan to initiate criminal charges against him and his subordinate Mirko Skero. Then, in October 2022, Gasič was appointed as the new minister of interior. The final chapter of the nightmare for the two police inspectors then began.

The purpose of the tabloid criminalization is to completely discredit the targets so that the public can remain blind in case something happens to them. The legal representative of the two inspectors, prominent Belgrade attorney Zdenko

Tomanović, informed the public that they have information that the elimination of the inspectors is being prepared. Allegedly, certain organized crime groups (featured on the US black sanctions list) connected to the Serbian secret service agencies paid 500,000 euros for this task. Moreover, Inspector Milenković has been warning for years that his personal safety is in danger and has asked for official security from the ministry of the interior. No response ever came. His armed colleagues have been guarding him in shifts after their work.

The new interior minister immediately started a process of personnel changes. Both inspectors were removed from their positions and placed in some administrative departments, far away from Jovanjica. The investigative journalist, Jelena Zorić, explains that the inspectors were removed after they initiated additional criminal charges and requested further investigation into Jovanjica III. The main goal of Jovanjica III would be to expose the involvement of the top government officials. It would certainly open a Pandora's box concerning this state drug project. Meanwhile, Koluvija is no longer under house arrest; he just needs to stay in Belgrade. EE

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What role can Romania play in facilitating Western Balkan integration?

MIRUNA BUTNARU TRONCOTA AND MARIUS GHINCEA

Recent geopolitical developments have resulted in renewed discussions on the enlargement of the European Union – including in the Western Balkans. Many factors will determine how these talks go in 2024 but some local actors may have significant input. Through its experience, Romania can be one of these actors and play a unique role in this process.

The new geopolitical context stemming from Russia's ongoing brutal war on European soil has had profound effects on the geopolitical dynamics of the European Union's enlargement. After many years of inertia and stagnation, enlargement seems to be back at the top of the EU agenda. The geopolitical decision made by the European Council in June 2022 to grant Ukraine and Moldova candidate status was followed by the (re-)opening of previously stagnating accession negotiations with the countries of the Western Balkans (Albania and various ex-Yugoslav states). This was further supported by the most recent decision in December 2023 to move the process further and start negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, despite divisions among member states.

The year 2024 will see a redistribution of power in the EU after the European elections in June. The topic of enlargement, together with the evolving geopolitical issues in the EU's strategic neighbourhood, will remain high on the agenda. Some EU states and their citizens resist enlargement in the Western Balkans on geopolitical grounds, pleading for a "business as usual" model. In contrast, others fervently advocate for an accelerated process, a model of exceptional fast-track accession that would allow certain exceptions to EU conditionality. This would help the countries get closer to EU membership and avoid the deterioration of their geopolitical status. Romania, while a key regional player supporting the accession prospects of these countries, has a clear role in the larger mosaic of influences and challenges that define the Western Balkans' path toward EU integration. What is Romania's role in the next steps of EU integration in the Western Balkans and what should we expect from its foreign policy position in 2024?

Hurdles to stability and development

The Western Balkans is a region rich not only in cultural and ethnic diversity but also in pervasive political controversies. In the aftermath of the Yugoslav Wars, a series of unfinished processes have left a legacy of political and ethnic tensions. These continue to impact the region's current stability and development and are exploited for short-sighted purposes by both local elites and external powers. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the complex political structure created by the Dayton Accords continues to be a stumbling block. The country's governance system, divided along ethnic lines, often leads to political paralysis, hindering the reforms needed for EU accession. Similarly, Kosovo's status remains a contentious issue, particularly with Serbia and a few EU member states not recognizing its independence, including Romania. This unresolved issue poses a significant challenge to the region's stability and Kosovo's EU aspirations.

Kosovo's status remains a contentious issue with a few EU member states still not recognizing its independence.

The EU's interest in integrating the Western Balkans is driven by several factors, including the desires to ensure regional stability and security, extend the internal market, and consolidate the EU's political and economic influence in South-Eastern Europe. Economic challenges are another critical aspect. The region, though showing signs of economic growth, still lags behind the rest of Europe in terms of income, employment and infrastructure development. Unemployment rates, especially among the youth, remain high, and the region struggles with brain

drain as many young, educated individuals migrate in search of better opportunities. EU integration is seen as a pathway to improving economic prospects through access to larger markets, increased investment and funding opportunities. However, aligning with the EU's economic policies requires significant reforms in the Western Balkans, including modernizing industries, improving governance and tackling corruption and organized crime.

Different paths

The Western Balkan states' quest for EU membership has been a complicated journey marked by complex political, social and economic dynamics. It all started 20 years ago when the Thessaloniki Agenda was launched. This brought to life the states' EU perspective only a few years after the violent wars that led to the breakup of Yugoslavia. The intricate dynamics of the region are shaped on the one hand by its tumultuous history, diverse cultural landscapes, unhealed wounds from past war crimes and pervasive ethno-nationalism, and on the other hand by an interplay of external political forces.

The area's six countries are situated in different positions along the accession process, even though they all started from the same place. Montenegro and Serbia are the front runners in the accession process, starting negotiations almost a decade ago. However, they are still grappling with significant political tensions and democratic regression tendencies. They are for the moment stuck, unable to close crucial chapters. After being blocked for many years in a row by member state vetoes, Albania and North Macedonia find themselves in a middling position. This is seemingly conducive to the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* (the collection of common rights and obligations which are incorporated into the legal systems of EU member states – editor's note) in the coming years, as these states are close to starting concrete negotiations. Bosnia and Herzegovina was effectively decoupled from Kosovo after being granted candidate status in December 2022. Despite this, both states face precarious situations marked by internal threats of secession, instability and security problems. Kosovo is the only remaining potential (not official) candidate country. This is despite good progress in visa liberalization offered by the EU starting in January 2024.

Bosnia and Herzegovina was effectively decoupled from Kosovo after being granted candidate status in December 2022.

Beyond these hurdles, the EU's main stakeholders showed a visible openness in supporting enlargement over the past year. In the summer of 2023, Charles Michel,

the European Council president, mentioned 2030 as the year when a new enlargement wave will take place. Last September, Ursula von der Leyen mentioned in her last State of the Union speech that enlargement is an important objective in the years to come. The same message was reiterated before the Council in Granada during the Spanish presidency. This came in the form of the Franco-German proposal on how the EU should be transformed to include more states (focused on changing the treaties to abolish the unanimous voting system). In early November 2023, the European Commission recommended starting accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova but was more reserved when it came to negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina. These supposedly cannot happen until "the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria is achieved".

Last summer, Charles Michel mentioned 2030 as the year when a new enlargement wave will take place.

The most recent EU-Western Balkans Summit held in December 2023 in Brussels concluded by mentioning the struggle to keep the region united against threats, especially after Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Finally, in December during the European Council in Brussels, member states decided to open negotiations only with Moldova and Ukraine, leaving Bosnia and Herzegovina still in the "waiting room". What became evident during these events and decisions was that EU member states and institutions exhibit divergent positions on the pace of enlargement.

The influence(s) of geopolitics

The major question now is not if the EU will enlarge in the next decade, but how. In 2023 the main scenarios on the policymakers' table were either a "fast-track accession" of the current candidates (Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkans without Kosovo – remaining for the moment the only one with the status of a "potential candidate" until an agreement is reached with Serbia) or the "business as usual" scenario. This second option was based on fulfilling strict EU conditionality (as was the case for the last 15 years), without any more geopolitical exceptions caused by the war in Ukraine.

The key policy issue here concerns the incentives arising from current developments for various countries. The question is whether including Ukraine and Moldova in the EU will act as a catalyst, encouraging all candidate countries to progress more swiftly through the stages of EU accession. Alternatively, this could create a competitive dynamic among the candidates, leading to demotivation among long-

er-ranking candidates due to perceived unfairness and double standards. This could lead to a subsequent decline in the EU's credibility and influence in the region.

The geopolitical significance of the Western Balkans has attracted various external actors, each with their own strategic interests. Russia, for example, has historically wielded significant influence in Serbia, Montenegro and Republika Srpska (in Bosnia and Herzegovina), often using energy dependency and cultural ties to maintain its presence in the region. China's involvement, mainly through its Belt and Road Initiative, has grown in recent years. Chinese investments in infrastructure projects have been welcomed by some Western Balkan governments but these developments also raise questions about debt sustainability and adherence to EU standards. The influence of Turkey, especially in countries with significant Muslim populations like Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, is also notable. Turkey's cultural and economic ties with these countries have been a factor in the region's geopolitics.

The geopolitical significance of the Western Balkans has attracted various external actors, each with their own strategic interests.

After the full-scale war in Ukraine started in February 2022, all these competing geopolitical actors have shown increased action in the region. Russian influence operations have been fomenting EU accession fatigue among the elites and propagating anti-western narratives in Serbia. They have also raised the risk of violence in North Mitrovica, the Serb-majority part of Kosovo, by further disrupting the normalization process between Belgrade and Pristina that failed to reach any agreement in 2023.

Aligning foreign policies with the EU is one of the main conditions for joining the bloc, yet Serbia repeatedly refused to join western sanctions against Russia. Since the beginning of 2022, Serbia has purchased multiple pieces of Russian military hardware, such as the Pantsir-S1 air defence system and 9M133 Kornet anti-tank missiles. On September 24th 2022, that is at a time of increasing tensions between Pristina and Belgrade, Serbia signed an agreement with Russia that includes mutual "consultations" on foreign policy. This resulted in heavy criticism from EU countries. In a display of their strong political connections, senior Bosniak politicians from Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro called on Turks of Bosniak descent to support Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the country's May 2023 elections.

China and Serbia signed a Free Trade Agreement on October 17th 2023, making it the first of its kind between Beijing and a nation in Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, China's Zijin Mining Group has confirmed its intention to invest an additional 3.8 billion US dollars in Serbia. This was confirmed by a memorandum of understanding signed between the company and the Serbian government. The

agreement is expected to place Serbia among the largest European copper and gold producers. The growing presence of these external powers in the region produces significant challenges for the EU's ambition to integrate the region and manage its neighbourhood.

Unique role for Romania

Romania's position in the delicate issue of Western Balkan integration is both distinct and impactful. As a neighbouring EU nation intimately connected by history, culture and geopolitics, Romania plays a pivotal role in supporting the region's EU ambitions. Intriguingly, Bucharest's position among EU nations emphasizes its commitment to Moldova, advocating for its EU prospects as a foreign policy priority even amid the difficult dynamics faced by Eastern Partnership states. Beyond its immediate focus on Serbia, Romania champions the integration of the entire Western Balkan region.

Romania's backing of the Western Balkans stems from its own complex accession story. Having navigated the EU membership path under unique conditions, such as the 2007–22 Mechanism for Cooperation and Verification in judicial reform, Romania is uniquely positioned to understand the region's challenges and possibilities. This first-hand experience makes Romania an empathetic and credible voice for the Western Balkans at the EU level. Amidst concerns of enlargement fatigue and internal EU issues, Romania's diplomatic and political advocacy helps keep the region's EU goals in the spotlight.

Romania's EU accession required substantial reforms in judicial independence, anti-corruption efforts and economic restructuring, echoing the current hurdles faced by the Western Balkan nations. Bucharest's readiness to share its lessons and successful practices, particularly in combating corruption, offers practical strategies and insights for these countries grappling with similar issues.

In recent years, Romania's involvement in the region has visibly expanded. Its Development Agency, RoAid, has notably increased development assistance, especially to Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia. Trade with the region is growing, as evidenced by the 2020 establishment of a Serbian-Romanian Chamber of Commerce in Timișoara, in western Romania. Additionally, the 2022 appointment of a special representative for the Western Balkans in Belgrade (Ambassador Adrian Davidoiu) and the 2023 signing of the Romania-Albania 2024–2025 Action Plan mark meaningful diplomatic progress.

Economically and infrastructurally, Romania's role is crucial for the Western Balkans to modernize and align with EU standards. Romania's post-EU accession

infrastructure development experiences could serve as a model. As the largest economy in South-East Europe, Romania's businesses and investors are poised to play a significant role in this process, fostering regional growth and benefitting both the Western Balkans and the EU.

In terms of security, Romania offers substantial support to address the region's challenges, including when it comes to organized crime and ethnic tensions. Its contributions to the EUFOR Althea mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the KFOR mission in Kosovo as a NATO country, despite not recognizing Kosovo's independence, underscore its commitment. Continued collaboration is essential for the region's stability, a cornerstone for successful EU integration. The inclusion of both the Western Balkans and the Black Sea in NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept opens avenues for a comprehensive South-East European security framework, with Romania as a key player. However, this requires the region's nations to identify and act on shared interests and priorities.

More work ahead

The journey of the Western Balkan states towards EU membership is not straightforward. Each nation confronts its own challenges, ranging from the necessity of political and judicial reforms, combating corruption and organized crime, to resolving ethnic and territorial conflicts and bolstering their economies. However, the allure of EU membership remains a potent catalyst for regional transformation, provided it offers tangible benefits for both the leadership and the populace of these countries. The EU's revised enlargement strategy sets the stage for this transformation, contingent on Brussels' ability to harness necessary resources and political resolve, while also countering external influences and internal obstacles.

Romania faces a politically turbulent year with four rounds of elections, including elections for the European Parliament.

As these nations strive towards EU accession, they must navigate a labyrinth of political and ethnic discord, economic hurdles and the interests of external geopolitical forces. The influence of countries like Romania is undeniable, yet it is a piece of a larger puzzle that reflects the aspirations, challenges and geopolitical intricacies of the Western Balkans within the European integration narrative.

In 2024 Romania is poised to significantly increase its support for the Western Balkans. This ambition, however, is tempered by the emergence of the far-right, Eurosceptic AUR party, which exhibits limited enthusiasm for the region's inte-

gration into the EU. Romania faces a politically turbulent year with four rounds of elections, including the elections for the European Parliament. This electoral whirlwind includes the risk of shifting public opinion towards Euroscepticism, potentially altering Romania's foreign policy stance. To mitigate this, we advocate for heightened communication strategies that highlight the advantages of EU funding in the region. Emphasizing the tangible results of projects, actions and events and drawing on Romania's own EU membership benefits could be instrumental.

Furthermore, we recommend that Romania strategically positions its representatives to secure influential roles in the next European Commission (2024–29). This is particularly true regarding the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) and the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy. Although commissioners operate independently from national governments, a Romanian in such a pivotal role could significantly boost the country's visibility and sway in steering the EU's regional policies. EE

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The spectre of Slobodan Milošević continues to haunt Serbia

STEFAN MANDIC

Despite having died over 17 years ago following his war crime tribunal in The Hague, Slobodan Milošević continues to make a mark in Serbian politics. Helping to understand his legacy and why it lives on should be the first step in overcoming the divisive politics of today. This will ultimately redirect Serbia back on the path to integration with the West.

The collapse of communist Yugoslavia was undoubtedly the biggest tragedy for the Balkans at the end of the 20th century. What had been agreed during and after that conflict still greatly affects Balkan politics to this day. Other than the changes in borders or alliances, many politicians and political parties rose to prominence during the war or afterwards because of it. The most familiar person to anyone both in the Balkans and in the West that made their claim to power during the Yugoslav Wars is the former president of Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milošević.

Milošević has one of the most complicated legacies and images of any politician of the 1990s. Inquiring about his name will bring about a wild variety of claims. For some in Serbia, he was a dictator, a kleptocrat, a murderer and a moron. While for others, he was a patriot, a hero, a true leader and a man who stood against a sinister anti-Serbian conspiracy. In the eyes of the West, he was an autocrat who engineered ethnic cleansing and other crimes in the Balkans, but for many citizens in Serbia, he was the opposite, being seen as a national hero who opposed NATO encroachment.

Roots of the legacy

The many years since the end of the wars in Yugoslavia and the ousting of Milošević in 2000 have not done much to change his image among many Serbs. Many westerners believe that since Milošević was tried in The Hague and sent to prison, where he would die in 2006, that the issue over his place in Yugoslavian and later Serbian history would be resolved. Yet, unfortunately, that is not what has happened.

Even though his mortal form perished, his ideas and cult of personality continue to this day with a noticeably strong presence. A variety of motivations preserve Milošević's legacy within the Serbian population. The most prominent of these sentiments are primarily based on Serbia's national humiliation at the hands of NATO, unsolved grievances and continuing narratives from the war. What is even more problematic is that modern Serbian politics continues to utilize many of the talking points and grievances that fuelled Milošević's rise to power. Milošević's continued presence within Serbia is a point of serious concern for many western diplomats, academics and leaders, who fear that his ideals and veneration may re-ignite conflict in the Balkans. However, by looking back at his history, his ideals and the societal contexts that surrounded the aftermath of the war, it is possible to answer critical questions on not just why people continue to support him, but the continued survival of his politics and legacy.

Before understanding his modern image, it is important to examine the politics that helped him pave his way to power and popularity. Long before the chaos of the 1990s, Milošević was quite a typical individual for his stature within communist Yugoslavia. During his undergraduate studies and early professional years as a trained lawyer, he was a loyal communist who did not dare question the political establishment, seeming to be totally ambivalent to nationalism. By the time he graduated in 1964, his career path seemed quite promising. For the next decade, he would be put in charge of a few different major public institutions within Serbia, especially with the help of his long-time colleague, Ivan Stambolić. Most importantly, during his time as head of Belgrade's information department, he learned extensively about propaganda, media manipulation and censorship. His time and lessons learned within the communist party and government offices would be utilized to the fullest extent a decade later.

Milošević's continued presence within Serbia is a point of serious concern for many western leaders.

His rise to political prominence within the Socialist Republic of Serbia's political establishment would be marked at every turn by intrigue and Machiavellian

manoeuvring. In 1987, Milošević outmanoeuvred Stambolić, the then president of the Serbian republic, and ousted him from power. At this point, Milošević had abandoned a lot of the internationalist and anti-nationalist orthodox communism of the Tito era and shifted to embracing Serbian nationalism to win appeal. Outside of Milošević's politics, nationalist sentiment within Yugoslavian society skyrocketed as support for communism declined. Many Yugoslavs were discontented with the country's declining economic prospects and lost faith in Tito's whimsical prospects of an internationalist workers' utopia.

Politicians began flirting with combative nationalistic rhetoric that pinned many social ills or other issues on rival ethnic groups. Milošević was the ultimate example of this strategy. Now as the leader of Serbia, he began to rapidly consolidate support amongst the Serbian population and pave the way for future political success via pandering to nationalism. In the same year as his appointment, he made the famous address to the Serbs of Kosovo, where he declared that "no one will ever touch you again" – a clear violation of communist party policy on nationalism, but at that point few cared.

By 1991 Milošević was now in control of a dishevelled husk of Yugoslavia that was extremely Serbian in character. The Milošević government was arguably the most autocratic and repressive in modern Serbian history, only behind the Nazi occupation of the 1940s. The regime freely silenced opposition media, the military was deployed to put down protests, assassinations continued unopposed and any opposition political party would be eliminated with only the most loyal remaining. However, appealing to nationalism and using repression could not preserve his regime for long as the failures of the war, economic collapse and NATO intervention would finally push the Serbian population to overthrow the Milošević regime in 2000. Yet, opposition to Milošević was not universal, as a large segment of the Serbian population still supported him even as everything fell apart in the late 1990s. By the time of his jail sentence in The Hague, he was a shell of his former self, with illness finally taking him in 2006.

The Milošević doctrine

The doctrine of Milošević is difficult to classify on the traditional left versus right spectrum that most people are accustomed to. It is undeniable that for most of his life he was a communist whose loyalty to the communist party and Yugoslavia was unquestionable until 1987. His loyalty to Tito's communism may have vanished, but he would continue many of the political policies recognizable in a communist dictatorship. His party, the Socialist Party of Serbia, held unquestionable

power in collaboration with a few different supporting parties, the security apparatus held unchecked power to do what they pleased in defeating "enemies of the state", and Milošević himself held implicit but clearly dictatorial powers.

