

New Eastern Europe

Bimonthly **November-December No 6 (LIX)/2023**

20 PLN (w tym 8% vat) | 12 EUR | 14 USD | 8 GBP

neweasterneurope.eu

ISSN 2083-7372



9 1772083 737135

THE DRAGON IN EUROPE

How China approaches Russia and the region



'How did these stories get into your hands? They flew, as if painted by Marc Chagall, through prison walls, borders, and languages.' **Valzhyna Mort**



THE ZEKAMERON

BY **MAXIM ZNAK**

WRITTEN FROM PRISON IN BELARUS

TRANSLATED BY JIM & ELLA DINGLEY



'It's a terse account of painful experience, prison, bewilderment; hugely atmospheric and extremely funny - full of dry wit and small biting observations.'

Anna Vaught

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DEAR READER,

This year, on September 13th and 14th, China hosted a summit in Hong Kong dedicated to the ten-year anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative. Notably, among the guests of honour invited to this event was Vladimir Putin, whom the Chinese leader Xi Jinping presented as a “dear friend”. This gesture is one of many examples of the growing cooperation between Russia and China, which we have seen since even before the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

That is why for this issue of *New Eastern Europe*, we asked our authors to look at China’s role in the region. They analysed the various aspects of the Sino-Russian axis trying to understand whether it is driven by convenience or a deeper connection between the two powers. In addition, they also looked at China’s presence in Central and Eastern Europe, and especially the 17+1 format which was initially met with some enthusiasm, especially among the more authoritarian politicians. However, the initial support for this format has somewhat waned recently. This shift, especially in Czechia and Lithuania, can be explained by a change of attitude to China’s policy towards Taiwan, the human rights’ violations towards the Uyghur population and China’s ambiguous position in the current conflict in Ukraine.

In addition to the China-focused bloc we encourage you to read the texts that cover the developments that have also been observed in the region but are less often addressed by the mainstream media. In particular, with the ongoing migration waves, be it from the Middle East or the war-affected Ukraine, our authors analyse different social reactions (in Poland and Romania) to ethnic Ukrainian migrants and those who are Muslim or from the Roma community. The lengthy war also requires that we discuss the role of the Russian society, its responsibility and sense of guilt, for the atrocities committed against the Ukrainian people and on the territory of Ukraine. We chose to address all these difficult and painful issues to stimulate discussions on the challenges that are continuing to emerge and which may determine the future condition of the social reality in Europe and beyond.

As 2023 draws to a close, we would like to thank you all who support our publication and mission to bring the stories of this region to the world. We encourage you to stay in touch and share your thoughts with us via email or social media.

Sincerely,
The Editors

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

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College of Eastern Europe in Wrocław
(Kolegium Europy Wschodniej
im. Jana Nowaka-Jeziorańskiego
we Wrocławiu), 2023.

New Eastern Europe is co-funded by the
European Union, under an operating grant
titled "Protecting European Values. A proactive
approach to strengthening and building
European democracy by countering hostile
threats aimed at diminishing EU values
and bridging existing divides". Views and
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**Co-funded by
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Texts and opinions published in *New Eastern
Europe* do not necessarily reflect the views
of the funders, publishers and editors.

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



Ministry of Culture and National Heritage
Republic of Poland

Circulation: 3500

Printing: Zakład Poligraficzny Moś i Luczak sp.j.

International Distribution: Magazine Heaven Direct /
<https://www.magazineheavendirect.com>

Printed in Poland | Published since 2011

Between “Trojan horses” and an “Anti-China Vanguard”?

EMILIAN KAVALSKI

While China may be growing into an economic, military and technological giant, the experience of Central and Eastern Europe indicates that this “hegemon in the making” is much more **vulnerable and isolated** than it likes to believe. At the same time, wishing China away is impossible. At the same time, ignoring the fact that China is already a stakeholder in the complex European landscape comes with great risk.

On the pleasant sunny morning of June 14th 2023, pedestrians crossing the iconic Charles Bridge in Prague found themselves navigating through multiple meticulously-staged Chinese couples. These groups were taking their pre-wedding photos against the scenic skyline of the city. Locals have probably become accustomed to this sight. Ever since the Taiwanese singer Jolin Tsai released her Mandopop hit “Prague Square”, hundreds of thousands of Chinese tourists have been flocking to the city to enjoy its romance. While outsiders may have found such photoshoots curious, for those crossing the bridge to attend the European Values Summit that day, the sight must have been particularly jarring. This was because they were about to witness the president of Czechia, Petr Pavel, share a podium with the foreign minister of Taiwan, Joseph Wu. The high-level meeting at Kaiserstein Palace appeared to confirm a radical shift in relations not only between China and Czechia, but the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) as a whole.

This shift might appear puzzling to some observers. It was not that long ago that Beijing’s cooperation with the region was touted as a real feather in China’s foreign policy cap. In fact, the evolution of China–CEE cooperation – better known as the “17+1” group because it brought together in 2012 Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, as well as Greece in 2019 – played a significant part in the EU’s designation of China as a “systemic rival”. Ensuring that the point was not lost on anyone, the then EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Johannes Hahn decried the participating CEE states as “Trojan horses” undermining European unity. Hahn’s designation was puzzling, not least because it conveniently overlooked the fact that the bulk of Chinese trade and investments were (and still are) with the western part of the continent. China was equally forthright in flaunting the significance of its cooperation with CEE countries. In January 2020, just as the Covid-19 pandemic was about to begin, Beijing made the unexpected announcement that President Xi Jinping will be taking over the hosting of all future “17+1” summits. At the time, Chinese media was hailing Beijing’s cooperation with the CEE countries as evidence of the successes of “Xiplomacy”. Today, however, the very same outlets are lambasting regional states for spearheading an “anti-China vanguard”. How accurate are these representations? Answering this query requires an overview of the brief history of China’s cooperation with the CEE countries.

Lack of history as a prologue

In international affairs any relationship will seek to utilise the past experience of its actors to inform the future trajectories of their interactions. For instance, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe deployed the narrative of a “return to Europe” in order to justify their demand for membership in Euro-Atlantic institutions. Likewise, Beijing amplified the 15th century exploits of Admiral Zheng He in its public diplomacy across the Global South to emphasise that China has historically shunned colonialism and imperialism.

Yet when it comes to the relations between the CEE countries and China, there do not appear to have been any specific or imagined pasts on which to base their contemporary interactions. This is not to say that there have been no attempts at creating such narratives. For instance, in 2011, the former Croatian President Stipe Mesić proclaimed on a visit to China that “Marco Polo is a world explorer, born in Croatia, who opened China to Europe.” Such attempts notwithstanding, China has been far too distant geographically, historically and ideationally to have any



meaningful resonance in the political, cultural and (until very recently) economic imaginaries of the region. The same applies to China as well. Conspicuously, the dearth of such experience makes it difficult both to root contemporary interactions and to use history as a means of addressing the exigencies of the present.

Even during the Cold War, most of Central and Eastern Europe (apart from Albania and to an extent Romania) sided with Moscow during the Sino-Soviet split. The fall of communism across the region seemed to reinforce this trend. Some of the protesters who began gathering in Tiananmen Square in April 1989 took inspiration from the nascent democratisation of the CEE countries. Motivated by a fear of contagion, the Chinese leadership ordered the violent suppression of the protesters on June 4th 1989 – the very same day as the first multi-party elections in a communist CEE country were taking place in Poland.

Consequently, for much of the post-Cold War period, both China and the CEE countries remained largely isolated from one another. The political chaos, ethnic tensions and economic turbulence that marked the post-communist transition in the CEE region provided the Chinese leadership with ample evidence of the dangers of a political “opening up”. Chinese media narratives drew on this experience to “teach” its audience that “under no circumstances can capitalism bring peace

and happiness to the people.” At the same time, the CEE countries remained primarily focused on their integration into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions, which did not leave many opportunities to develop a foreign policy focused on developing relations with other regions and parts of the world.

When an afternoon fish turns out to be fresh

The EU and NATO accession of the majority of the CEE states appears to have shifted international outlooks both within and outside the region. Following the 2004–07 “Big Bang” enlargement of the EU, CEE representatives became involved in the whole spectrum of issues and levels within the EU policy-making process. This included Brussels’ outreach to China. Beijing’s growing economic footprint was also becoming difficult to ignore. This became particularly pronounced in the wake of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), which impacted profoundly the legitimacy of western institutions and economic models. China appeared to benefit from these developments owing to its seeming immunity to the crisis.

One of the unintended effects of the GFC was to bring the CEE region to Beijing’s attention. Greece, whose economy was severely affected by the crisis, came under immense pressure from its creditors to sell off the country’s national assets. One of the first items on the privatisation chopping block for the Greek government

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was the port of Piraeus. The China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) acquired the operating rights for the container terminal in 2008 and by 2021 it controlled a 67 per cent stake in the port. The then president of the COSCO group, Wei Jiafu, acknowledged that the Piraeus investment far exceeded his expectations and compared it to “buying an afternoon fish only to find out that it was fresh.”

COSCO’s investments in Piraeus put the CEE region firmly on China’s investment and foreign policy map. In 2009 the automaker Great Wall Motors opened a joint venture in Bulgaria, which involved oversight from then Vice President Xi Jinping. In 2010 Premier Wen Jiabao visited Piraeus to demonstrate China’s contribution to European economic recovery and a few months later he visited Budapest to attend the China-CEE economic and trade forum. It was during Premier Wen’s 2012 trip to Warsaw that Beijing’s bespoke framework for cooperation with the CEE countries was formally launched. Chinese commentators started to refer to this cooperation as “one of the most important achievements of China’s diplomacy”.

The end of the affair?

The new-found centrality of the CEE countries created the perception that the region was moving steadily into China’s orbit. Yet, perceptions and reality rarely overlap. China’s failure to meet the stratospheric expectations generated by the lavish promises of large-scale investment provided the main reason for some CEE countries to give China the cold shoulder. For instance, Prague Mayor Zdeněk Hřib, who famously ended a “sister city” relationship with Beijing in 2019, stated half-jokingly that Czechia has not gotten so much as a panda for the Prague Zoo, let alone any of the other investments promised by China.

Some of the cracks in the “17+1” framework appear to have been prompted by a lack of knowledge about the region in China. This became apparent as early as 2009, when China’s COVEC construction company won a tender to build a 50-kilometre section of a highway running from the German border to Warsaw. The success of COVEC’s bid was significant as it marked the first time a Chinese construction company had won a public competition in the EU. Yet by 2011 it was apparent that the company had miscalculated the impact of EU road infrastructure standards and labour legislation on the price of the project. Lack of local know-how also precipitated the collapse of the Great Wall Motors car manufacturing plant in Bulgaria in 2017. More surprisingly, in September 2023, China cited an inability to meet EU safety standards as a reason for suspending work on the flagship Budapest–Belgrade railway line.

China’s failure to meet **expectations** of large-scale investments was the main reason for some countries to give China the cold shoulder.

At the same time, after years of “17+1” summits, CEE policymakers were venting privately that rather than developing initiatives in the region, the organisers of these forums were using them to advance their careers in China. Beijing was also becoming a political punching bag for diverse local grievances in the CEE region, most of them having little to do with China and more to do with spats between government and opposition parties. While there does not seem to be a common denominator for pro- and anti-China attitudes in the CEE region, in general political formations with anti-liberal, Eurosceptic or pro-Russian sentiments tend to be more favourable to Beijing. For instance, the 2021 protests against the establishment of a Fudan University campus in Budapest had more to do with the opaque and authoritarian nature of Orbán’s regime than the academic credentials of the Chinese university.

In this respect, it was during the 2019 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong that some of the tensions in “17+1” burst into the open. Coinciding with the thirti-

eth anniversary of 1989, the Hong Kong protests triggered memories of the largely peaceful revolutions in the CEE countries. Furthermore, Hongkongers’ use of the tactics developed by CEE dissidents – such as the Lennon Wall and the Baltic Way – resonated in the region. Across the Baltics, commemorations of 1989 involved support for the plight of Hong Kong. These also provoked negative Chinese reactions. For instance, in August 2019, Chinese diplomats in Lithuania attacked a gathering intended to show solidarity with Hong Kong. A month later, a group of self-styled “Chinese patriots” defaced the original Lennon Wall in Prague, with graffiti celebrating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. The Covid-19 pandemic only intensified the split within the “17+1” group between countries such as Hungary and Serbia, who were developing ever closer relations with China, and the rest of the CEE countries, who were becoming either lukewarm or outright hostile to Beijing. In May 2021, Lithuania became the first CEE country to pull out from China-CEE cooperation as a whole. Vilnius now stressed its normative commitment to support “those fighting for freedom from Belarus to Taiwan”. The following year, Estonia and Latvia also suspended their participation in the forum.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine last year and China’s perceived support for Moscow reinforced the view that Beijing “does not get” the CEE countries. Even in Poland, which had tended to adopt a more “pragmatic” approach to relations with China, there has been a palpable shift both in public perceptions and government attitudes towards Beijing. A foreign ministry communiqué in June 2023 mentioned potential “grave consequences for the bilateral relationship between Europe and China” if Beijing were to provide any military aid to Moscow. At the same time, the crude assertiveness of Beijing’s “wolf warrior diplomacy” has not helped China’s case either. For instance, in April 2023 the Chinese ambassador to France, Lu Shaye, stated that the post-Soviet countries have no “effective status” in international law. The Baltic states immediately issued a strong response, with the Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis tweeting that “If anyone is still wondering why the Baltic States don’t trust China to “broker peace in Ukraine”, here’s a Chinese ambassador arguing that Crimea is Russian and our countries’ borders have no legal basis.”

There is also growing evidence that Beijing is trying to interfere in CEE affairs through cultural diplomacy, media manipulation and espionage. China is also using the support of its “ironclad friends” in the region to shape their policy outlook. For instance, in a September 2023 phone call Foreign Minister Wang Yi urged his Hungarian counterpart Péter Szijjártó to “push the EU to adopt a more open policy towards China”. Such statements demonstrate China’s abandonment of the rhetoric of non-interference when it comes to the affairs of other states.

