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New Eastern Europe

VALUES UNDER SIEGE

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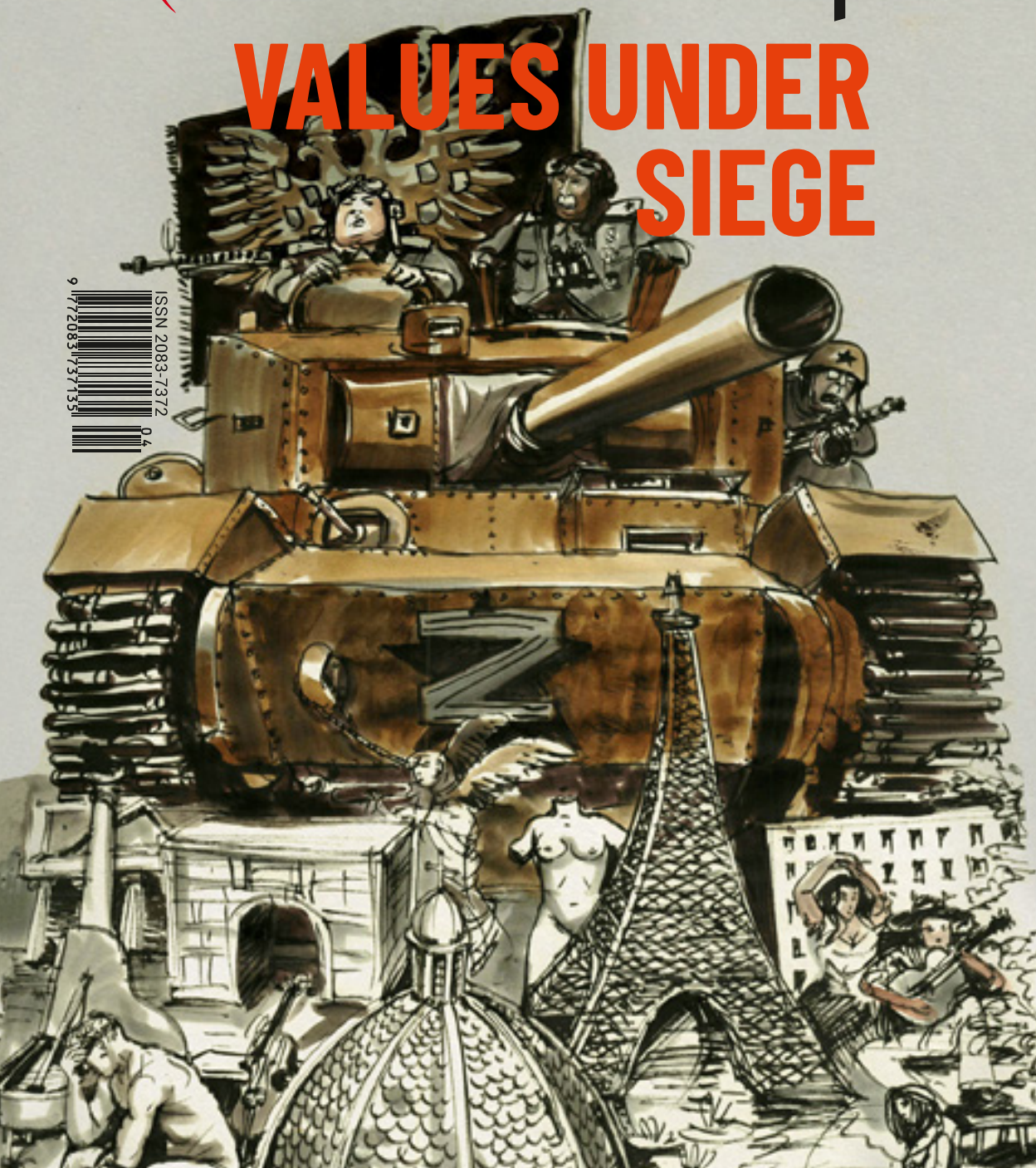

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DEAR READER,

Ukrainian philosopher and writer Volodymyr Yermolenko recently wrote that "the war changes the perception of time. Your life can change in one day, one hour, one minute." This has certainly been true for the Ukrainians who are experiencing a new reality every day. The unprovoked full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine which began on February 24th 2022 has certainly changed nearly every aspect of life for Ukrainians, we began covering this in our previous edition of *New Eastern Europe*.

While it is true that the reality for Ukrainians has changed dramatically, it is also true that our geopolitical reality has also been significantly altered. With Russia's invasion of Ukraine we now see our western values under siege, whether we consciously recognise it or not. The response to the level of violence against Ukrainians was encouraging – as countries in the European Union together with other western states swiftly enacted sanctions against Russia and began supporting Ukraine militarily.

Yet, many decisions on what level to support Ukraine against this illegal invasion have become politicised or poorly understood. To understand this better, the theme of this issue of New Eastern Europe looks at the ways Russia's siege have changed our societies (or not). We open this issue with an essay by Samuel Abraham who puts the war in the context of what Henry Kissinger describes as a "totally new era" and argues that Ukraine's victory will only strengthen the West. Rebecca Harms advocates for a stronger, more coherent German strategy, while Cyrille Bret puts perspective on Emmanuel Macron's most recent presidential victory. Paweł Kowal discusses how the West must also better support free Belarusians in exile or those being repressed in their own country. Mykola Riabchuk outlines the shared values under siege, and why Ukraine is fighting not only for their freedom, but ours as well. Lastly, we add commentary on how the war has changed countries beyond the region – which shows the extent of the changes that this invasion has wrought.

Unfortunately as of printing this issue, the news from Ukraine's front is not overly optimistic. Russian forces continue, albeit slowly, to push the front in the east. In the south there has been some successful counteroffensives, yet our colleagues in Ukraine warn of a difficult summer.

We invite you to please keep our Ukrainian friends and colleagues in mind as you read this issue. If you would like to offer support, we have an ongoing fundraiser to assist our contributors and translators. Please consider donating to this campaign. You can find it via our website at: www.neweasterneurope.eu.

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Ukraine and its discontents

SAMUEL ABRAHÁM

The outcome of the war in Ukraine will be determined by three key actors – Ukraine, Russia and the West. However, all three operate as if they are in different time dimensions. One of the features of this "totally new era" is that clocks are ticking on all sides, but the speed seems different.

Since February 24th, Ukraine has been at the forefront of global media and we have been inundated with both short and long-term predictions about the war as it progresses. It has led to endless analysis, some profound, some superficial, some objective, some ideological, some partisan and much contradictory. We all want to know how this tragic conflict will end, whether Ukraine prevails and remains free or Vladimir Putin's Russia conquers its neighbour. What would either development mean for the future of the West? What would be the status of the external and internal enemies of liberal democracy that have grown during the last decade and have been somewhat muted since February?

While the war continues, one thing is certain: this is a "totally new era". Henry Kissinger defined the period after February 24th in this way as one cannot predict the outcome of the war and its global ramifications. To complicate the matter, it seems as if different forces in the conflict operate according to different timeframes and hence require a different prism to understand. This piece will subsequently look at the many key unseen developments unleashed by Putin's aggression. Furthermore, it will review the areas – the status of Saudi Arabia, China and the future of offshore tax havens – that might influence future developments in international

relations and determine the fate of Russia. But first, it is important to discuss a bit of Central European history in order to assess the current conflict.

1968 and 2022

To many Slovaks and Czechs, Russia's aggression towards Ukraine was a reminder of a similar act of aggression they had experienced by the Soviet Union in 1968. Both events were unexpected and shocking, although in both cases the United States was aware beforehand of what was coming. Whilst diplomatic channels revealed the USSR's intentions, Putin's plans were revealed thanks to the work of US intelligence agencies. In both cases, no one offered direct help to the countries facing the aggressor. The nuclear deterrent worked in Moscow's favour in 1968 and holds NATO back in 2022, although the West has responded with a massive amount of help in the form of military equipment and economic assistance.

The worst part of the invasion of Czechoslovakia was not the direct military occupation. In fact, the nation remained united and stood behind then leader Alexander Dubček and his government, who were kidnapped and taken to a location somewhere in Russia on the night of the invasion. The puppet government planned by Moscow did not take over in August 1968 and Dubček's legitimate government was allowed to return, albeit just for a few months until Moscow found its quisling figure, Gustav Husák. In consort, they unleashed the so-called "normalisation" – the most humiliating two decades of Czechoslovakia's history. Almost a million Slovaks and Czechs emigrated and those who remained and wanted to keep their professional positions of any sort had to sign a shameful declaration that they "agree with the brotherly help of the Warsaw Pact Treaty Organisation in August 1968". That "brotherly help" was as much a euphemism for Soviet aggression as the "special military operation" is for the Russian war and aggression in Ukraine today.

It is clear that Ukraine is fighting not only for its land and political system, but also the survival of human dignity.

The "normalisation period" (1969–89) broke the spirit of the nation. People withdrew into internal exile and hopelessness. This was combined with a cultural and intellectual bleakness that, everyone believed, would last for generations. No one, not even the communist leaders, believed in the communist propaganda. It was just a puppet regime led by puppet henchmen on the outskirts of the Soviet imperium.

Why this comparison from a different era? Overall, it is clear that Ukraine is fighting not only for its land and political system but also the survival of human

dignity that, if victorious, Russia would undoubtedly try to obliterate – a brutal but ultimately futile endeavour. In fact, it is already doing this in those areas under its occupation, with some Ukrainians even being deported to Russia. A successful Russian occupation would mean the physical destruction of cities and expulsion of much of the population, just as the occupants are already doing in Mariupol and Eastern Ukraine. Putin, a former KGB officer in East Germany, knows by now not only that Russian soldiers are unwelcome but that the Ukrainian spirit and dignity must be subdued and those unrepentant, expelled or killed. The lesson from Czechoslovakia after 1968 is that the aftermath of Soviet/Russian aggression is worse than the defeat itself.

Different clock

The outcome of the war will be determined by three key actors – Ukraine, Russia and the West. However, all three operate as if they are in different time dimensions. One of the features of the "totally new era" is that clocks are ticking on all sides, but the speed seems different. For Ukraine, fighting for its survival every hour and every day is crucial and fateful. The government has to attend to the immediate needs of the military and civilian population, unaware of where the next Russian missile will hit. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the prime target of Russia's henchmen from day one, lives every minute on borrowed time. Hence, the next shipment of arms or economic aid dominates the country's priorities and discourse with the outside world. Zelenskyy's desperate appeals and pleading reflect his country's daily troubles and, at the moment, discount any long-term consequences and future settlements. That is why Kissinger's long-term strategic proposition that Ukraine cede territory to Russia seems so absurd and outrageous to Kyiv. The government needs a morale boost for its population to fight and survive the next day.

The clock for the West ticks in weeks and months, reflecting the price of oil and gas, as well as a looming economic crisis, general wariness and the media's natural attention span. Despite the unprecedented unity of its key political actors, politicians are aware that there is a limit to how long the West can focus on Ukraine, especially if the economic crisis deepens and Kyiv starts losing on the battlefield. The threat of nuclear escalation, though illogical and unlikely, cannot be discounted because the perception of the threat among western populations is real and ominous. Putin's decision to put Russia's nuclear arsenal on high alert, combined with the hysterical diatribe of Russia's media demanding the use of nuclear weapons, only heightens the western public's uncertainty. One notable example of this trend can be found in Germany, whose current leader Olaf Scholz has proven un-

reliable regarding military help for Ukraine. The chancellor continues to act cautiously lest Russia take revenge against the West.

Ukraine and the West, whose clocks seem to tick faster, face a Russia where the clock ticks in long spans, in years or even the lifetime of the dictator. Putin can use force to suppress the population and faces no hostile opposition or critical media. Thus, the initial military failure to take over all of Ukraine or even the capital Kyiv has not affected his position. Yet the history of tyrannies shows that there is no guaranteed security for a despot. The Russian president's prospects imply a life in power but, in times of crisis, as Xenophon reminds us, any moment can be fatal. Putin's regime can keep suppressing Russia's population and opposition, but there is a limit. This kind of society simmers underneath and might boil over if the misery becomes worse than fear. There is a long tradition of rebellions and revolutions in Russia's chequered history and these were directed at many rulers who acted ruthlessly towards the population and any political opposition.

In addition, although there is no opposition in Russia today, there is a modern "praetorian guard" consisting of the army, secret police and oligarchs who assess their prospects carefully every day during this uncertain war. Paradoxically, with no democratic politician to replace Putin, his potential replacement by someone from

that group would be worse than facing a strong Putin today. The current Russian leader seems resolute and somewhat unpredictable, but in command. The praetorian guard in charge would be fierce, dangerously unpredictable and prone to fighting with one another. A threat to Russia and the rest of the world.

Many uncertain variables must be tackled before the clocks of the three will synchronize. Russia's advantage is relative and related to Ukraine's resolve and West's unity. Still, the West and eventually Ukraine will have to find a way to negotiate with Putin. This will not happen, however, before either the battlefield decides or the pressure against Russia forces it to the table.

Many surprises

It is useful to briefly review the key aspects of Kissinger's "totally new era". First, Ukraine's resistance has been unexpected, strong and heroic. The circumstances also generated a great leader. A comedian who became president and whose popularity prior to the invasion was plummeting, became a statesman. He acted as a true leader, not fearing for his life but for the existence of his nation. Ukraine rallied behind Zelenskyy and this has truly become his "finest hour". One can assume that if Ukraine was defeated shortly after February 24th, developments in the West would be quite different.

However, thanks to Ukraine's resistance, the European Union and NATO stood united behind the victim. The country's bravery also strengthened internal cooperation among EU members and improved NATO's resolve and legitimacy. Help from these two western alliances has denied Putin military and strategic success. Another development can be seen regarding transatlantic cooperation, with US President Joe Biden pursuing a more constructive policy towards the EU and NATO than his predecessor. NATO is now ready to fulfil Article 5 of its charter, which outlines how all members must come to the military assistance of any member attacked by an external aggressor. The Baltic states and many post-communist countries value their membership in NATO now more than ever.

Thanks to Ukraine's resistance, the European Union and NATO stood united behind the victim.

Finally, although the resistance of Ukraine has been admirable, the porous strategy and capabilities of the Russian army have also been surprising. The Russian Federation's intelligence community did not provide valid information about Ukraine's military capabilities or the mood of the population. Subsequently, Putin dismissed the whole department that provided unreliable information. This is

a common story in the history of dictatorships, where even intelligence services are afraid to provide a fair assessment to the dictator for fear of being punished. In addition, the morale of the Russian army seems low and its young recruits are naturally reluctant to fight. Contrary to what Putin claimed prior to the invasion, they neither faced Ukrainian Nazis nor were killed by biological weapons. And there was no cheerful welcome even from the Russian-speaking population. Instead, they faced the misery and cries of civilians and the feisty resistance of the Ukrainian army. Hence, after several failures, Putin's strategy has focused on fierce artillery shelling and long-distance missile attacks, rather than continuous and direct combat. Although the size of the Russian army is much bigger than Ukraine's, there will be a limit on how many long-range missiles Russia can deliver and produce due to western sanctions.

China, MBS and offshore money

The role of China, Saudi Arabia and the status of global tax havens are three issues that might have a great impact on the outcome of conflict. The West is instrumental in all three of these areas. It must do its utmost to prevent close cooperation between Russia and China. This is a delicate diplomatic chess game that experts analyse and design and politicians execute. It will be a complex and complicated process because Xi Jinping's mighty China does not bow easily to pressure. Yet without co-operation with Beijing – especially with respect to the production of electronic components that Russia does not produce – the sanctions will not be effective.

The role of China, Saudi Arabia and the status of tax havens are three issues that will play a role in the conflict's outcome.

One key factor that will determine the unity of the western countries is the price of crude oil on the world markets. And the key actor for that here is Saudi Arabia, which can immediately increase the supply and thus decrease the price of crude oil. The problem is that Mohammed bin Salman, better known as MBS, is now a pariah in the West after he ordered the murder of exiled Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. MBS conditions any increased supply with once again being internationally recognised and accepted. The West is naturally reluctant to undergo such a cynical diplomatic trade.

However, political philosopher Fareed Zakaria, who was a personal friend of the deceased journalist, recommends that the West considers such a deal with MBS in order to lower the price of oil and keep the current anti-Russian front united. It is a complicated diplomatic move and requires the West to sacrifice some of its high

moral ground in order to prevail over Russia and, eventually, save Ukraine. And that is difficult for any democratic politician under pressure from public opinion, opposition and a free press. But as Zakaria argues, Nixon and Kissinger visiting, co-operating with and recognising Mao's China in the early 1970s solved a dilemma similar to what is now faced by western leaders regarding MBS. In the long term, Nixon in China was a decisive move that, among other things, eventually forced the Soviets to the negotiation table regarding nuclear disarmament.

Tax havens

Another strategy that would impact Russia's fate and also curb global corruption is preventing dictators, oligarchs and financial speculators from hiding their ill-begotten fortunes in the many tax havens around the globe. This is a long overdue move, regularly discussed when investigative journalists from major western dailies work together and publish the lists of secret bank accounts, as was the case, for example, with "The Panama Papers". Tax havens are a global problem and the West, being fully involved, is reluctant to act. Yet, in the long term it is a crucial strategy in the fight to curb ubiquitous global corruption – the key drain on the global economy. As long as these mostly illegal offshore bank accounts exist, Russian oligarchs will continue to stash their loot there. Seizing a few yachts makes for good headlines but is insignificant in fighting Russia's status quo. It is a regime based on loyalty and the corruption of a few, draining Russia's economy and resources, taking money abroad. The Russian oligarchs know that once the embargo and sanctions end, their stolen money awaits them, among others, in Austria, Luxembourg, Malta, Delaware, the Cayman Islands or Panama.

Ending tax havens would help the West and eventually democracy in Russia and would restrict many dictatorships around the globe, who drain their countries of precious financial resources. It seems like a long-term and seemingly insurmountable problem. In a way, it is similar to the climate crisis. It also requires a united global strategy and strong determination. The same shown as a united world faced and resolved the COVID-19 pandemic. Actually, the closing of tax havens is technically much simpler if western governments decide to act in unison.

With Ukraine and Putin's aggression looming over the West, there is a window of opportunity to tackle this decisive problem. This opportunity should not be missed. Tax havens drain democratic regimes, undermine the rule of law, encourage corruption and sustain human and drug trafficking. They allow all the dictators and criminals of the world to steal indiscriminately and hide their loot with impunity. It would not solve all the issues of this world but it would be a decisive

step towards strengthening democracies while facing global poverty and even environmental crisis.

As mentioned at the outset of this text, the outcome of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is unknown. Ukraine defends itself with a level of bravery not many expected. The West also underwent spectacular development by uniting and assisting Kyiv. For Putin, his regime is at stake in Ukraine and he will not give up easily. If Russia wins, the bleak consequences are clear. On the contrary, if Ukraine defends itself against aggression, it will secure its own survival and strengthen the West. Before Kissinger's "totally new era", it would have been hardly conceivable but, at this moment of war, any strategy leading to Ukraine's freedom should shape the West's resolve, actions and goals.

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Germany's Russia policy must change

REBECCA HARMS

While Germans are slowly learning that Ukraine is a nation with a unique language and culture now threatened with annihilation by Russia, the country's traditional longing for accommodation with Moscow is already starting to re-emerge in national discourse. In Germany, we have yet to understand that it is a Russian war against which the Ukrainians are defending themselves militarily. Russia must lose and Ukraine must win in order for it to have a future.

There is one key thing that I have learned since Vladimir Putin openly declared war on Ukraine and attacked it by land, sea and air. In Germany, people prefer to speak of peace rather than talk about war. In many conversations and discussions that I engage in privately or publicly, I not only need to explain, but often have to justify myself for being in favour of Germany and the EU supporting Ukraine in its defence against this attack. I am often accused of being emotional. Of course I am emotional. I too, take this war personally. This is what a Ukrainian friend said about herself a few weeks ago.

The Russian war is being waged against cities that I know well, in whose parks I met my friends, in whose restaurants I learned to read Ukrainian menus, in whose broadcasting studios I gave interviews, on whose squares and esplanades I supported the EuroMaidan, in whose churches I lit candles for the Heavenly Hundred, in whose museums I learnt about the country's history, and at whose memorials I stood in remembrance of the Chernobyl liquidators, the victims of the Holocaust

and Holodomor. Since 2014, they have been joined by those who perished on the Maidan, by the victims of the downed flight MH17, and by the thousands killed in the Russian war against Ukraine. The Ukrainians always bring a sea of flowers to the places of remembrance in their cities. Many times I was there as well, hoping that it might be possible to drown my sorrow in these flowers.

Misguided policy

Since February, the Russian war has been directed with the utmost vehemence against my friends, against many people whom I regard highly, against people with whom I have collaborated on policy-making for many years, against soldiers I have met again and again in the trenches of Donbas since 2014, against volunteers who joined us as activists pushing for anti-corruption reforms or a strengthening of local democratic structures, and against journalists and artists whose work inspired the Ukrainians to finally leave the Soviet system behind. Mariupol is in ruins, new large cemeteries and reports of massacres and terror at the hands of the Russian occupying forces are showing the entire world that the Russian army's war of aggression violates all international rules and conventions. What we are hearing from Vladimir Putin and others is precisely what we are seeing on the battlefields. The Russian war aims to annihilate, to eradicate a nation. I am deeply attached to Ukraine. Naturally, I am emotional. And naturally, I also want to talk about the war and Germany, and about how Putin and his regime can be stopped, so there can even be peace.

German politics leaves me bewildered. During the three months of Russia's war, our government has not managed to extend the necessary and existential support to an invaded Ukraine. And this applies to all levels at which our support is required. Germany is dragging its feet with respect to economic sanctions for as long as it can. For weeks, Germany has failed to supply any weapons at all to Ukraine, while the Russian army has geared up for a new offensive. Berlin is now even stalling the European Commission president's initiative to finally open the door to Ukraine by giving it EU candidate status. The Germans are getting lost in debates over the ethical and economic dilemmas of arms shipments and the energy embargo. At the same time, they are overlooking their part in Putin's rise. Today, they apologise for their blindness, even though they were tolerant towards his politics that were becoming increasingly authoritarian domestically and more aggressive on the world stage. Germany's policy towards Moscow showed no interest in the alarming change that was taking place in Russia and focused entirely on trade. Germany's hunger for cheap energy and the opportunities of a big market

for German products have been the determining factors in its Russia policy for many years under various governments.

This misguided and irresponsible policy toward Russia has hardly changed at all since 2014, since the beginning of the war against Ukraine. Germany's dependency on Russian energy and the influence of Russian companies on energy security have even been exacerbated. Berlin's outlook regarding Ukraine during the Revolution of Dignity and the first eight years of the war can only be explained in light of its Russia policy.

Germany's policy showed no interest in the alarming change that was taking place in Russia and focused entirely on trade.

It was German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier who, after Viktor Yanukovych's government had shot 100 people dead in the middle of Kyiv, negotiated a compromise and demanded that the pro-Russian leader be kept in power. It was against this puppet of Putin and his anti-European and anti-democratic stance that the Revolution of Dignity had been aimed in the first place. The compromise failed. Yanukovych and his inner circle fled to Russia. And once Putin was no longer able to maintain his corrupt regime in Kyiv, Russia occupied the Crimean Peninsula and attacked Ukraine on a broad front in Donbas. Russian propaganda about a coup d'état in Kyiv has since been given much attention in Germany. This talk of a coup accompanies Russian propaganda that has used the pretence of fighting Nazis in Kyiv to invade Ukraine and justify the "gathering of Russian soil" ever since 2014. Many Germans never even noticed the fascist tendencies of Russian propaganda.

Unheeded warnings

Germany and the government of Angela Merkel played a decisive role when the EU and western states were faced with deciding on how to respond to the Kremlin's breach of international law and Europe's peace architecture. It was agreed that there would not be a military solution, but that the conflict would have to be resolved politically and through negotiations. Instead of relying on a military response, economic sanctions against companies and individuals were enacted. These initial decisions on sanctions already showed how weak they would be in the long term.

Even a Germany led by Angela Merkel, who was often lauded for keeping sanctions in place, was adamant about protecting national interests. Neither of the two Nord Stream pipeline projects was impacted by these restrictions. Both the federal government and German industry were so sure of good relations between Moscow and Berlin that in 2015, during the Russian war to occupy Donbas, a substan-

Photo: photocosmos1 / Shutterstock

While Germans are slowly learning that Ukraine is a distinct nation with its own language and culture now threatened by Russia, Berlin's longing for accommodation with Russia is already starting to re-emerge.

tial portion of German gas storage facilities was sold to Russian companies. The Baltic and Scandinavian states, as well as Poland and Ukraine, had been warning Germany since the planning stage of Nord Stream 1 that Russia would use energy as a political instrument in its bid for influence and power. All of these warnings went unheeded. Instead of making the sanctions strong enough to be effective in lieu of military support, the exact opposite was done. Germany strengthened the Gazprom empire and became an ally in Russian pipeline politics. Political and industry players assisted Putin in deepening the country's dependency and providing a never-ending stream of our money that finances the Russian arms build-up and war.

The Merkel government also played a significant role in the Minsk negotiations, which were initiated to stop Russia's bloody war in Donbas. The Ukrainian army and volunteer battalions had suffered heavy losses. They had been ill-prepared for the war, with a Ukrainian army also weakened by corruption. With the prospect of a truce, an agreement was thrown together that turned the Russian war against Ukraine into a civil war between the Ukrainian army and the so-called separatists

in Donbas. Putin negotiated with the German and French heads of government. They discharged Russia from any accountability for the war.

At the same time, it was demanded that Ukraine guarantee the rights of citizens in the Russian-occupied territories, including everything from the right to vote to social standards. This was despite the fact that the occupied areas were controlled by Russian soldiers and mercenaries. Without the Russian military and without Russian weapons, there would not have been a Luhansk or Donetsk "People's Republic". The past several years have even seen Russian passports being issued and people from the occupied regions taking part in Russian elections. The war in Donbas was never a civil war but the first step in Putin's plan to bring the whole of Ukraine back into his Russian empire. Just as Crimea was not occupied because of human rights for ethnic Russians, but because Putin needed the peninsula to gain military control of the Black Sea.

The German role in the Minsk negotiations helped Putin to further establish his preparatory propaganda about threatened ethnic Russians and Moscow's necessary role in protecting this population. A lasting armistice, however, was never achieved. Soon after the first signing in Minsk, any escalation in the fighting was followed by a stern appeal from Berlin and Paris to "both sides" of the "conflict" to adhere to the agreement. It is an irony of history that Ukraine's current president made an earnest effort to ease the situation for the people in Donbas, and was lauded for it by Berlin. He now faces the greatest conceivable escalation. The Minsk negotiations and their results, which turned Russian militias and terrorists into Ukrainian separatists, fit seamlessly into today's propaganda narrative of the Russian war as a targeted operation to remove Ukrainian Nazis.

With both their Russia and Ukraine policies, successive German governments have made Putin stronger. They stepped up trade with Russia and, in the face of an increasingly authoritarian regime, enhanced Putin's power and put weapons in his hands in more ways than one. German negotiation strategies in Kyiv and Minsk also involved supporting the falsification of the war's reality in line with Putin's aims.

Working through the past

For us Germans, the history of the past century gives us reason to assume responsibility for the European continent's security to this very day. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its gruesome consequences for the region call us to act responsibly towards present-day Ukraine. After all, the ensuing war of aggression in 1941 and the German occupation of Soviet territories led to millions of victims, particularly among Ukrainian Jews. Germany's interest-driven policies and toler-

ance shown towards an authoritarian regime in Moscow only aided and abetted the current Russian war against Ukraine. Our past and more recent history obliges us to now help Ukraine, a country that has never waged a war against another state.

We must do this with sanctions and in particular by renouncing energy imports from Russia. We must also supply effective weapons for the defence of the Ukrainian nation. Likewise, opening the doors for Ukraine to join western alliances is a long overdue step. Despite our Nazi history, it was made easy for us Germans to first attain membership in the European Community and subsequently NATO. And after 1989, East Germany – in contrast to other Warsaw Pact states – very simply became part of these alliances. This, therefore, cannot mean that today's Germany simply keeps the doors to these alliances shut to Ukraine.

While Germans are slowly learning that Ukrainians are a distinct nation with their own language and culture now threatened by Russia, Berlin's longing for accommodation with Russia is already starting to re-emerge. In Germany, we have yet to understand that it is a Russian war against which the Ukrainians are defending themselves militarily. Russia must lose and Ukraine must win in order to even have a future.

Ever since the invasion, we in Germany have been arguing about arms shipments to Ukraine. I have often reminded other participants in debates that our country was liberated. This then makes me wonder what is wrong with us. Is it that we do not understand the Ukrainians' struggle for freedom because Germany once had to be defeated, and only later we decided that we had actually been liberated? Or is it that the view of Ukraine, this great land in the East, is still skewed by a colonialist perspective not only in Moscow, but also in Germany? As far as our role in Europe is concerned, we Germans have a lot of sorting out to do.

Rebecca Harms was a member of the European Parliament for Alliance '90/The Greens from 2004 to 2019. She is a former co-president of the Greens/EFA in the European Parliament. She is a member of *New Eastern Europe*'s editorial board.

For our freedom and yours

MYKOLA RIABCZUK

Ever since 2014 the war in Ukraine has often been thought of as a local conflict, wholly separate from wider issues. If Putin's full-scale invasion has proven anything, however, it is that Kyiv now finds itself on the frontline of a battle to defend liberal democratic values against authoritarianism.

For at least a few years, if not more, we have heard many intellectuals grimly point to a growing crisis of democracy and an increase in populistic, authoritarian and even dictatorial tendencies in an increasing number of states. This trend has also been evidenced by Freedom House studies. The data these investigations have collected in recent years demonstrate that the number of democratic countries in the world has been on the decline since 2005. In addition, there have been numerous reports on the worsening quality of democracy in countries that may have not formally abandoned the democratic system of governance, but have become illiberal nonetheless.

To illustrate the seriousness of the situation it is useful to glance at some titles of books and articles that examine the topic. Starting with the more subtle ones we can find: "Is Democracy in Decline?" (published in 2015) and "Is Transition Reversible?" (2016); or "Is Liberal Democracy in Retreat?" (2018). The more direct in tone include: "Kriza dovery, kriza demokracie" (Crisis of confidence, crisis of democracy, 2015); "Democratic Deterioration in Central Europe" (2017); "The Authoritarian Temptation" (2017); "The Return of the Authoritarian Spectre" (2018) and "The rise of illiberal politics in Southeast Europe" (2020). Finally, there are also some radically revisionist works such as "Rethinking 'democratic backsliding'

in Central and Eastern Europe" (2018), "Post–Cold War Democratic Declines: The Third Wave of Autocratization" (2019), "From revolution to 'counter-revolution': democracy in Central and Eastern Europe 30 years on" (2020), "Goodbye, Post-socialism!" (2019) and *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning* (2019).

The end of the end of history

Francis Fukuyama's theory presented in his infamous early 1990s book *The End of History* triumphantly announced the coming of a brave new world – one that would be free from visible ideological alternatives and the victory of liberalism. Starting from a decade later, the book became more and more ridiculed and criticised. As a result, we have seen many titles of texts that have twisted Fukuyama's words, such as *The End of the End of History*. This was the title of a 2019 text authored by Maximillian Alvarez and published by the influential *Boston Review*. In 2021, the same title was chosen for the book authored by Alex Hochuli, George Hoare and Philip Cunliffe, as well as an interview with Fukuyama himself. This discussion was called "We could be facing the end of 'the end of history'" and was published by *The New Statesman*.

Regardless of the circumstances, Fukuyama has never fully changed his position. He still believes that in the end liberalism will win. However, his conviction in this regard is now clearly less certain and includes the possibility of failure. This is what Fukuyama refers to as the "ultimate nightmare". He believes it would take the form of a coalition between totalitarian China and Russia. This would be coupled with a simultaneous destruction of Ukraine and Taiwan and an inability of the West to face up to such realities. Such a situation, as Fukuyama argues, will lead to a world that is dominated by two non-democratic powers. Here, we will face – as Fukuyama states himself – the real end of the end of history.

Fukuyama has never fully changed his position. He still believes that in the end liberalism will win.

Vladimir Putin and his advisors did not necessarily read all of these aforementioned texts. It was enough for them to observe the processes taking place in the leading states of the collective West and nudge them to Russia's advantage. They have done this by supporting right wing and populist political parties and movements, intervening in elections, and bribing western politicians, businessmen, experts and journalists. They also widely spread their propaganda poison, which is euphemistically called "post-truth". They recognised the susceptibility of the German elite and others who were not capable of refusing

the Kremlin's business offers. Moscow also took advantage of the helplessness of international institutions, including Euro-Atlantic bodies, in making important decisions. They also saw the reluctance among western politicians and intellectuals to see reality as it was and call a spade a spade. Many in the West continued to adhere to wishful thinking and dreams of a "democratising" Russia.

The Kremlin elite, who have successfully manoeuvred through the world of international affairs in recent years, now have reason to believe that they can succeed in a world of egocentrics, who have long been spoiled by living in peace and prosperity and who nonetheless can still be bribed. If they cannot be bribed, then they can be intimidated. If not intimidated, then cheated and openly disdained. This is what explains the promotion of labels such as *Gayropa*.

Standing ovations for a KGB agent

The Kremlin elite first started to gain this confidence in 1999 when the western elite did not react to the blowing up of residential buildings in Moscow and a few other cities. It is believed that these acts were carried out by Putin's secret services. Their aim was to spread anti-Chechen hysteria in the country and help Putin, at that time a little-known KGB agent, gain power. The western response to these provocations took the form of an invitation that was issued to Putin by the Bundestag. A year later in the German parliament, he delivered a fully hypocritical speech, one for which he received a standing ovation.

Similar reactions were also seen at the time of the genocide that took place in Chechnya. Putin again received high-level invitations and ovations from politicians in the West. In France, he even received the National Order of the Legion of Honour, which was granted to him by President Jacques Chirac. A similar trend was observed after Russia's invasion of Georgia and the annexation of 20 per cent of its territory. There were no sanctions introduced. Instead, the West launched a "reset" and an ambitious "partnership for modernisation" project.

Even the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas in 2014 did not bring a collective awakening in the West. The minor, and rather just formal, sanctions that were passed back then hardly resembled an adequate reaction. Expectedly, they caused no real effects. Instead, they disgraced the idea of sanctions as an instrument of punishment. This is especially true when contrasted with the enthusiasm that accompanied the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

All in all, western reactions (or lack thereof) to Russia's atrocities over the years have encouraged, rather than discouraged, the Kremlin to exploit the same techniques time and time again. This is why the war launched by Russia in 2014 against

Ukraine was never officially called a war. The effectiveness of this technique can be seen even now, eight years later. We can still hear western politicians and journalists use the term "Ukrainian crisis" in reference to the military conflict that has been taking place in Eastern Ukraine since 2014. Knowingly or not, they voice Russia's interpretation of these events. This outlook portrays the war as an internal Ukrainian matter, a kind of "domestic war" that Russia is not involved in. To bring an end to the aggression taking place in Donbas, western politicians tried to force the Kremlin to make some concessions within the framework of the Minsk agreements. Yet, from the very beginning this was doomed to fail, mainly because Russia – the main initiator of the aggression – has continuously and widely denied being a part of it.

A "crisis" no more…

Russia's interest in hiding its role in the war is understandable. Yet, what is more difficult to comprehend is the readiness of western politicians and intellectuals to adhere to an Orwellian newspeak that does not allow them to call the current war a war; the aggression, an aggression; or the criminal state, a criminal state. Even in scholarly discourse there are texts that follow Moscow's rhetoric in this regard. The term "crisis", which in fact is a purely abstract concept, has subsequently obtained features of agency. In other words, it assumes that there is an independent actor with some kind of magical and spontaneous power, which apparently operates independently from anybody's mind or will. The term "crisis" appears as a kind of *deus ex machina* that brings on processes and actions, but at the same time hides the real role of the Russian Federation and its politicians, ideologues, secret services and mercenaries.

The term Ukrainian crisis was yet at one point adequate and relevant and used to describe events that took place in a certain time frame. Specifically, it referred to the events that started on November 21st 2013, when Viktor Yanukovych – Ukraine's then president – decided (under Russia's influence) not to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union, thereby causing mass protests in Kyiv. This crisis ended on February 22nd 2014 when the very same president fled to Russia terrified by the consequences he may face as a result of the protests. The following day, during an extraordinary session of the Ukrainian parliament (at that time the only legitimate agency of power in Ukraine) impeached Yanukovych, formed a new temporary government, established the date for new presidential elections, and gave the parliament's new Chairman Oleksander Turchynov the temporary role of president. In this way, the political process moved from Kyiv's

Maidan square to the halls of the parliament, and from an extraordinary time to a procedural routine.

In other words, the "Ukrainian crisis" in the strict meaning of the term ended in early 2014. What started after was neither a "crisis" nor "Ukrainian". It was an unprovoked Russian aggression and ultimately a Russian-Ukrainian war. It took the form of a hybrid, local and undeclared conflict. It was also a low intensity engagement. In fact, it aimed to gradually destroy the then limited Ukrainian state, which was being forced to accept the Minsk agreements as they were understood by Russia. In this way, Kyiv was forced to give up its real sovereignty in a similar way that Central European states were forced to after the Second World War.

It seems that one year ago, in February 2021, the Kremlin lost hope to conquer Ukraine via its hybrid war – one that would turn Ukraine into some kind of Belarus or dysfunctional Bosnia, manipulated by Moscow. Such a strategy would not require an open and large-scale invasion, meaning that it would not put Russia at risk of large military losses or even at a greater risk of international sanctions. As long as the negotiations over the Minsk agreements were in place and Kyiv allowed pro-Russian agents to legally operate in Ukraine, Moscow had hoped to simply foster pro-Russia sentiment in the country.