During his time as president of the Socialist Republic of Serbia and later Yugoslavia, the most left-wing part of his politics was his strong opposition to the West. Like that of other communist states, the West was portrayed as a band of sinister conquering imperialists who constantly thirst for conflict. Serbia was portrayed as a totally innocent and oppressed nation under attack by malicious westerners in NATO who hated Serbia simply for the fact that Serbs existed. This also extends into a worldview in which kleptocratic and repressive dictators like Muammar Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein are innocent as they were "victims" of these conquering NATO powers. Being a "victim" of the West, in the eyes of both Milošević and his ardent supporters, absolved anyone from their crimes as the western "imperialists" were always an infinitely greater evil.

However, these stances were merged with the exploitation of Serbian nationalistic sentiments, something very familiar with anybody studying or involved in the region. Serbia was portrayed as a nation under siege by a coalition of jihadists in Bosnia and Albania along with the fascist Ustaše in Croatia, all part of the sinister

conspiracy of anti-Serbian western imperialists. The role of Christian Orthodoxy was merged as well with an appeal to the traditional Serbian Orthodox faith and important historical moments. The Battle of Kosovo Field in 1389, the First World War and even the Second World War were referenced as justification for the actions of the Milošević government. Resistance to hostile occupation, whether against the Ottomans, the Austrians or even the Nazis, was constantly linked to the wars across Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo. Serbs were told that these traditional enemies were once again at the gates of their homeland and only by trusting Milošević and his compatriots would the nation be saved. As heavenly Orthodox Christians, anything wrong done by forces loyal to Yugoslavia was dismissed, their enemies were seen as always worse.

Even though one would expect him and his fellow "socialists" in the ruling party to implement socialist policies, anything but that occurred. For Milošević, a socialist or communist doctrine could no longer serve its purpose as faith in such ideologies vanished in the 1980s. Most of Milošević's policies on a variety of other issues regarding the state were incoherent or thoughtless. The duties of managing more practical issues of governance were not a major concern to him and left to his corrupt underlings. His politics hinged on the principles of autocratic power and the nationalistic mobilization of the population to keep himself in office; not much else mattered.

Even some of his public statements and campaigns seemingly contradicted themselves. Milošević would often conflate Yugoslavia with Serbia, as if he saw the two as identical. "Long live Yugoslavia! Long live Serbia!" was even one statement made to an audience. He and his party were portrayed by state outlets as the only capable defenders of the nation against both domestic traitors and foreign enemies. Loyalty to the party, the man and his war was the most important thing instead of policy or puritanical ideology. If one could describe the ruling ethos of the Milošević presidency in a single sentence, it would be Eastern Bloc communist autocracy merged with Serbian nationalism.

The narratives which keep Milošević alive today

One of the strongest segments of Milošević's political doctrine that survives and thrives today is the Milošević narrative of total innocence during the Yugoslav Wars. Any notion of wrongdoing committed by paramilitary groups fighting on behalf of Yugoslavia is immediately dismissed as enemy "propaganda" or as an expression of treasonous sentiments. A constantly repeated position is that all such crimes committed by forces loyal to Yugoslavia were "fabricated" by NATO to

frame Serbs. Explanations commonly descend into hearsay, rumour and the wildest of conspiracy theories. Coincidently, to them, all of the opposing forces were constantly committing the most barbarous of crimes, while ethnic Serb forces were completely honourable in their conduct. Certainly, Croat and Bosniak paramilitary groups were also committing war crimes, but it is important to recognize the outright conspiracy theory level detachment that exists to justify the views of Milošević and company.

The post-Milošević 2000s did not do much to dispel a lot of the unsavoury sentiments from the previous regime. The failure of the pro-western democratic political establishment to prevent Montenegro and Kosovo from seceding and the continued sluggishness of the economy only fuelled resentment. The resurgence of western-sceptic politics in the wake of the political blunders of the pro-western government has played into another major narrative that asserts that anything pro-western, pro-democracy and anti-authoritarian equals treason. During Milošević's reign, if you criticized the war effort or sided with anyone that opposed the regime, you were branded a traitor, a "fifth columnist" or a foreign agent. This has survived long after Milošević, as any political party, NGO, or civic organization that is pro-western and operates within Serbia are all often condemned as sleazy traitors.

The post-Milošević years did not do much to dispel unsavoury sentiments from the previous regime.

As unsavoury as it sounds to put faith in such positions, a key underlying motivator for such unrelenting faith in this narrative is the trauma of the war and the total national humiliation faced by Serbia. NATO pummelled major Serbian cities, Serbia was made into a pariah internationally, the economy was destroyed and the armed forces exhausted. Most tragically for many Serbs, Republika Srpska, the Serbian Krajina, Montenegro and Kosovo fell to rival groups and adversaries – the ideal of "Greater Serbia" was lost. These circumstances and trauma at a national level made for a perfect scenario for both individuals and politicians alike to try and rationalize the loss. How could we have failed? How could we have lost? It was all the sinister conspiracy of NATO and their lackeys within Bosnia, Albania and Croatia! The war crimes of paramilitaries, the rejection of diplomatic solutions, the incompetence of the regime and the failures of the armed forces on the battlefield all mean nothing. Serbia is the victim and everyone else is the aggressor, committing the most heinous barbarisms against the Serbian nation. Any act of self-criticism or reflection on the notion that maybe something was done incorrectly would admit either concessions or defeat regarding the narrative, an unacceptable prospect for most politicians and citizens. In attempting to preserve some perverted and

watered-down version of patriotic dignity, apologetic narratives have found their place to deny or explain this tragic loss.

Milošević's politics for modern Serbia and the future

To the ire of many western leaders and Serbs, there are a number of active political forces in Serbian national politics that use Milošević's playbook and continue to see success. It is important to note that there are no "carbon-copies" of Milošević currently within Serbian politics, but rather there are many that continue to use the tactics and narratives seen under him with notable commitment. A few major political parties that have found success in using the tactics of the 1990s include parties that hold political power, such as the Socialist Party of Serbia, the Serbian Progressive Party, the Serbian Radical Party and others. Appealing to the trauma, frustration and anger of the war along with very basic nationalistic sentiments has proven quite effective.

Just as during the Milošević era, anti-western fearmongering is now a part of the mudslinging and smear campaigns used today by political actors working for establishment parties or on the so-called "nationalistic" side of Serbian politics. One can see many politicians who will bemoan how opposition and pro-western groups are all made up of traitors, foreign spies and paid agents from the West. A large segment of the voting base for major western-sceptic parties will rehash a lot of these sentiments: "Why would I want to vote for those pro-western thieves? Aren't they just the stooges of NATO intelligence and foreign money?" Succeeding in Serbian politics becomes challenging when you are branded a traitor or an agent of hostile foreign powers.

Appealing to the trauma, frustration and anger of the war has proven quite effective.

Another major inheritance of that time has been the "saviour of the nation" rhetoric. Since many Serbs have very low trust in government institutions, politicians will appeal to voters by saying that only they can save the nation from ruin. Opposing politicians or parties are constantly framed as criminals, thieves and foreign agents. As mentioned before, this is something commonly thrown primarily at pro-western parties or candidates. Many establishment parties and candidates will claim to have the gracious ability and interest to save the nation from these suspicious actors. However, a lot of this rhetoric is quite shallow and only serves to rile up voter outrage to scrounge up support for elections and smear campaigns. When democratic institutions struggle to check the power of the executive, a problem encountered in Serbia, a lot of personalis-

tic rhetoric is used to mobilize supporters in the absence of more productive appeals for concrete change.

The future will pose both a major challenge and crossroads for Serbia if Milošević's ideas continue to linger. Under the current political establishment, Serbia aims to join the European Union, integrate with the West and procure massive foreign investment. To keep this integration plan going, a lot of the talk about "traitors" and how NATO or anything western is a malicious conquering force has vanished from Serbia's foreign policy, all to be replaced with talk of "integration" and "cooperation". Yet, this cannot last forever, as Serbia's political establishment will have to reckon with their future EU "partners" about the nation's domestic politics.

Even though Milošević has been dead for over seventeen years, what will likely carry his legacy on will be both the upholding of his image and an authoritarian interpretation of Serbian nationalism fuelled by trauma, propaganda and discontent from the war. If Serbian society cannot face down the spectre of Milošević, then it will continue to haunt the nation into the foreseeable future. ЕЕ

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From war propaganda to aggression

Recognizing a new crime

MAKSYM POPOVYCH

Disinformation has become an effective weapon in Russia's ongoing assault against Ukraine. However, there is currently little that can be done to prosecute those guilty of spreading such dangerous narratives. A new framework is needed in order to effectively challenge this key part of Moscow's war.

The brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine, the full-scale stage of which began in February 2022, was both preceded and further accompanied by a rampant propaganda campaign that reached new heights of cynicism, bloodthirstiness and warmongering in just a matter of days. The propaganda machine spent immense resources on justifying Moscow's heinous acts of aggression by employing a combination of manipulative and selective reporting on the hostilities in eastern Ukraine.

In an infamous quote from May 2022, the chief Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov referred to Ukraine as "a Nazi tumour, similar to brain cancer that turned the population into zombies, which needed to be liberated from German, Anglo-Saxon, and Jewish colonizers". It was just a hint of the warmongering rhetoric and lurid claims in store, from conspiracy theories about American biological weapon laboratories in Ukraine to the development of Ukrainian attack birds that were supposed to spread viruses over the territory of Russia.

Absurdity of falsehoods

In a similar vein, a mind-boggling article titled "What Russia needs to do with Ukraine", which appeared on the major Russian media *RIA Novosti* and is still readily available on their website, directly calls for violence against civilians. The article states that "besides the leadership, the bulk of the general population is also guilty, as they are passive Nazis and Nazi accomplices. They have supported the Nazi authorities and endorsed them. A just punishment of this part of the population is only possible through the inevitable hardships of the just war against the Nazi system."

With time, disinformation and propaganda was faced with the realities on the battlefield. The Kremlin could no longer ignore these problems and shifted attention towards other targets. More recently, Margarita Simonyan, the RT news editor-in-chief and head of the media group managing *Sputnik* and *RIA Novosti*, alleged that Ukrainian troops are being entirely replaced by foreign mercenaries. This fell in line with the larger narrative that Russia is directly at war with NATO, a dominating vector of Russian propaganda that has emerged since Moscow's major losses. These are namely the Ukrainian liberation of Kherson and de-occupation of large parts of Kharkiv Oblast. She declared the following in her comments on the Ukrainian counter-offensive in summer 2023: "we will see these fields full of dead bodies with not a single man who speaks Russian, and not because Ukrainians have been reconditioned not to speak Russian, but because these people have never in their life heard the Russian or Ukrainian language."

Russian propaganda is smart enough to mix blatant lies with slight exaggerations, partial reporting and manipulations.

Having watched hours of propaganda footage and having immersed myself in thousands of pieces of the most ludicrous disinformation disseminated on Russian mainstream media, as well as having learned the Nazi-centric vernacular at the heart of this propaganda, I feel a nauseating disgust and a desire to find a systematic and law-rooted approach to accountability for these crimes.

No one is impressed with the brutality or absurdity of the falsehoods emanating from the Russian side. In fact, it is utterly counterproductive – at least from the point of view of calibrating a legal response – to focus on the veracity of such statements. Russian propaganda is certainly smart enough to mix blatant lies with slight exaggerations, partial reporting and other manipulations. There are also many subjective value judgments, which by definition cannot be proven, alongside lots of factually correct information as well. What is much more important is to look at the intent and desired effect behind these communications.

Penalizing lies

This might come as a shocking revelation but international human rights law does not allow prohibiting or sanctioning speech for the mere reason of falsehood. Relevant legal norms allow for restrictions on information, including disinformation, only if it is done on the basis of a clearly defined law and in pursuance of recognized legitimate aims. These are limited to the protection of the rights or reputations of others, national security, public order, public health and morals.

Protections regarding the veracity of information are not an internationally recognized legitimate aim when it comes to restricting speech. States must also follow the test of necessity and proportionality, which essentially means that the chosen restriction, for example a penalty imposed on the speaker, must be used to achieve a specific legitimate aim. In other words, the dissemination of a false statement about vaccines can only be limited insofar as it is directly threatening public health. This was clear during the medical emergency experienced across the world in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In contrast, people spreading a ridiculous conspiracy theory, regardless of its clear falsehood, such as the clearly anti-scientific "flat earth" conspiracy, do not have any tangible adverse effect on public order, national security or the rights of others. Due to this, they are not subject to sanctions. In certain cases, international law explicitly permits the use of deception and misinformation. For example, in the context of an armed conflict, international humanitarian law, which sets the rules for the conduct of hostilities, explicitly allows for mock operations, misinformation and other "acts which intend to mislead an adversary".

It would be a disaster for free expression and independent journalism if governments, especially law enforcement, would suddenly be allowed to police speech and determine which statement is true and which is false. "Fake news laws" are certainly characteristic of undemocratic regimes. For instance, Russia criminalized the dissemination of "false information" concerning the Russian military shortly after unleashing its full-scale aggression against Ukraine. Among other devastating effects on freedom of expression, the amendment has allowed for the state to prosecute people for raising allegations of war crimes committed by the Russian army in Ukraine. At the same time, the governments in Myanmar, Egypt and Cameroon all have "false information" legislation to repress independent media and journalists.

The right to freedom of expression also protects statements and views which can be shocking, provocative, disturbing and offensive to some. This protection is also granted to many forms of hate speech, which are not automatically "illegal" despite common misconceptions. The human rights approach to addressing these various information threats focuses on the actual or intended effects. Thus,

countering a piece of manipulative information must be necessary to protect a recognized legitimate aim, such as the protection of the rights of others. Additionally, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which has been ratified by both Russia and Ukraine, requires states to prohibit "propaganda for war". It also bans the promotion of "national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence". Furthermore, the Rome Statute, a key international treaty that was brought into existence by the International Criminal Court, penalizes "incitement to the crime of genocide". In order to pursue the concrete accountability of Russian propagandists, the disinformation and hate speech that they spread needs to be examined from the point of view of these concrete and prosecutable offences.

The full ensemble of vectors and effects involved in Russian propaganda vis-à-vis Ukraine requires a much lengthier study. However, this article will further focus on framing these expressions through the lens of propaganda for war.

Not all propaganda is created equal

This article is not original in the sense that it examines rampant Russian disinformation through the concrete legal lens of propaganda for war. Notably, the ban imposed on Russian state media in the EU was upheld by the bloc's General Court on the basis that RT reporting amounted to propaganda for war. The court noted "broadcasting 'selected' information, including manifestly false or misleading information" by RT. Though that in itself could not form the legal basis for upholding the ban. Instead, the court assessed that the aforementioned expressions were designed to "justify and support an act of military aggression". Although the judgment has received some convincing negative commentary in relation to the neglect of essential procedural safeguards and the application of the standard of proportionality, the very premise of linking the justification of the ban on RT's reporting to propaganda for war remains the most solid legal strategy.

Foreign propaganda is too vague and subjective for designing a narrowly construed legal response that would not risk backsliding into a censorship measure. In contrast, propaganda for war, especially in its extreme form of direct and public incitement to aggression, is much more concrete. It is also clearly prohibited by international human rights law which, in fact, requires – rather than simply allows – states to take actions to effectively prohibit propaganda for war in their domestic legal systems.

In practice, the slew of disinformation described at the beginning of this article would need to be analysed vis-à-vis specific criteria: the context of Russia's merciless

aggression against Ukraine; the high-profile status of the speaker who has a clear influence on their audience; the intended effect and result that these communications are trying to achieve; and the real possibility of harm that emanates directly from the manipulative statements. Saying that Ukrainians are Nazis or zombies, portraying acts of aggression as "liberation" and lying about the "war with NATO" transgress the notions of "hate speech" or "incitement of hostility", especially if examined holistically. This type of propaganda amounts to the ultimate form of incitement to violence – incitement to the crime of aggression. In other words, this is exactly a case in which words fuel a vicious cycle of violence that manifests in attacks on civilians, torture, enforced disappearances and atrocious war crimes in the occupied territories of Ukraine.

Paradoxically, Russian criminal legislation makes incitement to war an offence punishable by fines or even imprisonment. Needless to say, no charges under that provision have been brought against any chief Russian war propagandist. That is a curious twist of fate, considering that it was the Soviet Union that insisted on the international recognition of the prohibition of propaganda for war during the post-war drafting of the key human rights covenants that we have today.

To make it clear, the international prohibition of propaganda for war is not absolute. Most significantly, advocacy for the sovereign right of self-defence is excluded from its scope. Thus, the calls of Ukrainians to repel Russian attacks firmly belong to the realm of protected speech. On the contrary, the most egregious form of propaganda for war – direct public incitement to the crime of aggression – must be actively prevented, counteracted, and, in certain cases, addressed by resorting to a criminal law framework.

Towards practical accountability

How can we achieve accountability for Russian propagandists in a situation where their home state is certainly disinterested in applying its own laws to their atrocious incitement to war against Ukraine? One way is to hope for a miraculous change of government and democratization in Russia, which would result not only in a process of lustration and condemnation of past crimes but also an elaborate transitional justice process against the "trumpets" of propaganda. Another is to act now.

The Rome Statute, a key international treaty that brought into existence the International Criminal Court, punishes "planning, preparation, initiation or execution" of the international crime of aggression. Curiously, prosecution of incitement to the crime of aggression, for example, a call to bombard the territory of anoth-

er state, is not within the jurisdiction of the court, although a proposal to include such a crime existed at the time of the drafting negotiations but was eventually dismissed. This is in sharp contrast to the "direct and public" incitement to genocide, which is both recognized as a crime under the Rome Statute and governed by a separate Genocide Convention.

One excellent study by the New Lines Institute and the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights examined the elements of genocidal intent in some of the pieces of disinformation and propaganda mentioned at the beginning of this article. However, incitement to genocide is a crime with a high threshold and a number of cumulative constituent elements which, therefore, risks not covering the bulk of the diverse Russian propaganda directed at aggression against Ukraine.

Considering that the International Criminal Court lacks the jurisdiction to prosecute incitement to aggression, a viable and completely realistic alternative consists of applying relevant national criminal law to Russian propagandists. The principle of universal jurisdiction, as the name suggests, allows prosecutors to transgress national borders and challenge atrocious violations of international law, even if neither the victim nor the perpetrator is a citizen of the prosecuting state. Most recently, three separate war crime cases, involving allegations of torture, rape, summary execution and missile attacks on civilians committed by Russian forces in Ukraine, have been handed to German prosecutors. Numerous EU member states, including Germany, Poland and Finland, have at their disposal specific criminal provisions that allow them to prosecute incitement to war, including those forms of incitement that are disseminated through mass media. While some jurisdictions might have more conservative rules on the exterritoriality of their jurisdictional reach, it is certainly an accountability avenue worth exploring. This is especially true considering the appalling degree of impunity that Russian propagandists currently enjoy.

The Rome Statute punishes "planning, preparation, initiation or execution" of the international crime of aggression.

Another tangible avenue of enquiry is the establishment of a special tribunal to prosecute Russian aggression against Ukraine. Most recently, with the support of the European Commission, the International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine started its work. It is essential that the investigative activities of this institution, which are laying the groundwork for a future justice process, also include a focus on incitement to the very crime that the centre was created to address. Specifically, the treaty that would establish the future tribunal would need to grant clear jurisdiction to prosecute incitement to aggression, along with other elements such as planning, preparation, initiation and execution.