Vulnerable and isolated

Are the countries of Central and Eastern Europe “Trojan horses” for China or the leaders of an “anti-China vanguard”? Well, neither description seems to be entirely right. Serbia and Hungary are probably the only countries in the 17+1 format that come close to the “Trojan horses” end of the continuum, while the Baltic states (and especially Lithuania) are the main protagonists in the “anti-China vanguard”. The rest of the group was motivated by expectations of economic gain. Yet, after more than a decade of interactions with Beijing, most members of the 17+1 format are becoming either suspicious or disappointed with China’s inability to deliver on its economic promises. Consequently, more and more, the countries of the region seem willing to challenge China’s so-called “red lines” – such as the status of Taiwan or Beijing’s treatment of minorities. China never developed sufficient expertise with regard to the countries and, in particular, their economies. Instead, its presence in the region became quite divisive and contested. As a result, Beijing gradually found itself dragged into the squabbles of local stakeholders.

The unravelling of the 17+1 format illustrates that Beijing does not possess a very versatile diplomatic toolbox – beyond bullying or buying support. And while China may be growing into an economic, military and technological giant, the experience of the CEE region indicates that this “hegemon in the making” is much more vulnerable and isolated than it likes to believe. At the same time, wishing China away is impossible. Ignoring the fact that it is already a stakeholder in the complex European landscape comes with great risk. In a rapidly changing world, with volatile transatlantic relations, rising populism and a fragile European neighbourhood, the experience of the CEE countries illustrates the challenges of finding a consistent strategy for dealing with China. Perhaps paradoxically, both for Beijing and for the region’s capitals, the future trajectory of their relations will likely depend on interactions with other international stakeholders. ~~EE~~

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China and Russia

A strategic partnership with many limits

ALEXANDER LANOSZKA

The threat of a China-Russia alliance poses **significant geopolitical challenges** to the United States and the European Union. However, the strength of the Sino-Russian relationship may not be as powerful as they declare.

In his September visit to Stockholm, the Republican chairman of the US House Foreign Affairs Committee, Representative Michael McCaul, warned that the strengthening relationship between Russia and China was the most significant “threat to Europe and the Pacific ... since World War II”. This viewpoint, as sensationalist as it appears, has some merit. Both China and Russia are nuclear-armed, both can paralyse the United Nations Security Council with their veto powers, both have in the last decade become more authoritarian at home, and both have engaged in a variety of malign activities that damage democracy abroad. Russia is clearly intent on revising the territorial order in Europe with its brutal war of aggression in Ukraine, while China is gathering the military and intelligence assets necessary to go about its stated ambition of finally bringing Taiwan to heel.

Superior relations

Reinforcing the notion that Moscow and Beijing pose a uniquely serious danger to the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific areas is their own self-declared strategic partnership. Mere weeks before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in ear-

ly February 2022, Russia and China announced publicly that their friendship has “no limits” and that “there are no “forbidden” areas of cooperation.” In an obvious dig at NATO, the two sides asserted that their relations are “superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era”. Going beyond those words, China has provided diplomatic support to Russia following Moscow’s fateful decision to mount large-scale combat operations against Ukraine. Reports abound of China sending military gear to Russia. China has encouraged narratives that Russia is waging a defensive war against the West’s challenge to its supposedly legitimate security interests.

But is the strategic partnership really without limits, thereby posing the most significant threat to liberal democracies since 1945? The answer requires some nuance. On the one hand, China and Russia have indeed strengthened their alignment in a process that can be traced back to the 1980s. Their deepening security cooperation does present a challenge to the United States and its allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. On the other hand, China and Russia have revealingly stopped short of signing a defence pact. No military alliance is in the works. And so insinuations that their relationship outperforms NATO come across as almost apologetic, hiding the major geopolitical disagreements that lurk beneath the surface.

Moscow and Beijing used to have a treaty-based defensive alliance with one another. Shortly after the communist victory in the Chinese Civil War, Mao Zedong petitioned Soviet leader Joseph Stalin to formalise their countries’ political and military ties. Stalin saw no need for an alliance and was reluctant to establish one, but eventually agreed to do so. For several years, the Sino-Soviet relationship was strong. Soviet engineers and scientists even helped with China’s fledgling nuclear programme.

However, major tensions arose between the two sides by the late 1950s. Mao disliked Stalin’s eventual successor, Nikita Khrushchev, perceiving the new Soviet leader’s attacks on personality cults as ideological heresy. Geopolitical disagreements over how to take the communist struggle abroad, especially with regards to Taiwan, grew with time. The Soviet Union withdrew its scientific support from China and border disputes between the two intensified, leading to a serious flare-up that brought them close to war in 1969. Moscow and Beijing let their military alliance wither away. Its foundational treaty reached its expiry date in 1979 with neither side making a serious effort to renew it.

Relations between the erstwhile allies would eventually start to improve in the late 1980s. Soviet leaders were trying to figure out how to restructure their scler-

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rotic, command-based economy without losing political control. China offered a model to this effect, albeit one that would prove impossible for the Soviet Union to replicate given its ethnic diversity and a military establishment too obstructionist to countenance meaningful reform. When the Soviet Union did collapse and left in its wake a much reduced and weakened Russian Federation, China chose not to use the occasion to litigate old territorial disputes. Instead, the two sides signed a treaty of friendship that saw agreement on their shared border. Shortly thereafter, they increased their military personnel exchanges, enhanced their consultative bodies and rekindled their military-technical cooperation. In the early 2000s, the two countries announced their intention to undertake joint military exercises, with their first large-scale exercise bearing the assuring name *Peace Mission-2005*.

Authoritarianism at home and abroad

Russia and China were thus becoming more aligned geopolitically in the years leading up to 2014. By the time it seized Crimea from Ukraine and destabilised Donbas in Ukraine's east, Russia had already undertaken several military drills, engaged in several confidence-building measures and expanded security consultations with China. Of course, western sanctions imposed after Russia attacked Ukraine in 2014 diverted the country's trade away from Europe and towards China,

China and Russia have
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with some observers subsequently arguing that these sanctions have served only to push Russia into the arms of China.

Yet a wider historical perspective suggests that trends already appear to point to strengthening relations between the two countries. And indeed, when looking at the leaders themselves, one can see that, prior to 2014, both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping were starting to consolidate authoritarian control over the societies that they ruled. Putin became president again in 2012 amid credible allegations of electoral fraud and stepped up repressive activities against ordinary citizens, most prominently against members of Russia's LGBTQ+ community. In 2012 as well, Xi launched an anti-corruption campaign that would enable him to consolidate political power within the Chinese Communist Party, even if there was genuine corruption that needed curbing.

The time since 2014 has seen greater efforts by China and Russia to increase authoritarianism at home and export it abroad. Freedom House reports that, as much as they were hardly ever democratic in any meaningful sense, the space for

freedom of expression and assembly shrunk significantly in both countries in the last decade. China stepped up surveillance of its citizens, both within its territory and without. The quality of human rights deteriorated, with over one million members of the Uyghur population interned in detention centres. In its foreign relations, China has unsettled its neighbours by pressing territorial claims against them while going about a major military build-up that encompasses the biggest expansion of its nuclear weapons arsenal in recent memory. Taiwan is the most serious target for Chinese military aggression, with some forecasting a Chinese effort to annex it in the not-so-distant future.

For its part, Russia continues to occupy large swathes of Ukrainian territory that it seized in 2014 and 2022, while its leaders brandish nuclear threats against Ukraine's international partners. Both China and Russia push anti-liberal narratives on social media that serve to widen political polarisation and erode trust in public institutions.

If China and Russia thus increase their collaboration, the geopolitical challenge to the US is significant. Many analysts claim that the United States is overstretched due to the large number of military personnel it has deployed in Europe, East Asia and the Middle East. In 2018 the Pentagon issued a strategic document that abandoned the two-war standard, whereby it could face off militarily against two regional adversaries, whether simultaneously or in tandem. Now the US military has embraced a one-war standard – that is, a strategy focused on winning a single war with another great power. Though this strategic change might reflect a more realistic appraisal of what the US can do these days, it opens up the possibility of opportunistic adversaries instigating crises in different parts of the world to leave the United States exposed anywhere it has commitments. A unified bloc comprising a revisionist China and a revanchist Russia has this potential.

More limits than advertised

This close alignment between Russia and China, however, has not so far led to a formal military alliance. The lack of a treaty-based alliance is revealing. States sign binding alliance treaties when they have enough in common with each other that they wish to certify their shared approaches to domestic and international audiences alike. Yet states rarely, if ever, have harmonious interests. Whether because of geography, ideology, history or whatever else that can produce differences between them, even the closet allies will have disagreements about how to confront shared threats. A prospective ally could, for example, be more hawkish and appear overly eager to start a fight that could entrap the wider alliance. To reduce

such risks, states can negotiate into an alliance treaty conditions or more precise language on those clauses that could be triggered should hostilities break out.

The treaties that the US has with its military allies are indicative in this regard. Signed in 1949, NATO's founding treaty restricts the military alliance to a specific geographic region so as to exclude the vast majority of the colonies that various Western European states could have plausibly waged war to keep at that time. Article Five – which states that an attack against one NATO member is an attack against all – does not automatically cause any specific action, if invoked. Members retain their sovereign powers to determine their response. The alliance treaty between the US and South Korea has similar features. An understanding appended to it explicitly states that Washington will only come to Seoul's aid in the event of an armed attack against territory already under Seoul's administrative control. In either case, the United States used strategic language to avoid the possibility that it could be dragged into any conflagration that others might initiate.

The fact that China and Russia have not concluded a treaty-based defence pact suggests that the potential differences between them are too difficult to smooth over with treaty language. Why that is the case is not hard to see. Russia is already involved in a very hot war with Ukraine. Just as many analysts argue that the war is preventing risk-averse NATO members from extending a clear membership pathway to Ukraine, one can similarly argue that China is rather hesitant about formalising its ties with Russia via an alliance. With Ukraine launching drone strikes against Moscow, a defence clause would be implicated in any treaty commitment that China would sign up to, thus putting its credibility immediately to the test. This point is not abstract. Moscow has had great difficulty rallying its current treaty allies in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation to offer any support.

The risk is not entirely one-sided. If China were to move forcefully against Taiwan, then it might try to enlist Russian military assistance. Russia may be averse to becoming too involved – even by mere association – in China's territorial and maritime disputes. Besides, Russia does not have significant bandwidth to provide much beyond diplomatic coverage and a coordinated disinformation campaign, actions that Russia can already take without a treaty.

Though Beijing and Moscow clearly share an antipathy for liberalism and democracy, the strength of their alignment is easy to exaggerate. Chinese-made equipment has shown up in Ukraine, but its volume is far less than what China can provide. Beijing has, to a certain extent, respected the sanctions imposed on Moscow by Washington and its allies and partners around the globe. Crucially, distrust between Russia and China remains. Their joint military exercises may look impressive but they are heavily scripted, with Russia inviting China to contribute to its quadrennial *Vostok* exercise partly to defuse possible concerns that the drills are

directed at Beijing. China and Russia have overcome western expectations in how they have smoothed out their relations with the Central Asian countries wedged between them. Yet Russia's eastern borderlands have seen enough economic underdevelopment and Chinese migration for social tensions to arise.

Fear not for now

If China and Russia were ever to agree on a bilateral defence pact, then such a geopolitical event would be significant. It would demonstrate that the two sides have grown comfortable enough with one another that what disagreements they might have will not rise to the level of discord. It would signal that they are confident enough about the pledges involved that they can foresee fighting alongside one another. It would also show that, notwithstanding the massive attrition suffered by the Russian armed forces in Ukraine, China believes that Russia can meaningfully support its military objectives in the long term. Both Moscow and Beijing could use the alliance treaty itself to address what worries they have with one another so that they can pursue their defence cooperation more effectively than before. Representative McCaul's fears would receive validation.

Yet such a military alliance does not appear to be in the offing. For the time being, they differ enough in their priorities and concerns that a mutually satisfactory treaty appears too difficult to conclude, let alone negotiate. Of course, even if a treaty is achievable, their relationship may still be prone to experience trouble. After all, Beijing and Moscow did have an alliance early in the Cold War that ended up facing an existential struggle not long after one leader passed away and his successor consolidated power. A decade barely passed before their division widened enough to be a split.

Perhaps mindful of that history, Beijing and Moscow will be satisfied with limiting themselves to declarations of a strategic partnership and all the rhetorical flourishes that they deem necessary for projecting an image of strength and unity. ~~EE~~

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Leading a rethink of China's Belt and Road Initiative

JENS BASTIAN

China's Belt and Road Initiative is no longer seen as attractive today as it was ten years ago. However, some key differences in approaches to China are emerging throughout Europe. This is evident when analysing **German engagement towards China**, versus that of Southeast Europe.

It has been ten years since the inauguration of China's flagship foreign economic policy – the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Chinese President Xi Jinping has labelled the BRI as the “project of the century.” Many of the more than 140 participating countries have ample reason to take stock of the benefits and drawbacks of their cooperation with, and integration into, this geopolitical and geo-economic project.

Beijing has used this anniversary to celebrate its so-called “win-win” initiatives in a “changing multipolar” world – a decision which cannot come as a surprise, given the political importance attached to the initiative, the magnitude of financial resources committed, and the international outreach achieved with projects. These initiatives have ranged from traditional infrastructure building and cultural diplomacy to lending arrangements and corporate investments. This China-led project has also earned a rising tide of vocal critics. These critics may not have much in common with advocates of the Belt and Road, but they can all agree on one critical element: no other government has been able, nor willing, to match Beijing's geo-strategic ambition embodied by the Belt and Road Initiative.

Peak China?

Today, China is consolidating its role in the region of Southeast Europe, especially in the Western Balkans. Meanwhile, the Sino-German relationship is also evolving. The reality on the ground over the past decade has changed and so have the narratives when engaging with China. This should encourage a critical assessment of where bilateral relations with Beijing currently stand and what should guide them in the near future. The German perspective on this topic serves as an illustration that similar challenges and opportunities characterise the current state of play in bilateral economic, commercial and political relations with China, irrespective of whether the country in question is a member of the EU or a candidate country.

There is a growing body of critical China research in Europe which argues that we have witnessed “peak China” in terms of investments, lending and infrastructure projects related to the Belt and Road Initiative. Based on available statistical data, this assessment is correct. Chinese companies and state-owned banks are not as active anymore as they were a decade ago in terms of securing funding for government-driven infrastructure projects in Southeast Europe. Moreover, we can identify a greater country-specific focus by Beijing, with a clear preference for Serbia, Hungary and Turkey. Major infrastructure investments in Greece (the expansion of the Port of Piraeus) and North Macedonia (construction of the highway from Lake Ohrid to Kičevo) are also ongoing and the Chinese-built Pelješac Bridge was inaugurated to great fanfare in July 2022 in Croatia.