A double shock

Petro Poroshenko's defeat in the 2019 presidential election, along with the failure of his party (portrayed by pro-Russian media as ultra-nationalist) in the parliamentary elections, were viewed by Moscow as a chance for a political coup in Kyiv. Instead, it turned out to be a fatal blow to the Kremlin's strategy. In fact, the elections demonstrated that there were no influential pro-Russian political forces in Ukraine and that no natural change of power in Kyiv would lead to a significant geopolitical reorientation.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who came across as a pacifist and was promising a peaceful end to the conflict, turned out to be uncompromising in negotiations. He expressed not only the voice of Ukrainian society but also Ukraine's national interest and his own rational and responsible attitude towards the issue. For Russian propagandists it was a double shock – the label of an ultra-nationalist poorly matched a man who came from a Russian-speaking Jewish family from southern Ukraine. He had also always kept his distance from any kind of "nationalism" and even attacked it, in many different ways, during his popular TV shows. That is why Russian propagandists chose a different approach. They presented Zelenskyy as a puppet of the United States, a politician who cannot be independent.

In addition, February 2021 saw Zelenskyy accuse Viktor Medvedchuk, Russia's main political agent in Ukraine and Putin's friend, of treason and placed him under house arrest. In addition, Zelenskyy decided that the main TV channels that were spreading Russian propaganda in Ukraine should be shut down. This probably pushed Putin to further pressure Ukraine and prepare his large-scale invasion. At the very least, he hoped to threaten the country by demonstrating that such preparations were taking place.

Foreign policy experts are of the opinion that Russia's decision to launch an invasion of Ukraine was also facilitated by the completion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. The launching of this project meant a removal of gas transportation infrastructure (important for Russia) from Ukraine's territory. As a result, a whole new area for potential battle appeared overnight. There were also experts who claimed that the failure of the West in Afghanistan and the chaotic withdrawal of US troops from Kabul ultimately convinced Putin that it would be easy to tackle this "paper tiger".

As Russia built up its troops on Ukraine's borders, it started to carry out military drills and demanded that Kyiv recognise the so-called people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. Naturally this would mean Ukraine's capitulation. Towards the end of last year, Putin formulated his demands directly to the West in the form of an ultimatum, demanding a direct reaction from both Brussels and Washington. Yet the West did not blink and neither did Kyiv. As a result, Putin felt that he had no choice but to either capitulate or continue to push further.

People power

Neither the foreign policy experts, nor western politicians gave Ukraine much of a chance of survival in a total war with Russia. In one interview, the Ukrainian ambassador to Germany Andriy Melnyk admitted that right after the Russian aggression he jumped on German officials and begged them to initiate immediate sanctions against Russia. One of his interlocutors, Germany's Minister of Finance Christian Lindner, welcomed him with a friendly smile. However, the conversation's tone was as if Ukraine's failure had already been foreseen. He reportedly said to Melnyk that "You have only a few hours". He was probably convinced that there would be a return to business as usual with Russia once a puppet government was installed in Kyiv and a peace agreement signed with Moscow.

Lindner's "few hours" however turned out to be at least a few months. Even now there is no indication that Ukraine will capitulate to Russia. Furthermore, the genocide rhetoric that was used by the Russian authorities to question the existence of the Ukrainian nation and call anyone who thinks otherwise or questions

the Russian military's actions a fascist has left Ukrainians with no other choice. They have to fight or die – at least as a nation, because individuals have a chance to survive if they agree to be called Russians and engage in collaboration.

A united, consolidated Ukrainian nation probably caught external observers off guard the most. It probably surprised them more than the poor condition of the Russian army, which was said to be the second-best military force in the world. The military's performance was even more surprising vis-à-vis the well-prepared Ukrainian army. This is especially true when we remember its condition in 2014 after years of Yanukovych's rule.

This surprise reflects a lack of knowledge about Ukrainian identity and local patriotism that have always been present on these territories. These allowed for the preservation of the Ukrainian people even in times of the greatest repressions and imperial conquests. The pages of Ukrainian history are full of events such as the 1918 Ukrainian People's Republic or the anti-Soviet guerrilla fighters who operated after the Second World War. Ukraine also had the largest dissident movement in the Soviet Union, which was of crucial importance in the 1970s. Not to mention the 90 per cent pro-independence vote cast in 1991, the Orange Revolution in 2004, or the 2013–14 Euromaidan and Revolution of Dignity. While these events may not have generated changes that would have met the expectations of society, they for sure saved the country from neo-Soviet authoritarianism by revealing the power and agency of civil society.

It is precisely this political culture that significantly distinguishes Ukrainians from Russians, against Putin's will and wishes. It is the culture of free individuals who are not attached to their country like slaves are to their master, but who respect it as long as it is capable of protecting and respecting freedom and dignity, just as much as they do. This is a culture that makes Ukrainians one nation – in a political understanding of the term – not with the Russians, but with Poles and Lithuanians. This is a culture that is rooted in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, its freedom traditions, as well as the experiences of mutual responsibility and accountability. These differentiated the Commonwealth from the Russian Empire just as much as today's Ukraine is different from Putin's empire. We have to remember about this tradition, cherish it and look to the future.

Overcoming evil

At the time of writing the Russo-Ukrainian War is still ongoing and its final outcome remains unknown. Ukraine may lose in this war because it is fighting a large and heavily militarised state; a state that is cruel, full of lies and capable of

terrible atrocities. It is a state that is in possession of nuclear arms and could use them because its leader is completely paranoid. Yet Ukraine can also win this war. This is its mission and its utmost need.

Ukraine understands that this is a war for its independence, a process that has not been completed yet. Even though it started in 1991, Ukraine is today fighting a different regime, a regime that is fascist. That is why Ukraine fights not only for its independence but also its survival and existence. It can win if it receives the necessary support from allies: rockets, planes and heavy weapons. It will win if western societies push their pacifistic and interest-driven governments to support Ukraine and finally come to the realisation that this war is a unique chance to destroy the evil empire, a criminal state that has been rotting for years now and infecting everything around it. On the other hand, a successful destruction of Ukraine would give Russia an impetus to destroy its other neighbours. This is why it is better for everyone to win against this evil now, with Ukraine's courageous effort, than to fight it later, when – as it may indeed happen – there is no Ukraine left.

"The Ukrainians", Anne Applebaum poignantly wrote in one of her most recent essays, "have made their cause a global one by arguing that they fight for a set of universal ideas – for democracy, yes, but also for a form of civic nationalism, based on patriotism and respect for the rule of law; for a peaceful Europe, where disputes are resolved by institutions and not warfare; for resistance to dictatorship". The language they use to talk to the world is effective "because it evokes the principles that bind together the majority of Europeans, Americans, and many other people around the world, reminding them of how much worse the world was in the bloodier past, and how much worse it could be in the future if those principles no longer matter".

This is precisely what this war is all about. It is not only about the future of Ukraine, or that of our whole region, but it is also about the future of the whole world. "A victory for Ukraine will really be a victory for all who believe in democracy and the rule of law," Applebaum concludes. Yet, its failure would be exactly what Fukuyama correctly described as the "ultimate nightmare" – a real end to the "end of history". NEE

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

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How a free Belarus can join the anti-Putin coalition

PAWEŁ KOWAL

Since the spurious presidential elections of 2020 and subsequent protests, as well as the repressions that have been taking place, we know that Alyaksandr Lukashenka does not represent Belarus. Even more importantly, regardless of the scale of repressions, the Belarusian nation is not the dictator's property. It continues to fight for its freedom and independence and could be a vital force in ending Russian imperialism once and for all.

The anti-Putin coalition is divided on the question of what tactics should be used against Russia at the time of its war against Ukraine. The main problem in this dispute involves two key conflicting ideas. The first believes that we should take advantage of Putin's huge mistake of starting a war in Ukraine and now must do everything possible to get rid of Russian imperialism in Central and Eastern Europe. The second states that regardless of all the atrocities, the status quo in Europe should be maintained. In other words, while we need to punish Russia for attacking Ukraine and the consequences of its military activities against this country and its nation, we should also allow the Kremlin to maintain its relatively strong position in international affairs. Put simply, Russia cannot come out of the current conflict weak and humiliated.

While the first idea is supported by the current foreign policies of the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Poland, the Baltic states and a few Central European countries, the second one is the basis of activities (or lack thereof) of the French and German governments (along with a few other EU states). As a result, the current division within the West revolves around the question of whether Putin should receive a life jacket or not.

Where opportunities lie

There are a few reasons why some western states cannot accept the end of the Russian empire. The most plausible is the continuing influence of the so-called "brotherhood of former empires". Its elements can be noticed even today, which indicates that the old connections have not yet been overcome. It is also clear that some of the former colonial powers have not rid themselves of their imperial pain. As a result, they cannot stop thinking about Russia's imperial role, even if they are convinced that Putin needs to be stopped. Thus, they would argue that we need to find a proper balance of power in international affairs.

I am not going to discuss whether the assumption that Russia's imperial position should be maintained is realistic or not. In my view, it is simply impossible to engage in talks with Putin after what has taken place in Bucha, Irpin and other sites of genocide committed against the Ukrainian population by the Russian army. It is also clear and unquestionable that, at least with regards to Ukraine, the Kremlin pursues policies that allow it to engage in 20th century-style warfare and avoid internationally accepted diplomatic means and procedures.

It is also quite clear that after three months of war in Ukraine, neither Germany nor France have had any impact on the scale of the military activities undertaken by the Ukrainian side. There is no doubt that at the end of the day it will be the Americans and the British who will decide on how much military support Ukraine will obtain.

Returning to the first idea, its assumption that a weak Russia must be forced to introduce reforms and large systemic changes once it loses the war is not only welcomed by Central European and Baltic states, but also could be highly beneficial for several post-Soviet states such as Belarus and Kazakhstan. In fact, it would mean a huge developmental opportunity for both of them.

And this is where the main difference between the two outlooks lies. Namely, the thinking that Russia needs to maintain its post-imperial position gives no room to an independent Belarus. Recognising this should encourage discussion on Russia's position and role in today's Europe. We may indeed not be able to find answers to

such questions when intense military activity is still taking place in Ukraine, but we cannot help but notice that the US government has already started making efforts to expand the anti-Putin coalition beyond the borders of the European continent. This is evidenced by US talks with potential partners in Asia and Africa. In this process, we should not yet overlook the fact that a candidate willing to join such a coalition can be found very close to the frontline in the middle of Europe. There, it borders both Russia and Ukraine.

Backing a loser

Of course, the country in question is Belarus. Since at least 2020 we have known that we should not "leave it behind" to allow it to be taken over by Russia. However, in light of the current Russo-Ukrainian war, it is important to determine which side Belarus is really on. Alyaksandr Lukashenka is evidently Putin's client. It is also quite clear that in recent months he has been paying his patron back for the support he received in 2020. It has also been recognised that some acts of Russian aggression against Ukraine originated from the territory of Belarus. This includes numerous rockets attacks.

However, the moment Lukashenka realised that Russia was not doing so well in Ukraine, he (unsurprisingly) took a few steps back and opted for a "wait and see policy". Being in power for over a quarter of a century now, he knows all too well that the truth can be cruel and inexorable and that one day he too will be seen as responsible for the current atrocities. He also knows that he decided to help Putin against the will of the majority of Belarusian society. The population, unlike their Russian counterparts, do not support the war in Ukraine en masse. This is evidenced by public opinion polls showing that only a very small group (a maximum of six per cent) of Belarusians support their country's engagement in the current war on the Russian side. Also, only a mere 30 per cent support Russia in this conflict.

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These numbers, especially if we take into account the scale of the Kremlin's propaganda in Belarus, may indeed suggest that the opinion of the Belarusian society regarding the war runs contrary to the position of the Minsk authorities. They may also explain various cases of social discontent that have recently been recorded in Belarus. These include acts such as not allowing supply trains to continue their journeys. It is thus justified to say that Lukashenka decided to support Putin in his war against Ukraine because he was scared for

Photo: Valeriya Zankovych / Shutterstock

Many acts of Russian aggression against Ukraine have originated from the territory of Belarus, including rockets attacks.

himself. He wanted to protect his family fortune and his own position. However, Putin's failure in Kyiv also placed Lukashenka in a losing position.

Keeping in mind the staged presidential elections of 2020 and continued protests, as well as the repressions that have been taking place in reaction to them, we know that Lukashenka does not represent Belarus. Even more importantly, regardless of the scale of the repressions, the Belarusian nation is not the dictator's property. It continues to fight for its freedom and independence and now has been directing its attention towards the anti-Putin coalition that started to form in the aftermath of the February attack on Ukraine. Such activities can be observed among both the Belarusian political leaders who have been forced into exile since 2020 and the political oppositionists who are now kept in Belarus's prisons.

But these activities can also be seen among Belarusian artists in the country or in exile, social activists, clergymen, and the assumed silent majority of citizens that now make up the independent part of Belarusian society. This clearly means that there is a "non-Lukashenka Belarus". Not only is this Belarus real but it also supports Ukraine in its war against Russia. It is therefore in the West's interests

to include this non-Lukashenka Belarus in the anti-Putin coalition, in a similar way to how de Gaulle's France was included in the anti-Hitler coalition during the Second World War.

Democratic post-war Europe?

If we want to see a new democratic order in a post-war Europe, we need to start investing now. This will require us to focus more of our political capital on building a "new Belarus". The first step in this process of empowering a post-Lukashenka Belarus involves the development of strong Belarusian political institutions in exile and their gradual recognition by the West. Since 2020, the US has almost no relations with Lukashenka's government and there are no American diplomats in Minsk. At the same time, only three Belarusians work at their embassy in Washington DC. The situation in other western countries is similar. It is now high time that we stop fooling ourselves and finally place our bets on the collapse of the remains of Russia's imperial power, which includes current Belarus's status as a satellite state.

The 2020 and 2021 protests have created a paradoxical situation. While Belarusians became empowered as a society, in the end they lost control over their state. After 2020, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's office was created in exile to give a voice to the country's opposition. This centre of political representation of free Belarus is located in Lithuania. It is indeed a form of presidential office, even though it may not be called this officially. Warsaw, in turn, is home to the National Anti-Crisis Management group, which is an organisation comprised of Belarusian civil servants, social activists and former diplomats. The group is headed by Pavel Latushko, former Belarusian politician and diplomat.

We may say that this group is in a way Belarus's government in exile. It recognises the supremacy of Tsikhanouskaya's power and her role as representative of Belarus and the Belarusian people abroad. Unfortunately, the western world has not decided to recognise this body either. It also does not recognise the Coordination Council, which resembles a national parliament and gathers such prominent figures as Svetlana Alexievich, Belarusian Nobel laureate in literature. These three political bodies of independent Belarus in exile work together, even though some of their members compete with each other for influence.

With most western attention now focused on Ukraine, interest in the situation in Belarus has naturally decreased. Consequently, the Belarusian political institutions in exile have also received less attention. Ideally, the situation should be the opposite. Belarusian émigrés should be given a clear signal that it is time for them to get organised and complete the process of establishing political institutions in exile.

The West should also admit that the framework of Belarus's political system has already been established in exile. This includes three key institutions: the office of the president, the parliament and the government. Now it is time to complete the process and show them adequate support. This would be beneficial both for the West and the Belarusian society, which clearly does not support the war against Ukraine or Lukashenka's involvement in it.

The price of war

The second step for the true and real inclusion of Belarus in the anti-Putin coalition requires showing that the country does not support Putin militarily and is in fact fighting on the side of free Ukraine. In this regard, many things have already taken place as well. That is why all we need to do now is recognise and accept some facts. This includes the existence of an independent Belarusian battalion (known as the Kastus Kalinouski Regiment), which is made up of around 1,000 soldiers and officers. There are also other Belarusian military formations in Ukraine. To mark their importance and show on which side free Belarus stands in the current war, Tsikhanouskaya should oversee an oath of allegiance from the Belarusian soldiers who are now fighting in Ukraine. Finally, the third step in the fight for free Belarus should include a large information campaign, which would be directed at the Belarusian society. This would involve one simple message: Lukashenka is pushing you into a war that will shame you for decades.

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In the coming months, we may witness a situation in which Putin temporarily gains the upper hand in the war against Ukraine and the repression of the Belarusian society gets even worse. This internal crackdown by Minsk will affect first and foremost those last Belarusian political activists who are not yet in prison. That is why we cannot allow Lukashenka to strengthen his position.

Once he realises that the new Belarus indeed exists and constitutes a true alternative to his rule, and once he knows that after the war he will find himself on the court bench with Vladimir Putin, Lukashenka will be forced to make new calculations. It is indeed clear already that Belarusian institutions in the West will not get automatic support in countries such as France, Germany or Italy (I hope I am mistaken here). But this will only make Lukashenka's life more difficult. He will have to operate in such a way that his silent patrons and impatient allied leaders in the West will have no reason to decide that the Americans were right when

they placed their bets on Tsikhanouskaya. He will have to roll back the repressions against Belarusians in his country.

The ideology of *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) is one of the foundations of the Russian war against Ukraine. In geographic terms, this vision is based on three states: Ukraine and Belarus in an alliance with Russia. The price of the war, from Russia's perspective, is to take over Ukraine, while Belarus has faded into the background. But in reality, Belarus is the most forgotten asset that the West has in this war. That is why it needs to find allies throughout the entire world. Breaking down Putin's regime is now the obvious goal of key western players. A few key political steps and a bit of imagination could ultimately make Belarus at the very least a symbolically important part of the anti-Putin coalition.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

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Macron's Eastern Europe rethink

CYRILLE BRET

The war in Ukraine and its effects are forcing the newly re-elected French president, Emmanuel Macron, to reshape his foreign policy in the region. As an inflation boom and energy crisis loom, Macron must also reconsider his strategies for Russia, the Balkans and non-EU states such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

At home, President Emmanuel Macron recently obtained a rock-solid political victory, whatever the pundits might say to minimise his feat. The incumbent managed to be elected for a second time, whereas his two direct predecessors (and political patrons) Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande, failed even to make it to the second round of their second presidential races. Moreover, Macron defeated Marine Le Pen (for the second time) by a large, increased and indisputable majority. Overall, 58.55 per cent of the voters chose him over the far-right leader. His party is now very likely to achieve an absolute majority in the lower chamber of the parliament (Assemblée Nationale) this June. In other words, the victory at home looks much like a triumph abroad.

The state of international relations in general and the war in Ukraine in particular played a significant role in Macron's re-election. The Russian invasion discredited his main opponents and competitors. Far-right (Le Pen and Éric Zemmour) and leftist (Jean-Luc Mélenchon) leaders had always been vocal in declaring their admiration for the master of the Kremlin, Vladimir Putin. Yet, in France at least, politicians must always take a significant step – actually a leap – to discuss international policies. It is well known among spin doctors and electoral moguls that

foreign policy shows a candidate's statesmanship but does not secure any votes. For French voters, international prestige is important but it is not a pressing matter.

First time around

Let us take a closer look at Macron's policy for Eastern Europe and Russia during his first term (2017–21). This will help us scrutinise whether his success might play a decisive role in the reshaping of Eastern Europe's strategic balance. French voters and leaders are usually not at ease with this part of Europe. They often struggle to grasp what is at stake east of Berlin. Yet, this does not prevent them from taking a profound interest in the critical situation faced by Ukraine and the other countries of the region. The war in Ukraine is no longer considered a regional issue in Paris. It is now a direct strategic, political and economic challenge for the French government.

In light of the current situation in Eastern Europe, several paths taken by Macron during his first mandate clearly led to nowhere. First and foremost, formats designed to improve relations with Russia, such as the "Brégançon spirit" and "Trianon Dialogue", are now to be set aside for the foreseeable future. Inspired by the Soviet policy of Charles de Gaulle during the Cold War, Macron tried to establish and maintain direct communication channels with Vladmir Putin. The meeting of the two leaders in August 2020 just before the Biarritz G7 Summit at the official summer residency of the French presidents, the Brégançon Fort, showed these ambitions to the world. As of today, such direct dialogue would appear to be a fool's errand, as such actions did not deter Russia from attacking Ukraine. The reshaping of the bilateral French-Russian relations is unavoidable.

French dialogue formats designed to improve relations with Russia are now set aside for the foreseeable future.

Everyone in Eastern Europe remembers Macron's 2019 statement that NATO is "brain dead". Even then, the declaration was rather bitterly received in Riga, Warsaw and Sofia. But now it appears completely outdated. The more lives, infrastructure and cities that are destroyed in the war, the more NATO membership appears to be the only security guarantor for the region and Ukraine. Even historically neutral Sweden and Finland shifted their position and applied for membership in the alliance. The French president can no longer advocate for any kind of European strategic autonomy in the region by criticising NATO.

Open political confrontation with Poland's government was the third trend of Macron's first mandate. This led to successes at home but setbacks in the region.

Photo: macri roland / Shutterstock

President Emmanuel Macron recently obtained a rock-solid political victory, whatever the pundits might say to minimise his feat.

Indeed, confronting the leadership of Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party has been a long-lasting goal for Macron. He has explicitly sided with the Polish opposition in the media, as well as during the country's judicial and abortion rights reforms. He has subsequently left his mark on the European elections of 2022. The confrontation with PiS did not exclude a pragmatic alliance with regards to the European five-year budget. Yet, this long-term struggle diminished the French president's prestige in Poland, the leader of the region and perhaps all of Eastern Europe.

Despite all of Macron's international efforts and achievements during his first mandate, his history with Eastern Europe is far from a love affair. It remains to be seen whether he can do something about this and finally get what he wants: leadership of the continent.

Old challenges, new constraints

The current crisis in Eastern Europe leaves the re-elected French president with no other option but to reshape his foreign policy in the region. With a long

war in Ukraine, inflation boom and energy crisis looming, Macron must rethink his strategies for Russia, the Balkans and non-EU states such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

For the French president, the first challenge is an old one: how to deal with a non-democratic and aggressive nuclear power such as Russia without undermining support for Ukraine and Eastern EU member states? Many of his predecessors grappled with the same dilemma. Macron's second term will most probably reinforce the sanctions strategy against the Russian authorities. It is indeed one of his first mandate's most important achievements and was organised in close cooperation with Berlin and Warsaw. It not only damaged Russian GDP in 2015–16 but also secured the position of EU member states throughout the continent. The French position will first set out to maximise the economic, diplomatic and military sanctions. Second, Paris will attempt to leverage them in order to obtain concessions from Russia when ceasefire talks seriously begin. The new constraint is that a revival of the "Brégançon spirit" is unacceptable. But the old goal of France remains the same: resist Russia without fighting it directly.

The Western Balkans will also be a top priority for Macron's second term agenda. Indeed, in the last few months of its EU Council presidency, France will host a summit on the development of the region and on the EU candidacies of Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania. In the context of fast track membership for Ukraine, the summit will provide the re-elected French president with a unique opportunity in Eastern Europe. If he wants to display a sincere interest in the region, he will have to set a clear path for a new wave of enlargements and investments. If the French perspective on investment and enlargement remains unclear, a huge opportunity will be missed to bridge the gaps between France and Eastern Europe. Once again, the challenge is traditional: how can France be heard in a region where other voices (Germany, Austria, Russia) are historically louder? But the constraint is new: can EU membership be granted quickly to Ukraine without discouraging efforts in Belgrade, Tirana and Skopje?

Opportunity for a new approach?

Regarding support for Ukraine, the coming months will be decisive for the French president's status in the region. He is sometimes accused of being only a tepid supporter of Kyiv. At the same time, he has been granted the title of "true friend of Ukraine" by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The challenges here are long term in nature. To tackle the emergency of the day, France will have to bolster Ukrainian military efforts with equipment, intelligence and logistics. But, in the medium

term, it will have to exert maximum pressure on Russia to enter ceasefire talks and make concessions, so that Ukrainian sovereignty can be restored.

The "hour of truth", however, will also involve discussions on the unavoidable reconstruction of the country. The business friendly former investment banker in charge in Paris has a vital role to play here. He can set up a brand new kind of relationship between France and Ukraine by gathering investors – both public and private – to give Ukraine a future. Whilst the challenge is largely predictable, the constraints are quite new for the French president. Indeed, prospective NATO and EU memberships can no longer be treated as distant questions. Eastern Europe wants clear and quick answers from the EU's founding countries.

In spite of appearances, Eastern Europe has never been a marginal factor in Macron's domestic agenda. In his first mandate, he suffered setbacks in his dialogue with Russia and the survival of NATO. Yet, he also engaged with PiS and the leaders of Hungary's Fidesz to launch a new political trend in Brussels. With Germany and Poland, he managed to secure a sanctions strategy on Russia that asserted the geopolitical role of the European Union on the continent. Hence, his second and final term as president is supposed to be one in which international maturity wins over the fights of domestic politics. The critical situation facing Eastern Europe certainly will require the newly re-elected French president to find a new approach that will also strengthen his bonds with the continent as a whole.

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Overcoming imperial trauma

PIOTR AUGUSTYNIAK

Perhaps Poland's own troubled relationship with Europe and European values, flirtations with quasi-Russian authoritarianism, nationalism and xenophobia, underpinned by aggression, prejudice and contempt – are all symptoms of our unresolved contest with imperial Russia. In other words, we are not Eurosceptic at all. We would truly like to be Europeans, but are restrained by unfinished business with Russia.

News of the Russian invasion of Ukraine caught me off guard in Greece, to where I travelled for a few days of spring and peace, the deficit of both we often find chronic. We are experiencing a seemingly eternal pre-spring, arranged for, by and into variable tones of depression, aggression, despair and sterile dynamism. This is underlined by a repressed impression of pointlessness, sterility, perpetually alternating frost and thawing of the spirit. We anticipate war and an inability to find peace.

On the first morning, Putin jumped out of my iPhone, just after waking up, before coffee. War and Putin. Disbelief, doubt and confusion contrasted with the Greek spring, with its peace and spectacular weather garnishing the no less awesome view. The Peloponnese, mountains and sea, azure and green, and simple fulfilling activities, such as picking oranges, squeezing lemons, walks through flowery meadows, olive groves. These do not disappear during war but resonate all the more. They all become more "complete" and meaningful but can also induce pain. This war is so close to Poland, impacting people who live among us, occurring in

cities for which we still often retain in memory their old Polish names. This is, perhaps counterintuitively, directly significant for the way in which we perceive this war, this brutish, monstrous assault. It reanimates many bygone memories, many dormant ghosts. It is a great shock to our internal world. A return of that feeling which sealed the fates local to this part of Europe most painfully and tragically. A return of the suppressed. I think about all this, standing at the scene of the great theatre in Epidaurus.

Familiar ghosts

The war is in its fourth day. The theatre is completely empty, but this vacuum is marked with a concentrated presence. Something wells up within me and I start to shout, standing alone in the middle of the ancient scene. The insane acoustics lower my voice, multiply it and make it resonate with the void. Fortified, it becomes otherworldly, stemming from an abyssal and gushing wound – the eternal struggle of freedom with tyranny. I feel in this desperate cry of mine the presence of all those who had to face imperial madness in defence of freedom. Against, as Mickiewicz wrote, "the mad hubris of great autocrats", among which Putin would so like to be counted. Ukrainians today are fully justified to feel like the Greeks resisting the Persians at Marathon, Salamis or Thermopylae.

Yes, dear Ukrainian brothers and sisters, you have this right! And every day of the war, your heroism and suffering confirm this conviction. Your *іди на хуй* is a translation of the Greek *μολών λαβέ*. Shouting on the stage at Epidaurus I felt that all those ghosts that had loved freedom over tyranny are with you today – and they will ensure that your assailants shall not prevail against you.

Just as I return from Greece I am submerged into our collective unconscious, clouded with a fog black as soot and red like blood. Indeed, Poland is, especially now, its own Hades. Mobilised, it reverberates with enthusiasm – something which, believe me, I am truly proud of. What emotional resources has this war activated in us Poles and no doubt other Eastern European nations? I will not write about what is already known. Yes, those emotions certainly include empathy, hospitality, solidarity, etc. Of course, we are all conscious of these feelings. But they are merely at the surface of our psychosocial life, which is full of fantasy and fantasies which we have long preferred to remain ignorant of. That which emerges from the depths and reveals itself so wonderfully under the guise of empathy and support is our Russian trauma, our own unburied past.

Russia did not withdraw its troops from Poland as if out of mercy. It was forced to remove itself, still harbouring its imperial aspirations. It was something it nev-

er accepted. Russia is not only incapable of change, it has no aspirations to that effect. The cult of Stalin in today's Russia is a virtue. In its essence, Russia remains as it was, voluntarily. Russia has not atoned for or worked through its past. While this is certainly not true of all Russians, it describes Russian collective memory and identity well. An aggressive, imperial Russia remains a reality of which Putin is only the face.

This is why victory over the USSR has brought us neither satisfaction, nor a sense of justice that meted punishment engenders, and no feeling of security that would be justified in the absence of Russian imperialism. Fear of Russia, a lack of punishment or recompense – all this lives within our collective psyche, thinly veiled on one hand with a sense of belonging to the West and the anti-western "getting up from our knees" on the other.

The Ukrainian war has at last provided all this frustration and suppressed trauma with an opportunity to be satisfied and overcome. This will occur at the hands of the Ukrainian nation, which will punish Russia by breaking its imperial might and disproving its myth of supremacy by laying bare its fragile foundations. This is indeed happening before our very eyes.

Unconscious inevitability

Within the war's first few days, Ukrainians achieved something which we Poles were never able to do. They proved their efficiency, enthusiasm and romantic zeal. In them that which we have lost has been reborn. Through them, we would like to somehow rediscover all this, something which cannot be achieved without sacrifices and true solidarity with Ukrainians. This is why we want to save them and in doing so, also save and regenerate ourselves. Ukrainians are both us but also others.

Poland, like no other European country, has already been a participant in this war from its first day.

War, along with refugees, moves from Ukrainian soil onto the sterile turf of the Polish soul, bringing with it the opportunity for a real turning point within us. It promises that we will regain something through opening ourselves to them, that is ourselves to the Other, the Other possibility within us. I have long been convinced that if anything can change Poland it would be an influx of Ukrainians, let alone fleeing from a common, archetypal enemy. This psychosocial mechanism transcends Poland, also supporting Ukrainians, who are attuned to our enthusiasm which they ultimately generate. They feel this change that they provoke within us and derive from it the strength to fight and resist.

All this means that Poland, like no other European country, has already been a participant in this war from its first day. This was determined by an unconscious, psychological inevitability. On the most basic, archetypical stratum of the Polish soul, Ukraine's struggle with the Russian aggressor is a war to split Ruthenia from Muscovy. The goal here on a group-psychological level would not be some new annexation of Ruthenia to Poland, but rather the entry or introduction of Ukraine to Europe.

There is a deep, psychological need to regain Ukraine as a partner and an ally, a neighbouring country freed from the Russian imperial yoke. In other words, on this group-psychological level Ukraine's victory would lead to an elevation of Poland, just as its conquest by Russia would be Poland's *coup de grâce*. A strong, reborn Ukraine allied with and supported by Poland would, on the plane of psychosocial energies, be nothing other than Ukraine "regained" for Poland, leading in turn to a Polish ascent. It was after all the Russian annexation of Ukraine, and its loss to Poland, that made us into a vacuous, sullen and demotivated nation. This gambit is already being played out in our collective unconscious.

This group-psychological match between Russia, Ukraine and Poland occurring alongside the war has very real implications and may prove decisive for the future of the region and beyond. Poland senses this and so it exerts itself. We conduct this war, which might free us from over two centuries of partition, with Ukrainian hands, and, thank God, we arm and support those hands as much as we are able to. This has only just begun, and may only now be resolved, since the mental partition about which I write is deeper and more enduring than a territorial one. The mere thought of this shakes me to the core. Perhaps our own troubled relationship with Europe and European values, flirtations with quasi-Russian authoritarianism, nationalism and xenophobia, underpinned by aggression, prejudice and contempt – are all symptoms of our unresolved contest with imperial Russia. In the hidden but overbearing shadow of which we remain, like a victim dependent on its tormentor.

In other words, we are not Eurosceptic at all. We would truly like to become Europeans, but are restrained by unfinished business with Russia, which colonised, terrorised and debased us over the centuries. Today, Ukrainians provide us with the chance to be released from this burden, provided we become engaged in their struggle, just as we are now and to an even greater extent looking forward. The current situation amounts to an intense national shock therapy. Their war with Putin's Russia is their, and our, war for ourselves. It is our common war with Russian imperialism, which made this part of Europe desolate not only physically but also mentally. Our energy and aid give us the opportunity to lift ourselves from the stupor that had not been broken even by joining the European Union. To paraphrase the title of a book by Maria Janion – To Europe, Yes, But Only With our Ukrainians!

Victory, together

This is the game played by our collective unconscious in the world today. The stakes could not be higher – being a true subject within Europe, freedom from the spectres that consume us. If Ukraine loses, that is, loses mentally, or should it win, but without us at its side, we will never recover within the EU. We will never return to the path of democratic rule of law. Russia will not have to arrive here for us to become like it in the long run.

To recover, our collective psyche must defeat Russian imperialism. Win alongside Ukraine. This has nothing to do with Russophobia. The goal is to break Russian imperialism, which would also offer an opportunity to Russia and Russians. Though it is not for us to judge whether our "Muscovite friends" will accept this opportunity.

It is not by accident that I once again make reference to poet Adam Mickiewicz. I do this because it seems to me that no one else can explain this war to us. No one but Mickiewicz, not political science, sociology or cultural criticism. While this may seem farfetched, one only has to read his "Ordon's Redoubt" to understand that nothing has really changed since the beginning of the 19th century. Our social health and development are still conditional upon resisting and overcoming the spectre of Russian imperialism. That this imperialism today is nothing but a spectre has been demonstrated most clearly by this war, but as it turns out, in its spectral form it is no less monstrous and malevolent.

Only Mickiewicz explains this war, only Mickiewicz conveys the enormity of its menace, the height of its stakes, not only geopolitical, but also mental. Mickiewicz is Eastern European romanticism written in Polish, though his "Ordon's Redoubt" resounds equally well in Ukrainian. This romanticism was politically established alongside the Spring of Nations' democratic protest against the imperial tyranny of the tsarist knout. In its essence, this war ought to have been fought in the 19th century. It has been taking place since the November Uprising.

This is why Western Europe will never fully comprehend this war, just as it never understood Polish insurgent upheavals. The West is currently showing extraordinary and laudable determination in this war, though it is also partially responsible for causing it. This responsibility derives from the maintenance of "pragmatic" relations with Putin's regime in recent decades, which moreover, was part of a very long tradition of not "provoking" Russia, "understanding" its otherness, etc.

I am unable to understand the deference and awe that the West has for Russia, about which much has been said and written. Could this perhaps have reached its peak now, to decline? If only… But this is dependent also on the processes that transpire in the western unconscious. After all, the core of Western Europe has an

imperial past. It is no surprise, then, that their own repressed and not adequately addressed imperial trauma is manifested in an equivocal relation to imperial Russia. Unlike in Eastern Europe, which is marked with tragic, anti-imperial upheavals and abortive attempts at winning social sovereignty, in Western Europe the dominant trauma is that of a loss of imperial potency and significance. Eastern Europe is democratic in spirit, though, in the face of recurring failure, has fallen victim to the social swamp we experience currently, punctuated with less frequent explosions of enthusiasm for independence. These spectral, shattered western empires, colonised by American capital, terrified of refugees, concerned with China, placated with obscene satiety and safety, unconsciously favour Russia, which still flexes its imperial muscle, demonstrating its vulgar contempt for all to see.

Mickiewicz is Eastern European romanticism written in Polish, though his "Ordon's Redoubt" resounds equally well in Ukrainian.

While disgusted by Russian aggression, the West is also full of unconscious jealousy and admiration. In this context, the western split between an imposition of truly severe sanctions, necessitated by Putin's war crimes, and its hesitance and reserve towards Ukraine's European aspirations, is significant.

Thinking about this I reach truly radical conclusions. If the ideal of a unified, cohesive and free Europe is to win, Western Europe has to unequivocally stand with Ukraine and accept it into the fold, finally and fully abandoning its sympathies for the Russian empire. If this does not happen, Europe will never ascend again. It will reveal itself to be a living corpse, a pitiful fool no longer able to understand anything significant.

I think about all this with great concern, with a growing suspicion that the game was rigged from the start against Ukraine. Perhaps (hopefully) the West has already sealed Putin's fate. However, it is still unable to revise its post-imperial pro-Russian sympathies and reject them once and for all. If they do not do this, their inclinations could return after Putin's removal, but as long as this war is ongoing, a chance remains. This is a critical time and an opportune moment, a last chance for a spectacular break and recovery, not only for the East, but also the West.

Spectre of tyranny

Such are the thoughts born within the Polish Hades. I take responsibility for them not without confusion, but the Ukrainian war leaves me no other choice – its influence is so overpowering that one loses solid ground on which to stand. And

yet it is hard to reject the disquieting thought that I am being carried away by East European paranoia which I dread. The explosion of mania, a reaction to powerlessness in the face of Russia's bombs, rockets, war crimes, and scandalous and beastlike determination to kill Ukraine. Moscow wants to blow it all up and extinguish it.

Maybe these thoughts are just some war delirium, delusions and vain hopes, because the spectre of tyranny, of Eastern empire will win again and triumph over life. Perhaps in Eastern Europe the spirit of freedom and democracy will never prevail over this spectre and even the West's potential awakening will not succeed in helping us in this. How absurd are imperial violence and war, to which this spectre leads. Unhealthy ambition, misplaced pride and a sick soul. Maybe nothing can be done about them?