Reconciling the effective implementation of accountability for this crime with international free speech standards will have practical application for a variety of other conflict situations worldwide. This process would be highly relevant in the Middle East as the Israel-Hamas war risks escalating into an even larger regional conflict. A legal precedent would also guide international responses to propaganda around the rising tensions in the South China Sea. Stronger international disincentives against propagating conflict and violence firmly belong to the common global interest.

At the same time, one should not be delusional about the timelines of these processes. The establishment of an international tribunal while an armed conflict is still very much active is entirely unprecedented. Individual criminal cases on the basis of universal jurisdiction would likely take years before they could reach the judicial phase. Furthermore, although propaganda for war is explicitly prohibited by international law, its most extreme form – public incitement to the crime of aggression – is not currently recognized in international criminal law. There would have to be a clear criminal law standard to ensure meaningful accountability that also respects fair trial guarantees.

The cases against Russian propagandists would have to be built in absentia, i.e., in the absence of the defendant. But this process can still result in a meaningful interim effect. This is particularly true regarding the issuance of arrest warrants, such as the ones that were issued against Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, the Russian commissioner for children's rights, for the deportation of Ukrainian citizens to Russia.

The bottom line is that the crime of incitement to aggression needs to become effectively prosecutable, both as a deterrent measure against future war propaganda campaigns and, most importantly, as an element of the duty of the international community to foster international peace and security. EE

Maksym Popovych is a human rights lawyer from Ukraine. He specializes in freedom of expression and media freedom issues, including responses to "information threats": propaganda for war, hate speech, incitement to violence and manipulation of information. He previously worked on investigations of grave human rights violations and war crimes perpetrated in the territories of Ukraine occupied by the Russian Federation.

I am the peninsula, with all its colours

An interview with Jamala, Ukrainian singer, performer and 2016 winner of the Eurovision Song Contest. Interviewer: Anna Arkhypova

ANNA ARKHYPOVA: You are an incredible example of personal cultural diplomacy and the promotion of Ukraine in the world. The results of your American tour have impressed many. At the same time, you are a voice of conscience. I remember that once in a conversation you stated very clearly that the war is not a reason for more hate. Have your musical talent and social sensitivity always gone together or have they blended as a result of the war?

JAMALA: I have always listened to artists who inspire me with their philosophy and social contributions. That's why I never separate my personal thoughts and convictions, which are always in me, from my artistic work. This is how I have been since 2009, when I participated in a music competition in Latvia. I am Jamala from Crimea, a Ukrainian of Crimean Tatar origin, a Muslim. After that come other things, such as social projects, my support for women, or promotion of tolerance.

What is your motivation today?

My positions and my philosophy of life have not changed much. I believe that to exist people need to have solid foundations. For me it is my family and my homeland. These are things that I am trying to protect with all my might and means. So yes, my motivation today is a heightened sense of justice. That is why, when I see that the wider world is not paying enough attention to us because it has other problems such as the pandemic, economic challenges, other wars, and many other things, I want to shout. My goal is to bring peace to our homes as soon as possible and to bring our children back to where they belong: their own rooms and play areas.

The situation is extremely tense now. What are the "secret ingredients" of your cultural diplomacy that are a result of your experiences?

Photo:
Michael Fedorak

I definitely didn't choose to be an activist, or, as you said, a "cultural diplomat". It came unexpectedly to me at the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and it has been a part of my life for the last two years now. This mission accompanies me at every event: a solo concert, a tour of the United States, the Global Citizen Now gathering in New York, or the ceremony of the Kennedy Center Honors. These are large-scale venues, again, like Eurovision. But the most important thing is that no matter how much time you are given, be it 30 seconds or an hour, wherever you are and whatever time you have, you have to use every moment of it. That is why I even participated in the Polish TV show called Dancing with the Stars. That was unique! Every time we went on the floor with Poland's top dancer, Jacek Jeszke, we raised money for Ukrainian children. I was so impressed with the courage of the Polish television staff. For the first time in the history of the programme, they raised funds for Ukraine. There were many other concerts and cultural events that were held in Poland in support of Ukraine. For example, I performed at a festival with Kayah, a well-known Polish singer, and we are now very good friends. In Rzeszów we also sang together a song titled "Thank you stranger". I dedicated this song of gratitude to all the countries, especially to Poland, for opening their doors to us. The concert was held on the first anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Can you name a situation and event that took place in your life that will stay with you forever?

Oh there have been lots of them, including the memories of my childhood in Crimea and my great-grandmother's stories of the 1944 deportation. But among other events that I will never forget are our family musical evenings in Crimea and of course meeting my husband in Kyiv, the births of our children, and winning the Eurovision Song Contest. There have been so many such memorable events in my life. The last one was the morning of February 24th 2022, but then that feeling was of despair and

hopelessness … However, as a mother you cannot succumb to that. You have to take your children and leave, even when you do not know what will happen next. Missiles may be flying over you, but you need to go. And you know for sure that you will protect your children. Perhaps these are the "secret ingredients" of my cultural diplomacy.

What impact has this last event had on you?

It has had a great impact on me. I have become even more careful about what I say, where I am, who I am with, whether there are any provocations where I perform. And here I am grateful to my husband and manager, and to the whole team, who constantly guard and check everything carefully. It would be difficult for me to do it all by myself because of the volume of engagements that I have. Let me just say that after the 800th interview, I stopped counting. Of course, I remember all the meetings with top officials and celebrities: Anthony Blinken, Julia Roberts, U2, Pharrell Williams, Tom Odell, Ed Sheeran, the Spice Girls. The list goes on. There have been a lot of meetings where people come up to me, hug me and express their support for Ukraine. And this always requires me to be focused, to be grateful. I guess this is what has defined me over these two years: no matter how much I say thank you, it will never be enough.

Let us turn to Ukraine and the situation inside the country. Do you think our country and its society have a culture of honouring memory and traditions, and, ultimately, a certain protocol of clear actions to preserve the creative works of artists during war? Something that would not be only kept in families but as a national treasure that would form the basis of the culture of independent Ukraine today, and in the future?

I personally lost some close friends who were also artists. For example, Pasha Li, a Ukrainian actor with whom I worked in the filming of the movie *Taste of Freedom*, died as a hero while rescuing children from Irpin. I also knew our singer Nina Matvienko and the famous Ukrainian religious scholar Ihor Kozlovsky, who both died in 2023. Also, the loss of Serhiy Krutsenko, who was an incredible human being, but also a philosopher, composer, director, sound producer and most importantly a great friend of mine, was extremely devastating. Serhiy was one of those few sound artists who could record complex orchestras and complex music and who knew and read scores very well. He was unique, with an absolute ear for rhythm. His death is such a great loss for Ukrainian culture. That is why I would like to see more honouring of Serhiy – for example a street should be named after him. We recorded the *QIRIM* album in September 2021 with more than 80 instrumentalists – a symphony orchestra and a group of folk musicians from Crimea. All the material, terabytes of data, was stored on the computer at the recording house. When Kyiv was being bombed, I called Serhiy asking what we

should do. It seemed that we had lost the album. I was scared that a rocket was going to hit the building, and there will be nothing left. He told me not to worry and said: "I'll get there, I'll save it." He risked his life but saved the album. The last time we met was on December 23rd 2022. He was then full of hope and life. He lost his life on January 7th 2023. It's been very difficult. Serhiy's death was entirely the result of the war. All these artists that I mentioned died because of the occupier.

Have you come across any good examples or traditions, in other European states or parts of the world, that are worth praise when it comes to honouring artists and their work and including them in the canon of national heritage?

It's a difficult question, I don't know such European examples but I think that we can, for example, make documentaries to preserve the memory, we can collect works of art and yes, we can make films. I would really like to see movies made about our national composers Myroslav Skoryk and Boris Lyatoshynsky and our national poet Taras Shevchenko. These films would portray our artists who have already inspired more than one generation. And how many more they will still inspire. As for our work, it was Serhiy Krutsenko who came up with the idea that in order not to lose the sound of the violins, due to the sound of the winds, we should separate them during the recording process. That is why we recorded all the strings first and then all the wind instruments, so they wouldn't interfere with each other during the recording. He followed every note, score, rhythm. We sat together in the studio: myself with other artists, Max Gladetsky and Artem Roschenko. After a week of work, we created what I would call a real "island" of Crimea. For the outro, where the orchestra had already been mixed, I wanted to include what was happening in the cities such as Mariupol, and Bucha at that time … We can say that this is one of the few compositions with the sounds of bombs and rockets. Serhiy agreed with me and added them to our music. The music we created together was based on such a great faith, strength and professionalism. It may sound bold coming from me now, but I have never seen such a high level of recording. At least I have not heard anything like this in Ukraine.

I think all these efforts are being recognised now. On September 27th 2023 your album *QIRIM* won the independent national Muzvar award in the category "digital music heritage". You also received a special award for your contribution to the Ukrainian music industry. What does the award mean to you?

It is important because of what is happening in Ukraine now when our country is at war. Of course, we don't expect any awards now and the most important thing is that the information about us gets out. I was very pleased when Arnold Schwarzenegger recommended my album on his Twitter page. It was very

At the world premiere of the new album QIRIM in Liverpool.

nice! Or that *QIRIM* hit the World Music charts. This is also an achievement.

The world premiere of *QIRIM* took place in Liverpool, in front of an audience of 15,000 people who do not know the Crimean Tatar language, and was accompanied by the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra. The rapid popularity of the album in different countries is evidenced by the number of radio networks that are broadcasting it. What is the global reach of the album now? Are you getting feedback from listeners in other countries of the world?

When we released it, unexpectedly for us, the album was at the top of Spotify in Croatia. The album was also played in Poland, Greece, the US, Canada, Georgia and Jordan. Thanks to Apple Music and World Music it was very widely distributed. Yes, we have been getting feedback from everywhere. It was very nice to hear from some composers who write music for Hollywood movies and Netflix, or from Canadian artists and musicians, or the American singer Gregory Porter and others.

In a joint project with Spotify Singles, you added Crimean Tatar motifs to your own version of a song cover of the iconic American singer Madonna. And your performance of the Ukrainian national anthem in London during the Game4Ukraine charity football match also brought new musical features to the traditional sound, which provoked

a strong reaction from the audience. What do these gestures mean to you?

What was important to me about covering Madonna's song was that Madonna is one of the stars who has a lot of influence. She was one of the first to support Ukraine and I wanted to thank her, but in my own way. I wanted to cover her, adding my own characteristic pieces and the part in the song "Frozen" that was symphonic became a "mugham". You mentioned the anthem of Ukraine; here I added more American soul to it, which is characterized by "melisma". We have already seen different interpretations of the American anthem by Whitney Houston or Lady Gaga and that is why when I was invited to London, I wanted to add something new and bright to the composition. It was made in America by Andrey Chmut, my friend, saxophonist and arranger.

Tell me a bit about your cooperation with Netflix. On June 26th last year the Eurovision comedy, *The Story of a Fiery Saga*, directed by American director David Dobkin, was released. You acted and sang in this film. What was your experience working on this production? Do you have any plans for further collaborations with the cinema industry?

It was a great collaboration. For three days we were shooting in a castle near London with other performers chosen by the director. It was a really cool experience. All the actors we worked with sang my song "1944". Believe me, it was really amazing. When the main character, Rachel McAdams, sings to you in Crimean Tatar, it is worth it! Also, on February 29th 2024, another film production, *The Taste of Freedom*, will premiere in Ukraine.

You spend a lot of time on the road, performing at concerts and various events. Sometimes you say, with pain in your voice, that you hardly ever see your sons. Can we talk about them a bit?

It is true that I do not see my children enough. My boys have an ear for music, they have musical talent, which is already clear. But they also play with toy cars, Batman and Spiderman characters, like all boys their age do. They love to listen to music. Yet, the younger one gets very jealous when I sing – he thinks that then I am at work. That's why I don't sing so much in front of him. But children change you, make you wiser, more sensitive. My children are currently living in Warsaw and speak Polish. For my youngest son, Selim, Polish became his first language. I will never forget this and I will always be grateful that Poland has accepted us so well.

Has the war affected your stage image? Have your costumes and concert outfits changed? I remember in Liverpool you had this cocoon dress and symbolic jewellery…

Of course, the war has influenced my stage image. Believe me or not: when I was first invited to Berlin, on March 3rd 2022, for their Eurovision National Selection, the first thing I thought was that I had nothing to wear. This is be-

cause when I was quickly packing our things on February 24th 2022, I didn't take any clothes for performing with me. I had one tracksuit. All my clothes, which every artist should have at hand, stayed in Kyiv. I went to my sister's house in Istanbul and borrowed a regular black pantsuit. I travelled in that suit for quite a long time. Later I asked my husband to get me my black jumpsuit with a red cape. I performed in it in Hungary, Italy and Spain. I didn't pay attention so much to what I was wearing. At some point, Ukrainian media wrote to me asking me to please change my clothes on stage for different performances. They said it was getting hard for them to distinguish between each event because I was always wearing the same clothes – but you know I didn't even think about it. Probably the first time I dressed consciously was on independence day in August 2022, which we celebrated in Kyiv. Then I put on a yellow and blue suit. For safety reasons, we filmed the performance in the subway.

As for my images for the *QIRIM* album, this was a continuation of the theme itself, because I am this peninsula, with all its colours! Maybe you noticed that the album cover shows that it is dawn, around five or six in the morning. The sand is also pink … We created a separate print that became the colour of dawn, the colour of rebirth. These are the same forms as stone and water. It's a texture like our planet, which has mountains, the sea, moss … it all matters. I really wanted to create this unique world where I want to be. ❞

Jamala is a Ukrainian singer born in Crimea. She won the Eurovision Song Contest in 2016 with her song "1944". Her latest album is titled *QIRIM* – which is Crimean Tatar for Crimea. The popular European online magazine *Beehype*, which talks about current music from around the world, named QIRIM's (Crimea) album one of the best albums of 2023 among musicians from more than 80 countries around the world. The album QIRIM for the month of January 2024 holds the position of the top 20 albums of the World Music Charts Europe.

Anna Arkhypova is a Ukrainian journalist.

Lost Legacy?

Georgia and the Rose Revolution twenty years later

An interview with retired Ambassador Richard Miles, former US ambassador to Georgia.
Interviewer: Vazha Tavberidze

VAZHA TAVBERIDZE: Let's begin with the Rose Revolution as you remember it. From your perspective, what exactly transpired 20 years ago?

RICHARD MILES: Well, it was a very interesting display of – I guess you have to say democracy – because what happened was what the majority of the population wanted. I wouldn't say that it was entirely legal, but I do not think it was exactly illegal either. In fact, the country adapted to the revolutionary changes and the opposition leaders fairly easily. I should point out almost from the start that not all of the opposition leaders were supporting the demonstrations and therefore the Rose Revolution. But I would say that the majority were, and the leaders of the opposition who were organizing people out on the street handled the transition of power fairly well. President Eduard Shevardnadze who was in power at that time was an unhappy man, obviously as anybody would be, and maybe made some statements that were a little bit too unfortunate. Yet on the other hand, he did abdicate peacefully. I've seen other efforts to overthrow existing governments, some a little bit bloody, some not so much. But the really interesting thing in my mind about the Rose Revolution is that it was almost completely bloodless. It was a civil disturbance, but buses were not overturned, cars were not burned, windows were not broken, shots were not fired. That was really one of the most interesting things about what actually happened, the peaceful nature of it all, despite the tension and the excitement and the stress. It was a peaceful overthrow of an existing government.

When you said that it was not exactly legal, what exactly do you mean by that?

Well, there had been a parliamentary election. And one could argue, as we all did, that the election was not completely correct. People had the right to be upset about it. But one would think that what should happen would be a call for a recount, or for a new parliamentary election. And not exactly a change of government, which did not automatically follow. But that is the way the leaders of the demonstration organized it and people caught on to the idea because they were very upset with the government. So in the end, the change was successful and it represented an interesting shift of public opinion away from the failed parliamentary election to the overthrow of the existing government.

What's your most vivid memory about the Rose Revolution when you look back at it? What comes first to your mind when you think about it?

There is one rather funny thing. Almost to the minute when Shevardnadze had basically stepped down from power, fireworks broke out across the city of Tbilisi. And they weren't just individuals shooting off some store-bought fireworks, they were like the kind of fireworks you see during a national holiday. Who organized the display? I never found out. But no one knew that Shevardnadze was going to step down, the protests could have gone on for quite a while. And so here was this rather tremendous display of fireworks over the city at the exact moment the government essentially changed.

You noted the bloodless nature of the Rose Revolution. What do you think made it possible for it to become one of the so-called "velvet revolutions"?

In my opinion, there were a number of factors, but especially the spirit of the Georgian people, which was certainly one of dissatisfaction with the way things had been going in general. There was unhappiness and a desire for change, but things had not taken a violent turn. So that set the stage and the opposition leaders like Mikheil Saakashvili, Zurab Zhvania and Nino Burjanadze were determined to keep it non-violent. The patriarch also came out with an extremely strong statement, I still remember it to this day. He said that "People certainly have a right to demonstrate for what they believe in. But it should be kept non-violent." He said he would condemn anyone who would bring weapons, guns or knives to the demonstration. The patriarch did and still has a lot of the respect of the population, so that also played a role. Another extremely important institution was the army, which refused to violently disperse the protesters. If I may say so, I think the foreign diplomats did what they could to try to keep things non-violent as well. I spent a fair amount of time talking to everyone from Shevardnadze and his ministers to the heads of organizations that controlled the instruments of power. I spoke directly with them and I said, "Look, this is go-

ing reasonably well for you on a non-violent basis. You should try to keep it that way. And any use of violence is going to severely affect foreign nations' abilities to look favourably on what is happening in Georgia right now, and it will not reflect well on Georgia as a country and Georgians as people. So it is extremely important to maintain this non-violence, you should do everything to maintain it." I think that had some effect.

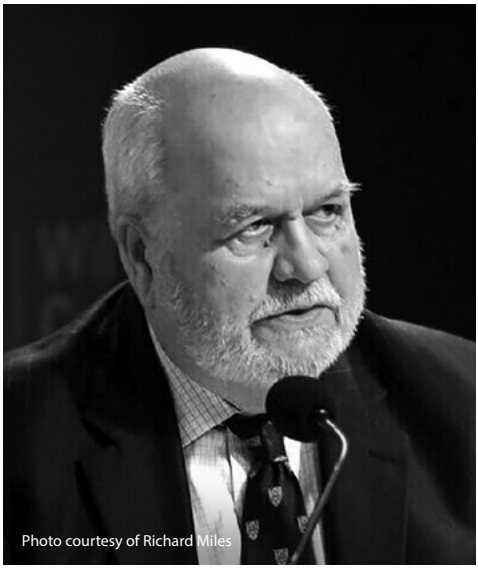
Photo courtesy of Richard Miles

Speaking of the external actors, and more specifically US involvement, just how much and how great was the American involvement in the Rose Revolution? Was it an American project, as many claim?