These trends point to a greater focus on the Balkan region (and more broadly Southeast Europe) with a noticeable and long-term presence in key sectors of these countries' political economies. However, this observation should not obscure new Chinese initiatives in selected countries that emphasise the continuation of its Belt and Road outreach, its infrastructure agenda and connectivity objectives. Consider the following examples:

- In September 2023, a Sino-Turkish agreement was signed to build a nuclear power plant in Kırklareli in Eastern Thrace. If and when completed, it would constitute the country's second nuclear reactor for Turkey. At present, Russia's Rosatom is completing the construction of Turkey's first nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, in the southern province of Mersin.
- In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Dakar hydropower plant is being built by the China Gezhouba Group. The cost of the project currently stands at 338 million euros.
- Similarly, the construction of the Počitelj Bridge in southern Bosnia and Herzegovina is advancing. The Chinese companies involved are Sinohydro Corp., PowerChina Roadbridge Group and China Gezhouba. The bridge project in-

cludes a loan agreement with the European Investment Bank (100 million euros) and a five million euro grant from the Western Balkan Investment Fund.

- The Chinese copper mining conglomerate Zijin, which is already active in Serbia, is planning to invest up to 3.8 billion US dollars to expand its copper mining operations in the country.

What do these recent Chinese activities in Southeast Europe highlight? For one, they underscore the continuous nature of Beijing's investment in and commitment to the region. Moreover, individual Chinese companies are prepared to invest considerable amounts of financial resources in selected sectors, particularly in energy extractive industries necessary for electric vehicle production. Finally, as the Počitelj Bridge project in Bosnia and Herzegovina illustrates, these infrastructure initiatives are partly co-financed by European Union institutions and funding facilities to which Chinese companies are gaining access.

Germany debates its China engagement

The aforementioned examples underline that governments in various countries in Southeast Europe do not consider China either a rival or a competitor. They are also not reluctant to permit Chinese investments and/or lending facilities for large-scale projects in critical infrastructure. This continued proactive engagement of the region's political elites with China stands in marked contrast to how the German government in Berlin is currently re-evaluating

its policy priorities towards Beijing.

In July 2023 the German foreign ministry published its first China strategy. After a rather long inception period and vibrant debate inside and between government ministries, the strategic document lays out a critical roadmap for dealing with China. The focus rests on issues such as the impact of China's engagement on national security; how supply chains in different sectors of the German economy are affected,

in particular car manufacturing; and a plan for products that rest on sensitive intellectual property, such as pharmaceutical products and cybersecurity (the presence of Huawei in 5G telecommunications). The emphasis rests on establishing a level playing field if and where Chinese companies seek access to economic sectors in Germany.

Such reciprocity is still not guaranteed for many German companies, including in Chinese telecommunications or access to shipping terminals in China. German

After a long inception period and vibrant debate, the German foreign ministry published its first **China strategy** in July 2023.

companies' access to Chinese financial and insurance sectors is similarly insecure and dependent on the whims of the Chinese state. Thus, the new China strategy underlines a shift away from considering China as primarily a partner for business affairs (the predominant focus of the previous government of Chancellor Angela Merkel). Instead, the new rules of the game in government ministries and the chancellery in Berlin are to see China as a rival towards which it is increasingly necessary to voice an assertive "no" with regards to certain investment projects in defined industrial and service sectors.

Unsurprisingly, this new positioning of the federal government in Berlin is not without its critics. Obviously, the Chinese side was quick to disqualify the strategy document as one-sided and lacking in analytical depth. But it was perhaps more interesting to note a similar reaction from the German business community, in particular large companies in car manufacturing and the chemicals industry. From Mercedes Benz to Siemens, a large swathe of German producers continue to increase their investment portfolios in China. We can thus observe a growing divergence between the political strategic roadmap presented in Berlin and how large German companies "read" China. This divergence is counterproductive for the coherence of a strategic recalibration.

Sino-German interdependence is primarily reflected in commercial trade. In 2022, bilateral trade rose to a record level. Despite political warnings in Berlin about excessive exposure, China has been Germany's single largest trading partner for seven years running. Goods and services worth 298 billion euros were traded between both countries in 2022. This marked an increase by 21 per cent against the previous year. China is one of the very few countries with which Germany has a trade deficit, which reached 84 billion euros in 2022. German direct investment in China eased in the first half of 2023. However, it remained close to its record high in 2022 and increased as a share of the country's overall investment abroad.

There is a growing divergence between Berlin's political approach and how large German companies "read" China.

Taking stock of China exposure

In Germany the public debate about how to approach China is chiefly characterised by its critics arguing that companies have replaced their historical dependency on Russian energy with a new dependency on Chinese markets. China advocates in the corporate sector and in some parts of German academia warn against "China bashing". They argue that the German economy is not in a position to dis-



Photo: Baloncici / Shutterstock

A monument to Confucius in front of the Chinese Cultural Centre Building in New Belgrade. China is consolidating its role in the region of Southeast Europe, especially in the Western Balkans.

invest from its exposure to Russia following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine and simultaneously disengage from China. In that context, the mantra of "de-risking" instead of "de-coupling" from China is the order of the day for many in German politics and corporate operations.

What is the perspective that we can identify in the countries of Southeast Europe? Do they have similar debates and face similar challenges? What lessons have they learnt over the past decade from their engagement with and exposure to Chinese infrastructure projects, lending arrangements and corporate investments? A striking feature of this experience is the level of knowledge concerning China in the region. Over the past ten years, the Balkans have produced an ever-increasing amount of intellectual work in this field. Think tanks such as ESTIMA in North Macedonia, the BIRN reporting platform, China Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE) and a wide array of other non-governmental organisations have emerged and grown. This is especially true in reporting on the environmental impact of Chinese infrastructure projects and mining activities, for example in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

However, the mobilisation of civil society is still a work in progress. Today any Chinese investment or infrastructure project faces a level of public scrutiny that

did not exist prior. This also makes it much more challenging for governing elites in the recipient countries to close deals with their Chinese counterparts. Calls for contract transparency, the implications of loan facilities and the small print of negotiated commitments are all part of public inquiry today. If Chinese parties want to invest in Serbia, Hungary or North Macedonia today, they must anticipate challenging questions, recourse to judicial review and vibrant public debates among different constituents of civil society.

In Germany, the federal government has established guidelines as to which sectors of the economy are either off limits, or in which strict limitations of share ownership by Chinese companies exist. Restrictions currently exist in cybersecurity, data mining, pharmaceuticals, port infrastructure, semiconductors and artificial intelligence. This more muscular approach towards China is as much driven by geopolitical considerations as it is the result of a root and branch evaluation by the current governing coalition in Berlin. The main goal of this shift is to seek a new definition of the country's China priorities as reflected in the recently released strategy document.

With regard to the countries of Southeast Europe, the level of established China competence outside governing elites has not automatically led to the revision of projects or the rejection of loan offers. While ministries and regulatory authorities have gained a wealth of policy experience by dealing with Chinese interlocutors, this does not (yet) translate into a manifest political will to challenge Chinese projects, seek revisions to established contract conditions or even reject loan offers from a Chinese bank. What we rather observe is that governments in Serbia, parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey and Hungary in particular are willing enablers of Chinese project initiatives. They reflect a level of local political agency that continues to see Beijing as a prominent alternative to the administrative regulations and transparency requirements inherent in projects co-funded by the European Commission in Brussels.

Outlook

Over the course of the past decade, as the Belt and Road Initiative has evolved, so have China-related research and fact-based advocacy. In Germany, the debate centres strongly around the issues of how politics and business can realign in their diverging approaches and strategies towards China. While the federal government is increasingly taking a geopolitical perspective vis-à-vis China and rearranging its policy toolbox, many business representatives from large companies focus on the challenges of recalibrating their geo-logistics to countries neighbouring Chi-

na. This process involves expanding their supply chain management and investment priorities towards Vietnam and a larger focus on India. These two conflicting perspectives between federal politics in Berlin and corporate priorities of German (large) businesses are intertwined, and it does not appear that any resolution is in sight in the near future.

Such domestic debates about China do not exist to the same extent in the countries of Southeast Europe. While much progress has been achieved in terms of creating independent China research and competent, fact-based advocacy, policy formulation remains essentially an elite-driven arrangement between the government in Beijing and the host country, as well as (some) corporate insiders benefiting from procurement contracts for large-scale infrastructure projects.

But we should not underestimate the capacity building efforts of civil society. On occasion informed pushback against China has become influential unexpectedly and yet forcefully. This was in evidence in mid-2021 in Hungary, where the government of Viktor Orbán is one of the loudest cheerleaders of China engagement. When Fudan University in China announced plans to build a campus university in Budapest with the explicit financial support of the Hungarian government, protests broke out on the streets of the capital city. The estimated costs of the project were projected to reach 1.1 billion euros. Ninety per cent of this funding would be provided by a loan from a Chinese state-owned bank. In light of these conditions, Budapest witnessed some of the largest mass protests since the fall of the communist regime in 1989. The magnitude of the opposition on the streets reached such a level that Orbán, who is not prone to give in to street protests against his pet projects, was forced to acknowledge that he would have to hold a referendum on the controversial Chinese initiative. It goes without saying that the referendum has not been held nor has the Fudan University project advanced in any significant way. ~~EE~~

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The Sino-Baltic dynamic in the age of Sino-Russian synergy

UNA ALEKSANDRA BĒRZIŅA-ČERENKOVA

The strengthening of **China-Russia relations** has raised concerns in the countries over which Russia still projects its ambitions, including the Baltic states. Thus, China's position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine has only served as the tipping point in an already souring relationship between the Baltic states and Beijing.

“We have ... certain differences of opinion. Such differences on specific questions were, are, and will be the case. If we compare this with ten fingers, then our cooperation will [account for] nine fingers, and the differences for one.”

Mao Zedong during his first talk with Nikita Khrushchev, Zhongnanhai, July 31st 1958

Both Russia and China have ventured into each other's perceived space over centuries of mutual interactions. Still, there are no grounds to argue that China would go against Russian claims in Europe. Russian actions, including the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th 2022, minor inconveniences aside, have proven to be useful for China's rivalry with the United States. The two countries are not allies, yet a mutually beneficial relationship has emerged with Russia as a spoiler and China as a global agenda shifter. On top of an array of other issues shared across Europe – such as unequal trade practices, economic coercion and

values – it is this consideration that serves as the strongest argument limiting Baltic engagement with Beijing.

Friends sometimes, neighbours always

China and Russia have a long history of relations, with the first official territorial demarcation dating back to the Treaty of Nerchinsk, signed in 1689. The length of the border has changed throughout the centuries since. Still, the need to manage relations between the neighbours has been constant. Even during the relatively short break in relations following the Sino-Soviet Split from the 1960s to the 1980s, which escalated to an undeclared military incident over Damansky (珍宝島) island in 1969, both nations were seeking ways to engage both practically on border demarcation, and ideologically on common issues.

On the ideological front, interestingly, at the height of the spat Beijing had noticed resistance was taking place in the Soviet-occupied Baltic states and used this to stress the supposed ideological fallacy of the Soviet Union after Stalin (“Soviet revisionist great-Russian chauvinist policy”). This became a key part of a critique of Moscow’s approach to the national question: “Struggles by national minorities against the Soviet revisionist great-Russian chauvinist policy have been more frequent in the last few years. ... In Kaunas city in Lithuania, thousands took to the streets shouting the slogan ‘Give Lithuania freedom’ ... 17 veteran party members in Latvia sent long letters to people inside and outside the Soviet Union exposing the Soviet revisionists’ betrayal of Marxism-Leninism and their policy of arbitrary assimilation of the national minorities. In Tallinn, Estonia, demonstrations were held by college students.” This and other signals coming from Beijing were heralded by the Baltic overseas community as China’s support for the regaining of Baltic independence.

Vilnis Viktors Šveics, a US-based Latvian political scientist, wrote in 1978 that “One of the most spectacular developments concerning the Baltic states in the last ten years is the interest of the People’s Republic of China in the fate of the Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians. This is a new and significant trend. For the first time in history a country situated in Eastern Asia shows consistent concern for the situation and events in the Baltic area.” Any expectations, however, were soon dashed. No serious support was to come from Beijing. First of all, this was because it would mean an escalation in the conflict with the Soviet Union, which China could not afford, and second, because Beijing, hardly a self-determination champion at home, did not really care. China’s mentions of the Baltic states were merely a rhetorical weapon in the stand-off with Moscow.

During a dozen rounds of consultations throughout the 1980s, many inconvenient truths were communicated by the Chinese to the Soviet side, including Deng Xiaoping's history lesson that Mikhail Gorbachev had to sit through during a meeting on May 16th 1989: "The countries that took greatest advantage of China were Japan and tsarist Russia ... and at certain times and concerning certain questions, the Soviet Union."

However, the time had come to put the conflicts to rest and build a normalised relationship. Deng Xiaoping, in his signature pragmatic style, was even ready to yield some ideological ground. He admitted to a certain dogmatic over-zealousness on the Chinese side, identifying the root of the issue as a lack of respect instead, which, unlike ideological conflicts, could be easily solved: "I should say that starting from the mid-1960s, our relations deteriorated to the point where they were practically broken off. I do not mean it was because of the ideological disputes; we no longer think that everything we said at that time was right. The basic problem was that the Chinese were not treated as equals and felt humiliated. However, we have never forgotten that in the period of our First Five-Year Plan the Soviet Union helped us lay an industrial foundation." The "one finger" of differences was still there but Deng had decided to focus on the "nine fingers" of cooperation. The message was that we have had some good times, followed by some bad times. Let us see where we can go from here.

Gorbachev had no issues with Deng's framing. Relations were headed for improvement, yet the collapse of the Soviet Union just two years later, in 1991, meant that the framework of engagement had to be renegotiated yet again. Moreover, for Beijing, it also now showed the need to craft an approach to bilateral relationships with 15 sovereign countries that (re-)emerged after the fall of the Soviet regime.

The Baltic factor

The window of opportunity in the 1990s allowed China to explore relations with the newly re-established Baltic states without upsetting Russia. China was quick to adapt to the new reality. It had been among the first countries to recognise the restoration of the independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in 1991 and establish diplomatic relations with the Baltic states. This speaks to a constant principle in Beijing's foreign policy approach that also appeared at later stages, including the beginning of China's cooperation framework with Central and Eastern European countries ("16+1") in 2012, and something we are witnessing vis-à-vis Ukraine today. China is interested in developing friendly engagement with smaller countries, as long as it can avoid stepping on a bigger partner's toes in the process.