I am in Greece again. It is the last day before returning; I reminisce. In Kameni Chora, a village on a slope of great lava rocks, we visited a volcano. We drove up a winding road between volcanic peaks, through fertile, though lunar-like craters. There is a cosmic, archaic, otherworldly aura. A place of burnt out beginnings; a great and eternal peace at the site of the world's primordial explosion. Walking in this thundering silence over volcanic gravel and slippery, mossy stones, we climbed the Methana Volcano. The summit has a tiny church and a fascinating view. The Saronic Islands in the misty sea. Aegina, Agistri and the tiny isles of the Peloponnese are scattered on the sea like the remains of some monstrous, archaic creatures.

Why is the world so frightful? Faced with an insane Putin and a foolish West, which, suddenly startled, is trying to wake up. What a ditch, cesspool, sewer we are in – I shudder to think. Why, why cannot the whole of humanity meet atop here at least for a moment? Meet and fall silent, become quiet and feel that such power, strength, rule, suffering, stupidity and pointless stubbornness are not necessary. It is terrible, so terrible. Terrible… And it would suffice to stand on Methana for a moment, drive through Kameni Chora and stand on a volcanic crater. What a bewildered animal man is today. Everyone, not just Putin. Indeed, Putin is an everyman. He is a paranoid admirer of his own grandeur, much like each and every one of us. Standing on the volcano, I understood. I understood this.

Translated by Hugo Lunn

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Central European sensitivity towards Ukraine

KINGA ANNA GAJDA

After Russia's aggression in Ukraine, people who live in Central and Eastern Europe were able to quickly assess the situation and express their empathy for Ukrainians. They felt a sense of connection with them and started to help them straight away.

We have always had difficulty when trying to explain what it means when we say "Europe". Indeed, this concept is dynamic and has undergone many changes over time. That is why in his "Letters to the European Deputies" (*Lettres aux députés européens*), a Swiss writer and promoter of European federalism in the 1950s, Denis de Rougemont, wrote that it was difficult to place Europe in one space and time. Clearly, the Europe which is seen from nearby, from within or on the periphery, is different from the Europe that is seen from afar. For example, from a remote continent.

Thus, it is never easy to define Europe within geographic boundaries. Such an attempt always brings more questions than answers. Can we limit Europe solely to the continent's borders? If yes, would that mean then that a quarter of Russia, including Moscow, which is located on the European continent, can also be called Europe? Can we thus decide on the Russian Federation's belonging to Europe? In light of today's war in Ukraine, which was deliberately started by the Kremlin, we are clearly far away from identifying Russia with what we call Europe.

Should we then talk about Europe as an area which falls within EU borders? If yes, would this mean that after Brexit we should stop calling the United Kingdom a European state? What if we limit our understanding of Europe to European

states and their colonies? Can we then claim that the French Antilles belongs to a European rather than Caribbean culture? These kinds of questions continue; while the answer to what Europe is, has become increasingly more and more difficult.

Heritage and belonging

To define Europe and European identity we should look at Europeans and their sense of belonging to European culture. Above all, Europe is a cultural fact. That is why it seems more rational to put aside the less useful geographic definitions and attempt to describe Europe through the prism of cultural sources and the values that its people hold dear. These sources, as the French essayist Paul Valéry rightly noted, include the heritage of ancient Greece and Rome, as well as Christianity. In addition, there is the heritage of the French Revolution, with human rights at the centre and treated as an absolute value.

The idea of Europe is thus based, or maybe we would like it to be based on, such values as freedom, democracy, dignity, equality, rule of law and human rights. More than anything else, these values are said to distinguish Europe from "non-Europe". They also determine whether we belong (or not) to the European community. Today, at the time of Russia's war against Ukraine, they are – on the one hand – what we are trying to defend and – on the other hand – what motivates us to move forward.

Faced with the brutality of Russia's aggression we have also seen a return of the justified question about Europe's limits and how to overcome them. Even though we know that many of our borders cannot be called natural – just like the Berlin Wall was never a natural border and erected for purely ideological reasons – we now see that some borders have again become important, mainly for security reasons. This also explains why the old division between Western and Eastern Europe has not only become central to many recent discussions but has also gained more exposure than we have seen in years.

Europe's internal border, rightly criticised, shows that there are still large mental differences between different parts of Europe. As a result, there are differences in the senses of threat and shock that are experienced by people who live in them. The point of stressing these differences is, however, not to eliminate Europe's East (or centre) from a civilised, progressive and democratic West. Neither is it to embrace a discourse of exclusion. The point of understanding these two different sensitivities that characterise the East and the West is rather to stress the fact that the internal border that divided Europe after the Second World War has had a long-term effect on the whole region that was once behind the Iron Curtain. Indeed, the area is still freeing itself from this burden.

The existence of this clearly political border explains why in the 1990s countries such as Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and others were seen as different from those located in Western Europe. It also explains why the term "Eastern Europe" was used to collectively describe a region that was in fact made up of different countries, ethnic groups, languages and histories. Not all of them would even like to use the term "Eastern" to describe themselves.

Memory and experiences

The concept of "Central Europe", put forward by Milan Kundera in 1984, was popularised by Polish, Czech and Hungarian intelligentsia. It was meant to serve as an antidote to the derogatory term "Eastern Europe". This term – as it was believed – denied the inhabitants of our region a sense of belonging to Europe. Central Europe's "return" was manifested with German reunification in 1991 and the EU enlargement of 2004. However, even after these two breakthrough moments for European integration, the East-West division remained, at least in discourse. It became a label to which Central and Eastern Europeans always had to make reference, regardless of whether they wanted to or not. The term can be offensive, but it cannot be ignored.

Since February 2022 this emblem, or uniform to use Hannah Arendt's words, has once again been publically put on by Central and Eastern Europeans. In other words, it has become the lining of the Western European suit. The fabric of this Eastern European uniform is made of the experience of socialism and communism, but also the memory of the lack of sovereignty, Stalin's repressions, and the knowledge of persecution and propaganda.

> We should not be surprised that the voices calling for more weapons to Ukraine come mostly from this region.

It was because of these experiences that Czesław Miłosz wrote about *Homo Sovieticus*. This victim of the totalitarian regime later – after the collapse of the Soviet Union – turned into a *Homo Post-Sovieticus*. Analysing these two sociological and political categories in *New Eastern Europe*, Professor Venelin I. Ganev wrote that what connects *Homo Sovieticus* and *Homo Post-Sovieticus* is an "interpretative template" that people in post-communist countries use to analyse the world that surrounds them.

That is why right after Russia's aggression in Ukraine people who live in Central and Eastern Europe were able to quickly assess the situation and express their empathy for Ukrainians. They felt a sense of connection with them (we can call it brother or sisterhood). They began to help straight away; unconditionally and en

masse. They also did it because collectively they share the memory of the brutality of the Soviet regime and the times when their countries were victims of Russia's crimes. This and the information about the threats that Vladimir Putin and Sergei Lavrov have been directing at other post-Soviet republics have generated a sense of threat, fear or even panic.

Recognising these emotions, we should not be surprised that the voices calling on NATO to send weapons to Ukraine and close Ukraine's skies come mostly from this region. Also, characteristically, people from this part of Europe seemed less shocked when they heard about the Russian army breaking international legal norms or deliberately killing or hurting innocent civilians. Unfortunately, the experience of torture and imprisonment is widely present in our history. The earlier experience of Soviet propaganda explains why in Central Europe we are more conscious of widespread Russian propaganda.

All said, we can now see that our thinking about security, which has clearly been shaped by these experiences and the sense of threat that accompanied them, is evidence of a certain distinctiveness. This is despite our attempts to wipe out this feature of being non-western. As a result, the memory of the past has turned out to be a living and non-erased experience.

Most importantly, however, the war that has been taking place since February right at the EU and NATO's borders, as well as the world's reaction to the violations of human rights and international law committed by the Russian army, have brought to light differences between what can be called European and what is not in accordance with European norms and values. Consequently, the conflict has made it clear that we need to define anew what we mean by Europe.

Europe's bulwark

Undoubtedly, creating a new border between Europe and non-Europe will amount to condemning what is beyond it as unacceptable. It will also have consequences for our discourse, as clearly a new border would mark a division between what we see as familiar and what is foreign to us. Indeed, since the 17th century everything that was East to Europe, or its core, was described as primitive, pre-modern, semi-civilised, traditional, despotic, barbarian and backward. It was contrasted with the progressive, democratic and dynamically developing western part of the continent. In this way, Western Europe managed to determine its positions of power as well as dependencies and subordination. It also determined who is to be called aggressive and who is benevolent; who is fast and who is slow; who is brave and who is fearful; open to the future or stuck in the past; controlling and controlled.

Culturally speaking, on the first day of the war's outbreak, Ukraine has become Europe's bulwark. We understand its importance for the security and future of the European community, even though we know that formally Ukraine is not a member of the EU. Yet, we admire Ukrainians who fight also for our values and thus ask ourselves whether our understanding of Europe should also embrace other countries that are not necessarily a part of the EU. We should also think about states that are not located on the European continent and even those that do not belong to what is popularly called the "West". And yet many of these countries, as it turns out, are now on "our" side. These countries have developed what we like to call modern statehoods, are willing to cooperate (and not fight) with other states and respect others' sovereignty (even if in the past they had conflict with other states).

Thus, a wider marking of European borders would not necessarily be limited to formal divisions of territories, but rather reflect our shared values and their protection in the face of future challenges. We should also remember that because of varied adherence to the aforementioned value system, Europe's Eastern border was never permanently set in one place. Research on axiological preferences in the region shows that it actually has been moving further and further to the East. Until not that long ago Europe was said to end in Poland, while Ukraine was believed to be the beginning of the East. For Ukrainians, in turn, it is in Ukraine that Europe was to end, at least since the time of the Orange Revolution, while the East was believed to start in Russia.

The only question is how far can the border move? Clearly the current discourse points to a division between Russia and the West. Yet, it should also be noted that this West is also joined by what we consider non-western states, such as Japan. As a result, it is probably better to place the current division between states that are for and against Putin (it is surely difficult to find neutral ones). Possibly, this division over the war in Ukraine will overlap with US President Joe Biden's theory that the world is now divided between democratic and authoritarian systems.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

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The power of local diplomacy

CRISTIAN CANTIR

Local networks and "sister city agreements" have become an opportunity for local governments to express their outrage directly to Russian cities or partners. Since the end of February, cities like Glasgow, Turku, Tokyo and Tallinn have suspended their relations with their sister cities in protest of the invasion.

In 1986, the Chicago City Council passed an ordinance to divest city funds from banks connected to the South African government. Hundreds of US cities and states adopted similar policies in the last years of the Cold War, lending a hand to national decision-makers – and sometimes pushing them – to end apartheid. These actions were part of a longstanding tradition of local government diplomacy that has continued during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In March, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot announced that she was suspending sister city ties with Moscow. "While this is not a decision I enter into lightly", Mayor Lightfoot explained, "we must send an unambiguous message: we strongly condemn all actions by the Putin regime."

It is easy to view such decisions as symbolic endeavours that will have little impact on the course of the war. Yet, taken as a whole, the chorus of local governments reacting to the invasion has made a difference. Their diplomacy has amplified the material punishment and ostracism of Russia, brought more aid to Ukraine, and personalised the conflict to local communities in the West that are far removed from the war zone. Some cities have kept lines of communication open with counterparts in Russia, which has undermined the Kremlin's narratives about its invasion.

Bricks in the wall around Putin

Countries have unsurprisingly been at the forefront of sanctions. But, under the radar, local governments have reinforced and strengthened the legitimacy of these efforts. Right after the invasion, for instance, authorities in Quebec tasked the local liquor board with getting rid of Russian products in stores. In New York state, Governor Kathy Hochul signed executive orders banning state entities from relations with Russia-based businesses. Washington Governor Jay Inslee explained the thinking of some local decision-makers to the Associated Press: "If our state can put one brick in the wall around Putin, it will be a good thing." These bricks in the wall, as Governor Inslee has called them, are inseparable from national policies and deepen the sanctions regime by establishing roots at the local level. It also makes a reversal of policies more difficult as regional governments move on to establish other global connections. For the Russian elite, these actions illustrate western consensus and cut off potential weak links that could facilitate the evasion of punitive policies.

In light of a bewildering array of options for helping Ukrainians, sister city arrangements have also made it easier for local governments and people to give direct donations and aid. The mayor of Chernivtsi, for instance, requested and received generators and humanitarian assistance from its Romanian sister cities of Suceava, Iași and Timișoara. Florence held fundraisers for Kyiv, one of its sister cities, while the mayor of Winnipeg donated 10,000 US dollars from the local budget to Lviv, a sister city since 1973. Beaufort, a small South Carolina city of about 13,000 people, raised 50,000 US dollars for its sister city of Ostroh.

Sister city arrangements have made it easier for local governments and people to give direct donations and aid to Ukraine.

As the number of actions increases, other cities have become aware that institutionalised bonds can open a pathway to assistance. At the end of March, local officials in Los Angeles were discussing fast-tracking the designation of sister city status for Kyiv, which would make it easier to donate emergency vehicles. For Ukrainian local authorities, the aid may not be as substantial as the involvement of international organisations and large-scale donations from countries. Nonetheless, having friends around the world diversifies global reach and increases potential sources of assistance.

In the European Union, German and Polish cities have called upon their partners across the world to help with refugees arriving from Ukraine. Bad Königshofen, for instance, has reached out to its sister city of Arlington (Texas). The city of Camas (Washington) has collected donations for its sister cities of Krapkowice, Morawica

and Zabierzów, while the Cape Breton Regional Municipality in Canada has done the same for Wałbrzych. For cities within countries that have welcomed refugees, partners in other countries have offered a significant channel for collecting resources to help those displaced by the war.

No longer an abstract concept

Even in the absence of direct financial assistance, local government ties foster empathy that allows people – however far away from Ukraine they may be – to gain a better understanding of the dire consequences of the Russian invasion. Mayors and their constituents are often more concerned about pavement repairs than foreign wars, but decades-long sister city relations involve interactions between people who would otherwise never encounter each other. They enable local media to weave a personal angle into stories, which is more likely to be memorable for its audience. Dozens of examples in the United States have included small and big cities alike: a couple from Corvallis, Oregon delivering supplies to Uzhhorod; locals in Arlington, Virginia collecting donations for Ivano-Frankivsk; a woman from Randolph, Vermont worried about her friends in the town's sister city of Myrhorod; and a teacher from Kharkiv speaking with her friends in Cincinnati, Ohio about the war.

Many of the stories may seem pedestrian, but they strengthen the sense that war is not an abstract concept. For westerners who have experienced very little conflict at home, having Ukrainian friends or acquaintances who are living through it can be more poignant than simply watching the conflict unfold on television. Furthermore, empathy can create a more welcoming environment for refugees and can mitigate information exhaustion: it is easier to turn off the TV to forget about the war than it is to stop paying attention to the plight of one's friends.

On the other hand, these local networks and sister city agreements are an opportunity for local governments to express their outrage directly to Russian sister cities or partners. Sanctions go beyond material punishment; they seek to ostracise. Local decision-makers have also made their own contributions in this regard. Since the end of February, cities like Glasgow, Turku, Tokyo and Tallinn have suspended their relations with their sister cities in protest of the invasion. Sarasota (Florida) Commissioner Hagen Brody framed his city's decision as being "in line with the international community's response to isolating Russia". Since ostracism is a communal activity, more voices in support of Ukraine augment the Kremlin's isolation.

Outright suspensions have elicited some criticism. For instance, Sister Cities International, an organisation that coordinates the sister city programme in the US, has urged cities not to cut contact lest it remove the "last channel of commu-

nication with vulnerable or isolated populations". Some cities have indeed rejected suspension proposals for this very reason, Juneau (Alaska) and Louisville (Kentucky) among them. The mayor of Livermore (California) even sent a letter to the sister city of Snezhinsk to "request your support for a ceasefire in Ukraine. Thousands of innocent lives have already been lost and the Ukrainian people continue to face an unprovoked, unrestrained military aggression from the Russian Federation". Whatever choice one makes, the outcome has been the same: local leaders have voiced their opposition to the invasion to Russian colleagues directly.

Friends and foes

It is not yet clear what the consequences of such suspensions or letters will be in the long term. The administrative head of Pskov, Elena Polonskaya, seems to be one of the few Russian officials who has issued a public response. In April, the official acknowledged the receipt of a letter from the German city of Gera, which asked for a public position on the war. Polonskaya's retort echoed Kremlin talking points about Russia's "special military operation" and said that "Russia did not start, but is finishing the war that Ukrainian authorities started against their own Russian-speaking citizens." Keeping lines of communication open may not, then, create a space outside of state interaction that is safe from Russian propaganda, as even local Russian leaders may support the invasion.

Whether cities halt or continue communication to express their opposition to the Russian invasion, local diplomacy still blunts the Kremlin's propaganda. A familiar talking point from Moscow suggests that regular westerners resent their leaders' policies toward Russia. The claim is akin to an argument that a "silent majority" in the West is or could be pro-Russian and is against what Moscow defines as an aggressive foreign policy pushed by national decision-makers. The fact that cities and regions criticise Moscow's invasion both hinders such narratives and indicates to the Kremlin and local Russian governments that support for Ukraine runs deep. Networks also preserve local contacts that are difficult for Moscow to suppress. This may be paramount now that the Kremlin has severely restricted access to western media and information in the country.

Of course, if local governments can strengthen the punishment and ostracisation of Russia, they can presumably do the opposite. Moldova, despite not formally joining western sanctions against Moscow, has supported most punitive policies and criticism. The governor of its autonomous region of Gagauzia, on the other hand, said on February 25th that nobody should try to "blame or justify any of the sides" in the war. Statements like these erode the ability of a sovereign state to present a

coherent front and weaken the effort to isolate Russia. In the EU, Moscow may be able to rely upon local governments like Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, which was instrumental in advancing the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline prior to the invasion, to mitigate some of the EU's sanctions in the future. After the war ends, the revival of diplomatic ties with local governments may be one pathway that Russia pursues to re-enter international society.

For now, though, local diplomacy surrounding the Russian invasion has been largely supportive of Ukraine. Kyiv's diplomats are aware of its benefits. In March, Ukrainian consulates sent a message to US cities with partners in Russia, urging them to take a stand. "As a mayor", the letter said, "you have the power to address your counterparts in Russia with a firm demand for them to start acting now in resisting the criminal regime of the Kremlin before it's too late." Diplomats and local governments have indeed realised that, even during war, power does not only belong to sovereign states.

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In the footsteps of Viktor Orbán's invincibility

SZABOLCS VÖRÖS

Viktor Orbán's thoughts about the Hungarian people almost always appear in his speeches. If you search for the term "Hungarian people" on Orbán's personal site, a peculiar universe unfolds in front of your eyes. Certainly, his target is not the liberal Budapest intelligentsia, but rather ordinary Hungarians, a group that Orbán knows best – and grants him victory.

Whatever the expression means, Hungary has degraded into a "partly-free" democracy in recent years according to Freedom House. We are now both geographically and politically halfway between Germany and Belarus. Our democratic institutions still stand but they are like houses whose only renovation has been the façade – they look nice from the street but if one enters, destruction is obvious. This is because the caretaker was not appointed as the result of the residents' trust but that of the local real estate tycoon. According to the 2022 World Press Freedom Index, Hungary's media ranks 85th, behind Guinea and ahead of Israel. It was 23rd in 2010. No other country has slid down about five places on an annual basis.

It is best not to talk about the handling of the pandemic. More than 46,000 people have already died in a country of 9.8 million, resulting in the fourth worst outcome worldwide. Our prime minister stated in September 2020 that "we can measure the success of our containment effort in the number of deaths – or lives saved." Our welfare system is indeed growing. However, countries like Slovakia, Poland or Romania, all looked down upon by the Budapest intelligentsia around 1990, now have more robust development.

All the ingredients were there for the political opposition to score a landslide election victory this year. What happened instead? Viktor Orbán was elected Hungary's prime minister for the fifth time by a massive margin. His Fidesz party – with their invisible junior partner, the Christian Democratic Party – now has 135 seats in the 199-member National Assembly. Essentially, the prime minister can carry on doing whatever he wishes. It should be noted that Orbán is now the most senior leader in the European Council. This means that there is no other politician in the club who has seen more Brussels bargaining. He is never shy to exploit this experience – just look at his most recent game of chicken with the EU over the Russian oil embargo.

The Viktor Orbán show

Every Friday at 7:30 in the morning, the studio of Hungarian radio's legendary first station Kossuth becomes a venue for excessive flattery. The guest is always Viktor Orbán. While Kossuth's leaders say that the radio is edited in line with BBC standards, these interviews are rather the prime minister's own 22-minute one-man-shows. He is allowed to say whatever he wants without interruption. Sometimes even he is surprised that the host – a worrying but dulcet-voiced mother of two – voices harsher views about Brussels or migration, let alone the opposition. By nine o'clock, the essence of these conversations overwhelms the Hungarian public space.

Orbán's thoughts about the Hungarian people appear in almost every one of his speeches. If one takes the trouble to search for "Hungarian people" on Orbán's personal site, a peculiar universe unfolds. It is as if the writer Paolo Coelho had written a booklet about us: "For centuries the Hungarian people have defended Europe in its battles" … "The Hungarian economy has three treasures: the Hungarian people, land and water" … "Hungary's greatest advantage is the knowledge and professional expertise of the Hungarian people" … "The Hungarian people stood up in support of Hungarian sovereignty" … "The Hungarian people deserved the Lord's patronage."

Viktor Orbán is now the most senior leader in the European Council. No other politician has seen more Brussels bargaining.

Of course, the most recent statement declares that "We do not want the Hungarian people to be made to pay the price of war." Although no one has ever examined these statements, one thing is certain – it is not the liberal Budapest intelligentsia they intend to flatter. Their target is rather ordinary Hungarians, a group that Viktor Orbán knows best. The reason for the growing discrepancy between western

wishful thinking about Hungary and reality is that the foreign media picks up the comments of those who are politically irrelevant to the prime minister.

So, how come Orbán knows what the Hungarian people like? This is partly because he is the only person who uses this expression. Words carry weight and the prime minister has been using terms like this for decades. He also misuses them. In his vocabulary, for instance, national equals Fidesz voter. He even labels his base as the national side. As a result, anyone who does not vote for Fidesz is not national – even a traitor, according to the logic of Hungarian grammar. There are some who do not even intend to conceal this connotation. Orbán's eternal brother-in-arms, the Speaker of the National Assembly László Kövér, said in April 2020 that "The left-liberal opposition in Hungary is part of the globalist, anti-national network. Their intentionally fake information and slanders are the basis of the propaganda campaign of western opinion-makers. This opposition is not part of the nation but a comprador unit of this world elite."

If something does not serve the Fidesz party's interests, it is simply thrown away.

For Kövér, this is probably a personal belief but make no mistake – these statements are the result of a constant and systematic monitoring of Hungarian society. If something does not serve the party's interests, it is simply thrown away. In early 2015, for instance, Fidesz tried to score sympathy points by praising hard-working citizens (literally calling them "hard-working little men"), the low-income countryside cluster of Hungarians – typically Fidesz voters. Internal polls showed that such talk was viewed as rather humiliating for this group. Fidesz stopped using it in a heartbeat.

Island of normality

Why does the self-image of Hungarians matter to Orbán? The answer can be found in Hungarian history: a thousand year struggle with external enemies. These include Batu Khan's Mongols in the 13th century, the Ottoman Turks from the 15th, the Habsburgs, Russians, Nazis and Soviets. The country's Trianon trauma in 1920 should also be mentioned. One does not need to be an outright patriot to draw the conclusion that "we have always been doing everything right, we protected Europe but never got anything in return, moreover the West let us down – like in 1956."

I have been studying history for eight years but am unable to recall a single footnote about the possible faults of our historic figures. Defiance is in our bones and waits to be exploited by politicians. This is the very Hungarian reflex Orbán

appeals to with cold professionalism. He is fully aware of the reality-conquering power of grievance politics. Are you underpaid? It is the fault of Brussels! Worrying about your family? Rightfully so, as George Soros and his friends certainly want to change the gender of your kids! Was Fidesz expelled from the European People's Party? Good for them, as there is no more line between Christian democrats and socialists in Europe! Has the unification of Europe's far-right parties been a huge

failure so far? Orbán did his utmost to make it happen! Is there a war in Europe? Americans should have never provoked Moscow!

According to the narrative of Fidesz, Hungary is an island of normality surrounded by an ocean of strange ideas. It is as if we are not EU and NATO members – confirmed by referenda – but rather some external actors. As if it was some sinister external power and not Orbán's votes in the European Council that influence European grand strategy. It is not a coincidence that Orbán differentiates between Brussels and the EU. Brussels is the complicated universe of unelected bureaucrats, with a deliberate anti-Hungarian mindset, whereas the EU is something 80 per cent of Hungarians consider beneficial. Perhaps this sounds familiar in Poland?

The Hungarian language is a unique encrypted code system. We might have some relatives, but we do not understand each other at all.

Another blessing of the prime minister is his mother tongue. The Hungarian language is a unique encrypted code system. We might have some relatives, like the Finns or Estonians, but we do not understand each other at all. As Hungarians say, "we are an island in a Slavic and Germanic sea." This outlook also hints at the country's insufficient knowledge of foreign languages. According to a 2019 Eurostat figure, the Hungarians' language skills are among the worst in the EU, as only 42 per cent of the 25–64 age group speak another language. Apart from being isolating, our mother tongue also provides us with the feeling of being special. Anyone criticising us is suspected of cancelling our language and culture. Why do we have this reflex? Precisely because of the nation's aforementioned historical experiences. The thoughts of critics also cannot often be verified due to our poor language skills. What is the result? Our leaders are free to feed us with the most absurd narratives.

New state religion

Shortly after Orbán's 2018 election victory, I tried to explain on these pages that it was a grave mistake to judge his media empire by journalistic standards. This is an unnecessary mission, as the Hungarian leader's media holdings are anything but watchdogs. They have the same goal as their masters – keeping power. If they have to make a U-turn, even from one day to another, they just do it. If they are ordered to destroy an opponent, they do it too. The media has become Fidesz's revolver in its fight with political opponents. This spring, this gun shot a whole round with such efficiency that even the most pessimistic opposition policymaker could not

have imagined its impact. In the run up to the April election, a misinterpreted quote from the opposition's leader was repeated day after day. By March, even the residents of the smallest villages were talking about how "Péter Márki-Zay was about to take our kids to be human shields in Ukraine."

Having suffered a fatal wound, the opposition's excuses were useless. No question remained about the election's outcome. Vladimir Putin's best friend in Europe was once again allowed to comfort a nation that bases its self-worth on the legacy of the anti-Soviet revolution in 1956.

Even if it sounds absurd, the majority of Hungarians could not care less. Indeed, "Orbánism" has effectively become the state religion of their homeland. But this religion has no dogmas, except for the idea that the leader is always right. Fidesz does not have voters, but rather believers who, much like good Christians, are seeking answers to big questions. They receive them as soon as they internalise Orbánism, alongside massive financial reimbursements throughout early 2022. The state religion has an answer for every problem in life, be it family, educational, geopolitical, art or media issues. Over its 12 years in power, Fidesz has seized every asset with which it can fulfill these needs. Answers are also produced around the clock by its hand-fed "think tanks". Their unquestionable effectiveness is one of the reasons why believers are supposed to forgive the "church" for its own mistakes. This is especially apparent when life standards have been growing significantly. Who cares that this was the result of EU money and an international economic boom? Who cares that other countries in the region outperformed us?

The point is that, thanks to Viktor Orbán, everything is good for us. Just as the Catholic Church will not collapse because of its paedophile priests, Orbán will not lose popularity either because of some corrupt subordinates. Orbán's supporters typically overlook issues such as oligarchs continuously winning public tenders. Instead, they say, "At least they do not wheelbarrow the money out of Hungary." The longer this state religion prevails, the lazier people become. They increasingly accept the idea that all of their problems can be traced back to either the grey corridors of Berlaymont or the glass tower desk of George Soros.

"Orbánism" has effectively become the state religion. But this religion has no dogmas, except that the leader is always right.

It is instructive to see what happens when someone backs away from the Orbán Bible. Just ask Hungary's new president, Katalin Novák. Whilst Hungary's most senior politician often remained closely aligned with the prime minister's will, she finally condemned Putin for his war in Ukraine in her May inauguration speech, something her former senior colleagues in Fidesz were reluctant to do since February.

Minutes after, hundreds of social media commentators – former fans – attacked her. One of them criticised her for donating state money to Ukrainian refugee children during her first foreign visit to Poland. No one really cared that Novák was the face of Fidesz's rather successful family policies. The fact that she was the chief negotiator for Fidesz in its effort to create a far-right group in the European Parliament was also forgotten. After all, she committed a deadly sin by offering a war narrative different to that of her former boss. Apostates have to confront the public wrath of the believers, as it is still the sect leader's exclusive right to decide on new dogmas in Hungary.

Szabolcs Vörös is a Budapest-based Hungarian journalist. He is the co-founder and editor of Válasz Online, a collective of journalists founded by five former staffers of Hungarian weekly *Heti Válasz*, which ceased publication in 2018. Over the past two years, its articles have been quoted in publications like the *New York Times*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Ukrainska Pravda* and *Le Monde*.

GDAŃSK

IT HAPPENED IN GDAŃSK

MACIEJ BUCZKOWSKI

June 4th 1989 became the symbolic end of communism in Poland, even though the Soviet troops were still stationed in our country. For the first time, in over 40 years, someone else – other than communists – could participate in power and decision-making.[1]

In Gdańsk the first weekend of June 2022 was dedicated to freedom and civil rights. The anniversary of the first, semi-democratic, elections, which took place in Poland after the political changes that began in 1989 was the inspiration for us to organise the Celebrations of Freedom and Civil Liberties (*Święta Wolności i Praw Obywatelskich*).

The jewel in the crown of these events is the social zone, which is a unique form of activation of non-governmental organisations from all over Poland, which we organised for the first time in 2019, when we were commemorating the 30th anniversary of the June 4th 1989 elections.

Hence, for the third time this year near the European Solidarity Centre, next to the Solidarity Square, we created a special space for meetings, debates and an exchange of ideas for over 100 organisations. On the invitation of Gdańsk Mayor, Aleksandra Dulkiewicz, the social activists of different backgrounds and political convictions, arrived to Gdańsk. We can say that the lead motto of this gathering was: power in diversity.

All these events took place in the spirit of the Round Table. The participants of the meetings, discussions and

1 Europejskie Centrum Solidarności, https://strefaspoleczna.online/

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workshops certainly contributed to an atmosphere of a pluralistic discourse adhering to the idea that contemporary European citizens need to be well-educated and equipped with interpersonal skills not to break the rules of freedom of speech and expression in the public sphere. These citizens should know their rights as well as obligations. And hold dear the old Gdańsk motto: *nec tereme nec timide* (neither rashly nor timidly).

1989 – Breakthrough periods – 2022

The war in Ukraine became a significant challenge not only to the Ukrainians who are now defending their own state. It has become also a challenge for Europe and the world, for national and local policies but also for non-governmental organisations and the citizens.

This important topic could not be missed during our Gdańsk celebrations of the anniversary of the beginning of the democratic transformation in this part of Europe. We made it a topic of a debate about the changes that have taken place in the last 33 years. During this discussion we focused on the question of what we overlooked and at what moment in this process which started in 1989 when the international community started to build a new architecture of security and co-operation for our part of Europe.

Participants of the debate asked these tough questions knowing that it would be nonetheless difficult to find answers to them. They were reaching out to their memory of the past to attempt an answer to these questions that intrigue us here and now and to try to attempt a prediction of what will happen in the future.

We should certainly stress where we have had success. And as such we should unquestionably see one of them as the "withdrawal" of the Red Army from Central and Eastern Europe (and former East Germany) which was followed by the arduous road to join NATO and the European Union. Today's war in Ukraine and the presence of Russian troops in Belarus demonstrate that this "window of opportunity" could not be open for ever. Thus, the truth is that we used this chance very well.

Shouldn't we nonetheless be equally daring in our thinking about a formal sanctioning of Ukraine's readiness to join the European community? Shouldn't we take concrete actions in this regard as we witnessed the pro-European attitude

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rising in Ukraine? Shouldn't we act in a pro-active way, point to the opportunities, instead of looking for excuses and become paralysed by real threats?

And here we come to an important question: did we, Central and Eastern Europeans, do everything we could to show to our Western neighbours what kind of "partner" Russia is? Did we do everything so they understood what language Russia understands, and how it approaches weakness and how it creates and uses "useful idiots"?

Maybe this is too much audacity on our part too. We also overestimated our expert knowledge and the possibility to positively influence changes in Russia. In the previous issue of *New Eastern Europe* I mentioned the failure of the Gdańsk flagship progamme called "Gdańsk open to the East" through which we tried to positively influence the creation of a foundation for Russian civil society.

Also, during the debate a question arose about the future of the Eastern Partnership project and whether there is still a chance to create a real European counterbalance to the Russian sphere of influence. What do we need to do to achieve it and what assets should we use?

Together we were reflecting on the future of European solidarity, in the face of the tragic war in Ukraine. The future will show what is the readiness to the solidarity in the face of concrete financial consequences of the sanctions that have been imposed on the Russian Federation. It is still to be seen whether we will be consistent in implementing these sanctions and what is our European readiness to solidarity in Ukraine's rebuilding.

One of the assumptions which came out from our discussions was that Ukraine is defending our ideals. The true questions yet here is whether our reaction to the war in Ukraine will allow us to say, honestly and openly, that we are indeed defending and implementing the values we claim to adhere. This is an important test that we are taking now. Will we finish it victorious or not?

Gdańsk host of the 2022 International City of Refugee Network General Assembly[2]

When in 2017 Gdańsk Mayor – the late Paweł Adamowicz – decided that Gdańsk will join the network of cities supporting oppressed artists he said the following words: "My position about helping people from areas affected by the war and political oppression is clear. Gdańsk is a city of solidarity not in name only, but – above all – in its activities. The artists-residents who apply for a scholarship through ICORN are intellectuals who often held high positions in their countries' literary organisations, among them are also Noble Prize winners. I know that their presence in Gdańsk and the message they carry along, as well as the knowledge about the real situation in their countries, from which they were forced to escape, will only have a positive impact on our city's residents. The "freedom of culture" is a slogan to which we have been faithful for many years now … Such initiatives as the Solidarity of Arts or the European Poet of Freedom have been already reported on internationally and bore fruit in the form of our invitation to ICRON."

Today, when Europe's stability and security are under threat, we need people who share our views to gather around the European idea. Europeaness, freedom and solidarity are our good ambassadors. These ideas are what united the 250 participants from over 35 countries who from June 8th to June 10th were the guests of the ICORN meeting at the European Solidarity Centre.

Inspired by the history of the Gdańsk-born solidarity movement, the ICORN General Assembly proved to be an opportunity for a meeting of an international community composed of members of the organisation, writers, artists in exile and city authorities. And all of these took place after the three long years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The conference participants discussed such issues as freedom of speech, international solidarity, art and democracy. They talked about how to support writers and artists in exile and how to help political dissidents and representatives of non-governmental organisations who operate in countries where freedom of speech and artistic expression do not exist.

2 ICORN: https://www.icorn.org/article/city-gdansk-hosts-2022-icorn-general-assembly-under-theme-solidarity

© phot. Renata Dąbrowska

Announcement about the second edition of Paweł Admowicz Award – a prize established by the Committee of Regions, ICORN and the city of Gdańsk for courage and excellence in the promotion of freedom, solidarity and equality.

Paweł Adamowicz was first and foremost a local politician and activist. However, we cannot reduce his accomplishments solely to those of a local player. He was a man of extremely wide horizons. He was deeply rooted in Polish culture and tradition, but at the same time fully aware of a much wider context. He was a true European, a defender of freedom and human rights, and a creator of democratic structures at the level of local governance. For him these values were not empty slogans, but meant an everyday building of the new order in our part of Europe. Adamowicz was also a visionary who in the 1980s had been engaged in underground organisation of the democratic opposition and dreamt about a free Poland. He also belonged to a group of people who, in the 1990s, created the foundation for modern local governance in Poland and assisted Poland in joining the EU. He understood the pro-independence aspirations of the post-Soviet states which are to the East of our border. In the spirit of Jerzy Giedroyc, a Polish 20th century thinker, he knew that there was no free Poland without a free Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine. He was fully determined to support these countries' fight for independence and understood their difficult path. He was rejoicing Poland's membership in NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004. He was happy to see the rapid development of his city, Gdańsk, for which the EU financial resources were well-used. Adamowicz was certainly a European-level politician. He was also very unique. His work and activities were beyond those of a local leader and included a brave vision of the future of Europe and the world. People like Adamowicz were the reasons why Europe and the world were proud of Poles, their achievements and positions.

President Paweł Adamowicz was attacked and murdered on January 13th 2019 when he was talking to Gdańsk residents who gathered at a charity event – the final concert of the *Wielka Orkiestra Świątecznej Pomocy*. His words were the following: "Gdańsk is generous, Gdańsk shares good, Gdańsk wants to be the city of solidarity. This is a wonderful moment to share good. You are wonderful. Gdańsk is the most amazing city in the world. Thank you!" These were his last words.

© phot. Grzegorz Mehring / gdansk.pl

He talked about Gdańsk, but we know that the meaning of his words was universal and included European values, for which he paid the highest price.

The establishment of an award named after Paweł Adamowicz was meant to pay tribute to him and all courageous and just people who counteract intolerance, radicalisation, hate speech, terror and xenophobia. It is an award for those who share the values of equality, social inclusion, participation and civil courage.