There's a lot of talk and nonsense about foreign influence and foreign instigation. It is pretty much nonsense as far as I can tell. I think just about the only thing which we really did was to spend an enormous amount of money trying to ensure that it would be an honest and open election, and millions of American dollars went towards establishing a computer-based voter registration system, training election poll workers, and even doing some political training for various political parties in and out of government. We also brought experts on exit-polling to help with the process. Other members of the international community did similar things, although I think the expenditure of American money was probably greater than all the rest of them combined. We were meeting on a weekly basis, the ambassadors of most of the western countries, and that also included an invitation to the Russian and the Chinese ambassadors by the way. We would meet weekly during the build-up to the election to discuss what was going on, what we were observing, what we might do to ensure that the election was open and honest. Even Secretary James Baker (former US Secretary of State between 1989 and 1992 – editor's note) came to help resolve an impasse that had occurred between the opposition leaders and the government over the electoral commission. Baker met with Shevardnadze, and during that meeting there was a good deal of talk about the election. Baker explained the importance that the US places on having an open and honest election. They were on a first name basis, and Shevardnadze said to him, "So, James, what you're saying is that the relationship with the United States will be affected by the degree to which we con-

duct an open and honest election?" Baker replied by saying, "Eduard, that's exactly right." So warnings were laid down at the highest levels regarding what was, in essence, the internal affairs of the Georgian people. But I don't think anyone can fault the foreign nations for the way in which they went about handling things. Yet after Shevardnadze abdicated, he did make some [critical] statements about me, actually. And, you know, the funny thing was that Saakashvili was even annoyed [with me], he thought I was claiming credit for what took place. I had never claimed any kind of credit for what happened, but that, in a way, really soured my relationship with Saakashvili because he never gave up on that.

After your tenure in Belgrade, where there also was a change of government, and then Tbilisi, you became somewhat notorious. The Russians, for example, called you a "revolution-maker" and an *éminence grise*. Do you think you deserved such a moniker?

It was just Russian propaganda. There's not a lot you can do about it. I recall after the NATO air campaign in Serbia I went to Bulgaria as ambassador and one journalist wrote: "And here comes Ambassador Miles, trouble follows him like a faithful dog." I thought that was very clever, actually, and I kind of have carried that strange reputation, which was only aided by Russian propaganda. Oddly, after I retired and left Georgia, I was later recalled and sent to Turkmenistan. And nothing was said. I got along well with the Russian ambassador there. There was never any kind of fuss about my "alleged past". But about six years later, when I was sent to Kyrgyzstan – oh boy, I really caught it there. There was a vicious campaign and it actually affected my ability to cooperate with the government because the propaganda was endless, and I remember there was a demonstration outside the embassy by people chanting "Ambassador Miles, go home! Ambassador Miles go home!" My wife saw that on TV – she was back in America – and she sent me an email saying, "yes, Dick, come home, come home."

So she sided with the Kyrgyz protesters!

It was really kind of funny in a way…

Speaking of US involvement, what do you think about the claims that there was American money funnelled into funding the Rose Revolution and maintaining it?

We never gave money directly to the opposition leaders.

And indirectly?

Well, indirectly in the sense that we provided all sorts of expert advice during the election itself, as I mentioned earlier. A lot of money went into supporting the process and to the people that were conducting the elections to ensure that they knew what they were doing and that they could do it on a professional basis. But there was no money given to the Rose Revolution. The only thing even close to that was after the change of power. I was actually getting ready to go to

bed one evening, I was in my pyjamas, and Zurab Zhvania called me and said, "Dick, you know, we've looked into the treasury and it's empty. What can you do to help?" And I said that the US Congress hates to provide direct funds but I understand your difficulty. He told me that they needed money to pay the police and the soldiers. I said I would see what I could do. And I got up, went to the embassy, called Washington and was able to secure what we call "bridging money" – money that would help them to get over the immediate aftermath of the crisis. A small team came out from Washington, led by a very experienced American diplomat. They went around and talked to a few people and tried to figure out what we might be able to provide. In the end, I think it was about maybe 20 million US dollars, or something like that which was provided as bridging money.

One of the names which gets thrown around, often dismissively, by sceptics is that of George Soros. How big was the role he or his institution played during this time period?

I don't think George Soros had anything to do with the Rose Revolution. I knew his people well in Serbia and I have great respect for his organization, and what he has done in the former communist countries of Europe. But the role that his people played in Georgia was minuscule. I don't mean to demean them or denigrate them. But I think that this narrative is rather part of this conspiratorial nonsense that is prevalent in the United States as well. After I retired, I was up in New York for some event, and George and I were there and I said, you know, you and I are the bad boys of all this. And he said, don't think a thing about it. And I said, I never have and I never will.

Then let's move to the figures who definitely played a significant role in this. Who do you think were the principal actors in the Rose Revolution and how have they fared in your opinion?

The main operator on the side of the government, of course, was Shevardnadze. By the way, I always liked Shevardnadze, we always got along well. Our wives remained in touch until his wife died. And my wife and I went to the funeral service for his wife and we went to see him I think the day before I left Georgia at the end of my assignment. I think we sort of made up after some of his rather tough words when he was under stress. So on the government side, certainly things started with Shevardnadze. The opposition leaders, basically the triumvirate, they were all very competent in rather different ways. Saakashvili was out in front. And the whole business of calling for the president's abdication was his idea, I think. The others were a little uneasy about that simply because they had not really thought of it in that context. Certainly, Saakashvili was the most fiery speaker, he was able to mobilize public opinion. Zhvania was very methodical, and very organizationally minded. He was very good at keep-

ing things moving along in an orderly fashion, as orderly as one could expect in those times. And Nino [Burjanadze] had great experience, especially in dealing with other factions and other people. So they made a good triumvirate, and I thought the decision that they made that they would unite behind Saakashvili, as a replacement for Shevardnadze, was almost the only politically sensible solution at that time.

Fast forward 20 years later to today and let me ask you, what is the importance and the legacy of the Rose Revolution?

Well, first of all, the revolution does not seem to have had a great effect on what is happening right now – with the return of Bidzina Ivanishvili and his influence and the rather major shifts in government policy, plus, you know, the devastating effects of the 2008 military hostilities. So things have changed not always in a manner which the international community would like to see. But the Georgian people remain democratically minded people. They have a free economy, they're free to travel, free to read, access the internet, study abroad – and in the end it is a free country. RFE

Richard Miles is a retired US diplomat who served as the US ambassador to Georgia from 2002 to 2005.

Vazha Tavberidze is a Georgian journalist and staff writer with RFE/RL's Georgian Service. His writing has been published in various Georgian and international media outlets, including *The Times*, the *Spectator*, the *Daily Beast* and *New Eastern Europe*.

Ukrainian refugees with HIV adjust to care abroad

LILY HYDE

Ukraine has the second-largest HIV epidemic in Europe after Russia. Those refugees who fled the full-scale invasion to Poland with HIV have been forced to seek treatment and adjust to different approaches to the disease. In the end, the experience can provide lessons on how to better help those afflicted with the disease.

When Anna Aryabinska fled from Kyiv in March 2022 with her ex-partner's children, she had little idea that she would end up supporting not only his family, but many HIV-positive Ukrainians in Poland. Until Russia's full-scale invasion, Aryabinska had been an activist for the Ukrainian organisation Positive Women, supporting women with HIV. Now she is one of a group of volunteers assisting fellow Ukrainian refugees to keep taking medication for HIV, as well as integrate into healthcare systems in European countries which have very different epidemic profiles and standards of treatment.

Ukraine has the second-largest HIV epidemic in Europe after Russia, with an estimated 260,000 people living with the disease. Over six million Ukrainians are now refugees from Russia's full-scale invasion, according to the UNHCR. In Poland, the top destination, 1.6 million Ukrainians have applied for temporary protection schemes (the vast majority are women and children as martial law bans most men aged 18 to 60 – like Aryabinska's ex-partner – from leaving Ukraine). On top of issues around housing, work and schooling, people with HIV face an addition-

al, urgent difficulty: how to access the antiretroviral (ARV) medicines they need to take every day to suppress the virus.

Difficult adjustment

Anna Aryabinska left Kyiv in March 2022, when Russian forces were just a few kilometres from the city. Better prepared than many, she took a three-month supply of ARVs and a medical note from Kyiv doctors with her. When she reached Poland she registered right away at the local AIDS centre. Since then, she has been guiding others through a similar process as part of an online service, HelpNow, supported by the Ukrainian NGO Alliance for Public Health.

"People are in such a panic," she says. "And they have no one else to ask." HelpNow has set up hubs in Poland, Germany and the Baltic states, and has helped Ukrainian refugees in 47 countries with online support, as well as in-person assistance in major refugee hubs like Warsaw. HelpNow volunteers teamed up with local NGOs to help refugees baffled by practical issues like finding translators for medical records or doctor's appointments, receiving necessary documentation, or simply reaching the nearest AIDS clinic – there are only 16 in Poland, compared to 300 in Ukraine.

HIV is little talked about in Poland, a conservative country that rejects sex education and LGBT rights. There are no prevention programmes for populations at more risk of infection, like drug users or gay men, and the disease is highly stigmatised. Only four people in Poland have ever come out publicly in the media as living with HIV.

This was a shock for Ukrainian activists like Aryabinska, who have been campaigning for HIV awareness and tolerance for decades. "I have a feeling I'm back in the 1990s, compared to Ukraine," Aryabinska said. "There are some organisations that work here, but the general population knows nothing."

There have been about 29,000 registered cases of HIV in Poland since the epidemic began in the 1980s.

There have been about 29,000 registered cases of HIV in Poland since the epidemic began in the 1980s. New recorded cases of HIV have been going up since before the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, although due to the disruption caused by the pandemic they are only now showing up in national statistics. But because no one talks about it openly, few are aware that HIV cases exist, according to NGOs like *Fundacja Edukacji Społecznej* (Foundation for Social Education), which has been working for 20 years in the sphere of HIV treatment in Warsaw. Medical assistance with

HIV in Poland is free and universally available, and Ukrainians who have started treatment in Poland say the medical staff often have a better attitude towards them than their Ukrainian counterparts. Testing, however, is limited to 28 centres for voluntary counselling and testing, and prevention is even more limited. Only five per cent of the overall national budget for HIV is for prevention services, and the vast majority of that five per cent goes to testing.

At the beginning of the full-scale invasion, *Fundacja Edukacji Społecznej* received requests for help from Ukrainian migrants already in Poland who could no longer get new stocks of ARVs, which they were used to collecting from Ukraine every three months. The NGO helped to get these people onto treatment programmes in Poland and teamed up with HelpNow volunteers to assist the flood of new refugees, often meeting them straight off the trains coming from cities under siege.

Ukraine has many women with HIV, while female and child patients are almost unknown in Poland.

"People have only one bag, they have nothing, they don't know what to do and of course at the beginning they try to find a safe space, and afterwards they ask about treatment," Magdalena Ankiersztejn-Bartczak, director of *Fundacja Edukacji Społecznej*, tells me. Initially Polish medical staff sometimes needed support too, to deal with a new contingent of patients. Ukraine, for example, has many women with HIV, while female and child patients are almost unknown in Poland.

"We are a new experience for doctors here as well. Now Polish doctors are ringing me to ask how to talk to these patients; for example, what to say to persuade them to keep coming [for treatment]," Aryabinska says.

Trauma and fear of stigmatization

The HIV treatment regimen used in EU countries also differs from that in Ukraine. Poland has passed legislation to ensure that Ukrainian refugee patients can continue to use the ARV medications they are used to without interruption, and made other adaptations such as allowing longer take-home stocks of medications and exchanging patient information with Ukrainian health facilities. Poland now provides ARV treatment for over 3,000 Ukrainians, according to the national AIDS centre.

The patients' psychological barriers to treatment can be harder to overcome. Many refugees do not want to disclose their health status, for fear of stigma, but also from a hope or perception that their situation is temporary and that they will soon return home. Struggling with depression and the loss of social structures like

family and work, they can become overwhelmed or indifferent to their health, and lapse easily from adherence to daily treatment.

According to Ankiersztejn-Bartczak, many of the Ukrainians starting treatment now in Poland are late presenters, turning to doctors when the HIV infection is already at an advanced stage and causing many health complications. Some may have been unaware of their status, but HelpNow volunteers say they are approached by refugees who admit they have not taken any treatment for months because of the disruption in their lives, or the fear that if their status is disclosed, they could for example be evicted from rented properties.

As someone who has lived openly with HIV for many years and worked on a crisis hotline in Ukraine, Aryabinska is well placed to provide support. It is an exhausting, 24-hour task, but it also helps her to deal with her own trauma connected to leaving her home.

"This work kept me sane as well, when I knew that people were in such trouble and pain, but I was able to help them," she says.

There is a widespread social stigma against HIV in Ukraine too. But there is also an extensive system of prevention, diagnosis and treatment, led by NGOs in partnership with state health services and designed to reach and support vulnerable groups. Another difference between Ukraine and Poland is Ukraine's case management approach to HIV and other socially dangerous diseases, whereby social workers assist clients not only to start and adhere to treatment for HIV, TB or hepatitis, but to resolve a range of related medical and psycho-social issues. Despite the Russian bombing and looting of healthcare facilities and infrastructure in Ukraine, health and social workers still in the country continued to support their clients who have left, sending them medications and monitoring their health from a distance.

Challenging transition

As well as visiting his clients still in the eastern Ukrainian city of Kryvyi Rih, social worker Serhiy Pidvalyuk from the NGO Kryvyi Rih Public Health Foundation is now used to parcelling up six-month supplies of ARVs and dispatching them, with an accompanying letter from the healthcare facility, to his clients in Poland, Germany and Turkey. "They are scared to reveal their status, so it's easier this way," he says.

The patients use private clinics abroad to measure their health and disease indicators, like CD4 and viral load, and send the results back to doctors in Ukraine via online messengers. After six months, Pidvalyuk encourages his clients who

are still abroad to register with healthcare systems in their new place. "We have no right to force them to do so," he adds, "but we cannot support them forever".

Though the Ukrainian case management system has been invaluable in supporting patients through a difficult transition, it has a downside. Volunteers, Ukrainian social workers and medics all say that Ukrainian refugees can be very passive when it comes to resolving issues abroad because they are used to relying on their case managers.

"Case management is a process of leading people by the hand. In some ways it is wonderful, but in other ways it's a problem," says Mariia Ralko, a volunteer with HelpNow in Poland. "Now when clients go abroad, they just sit and wait for someone to help them."

Nevertheless, other European countries could learn something from Ukraine's approach to HIV. "Maybe Ukrainians will change the medical systems in Europe," Aryabinska says. "In Poland there's no medical-social support, and people don't understand what we do. But now they have started to ask us for expertise, and compare the systems of service provision."

Meanwhile, Aryabinska has used her Ukraine experience to set up the first self-help group for HIV-positive people and members of vulnerable groups in Poland. "I really missed live meetings and the sense of community," she adds. "And people come from all over Poland, at their own expense, so I see it's not just me who needs it."

Lily Hyde is a journalist based in Ukraine. She has written for *Politico*, the *Guardian*, *Atavist* magazine, the *Times* and many other publications. Reporting for this piece took place during an assignment for the Alliance for Public Health documenting the organisation's programmes in response to the war in Ukraine.

Abortion in Poland

What will Tusk's new day for women bring?

KATIE TOTH

The new Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk has promised a liberalization of the country's abortion laws, which are some of the most restrictive on the European continent. His path is a sharp contrast to the previous government's anti-abortion crackdown. Yet, even as he commits to the issue publicly, the campaign he took to get there reveals that reproductive freedom in Poland remains an issue many lawmakers use only instrumentally.

Hot water, running over a pregnant belly, under beige and purple shower tiles. An orange cat, crawling through the litter box. Only a couple months after abortion doula Wiktoria Szymczak moved to Kraków from Warsaw in 2023, she was helping a stranger end a pregnancy in her apartment bathroom. Earlier in the day, Szymczak had got a call from a client who needed more help than anticipated, who we will call Agata to protect her privacy. Previously, Szymczak had told her how to pursue one of the few legal methods left for obtaining an abortion within the country. It is still legal to go online and order abortion pills for yourself in the mail through a dealer based outside Poland (Szymczak recommends medical nonprofits like "Women Help Women"). Agata went online and she bought the pills to end her pregnancy.

But "she miscalculated", Szymczak recalls. The pregnancy was further along than they thought and they were going to need more medication to end it. "As

an abortion doula, I obviously have the pills at home," she says. But Szymczak is also a newly-practicing lawyer, and she brings her fresh knowledge of Poland's legal landscape into her activism. So as a doula who collaborates with other abortion activists, she had a strict rule for herself and others on her team: you never give out your own abortion pills to a client in Poland. "You hold their hand or support them while they order their own." When you give the pills to someone else, you are putting unregistered drugs into Polish circulation – and that crosses a legal line. "I am always the one making sure nobody does stupid things that can get them arrested," she says.

Risks

Agata had already taken mifepristone and some misoprostol, but she needed more of the second pill. Obtaining more would take at least two more days. On the phone, Agata was a mess, erratic and "very shaky emotionally". Szymczak did not want her to wait any longer. Agata's abortion would have to happen at Szymczak's apartment, in a quiet corner of Kraków at the end of a tramline.

Women are often denied hospital abortions despite the fact that their situations meet the legal requirements.

Szymczak called a friend from the network to confirm the correct dosage, telling her to keep their lawyer's phone number on hand. Szymczak did not know Agata beyond a few chats they had online. And Agata's boyfriend had become increasingly controlling, which meant Szymczak didn't know how he would react after the abortion was done. Would he call the police?

"Don't worry," Szymczak's friend joked. "We'll print t-shirts for your court date like we did for Justyna." In March 2023, Warsaw abortion-rights activist Justyna Wydrzyńska was sentenced to eight months of community service for helping a pregnant woman get abortion pills.

The next morning, Szymczak and her partner made Agata breakfast and drove her home. "The whole time I was thinking that I might go to jail or I might get arrested," Szymczak says now. She still might, in theory. In Poland, the law that saw Wydrzyńska convicted less than a year ago remains in force. Poland has a near-total ban on abortion with exceptions if the pregnancy is the result of a criminal act (such as rape) or if the pregnant person's life is at risk.

Szymczak says she saw women denied hospital abortions, despite the fact that their situations meet the legal requirements. A "conscientious objection to abortion" law means doctors do not need to perform or refer patients for an abortion if

this contradicts their religious views. And other doctors often fear strict readings of the legal code that could penalize them if they decide too quickly to protect their patient from a dangerous pregnancy.

Szymczak is sharing her story because she is tired of waiting for something to change. "[Agata] was lucky. And I was lucky," she says. "Lucky that I had [the pills] at the time, and … lucky that I was willing to do this." She does not want luck to decide the outcome anymore.

"Women in Poland deserve to go to a doctor, say that they don't want to continue the pregnancy, and be given all of the pills that they need. If we look at other European countries, somehow it's okay for women there to be treated like humans."

Difficult history

For more than 30 years, Poland has been home to a ban on abortion with very few exceptions, leaving people like Szymczak to fill the gap. Under the conservative Law and Justice party which ruled Poland from 2015 to 2023, those restrictions were even further tightened both on paper and in practice. A 2021 court decision forbade abortion due to significant foetal abnormality, and in one high-profile case, a woman who miscarried found prosecutors for the Constitutional Tribunal going through her sewage system to find the foetus.

But over the past few months, a waterfall of changes suggests a new day in Poland may be coming for supporters of abortion rights. In his first address as prime minister in December 2023, Donald Tusk promised "a programme so that every Polish woman feels a change in the treatment of motherhood, protection of mothers and access to legal abortion." And just a day before he spoke, the European Court of Human Rights declared that the law against abortions in the case of foetal abnormalities infringed on an individual's right to privacy. Responding to the decision, Federa, the organization that fights for reproductive rights in Poland, said that it was only a first step in their work to liberalize Polish law: "We will not rest until every woman in Poland is guaranteed the right to decide about her life."

A waterfall of changes suggests a new day in Poland may be coming for supporters of abortion rights.

But getting to this point has not been easy – and many feminists say they will view these political promises with suspicion, until they see actual results. This is largely due to a long history in which abortion rights have been used as a political weapon at the expense of women and their bodies. Polish feminist, Sławomira Walczewska, traces this back to the last days of communist rule.

Photo: Lena Ivanova / Shutterstock

A protest in Wrocław in October 2020 against the anti-abortion measures forced by the then Polish government under the Law and Justice party.