In the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia and China picked up the pace in their relations. Both countries were looking for new partners and opportunities, and they found them in each other. Russian leaders such as Yevgeny Primakov paid significant attention to Russia's relationship with Asian states and underscored the significance of the link with Beijing: "They [China] are based on a

Russia's full-scale
attack on Ukraine
appeared to be
a stress test for the
Sino-Ukrainian
relationship.

solid political and even, I would say, strategic foundation. Both states [China and Russia] realise that they need to be together."

In the years that followed, the two countries have signed several cooperation agreements, including a "no limits" partnership in February 2022. Although not bound by an alliance, the countries have nonetheless found in each other a visionary partner in countering the influence of the United States and other western countries. Both engage in a mutually beneficial relationship in which Russia acts as a spoiler and China emerges as a global agenda shifter.

Clearly, Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine appeared to be a stress test for the Sino-Ukrainian relationship, given Kyiv's strategic partnership with Beijing. After all, the "Joint Declaration on Establishment and Development of Strategic Partnership Relations" between Ukraine and the People's Republic of China was signed in 2011 and strengthened in 2013. However, and perhaps not duly factored in by Beijing, it was also a stress test for China's relationships with other countries that had shared some form of unwanted socialist history with Ukraine, including the Baltic states. While China has expressed support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and a peaceful resolution to the conflict, it has refrained from condemning Russia outright. China has refused to condemn Russia's actions and it has criticised the sanctions imposed by the West – to which the Baltic states are now an integral part. This has led to speculation that China may be willing to provide economic or military assistance to Russia. One and a half years after the beginning of the invasion, it is this consideration that serves as the strongest argument limiting Baltic engagement with Beijing. This is on top of an array of other issues shared across Europe, such as unequal trade practices, economic coercion and values.

China's stance on Ukraine is crucial for Sino-Baltic relations

The strengthening of China-Russia relations has raised concerns in the countries over which Russia still projects its ambitions, including the Baltic states. After all, being NATO members with a shared border with Russia, the three countries

had always been sensitive to all manifestations of alternative blocs that included Moscow. Still, up to the invasion, the argument of China and Russia being fair-weather friends prevailed in public opinion. Baltic grievances concerning Beijing had more to do with unfulfilled economic expectations, economic coercion and China's human rights record.

Given China's history of unease over imperial Russia's land grabs and Soviet activities in China's vicinity, including in Vietnam and Cambodia, one would think that Moscow's launching of a full-scale war on Ukraine would not be met with support in Beijing. Yet, after weighing up the pros and cons of the Russian attack, Beijing's actions and statements show that China views Russia's war as an opportunity to challenge the US-led global security architecture. Of course, China considers this to be in direct conflict with its interests.

Therefore, it can be argued that China's position on Russia's invasion, described by analysts as tacit support or pro-Russian neutrality, has served as a tipping point in an already souring relationship between the Baltic states and Beijing. The first Baltic country with an Indo-Pacific strategy, Lithuania, draws a causal link between China's position and the state of democratic countries' views of China today: "Beijing's warming relationship with Moscow, illustrated by China's stance regarding Russia's aggression against Ukraine, is fuelling tensions between China and democratic states." The Baltic states are worried that China's support for Russia could embolden the Kremlin to take further action against its neighbours.

Going back to Mao Zedong's metaphor on the ten fingers of Sino-Russian cooperation, Moscow's invasion of Ukraine and appetite for what are seen as Russian and Soviet historic territories do not seem to fall under the one finger of differences. For the countries in the immediate region, including the Baltic states, this factor adds one more reason to exercise restraint in relations with Beijing. ~~EE~~

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The Russian-Chinese asymmetry

A conversation with Michał Lubina,
associate professor of political science at the Institute of
the Middle and Far East at the Jagiellonian University.
Interviewer: Maciej Makulski

MACIEJ MAKULSKI: I want to start with a personal question about your approach to learning about, researching and describing Russia and China. It is a broad subject and, I guess, it is quite easy to replicate western calques when talking about these countries.

MICHAŁ LUBINA: Thank you for this question. No one has ever asked me that before. I research Russian-Chinese relations and Myanmar, and it is a lot. Regarding my cognitive beginnings, when I was 17, I went backpacking in Syria, and since then, I have travelled a lot. I cannot talk about a country if I haven't been there. Later, I enrolled in a Russian studies course at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków which taught me to look at a country through its culture, language and codes. It is, therefore, the antithesis of western universalism. Cultural relativism makes you look at each country through its lens.

And China? When did you first start taking an interest in it?

Similarly, in 2006, I went on a continental trip to China via the Trans-Siberian Railway. It was a great lesson in humility, as the trip was a complete cognitive disaster. I stayed there for two months and saw a lot, but I didn't understand anything about the country. I spoke two words of Chinese, and I had a lot of difficulties as a traveller. As they usually do, these difficulties stemmed from not knowing the language, the cultural codes, or both. I was tormented by the fact that I knew nothing about the country and was aware of my ignorance. Later, as a student of Far Eastern studies, when I began to familiarise myself with the basics of Confucianism, I learnt that the path of the sage (I am far from being a sage!) starts with feeling ashamed of being a simpleton and wanting to change that. I felt that shame.

I realised that I was an ignorant back-packer.

Let us move on to the main thread of our conversation, Chinese-Russian relations. Can the process of China gaining an advantage over Russia be considered finished? Can we point to a specific moment when this advantage began and became permanent?

These are difficult questions, especially regarding the origins of this process. One such defining moment was 2008 and the global economic crisis that hit Russia, ending a period of optimism that had existed since the early years of Vladimir Putin's rule. The source of that optimism was the belief that Russia had regained its position as a superpower based on energy commodities. The crisis was a severe blow to Russia. It hit Russia even harder than the West, where it is still remembered today. China, on the other hand, emerged from this crisis strengthened. From this point onwards, the Russian-Chinese asymmetry became clearly visible.

What happened next, in the second decade of the 21st century?

Between 2008 and 2012 we observed some hesitation on the part of Russia, which can be viewed as a continuation of its previous policies. Since 1991 Russia has not been able to clearly define whether it is more afraid of China or more willing to cooperate with it. During Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, we saw a reset of relations with the West on the one hand, and a deepening of ties

with China, on the other. All that time, however, one could speak of a certain dichotomy in Russia's approach to China. Then came the breakthrough. The protests on Bolotnaya Square in Russia, Putin's return as president in 2012, and Xi Jinping's rise to power in China all happened in the same year. At that moment, Russia bet on China, burying its fears of being dominated, exploited and reduced to the role of a vassal.

In other words, it has not entirely gotten rid of these fears.

Yes. They are still there today, just hidden away. One day, they will re-emerge. However, Russia decided that it was the West, or more precisely the United States, that was the threat. And if that is the case, Chinese domination has to be accepted, especially since it has certain advantages for Russia.

Maybe we should name these advantages...

China's primary advantage over Russia is that it is an adversary of the United States. The second advantage is that China respects Russia. That is why Russians can claim equal relations with them, as both countries describe themselves as superpowers. Russia is a big power. China does not publicly humiliate Russia, in fact, it supports it, it does not condemn killings, and it treats them as an internal Russian matter. Hence, Russia gradually acquiesced to various things under the guise of equality in perceived relations. In reality, howev-

er, they were already increasingly dominated by China.

What are the examples of that domination?

The ETSO oil pipeline is one example and the Power of Siberia gas pipeline is another. The overall Russian approach to the Russian Far East has also changed. As recently as 20 years ago, the Russians were saying that the Chinese would invade Siberia, but nothing like that happened. On an ideological level, the strategic partnership between the two countries was signed as early as 1996, and appended in 2019 with the phrase “for the New Era” (in Chinese: 新时代, *xin shidai*), which is Xi Jinping’s main slogan. It is hard not to notice the asymmetry here since Xi Jinping’s idea has now been written into the official formula of Russian-Chinese relations. Once upon a time, it was the Chinese who had to glorify Stalin, and 70 years later, these are the Russians who have to glorify Xi. Nevertheless, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has concluded the process of China gaining hegemony over Russia.

Why?

For many years, economic ties with Asia were an insurance policy for Russia, an emergency exit in case of the collapse of Russia’s relations with the West. But this is the first time anyone in the Kremlin has thought these relations would crumble to such a degree. The scale of sanctions and “de-Russification” in the West

took Russia by surprise. In March 2022 Dmitri Trenin (Russian political scientist – editor’s note) wrote outright that the Russians did not expect the Germans to behave as they did. In other words, Trenin’s writing shows the extent of the Russian elite’s surprise at the West’s reaction, and it was at this point the Asian insurance policy was pulled out. The Russians had to accept China’s terms and, in the case of oil, India’s. These conditions are much worse than what Russia had with the West, but in Russia’s view, the most important thing now is to win the war, and then somehow, they hope to make a deal with the West. As a result, they have to cosy up to the dragon as if it were their choice and pleasure.

And what did the dragon do about it?

The dragon, in Asian reserved manner, embraced and accepted the courtship, yet did so warily. The Chinese keep their distance but will issue the cheque sooner or later. Maybe not now, because for China, Russia is important in the competition with the US. One Chinese analyst (Wang Xiaoquan) called Russia “half the sky” (半边天, *ban bian tian*), referring to China’s security. In other words, as long as the US is China’s problem, Russia will come in handy on many levels, from the geographical to the psychological.

In your recent book, you disprove China’s alleged threat to Siberia. This issue, however, comes up from time to time during discussions on Russian-Chinese relations.

Is Siberia not an object of territorial ambitions for China?

The Chinese currently have no territorial claims there. But at the same time, China remembers that in the past, a part of Siberia was Chinese. But it is not a clear-cut situation, because this part of Siberia was, in fact, not Chinese but Manchurian. It is a subtle but important difference. There is a feeling that these territories were unjustly taken in the 19th century. So, we have two issues overlapping here. On the one hand, the Chinese are not planning to reconquer Siberia. On the other, they feel that the loss of that land was unjust. What is more important, however, is why China will refrain from trying to get these territories back. It is the issue of security, which I referred to earlier by invoking the quote “half the sky” metaphor. What would any hostile action in Siberia give the Chinese? Under any scenario, the Chinese would come out with Russia hostile to them, meaning they would lose half the sky. On top of that, Taiwan is the most important issue for China. Then there are the islands in the South China Sea. Then there are other areas that in the minds of the Chinese are as secondary as Siberia, and which would be much easier to recapture. Mongolia, for example, is one such territory. Northern Myanmar is another example. The same can be said with parts of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. If the Chinese were interested in this, they have many places to choose from that are emotionally as important as Siberia but are much weaker.

The Chinese also do not need new territories or to reclaim old ones. Naturally, they have a great thirst for prestige and status, but they do not need conquering territories, they are not Russia. If we look at China's actions towards the Russian Far East, they contradict the logic of reconquest, because China mainly exploits these territories economically. They extract timber, fish and other raw materials. They are plundering the area, just as they do in northern Laos. These are not the actions of a country that wants to conquer parts of another.

Then there is the question of colonisation and the occupation of the territories in this way rather than through armed force.

This approach is a myth and a very silly one. No matter how much data you can provide someone with, some people still cannot be convinced. When I went to Siberia in 2006, I also thought millions of Chinese were there. To my surprise, they were not.

Not at all?

There were between 200,000 and 400,000 Chinese in Siberia. I suspect that today this number is closer to 200,000. Let's remember that the 1990s migration was economic. Migration flows almost always take place from poorer countries to richer ones, except in emergencies such as wars. Back then, Russia was indeed still richer than China. But this is no longer the case. Northeast China is one of the poorest regions in the country, but still, the people there are more

prosperous than the Russians. So Russia is not attractive to them anymore. In Poland, we often root for China to take something away from Russia, which is foolish. I prefer Russia to focus on the East for as long and as closely as possible. If the Chinese took Siberia, we would have a problem because Russia reacts badly to the loss of territory. It would make it all the more interested in making up for the loss in another part of the world. In this case, our national Russophobia harms us because it prevents us from seeing and understanding our own national interests.

You devote a lot of space in your book to intercultural relations and differences. However, does this process of rapprochement between Russia and China influence any cultural exchanges and mutual perceptions between the two nations?

The geography of the brain drain in Russia forces people to go either to Moscow, St Petersburg or Vladivostok or, internationally if they live in Siberia/Russian Far East to South Korea, Japan and China. In this context, the “Asianisation” of Russia is a natural process. Many Asian countries have developed and it is normal that now people are going there to look for work. On top of that, there are also some quite mundane issues, like holidays in Thailand. It is a very interesting cultural change, as Russians had an Orientalist approach toward Asia for years. On the one hand, they had a chip on their shoulders regarding the West, presenting themselves as something dis-

tinct, trying to turn their weakness into strength. Towards Asia, on the other hand, they behaved like the worst European chauvinists, behaving as if saying “We are civilisation, and you are savages”. A copy-paste version of western colonialism.

Is the rise of China at the expense of Russia something positive from the point of view of Central and Eastern Europe? After all, it is not so desirable from the perspective of the US, as China and the US compete with each other. If so, there is a fundamental split at the strategic level between countries such as Poland, and the United States, which will expect its Central European allies to take a stand on Taiwan in line with American interests.

With regard to the American issue I agree only in part. On the one hand, I believe Poland should not allow itself to be dragged into the potential conflict surrounding Taiwan. The occupation of Taiwan by China would be the end of *Pax Americana* and would have bad consequences for Poland as well yet it would not mean the end of the world for Poland. And here we have an apparent contradiction in US-Polish interests, as the US would like all its allies to be prepared to die for Taipei. On the other hand, potential aggression on Taiwan would automatically deteriorate our strategic position. This is because China, as part of its feud with the United States, is giving Russia a free pass in our world. For them, Russia always comes first in these calculations. Therefore, if neces-

sary, the Chinese will sacrifice us without a blink of an eye. Therefore, this Sino-Russian entente is not good for us. It undermines the international order that we live in and may not be entirely happy about it, but it is one that is fundamentally beneficial to us. This order restrains Russia and allows us to develop. So, the intentions to change this order – which is what China wants and is pursuing evolutionarily – are bad for us. The moment the Chinese launch an attack on Taiwan and the Americans move to its rescue, the Russians will use it to profit from the hegemon's distraction.