Thus, the laureate of the first edition of the Paweł Adamowicz award was Henriette Reker, the mayor of Cologne in Germany. Reker was a victim of an attack in 2015 when she was running for mayor. Despite this experience she never relinquished her pro-immigrant position nor allowed radical nationalists to scare her. The day after the attack, Reker won the election with 52.66% of the vote.

European Poet of Freedom[3]

For the seventh time this year we held the celebration of literature in Gdańsk called the European Poet of Freedom. For three days (June 9th–11th) we were discussing contemporary European poetry and our public had an opportunity to meet with artists and discuss the shape and development of contemporary poetry.

The festival was initiated in 2010 and takes place on a two-year cycle. The event includes a ceremony of the handing of the Literary Award of the City of Gdańsk.

The idea of this award is to bring together different communities, languages and literary interpretations of the world. This is our city's contribution to the popularisation of European poetry.

In every edition there are three to six nominations of living European poets (men and women). Importantly, their nominations are proposed by the translators who also present and propose for the award their translations of the nominees' poetry.

The winners are selected by a jury comprised of translators, poets, writers, critics and representatives of different art and liberal arts disciplines. The laureate of the award receives a prize of 100,000 Polish zlotys. A separate award is given to the translator.

3 Miasto Gdańsk, https://europejskipoetawolnosci.pl/

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

- What do Poles and Ukrainians know about each other now?
- How do they imagine each other and the respective countries?
- How do they perceive relations between their countries?
- How exactly do they interact with each other?
- In which areas do they see opportunities for or limitations of cooperation?

This study, which results from the partnership of four institutions – the Warsaw and Kyiv offices of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe in Wrocław, and the Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism" from Kyiv – attempts to answer these questions.

Full report available online: **www.kew.org.pl/en/2021/06/11/poles-and-ukrainians-in-daily-contacts/** or **library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ukraine/18309.pdf**

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Local perspectives

What has (not) changed since the war in Ukraine

Germany still struggles to understand its Eastern neighbours

MATTIA NELLES

Photo courtesy of Mattia Nelles

The full-fledged Russian invasion of Ukraine has deeply shocked Germany and its political elite to the core. Ukraine and the West expected Berlin to step up and show leadership in this war. But has anything changed substantively in German foreign policy and its intellectual and institutional ability to handle this invasion? The answers are mixed and disappointing to many in Ukraine and Europe.

Until the last moment before the invasion, very few policymakers in Germany wanted to believe that an invasion would take place. This belief speaks to the inability of large parts of the German political class and punditry to see through Putin's revisionist agenda since 2008.

Russia's full-blown invasion on February 24th questioned the conviction held by most of the German political class to engage with Moscow and seek constructive relations by enhancing trade ties. The war caused great debate in Germany. Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier was the first to openly admit that he was "wrong" to hold on to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project as a bridge to Russia.

The debate, however, did not change much. Public opinion has turned decisively against ex-Chancellor Gerhard

Schröder, the Kremlin's chief lobbyist in Germany. But so far, there are few signs that society, let alone the Social Democrats, are willing to continue debating the errors of German Russia policy, Russian strategic corruption, and the country's high dependency on Russian fossil fuels.

When Putin ordered his army to attack Ukraine, Olaf Scholz's coalition had been in office for less than 100 days. While sanctions were being prepared behind closed doors, the German government would not send any lethal weapons to Ukraine prior to the invasion and merely offered 5,000 military helmets.

However, the Russian invasion appeared to quickly change things. Within the first few days of the war, the government greenlighted the first shipments of arms and ammunition, including portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons. On February 27th, Chancellor Olaf Scholz delivered an important speech in the German Bundestag, announcing the delivery of light weaponry to Ukraine and outlining the unprecedented sanctions that the West has unleashed on Russia. Scholz also stressed his commitment to the defence of NATO members along the Eastern front. To boost Germany's own defence capabilities, Scholz announced the creation of a special fund of 100 billion euros that would be used for necessary investments and armament projects which was recently approved by the Bundestag.

Despite the cancellation of Nord Stream 2, Germany is reluctant to employ the most drastic sanctions. The country remains the single largest buyer of Russian fossil fuel and has imported more than 8.3 billion US dollars of mostly oil and gas since February 24th. However, under the leadership of the Green Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck, the country's dependency on Russian gas decreased from 55 to 35 per cent. The government announced that it would permanently phase out Russian oil by the end of 2022 and gas by 2024.

At the same time, the German government has kept saying that the costs of a gas embargo for German industry would simply be too high. In several interviews, Chancellor Scholz and various business representatives have alleged that an abrupt end to gas flows would cause "mass unemployment" and big disruptions to entire sectors of the German economy. This would also undermine the competitiveness of Europe's largest economy and thus its ability to withstand Russia in the medium and long term. Discussion in the public discourse has largely focused on the economy and consumers and not on the cost of the war for Ukraine or Germany's contribution. For over three months, the country debated the limits of its support to Ukraine.

One primary issue now present in discourse concerns fears that the war could spiral out of control. The ultimate fear voiced repeatedly by Scholz was that of a nuclear war and World War Three. Such framing resonates deeply with the public and allowed the chancellor to justify the limits of his government's action. Even deliveries of idling German

infantry fighting vehicles and old main battle tanks were denied to Ukraine because Russia, according to the German government, might perceive the delivery of these weapons as an act of war. The fact that Poland, Czechia and other partners transferred a lot of their Soviet era arsenal to Ukraine was outright ignored. After a long debate and significant international pressure, the government announced the delivery of 50 anti-aircraft guns and seven artillery systems in April. The Ukrainian military is currently training to use these complex weapon systems.

With a limited willingness to deliver its own weapon systems to Ukraine, Germany has focused on the so-called "ring swaps". The German army first delivered or promised to deliver weapon systems to Central and Eastern European partners such as Slovakia, Czechia and Poland. In return, they would send their Soviet systems to Ukraine. These swaps have so far shown mixed results. Recently, Poland's President Andrzej Duda alleged that Berlin violated promises to deliver modern German tanks to Poland.

All of Germany's communications regarding its support to Ukraine have been erratic. The government decided not to speak about weapon deliveries to the country, citing security reasons. This has only increased suspicion among critics that Berlin is dragging its feet. The German public is now almost evenly split on weapon deliveries. Between March 30th and May 26th, the German government delivered only a few thousand mines. Moreover, it seems that the country lacks a clear strategy of what it wants to achieve in Ukraine. At Davos, Scholz recently said that "Putin must not win his war and I am convinced that he will not win it." Unlike many other western partners, Scholz refuses to embrace Ukrainian victory as the primary goal. Moreover, the government has failed to explain what a Russian "loss" in Ukraine would look like and what resources are being deployed to realise it.

Self-centred debate and incongruent communication have revealed that Germany still struggles to think strategically despite rousing speeches to the contrary. Different government actors, especially the ministries and the chancellery, lack the institutional capacity to define national interests and strategise in any adequate sense. In the absence of a proper institutional framework, like a real "National Security Council", each ministry thinks about its facets of the war in a compartmentalised way. This is part of the reason why debate has focused so much on the costs of sanctions but so little on the broader costs for Ukraine in this war, let alone the cost of a Ukrainian defeat for Germany and Europe.

These issues have also revealed that Germany struggles to understand its neighbours in Central and Eastern Europe and cope with new expectations that muddling through is now not an option. The growing sense of disappointment felt by its neighbours and Ukraine in particular is not properly understood in Germany. While many of Berlin's

Eastern neighbours led by Poland and the Baltics championed Ukraine's European perspective, Germany has been sceptical. The administration does not seem to comprehend the geostrategic importance of linking Ukraine's future, including its reconstruction, to its potential membership of the European Union in the future.

Ultimately, Russia's war has changed only a few things in Germany. In the early stages, Germany stepped up and for the first time delivered weaponry that was used by Ukraine. For the first time, the country has significantly reduced its dependency on Russian oil and gas. Such a reduction will limit Berlin's vulnerabilities. However, it has done little to significantly reduce the Russian regime's cashflows and its ability to finance the war in the short term.

Germany is still busy discussing its limits of support for Ukraine and its fears of a possible escalation. The self-centred German debate has revealed a lot about the country's limits in living up to expectations as a European leader. The vacuum is now being filled by Great Britain and Poland in Europe. Growing disillusionment and its long-term strategic costs are simply not understood in Berlin.

So far, Germany has not increased its institutional capacity to pursue a more robust foreign policy. It continues to fail to strategise and work out what it really wants to achieve in Ukraine. Indeed, Berlin talks more about what it wants to avoid. More than three months into the war, it seems that the chosen German approach is one of muddling through, of doing the bare minimum after significant pressure. This is likely to fuel growing disappointment in Europe and Ukraine and undermine Germany's long-term standing across the continent.

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The war in Ukraine as a test for "Global Britain"

ALEX NICE

Photo courtesy of Alex Nice

The United Kingdom has been one of the most prominent supporters of Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion on February 24th. There is a broad elite consensus behind the UK's hard-line position towards Russia and strong public backing for its support for Ukraine. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been eager to emphasise Britain's leading role in providing military and diplomatic support to the country, seizing the opportunity to try to shift the national conversation away from a series of domestic scandals. But like many incumbent governments, Johnson's party may ultimately suffer political losses following the sharp rise in the cost of energy and food precipitated by the war.

The UK's active and vocal support for Ukraine during the war is built on several years of close bilateral diplomatic and security cooperation. Since 2015 London has provided non-lethal equipment and training to the Ukrainian military as part of "Operation Orbital" and conducted joint naval exercises in the Black Sea. In 2016 the UK and Ukraine signed a 15-year agreement on closer defence cooperation.

However, the extent to which British support to Ukraine exceeded other European countries prior to 2022 should not be overstated. In the years after the annexation of Crimea, the UK rejected several requests from Ukraine for lethal military aid. Michael Fallon, the UK Defence Secretary from 2014 to 2017, has recently stated that senior ministers blocked arms supplies at the time out of fear of provoking Russia.

In January, as the UK and US started to warn publicly about the risks of a Russian invasion, London began supplying lethal military equipment to Ukraine for the first time. That support expanded after Russia's full-scale invasion, including long-range rockets, next generation anti-tank weapons (NLAWs), Brimstone short-range missiles, and Mastiff armoured patrol vehicles. By early April, according to Michael Clarke, former Director General of the Royal United Services Institute, the UK had sent its entire stock of NLAWs to Ukraine. In an illustration of the close military coop-

eration between Britain and Poland, the UK has also committed to supply Challenger 2 tanks to Poland. This will enable Warsaw to supply its Soviet T-72 tanks to Ukraine.

The UK has also joined the European Union and other G7 countries in imposing unprecedented economic and trade sanctions on Russia, as well as freezing the assets of prominent Kremlin-linked officials and businessmen. This marked a major reversal for a country that has long been a favoured destination for Russian oligarchs looking to invest, and in some cases hide, their wealth offshore. For years, Russia's mega-rich were attracted by the combination of stable property rights, light-touch financial regulation, and a steady supply of lawyers, bankers and accountants eager to help them protect their assets. In 2019 the UK parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee's Russia report highlighted that the country's openness to Russian investment provided "ideal mechanisms by which illicit finance could be recycled" through what it called the "London laundromat".

While almost all economic and financial ties between Russia and the UK have now been severed, it remains unclear to what extent the war will change the country's broader relationship with offshore capital. In response to the war in Ukraine, the British government expedited the adoption of the Economic Crime Act. This is intended to increase the transparency of property ownership and help tackle illicit financial flows. But transparency campaigners, while broadly welcoming the move, have noted that illicit financial flows can only be tackled if the new powers are accompanied by sufficient resourcing for law enforcement. It remains to be seen whether the government will continue to engage with the problem of corruption and offshore wealth beyond sanctioning Russian oligarchs.

While the UK has taken a prominent role in providing military support to Ukraine, its response to the humanitarian crisis caused by the war has lagged far behind other European countries. Britain is the only country in Europe to have continued to operate a visa regime for Ukrainian citizens since the start of the war. Ireland, which like the UK is not in the Schengen zone, lifted its visa requirements for Ukrainian citizens the day after Russia's invasion.

London has created a resettlement scheme that is in principle open to all Ukrainian refugees. But in practice, the design of the scheme imposes significant constraints on the number that will actually apply. There have also been widespread reports of backlogs in the issuing of visas by the authorities. As a result, as of May 24th, just 37,400 Ukrainian refugees had arrived in the country under the government's resettlement schemes. This was only slightly higher than the number of arrivals to Ireland, a country with a population 13 times smaller than the UK. According to the UNHCR, over 6.7 million people have fled Ukraine since the start of the conflict.

The war in Ukraine is the first major international crisis that Britain has faced since it left the EU in early 2020. While Brexit exposed deep divisions regarding its relationship with Europe and place in the world, this crisis has been characterised by broad elite and public unity regarding the UK response. Following the rancour and division of Brexit, the UK has rebuilt some of its international standing and sought to strengthen bilateral relationships with some EU states, most notably Poland.

But behind the appearance of consensus, the conflict nevertheless illustrates the incoherence in the country's foreign and security policy. The war has made clear that for all the talk of "Global Britain", London's primary security and foreign policy concerns lie in Europe. Yet the UK's 2021 Integrated Security Review, while recognising Russia as a key security threat, made almost no reference to the EU and advocated greater investment in power projection in the Indo-Pacific.

Britain is currently seeking to simultaneously expand its security cooperation in Europe, provide extensive military aid to Ukraine, and maintain a "persistent presence" in the Indo-Pacific, all while cutting troop numbers. At the same time, even as it works with EU partners to support Ukraine's sovereignty, the UK has continued to threaten to abandon parts of the Northern Ireland Protocol. This move would throw the country's relationship with major EU states into crisis.

As one of the signatories to the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, the UK has a particular responsibility to uphold Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Yet in 2014–15, London played almost no role in the failed Minsk Process, which aimed to bring the fighting in Donbas to an end. That has changed since Russia's full-scale invasion, and the UK is likely to seek a more prominent role in any eventual negotiations on the future of Ukraine and European security. But to do so effectively, it will also need to resolve the contradictions in its own relationship with Europe.

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The borders of solidarity

PAULINA SIEGIEŃ

Photo courtesy of Paulina Siegień

When Russia started its open aggression against Ukraine on February 24th, millions of Ukrainians started to flee from the rockets that were now falling on their homes and cities. Clearly, the most obvious direction of escape was to the West, and Poland in particular. However, it was not so clear how Poland would react to this inflow of migrants. A huge conventional war in the 21st century in a neighbouring country was once something unimaginable. As a result, it was difficult for the nation to prepare.

The fact that should be repeated time and time again is that Polish society showed great solidarity towards the Ukrainians. Millions of people put aside their daily activities and came to help the displaced. Almost right away, the necessary infrastructure for the refugees was built at the Polish-Ukrainian border. Polish families took fleeing families into their homes. Polish security services, non-governmental organisations and ordinary people, who overnight became volunteers, were doing everything they could to provide care for the frightened and traumatised people arriving in their country. At the central station in Warsaw there was even a special 24/7 volunteer service for pets and their owners, who had fled with their animal friends in any way they could.

At the train station, pet owners would receive adequate transport boxes, dry and wet food, veterinary medicine and assistance. I am not using this example of the pet emergency service for the refugees because I believe that their fate was more important or moving than that of people. Instead, I believe that it shows how efficient and complex the Polish volunteers' work was even in the war's early days. Everyone did what they could the best. People and organisations who before the war were working with children, took care of children; those who worked with the disabled, offered care to those who were sick or disabled; and activists helping animals, took care of animals. At that time, other volunteers were sorting and packing humanitarian aid against the odds and taking what they could to Ukraine. In the early phase of the war, few people understood how things would further develop. As a result, they used their own initiative.

This reaction of Polish society, which for sure was the result of years of close

contacts with Ukraine and Ukrainians living in Poland, amazed the whole world. In western press we could even read that Polish society should be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Representatives of this society would quickly take up this idea, promote it on social media and refer to it in different conversations. Whilst some did this in good faith, others were motivated by the narcissistic desire to take credit for sacrifice and bravery. This problem started to be quite visible in the weeks following the Russian invasion.

This hope for the Nobel Peace Prize was soon shattered as the Nobel Committee responded to this idea with a resounding "no". First of all, you cannot nominate the whole society of a given country. It is too large a group and it is clear that efforts are never made in an equal manner. In Poland's case, the assistance given to the refugees was mainly the work of private persons and the third sector. Whilst the engagement of state agencies was in fact very limited, their leaders naturally and willingly – especially in the international arena – took credit for Polish assistance to Ukraine. Even more importantly, these figures bragged that no refugee camps had been established in Poland, even though the coming weeks would change this reality. Unfortunately, many of the refugees got stuck at the so-called reception points, which were perceived as temporary shelter options. These places, in the majority of cases, were huge gyms or former supermarket spaces where dozens of emergency beds were set up. Given the ongoing housing crisis in Poland, the provision of proper living conditions to everyone who does not have them goes beyond the organisational skills of the volunteers and aid organisations. Yet, the Polish state agencies have done nothing to take part in this process.

As a result, after three months of war the country's initial enthusiasm is increasingly being replaced by tiredness and burnout. The heartfelt reactions of ordinary people were not replaced by systemic solutions. The programme to financially support people who took refugees into their homes also came to an end. Migration specialists have been warning us that what lies ahead resembles a marathon more than a sprint and that nobody really knows how long the war will last. They have also said that assisting millions of people, the majority of whom are women with children and the elderly, is a challenge that requires cooperation between state agencies, local governments, non-governmental organisations and even religious institutions.

And here Poland is showing its second face, which is just as real as the one it showed in the first days of the war. Dialogue and cooperation in the search for solutions are hindered by our internal political conflict. At the same time, Polish families are starting to feel the economic costs of the war and are rightly expecting that the state will free them from some of their obligations towards the Ukrainian refugees that they took into their homes. Even though the sit-

uation is far from tragic, it certainly requires immediate action. For sure, it is too early for the Nobel Peace Prize.

However, when discussing this possible award we should reflect on something other than just the fact that accepting Ukrainian refugees is accompanied by expected problems. It is a bit surprising that Poles embraced the idea of the peace prize so quickly. It is as if they forgot that for many months now the country's border with Belarus has been the sight of brutal violence. The majority of Polish society agrees with what the government is doing with regards to the migrants and refugees who are approaching the border upon Alyaksandr Lukashenka's initiative. The activities of the Polish government there include creating a closed zone along the border, which was introduced unconstitutionally and which remained closed to media representatives and humanitarian organisations for 10 months (from September 2021-June 2022). They have also pursued illegal pushback measures (there have already been court decisions in this regard) and some persons have already experienced these policies even dozens of times. At the moment, we know of 15 people who, as a result of the activities of Polish state agencies, died in the forest near the border. Their deaths were the result of low temperatures and/or exhaustion. What is indicative here is that the Polish authorities made no effort to deal with the issue on the border by entering into dialogue with non-governmental organisations, which offered their support in finding humanitarian solutions. Decisions in this regard were made in an arbitrary way, but after ten months of the closed zone and a military presence in the region there has been no visible effect. There are still dozens of people trying to cross the border on a daily basis. They hide in the forest from the Polish authorities in order to avoid being pushed back to Belarus.

There is nothing wrong with the fact that Poles identify more closely with Ukrainians than with people from Syria, Iraq or Yemen. It is natural and expected that a shared neighbourhood, common history and cultural proximity have made this a reality. After all, the years of Ukrainian economic migration to Poland have forged strong links between ordinary people on both sides. It is also inspiring that the majority of Polish society understands that Ukraine's defensive war against Russia's aggression is also our war. This, however, does not change the fact that refugees are still present and maltreated at the Polish-Belarusian border.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

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The ghosts of Poltava

MATTHEW KOTT

Photo by Jevgenija Gehsbarga

In May 2022, as a result of Russia's renewed war of aggression against Ukraine, Sweden broke its long-standing official position of military non-alignment and applied to join NATO. The success of this application will depend very much on the goodwill of Turkey. While this whole situation will seem very odd to the casual outside observer, there is an interesting historical backstory that connects Sweden, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine.

The conventional narrative is that Sweden lost its great power status and its eastern half (i.e., Finland) following a disastrous campaign against Russia in 1809. This was prompted by the Franco-Russian Treaty at Tilsit a few years earlier. Following the Napoleonic Wars, aside from an invasion to crush Norwegian independence in 1814, Sweden has not been at war for over two centuries. The terms "at peace", "neutral" and "non-aligned" are often used colloquially to describe Sweden's status during this period.

In fact, the 1709 Battle of Poltava in Ukraine between the army of Swedish King Charles XII and his Cossack allies on the one side, and the forces of Russia's Peter the Great (which also included Cossacks) on the other, marks the turning point for Sweden's role as the hegemonic power in Northern Europe. While this decisive battle of the Great Northern War is commemorated in Russia as a great victory, in the Swedish historical consciousness it was long remembered as a catastrophic defeat that left an imprint on the histories of many Swedish families.

A painting in the national Romantic style by Gustaf Cederström from around 1880 depicts the despondent Swedish king being advised by Hetman Ivan Mazepa to cross the Dnieper and try to regroup his shattered forces in the lands controlled by the Ottomans. Indeed, Charles and his remaining cadre ended up spending the next two years in the Moldavian town of Bender as guests of the sultan. When Sweden eventually took up the fight with Russia again, all initiative was lost for good. The country lost not only the territory around St Petersburg but also its Estonian and Latvian provinces on the eastern Baltic littoral. This provided Peter with his much desired "window to Europe".

Cederström's emotionally-charged painting would suggest that, even in

the late 19th century, Sweden's martial and imperialist past was not regretted, let alone forgotten. In the Baltic, figures such as Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas have described this period as the "good old Swedish times", albeit this being relative to the Russian rule that came after. The Swedes' rejection of their time as an expansive great powerwould only appear in the 20th century. Indeed, from 1814 to 1914, Sweden gave military guarantees of support to Denmark against Germany over Schleswig-Holstein, hoped to regain lost Finnish territories as a result of the Crimean War, and almost went to war with Norway again in 1905.

Sweden's policy of neutrality was also highly selective. This is probably due to the experiences of countries like Belgium in the First World War. Sweden subsequently became interested in collective security arrangements during the interwar period. It also proposed a "Nordic Defence Union" involving Denmark, Norway and Finland in the aftermath of the Second World War. However, Finlandisation and the founding of NATO ultimately made this a non-starter for Sweden's neighbours.

Similarly, Sweden's adherence to non-alignment – a mainstay of the self-image promoted by successive Social Democratic governments during and after the Cold War – was not always what it seemed. Sweden's military planners always believed that the main threat to the country would come from Moscow, even though politicians would publicly demonise Washington. Prime Minister Olof Palme could arouse the ire of the Americans with his sharp criticisms of their actions in Vietnam, knowing full well that his country's security ultimately depended on NATO and its nuclear umbrella in any conflict with the USSR. Stockholm acted accordingly behind the scenes. The post-Cold War generations of Swedish politicians, however, have often failed to appreciate this double game of "non-alignment". Overall, they have taken it much more at face value than their predecessors. This has led to the untenable and highly selfish position of believing that Sweden is perfectly right to not promise to aid others in times of war, while fully expecting others to come to its defence if attacked. Events in Ukraine since February 24th have been a wake-up call that this is not how things work in the real world. Non-alignment is no longer widely considered to be advantageous, calling into question the Swedish saying that "solitary is strong" (*ensam är stark*).

In actual fact, Sweden has been increasingly integrating with NATO for decades, starting with the Partnership for Peace in 1994. Stockholm has not only deepened cooperation through membership in various NATO structures but has also sent troops to NATO-led operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan. In recent years, Social Democratic governments have pursued further integration with NATO through joint exercises and "Host Nation" agreements. As Sweden was already essentially a fully interop-

erable NATO member in all but name, its application to join was seen as unproblematic.

Somewhat unexpectedly, Turkey soon threatened to block the process. Diplomatic and military relations between the two countries stem from the aforementioned aftermath of Poltava and have resulted in benefits for both sides. Legend has it that Charles XII introduced now typically Swedish culinary elements such as meatballs, coffee and *kåldolmar* (cabbage rolls) to his home country following his sojourn in Bender. More recent evidence of the mutual benefits of Swedish–Turkish relations can be found in the city of Kulu in central Anatolia, where Olof Palme Park bears witness to the Turkish workers recruited by Swedish industry during the 1970s.

Sweden also became the new home for a significant number of Kurds, many of them refugees from conflicts and persecution in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Ankara's view that the Kurds pose an existential threat to Turkey has also led to tensions between immigrant communities in Sweden. This dispute has even been felt in Swedish domestic politics. Over the past year, the fate of the Social Democratic minority government has often depended in parliament on the deciding vote of a single independent MP, Amineh Kakabaveh. A former *peshmerga* who came to Sweden as a refugee, Kakabaveh has demanded that the government increases its support for Kurdish groups in Syria in return for her support. The criticism that Kakabaveh and other prominent Swedish Kurds have directed at Turkey and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is viewed by Ankara as proof that Sweden tacitly supports the PKK. This armed group, as well as its allies and branches in neighbouring countries, are all viewed by Turkey as terrorist organisations.

The "Kurdish question" is subsequently raised by Turkey as a stumbling block to Swedish NATO membership. Naturally, it is a key point of contention in relations between the two countries. Ankara, however, has said that the situation may change after regular parliamentary elections in Sweden this September. This is because the vote could end the parliamentary deadlock that currently gives independent MPs bargaining power. At the same time, Kakabaveh's decision to not run again removes a symbolic obstacle in the eyes of Turkey.

Turkey may also be hoping to gain its own influence over the Swedish political process. The radical nationalist Grey Wolves – classed as a terrorist organisation in several post-Soviet states – have been active in Sweden for years, cultivating ties with politicians and even being involved in violence. A noteworthy member of the liberal Centre Party was expelled in 2018 for having concealed his relationship with the Grey Wolves. In response, he went on to form a new party, *Nyans* (Nuance), which claims to offer a political voice to the Muslim, immigrant population of the deprived neighbourhoods surrounding major Swedish cities. Should this party gain seats in the

Riksdag this autumn, it could serve as a lobby for Turkey's interests. For example, it could push for the sale of advanced arms systems produced by Sweden to Turkey. These arms flows have been frozen ever since Ankara's offensive in Rojava in 2018.

Just as in 1709, however, Russia's attempts to change the geopolitical balance by deploying military power in Ukraine have served to bring the previously more disparate security interests of Sweden and Turkey into alignment. Sweden seeks greater protection for Gotland, an island so strategic that Russian military planners do not think a country like Sweden "deserves" it. Gaining as many allies as possible that can help deter Russia from seizing it is necessary now more than ever. Here, Turkey, whose weapon systems have been put to effective use by the Ukrainian defenders, can again play a key role in helping to provide Sweden with some respite while it rearms.

It would seem that Vladimir Putin is also tempted to draw parallels between the Great Northern War and the situation today. According to reports from the BBC, on the occasion of the 350th anniversary of Peter the Great's birth, he told his audience that "You get the impression that by fighting Sweden he was grabbing something. He wasn't taking anything, he was taking it back." Putin believes that he shares a common historical mission with Peter to reclaim rightful Russian territories that were stolen by hostile powers. The Russian president then stated that "It is our responsibility also to take back and strengthen." This attitude from the region's self-appointed hegemon is a threat to Russia's neighbours, requiring collective security arrangements to contain such threats of aggression. To achieve this, both Sweden and Turkey need reliable friends. Ukraine is also aware of this reality. As Charles XII's counsel after Poltava, Mazepa, wrote in his poem "Duma": "Alone I am bound to fail…"

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As Russia invades Ukraine, Israel walks a diplomatic tightrope

SAM SOKOL

When Russian troops crossed the Ukrainian border on February 24th, Israel found itself in a dilemma. Faced with western pressure to pick sides, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid stressed that they had to act to preserve their freedom of action in Syria. The Israeli Air Force has long carried out airstrikes against Iranian and Hezbollah targets with the tacit permission of Russian forces stationed in the country.

Photo courtesy of Sam Sokol

With its western allies mobilising to provide Kyiv with diplomatic, military and financial support, Israel sought to balance its relations with both sides of the conflict, endorsing Ukraine's territorial integrity without explicitly calling out or condemning Russia. It would largely maintain this approach until the emergence of the first reports of atrocities in the Kyiv suburb of Bucha.

Despite repeated entreaties, Israel declined to send Ukraine any weapons, instead offering humanitarian supplies and setting up a field hospital near the Polish border. It would eventually send several hundred protective helmets and vests for use by civilian first responders but nothing in the way of lethal aid.

Bennett, who had positioned himself as a mediator, explained that any such assistance could endanger his attempts to bring about a negotiated solution, one which thus far has not been forthcoming.

Ukrainian outrage at Israel was also fueled by Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked's decision to restrict the entry of Ukrainian refugees by imposing a quota and even, at one point, requiring Israeli relatives of the displaced to post a bond before granting them entrance – a policy vocally opposed by multiple members of the government. This approach angered many liberal Israelis, as well as members of the country's large Russian-speaking population, many of whom are originally from Ukraine.

"Israel is mumbling [when faced with] such a clear moral situation of a fight

of good against evil, and tries to be on good terms with all sides," former Soviet dissident and Israeli human rights icon Natan Sharansky told me in an interview for *Haaretz* in April. "Our prime minister is afraid to call out Putin, who is behind these crimes, by name."

Aside from strategic concerns in Syria, Israeli leaders have also repeatedly invoked the security of the large Jewish communities in both Russia and Ukraine, stating that taking sides could endanger both. However, some Ukrainian Jews have expressed consternation at such claims, noting that their communities are being destroyed by the war. *Aliyah*, or immigration to Israel, has been on the rise from both countries since the war started, with thousands arriving every month.

Jerusalem's silence was even more perplexing to many given that Russia's stated justification for its aggression was the "denazification" of Ukraine. Moscow has used various similar pretexts for years, claiming that it has had to intervene in Ukraine to protect ethnic Russians, Jews and other minorities. During the first phase of the war from 2014–16, Russian officials and state media outlets repeatedly shared fabricated tales of antisemitism and were frequently accused of staging anti-Jewish provocations by local community leaders.

But while Moscow said it was battling Nazis, it was the one destroying Jewish life in Eastern Ukraine, bombing Jewish institutions such as synagogues, Holocaust memorials and a student house belonging to the Hillel group. What did elicit condemnations, however, were Ukrainian officials' comparisons of Russian war crimes to those of the Nazis.

When Ukraine's Jewish President Volodymyr Zelenskyy accused Russians of using the "language of the final solution" while remotely addressing the Knesset this March, Bennett said that while he understands that Zelenskyy is "a leader who is fighting for the life of his country", he "personally believe[d] that it is forbidden to equate the Holocaust to anything".

Aside from speaking out about Bucha, Jerusalem largely maintained its silence until early May, when Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov publicly defended calling Zelenskyy a Nazi. He asserted that Adolf Hitler also "had Jewish blood" and "the most ardent antisemites are usually Jews."

The ensuing diplomatic spat was quickly resolved, however, with Bennett's office announcing that Vladimir Putin had personally apologised. Interestingly, the Kremlin's readout of their call made no mention of any backtracking on the part of the Russian president. Realpolitik appeared to have won out again.

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The war that brought back the eternal Bulgarian dispute

KRASSEN NIKOLOV

Photo courtesy of Krassen Nikolov

The war in Ukraine for Bulgarian society is what Donald Trump was for the United States and Brexit for the United Kingdom – a quake that divided society. Bulgaria became a member of the European Union in 2007, but never managed to part with two definitions of itself. One is that it is the poorest and most corrupt country in the EU, and the other is that it was the most loyal satellite of the Soviet Union. These labels continue to influence Sofia's policy and largely explain the political changes in the country since the beginning of the Russian invasion.

Last year was a time of unprecedented political instability after 12 years of governments controlled by Boyko Borissov and his GERB party. Severe accusations of corruption, a lack of reforms and a lagging standard of living have managed to unite parties that have never even entertained the idea of working together. The anti-Borissov coalition includes liberals, former communists, the most aggressive anti-communists and a populist party founded by former TV star Slavi Trifonov (the Bulgarian version of Beppe Grillo).

In December 2021, the parliament elected a government made up of this strange quadruple coalition. Its goals included judicial reform, the fight against corruption and the removal of Borissov's legacy from various institutions. On February 24th, Putin put an end to all this. The war in Ukraine brought Bulgarian politics back to its late 19th century roots – the conflict between Russophiles and Russophobes. This was the dominant reality of the Bulgarian transition from totalitarianism to democracy in the early 1990s, when the country actually had a two-party model – the anti-communist right and the pro-Russian left.

"Bulgarians have the wisdom of troubled wisdom. We live peacefully with this rift between philes and phobias. Bulgarian society is Russophile in its heart, but Europhile in its mind," said political scientist Parvan Simeonov. In fact, most

sociological research shows that Bulgarian society is divided into three almost equal parts. One part is made up of the extreme Russophiles who support the Kremlin, no matter what. The other part is the Russophobes, who are the core of the Euro-Atlantic parties. The third part consists of the people who support Bulgaria's membership in the EU, have some doubts about NATO and generally have nothing against Russia.

The war in Ukraine changed this middle neutral part of Bulgarian society the most. These people have never been particularly impressed by the "abstract" goals of the rule of law, accept the convenience of everyday small-scale corruption and are most concerned about living standards and inflation. Many of these people before the war liked Putin because in Eastern Europe he had created the image of a strong politician who cared about the little man. After the start of the war, some neutral Bulgarians condemned the brutality of the Putin regime. However, others succumbed to the extremely active Kremlin propaganda on social media and supported the aggressors.

Sociologists have clearly sensed the radicalisation of society and the impact of online propaganda. The biggest winner is the extreme pro-Russian nationalist Kostadin Kostadinov and his Revival party. He managed to enter parliament by campaigning against the COVID-19 "green pass". Kostadinov called COVID-19 a "little flu". As a result, he easily cleared the electoral threshold and gained about five per cent of the vote. Once in parliament, he became a key representative of Eurosceptic circles in Bulgarian society, speaking out against the country's membership in NATO and the EU. After the start of the war in Ukraine, which led to huge inflation, support for Kostadinov rose to 12 per cent. This is largely because he is the only political voice that strongly supports Russia's position. In a new election, he would become an unavoidable political factor in Bulgaria.

The conflict gave birth to another new Eurosceptic party – former caretaker Prime Minister Stefan Yanev's Bulgarian Rise. This party is working to attract more moderate Russophiles who find Kostadinov too radical.

However, the news about Bulgaria is not all bad. At the end of April, Gazprom stopped supplying gas to Bulgaria and Poland due to both countries' refusal to open accounts in roubles. Two months later, the pro-European Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov showed that Bulgaria can pursue an energy policy independent from Moscow. The country has gas, although in April it imported 90 per cent of it from Russia. Its price even decreased compared to April due to the supply of American liquefied gas through a terminal in Greece.

Starting in July, Bulgaria will receive Azeri gas through a newly built interconnector with the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP). The government is beginning to show that the Soviet Union's most loyal satellite can now pursue an independent policy and that the Kremlin's instru-

ments of influence are not as strong as pro-Russian circles in the country claim.

Most importantly, the new government has not yet been involved in any major corruption scandals. There is also a chance that Bulgarians are currently too tired of elections, since they just had three votes over the past year. This gives the coalition time to work. The multi-party model and the unstable ruling coalition brought life back to the Bulgarian parliament. The country can rightly be called a parliamentary democracy once again. However, the most serious problem is that this freedom seems unsustainable, and a weak government will be seriously challenged amidst unprecedented international crises.

Author's note: While this text was being prepared, Kiril Petkov's government lost a majority in parliament and is on the verge of falling from power. One of the ruling coalition's partners, the populist There Are Such a People party, announced he was leaving the country, justifying Petkov's betrayal of Bulgaria's national interests by promising to lift the veto of North Macedonia. If Bulgaria continues to block the European integration of Skopje and Tirana, it will fully serve the Kremlin's interests in the region. Whatever happens to Petkov's government, it is now clear that the next coalition in the country will be determined by the geopolitical orientation of the parties on the West-East axis.

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A referendum in the shadow of war

HANNA VASILEVICH

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has shifted international attention away from yet another referendum in Belarus. Like all the previous ones, these reforms significantly change the Belarusian political landscape, while giving Alyaksandr Lukashenka even more influence and power.

A long-debated constitutional referendum was held in Belarus on February 27th. It had only one question: do you accept the new constitutional amendments? An alternative version of the constitution was put forward by the country's democratic forces outside of Belarus called "The People's Constitution". However, this was not even considered by the state working group. Despite an official invitation to all citizens to participate in public debate and suggest proposals, it became obvious that only those changes proposed in line with the regime's vision would be considered and adopted by Minsk.

Those who questioned or even criticised the regime's proposals faced various negative consequences, such as detainment. This is what happened to Mikalai Vicikau, a pensioner who now faces criminal charges for his public criticism of the proposed constitutional changes.

Voting as a form of protest

The mainstream anti-Lukashenka groups joined forces in an attempt to use the referendum as a tool for political protest. To this end, they asked the electorate

not to boycott the referendum but to use ballots to express their negative feelings regarding the referendum in particular and the regime in general. Considering the invasion of Ukraine had been launched just a few days before the referendum, many Belarusians used their ballots to express their disapproval of the war – shifting the focus from the referendum to condemning the war and Russia's military presence in the country.

Only Belarusians residing in Belarus were allowed to participate in the referendum.

Only Belarusians residing in Belarus were allowed to participate in the referendum. For those residing abroad, no polling stations were organised. According to the official results, 65.16 per cent voted for the constitutional changes, while only 10.07 per cent voted against them. Nearly 43 per cent voted early. In the Minsk region, which returned the fewest votes in favour of the changes, 55.13 per cent voted for and 13.23 per cent voted against. Meanwhile in the Mahilioŭ region, the area most supportive of the changes, 71.69 per cent voted for and 10.4 per cent voted against.