Walczewska remembers a famous off-the-record human rights conference in the 1980s, where hundreds of people from around the world had gathered in Poland for workshops and panels talking about human rights. But when she went to a discussion on women's rights and abortion – when abortion rights had already faced increasing restrictions and anti-choice mobilization – the room was empty. Even the panellists decided to go elsewhere. Walczewska remembers her indignation. At the closing plenary – filled with hundreds of people – she called out the organizers, demanding that the next conference take women's issues seriously.

"I was a nobody in this space full of really great activists," she says. Some of them had gone to prison for years over their views, a badge of honour in the pro-democracy circles; she could feel herself shaking.

Walczewska remembers the applause from the audience. She also remembers the chairman's glare. "He was a first-class activist for human rights and would never say that he is misogynist. It would be too primitive for him," she says. But his face was boiling with rage. "If such beautiful people don't want to hear anything about women's rights, what about the barbarians – the people who are openly misogynist?"

The compromise

For Walczewska, this is the story of the Polish approach to women's rights over and over again: useful until they are not. By 1989, only one of the many women who had organized anti-communist newspapers and political activity, Grażyna Staniszewska, was sitting at Poland's Round Table to discuss the country's democratic reforms.

In 1989, under the last communist government, a draft bill making abortion completely illegal was presented to the legislature. However, the politicians agreed not to debate the abortion issue until after the new elections. Historian Sylwia Kuźma explains that the "Polish historiographical consensus" around the time frames this bill as a communist effort to "cause quarrel within the opposition," just as democratic institutions took their first steps. Thus, the refusal to argue the issue became a symbol of careful democratic leaders refusing to take the communist bait. However, this decision can also be read another way – setting aside a discussion that would have been relevant to the democratic experience of half the population, all in the name of something perceived to be more important.

The late Maria Janion, a leading Polish literary critic, feminist and member of the Solidarity movement who had been instrumental in bringing the new government into power, was one of the people arguing the abortion debate must be shelved for later – and, in the respected Polish daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, she remembered the resulting betrayal: "I claimed that Solidarity must first fight for the freedom and independence of the whole society and then together we can take care of women's issues. A few years later, Solidarity did take care of women's issues and we know exactly what happened, and in what manner it did so."

By 1992, under a new democratic government, women were in the streets protesting against the draft bill making abortions illegal. They collected over a million signatures which demanded the lower chamber of the Polish parliament (Sejm) put the idea to a referendum. Women knew that public opinion was on their side, and probably, leaders of the legislature did too, because the referendum never happened. Instead, legislators earned the favour of the Catholic Church with a less extreme ban, only allowing abortions in a few extreme exceptions.

These tactics crossed party lines. Months after abortion was made illegal in 1993, the parties that introduced the law lost political power, and the post-communist Democratic Left Alliance party won control. For years, that party did nothing about abortion. Then in 1997, just before new elections were due, the leadership started talking about a return of abortion rights, Walczewska remembers. "'Vote for us' … it was very clear, just manipulative." The ploy did not work. A liberal and conservative Polish Solidarity coalition government was voted in instead.

Twenty-six years later, Walczewska sees similarities between that past and the current situation. The Polish Solidarity coalition was dissolved in 2001. Two main rival parties were soon built from its ashes: the conservative Law and Justice, famously opposed to abortion rights, and the centrist Civic Platform. From 2015 to 2023 Law and Justice governed Poland and became famous for its increasing rollbacks on social issues. In 2023 a diverse coalition of parties came together and cobbled enough votes together to boot Law and Justice out of power. This win was thanks in part to the promise by the new prime minister, Donald Tusk, to reverse tightened restrictions on reproductive rights and make abortions up to 12 weeks legal in Poland – for the first time since the fall of communism. This was a pragmatic move on Tusk's part. After Law and Justice had eliminated one of the few legal exceptions for abortion in Poland – severe foetal deformity – forcing women in their second trimester to head out of the country for healthcare, the 2020 and 2021 "Black March" women's strikes in Poland had made it clear: abortion was an issue that many voters would mobilize around.

Instrumentalizing the issue

During the 2023 campaign, Tusk had called on women to vote for his party, Civic Platform, with abortion specifically in mind. Yet in November last year, when Tusk signed a deal to govern alongside more centrist and leftist parties in a new democratic coalition, abortion rights were nowhere to be seen in their first shared mandate. Journalist Anna Kowalczyk was not surprised: "Women's rights are treated very instrumentally and they are being sacrificed first when there is a need of sacrifice."

Politicos will insist that the coalition was a fragile one, and Tusk's party did not get enough votes to demand a pro-abortion turn once he took office. He had to make friends with more right-leaning agrarian and economy-focused groups, in order to keep the nationalist Law and Justice Party from taking control once again.

But a look at Tusk's earlier campaign trail tells a longer story of disregard for women's voices. At one prominent rally courting the women's vote, only one female speaker was listed – the Civic Platform's youngest candidate – and even here Tusk got her name wrong. And while ostensibly, the slightly broader Civic Coalition (which includes smaller parties that run on a shared ticket with Civic Platform) allowed its members to have diverse views on abortion rights, including anti-abortion views, one feminist was booted from the coalition for saying that in her belief, abortion should be allowed on demand. Instead, the campaign focused its energy on pushing social media videos of Donald Tusk winking and reclining on a

couch, posing as a caring grandfather or a grey-haired sex symbol. Women were voters – objects for campaigns to pursue – but they were not political subjects worth engaging in a respectful way.

To understand Poland's approach to abortion rights today one has to understand the impact of communist history on even the country's most liberal periods around the issue. In 1932 Poland became the second country after the Soviet Union to legalize abortion for extreme situations such as female health or surviving rape. After Joseph Stalin's death allowed the socialist bloc countries to turn away from his more extreme pronatalist policies, the country expanded legal abortion access to include "difficult living conditions", and deaths from abortion plummeted in Poland, from 255 cases a year to 12.

Yet, in the official discourse, this access was never framed as an individual right, explains Agata Ignaciuk, history of medicine professor at University of Grenada. Instead, "it was a healthcare procedure to solve a problem" – a problem for the family or for the common good. Ignaciuk says that in other countries at the time, feminists were arguing for abortion rights to be codified. "In Poland, it was more like, 'well, abortion should be legal, but it's a necessary evil and it is dangerous, potentially harmful, it could lead to infertility.' Even at its most accessible," she explains.

During the communist period, a woman's access to abortion was never framed as an individual right.

One 1988 survey found that even while 0.6 per cent of women approved of abortion morally, 37 per cent said they would have an abortion if they did not want a child. Looking at the numbers, Małgorzata Fuszara in the journal *Signs* noted that one must not assume "that women who have abortions approve of them or believe they are not sinning."

In Ignaciuk's research, she found that magazines and medical literature rarely swayed from the "fixed framing" of abortion as best done under legal conditions, but still dangerous and ideally avoided – a last resort. The goal with legal abortion was to prevent death, not provide female autonomy. She says this longstanding perception made it difficult for abortion advocates to stand up for abortion rights during the fall of communism, when the draft bill making most abortions illegal came into play. "It has an impact on how there is this … difficulty to develop this idea that abortion is a woman's right, is a human right," she says. "And make it resonate with the broader society."

The question remains: what to do about this now. Szymczak, the abortion doula, says that after decades of restrictions on abortion, Polish healthcare workers are sometimes stuck in the past. In her doula practice she hears from women who go to hospital after a miscarriage or problems with a pharmacological abortion. Too

often, she says, they're subjected to hospital procedures that feel punitive and, when not medically indicated, can add needless risk. Legal changes will need to be followed by support for doctors, like new equipment and wider training on the latest practices.

Before that point, another question is how to get there. In the major cities that are his stronghold, the prime minister is under immense social pressure to implement reforms. The Sejm's YouTube channel now has 650,000 subscribers and many Poles watch the proceedings closely. In January, Tusk told the country's top television stations he would put forward a bill legalizing abortion for the first 12 weeks "with some conditions". More conservative-leaning politicians in his coalition have argued instead for a return to the so-called 1993 compromise, or for the referendum that feminists fought for three decades ago. Szymczak does not want to see either of these alternatives. She says public opinion is not always reflected in a referendum because "people on the 'winning' side will often stay home".

Besides, she argues, the time is over for gathering public opinion on a pregnant person's individual decisions. For many women, technological and social shifts have made abortion even more personal than it has always been. It is often not even a "decision between a woman and her doctor" anymore, as western feminists used to say in the 1990s. Now it is possible with an internet connection and a mailing address, to do this completely on your own. Still, people like Szymczak do not want women to feel alone doing it. NE

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Estonia aims to help Europe's rare earth supply chain

ISABELLE DE POMMEREAU

Once a Soviet-era uranium processing plant, the Silmet factory in Sillamäe, Estonia, is now Europe's leading processor of rare earths. Silmet's mother company, Toronto-headquartered Neo Preformance Materials, aims to establish the continent's first manufacturer of high performance magnets for European consumers. These "permanent magnets" have the potential to make a huge impact in the European electric car and offshore wind-turbine industries, which up until now were exclusively dependent on supplies from an increasingly less reliable source – China.

It was during the COVID-19 pandemic, when China's borders temporarily closed, that something clicked in Raivo Vasnu's mind. Silmet, the factory he heads in Sillamäe, Estonia is a former Soviet uranium-processing facility in Europe's north-easternmost tip near the Russian border. It is also Europe's largest processor of rare earths, a crucial category of elements necessary for a wide range of technologies, including electric cars and wind turbine technologies. Where Cold War-era engineers once enriched uranium to feed the Soviet regime's nuclear arsenal, Vasnu's engineers today perform a no-less difficult, and strategic, task: that of chemically separating rare earths into oxides used in green technologies. China controls 85 per cent of rare earth processing and 92 per cent of rare earth magnet production.

(and dominates 90 per cent of the world's processed rare earths). Rare earths are considered critical materials.

Silmet's oxides are used to make catalytic converters in Europe and some of its oxides travel to Thailand to be turned into magnets for European customers, including makers of water circulation pumps. Meanwhile, most European electric cars are powered with Chinese magnets. After the COVID-19 pandemic, customers became increasingly concerned about supply chain resiliency and demanded that rare earth permanent magnets be made closer to them, in Europe.

"With COVID-19, some customers thought that this supply chain will not survive if the country starts to close borders, due to [the pandemic] and sanctions," Vasnu says from his office in the modern part of the old Soviet-era uranium plant, otherwise a sprawling maze of blackening red brick facades, metal pipes and old chimneys. Outside, grey smoke billows over the Baltic Sea.

This industrial port sits in the heart of Estonia's oil shale sector, which has heated and lit Estonia's homes for many decades but which the current government under Kaja Kallas has vowed to end by 2040 to meet EU emission-reduction targets. "They don't have anything against China but they are just afraid of those long supply chains," he adds. "Today we are living in a world of all kinds of sanctions. That is why they prefer to have material which is more or less risk-free for them."

A step for Europe, a boost for a fragile community

Now, three years later, with the war in Ukraine making both industry and governments realize the risks associated with Europe's dependence on concentrated supply chains from single jurisdictions – whether natural gas from Russia, or rare earths from China – Silmet's Toronto-based mother company Neo Performance Materials has taken a step toward strengthening the continent's supply chain of rare earths. This summer, it broke ground for a new factory in Narva, the Estonian city close to the Russian border some 20 minutes from Sillamäe that will use the rare earth oxides produced in its Silmet factory to make high performance, or "permanent" magnets European manufacturers of electric car motors and offshore wind turbines are increasingly scrambling to get their hands on. Rahim Suleman, the CEO and President of Neo Performance Materials, describes it as "the first rare earth magnet facility outside of China built at the technical and ESG (Environmental, Social and Governnance) specifications of European automotive and wind turbine industries". Environmental, social and governance (ESG) is a framework used to assess an organization's business practices and performance on various sustainability and ethical issues.

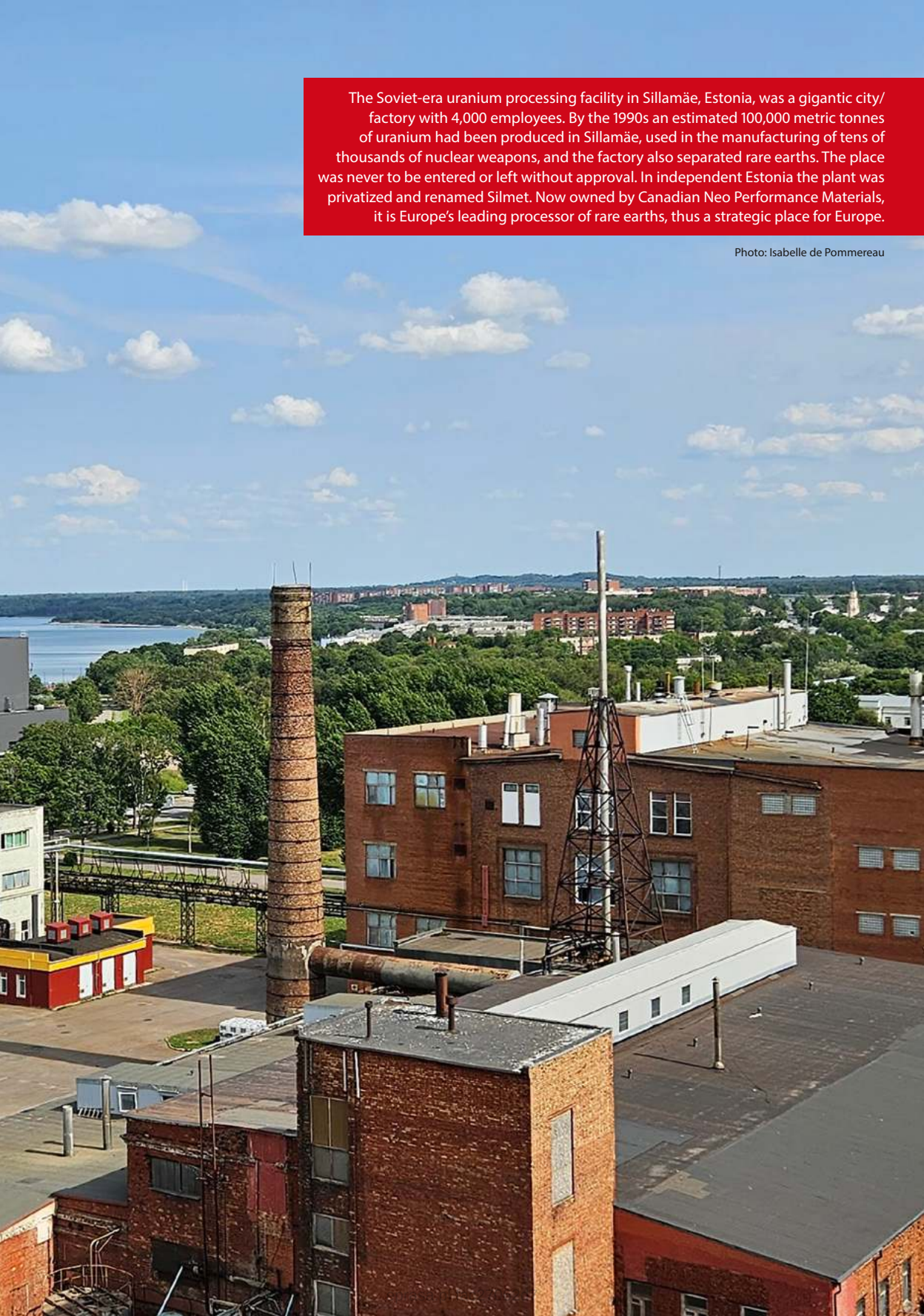
Silmet, a former Soviet-era uranium-processing plant, was modernized and downsized after Estonia regained its independence. Modern structures have been built, but many old ones still stand, so that, from the outside, it remains a sprawling maze of blackening red brick facades, metal pipes and old chimneys.

Photo: Isabelle de Pommereau


RAAMAT

Sillamäe, a largely Russian-speaking town of some 14,000 people in Estonia's east, on the Gulf of Finland, was a secret, off-limits place. Built in Stalinist architecture, it was designed to attract and please the USSR's best brains.

Photo: Isabelle de Pommereau



The Soviet-era uranium processing facility in Sillamäe, Estonia, was a gigantic city/factory with 4,000 employees. By the 1990s an estimated 100,000 metric tonnes of uranium had been produced in Sillamäe, used in the manufacturing of tens of thousands of nuclear weapons, and the factory also separated rare earths. The place was never to be entered or left without approval. In independent Estonia the plant was privatized and renamed Silmet. Now owned by Canadian Neo Performance Materials, it is Europe's leading processor of rare earths, thus a strategic place for Europe.

Photo: Isabelle de Pommereau

View from the roof of Silmet on the "tailing pond" which contains more than 10 million tonnes of radioactive material linked to Silmet's soviet-era activities and is now a gigantic green hill.

Photo: Isabelle de Pommereau

A Soviet-era control room from Kombinat number 7, which was one of the code names given to the top-secret uranium-processing city-factory in Sillamäe. The room is no longer used.

Photo: Isabelle de Pommereau

Funded with close to 19 million euros from the European Union, the 100-million-euro project could turn this fragile industrial corner into a key player in Europe's effort to regain its grip over critical materials essential to green transition technologies. It also represents "a leap for Estonia and a stride for Europe," as EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said this past summer. "The magnets that will be produced here are indispensable to growth and innovation in the sectors of electronic mobility, wind energy, and microelectronics," she added, speaking via video at the new plant's ground-breaking ceremony on June 29th. More than 140 people came to Narva to attend the ceremony, from Estonian ministers to foreign diplomats, scientists to researchers and representatives of car part producers such as Germany-based Schaeffler and the French magnet recycling start-up Carester. "They promise lighter batteries, less consumption of critical material and higher energy efficiency."

Estonia was the first EU country to benefit from the continent's 17.5 billion euro "Just Transition" fund, set up in 2021.

Von der Leyen's address on that June day was doubly symbolic. With the new magnet plant, she said, Estonia was also the first EU country to benefit from the continent's 17.5 billion-euro "Just Transition" fund, set up in 2021 to help EU regions with high-emission industries offset the socio-economic challenges of transitioning to cleaner forms of energy. This region, called Ida-Virumaa, is on the eve of one of its most painful transitions since regaining its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. This involves phasing out oil shale, an industry that has given this nation of 1.3 million a degree of energy independence, and is the lifeblood of a region that has remained Russian speaking since the Soviet era, but is highly polluting. The Soviet regime imported workers from around the USSR to build and maintain the huge oil shale power plants.

How to gradually end the industry while keeping the stability of the region has been a thorn in the country's side for a long time. "While this bolsters European resilience and security of supply, it primarily benefits the local people," von der Leyen said, referring to the new Narva magnet plant.

European effort

The new magnet plant "is essential for Europe … because access to these strategic raw materials has become a very important security issue we need to react to," says Elvire Fabry, an analyst on energy policies at the Paris-based Jacques Delors Institute, a think tank which authored the report titled "The looming war for minerals".

"We can't afford to be in a situation where we don't have enough supplies," she adds, evoking hidden threats by Beijing. Of course, China blocked the export of rare earths in 2011 over a dispute regarding Japan's detention of a Chinese fishing trawler captain. Indeed, the EU's financial support of the new Narva plant fits into a broader goal of regaining control over the production, exploitation and recycling of critical materials amid growing fears that China's control of the market could jeopardize western strategic interests.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the European commissioner for the internal market, Thierry Breton, warned about the potential risks of Europe's over-reliance on China for rare earth elements and said that the supply of raw materials has become a "real geopolitical tool". "We must avoid becoming dependent again, as we did with oil and gas," von der Leyen added not long ago.