Nevertheless, the Chinese are trying to recognise these smaller pawns on the chessboard in the form of Central and Eastern European countries and have been trying to develop relations with them for some time. So far, however, the track record of Chinese efforts in this part of the world since the beginning of Xi Jinping's rule has been rather unspectacular. The expectation at that time was that China would come here with a strategy that it would successively and meticulously implement. Meanwhile, we have seen more of a trial-and-error approach.

Let me start with the mental aspect. Outside the bubble of sinologists and China-watchers, hardly anyone knows China. Many positive and negative stereotypes about China still circulate. Perhaps the most famous example to illustrate China's perceived far-reaching planning is when the Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai was asked in 1972 what he thought of the impact of the



French Revolution, to which he replied that not enough time had passed since. Meanwhile, he was referring to the 1968 student revolt in Paris, which is described in Chinese using the same phrase, *geming*, revolution. So, he was referring to an event from a few years ago and not 200. The myth, nevertheless, remains and persists. My point here is that China often serves as an analytical shortcut to encapsulate one's dreams and fears. As for China's activity in Central Europe, the 16+1 format alone showed how unfamiliar the Chinese are with the region. Artificially linking the Baltics, the Western Balkans, while at the same time excluding Belarus and Ukraine, makes no sense. They have treated it as the Global South, which is OK for me, but many Eastern Europeans would find it insulting. This Chinese bid turned out to be ill-tailored entirely to the needs

of countries such as Poland, because where the Chinese wanted to be present they were restricted by EU laws, making them uncompetitive. They were able to achieve some success where the EU law did not restrict them, i.e. in the Western Balkan countries that are outside the EU, namely Serbia, Montenegro and to a lesser extent Albania. China also marked its presence in Hungary as a result of a purely political decision by Viktor Orbán, who needed it for his games with the EU. Later, Greece was added to this format, which economically put it in a position where it was easier for the Chinese to lease the port of Piraeus. In principle, the weaker countries agreed more to the Chinese terms of cooperation, but these tended to be countries on the periphery of the region. In contrast, the countries at the centre of the region generally remained quite distanced from the Chinese project. Poland had its moment of enthusiasm in 2014–2015, which quickly became disillusionment when it became apparent that nothing particularly significant would come and that there were no clear benefits of cooperation. Then came the period of the presidency of Donald Trump, who told us to “choose”. Notably, Trump came after the disillusionment, making the choice easier.

But this was not the case for Lithuania...

Lithuania is an interesting example. The question is, was their Taiwan gamble a good decision? I come across extremely different assessments of this is-

sue. Economically, it probably lost out. The Chinese took revenge on the Lithuanians through Germany by imposing a sanction that hit the Lithuanians hard. This was something the Lithuanians did not expect. Bilaterally, they expected some minor losses as Lithuanian-Chinese trade was by no means large. But the Chinese targeted the Germans and that hurt Lithuanians. From a security perspective, on the other hand, I was once told that the Lithuanians were much better informed than Poland by the Americans about Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s actions when he unleashed the migrant crisis on Belarus’s borders with Lithuania and Poland. The rejection of Chinese cooperation was undoubtedly a spectacular move on Lithuania’s part, but it remains to be seen whether it was definitely worthwhile. But when I lived in Taiwan in 2022, I learnt that everyone knows Lithuania. I had the opportunity to teach students in Taipei and tell them about the historical Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and it turned out that for them, Lithuania was the better known country.

I am looking for a way to close our conversation. The conclusion that emerges is that the Russian-Chinese alliance is resilient to shocks and can be regarded as something sustainable in rather uncertain times, at least until there is a significant reshuffle in the world. Is this cooperation really so resistant to change?

At the end of the book I wrote that this Sino-Russian relationship could

change radically if the Chinese suddenly go mad and start exaggerating. And now they are exaggerating a bit. They recently published a map of China on which the Bolshoi Ussuriysky Island (*Heixiazi dao*), now Russian-Chinese, is marked on the map as Chinese. The context is that, according to international law, this island should belong to China as it lies closer to the Chinese shore, but at the time of the delimitation of the border, Russia requested several exceptions and this was one of them, stemming from the fact that the island lies close to Khabarovsk. The Chinese agreed to this as part of a compromise in 2004, as they did with Abaigatu, another island that should also be all-Chinese but is Russian-Chinese. At the time, nationalist circles considered this to be a concession going too far. It was quickly hushed down but, the sentiment remained.

Why are the Chinese dragging this out now?

I do not know why it was published this way. Territories of other countries, such as India, were treated in the same way on these maps. So it is not clear whether this is an example of a grassroots initiative that went too far or whether it is part of some larger game, where the Chinese try to see how far they can go. If this is part of a wider game, it would contradict the image of the Chinese as stone-cold players, devoid of emotion. They have nationalists too, and Sinocentrism is a powerful force that the authorities need to restrain. This map contradicts what the Chinese have done so far with Russia. And so far, they have managed to keep Russian fears at bay. At the same time, it is a bit pointless, because half of the two islands is not worth teasing Russia over. **EE**

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Jak Rosja została młodszym bratem Chin (*Bear in the embrace of a dragon. How Russia became the younger brother of China*) published in 2022.

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China's role as a pro-Russian mediator in ending the Russia-Ukraine war

ARSEN MARTYSHCHUK

A debate has grown regarding Beijing's relations with Russia and its war against Ukraine. While China has offered support to Moscow, it is important to remember that the rising power has other wider interests. Overall, it seems that China will always put **its own interests first** with regards to the ongoing conflict.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has sent shockwaves throughout the international community, raising concerns about regional stability, human rights violations and global security. As the world grapples with finding solutions to the invasion, the role of key actors like China has come under scrutiny. Exploring China's strategic interests, economic ties, role in the balance of power and diplomatic leverage can shed light on the complex dynamics of the invasion. It can also reveal potential paths toward resolving the war and dealing with Russia and its allies.

China's strategic interests in the Russian-Ukrainian war are multifaceted and underscored by a desire to expand its global influence and secure its economic interests. China aims to strengthen its position as a major player in international diplomacy and enhance its diplomatic credentials as a global peacemaker by positioning itself as a mediator. However, China's approach to the war is characterised

by cautious pragmatism. While it has not explicitly endorsed Russia's actions, it has refrained from taking a strong stance against the Russian Federation, opting for a balanced approach that seeks to maintain positive relations with both Russia and western countries critical of Moscow's actions.

Strategic interests and geopolitics

There are many layers to China's strategic interests in the Russian-Ukrainian war. At first glance, its "good" intentions look positive in terms of rhetoric and theory, but in practice, we see direct and indirect support for the aggressor. This is especially evident in the information field, where China does everything possible to silence or whitewash the reputation of the Russian military and the Kremlin. According to reports from the *New York Times*, at the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Chinese leader Xi Jinping expressed confidence in the "strong support" for Vladimir Putin among the Russian population. This, in fact, was a sign of Beijing's continuing support for Moscow, which, according to its interpretation, is fighting not only against Ukraine but also against the entire West.

According to the *New York Times* report, the turning point was the Wagner Group rebellion, which shook Putin's authority across the whole world and particularly regarding his "closest ally" China. Xi Jinping and the entire Chinese leadership waited to make any statements while the late Wagner head Yevgeny Prigozhin confidently advanced on Moscow, where he was stopped only by deception and pseudo-negotiations with the alleged participation of the Belarusian dictator Alyaksandr Lukashenka. This particular situation once again proves that despite the common interests of Putin and Xi, the Chinese leader is not the kind of ally that the Kremlin will protect at any cost during critical situations. The main guarantee of such a situational alliance is primarily the interests of China itself. This situation also disproves the myths of some western politicians who promote the narrative of a "strong alliance" between Russia and China, which could threaten the security of the countries of the European Union and the United States.

Beijing, unlike Moscow, carefully calculates every step and does not make drastic moves in the international arena until it is convinced of the positive consequences of such a step. Rather, the situational Sino-Russian friendship shows a further deepening of the confrontation between the West and Beijing, which is only likely to grow in the future.

Beijing, unlike Moscow, carefully calculates every step and does not make drastic moves in the international arena.

The Russian invasion also set a precedent for a strong power to invade a weaker one. This immediately drew parallels with China and Taiwan. The main factors in the context of China and the West are the sharp reaction to the invasion by Ukraine's allies which, along with Kyiv's well-organised armed forces, actually restrained the Russian advance on Ukrainian territory and, most importantly, prevented the capture of the Ukrainian capital. Effective opposition in theory to one of the strongest armies in the world is what deters China from making drastic moves towards Taiwan. This makes sense because in the case of a sanctions regime against China, the already substantial Chinese economic expansion across the world could completely tumble, harming Beijing's interests.

Economic and energy ties

Despite general support for the Russian Federation in the information space, China is not harsh in its statements and tries not to give priority to either Ukraine or Russia. Such a "wait-and-see" strategy gives China room for manoeuvre when it is needed. For example, China's economic interests in the region are substantial.

Ukraine's agricultural resources, as well as its geographic location, make it an attractive partner for China's economic expansion.

It views Ukraine as a potential gateway to Europe and an important part of its Belt and Road Initiative. Ukraine's agricultural resources, as well as its geographic location, make it an attractive partner for China's economic expansion.

Moreover, Ukraine's strategic location as a gateway to Europe is not limited to the initiative alone. It also serves as a potential manufacturing and trade hub for Chinese goods entering European markets. This aligns with China's broader goal of expanding its economic influence globally. China also sees Ukraine as an emerging market with investment opportunities in various sectors beyond agriculture, such as technology, infrastructure and manufacturing. With all that said, Beijing remains a pro-Russian country in the war against Ukraine, as its geopolitical interests and competition against the US are ultimately more important.

Another important reason why China is so supportive of Russia is that Beijing somehow depends on Russian energy resources, particularly oil and natural gas. Realistically, a prolonged Russian war in Ukraine could disrupt energy supplies, posing a threat to China's energy security. Due to this, Beijing is doing everything possible to make Russia economically dependent on it, while simultaneously looking for alternative sources of oil and natural gas supplies.

Balance of power and multipolarity

Russia's aggression in Ukraine has highlighted the evolving global balance of power. China seeks to challenge the dominance of the United States and its western allies in international affairs. By supporting Russia diplomatically, China can promote multipolarity and undermine the unipolar world order. China's involvement in mediating the conflict allows it to assert itself as a major player on the global stage, promoting its vision of a "more balanced world order". Western allies very often express an opinion about the People's Republic of China and Russia as equal partners in a "confrontation with the West".

Such a delusion arises because of the effectiveness of Russian propaganda in positioning itself as a great geopolitical player. However, we need to consider the example of Chinese leader Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow six months ago. Before his talks with Putin, the main questions were not about the Kremlin and its position but whether Beijing would continue to provide institutional support to Moscow. Will military aid be provided? Will Xi help Putin fight sanctions?

If so, how much? How much energy will be bought and will it be bought at all? Even from this example, we can state precisely that Russia has ceased to be an independent subject of international relations. For the first time since before the era of the Russian Empire, it is not the Kremlin that decides its fate, but the "elder brother" that does precisely so. For Russia, the People's Republic of China is the main trading partner that can actually shut down the Russian economy if it has the political will and desire. Technology, industrial equipment and spare parts – all of Russia is mostly provided by China. Beijing itself, in the event of the loss of the Russian Federation as a partner, will hardly suffer in any way, but Moscow will actually lose its economic subjectivity.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the People's Republic of China has radically changed its approach to international relations. From a focus on domestic affairs in the 20th century, China became more involved in conflicts around the world. In particular, the rethinking of Beijing's traditional values of non-interference and respect for state sovereignty intersect with the need to protect its assets under pressure from the West, as well as its economic expansion in the world as a whole. Afghanistan, Mali, Sudan, Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan became countries where China was able to participate in one way or another to help defuse conflict for its own benefit. The primary driver behind China's involvement in conflict and post-conflict regions is its pursuit of natural

China's involvement in mediating the conflict allows it to assert itself as a major player on the global stage.

resources and improved access to markets, particularly along the route of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

According to data from the Mercator Institute for China Studies, in 2017 alone, the PRC became a mediator in the resolution of seven conflicts, compared to only three such efforts by Beijing in 2012. With Xi Jinping's rise to power, the country's peacekeeping efforts have grown exponentially throughout his five years in office. Looking at the statistics up to 2012, we can see that Beijing did not seek to be a mediator and did not make great efforts to win such a title. Returning to analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), we can see the tendency of the Chinese Communist Party to ensure the smooth flow of trade and investment through unstable regions, and most importantly, to protect the interests of Chinese citizens. The period from 2016 to 2020 represented an important shift and adoption of a major initiative in the context of mediation.

During the presidency of Donald Trump, the US administration chose a course of isolationism and non-intervention in world conflicts, even with regards to the role of mediator with some exceptions. Such passivity on the part of the United States, which made a sharp change from its role as "world policeman", gave China the opportunity to seize control in some respects. It also coincided with Beijing's plans to become a leading power by 2049. Shortly after Trump's term, the new administration led by Joe Biden once again returned to the principles of the Truman Doctrine and support for democratic states across the whole world and especially regarding allies. It can definitely be argued that such circumstances provided additional time for China to establish itself in the role of one of the main mediators in world conflicts. As a result, competition between Moscow and Beijing regarding their influence in international relations deepened.

Implications for Eastern Europe

China's role as a potential pro-Russian mediator in the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war is a complex and multifaceted issue. While China has strategically positioned itself as a mediator in international conflicts to expand its global influence and diplomatic credentials, its actual stance and actions regarding the war have been marked by cautious pragmatism.

China's strategic interests in the region encompass both geopolitical ambitions and economic considerations. Geopolitically, China seeks to challenge the dominance of western powers and promote multipolarity in international affairs. By supporting Russia diplomatically, China can assert itself as a major player on the global stage, projecting an image of a peacemaker and a proponent of a "more

balanced world order". However, China's approach to the conflict has been characterised by careful calculation, as it strives to maintain positive relations with both Russia and western countries critical of Moscow's actions.

Economically, China sees Ukraine as an essential component of its Belt and Road Initiative and a potential gateway to Europe. Ukraine's agricultural resources, geographic location and strategic importance as a trade hub make it an attractive partner for China's economic expansion. Additionally, China's dependence on Russian energy resources, particularly oil and natural gas, creates a complex dynamic in its stance towards the conflict, as a prolonged war in Ukraine could disrupt its energy supplies.