Of course, the procedures surrounding the referendum were not democratic and the results could hardly be trusted. The official results revealed an unprecedented percentage of voters who spoiled their ballots by writing anti-war slogans. As suggested by the opposition leader in exile Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's team, some also crossed out both answers in order to express their rejection of the referendum.

The Viasna Human Rights Centre published a list of 908 people who were detained on the day of the referendum for publicly protesting against the war. Most of them were detained near polling stations and the building of the general staff of the Belarusian armed forces in Minsk. Tsikhanouskaya called for citizens to gather in these places.

New governing body

The Belarusian constitution has been changed three times since Alyaksandr Lukashenka became president: in 1995, 1996 and 2004. In 1996 the presidential term was extended and presidential powers significantly broadened. This new fourth change to the constitution does not bring any checks and balances to the state's existing separation of powers. However, it does introduce some significant changes that could weaken the position of the president. At the same time, it has created a new supreme representative body made up of about 1,200 people called the "All-Belarusian People's Assembly". This new body will control key government appointments and reforms.

According to the new constitution: "the president could be dismissed from his/her position by the All-Belarusian People's Assembly in the case of systematic or brutal violation of the constitution or in conducting state treason or any other severe crime … An investigation of the accusations is to be organised by the assembly. A decision for dismissal of a president from his/her position is taken by the assembly after the conclusion of the constitutional court on the facts of systematic or brutal violation of the constitution by a president."

In general, the new regulation provides the assembly with the widest possible range of rights and responsibilities, affecting both domestic and foreign affairs. This includes approving the main concepts of domestic and foreign policy, military doctrine and national security. It will also preside over proposals regarding the constitution and referenda. Finally, this body will have the right to examine the legitimacy of elections and possibly even remove the president from office.

Upon the recommendation of the president, the All-Belarusian People's Assembly should be able to elect and dismiss the constitutional and supreme courts' chairpersons and judges. It will also decide on the possibility of sending servicemen and members of paramilitary organisations outside of the country to participate in activities ensuring state security.

Considering that the new constitution allows the assembly to overrule the decisions of state bodies and officials that threaten national security (except for acts of judicial bodies), its role essentially allows it to take on the responsibilities of parliament.

More power for Lukashenka

Lukashenka is expected to be appointed chairperson of this new assembly, suggesting that he could remain one of the country's main political figures well after his presidential term. In this capacity, he could easily influence presidential decisions and even question them, given the weak and dependent position of the Belarusian constitutional court. He could also become involved in most domestic and foreign policies.

Even before the next presidential elections in 2025, Lukashenka might simultaneously serve as president and chair of the new assembly. There are no limitations in the new constitution that say he cannot do this. However, such a move would contradict various official statements. According to the president's office, "the All-Belarusian People's Assembly should have the function of public control over the decisions of the new President when he is elected." As a result, the new assembly will carry out two functions: to control whoever becomes the next president; and

to allow Lukashenka to keep as much power as possible. What is more, the new constitution opens up the possibility that Lukashenka could become a lifelong member of the Council of the Republic – the upper chamber of Belarus's parliament.

These constitutional changes were actively promoted soon after the 2020 presidential election and associated mass protests that lasted for nearly nine months. The promoted changes are aimed at limiting presidential power. Considering the insecurity of Lukashenka's position for several months, the proposed amendments provided him with several options to stay in power and limit the powers of a new president. These have challenged some norms set in the 1990s that ultimately allowed him to become president in the first place. Thus, the "new old" age threshold of 40 instead of 35 has been brought back for the president.

The new constitution also limits the president to two terms. It remains unclear how this rule will be applied to Lukashenka.

The new constitution has also doubled the amount of time a permanent resident must live in Belarus in order to become president from ten to 20 years. Candidates must now also have no previous and/or current foreign citizenship/s, or a residence permit of a foreign state entitling them to privileges and other benefits. These limitations mean that a significant number of Lukashenka's opponents will not even have the chance to become president. After all, many of them had to flee the country during and after the 2020 protests.

The new constitution also limits the president to two terms. However, it remains unclear how this rule will be applied to Lukashenka. All previous constitutional changes were effectively used by him to "annul" his term, meaning that the new regulations applied only after they came into force.

Lukashenka's personal security

The 2020 protests naturally affected domestic security policy. They revealed Lukashenka's feelings of insecurity regarding his future position as president. As a result, another new constitutional change concerns the legal grounds for a state of emergency. This now includes "attempts at violent change of the constitutional order, seizure or appropriation of state power, armed insurrection, mass, and other riots".

A whole new article is focused on providing security for Lukashenka even if he should lose his position as president. It also ensures that he will not be persecuted for any deeds or crimes committed while in office. Specifically, it declares that "the president shall have immunity, his honour and dignity shall be protected by

law … The President who has terminated the exercise of his powers shall not be called to account for the actions he committed in connection with the exercise of his presidential powers."

One more significant change to the constitution concerns Belarus's status as a nuclear-free state. Article 18 of the new constitution states that "The Republic of Belarus excludes military aggression from its territory against other states." However, this provision has been broken from the very beginning, considering the Russian military's presence on the territory of Belarus. Moscow's forces have simply stayed after their "military training" and have been used ever since in attacks against Ukraine. Another issue of concern is that Russia potentially could use the territory of Belarus as a base for nuclear weapons.

One issue of concern is that Russia potentially could use the territory of Belarus as a base for nuclear weapons.

The new constitution has also introduced a new regulation regarding the potential termination of citizenship. Even though there have already been cases when Lukashenka has stripped critics of their Belarusian citizenship (e.g., the case of Pavel Sheremet), this amendment will likely be used to further target Lukashenka's opponents.

Back in 2021, the head of the department of the main directorate of the state security service of Belarus, Viachaslau Arlouski, suggested that the authorities deprive those Belarusians who left the country of their citizenship. Arlouski claimed that they "work in the interests of western countries" and "do everything possible to harm the state". He stated that those deprived of citizenship will not be able to return to Belarus, take part in elections or referenda, or participate in the social and political life of the country.

Finally, the new constitution is further regulating social life as it defines marriage exclusively as a union between a man and a woman, who "have equal rights in marriage and family". It also clearly limits interpretations of the Second World War, as it should be referred to as the Great Patriotic War like in Russia. This state approved version of history is described by the new constitution as "the historical truth and the memory of the heroic feat of the Belarusian people". As a result, it has become a duty for Belarusians to follow such history as a show of patriotism.

Transition

Overall, the Council of Europe's Venice Commission has stated that the constitutional changes proposed by the regime "fail to correct the strong unbalance

of powers which already exists under the current Constitution and indeed may even aggravate it".

The next two years will offer a transition for Minsk to adopt legislation on the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, which will become a central body with rather vague functions. It is clear that the assembly will secure Lukashenka's powers and provide him with chances to influence key legislation and appointments on a life-long basis.

However, the proposed changes will only become fully effective in 2024. Before the end of February that year, when the elections to the House of Representatives are due to take place, there will be no significant changes to the country's existing political system.

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The geopolitics of hospitality

NATALIA BARSZCZ AND LUIZA BIALASIEWICZ

The arrival of millions of Ukrainian refugees in Poland has resulted in an unprecedented humanitarian response from groups and individuals in Polish society. Yet the actual geographies of refugee reception differ significantly from their instrumentalised geopolitical representations by state leaders.

Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Poland has received over 3.5 million arrivals from Ukraine according to the latest UNHCR reports. This is an exceptional number, and the country became, in the space of one month, the state with the second largest refugee population in the world, lauded domestically as well as internationally for its outpouring of support.

But while Polish and EU leaders have used the country's hospitality to promote their stated commitment to a "European safe haven", it is important to understand who (and where) has actually provided this much praised reception. As much as state representatives have hailed Poland's unique contribution, it is in fact Polish cities, associations and individual citizens that have been doing the actual "work of reception".

Bottom-up refugee reception

When Warsaw Mayor Rafał Trzaskowski hosted the international "Stand Up for Ukraine" fundraiser on April 9th, he drew explicit attention to this fact. As

Trzaskowski wrote in his editorial in *The Economist* "in just a month the population of Warsaw increased by 17 per cent." Over half a million of the more than 3.5 million refugees had either passed through or remained in Warsaw and the city mobilised in an extraordinary fashion. Whilst information points and reception centres were already set up on the first day of the Russian invasion, the main railway stations were adapted to assist arrivals with food, temporary shelter and medical help.

As Trzaskowski made clear in his plea, the great bulk of the material and administrative burdens associated with the Ukrainian arrivals' reception and care was taken on by local, not national, authorities. Individual citizens came together to provide people help with official registration and the distributed government stipends granted to those hosting them. The city's medical and social workers were, overnight, given over almost entirely to assisting the traumatised arrivals, while local schools began to integrate as best as they could the newly arrived children. The situation in Warsaw was also replicated in other large Polish cities such as Kraków and Wrocław.

In his piece in *The Economist*, the Warsaw mayor was adamant that this form of assistance was simply not sustainable, writing that "It has to be clearly stated that most of what you see in Poland is improvisation. It is a bottom-up process driven mostly by a dense network of co-operation between volunteers, charities and local governments who shoulder most of the relief effort. We cannot go on in this way. Two weeks ago, at the peak of the crisis to date, 30,000 people a day were coming to Warsaw. I had to call mayors of other Polish and European cities to beg for assistance. My friends sent buses in the middle of the night to relocate people."

Several of the urban networks to which Trzaskowski appealed date back to Europe's previous large-scale "reception crisis" following the summer of migration of 2015, when other large cities in Europe found themselves in a very similar situation. That transformative moment resulted in the emergence of a number of urban networks that are still active today. This includes the Solidarity Cities network, which provides both a forum for information exchange and direct assistance between cities in receiving and relocating refugees. Yet despite the emergence of such networks and forms of bilateral collaboration, migrant and refugee reception remains a field in which EU member states insist on retaining crucial competences and powers. In spite of the etymology, it is states, not cities, that grant citizenship. Various city initiatives to grant specific rights of "denizenship" to migrant populations have, indeed, frequently been faced with legal challenges.

It is striking, then, that in the "spring of migration" of 2022 it is urban actors like Warsaw's mayor who have provided the bulk of the material assistance to those displaced by the war. Such figures do not possess any formal and legal role in refugee reception. However, it is often they who have most vocally insisted on going

beyond generic notions of "hospitality" to the arriving refugees and have invoked, instead, the language of legal obligations, both national and EU-wide. We want to examine this important distinction in what follows, for it is not merely rhetorical.

Urban framings – national framings

Trzaskowski has in fact been the only leading Polish politician to explicitly speak of a "refugee crisis" that must be addressed. He is also the only one who has appealed directly to the EU authorities and other competent international organisations for assistance. The Warsaw mayor's positioning – calling upon EU bodies and international organisations, as well as invoking systemic solutions, including the redistribution of refugees between EU member states – stands in direct contradiction to the way in which the Polish national authorities have been addressing the question of refugee arrivals.

If we examine both the official statements and social media posts of two key figures – Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and President Andrzej Duda – a quite different discursive framing is in fact evident. Any allusion to the notion of "crisis" is explicitly avoided, whether in relation to the exceptional numbers of refugee arrivals or the inability of state or local actors to assist them. Any mention of assistance from external actors is also carefully sidestepped, whether these are international organisations such as the UNHCR or the Red Cross, or the existing mechanisms of assistance offered by the European Union for situations such as this one.

Rather than drawing attention to the exceptional refugee arrivals, the communication of Poland's prime minister has been on wider geopolitical issues.

Rather than drawing attention to the exceptional refugee arrivals, Prime Minister Morawiecki's communication has focused instead on wider geopolitical agendas. Morawiecki's #StopRussiaNow campaign is a case in point. This involved a concerted social media and billboard campaign (that drew criticism for its expense that could have been more usefully deployed to directly assist refugees). Although the stated focus of this campaign is to show how Poland has led Europe in its provision of humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, the figure of the refugee is merely incidental to the narrative, merely a symbol of Poland's unique role in "shaking the conscience" of other (western) EU member states.

In President Andrzej Duda's communication, the focus lies with Poland's compassion and solidarity towards their "dear brothers and sisters". Polish actions are

thus not only guided by its legally-binding obligations to those seeking refuge but also by its "charitable" national "disposition". In Duda's words, Poland plays an "important role in supporting refugees fleeing the Russian invasion", a role that in Duda's framing draws on Poland's unique historical identity and its geographical proximity: "We try to help as much as we can, if only by making sure that women and children from Ukraine – wives of those who are fighting in Ukraine in defence of their homeland – find shelter, find a safe haven in Poland, in Polish homes, in Polish institutions; as close to Ukraine as possible, so that when the war ends, they can return there."

Very similar appeals are evident in Morawiecki's communication, which also invokes the image of Poland as the hospitable and brotherly protector of women and children. As Morawiecki has repeatedly noted, Poland was the first "safe haven" in the EU determined to provide "our Ukrainian neighbours with the best possible aid" and save Ukrainian "women, children and entire families" from Russian aggression. In the communication of both these political figures, Poland is an exceptional actor bound not only by duty but also a broader historical and geographical "destiny" to stand guard at the borders of the collective "European home" and protect those who seek shelter within it.

Exceptional mission

Such discursive framing of Poland's role by Duda and Morawiecki may appear at first glance simply the sort of lofty proclamations that state leaders often engage in. Yet the choice of terminology adopted to describe those arriving in Poland in the spring of 2022 – from "women and children" to "brothers" and "neighbours" – is not at all coincidental.

Indeed, when addressing a European or international audience, Morawiecki (and to a somewhat lesser extent Duda) describes those crossing the Polish Eastern border as those seeking refuge from war and genocide in a region bordering the European space. The prime minister also describes Poland as a model EU member state embodying the fundamental European values of solidarity, security and democracy through its reception of those fleeing the violence, and one that should serve as an example to others (the stated aim of Morawiecki's contested billboards was to "break through the wall of European indifference"). Morawiecki indeed views himself as leading both Poland and Europe in "helping Ukraine with humanitarian, military and political aid" and pledging to "count on the EU as well, which must introduce tough sanctions and provide systemic funding to help refugees" and "prove that it is a continent of peace and freedom". President Duda has

similarly noted on various occasions that "Today, Poland is the leader in aid to Ukraine" and is "once again showing what solidarity means".

However, outside of the international and European arena, in communication aimed at Polish citizens, and especially that directed at the Law and Justice electorate, such hospitality towards "refugees" is carefully presented as aid to "our neighbours", "brothers and sisters" and "women and children" above all else. Both Morawiecki and Duda's rhetoric has tapped into the traditional themes of a historical relationship between oppressed Poles and Ukrainians, as well as the romantic nationalist understanding of a strong and masculine Poland lending a helping hand to Ukrainian women in need of protection. This seeks to justify Poland's openness and hospitality towards "others" entering, traversing through, and seeking refuge in Poland as exceptional and linked to a unique historical and geographical condition. There is no mention of any sort of systemic, EU-wide assistance mechanism, as this is a "burden" gladly borne by Poland.

This discursive framing is important for it not only presents the hospitality shown to Ukrainian refugees as exceptional and part of Poland's longer historical "mission", but it also serves to distinguish the assistance granted to those crossing the Ukrainian border from those attempting to cross from Belarus.

Legal obligations

As noted above, the distinction between "hospitality" to brothers and the legal obligations of the Polish state to all those seeking refuge (whether holding Ukrainian citizenship or not) is not just a discursive one. It also brings with it real material effects. Hospitality depends on the willingness of the host to be generous, and it is ultimately able to side-line legal commitments to the rights of refugees. As migration scholar Jonathan Darling has argued, the language of hospitality "is always conditioned by the right to select, classify and limit [such] hospitality". The ability to select "who to be hospitable to" is indeed a key determinant when states adopt a language of hospitality for describing their obligations to provide refuge. In the Polish case, it has been a key determinant in promoting the forms of hospitality extended to refugees from Ukraine while denying, often very violently, the rights of those seeking to enter Poland through the border with Belarus.

Still ongoing, yet by now largely absent from media discussions, the flow of refugees from "the Global East" attempting to cross the Polish-Belarusian border and seek asylum in the EU has been described by Polish authorities as more than a "migrant crisis". Instead, it has been presented as a "weaponisation of migration" and a form of "hybrid warfare" conducted with the bodies of migrants, aiming at the

destabilisation of the Polish state. In the #WeDefendEurope promotional video released in November 2021, Prime Minister Morawiecki called for support from other EU states to "stop the evil threatening Europe", which he also described as "our common home". The "evil" invoked by Morawiecki here involved the instrumentalised "invaders" caught in the "hybrid war" taking place on the Polish-Belarusian border, "which Alyaksandr Lukashenka, with the back room support of Vladimir Putin, has declared against the entire European Union". Morawiecki described the flow of migrants as "a political crisis created for a special purpose", noting that it was not "an ordinary migration crisis" as the situation on the border with Belarus might appear "from a distance".

As various scholars, journalists and activists have noted, however, such a framing of this "other" migration as "instrumentalised", "weaponised" and "perilous" moves discussion away from Poland's legal obligations to provide asylum to those fleeing war and persecution in countries such as Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen and Egypt. Legal scholar Grażyna Baranowska has argued that the border regime put into effect from August to October 2021 was in direct "violation of Poland's international obligations and inconsistent with domestic law". Yet Polish state discourse all through the autumn of 2021 to the following spring spoke of "dangerous young men" at the Belarusian border who were not "real refugees" like those arriving from Ukraine. After all, they were not "women and children" needing protection and assistance. They were simply "illegal migrants" or "economic migrants", opportunistic and instrumentalised by Lukashenka's regime, and as such not eligible for the Polish state's altruism and charity.

Discourse of hospitality

In examining the migration crisis on the Belarusian border in autumn, it is also important to note that while Morawiecki appealed in broad terms for "EU support" in countering the "hybrid warfare" being waged on Poland's borders, he and the Polish state repeatedly refused actual material support in managing the migration flow, from both EU bodies such as Frontex and international organisations such as the UNHCR.

Why was such assistance refused? By framing the crisis on the Belarusian border as exceptional and war-like (not as a "refugee crisis"), Polish leaders hoped to keep it outside of the existing legal frameworks governing migration and asylum in the EU. Such a framing indeed served to both discursively and materially evade Poland's legal obligations of refuge to those attempting to cross its border. All the while, the continuous rejection of physical and military European help served to

uphold Poland's self-image as a resilient and independent member of the Union, destined and able to guard its borders.

Today, Polish state leaders' avoidance of the term "refugee crisis" to refer to the mass arrivals of those fleeing war in Ukraine is also problematic. This is not so much for its aversion towards the term "crisis" (a term that also comes with its own multiple dangers) but that of "refugee", a term that comes with distinct legal obligations.

Using the frame of hospitality to describe the reception of refugees from Ukraine, as both Morawiecki and Duda insist on doing, serves to distinguish between those who do and do not deserve Polish hospitality. It also blurs the Polish state's legal obligations regarding international protection and the principle of non-refoulement. As such, it fails to recognise all refugees as holders of legitimate rights and grants actors (states, cities or individual citizens) the choice of whether (and for how long) to dispense charity, rather than uphold Poland's legally binding obligations under international and EU law.

The investment made in the heavily emotional appeals of Morawiecki and Duda would indeed be better spent in providing stable and more long-term solutions to the reception of Ukrainian and other refugees on behalf of the Polish state, rather than relying on the actions of cities and citizens. But here, too, the performative discourse of hospitality seems to take precedence over actual support. As PiS leader Jaroslaw Kaczyński has repeatedly noted, Poland does not intern its "neighbours" and "brothers" in refugee camps. This leaves local actors like Warsaw's mayor and individual citizens to provide the actual material spaces of reception for Ukrainian refugees, beyond state leaders' grand appeals to "a shared history", "brotherhood" and a "common European home". NEE

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The political psychology of war

RAZE BAZIANI, RASAN BAZIANI

Political ideologies are influenced not only by socio-demographic factors, but also by psychological variables such as personal needs, social identity processes and information processing. It is difficult to give a simplistic answer as to why people follow the ideological constructs of lies. The rejection of information, the instrumentalisation of the media and the erasure of dissenting voices, as well as the creation of confusion and fear, create weaponised narratives aimed at undermining civilisation and the personal as well as cultural identity of the opponent.

The current Russian war in Ukraine raises many questions about the human willingness to use violence and especially so when the justifications for war are based on false and fabricated claims. Systematic manipulation and ideological indoctrination have been clear parts of Vladimir Putin's leadership style for quite some time now. He has almost perfected the tactics of psycho-political governance. This is accomplished through certain tactics and mind tricks that mobilise people to support the war or even participate in it.

Why war?

It is said that if you want to understand autocracy, you have to understand the autocrat. Yet, anyone expecting a remote psychological diagnosis of Vladimir Pu-

Photo: Lumen Photos / Shutterstock

Aggressiveness expressed in wars is often closely connected to the aggressiveness fomented internally by political elites in authoritarian systems.

tin in this article will be disappointed. Whilst this would represent a break with professional practice, an identification of the leader's core beliefs is also hampered by a lack of evidence. Remote diagnoses always remain speculative and therefore offer very little. However, it is possible to observe political behaviour and classify the basic logic of political patterns. Psychological models can then help us understand the causes of political preferences or explain why certain tactics and policies are particularly effective.

In wars, political and/or economic interests gain validity and power. Linked to these, psychological factors can also push people to war and influence the way they conduct themselves. On the one hand, war, defined as armed physical conflict, seems to be a group phenomenon. On the other, it is based on psychological impulses that predispose individuals to their hostile and aggressive actions. Individuals have to deal with their own positive or negative emotions regarding war, while groups replace such emotions with social norms. Individuals can be more or less aggressive, but the aggressiveness of collectives must be formed from the aggregate of individuals. The individual will must therefore be generally ready to accept the collective phenomenon of war. But how do such social norms arise?

Aggression is fundamentally a natural human phenomenon. For a long time, it was assumed that the use of violence against other social groups served as a means of survival. But humans also managed to use this natural readiness for aggression

to pursue the interests of ruling elites. At the same time, elites promote the idea that the people are pursuing their own interests when they participate in political violence. As a result, individuals declare themselves willing to risk their survival for the interests of elites. If we look at the perpetrators of violence on the front line, in other words the military, as well as their path to participation in war, it becomes clear that oppressive logics shape the pattern of action. Often humiliating military training and the orders of superiors ultimately generate hatred against those superiors among soldiers. But since aggression cannot be directed against superiors, it must be shifted to the enemy. This first occurs on an individual level and then as a military unit part of the collective. In this way, the image of the enemy is mixed with the individual's projected aggressions. It then becomes easier to fight this enemy by all means. The idealisation of military goals leads to a rationalisation of collective projections and ultimately the legitimisation of destroying the enemy. At the same time, however, the distorted image of the enemy makes it more difficult to take note of reality. This leads to strategic misjudgements and makes it more difficult to bring about peace and reconciliation.

Another crucial element in the psychological mobilisation of people is the breaking of the taboo surrounding killing and the framing of conflict as a kind of "holy war". The act of killing is a central taboo in every human culture and serves to protect the lives of all people. The prohibition of taking the lives of others is considered to be of paramount, sacred importance for human coexistence. In war, this logic is reversed both culturally and psychologically, as states demand that their soldiers extinguish other human lives in war. Such a breach of this sacred taboo subsequently requires particularly sacred justifications. In modern societies, the reversal of this ideal is usually justified by the defence of important cultural values. In this context, the enemy must represent a form of demonic evil. This is especially true when it comes to wars of aggression, which are precisely not aimed at self-defence. Indeed, these conflicts pursue other goals and often exploit the dictum of self-defence. The ideal of "holy war" demands that it always be presented as an act of self-defence against an insidious enemy who has forced (supposedly) peace-loving peoples to take up arms.

The dilemma of autocracy

Aggressiveness expressed in wars is often closely connected to the aggressiveness fomented internally by political elites in authoritarian systems. Authoritarianism is a system that forces people to obey governments and is often linked to fundamentalism, ethnocentrism and prejudice. In personalised autocracies such

as Russia, state power is concentrated in the hands of a single person. There may be parties, a legislature and an influential military, but the most important administrative and political decisions are made by one single person. This in turn makes these personalised autocrats dependent on an informal inner circle of decision-makers that gets smaller and smaller over time. Important political positions are thus filled with loyalists instead of experts. The autocrats also distances themselves more and more from critical impulses, which in turn are crucial for political decision-making. This is a dilemma often faced by autocratic rulers. In turn, they often compensate for this issue by invoking the support of the people and abusing their support as a pretext for covering up their wrong decisions.

When people get into uncontrollable positions of political power, desires for power can be reinforced. Studies have shown that power changes thinking and feeling, especially when no limits are set. Those who get into positions of power often see it as proof of their superiority. This reinforces claims to authority and devalues those who think differently. Powerful individuals often develop a dehumanised and functional relationship with their fellow human beings, who are valued first and foremost for their usefulness. In psychology, this is called "objectification" – people are degraded and viewed as objects. Looking at it rationally, this is a zero-sum game in which it is only a matter of time before this position of power is undermined.

For Putin's *siloviki* – members of the country's vast security services – the situation is probably becoming increasingly dangerous. The war continues on and the more reality intrudes into the parallel reality of Putin's echo chamber, the angrier the leader could become with his military and intelligence chiefs. In contrast, the *siloviki* could turn against their master. However, this does not seem to be happening at this point.

Weaponised narratives

It may seem contradictory, but autocrats love confirmation and want approval. If they do not get it, they will get it by using force if necessary. A fear-mongering ruler can induce an attitude of obedience among their people, putting them in a state of political powerlessness in which their options for action seem useless. This mindset is often reinforced with an element of threat, an antagonist to be fought. When a social group feels existentially threatened, its collective identity is formed under this threat. A struggle against the supposed danger then becomes a struggle to secure one's existence. Not infrequently, this image is constructed under false premises and spread with the help of propagandistic media. The phenomenon of social groups projecting fear or hatred onto other groups is not new. In the mod-

ern world, however, humans are not automatically each other's enemy. Understandings of the enemy are rather the result of learned and indoctrinated categories of thought. In particular, the constant repetition of (invented) threat elements creates the appearance of truth among people. Once people believe a theory, their perception is subject to cognitive influence. Whatever strengthens an individual's position is filtered out and the person thereby enters an echo chamber. In this way, opposing viewpoints are less and less allowed and a simple theory can quickly become an ideology.

Putin alone controls power in his country. Evidently, the Russian system itself causes economic disadvantage and a lack of political participation among the population. But this responsibility is systematically shifted to others, such as the West and Ukraine. Domestic causes are simply ignored by the authorities. Dualistic thinking is very persistent in Moscow's national narrative and historiography, which constantly emphasise Russian exceptionalism in relation to other political systems and worldviews. The Russian president is described by many voices as an eclectic, someone who picks approaches from different ideologies and uses them situationally to build his own theory. Indeed, Putin often links imperialism with neo-Eurasianism and pairs this with a revival of the Russian Orthodox Church. This makes sure that multiple belief systems are addressed among the people. Based on this, he has built a patriotic political programme that has been combined with controversial historical arguments. However, these constructions do not correspond with reality, so how can it be that they nevertheless bear fruit socially?

Political ideologies are not only influenced by socio-demographic factors, but also by psychological variables such as personal needs, social identity processes and information processing. Discriminatory prejudices and personal satisfaction with life also play a key role. It is therefore difficult to provide a simplified answer as to why there are people who follow the ideological constructs of lies. A lack of information, media manipulation and the eradication of dissenting voices strengthen the narrative of a "holy people", which on the one hand need to be protected and on the other are themselves upgraded to saviours.

It is difficult to provide a simple answer as to why there are people who follow the ideological constructs of lies.

In Putin's constructed worldview and the propaganda of state media, it is the Russians who are the saviours of the Slavs, or even the whole world. Counter-movements can be perceived as threatening by the adherents of these theories because they fundamentally question their own self-image. In an increasingly complex world, and especially in multicausal events such as wars, it is very comfortable and palliative to assume that one bears no responsibility. The human need for simplification is

not only theoretically understandable but can also be explained through psychology. Cognitive dissonance, that is, an inner tension arising from contradictory perceptions, is emotionally unpleasant. To end this negative emotional state, the tension is attributed to other causes. Bogus solutions and excuses are then sought.

Another coping mechanism is externalisation, in which behaviour is presented as being forced by outside actors. This allows the individual to avoid responsibility and confrontation with their own thoughts. Putin has adopted precisely these dissonance reduction strategies for his people. He shifts responsibility, declares war as inevitable and externally provoked, and soothes the soul of the Russian people through the ideological valorisation of national sentiment. This should not be interpreted as an appeal for understanding regarding the Russian people and their current situation. However, it should show how dangerous Putin's manipulation is and how effectively it appeals to many people in multiple ways.

Psychological trauma

Wars "benefit" only a small number of elites, but they result in material and emotional devastation for countless people. The loss of loved ones, a permanent state of fear, and disconnection from one's homeland not only disturb the psyche but also demonstrably disrupt the hormonal balance of human beings. In the course of warfare, the lifting of the killing taboo releases psychological processes that are later difficult to bring under control again. Trauma and the experience of extreme helplessness can be forever inscribed in the psyche. It can lead to emotional numbness and loss of trust in the social environment. Increased irritability, social withdrawal and uncontrollable anger are part of the behavioural repertoire of many affected people. The prevalence rates of psychological trauma among civilians in conflict zones are around 15 to 26 per cent. This massively exceeds the global average of 3.2 per cent. Civilians are more likely to experience intrusive memories, which means that traumatic experiences can unintentionally reappear in their minds again and again. Numerous studies also show that children who experience wars are more likely to suffer from various anxiety disorders than those who grow up in peace. There is also evidence that the stress hormones of mothers can be transmitted to children born under war conditions. Further implications have not yet been conclusively proven, but there are various indications that transgenerational trauma can also be directly inherited across generations.

Direct exposure to warfare causes civilians to experience a strong discrepancy between real and imagined threats, blurring the line between soldiers and civilians in many ways. The justification of acts that the population was previously

incapable of doing due to moral convictions causes trust in fellow human beings to fade. Fighting for the security of the country may provide a group feeling and a sense of agency, in other words, the feeling of being in control of one's actions. However, this lasts only for a limited period of time and the constructs responsible for maintaining mental health sometimes falter irreversibly. The feeling of self-efficacy, namely a person's conviction that they can successfully overcome challenging situations on their own, can be weakened in the long term. Socially, such developments can encourage a feeling of political powerlessness that favours further authoritarian governance under strong rulers. The instrumentalisation of this condition by violent regimes manifests at this point once again through the objectification of the individual, who is insidiously developed into an empty shell for the benefit of the regime.

After all, it is important to mention that psychological models do not work like a mathematical formula. Human behaviour is very complex and not so easily predictable. Providing simple explanations for it would only create a warped picture of reality. Nevertheless, people are suggestible and history has shown that a toxic political environment often leads people to disastrous behaviour. Therefore, it is of particular importance to deal with political psychology, create sensitivity to manipulation and, in the long run, make it more difficult for authoritarian regimes to "psychologically weaponise" their population. NEE

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From emperors to refugees

SVENJA PETERSEN

Moscow's war in Ukraine has not only forced millions of Ukrainians to flee their home country but has also led hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens to seek exile abroad. Among the most popular destinations for Russians are the South Caucasian republics: Armenia and Georgia.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in late February, several hundred thousand Russians have fled the country. Some sources even estimate that more than one million Russian citizens have already gone into exile. Among them are some of the country's biggest celebrities, such as Alla Pugacheva, who settled in Israel, and music stars like Face and Zemfira, who both moved abroad out of fear of persecution for their anti-war activism.

Many young, intellectual Russians, who are outspoken against the Russian government and the war in Ukraine, are among those settling abroad. They are afraid of repressions at home and want to live an independent life in freedom. Some of them contribute to initiatives that support Ukraine from abroad. But not all of them have these noble intentions. Many Russians leave Russia because they fear the impact of western sanctions, want to continue consuming western brands and products, and want to escape possible conscription in the war against Ukraine – all without questioning their government or opposing the conflict. As a result, the Russian population migrating abroad is a heterogeneous group that has left the country for a variety of reasons.

Two countries that have attracted particularly large numbers of Russian citizens since the war began are Armenia and Georgia. How this wave of Russian migration is perceived in each country has a lot to do with its respective national identity, trauma and narrative.

Georgia's trauma and Russia

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, around 30,000 Russian citizens have emigrated to Georgia, more than doubling the number of Russians living in the country. In addition to the capital Tbilisi, where the majority of Russians have settled, some have also moved to the Black Sea coastal city of Batumi. The majority of the Georgian population is extremely critical of these new Russian citizens in their country. Many are now demanding a stronger visa regime regarding Russian immigration. Elene Khoshtaria is one of the most outspoken Georgian politicians in this regard. She has received much support for her strong views from the Georgian public.

Recently, it has not been uncommon for public quarrels and mutual attacks to occur between Russians and Georgians. Georgian society, otherwise globally known for its hospitality, greatly resents this latest wave of Russian emigration as it fears its possible consequences. The most obvious reason for this broad rejection stems from past direct and indirect wars with Russia, as well as the country's occupation of about 20 per cent of Georgian territory. The trauma of the 1992–93 Georgian-Abkhazian War, in which Russia was an indirect warring party supporting the Abkhazian separatists against Tbilisi, is still fresh. More than 250,000 Georgians were forced to flee Abkhazia and about 4,000 Georgians were killed in massacres that the OSCE and UNHCR repeatedly described as ethnic cleansing (Budapest Declaration and Geneva Declaration on Ethnic Cleansing of Georgians in Abkhazia between 1992 and 1993 adopted by the OSCE and recognized as ethnic cleansing in 1994 and 1999).

> Many Georgians fear that the Russians now living in the country could be used as a "Trojan Horse" by the Kremiln.

The next major trauma suffered by Georgians at the hands of Russia was the August War of 2008, when Moscow moved military forces into the Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These units then fought alongside Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatists against the Georgian military. At the end of the war, Russia recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia's "independence". Despite this, these areas are now militarily and economically dependent on Moscow

and have been occupied by Russian forces ever since. The loss of these two regions that belong to Georgia under international law, as well as the trauma of war and the creeping Russian occupation that has continued since 2008, has encouraged antipathy toward Russia in Georgian society.

On the Georgian side, there is much trauma directly connected with the Kremlin's actions. Since the 2008 war, Russia has been moving the military contact line that separates Russian troops from the Georgian-controlled territories further and further into the country's heartland. Many Georgians fear that the Russians now living in Georgia could be used as a "Trojan Horse" by the Russian government. They could provide Russia with an opportunity – as it has already done in Ukraine and Moldova – to invade Georgia under the pretext of protecting Russian-speaking people and Russian citizens in its neighbouring states. Russian troops are currently only about 60 kilometres away from the Georgian capital. Realistically, the small Georgian army would hardly be able to oppose the Russian Goliath. Moreover, Georgia and Russia share a border that is more than 700 kilometres long. This remains a constant source of worry from a Georgian point of view. The fact that both Georgians and Russians predominantly belong to the Orthodox Church could also be used by Russia as an ideal pretext for re-establishing *Russkiy Mir* in Georgia.

The fear of Russification

Besides the military threat and the real occupation of parts of Georgia, however, Georgians are concerned much more with regards to their rejection of Russian immigration. Fear is spreading that Georgia could become increasingly Russified and many are now concerned with preserving their own national identity and culture. Many want to leave behind the country's Soviet legacy, as well as the lingua franca of the Soviet Union – Russian. A large number of Georgians perceive growing Russian immigration as a danger that could once again see them forced into a Russian and Russian-speaking dominant culture.

This discontent among the Georgian population has given rise to a number of civic ideas and initiatives that demand that Russian immigrants come to terms with Georgian history and language. For example, some Georgian banks have allowed Russian citizens to open bank accounts only if they sign a document recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia as parts of Georgia and condemn Moscow's occupation of Georgia and war in Ukraine. In some Tbilisi bars and cafés, people are even forbidden to speak Russian and are encouraged to speak Georgian or English.

Whilst these actions may seem extreme, Russia does pose a real threat to Georgia. This goes beyond the danger of new military confrontations. For example, many

citizens now think that uncontrolled immigration could allow dangerous Russian nationals to challenge Georgia's national security. As former Georgian Ambassador to the United Kingdom Giorgi Badridze notes, there is a risk that Russian security forces could smuggle themselves into the country and carry out attacks on Georgian pro-western politicians or Russian opposition figures. This would resemble the attacks that occurred in the past in the UK and Germany. For this reason, he has called for a new visa regime for Russian citizens. This would allow the Georgian authorities to determine the political backgrounds and potential security risks of Russian nationals wishing to enter the country.

The Russian war in Ukraine has driven another wedge between Georgia's current government and the country's young, liberal intellectuals. In spite of the country's tremendous solidarity with Ukraine, not all Georgians are on Kyiv's side. The current Georgian Dream government, for example, failed to take a clear stance on the war and did not join western sanctions against Russia. One might suspect that this strategy was designed to discourage the Kremlin from also attacking Georgia. The current government's actions do sometimes seem to follow this logic. While virtually all Russian citizens, regardless of their political views and background, are currently allowed to settle in Georgia, the country's border authorities have refused entry to liberal Russian oppositionists, such as journalist Mikhail Fishman, who worked for the independent media outlets *Ekho Moskvy* and *Dozhd*. This unsettled not only the pro-western segments of Georgian society but also the West, which is now asking itself whether Tbilisi is still the "beacon of liberty" that George W. Bush described it as in 2005.