And with its critical raw material acts voted on in December, the European Parliament says it wants to make sure that by 2030 it does not rely on a single country for more than 65 percent of its supply of any strategic raw material.

Gareth Hatch, a rare earth specialist with the UK-based Strategic Materials Advisory, who has followed Silmet's effort to make profit out of the rare earth business since the end of the Soviet era, says that the construction of the new magnet plant "is a long time coming."

"From a diversification point of view, it's important because it provides European users of permanent magnets a regional source of magnets that ultimately won't rely fully on China for supply," says Hatch, who is also advisory board chair of the Rare Earth Industry Association. "There is a recognition in the EU just as there is in the US that having the manufacturing of magnets in your region is potentially strategically important, and if you believe that you are probably going to support that and that is what the EU has said it would do."

Little known, but key

Not as widely known as other critical elements such as lithium and cobalt, rare earths, a family of 17 minerals with exotic names such as dysprosium and gadolinium are, in fact, omnipresent, albeit in tiny portions, on the earth's crust. Mixed together with other elements they are difficult to chemically separate out from one another and that is what makes them "rare". Since uranium mining during the Cold War made their values more apparent, rare earths have been used in an increasing array of applications in civilian and military technologies, from high-efficiency light bulbs to smartphones to smart bombs. In the case of motor applications, rare earths are used to make permanent magnets that make the motor most

energy efficient. With car makers scrambling to switch from internal combustion to electric engines and turbine makers to build ever more efficient machines, demand has been soaring.

Some among those 17 rare elements – praseodymium and neodymium, in particular – are increasingly coveted. They possess spectacular magnetic properties which electric car and off-shore wind turbine makers have craved. One to two kilogrammes of these magnets used in the motor can unlock the energy savings that help reduce the size of an electric vehicle's battery by 30 per cent, experts say.

"You get the most magnetic power for a unit mass or volume from those materials, so it is important that there are ways to produce them," says Hatch. Motors are among the most expensive components of electric cars.

Demand for those rare earths is expected to double between 2020 and 2030 as neodymium magnets are seen as the most efficient way to run electric cars and generate power from wind turbines. However, China dominates the supply, according to a study by the BRGM, France's public institution for earth science applications for the management of surface and sub-surface resources.

Those magnets are "the linchpin of the Green Transition … they are to motors what lithium and cobalt are to batteries," says Rahim Suleman, speaking of the magnets his company will manufacture in Narva starting in 2025. Initially, Neo Performance Materials envisions producing 1,500 tonnes of magnet blocks a year and equipping 1.5 million electric cars in Europe. It also plans to do research and development, recycle old magnets and create hundreds of new high skilled jobs in the region.

With permanent magnets "you make an electric vehicle more affordable for the consumer, and you also save on the need for more mining, more use of other critical raw materials, such as lithium, nickel, cobalt, magnesium, granite, which are used in the battery, the most expensive component of an EV,"" says Vasileios Tsianos, director of corporate development of Neo Performrance Materials and Board Member of the Rare Earth Industry Association. "The most optimal way to reduce our energy consumption without reducing our standard of life in modern societies is by increasing the efficiency of motors," he says. "And that's what permanent magnets do."

A long history with rare earth

Sillamäe's ties with uranium, and the rare earths, date back to the Second World War. The US bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 unleashed an arms race. After "freeing" Estonia from Nazi Germany, the occupying Soviet regime discov-

ered that "dictyonema" – a sort of oil shale found in Estonia's north-east along the Gulf of Finland – contains traces of uranium. It turned the tranquil coastal village of Sillamäggi into a secret military complex. Off limits and top secret, the place, referred to by code names such as *Kombinat 7*, became the USSR's third largest producer of uranium, used in tens of thousands of nuclear weapons. In the late 1980s the regime ventured into rare earth separation, which requires the same equipment and chemistry know-how as processing uranium, importing the ore by train from Russia's Kola Peninsula.

It was not until the end of the Soviet Union that the world discovered the environmental legacy of Silmet's activity. Some 14 tonnes of radioactive waste had accumulated only metres from the Baltic Sea. It took 28 million euros and 11 years for international experts to contain, thus help make the area safe. In independent Estonia, the uranium-related activities stopped, but rare earth processing continued, in modernized facilities and with only 400 workers, down from 4,000 in Soviet times.

It was after the fall of the USSR that the world discovered the environmental legacy of Silmet's activity.

Even if the factory produces only 3,000 tonnes of rare earth oxides annually – roughly two per cent of the global production dominated by China, "the capacity of the Silmet facility has been long standing and is well known in the industry," says Hatch, the rare earth expert. Silmet uses rare earth imported from the United States, Vietnam and the Kola Peninsula (in Russia).

"The Silmet facility was really the only commercial-scale producer of separated rare earth in Europe, and one of the very few outside of China," Hatch adds. And that makes Sillamäe a strategic asset not only for Estonia but also for the EU. Now, with a new magnet plant in Europe, "Estonia is officially the most strategic jurisdiction not only in Europe but also in the western world for the rare earth supply chain," says Neo's CEO Rahim Suleman.

Estonia was the "obvious" choice for the plant, Neo's CEO argues. He cites a "synergy" of having Europe's largest rare earth separation business at Silmet with Neo's long experience with magnet production through its Magnequench divisions, which run several magnet plants in China, Thailand and the United Kingdom. He says that the support from Estonian and European officials played a key role. The permit-issuing process from the Estonian local community and governments was unusually fast. Neo Performance Materials is looking into mining its own ore in Greenland, in addition to any other mines that other developers bring online globally, company officials say. Its hope is to create Europe's first mines-to-magnets supply chain for rare earths.

Long-awaited development

The region around Narva – called Ida-Virumaa – is not used to the attention, and the investment was greeted as a "positive signal to investors that Europe is interested in this dead end of the EU," says Sergey Stepanov, a long-time journalist for the region's Russian and Estonian-speaking public print and television media. "At long last it's going to bring people from other parts of Estonia, and Europe [to this region]. The government has been saying "Ida-Virumaa is important, we need to invest in it" for the last 30 years, but they have taken only small steps, not huge leaps to improve."

A major industrial hub in Soviet times with huge textile, oil shale and uranium industries fed by Russian-speaking workers, the region has struggled since Estonia regained independence. Simmering tensions between Estonian and Russian-speaking inhabitants have occasionally flared up. For decades the region was sometimes seen as a place apart – a Russian enclave closer to St Petersburg, across the Narva river, than to the Estonian capital, Tallinn.

Yet the support on the part of regional, Estonian and European leaders "gives a clear signal to shareholders and investors that in this part of Europe the government is interested in investing in new jobs, and this bureaucracy can be handled once the government has decided that this is the place," says Raivo Vasnu, head of the Silmet plant, adding that "it is not just words, it's also financial help."

"In Soviet times, the Sillamäe plant was one of three uranium-enrichment facilities in the Soviet Union. There was one in Kazakhstan and another one in Siberia," Vasnu points out. But between going to Siberia in the middle of nowhere or to Kazakhstan in the middle of the desert, if they could choose, the best brains opted for the Sillamäe seaside.

"That is why we had the sort of 'Silicon Valley' of this industry," Vasnu says. "We are trying to keep this tradition." EE

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Breathing room

Poland's minority communities after the elections

DANIEL JAROSAK

For years, minority groups in Poland have been feeling pressure both from the government and society at large. Now with a new governing coalition, there appears to be potential breathing room for many of Poland's minorities. However, that does not mean that the road ahead is clear or easily navigable.

Poland is often described as a homogenous state – white, Catholic and ethnically Polish. The numbers, at face value, support this idea. This apparent homogeneity is reinforced by the media. Often as a throwaway line when describing Poland's demographics, or, for more insidious motivations, by those on the far right. This characterization, however, grossly simplifies the story of Poland and its citizenry. Historically, both the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Second Polish Republic were heterogeneous states comprising a number of peoples, religions and languages. Poles, Ukrainians, Jews, Germans, Belarusians and more all inhabited lands that fell under Polish authority. It was the Holocaust and the population transfers conducted by the Soviet Union that turned this multi-ethnic land into a homogenous state.

This narrative masks the reality on the ground. While not nearly as diverse as it once was, Poland is still home to numerous ethnic groups, though some are yet to be fully recognized. It is important to understand that these groups have concerns, desires and wishes that do not necessarily reflect those of the majority. Two

of those groups are the Roma and German minorities. Both groups have faced challenges over the years, especially under the government of Law and Justice (PiS). Under PiS, minority groups and their concerns were either ignored or exploited for political gain. It is vital that these groups are not disregarded and that their identities are both maintained and promoted.

Long neglected

As of 2021, the official number of Roma in Poland is 13,303. However, seeing that they have been historically undercounted, it is probably many times higher. Compared to Poland's neighbours, Ukraine, Romania, Czechia and Slovakia, the Roma population in Poland is relatively small. Unfortunately, this does not equate to less discrimination and hardships. The Roma minority saw their concerns outright ignored in the face of growing physical and rhetorical threats. "We didn't get many chances to get financial support … we weren't invited to discussions concerning our community," claims Joanna Talewicz of the Roma organization *Funducja w Stronę Dialogu*. She further decried how two bomb threats were made against the organization's headquarters.

For her, this compounded the discrimination and abuse that Roma have faced in Poland for years. The idea that Roma children are stupid, the deprivation, lack of services and hate speech are all common cudgels used against the Roma population. The online Polish dictionary (PWN) still describes a Roma (*Cygan*) as a vagabond, lying, dark-haired man. Talewicz lamented how, "it is hard to feel pride knowing that you come from a group that is ridiculed and humiliated," when discussing Roma youth. She stated that this reflects years of government failures, not only by PiS, but also the previously more liberal governments.

The German minority, meanwhile, has experienced an especially public form of pressure. Leading up to the 2023 parliamentary elections, PiS used the German minority and the German state as a scapegoat to whip up their base. Talks of the opposition collaborating with the German government, anti-German rhetoric and the decrease in German-language learning all were utilized in the run-up to the election. As Maria Smarzoch of the NGO *Verband der deutschen sozial-kulturellen Gesellschaften in Polen* (VdG) tells me, "Statements by the United Right (*Zjednoczona Prawica*) politicians in recent years have often pointed to the Germans as the culprits behind many of the current problems in Poland and Europe." This is a common tactic of PiS and its partners to rally their base.

The most salient issue for the VdG was the reduction of language learning for German children living in Poland. In 2022 the government cut the budget for Ger-

man classes from three hours per week to just one when it presented its national budget. As part of the assault on Germans and Germany, PiS education minister, Przemysław Czarnek, wrote on Twitter, "If spending 120 million zloty per year on German classes for native speakers is discrimination what would you call the zero euros the government of the Federal Republic of Germany spends on Polish heritage language classes for Poles in Germany?" This, of course, ignores the fact that the federal government in Germany is not responsible for these programmes, rather the individual states of Germany take responsibility.

Cautiously optimistic

The effects of this discrimination are readily apparent. In the 2021 census, the number of Germans in Poland slightly dropped when compared to the 2011 census. According to VdG President Rafał Bartek, this is attributable to the policies and attitudes of the previous government. "The lower number of people declaring in the census seems to be due to the political atmosphere in Poland … telephone questionnaires also didn't exactly give callers the comfort to speak freely and declare other than Polish affiliation."

The promise of a new governing coalition has brought a sense of optimism. "There are people in the government who are close to social and minority issues," states Talewicz. She further hopes that members of the Roma community will be represented at the local levels of governance and that the government will address the poorest Roma living in Koszary and Maszkowice.

Education remains one of the major keys to improving the situation of minorities in Poland.

Smarzoch was equally upbeat in welcoming the new administration. "The parties that won the elections promised a return to the rule of law and democratic values. This seems almost a guarantee that discrimination against the children of the German minority will soon end." She noted that all of the incoming parties raised the issue of rights for the German minority, especially the Third Way (*Trzecia Droga*).

Both representatives were clear that education was the one of the major keys to improving the situation of both minorities. Talewicz is adamant about the importance of special assistants for Roma in Polish schools. "[The] Roma assistants working in schools to support parents and teachers … need support and a systemic programme to strengthen and increase their competence." Meanwhile, Smarzoch notes that "the German minority is primarily concerned about government support for education."

This sense of optimism is well founded, yet the path forward is not simple. For one, the current government must devote a large amount of time and effort in repairing the damage done by the former administration. Furthermore, the country is facing numerous internal and international challenges. The liquidation of the state media, the war in Ukraine and inflation are just some of the issues the government must tackle. It would be easy to see the government letting the issue of minority rights slip through the cracks. Talewicz alludes to these concerns, "let's hope … that our issues will [not be] marginalized [and] drowned in the thicket of other political challenges."

Key component

Another major issue is how challenging it is to change attitudes and eliminate long-held biases. Once stereotypes and animosity towards a group are developed and passed down generations, it is quite difficult to force people to develop a new perspective. That is to say nothing of reversing established bureaucratic obstacles and barriers. While this is more relevant to the Roma minority as their discrimination has been occurring for far longer, the attacks on the German minority were quite fierce, if shorter lived.

Nevertheless, the protection and promotion of minority rights in Poland should be important for the incoming government. On a practical level, the legal and social protection of minorities will yield economic benefits. In the case of the Roma, ensuring that they are able to learn, work and live without the threat of violence or discrimination will give the republic thousands of capable and eager citizens. In the case of the Germans, a Poland willing to explicitly promote their safety will convince Germans from around the world to invest and live in the country.

There is also the subjective benefit of supporting and protecting the minority populations of Poland. Many of these groups have resided in the country for generations, have contributed to Poland's history and will contribute to it in the future. As the Polish composer Henryk Górecki once said, "When you look at the history of Poland, it is precisely the multiculturalism, the presence of the so-called minorities, that made Poland what it was. The cultural wealth, the diversity mixed and created a new entity." EE

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A writer and war

Karahasan, the rebel

KRZYSZTOF CZYŻEWSKI

Dževad Karahazan's rebellion was the result of his refusal to live imprisoned in a world of absolute truths, which are fed on the fear of others. He was not an idealist. He experienced real evil. He chose the life of a writer who diligently collected the remains of the wisdom of bridge builders.

When I learnt about the passing of the Bosnian writer, essayist and philosopher Dževad Karahasan, I could immediately feel the taste and smell of the Bosnian meat stew *dagara*. In our lives there are meetings that leave permanent marks on us. Regardless of when and where they take place, they come back to us as if they were real again.

I was Karahasan's neighbour for half a year. We both resided in the famous clock tower (*Uhrturm*) at the Castle Mountain, which is now a public park, in Graz, Austria. At this place the city of Graz offers literary residencies to writers and writers in exile. There, we could also smell the *dagara* that one of our neighbours, Mrs Šarić, was cooking. Šarić's husband was a former prisoner of the Serbian concentration camp in Omarska. His look was that of a man who had gone silent forever. Karahasan could yet read from his eyes and write. He became the voice of the pain-torn and misunderstood Bosnia.

Dark and bright at the same time

Šarić's silence would be broken, even by the strong taste of coffee that Karahasan was brewing in his *cezve*, a small copper pot he had brought from Sarajevo.

Thinking about this coffee I can still taste its bitterness, perfectly balanced by the sweetness of the Turkish delight that we would place on our tongues when taking our first sip and which would actually burn our mouths. When consumed separately, these two are actually difficult to digest. They are extreme in their distinctiveness, just like everything in Bosnia and also in the whole Karahasan family. When describing his parents, Dževad would say that his father was a "religious communist", while his mother a devout Muslim. His own spiritual development was influenced by the Franciscan order from Duvno, his hometown, now called Tomislavgrad. Bosnian coffee matched the tone of our conversations, which were dark and bright at the same time. They were flavoured with both humour and bitterness.

During our residencies, the Yugoslav Wars were still ongoing and so was the siege of Sarajevo. I came to Graz straight from Mostar, Tuzla and other cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina that I had visited together with Poland's former prime minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki. At that time, Mazowiecki was the Special Rapporteur for the UN Commission on Human Rights. He was commissioned to prepare a report on evidence of ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia.

When I had shared my testimonies of Serbian crimes, Karahasan responded to me with a story about a Serbian woman who lost her life after having offered shelter to Muslims. It was his wife's mother. Dževad left Sarajevo in February 1993, almost a year after the shooting of Suada Dilberović and Olga Sučić, the first two victims of the Bosnian Serbs' Democratic Party militia. Their murder was later recognized as the beginning of the genocidal siege of the city. A few months later, Dževad was joined in exile by his wife.

Introduction to Floating tells the story of Peter Hurd, a specialist in ancient literature and mythology.

Karahazan needed a long time to write novels. It was as if he was waiting for his protagonists to leave him and start lives all on their own. He started writing his last novel, *Introduction to Floating* (*Uvod u lebdenje*), back in 1998, only to later shuffle its manuscript in the drawers of his desk. Three years ago, Karahazan was diagnosed with cancer. It seemed that he beat the beast after intense chemotherapy. A sudden wave of strength and close contact with death, which he had befriended a long time ago, allowed him to finish the novel before the first symptoms of the illness returned.

Introduction to Floating tells the story of Peter Hurd, a specialist in ancient literature and mythology, who had come to present a lecture in Sarajevo before the outbreak of the war. There his drama started. It took the form of a sudden, unexpected and counterintuitive decision to follow his internal voice and stay in war-torn Bosnia. He did this despite having had his return ticket already purchased, despite a life in peace and comfort being available to him.

It would seem that the experience of love and suffering somewhere else can make us who we are: "I would never trade with anyone in the world," says beautiful Aida in another Karahazan book titled *Sarajevo, Exodus of a City*. "Trust me, I would not trade with any of these people."

"These people" included, among others, an American who in a conversation with Dževad and Aida could not stop being surprised that "we were not going to agree with the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina, if this was the condition for peace." He could not overcome his surprise, not noticing that his own hiding place when the Serbs were shelling the city was Dževad's basement in Marindvor, a neighbourhood in Sarajevo where only one out of ten married couples was of the same nationality. "I realized this just now, at this moment," Dževad added to make us understand that before the war that nobody bothered with ethnic issues. To stay in a country at war is what Ukrainians today express with the words *"Я тут. Ми тут"* (I am here. We are here).

Unlocking the mystery

Karahasan's protagonists experience war not only because – like Peter Hurd – they renounce their tickets to paradise at the very last moment. They decide to go to war, equally unexpectedly, thereby causing distress to their loved ones who earlier thought of them as pacifists. Additionally, their wills include a mystery that will disturb their children and grandchildren. One of these characters was Max Löwenfeld from Karahasan's short story *Letters from 1993*. Max was a young doctor who joined a Bosnian regiment during the First World War to improve his medical knowledge and skills. Similar decisions were made by Joseph Roth and Joseph Wittlin, two writers who studied in Vienna and who, despite being pacifists, joined the same Austrian army and went to the frontline. In 1920 they all moved to Paris. In France's capital Max made a fortune and a name for himself and even built a wonderful family. He left it all behind in 1937 and moved to Spain, where he joined the International Brigades of the republican army. In a year he was among the fallen. His wife wanted to believe that he joined the army driven by his medical mission. This conviction was not shared by other members of his family, who knew his personality quite well.

Karahasan's protagonists' choice to go war remains a mystery that will disturb their children and grandchildren.

One of the leads to solving such a mystery can be found in Karahasan's *Letters from 1993*. It is to be found in a letter penned by Moritz, Max's grandson who

could not come to terms with the alienation of his father, who as a result of the Second World War, a tragedy that his grandfather wanted to prevent, became a Jew. This was despite the fact that only a few generations prior his family had adopted Christianity. "He had to understand that while it remains unclear what a Christian looks like, it is very clear what a Jew looks like; matter-of-factly an average Jew looks exactly like him."