China's diplomatic leverage and experience of mediation have evolved significantly in recent years, with the nation increasingly engaging in war resolution efforts around the world to protect its assets, secure natural resources and improve access to markets. This growing role in mediation aligns with its Belt and Road Initiative and its broader goal of becoming a leading global power.

While China's support for Russia in the information space may suggest a pro-Russian stance, it is essential to recognise that China's primary allegiance is to its own interests. The dynamics of the war have demonstrated that China does not hesitate to carefully weigh its options and make pragmatic decisions that serve its goals.

In the context of ending the Russian-Ukrainian war, China's role as a mediator is a reflection of its evolving global strategy and the pursuit of its own interests. The competition for influence between Moscow and Beijing in international relations is an ongoing process, and the invasion of Ukraine has provided China with an opportunity to solidify its position as a key player in shaping the future of global diplomacy.

Ultimately, China's involvement in the war highlights the complex interplay of global power politics, economic interests and diplomatic manoeuvring. As the war continues to evolve, China's role as a mediator and its broader aspirations on the world stage will undoubtedly have a significant impact on the path toward a resolution in Ukraine, as well as the future of international relations as a whole. ~~EE~~

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A mountain of controversies leaves Czech-China relations with little room for progress

VERONIKA BLABLOVÁ

The window of opportunity that was once wide open for China to establish a robust presence in the Czech Republic has closed due to a multitude of **unfulfilled pledges and growing tensions** in bilateral relations. Furthermore, China's pro-Russian leanings in the Ukraine war has sparked concerns about its appeal as a viable partner.

After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, the newly independent Czech Republic, under the leadership of Václav Havel, took a strong stance against China's human rights record and expressed scepticism towards cooperation with communist regimes. However, changes in the political scene gradually influenced this values-based foreign policy, as it was replaced by a more pragmatic approach aimed at attracting potential investment. Setting the foundations for the Czech Republic to become the gateway for Chinese investment in Europe, Petr Nečas's government, ruling the country from 2010 to 2013, saw China as a new and attractive partner. Overall, Beijing was seen as an alternative that could help diversify Prague's economic relations, with the country having to deal with the dire impacts of the recent economic crisis.

This was followed by the social democratic government from 2014 to 2017, when political enthusiasm for strengthening economic relations with China reached its

peak. However, the promised investments and anticipated projects failed to materialise, leading to widespread disillusionment with the relationship.

Promising the Moon

The promised investment mostly took the form of acquisitions, bringing little added value to the Czech economy. At the same time, besides investing in engineering factories, an airline, a brewery, luxury hotels and a football club, the Chinese CEFC company, the flagship of China's investment in Europe, also bought stakes in a media company, significantly distorting television broadcasting to show China solely in a positive light. The following government, led by Andrej Babiš between 2017 and 2021, mostly delegated foreign policy to its coalition partners, the Social Democrats, bringing no significant alteration to the previous course of relations.

Apart from these governments, the former Czech President Miloš Zeman was among the most vocal proponents of deepening ties with China. During his two terms, he travelled to China five times and would have likely visited China again if it was not for restrictions related to COVID-19. Zeman even appointed a Chinese national, Ye Jianming, who was the founder and chairman of the CEFC company, which promised multi-billion investment in the Czech Republic, as his advisor. Ye Jianming was later investigated by the Chinese authorities due to suspicions that he was engaging in economic crimes and bribery. He disappeared in 2018 and has not been seen since. Meanwhile, the CEFC struggled with debts and the Chinese state company CITIC intervened and paid them off in an attempt to rescue the group's reputation. Ye Jianming's disappearance and the CEFC's bankruptcy raised serious concerns about the transparency and accountability of Chinese investment in the Czech Republic.

Moreover, the CEFC played a crucial role in establishing a network of local politicians and businessmen with interests in China, which was crucial for advancing China's interests in the Czech Republic. The majority of those involved came from the Social Democrats, who are currently not in the parliament. With Zeman's departure from office, China has also lost one of its crucial political connections. Despite his huge support, even Zeman expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of investment that China promised to deliver, with mounting controversies prompting significant shifts in China-related debate.

The former Czech President Miloš Zeman was among the most vocal proponents of deepening ties with China.

Growing list of burdens

In 2018 the Czech National Cyber and Information Security Agency issued a warning against the involvement of the Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE in the construction of strategic infrastructure. Citing Chinese laws requiring the co-operation of Chinese private companies with Chinese intelligence, the agency was the first to issue such a warning, setting a trend for other countries. In this context, Zeman voiced apprehensions about potential retaliatory actions by Beijing in response to such precautions, alluding to potential consequences for Czech companies conducting business in the country.

Another issue in Czech-China relations was the end of the “sister city” agreements signed between Prague and Beijing. This was caused by a clause in the agreement ensuring Prague’s commitment to the One China policy and acknowledgment of Taiwan as an inseparable part of China. In response, China cancelled music concerts with “Prague” in their title. Prague established sister-city agreements with Taipei a few months later.

The space to navigate Czech-China relations has been shrinking, significantly **limiting opportunities** to find common ground.

Investigative journalists further revealed the Chinese embassy’s interference in the prestigious Charles University, sponsoring a course depicting China’s Belt and Road Initiative in a positive light. A study trip to China for students and an academic conference was also criticised for promoting Beijing’s interests. As evident from these examples, the space to navigate

Czech-China relations has been gradually shrinking, significantly limiting the opportunities to find common ground. Similarly, with a growing number of experts, journalists, political representatives and institutions documenting examples of bad practice and issuing warnings about potential risks, Beijing simply does not seem as much of a viable partner compared to a decade ago.

The current centre-right government led by Petr Fiala, which has been in power since late 2021, promised to further distance itself from China and initiate a revision of bilateral ties, emphasising democratic values in foreign policy. Nevertheless, efforts not to sow discord with Zeman, who was finishing his second term in office, coupled with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which stood as a foreign policy priority, likely postponed alterations to the Czech China strategy. The election of the new Czech president, Petr Pavel, who entered office in the spring of 2023, significantly underscored the changing political atmosphere towards China. After his election, he also accepted a congratulatory call from the Taiwanese president, Tsai Ing-wen, which made him the first EU head of state to do so. He even mentioned his willingness to meet with the Taiwanese president in person in the future.



Photo: Eva Lai / Shutterstock

Chinese nationals came out to greet President Xi Jinping's visit to Prague in March 2016. Chinese-Czech relations have soured considerably since then, with most high-level politicians distancing the country from China.

The Czech Security Strategy published in June 2023 directly refers to China as a systemic challenge endeavouring to transform the existing international order. The document further warns that China conducts cyber espionage, seeks to control global data traffic and employs various forms of socio-economic coercion and other hybrid tools of influence. The strategy also specifically warns about the links between Chinese companies and the state apparatus. Such wording underlines the complete shift from the previous pragmatic approach focusing on economic relations, omitting political and security implications.

Freezing the relations

The Chinese platform for cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe, known also as the 14+1 platform (previously 17+1), poses one of the key questions for the current government: whether to remain or leave this format. After the Baltic countries left the platform in previous years, some Czech deputies began to call for ministries to adopt a similar approach. Importantly, any specific involvement

in the 17+1 agenda remained rather scarce during the whole period. The government usually viewed cooperation as a disappointment due to the lack of implementation of envisioned projects. However, whereas the current political atmosphere favours a withdrawal from the platform and the Czech Foreign Minister Jan

Many Czech leaders draw a parallel between Beijing and Moscow, shifting the rhetoric towards China being increasingly viewed as a **threat**.

Lipavský ensures that Prague is inactive in the format, any concrete steps are currently absent. The platform's annual meetings of heads of state or other high-level government members, which have been held since 2012, are effectively frozen.

Viewed as a "Trojan horse" by Western European countries, the initiative seems to have resulted in the exact opposite, with most of the initial enthusiasm to promote cooperation with China now gone. Instead, Western Europe's ties with China have grown over the years, making it more difficult for countries to adapt to the current geopolitical situation and potentially reduce their dependence on China.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine clearly emphasised the need to assess the geopolitical aims of economic partners. Dependencies in the energy sector on Russia prompted European countries, including the Czech Republic, to revisit their strategic dependencies to identify potential bottlenecks. China's approach and loose rhetoric concerning the war in Ukraine, which partly echoed Moscow's narratives, further damaged China's image (not only) in the Czech Republic, which has stood at the forefront of support for Ukraine. Moreover, China's eagerness to buy Russian gas and deepen trade relations significantly strengthen Moscow's ability to overcome the sanctions imposed by the US and European countries. The number of partnership agreements between the two authoritarian states shows their mutual interest in challenging the liberal democratic world order.

Moreover, the remarks of the Chinese Ambassador to France, who contested the sovereignty of the post-Soviet countries, indicated the covert views of China's foreign policy elites. Pro-Russian neutrality impacts perceptions of China, with many Czech political leaders drawing a parallel between Beijing and Moscow, shifting the rhetoric towards China being increasingly viewed as a threat.

Pivot towards Taiwan

In this context, Czech political leaders seek to enhance cooperation with other countries in Asia, including Taiwan. In September 2020 Czech Senate President

Miloš Vystrčil visited Taiwan accompanied by a large delegation. Declaring “I am Taiwanese” in his speech, this visit opened a new era in bilateral relations. Whereas China reacted with its usual critical rhetoric, the real result amounted to the cancellation of a piano purchase.

However, with Zeman still in office at that time, the visit was criticised by the head of state and members of the government, including the prime minister, revealing the lack of unity in Prague’s approach towards deepening ties with Taiwan. In another milestone in bilateral relations, a delegation led by the speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, Markéta Pekarová Adamová, followed the trend this year. This group brought about 150 political representatives, scientists and businessmen to the country. Not only was this delegation the largest to date, it also represented the whole government, compared to the previous visit.

After China’s backlash against Lithuania’s approval of a Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius, the visit of the largest Czech delegation to date also served as a litmus test for China’s reaction. Besides the usual rhetoric opposing any diplomatic interactions with Taiwan, the lack of any strict measures from the Chinese side could have sent a signal to other countries that China tolerates a certain level of interaction with Taiwan.

One of the frequent arguments promoting economic cooperation with Taiwan focuses on the perception that Taiwan is a more important economic partner than China. Such a conclusion, however, depends on the choice of data. For instance, the trade exchange between China and the Czech Republic, although in long-term deficit from the Czech side, inevitably exceeds the trade exchange with Taiwan.

Nevertheless, in terms of the number of jobs created, Taiwanese activities have created more employment opportunities in the Czech Republic. Taipei is also a crucial partner in technologies, namely in the semiconductor field, in which the countries could cooperate in research and development. Czech students and researchers also benefit from training and education in Taiwan.

The visit of the large Czech delegation to Taiwan served as a litmus test for China’s reaction.

Giving Taiwan a voice

Together with other Central and Eastern European countries, such as Lithuania, the Czech Republic currently stands at the forefront of European relations with Taiwan. The small countries located in Central and Eastern Europe may not play a decisive role in sensitive geopolitical questions, however, they may serve as

valuable partners in times when Taiwan is gradually losing its official diplomatic partners, with Honduras being the latest country to switch its political orientation towards China.

Similarly, these countries may play an important role in formulating policies towards Taiwan within the European Union and other international organisations, such as the United Nations, of which Taiwan is not a member.

Faced with the current geopolitical situation and disappointment with unfulfilled promises, China simply no longer seems a plausible partner for the region. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine reviving memories of the decades-long Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, the country is even more prone to deepen relations with Taiwan, which needs to deal with constant pressure from mainland China. Overall, the Czech government seems to refrain from developing relations with China as the opportunities for cooperation are now limited. Prague is subsequently focusing its efforts on gradually deepening ties with Taiwan, primarily with regard to developing economic relations. ~~EE~~

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Hazards to Georgia's foreign policy

A strategic partnership with China?

NINO LEZHAVA

The latest shift in Georgia's foreign policy, marked by the signing of a strategic agreement with China, raises further concerns about the country's trajectory towards the European Union and NATO. By **engaging more with China**, Tbilisi is also helping Russia fulfil its aim to decouple Georgia from the West.

In July 2023, the relationship between Georgia and China grabbed the spotlight of global attention – the two countries decided to elevate their bilateral relations to a strategic partnership and signed a subsequent agreement. Although deepening relations between sovereign states is not out of the ordinary in foreign affairs, critical questions about this particular event are looming over the horizon.

Since the world order is effectively at stake in Ukraine, the great powers are striving to maintain and enhance their spheres of influence. At the same time, the small states, lacking individual security guarantees, try to find a silver lining based on their national interests. In this particular light, there is a clear controversy regarding Georgia's ultimate foreign security goal, outlined in the constitution of the state. This obliges governmental bodies to take all measures within the scope of their competencies to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and NATO. Engaging with a power determined to challenge Euro-Atlan-

tic security and its main competitor, the United States – which is a genuine strategic partner for Georgia – does not align with the priorities stated above. Moreover, the “limitless cooperation” between the People’s Republic of China and Russia, their mutual affection for authoritarian regimes and the temptation to undercut the rules-based international order exclude the option of considering China as a trusted partner for Georgia. There is a tangible risk that the cost of this opportunistic choice will be much more expensive in the long term than any short-term economic gain.

Enhancing cooperation

With a major international crisis at hand, China is making efforts to advance its position in the South Caucasus and beyond. Indeed, the war in Ukraine became a strategic opportunity for Beijing to establish coherent lines of action regarding the EU, transatlantic society and Russia. China’s extensive economic posture became a resource and at the same time, a threat to these actors.

The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, known as the Middle Corridor, promises the revitalisation of the ancient Silk Road, further expanding Chinese markets and leverage on Central Asia, the Caucasus and Europe as well. More importantly, the trade route bypasses the Northern Corridor, dominated by Russia, and the traditional maritime route through the Indian Ocean, which the United States could hold sway over. In this context, Georgia presents one of the key countries of the Middle Corridor, hoping to capitalise on international interest in an alternative Eurasian Trade route that avoids Russia.

China’s extensive
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Thirty-one years of bilateral cooperation between Georgia and China has witnessed fruitful results in various fields, especially in trade and economics. The two countries launched discussions regarding the possibility of establishing a free trade regime back in September 2015. In 2018 the agreement came into force and Georgia became the first country in the Caucasus to have this type of deal with Beijing. China is now Georgia’s third largest trading partner. In 2019 Tbilisi and Hong Kong signed another agreement on economic-technical cooperation and the Chinese government provided 15 million US dollars for Georgia with no apparent strings attached.