Russian emigration to Armenia

Georgia's southern neighbour Armenia has also witnessed an unprecedented influx of Russian citizens. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, more than 20,000 Russian citizens have been registered as new residents in Armenia, with the actual number present in the country likely to be even higher. Before, only up to 4,000 Russian citizens lived in Armenia. Most of these people were affiliated with the Russian 102nd Military Base in Gyumri.

A good number of Armenians acknowledge the positive effects of Russian emigration to their country. Many new businesses have been registered in Armenia, especially in the IT sector, bringing investments, human capital and money into the country. Within only three months, Yerevan's gastronomy sector has been boosted significantly, with new cafés, bars and restaurants opening every week. In addition, the tourism sector grew considerably within this short amount of time.

These investments are hugely appreciated in Armenia, especially after the destruction brought about by the recent war in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Yet, this boost in investment also has its downsides. Apartment rents in Yerevan skyrocketed over the last three months. Landlords have subsequently been incentivised to evict their local tenants in order to jump on the bandwagon of renting out their property for double or triple the normal price to generally wealthier Russian citizens. This has led to the segregation and gentrification of the Armenian capital.

Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, more than 20,000 Russian citizens have been registered as new residents in Armenia.

Whilst apartment rents have gone up, the overall cost of living has risen dramatically in the country and rendered many things unaffordable for the local population. This tendency has raised concerns regarding an increasing social divide and polarisation. Discontent over rising price levels is especially clear among lower income households in Armenia. The same factors have also affected Georgia's rent and general prices, despite being a popular tourist destination for Russians and westerners alike.

A shield of protection?

Armenia's national trauma differs significantly from that in Georgia. In contrast with the Georgian experience, Russia has been historically perceived as more of a saviour than an enemy in Armenia. During the Armenian Genocide committed by the Ottoman Empire, it was Russia that accepted major Armenian refugee influxes. This saved a considerable share of the Armenian population from almost certain death at the hands of Turkish nationalists.

Whilst Russia has controversially given weapons to both Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, many Armenians perceive Russia as their protector thanks to generous loans and a strong military presence in their country. Despite this, many Armenians were surprised by the Kremlin's non-intervention during the last outbreak of the Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020. While Baku was massively supported by Turkey, Armenia found itself largely fighting on its own, leaving many Armenians disillusioned with their alleged "saviour". Russia's popularity decreased massively in Armenia and many concluded that Russia is not an actual ally. For many, it now seems that Moscow rather only intervenes when it serves its own interests.

While the perception of Russia as a friend and saviour has suffered increasing unpopularity among Armenians since the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, many still

understand that they do not have a choice. Realistically speaking, Russia is the only significant actor in the region that could come close to resembling an ally for Yerevan. Otherwise, Armenia would be completely on its own. Militarily, it is already a constant struggle for Armenia to keep its positions in Nagorno-Karabakh. Economically, Armenia would be very isolated without Russia, as the borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey are closed. Armenia's southern neighbour Iran is itself suffering financially from decades-long sanctions.

From this point of view, Russian emigrants to Armenia can even serve as a certain shield of protection for the country. Russia's instrumentalisation of its diaspora is widely known and many Armenians believe that a growing Russian population will lead Moscow to have a more vigilant eye regarding the security of Armenia. In the face of centuries-old threats from Turkey and Azerbaijan, many Armenians hope that a larger Russian presence in their country will counter pan-Turkic ambitions in the region. Whether such calculations will pay off in the end is yet to be determined.

Armenia's trauma regarding Turkey and Azerbaijan leads the majority of Armenians to fear their Turkic neighbours instead of Russia. This point of view is perpetuated by two further factors. The first is the fact that Armenia, unlike Georgia, does not share any land border with Russia. This makes it impossible for the Russian army to simply enter Armenia. The second one is that – precisely due to its trauma – Yerevan has integrated into several Russian-led organisations. This includes the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). At least for now, the Kremlin does not fear a significant political pivot towards the West in Armenia, such as in Georgia and Ukraine. This is because the Russian leadership is well aware of Armenia's dependence on Russia.

Armenia's "mixed feelings"

Despite Armenia's dependence on Russian security protection, the country's population is very much divided on the question of Russian emigration to their country. Many perceive it as an economic opportunity and a potential additional security shield. Others, just like in Georgia, fear for Armenia's cultural and linguistic independence. This is especially true among Armenians from historic Western Armenia and the Middle East, who do not share any common history or (post-) Soviet culture with Russia. People from these backgrounds more often advocate for more independence from Moscow.

In addition, Armenian society is also divided when it comes to Russia's war in Ukraine. While most Georgians oppose Russian immigration because they believe

Russians should feel the economic consequences for tolerating and supporting a regime so often hostile to Tbilisi, Armenians have mixed feelings about the conflict. While most Armenians have experienced the horrors of war themselves and therefore feel for Ukrainians, the current government in Kyiv is perceived with suspicion in Armenia. This is because the Ukrainian leadership openly supported Azerbaijan in the last war in Nagorno-Karabakh and has even delivered weapons to Baku. Given Ukraine's struggle with separatist forces in Donbas and Crimea, Kyiv chose to support Azerbaijan's territorial integrity over the proclaimed self-determination of Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian population.

The Secretary of the Security Council of Ukraine Aleksey Danilov even went so far as to publicly encourage Azerbaijan via *Twitter* to start new military clashes in Nagorno-Karabakh. The politician hoped that a new military front would be opened against Russia, thus weakening Moscow's advancements in Ukraine.

"Every man for himself" goes the old saying. Armenians understand very well that Ukraine is not their ally and they know that a weakened Russia will only weaken Yerevan. Any wish that Russia's population suffer economic, financial and political consequences for the war in Ukraine is therefore not widespread in the country. With an Armenian diaspora of well over a million in Russia, Armenians know that economic sanctions will also affect their friends and relatives living there. Many Armenian households are dependent on money transfers from the diaspora and seasonal workers in Russia. If these transfers decrease, this is yet another reason for Armenians to regard the influx of Russian citizens and investment as an overall positive contribution to their country's economy.

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The mission of journalists is to reveal the truth

An interview with Mykola Semena, a Ukrainian journalist originally from Crimea. Interviewer: Anna Efimova

ANNA EFIMOVA: You are a passionate advocate for the Crimean Tatars, the indigenous Crimean ethnic minority who were deported to Central Asia and Russia in 1944 for collaboration with the Nazis. You witnessed their resettlement to Crimea during *perestroika*. What was your role as a journalist at that time?

MYKOLA SEMENA: At that time, I was editing and writing for a Simferopol newspaper. At the peak of Crimean Tatar resettlement in Crimea, the situation was so complex. Crimean Tatars are closely linked to the history of the peninsula. Their agriculture and folk crafts laid the foundation of the Crimean economy, they had a developed material and intangible culture. However, till the end of the 1980s, their history was suppressed by Soviet propaganda. The official Soviet narrative demonised Crimean Tatars as raiders and slave traders. Many in Crimea supported the official point of view that all Crimean Tatars should be recognised as traitors if some of them collaborated with the Nazis during the Second World War. They were not perplexed by the fact that only Crimean Tatars were chosen to be punished for collaboration with the Nazi occupation forces, despite cases of treachery among the Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian and Greek populations of Crimea. So, when in 1989 Soviet officials condemned the deportation of Crimean Tatars and they were allowed to resettle, the Crimean population was very cautious about it. The communist authorities intimidated the locals through lies that Crimean Tatars would hold "nights of slaughter", seeking revenge for their exile. It was recommended not to let children outside on their own. I know that some people were doing nightshifts at the entrances to their villages in order not to let strangers in.

To learn an accurate history of this ethnic group, I got in touch with Crimean Tatar historians and leaders of their national movement. Because we were publishing articles that they wrote for our newspaper, we were heavily criticised by the Communist Party. People should know the other side of the story – this was our defence. Journalists envisioned their mission as spreading the truth about the complex history of Crimean Tatars. Over time, people understood that Crimean Tatars are ordinary people who would have been their neighbours if it was not for the deportation.

How did the journalists help Crimean Tatars tackle their everyday problems?

We covered their protests demanding the return of the property that belonged to their families before the deportation. They lost 400 million Soviet roubles worth of property, according to the self-census that Crimean Tatar activists undertook. It includes houses, cattle, land and equipment for land cultivation. The Soviet authorities suggested resettling Crimean Tatars in new towns that they would construct for them in Crimea. There would be all the infrastructure they would need – accommodation, schools, hospitals. Mustafa Dzhemilev, one of the leaders of the Crimean Tatar national movement, gave a sharp response: "You sent us into exile overnight and now want to return us over the course of 20 years?" This resettlement programme failed to secure the approval of Crimean Tatars. Following this, the government distanced itself from the problem, as if it did not exist.

Then Dzhemilev urged Crimean Tatars to return to Crimea on their own and stay with their relatives. Some people retook the lands that belonged to their families before deportation. They considered it "self-resettlement", while the state argued it was an illegal appropriation of state land. However, this self-resettlement of land was not a chaotic process. Crimean Tatars held informal consultations with the local land offices about which pieces of land they could take, so that there would not be any pipelines or high-voltage lines present. In exchange for the consultations, officials expected them to take over extra pieces of land for themselves, as the Soviet authorities solved land attribution issues neither for Crimean Tatars nor any other citizens. Over time, the local authorities did recognise self-resettlement as legal. More than 300 areas of compact settlement for the minority were formed in Crimea this way.

Have you encountered someone who managed to win back their family property?

In the 1990s, one Crimean Tatar family who had a land case in the courts reached out to me. During the night of May 18th 1944, when soldiers appeared on their doorstep, their grandmother, who worked as an accountant, grabbed all the documents they had, including house papers. So, having returned to Crimea in the late 1980s, that family even had the official house register confirm-

ing their residence in that house. But the city council refused their house claim as other people had already been residing there. The new residents also refused to talk to the old owners of the house. This was a typical case at that time. Then that family filed a case in the courts but this was denied because the existing Ukrainian law could not regulate the issue. Having displaced the Tatars, the Soviets did not bother to make the appropriation of their property legal. People were just deported, and their property was just sold. After the war, you could find warehouses full of items from the houses of Crimean Tatars for sale in Simferopol. As a result, the authorities of independent Ukraine did not have any legal framework to prove that the Soviet officials confiscated the property of Crimean Tatars against the law.

Ukraine has a rich ethnic composition. Not only Crimean Tatars but Russians are living there, which have more than once served as a formal pretext for Putin to attack Ukraine. Yet in one of your articles, you speak of "a multinational Ukrainian nation, including Russians".

For many years Russia used the resettlement of ethnic Russians in these confiscated territories as a means of colonisation. Russians were resettled to Donbas, deserted after the famine of the 1930s; to Crimea, deserted after the deportation of the Tatars; to western Ukraine after the dekulakisation, famine of the 1930s, and the post-war repressions. Many Soviet officers chose to settle in Ukraine after retirement. Having gained its independence, Ukraine has demonstrated more tolerance towards them than the Baltic countries, where the populations of Russian origin were declared stateless. Granting citizenship rights to any patriot of Ukraine, regardless of their nationality, reason for settling in Ukraine, or knowledge of the Ukrainian language, was critical for us. So, in addition to Ukrainians as an ethnic community, there is a multinational Ukrainian political nation that includes the ethnic Russians living in Ukraine that make up 18 per cent of the population. Russians and Ukrainians now fight together in the Ukrainian army. Of course, there are those who have abused this tolerance to promote Russian interests on Ukrainian territory, but this is something we have yet to learn from.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, you were one of the founders of Crimea's first Ukrainian-language newspaper, *Krymska svitlitsya*. What were the circumstances in which it appeared?

At the beginning of the 1990s, Crimea was mentally a pro-Russian region, although 25 per cent of its population was made up of ethnic Ukrainians. There was not a single school or kindergarten where Ukrainian would be the language of instruction. Ukrainians needed unification. A newspaper in the Ukrainian language could help like-minded people to find each other. The only printed publication in Ukrainian in Crimea at that time was a Ukrainian-language version

of a local Russian-language newspaper, which had a meagre circulation of one thousand copies. Our publication became popular even among subscribers outside of Crimea. It discussed the social and political matters that concerned our audience the most in times of such socio-political transformation.

Is it the reason why one of your colleagues said that your articles "were strikingly pro-Ukrainian, which was rare among Crimean journalists"?

This was simply due to the situation in Crimea. Just to write the truth about Crimea is enough to be labelled a "pro-Ukrainian journalist". For me, the truth is that Ukraine and Crimea have always been close to each other. Even Nikita Khrushchev justified the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954 by their proximity. The current Crimea is, by and large, Ukraine's brainchild as it rebuilt its infrastructure in its present form after the Second World War. For Russia, Crimea has always been of interest only as an "unsinkable aircraft carrier". Crimeans, particularly politicians, live in a distorted reality. They fantasise about the idea that Crimea is self-sufficient and ignore the fact that Crimea survives solely on state subsidies, which amount to 65 to 75 per cent of its budget, previously from Ukraine and now from Russia. They believe that Crimea is a world hub. For instance, they like to say that the decision to create the UN was made in Yalta at the 1945 conference. It is worth recalling the UN Charter and its relationship with the San Francisco conference in these circumstances. By highlighting such events, you are already a pro-Ukrainian "enemy of Crimea".

Unlike Crimea's economic dependence, the conditions under which Crimean journalists work have changed drastically since 2014. Did these changes match your expectations?

Before 2014, hundreds of Ukrainian, Russian and European journalists who worked in Crimea had freedom of speech, official accreditations, could freely interview any official and obtain information and copies of official documents from the press services. In February and March 2014, we believed that the international community would quickly make Russia respect international law and that we would not have to face any changes. However, things deteriorated very fast. As the local TV and radio centre was seized by Russians, local broadcasting was switched to the Russian media. Newspapers and magazines were forced to redo all their paperwork according to the Russian legal framework for print media. Journalists frequently reported leaflets with "The enemy of Crimea lives here" written on them glued to the walls of their residential buildings. The Crimean Tatar ATR channel and the Black Sea TV company were expelled from the peninsula, as were the Kyiv media corps, Radio Liberty journalists, and correspondents and freelancers from the BBC, DW and AR. According to the Crimean media registration committees, formerly

Ukrainian and now Russian, more than 1,500 media outlets were registered in Crimea during the Ukrainian period. Since the occupation, little more than 100 remained, including small regional publications. The occupation authorities have no use of honest journalism.

What information in Crimea has become inaccessible for the journalists?

We were banned from attending official press conferences and meetings, denied access to official documents and press releases. The formal reason was that those Crimean journalists who did not recognise Crimea as a part of Russia refused to receive accreditation with the Russian occupation authorities. Ukrainian journalists also refused to receive accreditation through the Russian foreign ministry to work in their own country, because this is nonsense. However, some independent Russian media still managed to send journalists to Crimea. They visited courts, gathered information, and wrote unbiased reports after leaving the peninsula. However, Russian intelligence soon cracked down on them. Dozens of journalists were banned from entering the Russian Federation, by which the Russian authorities also meant prohibiting them from entering Crimea. For instance, Taras Ibragimov, a correspondent for Public Television of Ukraine, was banned for 35 years. Having occupied Crimea, the Russian authorities banned commemoration of the victims of deportation on May 18th 2014. Waclaw Radziwinowicz, Moscow

Photo courtesy of Mykola Semena

correspondent of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, had flown to Crimea to report on the commemoration events but was detained, expelled from Crimea, and subsequently stripped of his accreditation in Moscow. According to Vladimir Pritula, editor of "Crimea.Realities", a Radio Liberty project that I am working with, out of more than 60 journalists that collaborated with the project over the last eight years, half chose to stop cooperation due to repressions. However, more than three dozen other journalists are still finding ways to continue.

How do Ukrainian and international media get information from Crimea then?

Citizen journalism has become a deal breaker. Ordinary people are going live on social media and on media websites during public gatherings, mass events, trials against Tatar Muslims. However, the occupation authorities have responded by prosecuting them on trumped-up charges. Till now, 11 Crimean citizen journalists have been sentenced from eight to 18 years of imprisonment. They

are falsely accused of terrorism, extremism and plans to overthrow the government. Russia has ignored the fact that many of these people have accreditation from the European Federation of Journalists, which entitles them to work as journalists on its territory. Of course, the repression did not affect those Crimean journalists who decided to serve the occupying authorities. Independent foreign correspondents have been replaced by foreign journalists and bloggers hired by the occupation authorities. Of course, they portray the situation in Crimea in a favourable light.

Do you think Crimean journalists who work for pro-government media are sincere?

Yes, I think with a few cynical exceptions, most of them are sincere in their own way. I know a journalist who wrote at the beginning of the annexation that Crimeans wanted to be part of Russia because of a favourable sense of belonging to a more powerful state. This excuse gives an impression of a small and weak *gopnik* being proud that a strong and armed thug promises to protect him. The truth is that current events in Ukraine do not fit into this picture. Many Russians admitted they were ashamed of being Russians, as "more powerful Russia" turned out to be a colossus on clay feet. It is being accused of genocide and violations of the rules and customs of war, of killing civilians. The International Criminal Court is involved in the investigation of Russia's crimes; there is talk of creating a special tribunal. They are confused, but they still hope that either nuclear missiles or a war of attrition will bring victory to Russia. I think what worked in the 18th century will not work in the 21st. I do not know what people who approve Russia's war, including journalists, will feel when the global community places even more pressure on this dictatorial regime.

What does a Ukrainian journalist feel when the Russian occupation authorities come to his city?

It is a constant fear for our freedom and lives, as all communication channels that journalists were using were monitored. All telephone networks were switched over to Russian telecommunications companies. Internet providers were forced to transfer personal data to Russian intelligence. We found a surveillance camera right above the door of our office. After having moved the office to a private house, we found surveillance there too.

Shortly after the occupation began in 2014, you started publishing your reporting under pseudonyms. At what point did you realise this was necessary?

The very first critical articles I published after the annexation were quickly followed by prosecution. A local pro-Russian newspaper published an article in which they promised me a place in Kolyma (where Soviet labour prisons were located). Local television broadcasted programmes to discredit me, inviting journalists who took the Kremlin's side

to talk about the situation. I noticed surveillance in the street. This forced me to sign my pieces with fake names. Yet my writing style was recognisable, so, in two years, I invented more than 20 pseudonyms. One day, the internet on my computer shut down, and I called the internet provider to send someone to fix it. Two people came. Later, when I was shown screenshots from my computer by the police, I found out that those people installed spyware on my computer. But I decided to stay in Crimea to continue writing the truth. I realised that if everyone from the editorial office left, we would have to second someone to Crimea. I knew the setting well, had a working network of sources and, most importantly, was able to analyse the situation.

But the trick did not work?

In April 2016 the security services came to my house to conduct a search. They found the copies of my articles signed with the pseudonyms on my computer and digital media. They seized more than 900 gigabytes of archive materials that I had been collecting for decades. I was accused of "calling for violation of the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation". This is what the Russian authorities call denying that Crimea is part of the Russian Federation. I was banned from any professional activity for two years, that is, from publishing any articles. In fact, I was deprived of my livelihood as I have never done anything other than journalism. For 2.5 years, I also had to visit the police station twice a month to report on all my activities. Before the trial, Russian financial institutions had put me on a so-called list of extremists and terrorists, which blocked all my financial transactions in Russia. I lived off my family's money, was reading a lot, writing for myself, and saving up ideas for the future. They also cracked down on the entire network of Crimea. Realities by seizing all equipment from six other journalists and the former office manager of the project. Although my colleagues were only held as witnesses, the entire regional journalist network was paralysed. Vladimir Pritula, the editor-in-chief of the project, considers it the darkest of times for the project.

In 2020, three years after your conviction, you eventually left Crimea for Ukraine. How did you make that decision?

I realised that working in Crimea under the Russian occupation was impossible. When the time came, my lawyers and I filed a petition for a reduction of the probation, which the court granted. I did not think that at my age I would still have to change my place of residence, my job. That is why the decision to leave the place where I lived and worked for more than 30 years was purely forced. When I returned to Ukraine, I felt as if I had travelled back in time to before 2014 when we had freedom of speech in Crimea.

While over 30 European human rights organisations recognised your case as politically motivated, you called the case's verdict "a sentence for journalism in Russia". Why?

While prosecuting journalists and lawyers in Crimea, Russian lawmakers have created a lot of means to censor media. The Russian authorities used Crimea to test them and then applied the same means to independent Russian journalists. Those means are, for instance, convictions on far-fetched grounds or putting artificial obstacles in the way of the lawyers who worked on our cases. Then they started to recognise media and journalists as "foreign agents" and punish those who insult state officials.

What happened to you in 2016 has been happening to independent journalists in Russia for the last few years. What would you say to them?

According to independent media, some 250 journalists have left Russia to protest against the war in Ukraine. Those I have met are honest professionals who feel it is their duty not to sell their words to the regime. Among themselves, Russian journalists say that 90 per cent of their colleagues working in Russia are against the war in Ukraine. This may be true. However, when the Ukrainian Union of Journalists appealed to their Russian colleagues not to support the war, they received a boorish refusal in Kyiv and were accused of attacking Russian journalists. We have to ask ourselves a few questions. How is it that almost 100 per cent of Russian television broadcasting ended up in the hands of the ten per cent who support the Russian aggression and work for propaganda? How has this ten per cent ended up becoming stronger? The mission of journalists in this time of war is to work together, to reveal and bring the truth about this war to international courts and to debunk the fake news of Russian propaganda. While data on war crimes, violations of the customs of war, and facts of genocide by the Russian army are being collected internationally, the idea of a "second Nuremberg" where Russian occupiers will judge non-existent "Ukrainian Nazis" is being discussed in Crimea. It sounds insane, but I believe that if sane Europeans had only Russian television as a source of information like Crimeans do, many of them would believe that Ukrainian Nazis actually exist. NEE

Support for this interview comes from the Study Tours to Poland program of the Leaders of Change Foundation.

Mykola Semena is a Ukrainian journalist who has spent the last 30 years covering the major developments in Crimea for Ukrainian media and Radio Liberty.

Anna Efimova is a contributing editor with *New Eastern Europe* and a Russian journalist. As a PhD candidate at Jagiellonian University in Kraków, she focuses on social movements in post-Soviet space. She also holds an MA from the University of Glasgow, UK.

What Russia needs most is cash for bombs

An interview with Piotr Woźniak, former president of Polskie Górnictwo Naftowe i Gazownictwo (PGNiG), Poland's largest gas company. Interviewer: Mykola Voytiv

MYKOLA VOYTIV: If we look at prices and the war, what do you think awaits the European gas market?

PIOTR WOŹNIAK: The sharp rise in natural gas prices was caused by increased demand from the European Union in November and December 2021 – Russia expected this and prepared by not pumping natural gas into underground gas storages in the Netherlands, Austria and Germany. Russia's aggression in Ukraine only intensified this dynamic. Keep in mind, that natural gas prices are a relative concept. Whilst some are fixed in bilateral contracts for gas supply, such as Russian natural gas, natural gas from the Norwegian continental shelf, or LNG, others are priced in line with European energy exchanges and hubs. Whatever the sales channel, prices begin to fall with the end of the gas winter as a rule. This change occurs from the beginning of April, with prices remaining at a moderate level until October. This is what we expect this year as well, however, the level of prices will be substantially higher than in autumn 2021.

What is the situation now with the European underground gas storages? Were they also affected by the prices as well?

In Poland, for example, we oblige each importer by law to store its natural gas in underground storages. Thus, our storage facilities are completely full with gas every year, approximately more than three billion cubic metres. Other EU countries have not imposed such obligations on their importers and traders. That reflects a high level of trust among some European Union countries regarding the Russian gas supplies. Germany, Austria and to an extent the Netherlands have either sold or passed the business operation of their gas storage facilities to Russian companies and storages where controlled by the Gazprom subsidiaries up to the Russian invasion to Ukraine

on February 24th. As a result of such policies, we observed a gas crisis in Europe at the end of 2021, when there was high demand for natural gas. The underground gas storage facilities were either empty or half full.

Do you believe the issue of Nord Stream 2 to be completely finished? Is it a dead project?

It is important to emphasise that the problem with Nord Stream 2 is not over. Russia is very unpredictable. Its main partner, Germany, has issued some contradictory statements regarding the situation with the pipeline. For the moment, the launching of Nord Stream 2 does not comply with EU energy law because the gas supplier and the pipeline operator cannot be the same legal entity. Germany's energy regulator certifies the pipeline operator, which must be a fully independent legal entity – both with regards to capital ownership and organisation. Therefore, the German chancellor's claim that he withheld the certification of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline operator not only contradicts the EU legal system, but is also irrelevant. This is because the EU certification scheme is not involved with government procedures. In other words, such certification cannot be granted at all, as it contradicts EU energy law. Surely, Russia wants to isolate Ukraine from being a gas transit country by launching Nord Stream 2. Thus, if we assume that they will be able to launch this pipeline, as the Russians are behaving very unpredictably and Germany's political position is very unclear, it will be technically possible to stop the transit of gas via the Gas Transmission System of Ukraine within three days.

From my experience, Russia can totally ignore any gas transit contract even if it is legally binding until 2024. They will simply violate it without worrying about the legal consequences, disregarding even the declarations made by former German Chancellor Angela Merkel. She has talked about guarantees given to her by the Russian side regarding continued gas transit via Ukraine until the contract expires in 2024.

Will the EU stay united in its opposition to Russian gas and how long could this last?

Unfortunately, statements from some EU officials that "by the end of 2022 the purchase of Russian gas will be reduced by two-thirds", are only declarations. It is difficult to say when this will actually happen. It is not enough to simply reduce imports, but to substitute Russian gas with the same volumes of natural gas from other suppliers. I wish I knew what European politicians and the leaders of large energy companies are actually thinking and how this will affect their decision-making. This is particularly true with regards to the representatives of Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Generally, it takes about five to six years to withdraw from one supplier and to get a replacement that would not fund Russian armaments and warfare in Ukraine. In other words, to

diversify supplies with different sellers and routes that will work to the limits of available infrastructure, including LNG.

However, this must be a unanimous decision taken by the European Commission and must be strictly adhered to by all member states. Right now, there is no consensus in the EU on this issue when looking at the positions of Hungary or Germany. This does not mean waiting for others in the meantime. In fact, each European country can and should develop its own gas production in the near future. However, Germany has not produced natural gas from its domestic gas fields for nearly four years. Instead, they have relied on Russian supplies and on the concept of *Energiewende* (the German policy towards renewables and green energy – editor's note). Of course, this is a rhetorical question, does Germany not need these domestic resources? This is clearly a bad move as eventually someone will get access to this natural gas…

What is the policy of Poland in this regard and what are the other possible sources for Polish gas supplies?

Alternative supply routes include natural gas from the Norwegian shelf via the Baltic Pipe, as well as liquefied natural gas via the Świnoujście LNG terminal and the planned Gdańsk floating storage regasification unit. In addition, the interconnector with Lithuania may be used for gas supply, but only if it comes from Lithuania's Klaipeda LNG terminal, not Russian sources.

Photo: Polish Ministry of Energy (CC) commons.wikimedia.org

If Europe is backing out of Russian supplies, which countries could become new clients for Russian gas?

As soon as Russia begins to lose its gas market in the EU, Chinese companies will be able to become new parties as buyers. They can absorb large volumes of Russian gas, even if it requires additional gas transmission infrastructure that Russia is ready to invest in. In addition, Japan and South Korea could become new markets for Russian LNG. What Russia needs the most is cash for buying or producing bombs, missiles, submarines and fighter aircraft.

When Russia leaves the EU gas market, who will enter it?

Norway will certainly enter the European natural gas market with an increased market share. Other countries

like the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Denmark – who are operating gas wells on the North Sea continental shelf – can also enter the EU market. It should be noted that natural gas exploration and production infrastructure on the North Sea shelf is carried out in compliance with the highest environmental standards. I would like to mention that during my leadership at the Polish company PGNiG, we even invited Ukrainian companies to join partnerships in one of our fields that we explored, or had access to under legal concessions in the North Sea continental shelf. Ukraine may also independently take part in Norwegian tenders or the exploration and production of natural gas fields in the North Sea.

In your opinion, what does the Ukrainian gas transmission system face in the near future?

The problem with the Ukrainian gas transmission system is that a large number of small towns and industries are connected directly to the main gas transmission pipelines and not to the distribution pipeline system (gas distribution networks) as it should be. Nevertheless, the last five years have shown very positive results for the energy sector in Ukraine. The country has improved its regulatory field and embarked on an infrastructural transformation. The main pipeline system is now independent from the market of distribution and trading. Also, enhanced domestic production of gas and oil is very impressive and should continue. It is important to emphasise that Kyiv now has a very good opportunity to take advantage of help from the United States. Through American investors, Ukraine could complete the modernisation of its gas transmission pipelines and unbundle them from the gas distribution network. But it is very important to complete this unbundling not only formally, but also physically – according to market rules. This was the message sent during President Joe Biden's March two-day visit to Poland, which was not covered by the media.

If we talk about alternatives to Russian gas transit via Ukraine, today there are two options. The first involves the transit of natural gas from the Black Sea shelf, which is rich in natural gas and oil. However, its transit is currently impossible due to Ukraine's lack of access to the shelf. The second alternative is transit from existing LNG terminals in Europe (French, Polish, possibly German), or Norwegian piped gas via Poland. Looking at the Polish option, detailed negotiations with the Polish side and the participation of Lithuania will be necessary. It is obvious that such trilateral cooperation should take place in the context of the newly built GIPL (gas interconnection between Poland and Lithuania) interconnector. The commissioning of this interconnector is expected this year. Such cooperation should also result in liquefied natural gas being supplied through Polish and Lithuanian LNG terminals to Ukraine. As an alternative, Germany noted the

possibility of a natural gas supply to Ukraine from the planned LNG terminal in Brunsbüttel.

However, if we talk about cooperation with Poland, there is a need for a concrete agreement with the Polish side. This is not necessarily true regarding the administration but instead the private companies, which may not be such an easy process. I may also mention Slovakia. However, this is unlikely as the Slovaks have an agreement with the Russians that they will be supplied with gas through Nord Stream 2 via OPAL and the Czech Republic if gas transit through Ukraine is stopped. Again, Russian gas is not an option.

It is critical for Ukraine to develop its natural gas exploration and production and not only within the country. Today, Ukraine could take advantage of a favourable climate and apply for any exemptions for natural gas production in places such as the United States. This could also happen in many other countries, but the US is openly supporting Ukraine to a noticeable degree. It is an opportunity not to miss. Imagine the headlines in the media in the near future – "Ukraine has received ten licences for natural gas production in Pennsylvania or Texas…"

In the end, let me recommend that Ukraine needs a new gas strategy. A domestic one, without copying any particular pattern from any other country. Early results are already promising. However, they were interrupted by Russia's military aggression. Legally, the EU regulations are market oriented and reasonable, but business savvy Ukraine deserves a strong internal, national energy policy just like what we in Poland developed for gas (unfortunately not for oil) some 20 years ago. We did not wait for anyone to do it for us.

Piotr Woźniak is the former president of Polskie Górnictwo Naftowe i Gazownictwo (PGNiG), Poland's largest gas company. He previously served as minister of economy and in the ministry of environment.

Mykola Voytiv is a senior project manager at Reform Support Team at the ministry of energy of Ukraine.

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The ghosts of past wars live on in Russia's Victory Day

OLEG SMIRNOV

Victory Day has become the main secular holiday in Vladimir Putin's Russia. It is also an occasion for the government to showcase Russia's military might and rally people around the flag. This year, the authorities used the celebration to bolster public support for the war in Ukraine, which they described as a necessary measure designed to "denazify" the country and prevent an imminent attack on Russian soil.

"Here in Leningrad people were dying of hunger during the blockade. We don't want that to happen again," says 31-year-old Valery. He was explaining the reasons why he supported Russia's "special military operation" against Ukraine.

Valery was among the tens of thousands of people who took to the streets of St Petersburg to celebrate May 9th, or, as it is called in Russia, Victory Day. This marks the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany. St Petersburg, known as Leningrad in Soviet times, was blockaded by German troops for over two years. This resulted in a million citizens losing their lives. While commemorating his ancestors' sacrifice in the fight against Nazism, Valery is fully supportive of what he sees as his country's struggle against a new Nazi threat in Ukraine. He told me that "We are seeing the resurrection of Nazism, so that's the goal of the special operation, to destroy it."

As every May 9th, hundreds of thousands of people flood the city centre to witness a big show. This year, over 4,100 troops and 80 pieces of military hardware were on display in front of the Winter Palace, the former residence of the tsars. After that, war veterans on vintage military vehicles paraded along Nevsky Prospekt, the main city avenue. Then it was time for the "Immortal Regiment" march, in which Russians display the portraits of their family members who participated in the war. Finally, fireworks illuminated the sky in front of the Peter and Paul Fortress.

The spectre of Nazism

Victory Day is a picturesque and colourful spectacle. People from all parts of the former Soviet Union take part, many dressed in vintage costumes, waving flags and singing old Soviet songs. This year, among the usual St. George ribbons and Russian and Soviet flags, I also saw the "Z" and "V" – symbols of Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine.

"Considering the current situation, this date has become even more symbolic, important, deeper, more patriotic," said Alina, 29, an Immortal Regiment participant carrying the pictures of her grandparents. She is a convinced supporter of the military operation in Ukraine. "Our guys are at the front and we fully support them," she said with enthusiasm.

The Soviet Union played a decisive role in the defeat of Nazi Germany in the Great Patriotic War – the Russian name for the Second World War – and paid the heaviest human toll. Overall, around 27 million Soviet citizens died in the conflict. The war started on June 22nd 1941, when Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union, and ended on May 9th 1945 with Berlin's capitulation.

Victory Day has become the main secular holiday in Putin's Russia. It is also an occasion for the government to showcase Russia's military might and rally people around the flag. This year, the authorities used the celebration to bolster public support for the war in Ukraine, which they described as a necessary measure designed to "denazify" the country and prevent an imminent attack on Russian soil.

"Everything indicated that a clash with the neo-Nazis, the Banderites [slang for the so-called Ukrainian nationalists], backed by the United States and their junior partners, was inevitable," Vladimir Putin said in his traditional speech in Moscow's Red Square during the commemorations.

On the eve of the event, Putin sent a congratulatory telegram to the heads of the so-called separatist republics in Eastern Ukraine. He said that "Russians were fighting shoulder to shoulder to liberate their homeland from Nazi filth" and that "Victory will be ours, like in 1945."

Immortal Regiment

The Immortal Regiment march lies at the core of the May 9th celebrations. Launched in 2012 by a group of journalists from the Siberian city of Tomsk as a commemoration event, the march was soon co-opted by the authorities and increasingly turned into an instrument for propaganda. Since 2015 high-ranking officials have started taking part in it, including Putin.

This year, the authorities used the event to galvanise public support in favour of the war in Ukraine. Participants were allowed to use the Z and V symbols, while family members of soldiers fighting in Ukraine were allowed to carry their portraits in the march.

However, not everyone in Russia agrees with the increased politicisation of the Immortal Regiment. For many, Victory Day remains an apolitical event, dedicated to honouring the memory of their ancestors.

"I don't see any parallels between what our grandfathers fought for and what is going on right now [in Ukraine]," said Maria, 31, another participant in the march. "This celebration is about remembering and I hope that many people here think the same." While she was hesitant to condemn Russia's operation, she did not support it either. "I prefer to stay neutral," she told me.

A few days prior to May 9th, the original organisers of the Immortal Regiment distanced themselves from the event. A statement on the movement's website reads, "We consider it no longer possible to associate ourselves with what is happening in the columns on the street." Sergey Lapenko, one of the movement's founders, declined to comment further on the issue.

For many in Russia, Victory Day remains an apolitical event, dedicated to honouring the memory of their ancestors.

"The government has hijacked this event and desecrated it, transforming it into the glorification of the state, of militarism," said Bogdan Litvin, a coordinator of Vesna, an opposition movement based in St Petersburg. He told me that "They did not fight for this, people endured the war so that there would be no more wars. It was a struggle for peace and now their memory is being used to spark new wars."

Vesna was among the coordinators of the anti-war rallies that took place in the city back in February and which ended with hundreds of arrests. Since then, any public dissent around the war in Ukraine has been prohibited in Russia. Most independent media outlets have been blocked or forced to shut down and the only allowed information on the conflict comes from government sources. Vesna called for people to join the Immortal Regiment march with anti-war posters in an attempt to break through the curtain of state propaganda. "This is an opportunity to

talk to people about how the memory of their ancestors is being used against what they fought for," he explained. On the eve of the event, the apartment of Litvin's parents was searched by the police. Other Vesna activists were detained and they are now facing criminal charges.

In St Petersburg, district council member Sergei Samusev was detained while trying to take part in the Immortal Regiment with the portrait of Boris Romanchenko, a survivor of a German concentration camp who was killed in the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv back in March.

He was one of 125 people arrested all around Russia for anti-war protests on May 9th, according to independent monitor OVD Info. Over 15,400 Russians have been detained for anti-war protests since the start of the conflict.

A civil religion

As anthropologist Aleksandra Arkhipova pointed out, victory in the Great Patriotic War has become a "civil religion" under Putin, the only event capable of uniting the people of Russia. "There is no other factor capable of uniting people living on such a large, vast territory, speaking different languages, with different income levels," she said. According to her, the official narrative around Victory Day has been an effective tool in building Russians' collective identity and a sense of pride for being "on the right side of history". "It is such an indisputable value. You defeated Nazism, it's hard to argue with that," she continued.

Yet the victory narrative has also been used by the state to promote its political agenda. Since 2014, when Russia's confrontation with the West intensified following the illegal annexation of Crimea, Russian propaganda started spreading the idea that Nazism was being resurrected in Ukraine and other European countries. Russia was increasingly described as a "besieged fortress" surrounded by enemies.