When I am re-reading these letters today, I feel the bittersweet taste of Dževad's coffee. Moritz's grandfather Max indeed left Bosnia. He was convinced that it was impossible to live in a place with such strong cultural divisions and people who were only encouraging them. However, his own son, who was born and lived in Paris, where life was meant to be easier and more beautiful, also discovered the terrors of his times. He was not allowed to be like others and was humiliated by the need to hide from other "more real" Christians. As a result, he discovered that under the slogan of "us" is a hidden layer of "others" who are persecuted. Moritz also remembered that at the time of the Algerian War his father was calling the French authorities as "them", while calling the Algerians "us".

Hatred's hideous power

Karahasan's short story is like an identity "palimpsest" of his protagonists. It takes us to the depth of the dramatic experiences of the people who live in borderlands, and which take place in the face of subsequent wars. In his *Reports from the Dark World*, we can read another letter, this time one that Moritz found in his home archives. His grandfather wrote it in German to his old friend from Sarajevo. The letter was penned shortly before Max's departure to Spain. For me, this piece is one of the most touching out of all of Karahasan's writings. It echoes some of the conversations we had together during his stay with us in Sejny (in northern Poland) and when I visited him in Sarajevo. In these talks, Dževad was constantly referring to Ivo Andrić's *Letter from 1920*. Written soon after the Second World War, this short story depicts the world's darker side, one which is ruled by hatred and fear. And because the latter is here seen as the consequence of a lack of confidence and knowledge, the truth about what is evil in human beings is hidden in hatred. The heart of the dark side of the world can indeed be found in Bosnia.

Karahasan knew the whole of *Letter from 1920* by heart. He was reading this text as if Andrić (who, matter-of-factly also lived and worked in Graz) wrote it for him and sent it to his residence in Graz, addressing it to a "refugee" from Bosnia. He could feel that in this text there was something extremely poignant, something that we are too fearful to utter and put into words. At the same time, this something is

not the full truth, not about Bosnia or the world. Andrić was correct in recognising that hatred's hideous power comes from it being transparent to those who bear it or from them repressing it from their consciousness. That is why hatred also needs to be brought into the light and addressed in a way a doctor addresses an illness.

Andrić made hatred eternal by linking it with borders and darkness, which irreversibly are part of a human condition. This fatalism of the old master yet generated a need for rebellion in Karahasan. He felt that he had to respond to Andrić's text and thereby enter into a dispute about the essence of the world, the meaning of literature, about who is who and what is "the fight" all about. Responding to the *Letter from 1920* took him the rest of his life. Following Andrić's footsteps he entered into its darkness. However, his interpretation of it was different.

Karahasan's collection of short stories, *Letters from 1993*, was an intentional continuation of the correspondence which originated in Andrić's short story. Yet, his Max Löwenfeld was 17 years older. He had already lived in an Italy that was then celebrating its unification, as well as in France which had been united for long enough that nobody questioned it. He admitted to his old friend from Bosnia that these experiences did not give him a single argument for the superiority of uniformity over diversity. When wondering what would happen to his neighbours in Paris, who also all live in different worlds, he concluded: "It would only blur differences between us, our awareness of these differences and our self-awareness, as it is the differences between our private calendars that make me a doctor, my patient a future corpse and his son joy to the eyes."

Max's escape from Bosnia ended in Spain, in a hospital bombed by fascists. If it was an escape from hatred, it was in vain. A high price for the value of uniformity was also paid by his son who lived in occupied France during the Second World War. As important as all these are they are not enough to face the fatalism of Andrić's story, one that hangs over Bosnia, Karahasan and all the people who stayed in a war-affected country or have visited such a place.

In a letter from 1937, Max also did not give any final answers. By then he had been enriched by the experiences that allowed him to go beyond the uniformity versus diversity debate. This led him to the conclusion that he was not wrong in noticing the potential for hatred in Bosnia's nourishing of differences, but also admitted "that it was not enough of a reason to give up on the city and leave it. Real care for diversity means getting interested in one another and becoming important to one another". Max admitted that escape from Bosnia had an impact on his decision to join the International Brigades in Spain. His openness in admitting that there are no answers to all questions and problems was something that Karahasan shared. That is why despite visible traces of the search to find answers to Andrić's *Letter from 1920*, which we can see in many of Karahasan's texts, they never in-

clude the author's temptation to give superiority to his own views. Instead, there are more open questions and the reader is encouraged to continue the journey.

Temptation to escape

When finishing his *Reports from the Dark World*, Karahasan asks a question about whether it is possible to understand the fate that binds a man with the place and the people who live in that place, just like his fate bound him with Bosnia: "I don't know and I will probably never know. I can only secretly hope that we will be able to understand or sense at least some truth."

The same can be said about Karahasan's escape from Bosnia. Evidently, he never left it. He lived in Graz and Sarajevo at the same time. The problem lied in something else: it was his temptation to escape from the world of darkness. He continues to be haunted by the question of why he could not mentally leave Bosnia and was constantly writing about it. Why, as the opponent of the war, could he not turn his back on his homeland and enjoy peace elsewhere?

To better understand Karahasan, it is wise to analyze the moment when Max Löwenfeld decided to leave Bosnia. Specifically, what Moritz remembered from the story about his grandfather and his escape from the world where people guard their differences so jealously that an "unexperienced eye may notice mutual hatred in them". The point here is not the mutual hatred but the "inexperienced eye", which allows us to see this hatred in other people. It means we find hatred where it is not yet to be found. Just like there does not need to be hatred in places where life is full of tensions, conflicts, contradictions, burning passions and borders, which are protected as if they were something sacred.

Yet, unable to tame these discrepancies, feeling uprooted from the traditions that can cultivate them and see beauty in them, we start to fear them. We start to distance ourselves from them and let hatred take the lead. In this case, hatred is not the essence of the world but a reflection of our worldview. Human pessimism can easily be fed here. Thankfully, we are not doomed to live in hatred and we can still do something. For example, we can change what we see with our eyes.

Karahasan believed that our eyes and perception can be made sharper by the differences which exist between us and the darkness which we need to get through. Hence, it is best to stay in the place from which fear and hatred would like to push us out and take complete control over us. Our recognition of hatred and bringing it into the daylight only makes it weaker.

Hatred wants to be invisible and it manages to be so when we see it only in others. It also succeeds when we blur borderlines, especially those that mark out

oppressors from the victims. Good from evil. Our morality is born from differences. By blurring them we stop knowing who we are. Not only with regards to our gender or national identity but our morality. In this way, the border is the voice of our conscience. And that is why we are the people of the borderland. We see its overcoming but never blur it.

Wars, which make the enemy more recognisable, also make the borders of identity stronger. As a result, winners can draw political maps as they wish, taking control of the borders that had been fought over and gained with blood, which only reinforces them. A dictator who gains and keeps power as a result of war does not need to send people to prison or remote labour camps. It is enough that he forces us to put on the lenses of relativism. We could even help him achieve that. It does not matter that our understanding of moral relativism will be different than his and that unlike him we have our own morality. What matters is that the war that he had started takes control of our relativism and our ability to see borders.

From indifference to evil

War, together with the immense suffering that it brings on, can indeed make people insensitive to physical pain and mental suffering. This happened to Max Löwenfeld during the First World War. He had become indifferent to good and evil before he noticed that hatred was at the foundation of the multicultural Sarajevo and before he decided to escape from Bosnia. This huge change in Max's personality was noticed by his old friend, the narrator in Andrić's story. They knew each other from middle school in Sarajevo. They spent days browsing through the rich library of the Löwenfelds. They read books in their original language, which allowed them to learn German and Italian. They were also discussing philosophical matters and reciting literature. Yet the war separated the two friends. They tried to tell each other about it when they met at the train station in Slavonski Brod, where they were waiting for a train that would take them on a journey to a better world – the West.

War can indeed make people insensitive to physical pain and mental suffering.

Yet, when they talked, his friend did not talk about poetry or books. Their conversation was summed up in the following way: "[Max] talked a bit about the war in general and with great bitterness, but rather in the tone of his voice than with the words and which was not intended to be noticed." From the letters mentioned during the 1993 siege of Sarajevo by the protagonists of *Reports from the Dark*

World, Max Löwenfeld is a man who diagnoses himself and his surroundings with a fatal disease, which deprives him of the skill of separating the wheat from the chaff. That is why to comprehend Karahasan's writings it is important to understand the indifference to evil. Max suffered from it since the First World War onwards. His indifference to pain took the form of a mental inertia. This is how you capitulate in front of a real enemy and escape from having to recognize who is the criminal and who is the victim. The very same disease befell Andrea from *Sarajevo, Exodus of a City*, when she could not accept the position of the UN workers who were turning their backs on those who supported one of the sides to the point that they would even see wounded children as taking sides in the conflict.

To comprehend Karahasan's writings it is important to understand the indifference to evil.

Indicatively, right after Russia started its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, people from former Yugoslavia started to warn Ukrainians of the danger of forging a war reality by relativizing good and evil, and blurring the border between black and white. Just like the Russian propaganda called the residents of Kyiv fascists, pro-Serbian propaganda called the residents of the besieged Sarajevo Muslim *mujahideen*. The Austrian writer, Peter Handke, accused the victims, including women from Bosnia, of inflicting wounds on themselves in order to generate pity in front of the cameras. "These lies were more painful than hunger, coldness and death," wrote a Sarajevo-based journalist, Aida Cerkez, in her letter to Kyiv residents.

An escape from taking responsibility for the victims is the soft belly of the liberal West, which is skilfully abused by dictatorships like Russia and effectively used in their propaganda. As a result, the wars that these countries engage in often end with rotten compromises which take away a chance for victory. This more optimistic concept of believing in victory was only brought back to the world by the Ukrainians who put their faith in *peremoha* (victory in Ukrainian) in their fight for freedom and justice.

Be capable of more

In Sarajevo nobody talked about victory. That is why Karahasan called the 1995 Dayton peace treaty "a security vest" which only maintained the existing schizophrenic tribal divisions. As a recipient of many prestigious European awards, he could not forgive Europeans for their inability to understand and defend the ethos of the *Sarajlije* (Sarajevans), meaning those of the city's residents who wanted to

be a part of a shared and diverse *polis*. He was very bitter in his interpretation of the Dayton constitution, which made Bosnia the only country in the world where there are no citizens. Instead, there are only Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats.

Europe's failure in the Yugoslav Wars did not free Karahasan from his continuous fight. He became even more rebellious. The price of his victory was to leave the dark land. That is why a more adequate explanation of his struggles with the world is related to the meaning of the Ukrainian term for victory: it is not as much the act of achieving victory, as it derives from its Latin root, *victoria*. For Karahasan, the process of overcoming evil was the most important thing. And here the original meaning of the Ukrainian *peremoha* proves better again: *peremohty* means to be capable of more. Thus, for Karahasan, statements such as "We can do as much as we can afford" or "You won't be able to overcome" were expressions of capitulation that only allowed people to get used to living in the dark lands, where there is no exit. To be capable of more, in turn, is a challenge to overcome oneself, and aim at getting better. To enter this path, we need the bravery of our hearts and the readiness to follow our internal imperatives, to go against evil.

Europe's failure in the Yugoslav Wars did not free Karahasan from his continuous fight.

For Karahasan, it was clear that the side to support is that of the victim. That we need to stand by the *Sarajlije*, who were faithful to their diverse city. By opting for one side, he did not capitulate in front of evil but he also did not support any homogeneity or one-sidedness. In fact, it is just the opposite, as the bright side for him was diverse, complex and with multiple voices. On this side, the greatest art was that of the *neimar*, meaning bridge builder. Among these people the great master was Mimar Hajrudin, who combined beauty with goodness by building the famous Old Bridge in Mostar.

On Karahasan's bright side were also people of dialogue – those who were capable of critical thinking, self-criticism and who would not treat their own convictions as final and absolute. They could listen, have a sense of humour and self-irony. That is why, when I talked about the prosecuted Bosnian Muslims, he responded with a story about a Serbian woman who paid the price of her life for offering members of that group shelter. That is why he did not agree with those who would deprive Putin-like dictators of their humanity. The aim is not to free them from their guilt but to understand that evil is present in the world through other human beings. Finally, his bright side allows for moral relativism but not one that serves totalitarian regimes. Instead, it is one that can be found in the power of free people who recognize the relativity of their own moral judgements and are driven by the ethics of caring for the "Other".

Permanent wanderer

I do not know whether Karahasan felt that he achieved a *peremoha* in his life. I did not talk to him about it, nor do I find any definite traces of it in his books. I think that the innate distance he felt in relation to his ability to have a final say made me believe that it is more correct to perceive him as a permanent wanderer, who had experienced both the bright and dark sides of life. I am aware that these words do not depict the full truth about Karahasan. That there is some kind of a paradox in them which shows the inherently Bosnian unity of contradictions. Thus, one more time, I read the *Bosnian Discourse on the Method*, which is one of the chapters in *Sarajevo, Exodus of a City*. When reading it at the time of the war in former Yugoslavia, I discovered that Bosnia represents the world not only because of the richness of its diversity but also because of the crisis of the multicultural community that it experienced. Back then, diversity was regarded as a problem of the periphery, while now it is, as we expected, a global challenge. When reading this text today, I can see that it was written by a victor. Maybe because it talks about Karahasan's failed meeting with a guest from the West.

The meeting in question took place in 1992. Its failure was even more painful because the guest was friendly and understanding. He was also hosted and showered with gratefulness for coming to Sarajevo at a time of war. He only wanted, in his best intention, for his interlocutor from the besieged city to admit that he had been suffering beyond human endurance; that he is a victim of a pointless war; and that without accepting the terms of the militarily stronger aggressor he had no future ahead of him. Karahasan, who never pitied himself and who was determined to go through hell alone, managed to find what was good, constructive and empowering in life. Thus, when asked about the lack of water and heating in his flat, as well as his hunger, he would answer that it was possible to survive, that he had only lost five kilogrammes and that there were others who had it much worse. More than anything else he was trying to get the attention of his interlocutor on what, in his view, were more pressing problems. He did not want to respond to chauvinism with chauvinism and hoped to stop the spread of the global fear of cultural pluralism, which "directed its weapons against those who wanted to live together, enjoying their differences". It was all in vain, unfortunately.

Our failed encounters with the Other are failures which have negative effects on us and generate a sense of guilt in us. If not overcome, they will turn us into victims of fear and shadow. In response to this threat, a discussion on method is born. Karahasan called it Bosnian because the job of the *neimar* is to find the resources to rebuild a bridge in the world in which it was destroyed. Karahasan found inspiration for the description of this method in a hospital where, in the

early stage of the siege, he worked as a volunteer. This is where he heard the Sarajevo *sevdalinka* – a song that is popularly known as a Bosnian song, but its music was composed by an Austrian composer while the lyrics were written by Heinrich Heine. And yet in Sarajevo it is still treated as "local". A similar trend could be seen in the city's architecture, where the pseudo-oriental villas that Austrians built in Sarajevo and Mostar have elements of local Bosnian culture. As a result, Karahasan discovered that the "openness of Bosnian culture to 'the views of others' does not come from the lack of identity or its weak recognition, but from the readiness to admit relativism and the right of existence to others."

People wage wars to impose their narratives and their own truth on others, often with the use of tanks. Their power on the battlefield is often superficial and can collapse like a house of cards, even though before that it can take many lives. Karahazan's rebellion was the result of his refusal to live imprisoned in a world of absolute truths that feed on the fear of others. He was not an idealist. He experienced real evil. He chose the life of a writer who diligently collected the remains of the wisdom of bridge builders. He left behind priceless notes of a rebel, which together make one *Book of Exodus*. They became useful to the next generation of refugees leaving the dark lands. He left us with a path. Against everything, he remained a citizen of Bosnia. And Bosnia is the world. ŁŁ

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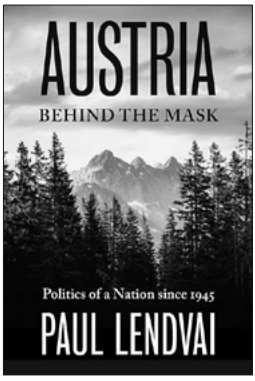
Through Lendvai's eyes

A unique perspective on Austrian politics

JP O' MALLEY

A review of *Austria Behind the Mask. Politics of a Nation since 1945*. By: Paul Lendvai. Publisher: Hurst, London, 2023.



The Habsburg Empire once stretched across nearly 700,000 square kilometres of Europe. Its origins can be traced back to 13th century Switzerland. In addition to Austrians, the empire's 50 million inhabitants included Czechs, Hungarians, Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, Slovenes, Romanians, Italians, Poles, Jews and Ruthenians. In 1700 the empire was reduced to several territories in Central and Eastern Europe. By 1804 it was known as the Austrian Empire.

Franz Joseph became emperor of the Austrian Empire in 1848. Following the Prussian victory over Austria in 1866, however, the *Ausgleich* (compromise) of 1867 transformed the empire into the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary. Franz Joseph ruled the multi-national cosmopolitan monarchy with benevolent tolerance until his death in 1916. His nephew, Charles I, reigned as emperor until the Central Powers were defeated in the First World War on November 11th 1918. With the sudden collapse of the Habsburg monarchy went Austria's status as a major global power with serious political influence.

From buffer to independent state

By 1922 Austria's First Republic was sliding into hyperinflation and pauperism. "During this interwar period, Austria was very weak, and Austrians regarded themselves as Germans," Paul Lendvai explains from his home in the mountainous spa town of Altaussee in Styria, Austria. "That is why in 1938, Austria was annexed into Hitler's Third Reich so easily."

The 94-year-old Hungarian-born Austrian journalist has published more than twenty books on the history and politics of Central and Eastern Europe.

The 94-year-old Hungarian-born Austrian journalist has published more than twenty books on the history and politics of Central and Eastern Europe. He has also received numerous awards for his journalism, including the Grand Decoration of Honour for Services to the Republic of Austria (1986) and the Austrian State Prize for Cultural Journalism (2005). Last July, Lendvai published *Austria Behind the Mask* (2023).

The book provides a detailed analysis of how Austria's politics has evolved over the last eight decades. The complex and paradoxical nature of the country's identity, Lendvai argues, stems from the numerous political forces that have shaped it, including Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, right-wing populists and Greens.

The author notes how the Allies initially treated Austria's Second Republic (1945–63) with distrust and suspicion. After the Third Reich's defeat in the Second World War, Austria was divided into four occupation zones. "In 1945, east Austria was occupied by the Russians. While the other parts of the country were occupied by the British, the Americans and the French," Lendvai explains. "Unlike Germany, however, Austria became independent as a united and neutral state in 1955. So the real freedom for Austrians came with the State Treaty."

Signed in May 1955, that treaty saw Austria – then a Cold War buffer zone between East and West – become a fully independent, neutral country. With no loyal military alliances, Austria did not join NATO. Lendvai was then in his late 20s, living in neighbouring Hungary. He was born into a Jewish family in Budapest in 1929 and received his education in the Hungarian capital. During the Second World War, Lendvai survived the persecution of the Jews in Budapest. Most of Hungary's Jews did not. By the end of the Holocaust, 565,000 Hungarian Jews had been murdered by the Nazis. Most ended up in the Nazi gas chambers of Auschwitz.

Lendvai lost 29 relatives. "For me, as probably for most people directly affected by the Shoah, many things cannot simply be forgiven and forgotten," he says.

In 1945, when Lendvai was still a teenager, Hungary was occupied by Soviet forces. The Stalinist regime didn't look kindly on idealistic Trotskyites, which Lendvai then identified as. "I was arrested and imprisoned, and I was one of the youngest political prisoners [in Hungary] at the time," he explains. "This was the period of the permanent purges in the communist countries of [the Eastern Bloc]."