As mentioned above, the new Strategic Partnership Agreement is the most comprehensive document envisaging future cooperation between China and Georgia. It hopes to foster cooperation between the parties through four main dimen-

sions: political, economic, cultural and international. Since publishing the brief of the document, it has been criticised for the inequality of the states' positions. Although Chinese officials openly support and reaffirm Georgia's territorial integrity, the critique was focused on the fact that the document fails to mention Georgia within its internationally recognised borders, which includes two Russian-occupied regions – the Tskhinvali Region, also known as South Ossetia, and Abkhazia – which Russia invaded in 2008 and then declared as independent states.

The opening paragraph of the new agreement reads: “The two sides reaffirm their respect for the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of all countries and Georgia firmly adheres to the One-China principle.” China understands the One-China principle to legitimise its sovereignty over the mainland, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, a position that the United States and most western countries have not endorsed, at least in the case of Taiwan.

The new document has become an impetus for more further actions. Recently the government of Georgia announced the abolishment of the visa regime with China, allowing Chinese tourists one-month visa-free travel. Consequently, flights between China and Georgia will increase and occur once per day. As stated officially, these decisions serve to boost Georgia's tourism potential and economy. Despite this, the same type of visa-free regime for Georgian citizens in China is allowed only if they are a part of a tour group. Interestingly, the same conditions apply for five more countries, including Azerbaijan, Belarus, Russia, Moldova and Turkmenistan.

Bringing Anaklia back

The joint political will expressed in the strategic document can easily be translated into action. Chinese government companies already take part in Georgia's infrastructure projects, including the construction of highways, railways and tunnels, mostly in the framework of the Middle Corridor. In this light, the Georgian government has recently revitalised the well-known Anaklia deep sea port project and the Chinese ambassador to Georgia straightforwardly expressed the readiness of Chinese companies to participate. Building the Anaklia deep sea port will be a game changer due to its geostrategic location and long-term outlook. It would allow larger ships to transport increased volumes more efficiently. According to open sources, 51 per cent of the construction consortium will belong to the government of Georgia, thus an international tender has been announced for 49 per cent. The tender proposals have already been received and surprisingly enough, along with Swiss-Luxembourgish companies, a Chinese-Singaporean one has also

registered. It is crucial to reiterate that previous efforts by a consortium between Georgia's private sector and the US-based Conti International to build the deep sea port in Anaklia were cancelled by the government in 2020 after being delayed for years in controversial circumstances.

Considering the full spectrum of advantages, Georgia's longstanding strategic partner, the United States, expressed disappointment regarding this development. In a letter signed by four US representatives addressed to the Georgian government, it was emphasised that the framing of the Anaklia Development Consortium (ADC), which was backed by the US, "scares and hinders the investments of American companies" in this critical project. Moreover, the then Trump Administration urged Georgia to abstain from enhancing economic ties with Russia and China due to the potential risks. Former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called Russia and China "fake friends of Georgia" at a joint press conference with the Georgian prime minister and stated that the Anaklia port would protect the country from the predatory economic influences of these two countries.

As for more recent reactions from Washington, the US State Department commented that "the US respects countries' sovereign decisions about with whom they want to engage with or do business with. However, they will continue to monitor the next steps of newly established Chinese-Georgian cooperation closely, whilst emphasising the importance of these activities being done transparently, according to the rule of law, and with trusted vendors."

Friend of a friend

As the turmoil around Anaklia unfolds, it stands as a crucial indicator of whether Georgia will persist on a trajectory of deeper integration with the European Union and other western partners, or if it will pivot towards forging closer relations with China, which is Russia's main partner. Amid sanctions, Moscow is more dependent than ever on Beijing's economic, technological and diplomatic assistance. The joint statement which the Chinese and Russian presidents issued in February 2022, less than three weeks before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, not only declared that the two countries enjoyed a friendship with no limits but also outlined many shared views regarding realigning the world order. Throughout Russia's war in Ukraine, China maintained a stance of pro-Russian neutrality, offering theoretical support and a boost to Russia's finances through increased energy purchases. China's economy is ten times bigger than that of Russia. Thus, Georgia should look back and move forward with the most pragmatic and value-based approach in mind, whilst pursuing foreign security goals.

Since the war in Ukraine, the position of the Black Sea ports has become more dangerous, having witnessed the continuing grain crisis. Diversifying existing transport routes and developing new ones is of critical importance. Despite this, actions speak louder than words and Georgia, which has a strategic partnership with the US, just received EU candidate status whilst striving for NATO membership, should be cautious in its decisions in such global insecurity. Even though the EU is trading and cooperating with Beijing, there are many red flags and even perhaps “wire fences”. The transatlantic community is focused on cooperative security and deterrence, and, unlike Georgia, is strong enough to opt out of cooperation with China if necessary. Georgia's latest moves carry significant implications especially since the European Commission recommended EU candidate status. Brussels has never hidden its concerns regarding stronger connections between Georgia and China, while Tbilisi has been increasingly reliant on Chinese firms for its extensive infrastructure projects.

Forging cooperation with China only widens the gulf in Tbilisi's relations with Brussels and Washington. The country seems to be taking a step towards the East and this fully fits in with Russia's interest to decouple and distance Georgia from the West. International relations theory states that small states should focus on national interests whilst considering great power rivalry. Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations are backed by an overwhelming majority in Georgian society and are enshrined in its constitution. Thus, establishing strategic cooperation with China should be criticised not only because it offends the EU or the US, but also because it is against the national interests of the country. ~~EE~~

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Curbing China's sway in Eastern Europe

VLADYSLAV FARAPONOV

In the evolving landscape of international relations, it has become increasingly clear that the US and Europe must join forces to address China's growing influence in Eastern Europe. The recent Russian aggression against Ukraine has reshaped regional dynamics and intensified the **global struggle for power and influence**.

The Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine had an evident impact on regional and global ties in Eastern Europe. While Russia was seeking opportunities to attract more allies in its war of aggression, like Iran and North Korea, its major objective internationally was to create an alliance with China. However, China sees the Russia-Ukraine war as an opportunity to change the status quo and raise the stakes to outlast the United States economically and militarily.

It is conventional wisdom that any war shapes political and military posture at both regional and global levels. Apparently, the Russia-Ukraine war in its current form will likely last for years. However, the changes in Russia's alliances are quite clear. Among the global powers, only China can really provide substantial assistance to Russia. At the same time, more than one and a half years into the most major war in Europe since 1945, the US and Europe are trying to stabilise their ties with China, mostly focusing on bilateral economic relations. However, this may be more complicated than it seems at first glance.

De-risking and its discontents

As an organisation and its key member states, the European Union leaders have tried several times since last year to talk with China about normalising bilateral relations. Presidents Emmanuel Macron of France and Ursula von der Leyer of the European Commission recently visited China, seeking a “de-risking formula resolution”. They saw this opportunity and managed to seize it. From the Ukrainian perspective, going to China amid a period of Beijing-Moscow cooperation looks like the old procedure of getting *jarligs* or edicts in Mongol times, when rulers of the Kyivan Rus’ had to receive orders from the khan, who authorised their rule. At the same time, it is clear that Macron tried to gain leadership in this regard and leverage it over other European leaders. He did not need to worry about re-election after he won a second term in 2023.

It is even more unnatural to see European politicians going to China after the so-called *Zeitenwende* speech, an address delivered to the Bundestag by the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, on February 27th 2022. Scholz had hoped to relaunch the German way of thinking about foreign policy. And in relation to assisting Ukraine, Berlin truly changed its attitude by providing massive security aid to Kyiv.

Even though economic cooperation will dominate EU discussions on China in the coming years, European leaders should not forget about the impact of China’s role in fostering Russia’s full-fledged war against Ukraine. Of course, before the invasion, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin agreed to deepen their cooperation. However, as the EU High Representative and Vice-President Josep Borrell mentioned, the EU had learned how dependencies can be weaponised. It would be right to assume so, especially concerning energy and infrastructure. If Europe is not cautious enough, before or after Ukraine’s victory, it may be trapped in a situation where Chinese economic influence spreads into Eastern European countries and Russia dictates energy prices. Thus, Russia will likely seek compromises in that regard, hinting at the lifting of sanctions and other changes. This lesson is very important for Europe.

Clearly, the Mercator Institute for China Studies has noticed this trend. It stated that 88 per cent of China’s investments mostly concentrate on four countries: the United Kingdom, France, Germany and, surprisingly, Hungary. These four countries received a major amount of greenfield investments from Chinese battery makers. At the same time, it is reported that the Chinese Contemporary Amper-

European leaders should not forget about the impact of China’s role in fostering Russia’s war against Ukraine.

ex Technology company will open its second European battery plant in Hungary, with an investment of 7.3 billion euros, more than three times the previous one.

Mercator also reports that battery investments are now the leading type of Chinese investment in Europe. Thus, it would be correct to assume that establishing local vehicle production, particularly in the same four countries, would be considered a small victory for Beijing. In addition, the republican candidates for US president in the 2024 election have described the possibility of Chinese electric car expansion as a tragedy for US national security and economic interests. Another reasonable assumption regarding China's economic expansion in Europe might include developing semiconductor companies as one of the most crucial tools in influencing European markets.

Different games

In that context, it would be correct to mention that the Biden administration took several essential steps to ensure proper semiconductor investment in the US internally, thus hinting at more competition with China. In 2022 Biden's team advocated for Congress to pass the "CHIPS and Science Act", which is worth 52 billion US dollars in investments. The White House even said that American businesses have announced nearly 166 billion dollars in additional investments spurred by the passage of the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022. This brings total business investment to more than 200 billion dollars. These chip manufacturers are now building factories in Phoenix, Arizona, (a TSMC chip plant); Syracuse, New York (a Micron chip plant); Austin, Texas (a Samsung chip plant); and Columbus, Ohio (an Intel chip plant), among other places. It would be wise to assume that these factories may want to deepen working opportunities with Europe and maybe expand manufacturing to the continent. The Biden administration noted that American businesses will be restricted from investing in China's semiconductor and artificial intelligence industries for national security reasons.

Apparently, there are not so many people among the EU leadership willing to talk with China directly. As aforementioned, one of them is Ursula von der Leyen. She openly stated that Xi is maintaining his "no-limits friendship" with Putin. At the same time, China would like to be the only winner of the Russia-Ukraine war by having the Russian army devastated and European and American stockpiles empty.

However, the idea of talking to the Chinese leadership, which has oppressed its own people and even some high-ranking officials, indicated that Europe and China are still playing different games in parallel. While Europe and the US are democratic, China is authoritarian. Another aspect of China-US-Europe relations

relates to Taiwan and China's ambitions to take the island. There are rumours that China has prepared to invade Taiwan in 2027, right before the start of the next presidential campaign in the US.

Europe, unlike the United States, does not have internal legislation requiring that weapons be provided to Taiwan. The American "Taiwan Relations Act" states that Washington would provide "Taiwan with arms of a defensive character, and maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardise the security or the social or economic system of the people on Taiwan". That factor, on the one hand, tightens the Americans' grip on the issue and, at the same time, serves as a security guarantee. However, despite many analysts saying that China is watching the Russia-Ukraine war in terms of arms usage and the European-American reaction to the conflict, China seems to be mostly watching and focusing on its economic expansion. It is important to remember that Taiwan produces around 60 per cent of the world's semiconductors and holds great significance for the US and Europe, not only China.

Divergent strategies

On the other side of the Atlantic, the US cannot even think about closer cooperation with China or at least reducing tensions. Washington is not sure that China will not provide Russia with weapons or help them bypass sanctions restrictions, which Washington has worked so hard on. Washington did much to rally more support among its allies and so-called "neutral" countries.

Both China and Europe have adapted to the conditions of war. At the same time, as the *Economist* has put it: "Europeans are being told that America wants to profit from the war, while Europe pays the price in soaring oil and gas prices and a flood of Ukrainian refugees. It is time for Europeans to seek more autonomy from America and deepen ties with China." This was also the key narrative that Russia and its proxies promoted worldwide in 2022. This had the clear aim of reducing support for Ukraine with regards to weaponry.

Another essential example that shows China and Russia have completely different strategies in the war is how Beijing and Moscow reacted to the Grain Deal

initiative brokered by the United Nations and Turkey in July 2022. China did not even try to persuade Russia to return to the deal. As *Politico* mentioned, China was one of the top destinations for grain shipments from Ukraine's southern ports.

China was one of the top destinations for grain shipments from Ukraine's southern ports.

However, China did not see this opportunity as forthcoming and decided to play by Russia's rules, which meant zero respect for international law. Speaking about the fleet, China may also be interested in how the Russian fleet left occupied Crimea after Ukraine's naval drones significantly damaged its ships. In that regard, China would be interested in observing what kinds of vessels really suit a conflict like the Russia-Ukraine war.

Moreover, the US and Europe are responsible for implementing and auditing the previous sanctions imposed on Moscow since 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and intervened in Donetsk and Luhansk, Ukraine's most eastern regions. It is widely accepted that the sanctions did not have the required preventive impact from 2014 to 2022. This is why the work on sanctions is much more critical

in October 2023
the US identified
42 Chinese
companies which
support Moscow's
defence industry.

now. One may argue that since the summer of 2022, when it became apparent that the sanctions' imposition would not have an immediate impact, Ukraine has urged its western partners to continue monitoring Russia's compliance with sanctions.

These efforts have been mostly arranged through the Yermak-McFaul International Expert Group, a leading platform for promoting sanctions against Russia. This is named after the co-chairs of the group, Andriy Yermak, the head of Ukraine's presidential office, and Michael McFaul, a Stanford professor and former United States ambassador to Russia. The group's major objective is to provide evidence in order to sanction Russia and its proxies that help Moscow produce and launch missiles and drones. Recently, in early October 2023, the US Department of Commerce added 42 Chinese companies to a government export control list over support for Moscow's military and defence industrial base. These efforts include punishing companies by limiting their access to both the market and finances that are used in the production of microelectronics. Russia uses this money for guidance systems in its deadly missiles and drones that have been launched against civilian targets in Ukraine. Ukraine and its partners have also completed the same scope of work with regard to Iran's involvement in the war.

Strength in unity

The United States still hopes to reach a consensus with China, even if it is just a short-term one. In mid-2023, Washington and Beijing created two working groups to tackle economic and financial issues in the latest effort to increase engagement and stabilise their turbulent relationship. At the same time, the US signalled its

support for the EU in its anti-subsidy probe against China, as Europe thinks that Beijing has flooded global markets with electric cars at prices artificially driven down by state subsidies. After the Biden administration came into office, the US and EU established the Trade and Technology Council (TTC) in 2021. Both sides likely use this to coordinate their positions on China. However, the public communication of the Biden administration implies that they wanted to deal with China alone and at least publicly did not want to tell European counterparts what to do.