"The Russian people have the impression that Nazism is everywhere in Europe, that this Nazism surrounds Russia," Arkhipova explained. This narrative was largely focused on the central role played by far-right groups in Ukraine's Maidan Revolution in 2014 and the subsequent decommunisation process taking place in the country. Monuments of Lenin were removed and cities and streets renamed after Ukrainian historical figures, including the controversial Stepan Bandera, a nationalist who collaborated with the Nazis against the Red Army.

As pointed out by Arkhipova, many Russians believe that "victory in the great war is being stolen by these modern neo-Nazis." Varvara, 47, argued, "What would you do if someone was dancing on the grave of your ancestors, whom you consider practically sacred?" She came to the parade with her 11-year-old daughter Taisia.

The victory narrative has also been used by the state to promote its political agenda.

Photo: Oleg Smirnov

Russia's increased isolation was reflected in this year's May 9th celebration.

Photo: Oleg Smirnov

Photo: Oleg Smirnov

Photo: Oleg Smirnov

Vctory in the Great Patriotic War has become a "civil religion" under Putin, the only event capable of uniting the people of Russia.

Photo: Oleg Smirnov


Бессмертный полк
Окуненко Гаврила Нижгич

Photo: Oleg Smirnov

Varvara, who has a Z-shaped St. George ribbon pinned to her chest, is fully supportive of the "special military operation".

"We know very well that fascism has always been present in Western Ukraine," she told me. Another woman who was listening to our conversation then intervened, "When was the last time you were in Ukraine?"

"A long time ago", replied Varvara.

"I was there last year," the other woman said. "I saw no fascists there!"

The besieged fortress

Following the invasion of Ukraine and the unprecedented sanctions imposed on Russia, the country's relations with the West reached an unprecedented low. Russia's increased isolation was reflected in this year's May 9th celebration. No foreign leaders were invited to attend the military parade in Moscow, as is usually the tradition. No matter, since western leaders have been boycotting the event since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. According to Russian propaganda, the country has now truly become a "besieged fortress", fighting alone against Nazism and its allies in the West.

A few weeks before Victory Day, the governor of St Petersburg, Aleksandr Beglov, compared Russia's current confrontation with the Siege of Leningrad. According to Beglov, "the troops of 13 European states" that besieged the city now "together with the United States, are trying to hold in a blockade our entire country".

Despite the dubious historical accuracy of Beglov's statement – only German, Finnish and Italian troops and Spanish volunteers took part in the blockade of Leningrad – they seem to resonate strongly with Russians' perceptions of current events. According to independent polls, the majority of Russians consider the US and other NATO countries responsible for the destruction and civilian casualties in Ukraine. Only seven per cent blame Russia. Even though the unprecedented crackdown on dissent is affecting polls' reliability, these numbers are still significant.

"I don't know who killed him," said Andrey, 41, pointing to the portrait of his grandfather, killed in Ukraine in 1944. "Perhaps he was killed by a German. But maybe he was Italian or French?" He fully agreed with the official version of events, that the attack on Ukraine was a necessary move to prevent Russia from being invaded. "If on the 21st of June, 1941 we attacked Germany first, St Petersburg would not have been held in a blockade, maybe there wouldn't have been so many victims," he concluded.

Oleg Smirnov is a freelance journalist currently based in Russia.

Russia's war has turned Hasidic pilgrimage site into safe haven

ALEKSANDER PALIKOT AND MARIA TYMOSHCHUK

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has forced many to flee the country's East. Whilst some have fled abroad, others have found shelter in settlements in other regions. One of these places is Uman, a city renowned for its rich Jewish history.

On the day Vladimir Putin gave the order to launch a "special military operation" to "denazify" Ukraine, Russian rockets fell on Uman, a city between Kyiv and Odesa famous among Hasidic Jews around the world. After more than two months of war, the Jewish quarter surrounding the grave of Tzaddik Nachman of Breslov has turned into a safe haven for people fleeing from fierce fighting.

Despite initial panic caused by deadly missile strikes at the beginning of the war, Uman is relatively calm now. The famous Sofiyivka Park, the city's landmark created by a Polish magnate in the late 18th century, is closed. However, the city centre is filled with people.

This is also true in the Jewish quarter, which appeared after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Families with children stroll along streets covered with Hebrew language advertisements for kosher restaurants and tourist agencies. Every year, tens of thousands of Jews visit Uman for the Rosh Hashanah celebrations. Now, most of the cars parked between the area's huge hotels and synagogues have licence plates from the Donetsk, Luhansk and Kherson regions.

Finding shelter

One of the hotels currently sheltering displaced people is managed by Vitaliy and Mikhail. "While the first days of the war were like an unending nightmare, the following seem to be one never-ending day," Vitaliy says, as he welcomes us. After the outbreak of war, the young man helped in the construction of fortifications in his hometown of Kryvyi Rih. Later, he switched to flying a drone over Russian units in the south of the country. Finally, he ended up here in Uman to support displaced people.

He met Mikhail, who is a generation older, a few weeks ago through their common acquaintance, Rabbi Leron Ederi from Kryvyi Rih. Mikhail or Moshe – "whatever you prefer", as he insists – is experiencing war for the second time. In 2014 he fled from his native Donetsk, like most Jews there, because he did not want to live in the so-called "Russian world". Eight years later, he knew what to do when the war started. After the darkest days of shelling in Kyiv, where he lived, he evacuated his family and came to help in Uman.

Mikhail asks, "You want to know what Ukrainian Jews think about denazification?" "Babi Yar, that's all," he says, referring to the Russian shelling of the site where over 100,00 people, mostly Jews, were executed en masse during the Second World War. "It is all happening again," he says. "Everyone must understand that an attack on the smallest Ukrainian city is as unacceptable as an attack on Warsaw, Berlin or Jerusalem."

The volunteers in Uman are people who left their pre-war lives behind and took on the roles of managers, receptionists, cooks and psychologists.

Despite the tragic circumstances, Vitaliy and Mikhail remain cheerful and engage in never-ending political discussions. They believe Ukraine is going to win the war because it is united as never before. For now, they are doing what they can. They help those in need alongside a number of other volunteers. These are people who left their pre-war lives behind and took on the roles of managers, receptionists, cooks and psychologists.

Kolya worked on construction sites before the war. Now he takes care of people who have fled from the frontline towns and villages. As he explains children who are coming from the shelling are afraid of loud noises and don't want to play and that's why he encourages them to make drawings, so that "they can somehow pull themselves together."

He smiles and looks at the wall in the hotel's hall covered with drawings, which say:

"Russian warship, go fuck yourself!"

"Glory to Ukraine! Kiril, three years old. Mykolaiv!"

"Orcs, your death awaits here!"

One of the pictures on the wall was drawn by Vera's older daughter. The family arrived in Uman after shelling intensified in Mykolaiv, a city in southern Ukraine close to Russian-occupied Kherson.

"My older daughter does nothing but keeps drawing and drawing," says Vera. "We were under fire for a month and decided to leave when rockets fell not far from our house. My younger daughter still has panic attacks when she sees car headlights at night, as they resemble the flash of falling missiles."

A new home?

Most of the people who found shelter in Uman had never planned to move from their hometowns and decided to leave at the last minute when the situation became too dangerous. Alina came with her husband, sister and new-born child from Kostiantynivka, an industrial city in Donbas. She recalls that only a week before, she was out walking with her baby in a pram in a city park and counting the rockets fired by the Russians. "We decided to leave only when we heard about the murders, rapes and tortures in Bucha," she says. "My sister is 16 years old, they would not spare her."

The new residents of the Jewish quarter are both surprised and grateful to receive free shelter.

Many of those ending up in Uman do so by accident. Bogdana had not heard of the city at all before. Three days ago, she and her husband, mother, child, dog and cat left Ukrainsk, a mining town near Donetsk.

They decided to travel in an old bus that had not been used for years, because of their 90-year-old grandfather. He can only stay in a lying position as he suffers from lung problems after decades of work in a mine. When they were fleeing, their vehicle simply broke down on the road near Uman. "If it wasn't for this place, I don't know where we would live," Bogdana says with tears in her eyes.

The new residents of the Jewish quarter are both surprised and grateful to receive free shelter. Most of them want to believe that they will be able to go back home. But the reality may be different. Overall, the situation facing internally displaced people in Ukraine appears to resemble a ticking time bomb.

According to the mayor of Uman, Iryna Pletniova, several thousand people were passing through the city each day during the first weeks of the war. She recalls that for days officials would stay up all night to help these people. "We fell asleep in a peaceful country and woke up at war," she says as spring sunlight streams into her office through windows partially covered with sandbags.

Photo: Maria Tymoshchuk

The Jewish community is serving hot meals to the needy in Uman.

The mayor says that the inflow of people fleeing the war through Uman has declined over time and the situation is now more stable. "But at the same time, there are people who have nowhere to go and nowhere to return," she adds. At the moment, more than 10,000 people have decided to stay in the city of 80,000 inhabitants.

Unspoken tension

As we walk through central Pushkin Street, where the Breslover community organisation is giving out hot meals to the needy, we wonder if Uman will stay as peaceful as it is now. On a calm sunny day, one could forget about the war, if not for the sirens and mobile notifications regularly reminding you about a possible missile attack.

At the end of March, the Russian defence ministry published photos showing men in uniform standing outside Uman's main synagogue. The post announced that the "Kyiv nationalist regime" was using the temple for military purposes.

"Unfortunately, there are people working for Russia in Uman," says Zvi Arieli, a Latvian Jew who helped to organise the city's territorial defence in the early days of

the war. In his opinion, the information about soldiers in the synagogue was devoid of any basis but could be used as a justification for further attacks.

Zvi came to Ukraine in 2014 and since then has used his experience in the Israeli army to help train Ukrainian police, border guards and soldiers. Dressed in a khaki jacket with a kippah on his head and an energetic, focused look, he seems like a walking confirmation of Volodymyr Zelenskyy's recent statement that future Ukraine will be rather like a besieged "big Israel" than a peaceful liberal country of its citizens' dreams.

Zvi says that whilst he is not an isolated case, Israel treats its citizens serving in the Ukrainian military with ambivalence. "The Israeli government could take a more active position," he argues. He believes that Zelenskyy's presidential victory had a huge psychological impact on Israeli society, which understood that there was no widespread antisemitism in Ukraine and sided with it almost unequivocally after the war broke out.

This does not mean, however, that relations between the small Breslover community permanently residing in Uman, the thousands of pilgrims from all over the world coming here every year, and the rest of the city's inhabitants, had always been perfect.

"When the coronavirus pandemic broke out two years ago, the former mayor tried to make political capital out of antisemitism by exploiting fears that religious tourists would bring the plague with them," says Iryna, a lawyer for the Rabbi Nachman of Breslov Charitable Foundation. This group now coordinates the aid activities of the Breslover community. "There have been other controversial episodes over the past 30 years, but things are slowly getting better, and the current sense of solidarity may speed up this process," she adds.

Forgive and forget?

The mutual historic injustices affecting the area have very deep roots. In 1768 thousands of Poles and Jews lost their lives in Uman during the so-called Koliivshchyna – an uprising of Cossacks and Ukrainian peasants against the Polish nobility and Jewish population. The Jews of Uman then fell victim to pogroms during the Ukrainian-Soviet War. During the Second World War, in turn, the Nazis murdered 10,000 Jews living in the city.

"Can all this be forgotten? Can it be forgiven?" asks Baruch Bavil, a Ukrainian Jew who became a follower of Breslov Hasidism after reading the texts of Tzaddik Nachman. "This land is soaked with the blood of Ukrainians, who fought for their freedom for centuries, and of Jews who were persecuted for their faith. That

is why we must fight for this land now," he says standing next to the grave of Tzaddik Nachman of Breslov.

How will the next wave of destructive violence in Ukraine end? Baruch, who experienced antisemitic repressions during his youth in the Soviet Union and came a long way from a home where Yiddish was gradually forgotten to his newly found faith, has few doubts. "One just needs to look at Putin's face to understand the future," he says. "There is anger and aggression in his eyes, he is a man of deep complexes and problems. He is a relic of the past."

Baruch says everyone in Uman believes that the war will end and Ukraine will emerge from it victorious. "The greatest tzaddiks were able to unite even what seemed to be in absolute opposition, to find peace where it seemed impossible. It is obvious that Rabbi Nachman protects the city," he says.

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A lot at stake for Estonia as it shifts away from oil shale

ISABELLE DE POMMEREAU

Amidst rising concerns over climate change, the Estonian government has pledged to stop burning oil shale for power generation by 2035. Tallinn will also give up the fossil fuel altogether by 2040. Oil shale, however, has a long history in Estonia and is the country's main source of electricity. Abandoning its use is not only a climate-related issue, but a geopolitical one as well.

In the weeks immediately following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Estonia's top brass showed up, one after another, in Narva, Estonia's third largest and overwhelmingly Russian-speaking city. This included the country's president, prime minister and defence and interior ministers. They gathered in places never far from the "Friendship Bridge" connecting Estonia's most eastern city with its Russian sister city Ivangorod. Prime Minister Kaja Kallas said that she had come to assert her government's "commitment to the region's development".

This industrial corner on the dividing line between the European Union and the Russian Federation has not received this level of attention for a very long time. Until Vladimir Putin's gesture toward his "compatriots" in Donbas revealed Narva's geopolitical significance, Tallinn's politicians and residents had tended to stay away. Narva was seen as a place apart, the "Russia city" in the European Union closer to St Petersburg than to the Estonian capital.

But now, on top of the war launched by their colossal neighbour, something else was driving politicians here. This is oil shale – Estonia's "burning rock." The region had quietly mined the kerogen-filled mineral for over a century. Under mounting pressure to line up with the EU's green agenda, however, the government had pledged to abandon the resource. Oil shale had made Estonia a top polluter in Europe but also provided jobs to this fragile Russian-speaking enclave and lit and heated the country's homes. Could Estonia afford such a change? "Every time you go somewhere, people ask how Ida-Virumaa (the Narva region) is doing, how people in Ida-Virumaa feel," Kallas said. She was swept to power in January 2021 after a corruption scandal caused the previous coalition government of centrists and far-right populists to collapse. "There is anxiety, there is tension (in the air)."

Burning rock

A mere two-and-a-half hour train ride from Tallinn, the Narva county which Kallas visited is nothing like western Estonia's picturesque villages and e-everything. Ida Virumaa has the highest unemployment rate in the country. Half-empty housing blocks, ageing power plants and black smoke billowing over the sea still speak of the Soviet regime's exploitation of the region. A myriad of artificial "ash hills" rise up from the otherwise flat, barren landscape. But it is here, with the "burning rock" oil shale burned into power or processed into oil, that the region has fuelled Estonia's post-Soviet tech boom and high standard of living.

Shale oil is a rather ubiquitous liquid obtained by fracking miles underground. Oil shale, on the other hand, is a sedimentary rock found close to the earth's surface, from the Narva region all the way to St Petersburg. Since finding out that oil shale could replace coal in running its locomotives in the 1920s Estonia has become world master in its processing the "burning rock." Oil shale gave Estonia a unique status. It fuelled the Nazi war machine. It also provided Leningrad with domestic gas and powered the entire Soviet empire with gigantic power plants (still the world's largest), which Moscow built near Narva. This brought citizens from all over the USSR to run the oil shale industry, thus forever changing the ethnic face of the region.

The oil shale business transformed the region in other ways. It reworked the terrain. Its forests transformed into a lunar landscape, with artificial mountains of processing debris. The rivers and air became clogged with emissions. In Sillamäe on the coast, where the Soviets ran a closed-off plant to extract uranium from the shale there to manufacture nuclear weapons, they left a town swimming in radioactive material.

After joining the European Union in 2004, Estonia took giant steps toward diversifying its energy mix. It made the shale oil industry more efficient and less polluting, but giving it up was not then seriously considered an option. With an average of 18 million tonnes mined annually, the "burning rock" gave the country enough to power itself and export a great deal to its Baltic neighbours and Finland. This gave the country a degree of energy security unique among ex-Soviet republics. In this economically embattled Russian-speaking border region, where suspicion toward the former occupier remained, oil shale was also a pillar of social cohesion. "We are one of the most energy-independent countries in the EU, and we will not compromise our energy security," Juhan Parts, a former minister of economy, said some time ago. "We have a large neighbour."

Under increased pressure

Amidst rising concerns over climate change and the increasingly demanding EU's "Green Deal" climate goals, incoming Prime Minister Kallas, breaking from the previous government, pledged to stop using public money to support the fossil fuel industry. By 2035, she said in January 2021, Estonia would no longer burn shale for electricity. The mining of oil shale would end altogether by 2040. "Estonia is number one in the world in the usage of oil shale for electricity generation which of course also makes it number one in Europe when it comes to per-capita CO2," says Tomas Jermalavičius, head of research at the International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS) a think-tank in Tallinn. Although it's been traditionally linked to national security, "In light of the government policy of seeking 100 per cent renewables and full decarbonisation, it is obvious that this industry's future is very bleak," says Jermalavičius.

The oil shale phase-out could be the biggest blow the region has experienced since the cataclysmic collapse of the Soviet Union.

Annela Anger-Kraavi, the Estonian director of the Climate Change Policy Group at Cambridge University, says that the oil shale phase-out could be the biggest blow the region has experienced since the cataclysmic collapse of the Soviet Union. Steering away from fossil fuel is painful for many of Europe's carbon-intensive regions, from Silesia to North Macedonia. But in Ida-Virumaa, with its Russian-speaking majority, and in the absence of any labour-intensive alternative so far, the transition poses a dilemma. "If those people are not taken care of, they might start to look across the border. That makes it even more important to make them feel that Estonia is their home," she says.

From the castle on the banks of the Narva River, one can see the Russian flag waving from Ivangorod, a medieval fortress across the river and only 84 miles from St Petersburg. This great Russian city is situated closer to Narva than Tallinn.

"The two castles are one view of society meeting another view of society," says Narva native Allan Kaldoja. Three years ago, Kaldoja set up a theatre in the former Baltijets military complex, a dilapidated structure where, among other things, the Soviets had manufactured equipment to extract uranium from the oil shale in nearby Sillamäe. "If the place is left empty, the other side will come here."

After pushing the Nazis out on May 9th 1944 and sending Estonians away – many to their death in Siberian camps – the Soviets built up the region as a key industrial hub fuelled by the oil shale and textile industries. The world of most Narva residents collapsed in 1991 when, overnight, Russian speakers were no longer proud players in an industrial empire, but rather the dreaded "former occupiers."

The Krenholm textile empire, once the world's largest cotton mill, eventually closed, leaving more than 10,000 people without jobs. Narva was plunged into poverty and drug addiction. Ida-Virumaa turned into "Estonia's Siberia," largely resented and neglected by politicians and Estonia as a whole. Roughly speaking, a quarter of Estonia's 1.3 million inhabitants are Russian speakers, and most live here.

Mistrust has long simmered in and around Narva that as occasionally resulted in serious unrest.

Mistrust has long simmered in and around Narva that as occasionally resulted in serious unrest. In 2007, for instance, long before Vladimir Putin set out to defend "compatriots" in Donbas, the Russian president described the removal of a Soviet war memorial away from the centre of Tallinn as "blasphemy" and a "vengeful policy toward Russians living in Estonia and towards Russia". The move set off riots among ethnic Russians, which took Estonia to the brink of civil war. At the same time, Estonia faced a major cyber-attack believed to have been orchestrated by Russia – the first the world had ever seen.

The illegal annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas in 2014 took theatre manager Allan Kaldoja to the day Estonia restored its independence when, as an 11-year-old alone at home in the coastal town of Narva-Jõesuu, he saw tanks roaming around. "For the first time, the fear came back," Kaldoja recalls. "Politicians started saying, 'oh, we have Narva!'" Journalists from around the world flooded into Narva asking, 'will Narva be next?' The attention and money that followed helped Kaldoja fulfil his dream of bringing more culture here, to bring Estonian and Russian speakers closer. In addition to his Vaba Lava Theater, Estonian Public Broadcast, with its TV and radio studios, has moved into the old military plant. "Before that, it was easy to forget about Narva."

The lifeblood of Ida-Virumaa

An estimated 6,000 jobs in the Narva region are directly linked to processing its "black gold". Tallinn officials say the transition away from it will be gradual. To help reorient the economy, a process officials say started long ago, the region is getting 340 million euros from the EU's "Just Transition Fund." Ivan Sergejev, a Narva native who manages the Fund at the finance ministry, says that the biggest challenge is "how to do it in a way that is fair, how to explain it to the community – mostly Russian speakers – who will suffer the greatest impact." Discussions with local groups are underway.

But many believe that this is too little and too late. Apart from oil shale, the region has little in terms of heavy industry. To be sure, the attention born out of the shock of Russia's annexation of Crimea Narva played a role in helping it overcome its image as a drug-riddled place. It also helped Narva entrepreneur Vadim Orlov's effort to boost the city's reputation as a unique border location offering Russian and European companies "clear legislation, no bureaucracy, no under-the-table money and a really comfortable working environment where you are in the EU but can still communicate in your own languages," says Orlov. Orlov, whose father worked as a driver for one of the oil shale power plants in Soviet times, grew up across the Narva River, in Ivangorod. In 2012 he converted a vacant space Moscow had once set aside for yet another oil shale power plant it never built into the Narva Industrial Park. Seven companies and 700 jobs have moved into his Park in the last years. But the current war in Ukraine has slowed investments. "Unfortunately, investment and troops go in opposite directions," Orlov says. He fears the loss of oil shale jobs. "If people have no workplace, we do not know what they think, where they turn their heads, to the East or West."

An estimated 6,000 jobs in the Narva region are directly linked to processing its "black gold".

From his office at Eesti Energia, Estonia's state-owned – and largest – electricity producer, Andres Vainola overlooks a gigantic maze of structures: blackening Soviet-era red-bricked units standing side by side with shimmering glass buildings. It is here in Auvere, about three miles from the Russian border that, after being transported from nearby mines in big conveyor belts, Estonia's "black gold" is crushed before being burned for power or processed into oil. While the electricity stays in Estonia, the oil is mostly sold abroad to be refined into gasoline.

The juxtaposition of the old and new plants tells the story of the company's transformation and, in the words of its officials, its contribution to a climate-friendlier future. There is a roughly six-year-old power plant worth 610 million euros mix-

ing shale with wood chips to make electricity. At the same time, a refinery reuses the steam left over when making oil to produce electricity. An oil shale plant under construction is meant, down the road, to evolve into a chemical plant that will use only old tyres and shredded plastic, and no longer oil shale, to make products for the chemical industry.

"We are trying to carry out a green revolution, and we agreed on a roadmap to zero emissions," says Vainola, the CEO of Enefit Power, a subsidiary of Eesti Energia. He says that since 2017 oil shale mining has been cut in half, to six million tonnes annually, and CO2 levels accordingly. The oil shale workforce is also half of what it once was. Rising carbon emission quota prices imposed on polluting industries have contributed to Eesti Energia's shift away from making electricity, which is particularly carbon-intensive, to making more oil.

"Do you know one country in Europe – in Germany, or Poland or in the eastern part of Europe where, in one region, half the employees have been laid off during the last three years?" Vainola asks rhetorically. "We did it and we are still alive." Eesti Energia, company officials say, has reforested abandoned surface mines, and turned open-pit mines into sports fields, wind farms, and artificial lakes for water sports.

"We can reduce our emissions to zero, but for the world, it is but a drop in the ocean," Vainola argues. Estonia has "no heavy industry, no aluminium, paper or huge car industry. In that sense, our consumption of energy is a very minor one. Hence, our security of supply is even more important."

Painful divisions

This past winter, when exceptionally cold temperatures caused energy prices to soar and wreak havoc on Northern Europe's energy market, Vainola grew emotional when talking about energy security. It was weeks before Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine and his troops were massing on the Ukrainian border. "You have to understand," Vainola said. "My brother was born in Siberia, in prison. My grandmother was deported to Siberia. This is why we don't trust the Russians and the big nations and try to be as independent as possible, energetically and mentally."

Yet, sooner or later, be it as a result of a political decision or natural change, the story of Estonia's love affair with oil shale will have to come to an end. Oil shale reserves are not limitless. Jaanus Uiga, director of energy at Estonia's ministry of economic affairs and communications, says "the transition to climate neutral energy production in Estonia is inevitable." Unusually cold temperatures and the war in Ukraine have forced adjustments necessary "to ensure the security of supply, and this means that it is reasonable to keep the existing capacities in working condi-

tion in case they are needed and there is an economic case for using them," Uiga says. But this is "short-term rather than long-term."

If anything, the war in Ukraine has sped up Estonia's efforts to boost its renewable sector, and partner with Latvia on a big offshore wind farm off the Gulf of Riga. This has subsequently given a boost to discussions on building small nuclear modules. Estonia's resolve, along with that of Latvia and Lithuania, to invest in grid infrastructure and disconnect from the Russian grid is stronger than ever. "Estonia will certainly not go back on its climate commitment, and Estonia will certainly not rely on Russian energy," says energy security expert Tomas Jermalavičius at the ICDS.

Nevertheless, the war has once again shown just how differently Ida Virumaa's Russian speakers tend to think – especially with regards to war in Ukraine or sanctions imposed on Russia, analysts says. While 30,000 Estonians swarmed Tallinn's main square for a pro-Ukraine rally in late February, the majority of Narva residents stayed home. While a few Ukrainian flags fly throughout the city, and despite Estonia's ban on Russian media channels here, Russian propaganda continues to spread across the Narva bridge, across the airwaves and the internet. Among the Russian speakers, some 80,000 are Russian citizens. Simultaneously, 70,000 have "grey passports" – meaning they are officially stateless. This has been an emotional and controversial issue for years. Russia, some feel, is using the grey passport issue as a tool to sow divisions between Estonia's Russian and Estonian speakers.

There is a fear that not only Moscow but also the far-right Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) could enflame the "Russian vote". "They are raising their voices saying we should walk out of the EU emission trading system, should maintain our oil shale industry and our reliance on oil shale power generation, otherwise those poor folks in Ida-Virumaa will suffer," says Jermalavičius. "They naturally try to hurt the image of the EU because the party is anti-EU."

A wake-up call

In Kiviõli, home to one of Estonia's first oil shale refineries, Kallas and her cabinet stopped to talk to local players about the region's economic transition. Basking in the sun at the terrace of a café they faced a white-capped mountain where people had been skiing earlier that week. The hill is made up of six million tonnes of semi-coke left over from turning shale into oil. Years ago, locals helped transform it into a ski and motocross resort. The Kiviõli Adventure Centre has brought tourists and interest to this polluted corner of Estonia. "Nobody believed that it was going to work," remembers resident Kaja Kreisman, one of the key players in

the effort, which has made Kiviõli one of Estonia's hippest holiday places. "Back then, we were the outland, Ida-Virumaa was an afterthought for Estonia – nobody cared what went on."

Like many, Kreisman would like to see an end to the industry that has maimed her family's soil and soul, but she is sceptical. A new mine is about to open near her and she feels that oil shale executives are scrambling to mine as much as they can before it is too late. Workers at the Kiviõli oil shale plant do not speak Estonian. If the refinery closes, where will they go?

Meanwhile, Kreisman's daughter Käbi, an engineering student in Tartu, comes home every weekend to help out with the Adventure Centre. The hotel the family bought to welcome tourists now houses some of the 100 Ukrainian refugees Kiviõli has taken in so far. For her, Ida-Virumaa is "the sea, the ash hills, the swamps, the quarries." "The oil shale area has done its part in making this area what it is."

It remains to be seen whether these visits by Estonia's top politicians have come in just enough time for Ida-Virumaa. "The current war needs to be a wake-up call," says Annela Anger-Kraavi of Cambridge University. Her Carbon Intensive Regions in Transition (CINTRAN) research project is underway in Ida-Virumaa to try to find out how oil shale workers – the miners themselves, not only the union and NGO representatives – perceive the transition, and what they need to cope with it. Oil shale may be polluting, but for many Ida Virumaa residents, including those whose families have worked in the industry for generations, it is often a source of pride and identity.

"The question is, why do we need this wake-up call?" Anger-Kraavi asks. "We should pay attention to the region anyway." NEE

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The Way of the Land

MIRIAM ȚEPEȘ-HANDARIC

Romania is not the first country people usually think of when it comes to slavery. Despite this, the country possesses an almost unknown history of Roma slavery that occurred over five centuries ago. The Way of the Land is a podcast that shows how this hidden history bleeds into the present discriminations against the Roma community.

In the small room of Romania's National Theatre, the public frets in their seats, waiting for the play to start. They came to see a one-woman show written, directed and staged by Alina Șerban. She is the first Roma woman to ever direct a play for the National Theatre in Bucharest. Tonight, she plays in *The Best Child in the World*, a play about her life. The only poster displayed remains inside the theatre, where only the spectators can see it. It features Șerban wearing a traditional Roma dress. The curly haired woman stands back to back with a grotesque figure, a symbol of the most crushing insult against Roma, the crow. Șerban smiles.

In the past, the Ministry of Culture requested that Șerban not use the word slavery in her posters. Then, she directed a play about the 500 years of Roma slavery that took place in what is now known as Romania. It was called *The Great Shame*.

"I am glad that I wasn't born during slavery, to be sold by my owner in auctions and separated from my mother. I am glad that I wasn't born during the Holocaust, to end up in those trains…" She was born just in time to chant, "Ole, ole, Ceaușescu is gone!" With this statement, Șerban opens the play.

Social amnesia

Șerban's experience is one of the many presented in *The Way of the Land*, a podcast series made by the magazine *Decât o Revistă* (DoR). Through personal stories and historical documentation, the podcast exposed the key role of slavery in past and current anti-Roma sentiment and discrimination in Romania.

When it comes to slavery, Romanians tend to look to the United States and the former colonies of the western world. What they miss are the almost 500 years of Roma slavery that took place in what is now known as Romania. It was the longest period of slavery in the world and is still barely known. That is why the first episode was called "Social Amnesia".

Officially, Roma make up 3.3 per cent of the total population of Romania. In reality, the percentage is approximately three times higher. Roma people hide their ethnic identity to avoid social marginalisation. This is one of the consequences of the politics of eugenics and the Holocaust that shook the last century.

"Slavery has mutilated us all," said Ana Ciobanu, the author and main voice of the podcast, in the first episode. "If we don't want our relationships shaped by an unknown history, we need to discover it so we can heal." She warns listeners that the journey will be difficult. In six episodes, researchers, scholars, artists and influencers sketch what systematic racism looks like in Romania. With one exception, all are of Roma origin. All of them have been victims of racism. The experience is almost didactic. Ciobanu presents the subject as if the listener has no clue about past Roma slavery. She shows how the names of streets and places and personal stories are marked by this traumatic past. It is made for a Romanian audience, and some nuances ultimately get lost in translation.

Ciobanu explains why she uses the term Roma instead of *Țigan*. Roma is the name that community members have chosen for themselves. *Țigan* is a name chosen by others. It has no equivalent in English, but it is the same as *cigány* (Hungarian), *Cygań* (Polish), *zingaro* (Italian) and *Zigeuner* (German). It comes from the Greek term *athinganos*/*athinganoi* which means pagan, impure or untouchable.

Unseen trauma

Anti-Romani sentiment is prevalent in Romanian culture. Ciobanu exemplifies this with commonly used expressions. When children are not behaving properly, they are warned that "the gipsy will steal them." When Romanians want to say, "to stumble at the threshold", many use the expression "to drown like a gipsy at the shore." They have forgotten the saying's dark historical meaning. When a slave tried

to run away and was captured, they were tied up and thrown in whirling water. In a sadistic jest, the master would often promise the slave freedom if they escaped.

The oldest known document that mentions Roma slavery in the Romanian provinces is from 1385. It states that Dan I, the ruler of Wallachia, gave forty Roma families to the Tismana monastery. For almost five centuries, the three main owners of slaves were the country's ruling house, nobles and church. The master owned the slave's body. He chose who the slave married, what language the slave spoke, and had the right to sell their children. Masters frequently donated slaves to monasteries, hoping for redemption. Roma women were often raped by their masters. Their children became slaves as well.

In 1865 slavery officially ended. The pressure came from a group of abolitionist students influenced by western ideas. There was also external political pressure. At that time, slavery was seen as a barbaric practice throughout Europe. It was the same year that in the US, the North won the Civil War. Almost thirty years earlier, the United Kingdom officially ended the practice of slavery. The Romanian provinces were allowed to unite only if they abolished slavery. However, Roma was only first recognised as a national minority in 1990, after the fall of the communist regime.

With so much proof, it is curious why many Romanians do not know about Roma slavery and its current effects. However, two years ago, the producers of the podcast also did not know the magnitude of this historic trauma.

"I have ten years of experience writing about racism, social injustice and poverty," says Ciobanu, the journalist who made the podcast. "I never connected them to our history." While she was a student, Ciobanu found out about Roma slavery from the memoirs of foreigners who passed through the Romanian provinces. However, the acts of cruelty were never discussed in class. It was only when Ioanida Costache, an ethnomusicologist of Roma origins, recommended a group of researchers that Ciobanu discovered the magnitude of the issue. One of them was the sociologist Adrian-Nicolae Furtună.

"When it comes to minorities, the issue of memory becomes a political issue," said Furtună. He is one of the main figures involved with the podcast. For many years, Furtună has researched documents that attest to slavery and has observed its effects in real life. "If you use the legal term, the crime that happened in the past becomes reprehensible."

But the word used by history books, in school, literature and mainstream discourse is *robie*. This archaic word does not challenge our modern sensitivities in the same way. It translates as captivity or servitude. Some historians argue that this is the correct term, as the human trade only occurred inside the provinces. It can also be a way of distancing the Roma experience from African-American slavery.

In his office, Furtună explains why he ultimately chose to use the archaic word. After spending so much time reading historical documents, this term has a stronger effect. It symbolises the characteristics of the Roma experience. He compares the current identity crisis of Roma to a form of schizophrenia.

Representation problem

To make peace with the past, one first needs to know it. Although there is a great amount of academic research about Roma slavery, Furtună points out how little we know about it. The Romanian Orthodox Church is the main owner of the documents and its leaders show little interest in collaborating with scholars.

"Many people think that Roma do not have a history," Furtună said. "They see them as exotic people with long and colourful skirts, fallen from the sky." In reality, they were forced to live in this land. They were forced to assimilate into the dominant culture and renounce their traditions. Furtună has seen how these policies shape the Roma community's sense of worth.

This was the case for Luiza Medeleanu, who is currently doing a PhD in how Roma are represented in the mainstream culture. Like many children, Medeleanu searched for role models in books. She wanted to find a Roma hero that she could imitate and love, just like how she loved Robin Hood and Uncle Tom. What she found were humble servants. They were mere shadows in the stories. "I never understood why they were like that until I understood what slavery was," said Medeleanu. In the podcast, she mentions that she only heard about slavery as a student. For her, slavery became a revelation. She finally understood why Roma women were sexualised and why the Roma community was side-lined. Slavery was the answer to why she was discriminated against when she was a child.

In her village, she was known as the granddaughter of "Nicu, the Gipsy". Medeleanu did her best to be a model child. She earned good grades and enrolled in national competitions. However, the other children did not want to play with her because she was Roma. "I couldn't understand why," Medeleanu said, "I kept asking myself what I was doing wrong."

Racism scarred her identity. As a young girl, she was proud that she did not speak Romani. She thought that if she spoke it, she would have an accent that would make her sound ridiculous. "It is crazy", Medeleanu says nowadays, "but I grew up with this stigma".

Medeleanu organises educational programmes for the Roma Education Fund. Once, she was asked why Roma do not know their past and why families do not teach their children. "As if you learn about Decebalus from your father," Medeleanu

jokes, mentioning the ancient past of Romania. The answer is simple: they do not learn it in school.

When Roma scholars open up about their trauma, they are mocked. Their discourse is considered self-pity. For Medeleanu, this sincerity marks the first step to regain a sense of dignity. It is how others can understand what it means to face discrimination. From this point on, people can talk of healing the past and current relationships.

A historical reckoning?

The Way of the Land quickly became the most popular podcast in Romania. Competing journalistic publications recommended it to their subscribers. Ciobanu was invited onto several other podcasts and interviewed on her work. Furtună and Medeleanu were also invited for interviews. Several teachers have written Ciobanu to say that they used information from the podcast in class.

Although Romanian politicians remained silent towards this issue, the Swedish Embassy in Bucharest shared the podcast on its Facebook page. "Historically we did not start with equal chances," said Therese Hydén, the Ambassador of Sweden in Bucharest, in an e-mail. Hydén stressed how important it is to support and encourage this sort of journalistic work. "The podcast is an encouragement to embrace tolerance and to try to understand the circumstances that led to the power relationships of nowadays."

The Way of the Land quickly became the most popular podcast in Romania.

The last episode of the podcast was released days after Putin's invasion of Ukraine. As a result, this potential historical reckoning never became a bullet point in the public agenda. The traditional media focused on the new conflict, while conversations about the programme continued on social media.

It is tempting to compare *The Way of the Land* with the 1619 Project, a programme that galvanised audiences in the US and put critical race theory in the spotlight. Cristian Lupșa, the editor-in-chief of DoR, laughed when asked if he wished for a similar effect. "It is difficult to produce a historical reckoning in Romania," he said. "We have many events with which we need to make peace," Lupșa added, "including the fact that, despite the usual narrative, Romania was not always the victim".

There are many comments on social media that back up Lupșa's concern. Talking points such as "we were also doing badly" or "slavery comes from the word Slav," reflect an unwillingness to take a critical stance against the mainstream narrative. Instead, the acts of other European states are presented as undoubtedly worse.