In October 1956 thousands of protestors gathered in Budapest to demand the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary, setting off a revolt across the country. The Soviet Union ordered its troops to crush the rebellion in Budapest. The uprising lasted 12 days. But the damage inflicted by Moscow on Budapest lasted decades. Thousands were killed and wounded and nearly a quarter of a million Hungarians fled the country.

Insider access

Lendvai thus found himself as a wandering refugee. He briefly took up residence in Warsaw, where he found work as a journalist. Eventually, he made the westward journey across the Iron Curtain to Vienna, which became his adopted homeland. In 1959 Lendvai became an Austrian citizen. He also landed a job with the *Financial Times*, becoming their correspondent for Central Europe, a position he kept for 22 years.

The job at the British broadsheet gave Lendvai insider access to Vienna's most influential power brokers and politicos. Among them was Bruno Kreisky. In 1972 Lendvai, along with the Austrian journalist and publisher Karl Heinz Ritschel, co-authored *Kreisky*: *Portrait of a Statesman*. A Jewish emigrant and intellectual from an upper middle-class background, Kreisky helped the Social Democrats emerge from the 1970 elections in Austria as the strongest party. He subsequently became chancellor of Austria, a position he served in for 13 years.

Lendvai describes Kreisky as the most successful politician in Europe at the time. But his political success story was also "the greatest paradox of Austrian post-war history", says the author. Many people in Austria and further afield were stunned that Kreisky, who had lost 21 relatives in the Holocaust, appeared as a vocal defender of former Nazis. In the first Kreisky government, for example, there were four ministers who in their youth were members of the Nazi party. "Kreisky always held the opinion that even an SS man must be allowed to hold any political office in Austria as long as no crime is proven against him," says Lendvai. "This attitude strained Austria's relations with the United States,

Israel, and many Jewish organisations, for years to come."

After the horrors of Nazim, the far right had become a shameful taboo in Austrian society. But Kreisky's willingness to do business with extremist parties brought the far right back into the respectable political mainstream. The author points to the importance of the "Kreisky–Peter Pact" (1970–71). This saw Kreisky initiate a political relationship with a former Nazi, Frederich Peter, who was then the chairman of the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ).

"When Kreisky lost his majority in [the Austrian parliament] he pushed the Social Democrats to make a coalition, with the FPÖ," says Lendvai. "In those days the FPÖ were more reserved. But under their very able leader, Jörg Haider, they became stronger, and more socially acceptable."

Under the leadership of Haider, the FPÖ drifted further and further to the right, often winning votes on an ultra-nationalist, anti-immigration and anti-EU agenda. Haider's greatest victory as leader of the FPÖ came in 1999, when the party captured 27 per cent of the vote in Austria. In early 2000 Haider made a deal with the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) to form a coalition government. It was the first time since the end of the Second World War that a party with Nazi origins had become part of a European government.

Shady dealings

Haider stepped down as leader of the FPÖ in February 2000 and formed the Alliance for Austria's Future in 2005. He died in a car crash in October 2008. As a journalist, Lendvai met Haider on several occasions, in both public and private settings. He remembers an intelligent, sympathetic, but flawed individual. "Haider was a very sick person who was brought up in a Nazi family and could not get rid of these traces in his upbringing," says Lendvai. "Nevertheless, he was a unique figure who helped to make the FPÖ the second largest party in Austria."

In the Austrian parliamentary elections in October 2017, under the leadership of Heinz Christian Strache, the FPÖ achieved the second-best result in the party's history, winning 26 per cent of the vote. They went on to form a coalition government with the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), led by Sebastian Kurz, who became the youngest chancellor in Austrian history.

That far-right coalition government was toppled from power in May 2019, however, after the "Ibiza affair". This resulted from then FPÖ leader, Heinz-Christian Strache, making shady deals with a woman he believed was the niece of a Russian oligarch. Lendvai claims there are still Kremlin lackeys lurking in the corridors of power in Vienna, even after Putin launched the full-scale inva-

sion of Ukraine in February 2022. This is also the case in neighbouring Hungary.

Hungary's far-right prime minister, Viktor Orbán, is a vocal opponent of the West's military support for Ukraine and for Kyiv's proposed entry into the EU. In late October, Orbán met Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, in Beijing. This meeting was officially meant to involve a so-called discussion on energy cooperation and peace. Really, though, it was Orbán's way of signalling to Brussels who his real allies are. In mid-December, meanwhile, members of the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs and staff from the Hungarian embassy in Washington met for a two-day event hosted by the conservative Heritage Foundation think tank. This was done to show solidarity between far-right conservatives in Europe and in the US, who ultimately want to put an end to US military support for Ukraine.

Lendvai has been critical of Orbán in books like *The Hungarians* (2003) and *Orbán: Europe's New Strongman* (2017). The second book, which won the Prix du Livre Européen, documented how Hungary, under Orbán's authoritarian rule, has become an outlier in the EU. Championing the concept of illiberal democracy, Orbán and his Fidesz government have used a far-right populist ideology that has led to the gradual deterioration of Hungary's rule of law. It has also led to the end of the separation of powers, gerrymandering, the creation of an oligarchy, corruption, mass clientelism and the erosion of a free press.

Lendvai has been critical of Viktor Orbán in books like *The Hungarians* (2003) and Orban: *Europe's New Strongman* (2017).

The Hungarian way?

Is Austria, which became a member of the EU in 1995, on course for a similar destiny?

"The EU has been very good for Austria," says Lendvai. "But, as in other countries, there is a right-wing lunatic fringe in Austria, which has become stronger since 2015, when the first big wave of refugees came from the [Middle East]." The author points to census figures from the beginning of 2021, which showed that every fifth inhabitant of Austria (20.1 per cent) was born abroad, and in Vienna 37.1 per cent of people there had a foreign place of birth. "This is something the far right has capitalized on and used to put fear into the electorate," says Lendvai.

Still, "I don't think that Austria will go the Hungarian way," says Lendvai. "Mainly because in Austria there is still an independent justice system, an independent constitution, an independent media, and a stronger civil society in general." Lendvai also stresses that, in contrast to, say, Hungary or Poland, the dark years of antisemitism in Austria are being dealt "with in an exemplary manner by scholars with official support".

Nevertheless, in Austria over the last decade, "the Russian factor was severely underestimated," says Lendvai. This was true "particularly as far as the economy, and the energy supplies are concerned". He also points out that like supporters of Orbán and the Fidesz party in Hungary, most supporters of the FPÖ in Austria are pro-Russian, "in the sense that they want a ceasefire in the Russo-Ukrainian War, even under circumstances which Russian troops remain on land that is today considered [Russian-occupied] territories of Ukraine".

Lendvai also remains sceptical of Austria's current chancellor, Karl Nehammer, from the ÖVP. In recent times he has publicly shown his support for Hungary's Viktor Orbán, as well as Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. Both of these figures are close allies of Moscow.

"This all casts a shadow over the standing of Austria in Europe today," Lendvai concludes. "Ultimately, though, I believe that Austria will stick to a firm, anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian foreign policy and won't become the second Hungary of Central Europe." EE

JP O' Malley is a freelance journalist and critic.

The (in)famous Dovbush

A robber of trust?

GRZEGORZ SZYMBORSKI

A review of *Dovbush*. A film directed by Oles Sanin. Distributed by Film.Ua Distribution Kinomania, Ukraine (2023).

When I first learned of a Ukrainian film set in the mid-18th century Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, I was full of hope and joy. As a historical re-enactor of that era, I could only envy Ukrainians. This is because they explore various timelines in their cinema, while Polish contemporary productions get bogged down almost entirely in the 20th century. Yet already with the first trailers of *Dovbush*, my hope was replaced by doubts.

The production is worthy of recognition. It is the most expensive cinema project in the Ukrainian film industry. It came to a successful end amidst the uncertainty of the Russian invasion. Yet, although it premiered on Ukraine's independence day, surprisingly it tells the story of the Polish nobility's oppression that forced Hutsuls (Carpathians of Ruthenian and Romanian origin) to rise against their feudal lords. The iconic hero of the folklore – the mountain robber Oleksa Dovbush (played by Sergey Strelnikov) – serves as the symbol of this struggle and encourages contemporary Ukrainians to defend their homeland.

Whilst being an actual historical figure, research shows that the plot of the film is far from authentic. And while the historical sources on Oleksa Dovbush himself leave room for interpretation, the director Oles Sanin ignored those facts that are indeed out of the ques-

tion. He did so for the sake of his narrative, which challenges, to say politely, today's often tense Polish-Ukrainian relations.

"Get a life!"

The reason why I take a harsh stance on the historical background is only partially connected to my personal interest and field of expertise. No historian should ever expect a film to be entirely correct. Ridley Scott's viral reply to the professor accusing his latest *Napoleon* of inaccuracies reminds us that motion capture will always serve other purposes such as entertainment, with history simply a tool to achieve it. At the same time, a disregard for reality may outrage people as *Napoleon* truly did, being widely accused of creating a simplistic view of the French dictator and 19th century European history.

Yet, at the very beginning of *Dovbush*, the director, through the narrator, pledged himself to tell the true story behind the mountain robber's infamous career and the multiple legends that arose concerning him over centuries. That is where the expectations start skyrocketing. If one claims to reveal the truth, they invite critics to test them. If the production was declared to be an adaptation, that would result in acceptable *licentia poetica*. Another reason for a watchful eye is the tone. Unlike the 1974 Polish comedy series *Janosik* by Jerzy Passendorf, which also depicts the story of the highland robber, yet, fully fictional, the mood of the Ukrainian film requires the audience to stay serious. And the spectator soon realises that this is more of an action, rather than a historical, production. But whatever genre it would be, it always conveys a specific message to the audience. After the screening I was deeply worried about what idea spectators may be left with. Surprisingly enough, Ukraine is never mentioned. Still, it is a truly patriotic film for Ukrainians, conveying somehow a universal value – personal freedom. At the same time, it praises – in a far more vague and historically questionable way – the equally important message of defending your surroundings and the local community.

Simplicity

Overall, the film is more about the story of people being oppressed by a cartoonish nobility. While some national diversity is hinted on the side of the robbers, with a Polish fellow among the outlaws, the noblemen are only Poles. Had the director used well-known connotations to make sure that the Ukrainian

audience would associate antagonists with Poles only, even if this is historically inaccurate? After all, many noblemen in the area were of Ruthenian origin. The presence and overuse of broadly recognised but historically absent winged hussars, the contemporary Polish flag as a military banner, and infantry officers commanding in Polish instead of in German, serve a simple and disappointing purpose. That being said, after watching *Dovbush* it is unlikely for the spectator not to perceive Poles as the enemies. Whilst making them the main antagonists is fully understandable, they are depicted as one dimensional characters. While the image is truly simplistic, one must also mention that character development is generally missing in the film, and not only in the case of the antagonists.

The most impactful yet irrelevant part of the movie's plot is actually the true flaw of the Polish nobility as presented by Oles Sanin – the readiness of the 18th century magnates to collaborate with the Russian court in pursuit of personal interests. Several scenes hinting at this cooperation could easily be removed without affecting the story itself. This is why this whole sequence may be questioned as poetically pointless. Historically, it is more than possible, yet potentially damaging to the current view of Polish-Ukrainian relations.

The film is more about the story of people being oppressed by a cartoonish nobility, and the noblemen are only Poles.

The same may be said about the historically inaccurate prologue, which presents the short-lasting cooperation between the Polish noblemen and Hutsul infantrymen as ending with the Poles turning their backs on their Ruthenian comrades once the fight against Russia is over. Taking into account the context of the film's release, this message is particularly painful and leaves room for speculation.

Adjustments to the history

I had already mentioned that historical facts are neglected by the director for the sake of the narrative. While little is known about Oleksa's life – that is why serving in the Polish-Lithuanian army is not unlikely – the death of the protagonist's father Vasyl at the hands of noblemen is pivotal proof that the director meant to make Poles personal and sanguinary enemies. This was used to give

the main protagonist a reason to unleash his need for vengeance. Meanwhile, according to the 19th-century Ukrainian historian Julian Celewycz, Vasyl Dovbush denounced his sons Oleksa and Ivan (played by Oleksiy Hnatkovskyy) and forbade them to return home after repeated pleas from his Jewish neighbours. These people were victims of the mountain robbers' raids and other illegal activity. Colonel Przełuski (played by Mateusz Kościukiewicz), presented as the protagonist's *nemesis*, was tracking his successors many years after Dovbush's death in 1745. Taking into account the known historical facts, so many changes and interpretations of the story led to the depiction of Poles as treasonous enemies fully responsible for Oleksa's tragic fate.

If the film was to deliver the message of the exploitation of the peasantry by the nobility, it was poorly executed.

On the other hand, little is said in the film about Dovbush's raids and his "professional" career. Celewycz claimed that Dovbush and his mountain robbers were feared by the Poles, Armenians and Jews that were targeted, with Hutsuls being spared. The film limits the story of the fearsome robber for the sake of the tale about the liberator who challenges Colonel Przełuski and Duchess Teofila Jabłonowska (played by Agata Buzek). She is ultimately presented as the hidden antagonist for Dovbush. While a real historical figure, she was incorrectly called a "grand duchess of the Crown" who rules over the peasants with an iron fist against the alleged will of her father. If the production was to deliver the message of the exploitation of the peasantry by the nobility, it was poorly executed with the depiction of Jabłonowska.

Fiction justifying the narrative and, therefore, the message conveyed by the film, in fact minimises the idea that should stay with the audience. I can understand that the question of feudal exploitation may be an important issue for Ukrainians with regard to our common history. But to make this clear and representative, the true story should support the director's idea. Otherwise, some Polish circles could sadly disregard any need for debate connected to the tale.

A new approach in the film industry?

Strikingly, Sanin's adaptation has a lot in common with the Soviet depiction from 1959 by Victor Ivanov. Just like in the 1950s, the Poles are again

cartoonish and cruel. Oleksa first attempts to trust the nobility and learns harshly from his mistake. In the Soviet version, Polish magnates pursue him in the form of Jabłoński's spouses, instead of Jabłonowska. In both films, the mountain robber outsmarts his enemies. Captured and brought to justice, he escapes. The first battle sequence takes place in the market square, with the second clash focusing on a classic trap in the wilderness. The outnumbered mountain robbers eventually overcome their pursuers. In both productions there is also one Polish fellow loyal to Dovbush, who then suffers grave consequences at the hands of his compatriots. The Commonwealth soldiers wear inaccurate blue uniforms, and lastly, the finale and fate of Dovbush are very much the same, strikingly opposite to the reality. Both adaptations make a nod to the alleged mountain robber's mercy – sparing both Polish soldiers and children. The links between the Soviet and contemporary versions are somehow noticeable.

It is worth pointing out some similarities with *Janosik: A True Story* – the 2009 reboot by Agnieszka Holland. While her attempt was definitely not as successful as the Polish communist TV series, by comparing Sanin's picture to the 1959 adaptation, it is clear that there are similarities between the contemporary images of the mountain robber. At this point the modern films essentially constitute a cliché. The leader of the robbers suffers from the scars of war, perceives authority as a source of oppression, cherishes freedom and accidentally becomes a leader while facing opposition within his ranks. The legend relies on people who tell stories about immortality and spells protecting the robber from bullets. The commitment of the robbers to the land and soil is seen as giving them spiritual strength and is highlighted in both contemporary movies about the mountain robbers. Yet, Holland does not try to immortalize her hero, concluding Janosik's journey with his true end as it was without any sparks of romanticism. And this is where the undoubtful commercial success of *Dovbush* may be found. While Janosik is vague, presented neither as a criminal nor a hero, he does not become immortalized or even memorable in Holland's depiction. While historically inaccurate, the Ukrainian spectator can truly get along with the predominantly fictional superhero-like figure, resembling Mel Gibson's *Patriot* protagonist.

Lessons to be learned

The comments around *Napoleon* remind us that historical authenticity still plays an important role in film. Whilst Scott's image generates broader debate due to the scale of his work and its subject matter, the issue triggered by *Dov-*

bush may affect the world at a smaller, more Polish-Ukrainian scale. For some reason, the director decided to delay screening in Poland until late autumn 2023. Many possible reasons for that are presented above.

All that being said, considering the circumstances and the tone of *Dovbush*, the dedication made to Poles in the opening seems unfitting and rather for a completely different film or political timeline. While Sanin's need to release already postponed work of his own is commercially and creatively understandable, doing it after receiving so much support from Poland is very questionable. While the film is truly entertaining, it follows the Soviet narrative. The depiction of the robber as the hero and liberator may only postpone a necessary and serious Polish-Ukrainian debate about the exploitation of people by the nobility. From the Polish perspective, the release date of the movie was very inconvenient. To be fair, I guess that for some far-right Polish circles, any time would be unfitting. Yet doing so on Ukraine's independence day, while the country continues to fight for its life against the Russians, could not have been worse from the Polish point of view.

There is something about this film that reminds us of the past in Polish-Ukrainian relations, before the time of the solidarity honeymoon. But it may also be the plain truth that as a Pole I may never fully understand the Ukrainian narrative – just like it may be difficult for Englishmen to accept the tale of William Wallace, with whom Sanin compared Oleksa Dovbush. I hope a time will come when Poles and Ukrainians combine their forces in directing a film of heroes that we can be mutually proud of, and antagonists we can mutually condemn for the sake of a common and undoubtful moral message. And, of course, do it in an equally entertaining way. EE

Grzegorz Szymborski is a graduate of the College of Europe in Natolin (Poland). He is also the author of the books *Wolność niejedno ma imię* (2013), *Wyprawa Fryderyka Augusta I do Inflant w latach 1700–1701 w świetle wojny domowej na Litwie* (2015), and *Działania zbrojne w Rzeczypospolitej podczas interwencji rosyjskiej 1764 roku* (2020). He is an avid historical re-enactor.

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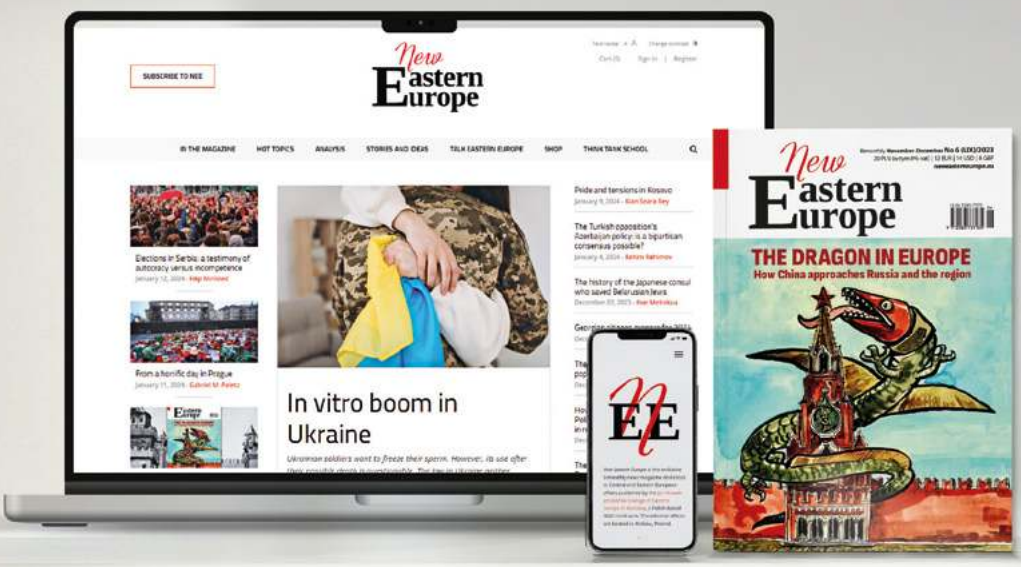

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