When asked why Roma slavery is not mentioned in the official gallery, the National Museum of History communications team gave a confusing answer. They argue that this exclusion has to do with the delayed restoration of the building, which has been going on for 20 years now. They also blame it on the lack of historical heritage.

The Orthodox Church has answered the allegations made by the podcast. In an e-mail addressed to Ciobanu, two historians claim that the church has never enslaved people. The church has merely accepted a system imposed by political leaders. They stress that Roma people did not experience "slavery". They also distanced themselves from what they called a Marxist-influenced thesis. The word they use for Roma is *Țigan*.

In 2019 Pope Francis publicly apologised for the Catholic Church's discrimination and abuse carried out against the Roma community. The leaders of the Orthodox Church have never asked the Roma community for forgiveness.

Confession

The play ends and the public cheers in standing ovation. Șerban bows and receives flowers. For almost two hours, the audience witnessed how racism shaped her life and identity. They discovered what it means to grow up in a ghetto. They saw how Șerban carried the stigma of her race even when she was playing in New York or London.

"It is important for people to see how difficult it is to live in a world where everybody has prejudices against you," said Agnieszka Krawczyk, who is from Poland. She listened to the podcast and this is the second time she has seen the play. She came with her husband and two colleagues. "In Poland, Roma people are also discriminated against," Krawczyk said.

Children rushed onto the stage to take a picture with the actress. For Claudia, who is ten, the most memorable scene was when Șerban danced while wearing a crow mask. She did not understand the racial symbolism, like most of her classmates, who asked the teacher what it meant. All she saw was the beauty of the dance.

"This is not the usual story," said Mădălina Ivan, who worked with abandoned children. She considers Șerban an exception to the rule, saved only by her strong will. "She is an example for the rest," Ivan said. "She understands their fight."

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The Russo-Japanese War

A forgotten lesson?

ANDRZEJ ZARĘBA

The Kremlin appeared very confident as it launched its invasion of a comparatively weaker Ukraine in February. In light of this, the Russian authorities appear to have forgotten their country's defeat at the hands of a relatively untested Japanese military at the start of the 20th century.

Russia's Tsar Nicholas II (1868–1918) was a model nobleman, a gentleman with a decidedly British air about him. His face was well defined and he had a well-cut beard, similar to the ones seen on Royal Navy officers. Should you be shown his photograph among a group of British naval commanders, you would not see much difference. Some people argue this was the result of genetics.

Of course, Nicholas II was the grandson of Queen Victoria, who was also grandmother to Wilhelm II of Hohenzollern, the emperor of Germany. In addition to having the same grandmother, Nicholas and Wilhelm also shared the same dream – they both wanted to become admirals of a sea fleet.

Well educated as they were, they yet knew that the planet was limited in size, even to privileged dreamers. The Royal Navy, for example, which had been by then ruling over the waves for a long time, did not want to share them with anyone else. Not even close relatives. As a result, Wilhelm and Nicholas had to limit their dreams, just like they were taught by their masters. Having not much choice, they marked boundaries both on the map and in their imaginations. While Wilhelm saw himself as "an admiral of the Atlantic", Nicholas was to become "an admiral of the Pacific".

Bad omens

As a young man, Nicholas II was quiet and moderate. His father ensured that the future tsar would get the best education he could and left classical "musts" behind. Instead, emphasis was placed on modern languages: German, French and English. The so-called "grand tour" was also an important element of Nicholas's education. It took place in 1890 and included a visit to Japan, which at that time was opening up and making efforts to modernise. Japan had leapt from malignant feudal stabilisation in the late 17th century straight to the era of steam and electricity. Such huge changes caused the country's society to pay the price, often with collateral damage. The tsar did not recognise any of these problems. He was not impressed by the nation's sophisticated rituals, nor its proud people or narrow streets with Chinese-style roofs. It was also in Japan where his overseas tour was unexpectedly cut short by a mentally ill policeman, who assaulted him.

Although Nicholas was only slightly injured and his young body survived the incident quite well, his attitude changed. Not only did he start to see himself as an innocent victim (an opinion he maintained right up to the last moment of his life), but he also started to call the Japanese "apes". After the incident, Nicholas also turned towards parapsychology and mysticism. He opted for religious devotion and became a devout Orthodox Christian. This transformation explains why later in life, when he was to make serious political decisions, he would take angels' whispers more seriously than daily reports.

Nicholas's coronation at the Kremlin on May 26th 1896 was also marked by an unfortunate accident. It happened at Khodynka Field outside of Moscow, where crowds of serfs gathered to cheer on the new monarch. The place chosen for the meeting was previously left with uncovered dugouts, trenches and holes. As a result, when people reached out to receive traditional gifts, many collapsed or stepped on one another. A large number of bystanders were trampled on in the sudden panic. Such an inauguration was clearly a bad omen. Not only did it overshadow the tsar's coming reign, it also gave way to more irrationalism in the closest imperial circles.

Chinese hesitations

By the time Nicholas II took his seat on the throne of the Russian Empire, the "civilised world" had just achieved a firm grip over the world's vast plains and waters. With almost all of Africa colonised and exploited, the European powers started to look towards the Far East. The Chinese Empire had remained relatively

unscathed behind the Great Wall before the arrival of the hungry imperial nations. Although the Chinese are said to have invented gunpowder and even the magnetic compass, they neglected to note the inevitable consequences of these inventions and other technical novelties. Instead, they effectively started this new era as a well-preserved open-air museum, with the nation enjoying its cultural superiority achieved at the price of complete stagnation. Thus, the Chinese were easy prey even for small numbers of well-trained soldiers.

Not surprisingly, a large number of Europeans were ready to send a contingent of their colonial armies to the country and act ruthlessly. This, in fact, was the case during the so-called Second Opium War, when the British looted and destroyed the Chinese imperial gardens, which are presumably one of the world's wonders. China had to come to terms with this and other humiliations. The British and other navies started to control trade, took over harbours and established colonial cities where they pleased. Such was the case in Hong Kong.

In China, which had then been ruled by a complicated feudal court with traditions reaching far into the medieval past, the imperial court was doomed to failure unless it modernised. The Chinese, however, saw modernity as something dangerous and barbarous. They believed it to be a potential cause of trouble and civil unrest. Thus, the hierarchy hesitated. A clear split emerged between influential court supporters and modernisers who led China to resist colonial oppression as best they could.

Japan's modernisation

The Japanese Empire and its imperial family are considered to be the oldest dynasty in the world. However, the emperor, who was believed to be divine, has always had less prerogatives than his counterpart in China, not to mention Russia. Since the 17th century, the Japanese political regime was made up of a complicated oligarchy led by shoguns. One of them – Tokugawa Ieyasu – created a system based on social balance and prosperity. He moved the country's capital from Kyoto to Edo (now Tokyo). Thus, the period of his rule is also called the Edo era.

During this time, Japanese culture flourished. The society was increasingly able to enjoy everyday life and feel no fear of war, siege or brutal repressions. Peace also meant that more children were born and families had more time for themselves. But change was yet to come. This was marked by black smoke on the distant horizon from the steam-powered navies showing up from the West. The Japanese authorities were alarmed; their islands had been kept closed since the end of the civil war, but the technical disparity between Japan and the West was starting to

make a difference. The Japanese coastal defences were made for another era and the military was not able to protect the nation.

The westerners, in turn, did not see much difference between the Japanese, Chinese and Koreans. However, the differences between these three nations were immense. First of all, unlike others, Japan had a ruling military class – the samurai. Secondly, it developed a code of conduct based on strict military virtues, which was useful in combat. This pattern was ready and adaptable. Thus, to make someone a modern officer it was enough to replace their armour and sword with a uniform and a revolver.

The Japanese reaction to the westerners' arrival was quite different to that of the Chinese. Japan sent a delegation overseas for a fact-finding mission and did so not because it felt offended by the "western barbarians", but because its power circles felt that new possibilities could be found outside the region. As a relatively poor island nation surrounded by an unstable sea, Japan struggled to survive. This also explains why its society seemed more willing to move towards modernity than their Chinese counterparts. Special attention was paid to military technology, as the Japanese also understood that it was impossible to separate civilisation from military effectiveness.

Thirty years after the crushing of the last coup that was organised on the islands, the Japanese political establishment seemed stable and safe. A homogenous nation with few minorities could clearly adopt a system that was best suited to the traditions of the country. It included a relative sovereignty of the people, who respected hierarchy and the rule of law. The emperor was thus ruling the country more like a moderator than a dictator. Japan also had a strong bourgeoisie and successful cooperation with foreign capital and firms. Special interest was paid to the British Empire regarding its naval buildup and Germany, which was seen as a blueprint for its land forces.

Thirty years after the crushing of the last coup on the islands, the Japanese political establishment seemed stable and safe.

Thus, the moment the Japanese army and navy were regarded as capable of defending the country from enemy attacks and the danger of submission, Japan also began conquests overseas. By European standards, its aims were modest – to incorporate the Korean Peninsula into the Japanese sphere of influence and establish safe harbours on the coasts around Korea. This would not yet be possible without extensive social reforms and military investments. China, on the other hand, which had constantly been maltreated by the European powers, was ready to halt its Asian brethren. To do so, it started a naval rivalry that brought it similar results to the clashes it had with the western colonial powers. It soon became apparent that Japan had quick-

ly moved forward towards westernisation, while the cautious Chinese regime remained in the same place.

The next move was the battle for Port Arthur in China in 1894. Surrounded by a new and modern Japanese army, the Chinese had no prospects of winning. The Europeans, and especially the Russians, watched this sideshow with astonishment. Interests clashed, as Russia wanted a firm settlement on the Chinese coast. Specifically, they saw the newly conquered Port Arthur as a key strategic port for the Russian navy. Vladivostok, the main Russian harbour in the Far East, was not enough as in winter its waters were frozen. Despite the fact that Japan had taken Port Arthur, it was forced to relinquish its claim in 1895 under pressure from France, Germany and Russia. This humiliation made Japan even more determined to stand up to the western powers.

Imperial dreamers

The beginning of the 20th century was marked by dramatic events. In South Africa, British domination was questioned during a costly intervention in the Boer Republics, which rebelled against the metropolis. In 1899, a thin red line of British soldiers was sent to pacify the region in what looked set to be a quick police operation. However, the professional war machine found itself stuck in the province of Transvaal, where it was harassed by small detachments of irregular cavalry, equipped with modern rifles produced by German and Austrian manufacturers. Britain panicked and had to apply an unprecedented level of brutality to deal with the resisting settlers. The Boers were backed by the German Empire, whose ruler Wilhelm Hohenzollern openly dreamt of having his own colonies. Germany did not yet dare clash openly with the British Royal Navy, but this made matters worse for the future of peaceful co-existence.

Nicholas II saw himself as the master of most, if not all, of China, the Korean Peninsula, Manchuria and later Japan.

Meanwhile, these opponents in Africa stood firmly together in China, where a rebellion had started in 1899 among the humiliated Chinese populace. The rebels were convinced of the superiority of their character and traditional martial arts. Once again, this struggle for values was inadequately armed. The fist symbol adopted by the insurgents inspired the "Boxer Rebellion" name for the conflict in Europe. This anti-colonial uprising lasted until 1901. Faced with the insurgency, the German emperor was eager for military glory. When speaking to the German naval infantry contingent, he encouraged his subjects to show no mercy and imitate the Huns and bar-

barians. He claimed that the Chinese were inferior, a subject race that is destined to serve the whites, and especially those of German origin. With the German consul killed by the rebels, revenge had to be quick and cruel. The Chinese had to remember their lesson.

Meanwhile, the Russians had ruled a vast territory in a style that shocked outside observers. The tsar – as mentioned above – was indeed a gentleman who was devoted to his family. Yet, the country he literally owned was the biggest single territorial empire in the world. To control it, one had to combine spiritual authority and modern methods of oppression, which probably explains why the tsars were always obsessed with strict control. They employed special boards in the government to spy on society, while the secret police served the interests of the state (effectively the monarch). These two groups conceived of a myth of racial superiority and encouraged conflict among various groups of subjects. Their favourite enemy were the Jews.

Similar arguments served well when Russia needed to mobilise the populace for territorial expansions. Nicholas II dreamt of controlling the whole Far East. Just like his predecessor Peter the Great had chopped his way to the seas via the Baltic acquisition of Polish and Swedish coastal territories, Nicholas saw himself as the master of most, if not all, of China, the Korean Peninsula, Manchuria and later Japan. This dream would make Russia the most important player among the European powers without directly clashing with them. Germany felt that this new direction for the sleepy bear was good – it served Germany's plan to neutralise the British and slowly take the empire from their weakening hands. The tsar received letters of encouragement from his German cousin. He also gave attention to a variety of advisors, among them a former cavalry officer named Alexander Bezobrazov, a political philosopher with an appetite for big money eager to see gains in Asia. The system seemed content and the Russian Empire was a good place for great business. The Russians had built a train line all the way to Manchuria. Their plans were clear and the Germans showed no concern. There were, however, two players who were watching closely and feared what the future might bring: the British and the Japanese.

Russian approach to war

The second half of the 19th century marked changes in military systems throughout the whole western world. Lifelong professional service – expensive and prone to battle losses on the modern battlefield – was replaced by mass conscription of all citizens, or subjects as was the Russian case. Previously, peasant soldiers spent

their entire life in the ranks, so the change was felt as a relief. "Only"six years of active service and the next nine as a reservist. Conscription was introduced in Russia by 1874.

By the beginning of November 1903, the Japanese Empire had mobilised its battle fleet and army. In 1903, the navy's Minister Yamamoto Gombei appointed Togo Heihachiro commander-in-chief of the combined fleet of the Imperial Japanese Navy. This nomination clearly astonished many people, including Emperor Meiji, who asked Yamamoto why Togo was appointed. In response, Yamamoto said, "Because Togo is a man of good fortune." Togo was born in 1848 to a noble family. At the age of 15, he joined the heavy gun crew at the fortress of Kagoshima, defending it against the bombardment of the intervening British Royal Navy. Later, he joined the Japanese navy and was sent by the high command abroad for an education. He spent seven years on the British Isles, including two years on board the HMS *Worcester*, a frigate which had circumnavigated the globe. Togo learned his lessons at the very heart of the mightiest navy in the world.

Meanwhile, the Russians had prepared for the coming events in the way a giant awaits an ordinary man. Admiral Yevgeni Ivanovich Alekseyev did not believe that the "monkeys" would do more than carry out a vain demonstration of their power. The Russian Pacific Fleet had anchored in Port Arthur on the bay on the outer area. The port had only one narrow strait letting ships out and the Russians were afraid of their fleet being bottlenecked by the Japanese. Togo knew through various intelligence sources about the Russian fleet's composition and decided to act immediately. Japanese torpedo boats attacked the Russians at night, taking them completely by surprise. Sixteen torpedoes were launched, three struck home damaging two battleships and one cruiser. The next morning the Japanese task force entered Port Arthur and commenced an artillery battle, this time seriously damaging the battleship *Poltava*.

At the same time, the First Japanese Army began a landing operation in Korea. The land was officially considered neutral with international guarantees from international peace forces. This squadron consisted of ships from Britain, France, Italy, the US and Japan. In Chemulpo several Russian warships were caught. The cruiser *Varyag* was shelled by the Japanese for almost one hour and almost half of her crew were killed. Her commander, Vsevolod Rudnev, survived the fight. His ship, which was wrecked and aground, had not surrendered and became an important piece of state propaganda. Rudnev was promoted to the rank of rear admiral.

Two days into the war, Japan had not managed to crush the Russian forces but gained the initiative and was still trying to block the Russian navy. The night of February 22nd brought more Japanese action. Both sides tried to gain an advantage but to no avail. Russian state officials found themselves in complete chaos and

no one seemed to have any idea what kind of strategy to employ. A saviour was at hand, however, but no one had cared about his opinions when the strains and risky business with Japan had begun.

Born to a reserve officer's family, Stepan Makarov came from the city of Mykolaiv in Ukraine. He and his family relocated to the eastward corner of the empire to Nikolayevsk-on-Amur, which at that time was the main Russian harbour in the Far East. Makarov joined the navy and became an accomplished officer. He designed artillery ammunition and was a part of the first successful Russian torpedo ships. A one-man institution, Makarov developed both creative prototypes of ships like the icebreaker and was also an explorer.

Taking command of the fleet in Port Arthur, Makarov displayed enthusiasm and energy as well as confidence and authority, which are all important in war. Facing the newly appointed admiral in chief of the Russian navy, Togo had met his match. Skirmishes began to get aggressive and the Russians were striking back. Observers noticed that the tsar's navy was put to sea every day and engaged the enemy. At least until April 13th 1904 when – apparently – Togo managed to trap Makarov. His flagship *Petropavlovsk* vigorously followed the enemy, but suddenly Makarov realised that his force was facing the main Japanese combat fleet. During an evasive manoeuvre the *Petropavlosk*'s hull activated a freshly planted Japanese mine. Then she hit another one.

The Japanese navy used mines as an offensive weapon. Soon the waters around the Liaodong Peninsula became infested with these floating charges, ready to blow up any ship indiscriminately. Many of the mines were cut from mooring, meaning they were a threat both to their owners and the Russians, who also planted them as fast as they could.

The Russians were known to be tough on land. But their initial fighting also went wrong. At Yalu River, on May 1st 1904, the Japanese army successfully pushed the Russians behind the Manchurian border. The fortress of Port Arthur became permanently cut off from Russian supply lines.

Modern Sevastopol

The siege of Sevastopol during the 1854–55 Crimean War had become a legend of Russian bravery. Yet, the Russian fortress was eventually taken by the coalition forces. Port Arthur became the blueprint for another legend, with Japanese land forces in April beginning to storm the fortified positions, losing hundreds in almost suicidal raids. Yet courage alone cannot win in the modern type of warfare. Hence, the artillery siege was slowly drawn up the hills. Modern Japanese

howitzers of 280mm calibre started shelling and crushed many concrete bunkers. New methods of directing fire were also used by the Japanese. Hidden behind in safe valleys, batteries of heavy guns were aimed via observers equipped with cable phones providing targeting information in real time, unopposed by the enemy.

Thus, several ships in the safe harbour of Port Arthur were attacked from above. Artillery shells fell onto the decks, easily penetrating the thin armour. With each month, the Russians were losing their safe haven. They were not able to leave the harbour due to a naval blockade and at the same time were unable to make any major overhauls of their precious ships, due to the constant danger from the hilltops. Waiting seemed to be a disaster on its own. Makarov's successor, Wilgelm Vitgeft, the new Russian fleet commander, made an attempt to escape to Vladivostok, to save the remnants of the Pacific Fleet until a relief task force was sent from the Baltic. On August 10th 1904 at 12:15pm six Russian battleships with admiral flags spotted Togo's squadron. By 6:30pm a well-aimed shell from one of the Japanese ships took out Vitgeft's flagship, the Cesarievitsch, killing the admiral instantly.

The final battles

The Japanese plan for war was based on close cooperation between its land and naval forces. These plans were thoroughly orchestrated by staff members and well executed by the subordinates. The army of Meiji's empire was ready for the mountainous terrain of Korea. Up to 40 per cent of the artillery operated agile mountain guns designed for use in narrow passages, easy to dismantle by the crew and pack on the backs of animals. The Japanese were disciplined, yet innovative and able to improvise. The field artillery and small arms were a completely new, modern breed.

In St. Petersburg the court was awaiting good news, but it seemed inevitable that all plans had turned into a disaster. The last hope was placed in Admiral Zinovy Rozhestvensky, the commander of the Baltic Fleet. The Russian navy still had more battleships than Japan. A third of the fleet was still available – the Black Sea Squadron. Unfortunately, due to major problems resulting from Russia's great unpopularity in Europe, with the exception of the German emperor, the Black Sea Fleet was bottlenecked at the Bosporus Strait. Thus, the Baltic Fleet would operate alone. The task given by the tsar to Rozhestvensky resembled that which caused the grand armada of Spain led by Alonso Pérez de Guzmán in 1588 to fail in its vain effort to conquer the British Isles. Rozhestvensky was a loyal servant, but knowing much better the state of affairs within the navy he felt doomed to his fate. After Makarov's death, he was the next hero, a man of various skills. Yet his ships were unprepared, the sailors lacked training and their armaments were obsolete.

Illustration from *Thrilling stories of the Russian-Japanese War* (public domain) 1904.

Destruction of the Russian warship Borodino in the straits of Korea.

After Vitgeft's death, Port Arthur was still in Russian hands. Yet the journey would belong to the rarest and most precarious of events. What is more – the armada of the Baltic Fleet was forced to sail an almost Magellan-like journey, which consumed unbelievable amounts of coal needed to keep the ships going. The British cooperated with the Japanese closely in many fields. They shared military intelligence and plotted together diplomatically.

Russia's allies were too weak to be of any use in this stressful moment. The right to pass through the Suez Canal was rejected, so the journey would take them around the Cape of Good Hope, exactly how the first navigator sailed to Japan in the 17th century. One would think that coal had made things better but nothing is less true. The coal only made navigation less prone to wind changes, but tied ships to colliers. Warships, which are designed not to travel effectively but to clash with other ships, are especially voracious consumers of coal. The bunkers thus emptied almost after three days.

The expedition consisted of seven capital armoured ships and many other smaller vessels. The relief expedition raised an anchor in Libau Harbour on October 15th 1904. At the same time, the Japanese infantry relentlessly stormed the forts in Port Arthur. For a whole month the defenders were able to repel the attackers. However, by the end of November 1904 the Japanese stubbornly renewed their offensive. This time they were determined to take the "203 Metre Hill", which would

allow them to dominate the city and quickly strangle its defences. While the fate of the Pacific Fleet base was being settled, the battle fleet from the Baltic passed the Dogger Bank, where a fateful incident took place. Danish and British fishing boats were shelled accidentally by a Russian torpedo boat, which sank one trawler and killed two of their sailors. The public was so outraged that the incident almost ended up with the Royal Navy setting sail to intervene. Ashamed internationally, the Baltic Fleet sailed on. On December 5th 1904 General Nogi Maresuke – a Japanese siege forces commander, announced the capture of the 203 Metre Hill. It seemed that the fate of Port Arthur was sealed. Ten days later, Russian General Roman Kondratenko, who was a skilful commander and an energetic staff officer, was killed by enemy fire. Morale on the Russian side dropped dramatically.

Radio communication with the battleships about the details of the land fighting was minimal, although there ought to have been very close cooperation between sea and land actions. When Rozhestvensky reached Madagascar on January 9th 1905, Port Arthur had been in Japanese hands for almost a week. The last commander, General Anatoly Stessel, had surrendered his troops as soon as it was possible. After the war, he was charged with treason and sentenced to death. The tsar would later show his Christian mercy and commuted the sentence, releasing Stessel from captivity.

It took another five months for Rozhestvensky to sail east, without hope of making any change to what was already a closed chapter of history. For the incoming fleet, only hope drove their will, hope alone to take revenge for the assault on their imperial pride. Yet they were ready in their action stations. On May 27th 1905, the Japanese cruiser *Shinano Maru* spotted the first of the Russian supply ships in the strait at dusk. It was about 2:25am. At 4:25 Commander Narukawa Hakaru telegraphed Togo stating that the "enemy fleet was observed in Square 203". The usually highly rational Togo and his staff read the message as a sure omen of coming victory. Of course, the same number marked the important hill that the Japanese siege forces had captured in Port Arthur.

On the morning of May 28th 1905, the shattered remnants of the whole Russian fleet were surrounded by Japanese battleships. After heavy shelling, Nikolai Nebogatov ordered to fly the flag of surrender on top of a battleship. The war had ended not only with a Russian defeat, but also humiliation. It had lost to an opponent who on paper appeared weaker. In the end, the Russo-Japanese War demonstrated that factors like morale, innovation and adaptability could be decisive. Whether Russia learnt this lesson remains to be seen in today's context.

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In search of Baron Kurtz in Bucharest

LILIAN PIZZICHINI

In the summer of 1990, I found myself sitting on the platform of Wien Sudbahnhof waiting for a train to Bucharest and dreaming of waltzing down the River Danube. In the dream, my partner and I spiralled through rooms that had hosted the secessionist salons of Mitteleuropa. We landed on the couch of Freud's 20th century, before spilling onto the streets and the opening scenes of *The Third Man*.

This is where my imagination takes me: Holly Martins has arrived in a burnt-out city. There are traps and ambiguities for a visitor from the New World; there are harsh and shifting choices forced on refugees. The lush romance of the Danube waltz lingers in the background, but my appetite for suspense has me gripped. In Vienna at the end of the 20th century, I searched in vain for the slippery labyrinths containing an enigma in the shape of a moon-faced man. I never found him, so I took the train to Bucharest.

One year after the execution of a dictator, I stepped off the train at Gara Nord. I was looking to witness the new dawn after revolution. The platform was long and narrow. The station was airy. There were newspaper kiosks streaming with Cyrillic screeds and trolley stands where porters smoked Turkish cigarettes. It was so hot I could feel myself on the crossroads of another weather system, no longer in temperate northern Europe, but, with its palm trees and sticky heat, I had reached the East.

Disparate yet related

On the platform was a "ratty little man", to quote Graham Greene. As he begged a spare coin from me, a jumble of impressions led me back to Holly Martin's arrival in Vienna and his meeting with a character called Baron Kurtz. The title of Baron took me back to the brittle elegance of Mitteleuropa and the intrigue of lost status, lost wealth and the gambits of survival. The name, Kurtz, sent me floating into the heart of darkness. But it turns out that Baron Kurtz is no more than a violin player in a cheap café. He does, however, have an agenda.

He tells Holly that Mr Popescu has disappeared. However, Mr Popescu turns up at the Casanova Club. In a city like this, everyone has to be careful.

Major Calloway explains, "You're blundering around with the worst racketeers in Vienna." But Holly won't listen. He has come to Vienna to look for his friend, Harry Lime.

Who would I find in Bucharest? Would I find Major Calloway – a brisk, kindly guide in an army-regulation duffle coat? Or would it be Harry Lime, who, when he was 14 years old, taught Holly three card tricks? That's growing up fast, says Holly with a rueful smile. I know what it's like to grow up fast and my heart belongs to guys like Harry.

I made my trip to Vienna and Bucharest shortly after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. It was the world of *perestroika* and Reaganism. But I could not let go of my vision of a black and white free-for-all, in which spaces open up for a guy like Harry to break the rules. Why has Romania, the home of Baron Kurtz, captured my imagination more than its Balkan neighbours? It's different from those neighbours. In 104 AD, the Roman Emperor, Trajan, imposed an imperium after winning a series of wars over Dacia, of which Romania was the heartland. The imperium lasted 165 years. This was long enough for the Daco-Romans to develop an offshoot of Latin. The Romanian language makes Romania's voice hard to hear in the chorus of Slavic languages that threatens to drown it out.

To increase my attachment to their story, the Romanians were largely ignored, or at best misunderstood, by the rest of Europe, because the life of other nations was more florid. Check. I was an only child overwhelmed by a dysfunctional family. Centuries of evading domination and destruction by Ottoman Turks, Hungarians and Hapsburgs made Romanians revert to a passive, avoidant and dreamy state. They call it the "mioritic" syndrome. The Dacians invented it. According to an ancestry.com test, among the strands of DNA my sample contained was a 14.9 per cent streak of Dacian. Early chroniclers said that the Dacians were refugees from Troy. The word "Dacia" means "wolf" with whom the Dacians identified. We circled settlements and villages waiting to take them over. We used knives and dag-

gers to attack from behind. We were cunning, and there is an implicit cunning in the "mioritic" syndrome, by which the immortality of the soul lifts us above the squabbles and squalor of chaos. In the end, as I see it now, it was Holly Martins who was walking with me through a cityscape that was Bucharest, on to which I projected a melody that belongs to a film about Vienna.

Harsh reality

Memories of the zither's sweet refrain are so potent they take over the present of today. I can go further back and hear carriages rattling over cobblestones and hawkers shouting their wares. In the 19th century, Bucharest was called the "Paris of the East" because of its Latinate influences. Under the socialist dictator Nicolai Ceaușescu, the boulevards gave way to concrete conurbations. I was walking in a city that had been turned into numbered blocks of flats. The concourse I trod was empty of landmarks, and I struggled to navigate the blocks. They were ziggurats, pyramids with windows, as silent and impassive as ancient. I do not remember how I got there from the station. I must have walked. I do not remember how I found the address written on a card given to me by the tourist officer at the station. My eyes were skimming off surfaces. Somehow, the address revealed itself as a second floor flat coming off an internal staircase. I knocked on the door. If I hadn't been so dreamy, I would have been afraid.

In the 19th century, Bucharest was called the "Paris of the East" because of its Latinate influences.

The door opened into a widow's flat. Her name was Ioana. She was in her 40s and was renting out a room. In many ways, her home reminded me of my childhood home. A two-bedroomed flat with low ceilings and mould on the walls. ("Low ceilings and cramped rooms crush the mind and the spirit", Raskolnikov tells Sonya in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.) But in our flat, there was a saving grace: the sunshine of suburban London. It filled our rooms with the promise of space and abundance. Not so in Ioana's home. I could only intuit the bulky shapes of her furniture. She herself was a small, plump woman with dyed blonde hair and blue eye shadow.

"Can I have a bath?" I asked her, keen to wash off the grime of train travel.

"No," was the short answer. Ioana was very gracious but her message was stark. Electricity was rationed and so was hot water – to two hours a day. There would only be hot water again from 8pm to 10pm. I did not know what to say. But I knew I could not stay in that flat and take hot water that would deprive my host of her

share. Ioana showed me her son's room which was to be mine for the night. I saw a boy's photograph on a shelf. Like other young people I had seen so far, he had green stubs for teeth and dull, frowning eyes. Ioana herself, she told me, had stomach cancer.

Had I come here to be part of something I would never have to live with? I had not set off with the idea of poverty tourism. At the same time, my naiveté appalled me. How could I expect anything else? The contrast between my romantic fantasies of "Paris of the East" and the harshness of reality was too much for me. I did not have the right to take my ease. Unnerved, I drifted back to the city centre, a stranger to my own motivation. Palaces with palm trees would usually charm me with their hints of oriental splendour. But all I could see was the drabness of Bucharest's citizens. No one stood out to me. Passers-by fitted into an overall theme that washed away colour. I retreated into not seeing. An angry police officer came chasing after me. I stood in the road trying to make sense of his gesticulations. I finally made out he was saying, "No jaywalking!"

I must have looked terrified because he let me off with a contemptuous gesture, probably sensing I was out of my depth. He was right. Finally I found a hotel that offered me a distraction from my shortcomings. There were bullet holes in the walls of the Athenée Palace Hotel but the air grew denser in its environs. Congestion offered the comfort of anonymity. The Athenée Palace, with its marbled façade and pillared lobby, was a glorious relic of the Art Nouveau "Paris of the East". Dacias – the Romanian car, pulled up, parked, and let out passengers in its forecourt. Commerce – the movement of money – helped me regain my confidence.

Theatrical performances

The Athenée Palace had gained a reputation during the interwar years as the most elegant – and notorious – rendezvous in the Balkans. At the start of the Second World War, Romania was in league with Nazi Germany. By 1944 the government had switched sides. So Bucharest, and specifically the Athenée Palace, served as a haven for wavering Nazis, western diplomats, spies and the dispossessed royalty of Eastern Europe. They all hung out at the hotel's English Bar.

The gilded mirrors and gold leaf filigree were still here, the illegal money changers were still here. But the English Bar was closed. Gone were the bellboys in white gloves and crested caps. Gone were the waiters in emerald jackets serving canapés and popping champagne corks. The staff were evasive and indifferent. My disappointment was intense. What was I to do? A nonchalant waiter offered me a chair at a table. I took my seat and looked across an ocean of white tablecloths dotted

with empty wine glasses and discarded napkins. In the distance, were the descendants of Baron Kurtz.

A portly, middle-aged prostitute and a skinny man in a leather jacket were hustling a half-drunk American. I guessed the woman was a prostitute because she had a look in her eye that said she was up for business. A kind of smiling alertness that was far more telling than the short skirt a couple of sizes too small for her. She wriggled in her seat, eyeing up the room while her companion convinced their mark he was onto a good thing.

"My friend, my friend, you must believe me," I heard him say, as he leant ever closer towards the westerner. He was too sozzled to do anything but go along with whatever scheme his new best friend was proposing. Meanwhile, a throng of in-

cantatory voices was approaching. Out of a cloud of black cassocks a convocation of Orthodox priests streamed through the restaurant like a frieze. Each one had a silver pectoral chain falling to his waist. Their numbers and the complexities of the turrets that sat atop their birettas amazed me. What did these turrets signify? Why were there so many variations? Equally unreadable were their waxy faces ending in beards that were uniformly thick and far-reaching.

These spectral figures were reclaiming their territory after Ceauşescu's reign of madness. Between the con artists and the priests I had to wonder if I had been drawn into some theatrical event staged for my benefit. I felt the same sense of hyper-reality Holly Martin feels when he sits at a banquette in the Casanova Club. All these characters were spinning a line. The film was seeping into my reality. My head was spinning with dialogue from *The Third Man*.

For example, when Holly visits Harry's girl in her flat in a crumbling mansion, he sees she has a cat:

Harry's girl tells Holly the cat only likes Harry.
Holly thinks Harry, his best friend from childhood, is dead.
Harry laughs at fools like Holly all the time.
He shops his girl to the Russians.
It's the cat who finds Harry Lime.

But that was Vienna, and this was Bucharest. How do I get back to the moment? I have to work at it, push away the curtains of forgetting and denial.

The encounter

In the restaurant of the Athenée Palace, the waiter arrived at my table. I wanted to ask him about Baron Kurtz's descendants. Instead I asked for *mititei* (meatballs). He said they were out. I asked him for soup. He said it was out. What do you have, I asked. Powdered eggs.

I made a mental survey of the restaurant, the lobby and the street outside. I acknowledged to myself that I had stumbled into a post-apocalyptic drought, with a complex set of rules I could not comprehend.

I left the Athenée Palace Hotel, and made my way back to the train station. The queue was long. When I finally got to the counter, I was told the first train to Vienna was the following morning. I just had to survive the night. Behind me, two loud voices were speaking English. I turned to see two Americans in shorts, baseball caps and vests. They looked so vigorous and western, I almost leapt into their arms.

Frank and Howard were on a walking tour of Europe, they told me, raising awareness for AIDS. Both men were HIV positive, and had been to visit a Roma-

nian orphanage. They were now doing a tour of the capital and had hired a young man, Florin, to show them around. Florin was eager to please, and once Frank and Howard had done their business at the counter, he suggested we go to Manuc's Inn. It was one of the few wooden buildings left in Bucharest. The first-floor gallery extended on all four sides of the inner courtyard. Behind me, a waiter lurked in a darkened doorway. He was not so much waiting for customers to place an order, more resenting any possibility of us lifting the gloom.

"Let me order for you," Florin said. He waved at the waiter who sloped over. Twenty minutes later, we received a round of Slivovitz beer and tinned pilchards.

I sized up my companions. The most noticeable features in Florin's grey plasticine face were his wary eyes. The two Americans were shining examples of health insurance. They both had moustaches like the Leather Biker from Village People. I felt reassured by their MTV modality. But Howard had a story to tell me. Romanian children were being abandoned by their impoverished parents. Orphanages were full of children who were dosed with tranquilizers, administered intravenously. Hepatitis B and HIV/AIDS was ravaging through the orphans. Howard showed me a photo. A tiny infant bundled into a commode at the end of a row of silent, worried-looking babies. I thought of Harry Lime diluting penicillin. I thought of Major Calloway forcing Holly to visit the children who had been affected by Harry's penicillin.

"A number of children simply died, and a number went off their heads," the Major says. "It doesn't bear thinking about very closely, does it?"

On the Ferris Wheel in Vienna, Harry tries to talk his way out of the horror he has helped to create. Sitting next to me, in an old Romanian inn, Howard was talking of the horror he had seen. Like the Major, I could not bear to think about it. Absolution was what I wanted, not a reminder. I pledged to support Howard's marathon walk across Europe and to raise money for the Romanian orphanage. The sun spread a benevolent silence through the latticed beams of the inn. Howard smiled and pressed my hand with his. With the other, he picked up his napkin and smoothed over his moustache, brushing out the smile and, just for a moment, leaving his face vacant.

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Several days after my return to London, I was standing on a carpeted floor in a comfortable living room. I had been woken by the telephone ringing. It was two o'clock in the morning. I picked up the receiver and heard the distant clicks that signalled an international call. A man was weeping. It was Florin.

"What's the matter?" I cried.

"They're going to kill me," he said in a stifled whisper. I pictured a man in a balaclava pressing the barrel of a gun to Florin's head.

"Ple-ee-ase send me some money …" He broke off, his voice muffled. I was on an assistant's salary. I started crying, too. I felt there must be something I could do. But did I want to do it? I hung up the phone, and stood for a while, ignoring its desperate ringing, gripped with the hopelessness of myself ever being the person who could or would help him, the person I wanted to be.

Back at my job in a literary agency, I set about raising funds from my colleagues in the publishing industry. The outside world had also discovered Ceaușescu's network of "child gulags". I wrote letters about Howard's mission and that here was an opportunity for us to help. I received many donations and was able to send a cheque for £2,000.

I did not receive a receipt or an acknowledgement. I did not hear back from Howard or Frank or anyone else about the orphans.

As the song of the zither fades, it is the orphans who ring in my ears. Those worried babies and my helplessness. All that effort, that misplaced belief that I could help them; the pity I evoked in others, only to be exploited. Worse, the children were exploited. I did not hear from Howard or Frank and I could only feel the numbness of my own denial – this didn't happen to me. Now I am writing about it, I hear again the words of Major Calloway. This time, he is talking to me: I had been blundering around with the worst racketeers in Bucharest.

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