In the evolving landscape of international relations, it has become increasingly clear that the US and Europe must join forces to address China's growing influence in Eastern Europe. The recent Russian aggression against Ukraine has reshaped regional dynamics and intensified the global struggle for power and influence. While Russia sought to forge alliances with nations like Iran and North Korea, its primary objective was to form a strategic partnership with China, presenting a formidable challenge to the established world order. However, China views the Russia-Ukraine conflict as an opportunity to assert its dominance on the international stage, aiming to surpass the United States economically and militarily. This shifting global landscape demands a unified response from the US and Europe, particularly in their relations with China.

One significant challenge facing Europe, especially Eastern European countries, is their engagement with China. While efforts have been made to normalise bilateral relations, it is essential to recognise the potential consequences of deepening ties with Beijing, especially amidst a period of Beijing-Moscow cooperation. The recent visits by European leaders like Macron and von der Leyen to China signal a desire to leverage economic relations. Still, they must remain cautious and not overlook China's role in enabling Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

China's extensive investments in some European countries, such as the UK, France, Germany and Hungary, should be considered. These investments, particularly in the battery and semiconductor industries, could grant China significant influence in the region. Europe needs to be proactive in safeguarding its economic interests and strategic autonomy.

Furthermore, the US and Europe must be mindful of the delicate balance in their relations with China. While cooperation is needed on various fronts, including in semiconductor production, it is imperative to ensure that such collaboration does not compromise national security interests or enable China to support Russia in circumventing sanctions. The contrasting political systems of democratic Europe and authoritarian China highlight the complex nature of their interac-

Europe needs to be **proactive** in safeguarding its economic interests and strategic autonomy.

tions. While Europe seeks to engage with China, it must do so with its eyes wide open, understanding the fundamental differences in their values and objectives.

The issue of Taiwan adds another layer of complexity to the US-China-Europe dynamic. As China's ambitions toward Taiwan become increasingly apparent, Europe must navigate this sensitive issue without the legislative framework that guides US policy on the island. This underscores the importance of the US-Europe partnership in maintaining regional stability.

The shifting global landscape brought about by the Russia-Ukraine conflict and China's ambitions necessitates a coordinated response from the United States and Europe. While economic cooperation with China is crucial, both transatlantic partners must prioritise safeguarding their interests, maintaining their democratic values, and ensuring their engagement with China does not inadvertently support aggression or compromise security. In this challenging era, a united front between the US and Europe is essential to address China's influence in Eastern Europe and shape the future of international relations. ~~EE~~

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IT HAPPENED IN GDAŃSK

• • •

MACIEJ BUCZKOWSKI

Democracy matters! Don't sleep or you'll be voted out!

Initiated by Gdańsk, the nationwide campaign to increase voter turnout, "Don't sleep or they'll vote you out", refers to what is at the core of democracy. It carries a message, a demand addressed to every informed citizen. If you care about democracy, you must do something for it. Be active, make your voice heard, take an informed stand. Elections are just such an opportunity. They are a great celebration of democracy, a moment when every vote counts.

The October 2023 elections to the Polish Parliament showed that the steps taken in favour of democracy in Poland have never been so important. Certainly,

the elections we had in 1989 may be an appropriate comparison.

Also now we were in a position to decide whether we would follow the path of freedom and democracy or whether we would go astray into illiberal democracy or perhaps even genuine authoritarianism. We answered this question for ourselves. The decisive question was whether we would remain passive and sleep through the chance for a genuinely good change, or whether we would vote to change Poland for the better. On October 15th, the Polish people passed the maturity test!

The Seventh Edition of Gdańsk Democracy Week



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This year, once again, the European Solidarity Centre hosted the Gdańsk Democracy Week. This was the seventh edition of this programme, which is inspired by the International Day of Democracy, established by the United Nations and which falls annually on September 15th.

Between September 15th and 19th numerous debates were organised in Gdańsk with invited writers, diplomats and local government officials, as well as workshops with journalists and meetings with experts on democracy and human rights. Another season of the Gdańsk Civic Lessons was also inaugurated, and reading enthusiasts could visit the Book Fair. The role of reading in creating an informed and free citizenry cannot be overestimated.

We consistently rely on young people. They were once again an important actor of this year's Gdańsk Democracy Day. As summarised by Aleksandra Dulkiewicz, the Mayor of Gdańsk: "Many points of

the programme, such as the Gdańsk Civic Lessons are aimed at children and youth, because our future depends on instilling sensitivity and awareness among the younger generation. A future in a society full of mutual understanding, tolerance, respect for human rights and the constitution. A future in which every citizen realises how important and valuable it is to be able to participate in elections."

One such event was the Convention of Young Pomeranians, a workshop for secondary school students from across the region. It included a meeting with local politicians, which took the form of a lively discussion on the state of Polish democracy as perceived from a young person's perspective.

During the Gdańsk Democracy Week, another edition of the Gdańsk Civic Lessons – an educational project aimed at children and young people at every level of education (pre-school, primary and secondary) – also began. This time it was the young people who hosted the event. They independently prepared and conducted six lessons in the format of quick lectures. After the lectures, there was a chance to participate in workshops to deepen their knowledge on youth mental health, youth self-governance, social media and misinformation.

A substantive debate about the basic values that citizens of a democratic country, especially the young, are entitled to, is essential in the public space. As part of the Gdańsk Democracy Week, journalists working for *Gazeta Wyborcza* held workshops with students attending

journalism classes in selected schools in Gdańsk and at the European Solidarity Centre. The workshops covered six thematic strands. The young participants talked about equality, truth, localism, applications for social media, the phenomenon of disinformation and journalistic credibility.

There was no shortage of attractions for the youngest during Democracy Week. The youngest democrats, children aged 5-10, could learn about the Constitution of the Republic of Poland and children's rights during a specially prepared workshop. The meeting was prepared by Kreatywna Pedagogika, a project for training of Gdańsk teachers, and Agnieszka Tomasiak, Magdalena Buda and Magdalena Łukasiak who are the authors of a book entitled *Constitution for Children*.

A Europe without Russia, or is a democratic Russia possible?

Between September 6th and 15th, during the Gdańsk Democracy Week, workshops on the Polish experience of democratic transition were held in five Polish cities. They were attended by a group of 20 Russian civil society activists. These were people who are working in exile in Poland and at the same time are looking for ways to initiate democratic transformation in their homeland.

The idea for the project came from the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights and the Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe. The meetings took place in Warsaw, Opole, Wrocław, Poznań and Gdańsk.



© phot. Grzegorz Mehring / gdansk.pl

The topics of the training courses and meetings focused on the Polish experience of implementing reforms in the areas of human rights and the rights of national minorities, historical policy, the process of German-Polish reconciliation, and the functioning of local government and democracy at local level.

The main goal of the project was to inspire Russian participants to create solutions for the transformation of the Russian society, based on universal and internationally acceptable values. Understanding the lessons of the Polish democratic transformation was aimed at better integrating Russian activists in Poland, but also at initiating actions to defend human rights and promote democracy in their country. A sine qua non condition for such a transformation, however, is to raise the awareness of Russians and to continuously inform the public about the

true consequences of the actions of the current Russian government, which draws its strength not only from uncritical support but also from the indifference of a large part of Russian society. It would be ideal to use the knowledge gained by the activists involved in the project to popularise it among the Russian civil society network and thus influence the development of mindsets, capacities and skills.

The motto of the Gdańsk meetings for the Russian activists was "How to overthrow tyranny without violence". It referred directly to the peaceful legacy of the Solidarity movement, which contributed to the bloodless fall of communism in this part of the world. During the Gdańsk part of the project, we shared our knowledge with the social activists about the essence of local self-government in Poland. We argued that local self-government is a kind of incubator of democratic attitudes and that democracy should be practised from an early age. We talked about the role of civic education for young people, emphasising the importance of getting involved in the affairs of one's community. This includes getting a taste for participatory processes: participation in local life and in the practice of everyday democracy (student self-government, youth city councils, volunteering, participation in local, national and European elections). We talked about equality policies: integration of sexual, religious, national minorities, immigrants. We provided examples of cooperation between local authorities and the third sector and showed how, through education, we are fighting the triumvirate of evil in Gdańsk: hate speech, fake news and disinformation.

During their stay in our city, the Russian activists also participated in the programme of the Gdańsk Democracy Week. They had the opportunity to listen to a debate with experts from Germany, Poland and Russia, who took up the challenge of answering fundamental questions. What political mistakes has Europe made towards Russia? How should policy towards it be shaped in the future? Are we in sufficient solidarity with Ukraine? Is the dream of a democratic Russia even realistic?

11th Congress on Belarusian Studies

On September 22–24, the XI International Congress on Belarusian Research was held in Gdańsk. It was attended by as many as 300 academics and experts from 22 countries. Initiated in 2011, the Congress is the largest and most influential annual scientific event devoted to Belarus. The Museum of the Second World War, the European Cultural Centre and the National Maritime Museum were involved in organising the event on the Gdańsk side.

Traditionally, the focus of the Congress is not only Belarus, but the entire Central and Eastern European region. The event featured 60 panels and public discussions on a wide variety of topics, from economics, politics and international relations to history, linguistics and culture. There were also presentations of books and research and educational projects. The Congress Award for the best academic publication in 2022 was also presented.

While many countries in our region have for years enjoyed the right to decide their own fate in a sovereign manner, such an option is not yet available to 10 million Belarusians. The Lukashenka regime denies them the right to taste freedom and to co-create a democratic state. That is why joint neighbourly support for the functioning of independent Belarusian thought, in the form of an intellectual centre working for an independent, sovereign and democratic Belarus, is so important.

“In Love with Democracy” – Gdańsk is bidding for the title of European Capital of Democracy 2024

The city of Gdansk is bidding for the title of European Democracy Capital 2024. This is the second edition of the competition aimed at European cities with a population of more than 100,000. The idea for the European Capital of Democracy appeared in 2020 and was initiated by the Institute for Policy Innovation.

The winner of the first competition is Barcelona. The Catalan capital will wear the proud title of European Capital of Democracy for the next 12 months.

Applications for the 2024/2025 competition are currently being reviewed, with Gdańsk competing against seven major urban centres. These are: Bratislava (Slovakia), Cascais (Portugal), Durrës (Albania), Izmir (Turkey), Leipzig (Germany), Tirana (Albania) and Vienna (Austria). At the end of September, Gdańsk hosted three international experts for two days, who checked on the spot what we are doing to develop the ideas of freedom,



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solidarity and democracy and what our strengths are to become a European Capital of Democracy.

“In love with democracy - all together and each individually”, is the title of the Gdansk application referring to the message that Gdańsk is not only a city of “freedom and solidarity”, but also open, innovative and progressive. Gdańsk was at the centre of events influencing European history. It was here that a social movement of millions – the Solidarity movement – initiated democratic change throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Today we see democracy in Gdańsk as a daily task for every citizen. It is a way to participate in social life, to practice citizenship, diversity, to build our local identity, but also the awareness of being European, to manage the city in a participatory way and to take responsibility for the local community, the closest environment: the housing estate, the district, the city, but also the country, Europe, the planet.



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“Happy Birthday Mr President”

On September 29th and 30th, Gdańsk celebrated the 80th birthday of Lech Wałęsa, Solidarity legend, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, President of the Republic of Poland and honorary citizen of the City of Gdańsk. The president’s birthday coincided with the 40th anniversary of his being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The programme of the celebration, which took place at the European Solidarity Centre, was extremely rich. Everything began with a special benefit dedicated to the guest of honor. In addition to Wałęsa himself, the Youth Forum with a debate on the human right to peace and a secure future was attended by Oleksandra Matvichuk from the Centre for Civil Liberties, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Pietro Bartolo, a doctor helping refugees on the island of Lampedusa, a social activist, Member of the European Parliament,

and representatives of the Polish Youth Parliament. A new book about the president was also presented, and there was a screening and meeting with the makers of the film *Wałęsa. Man of Hope*.

On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Lech Wałęsa, he was honoured by the Senate of the Republic of Poland with a special resolution in which the upper house of the Polish Parliament pays respect to the outstanding trade union activist, co-founder of the Solidarity Trade Union, repressed and slandered by the authorities of the People’s Republic of Poland, and the first democratically elected President of the Republic of Poland. The resolution was handed over personally by Tomasz Grodzki, the Speaker of the Senate of the Republic of Poland.

Young athletes from Odesa trained and rested in Gdańsk

At the end of September, Gdańsk hosted a group of 30 students from three sports schools in the Ukrainian partner city of Odesa. The stay was organised on behalf of the city by the Academic Sports Association. Our aim was to give the children at least a few days' respite from the war, fear and bombs raining down on Odesa, which is regularly shelled by the Russians.

As befits young athletes, they spent their time training at a sport camp at a resort in Górkki Zachodnie. The girls and boys, who train in acrobatics and swimming on a daily basis, were keen to take part in training in various sport, conducted by professional coaches. The pupils who came to Gdańsk were aged between 8 and 16; for the youngest it was the first time in their lives that they had been away without their parents.

The young Ukrainian athletes' adventure began with rugby training under the guidance of Anton Shashero, a Ukrainian player from Rugby Club Arka Gdynia. Anton Shashero is not the only Ukrainian athlete from the Tri-city area to get involved in the Odesa youth sport camp. Dmytro Doroshchuk, handball player for Wybrzeże Gdańsk and the Ukrainian national team, also conducted classes with the children.

Our young guests spent a few happy and carefree days in Gdańsk, filled with water sports: kayaking, windsurfing, and on SUP boards. The programme also included a visit to the old city and a seal cruise.



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Representatives of the European Committee of the Regions met in Lviv

On October 16–17th, the next meeting of the Ukraine Working Group of the European Committee of the Regions took place in Lviv. The initiative for a meeting in Lviv came from the Chairwoman of the Group, Mayor Aleksandra Dulkiwicz. The idea was met with an enthusiastic response from the mayor of Lviv, Andriy Sadovsky, who invited members of the Committee of the Regions' opinion-making body on Ukraine to his city to report on the current situation.

Mayor Dulkiwicz justified the choice of the Ukrainian city as the venue for the group's next meeting as follows: "This is the first time since the outbreak of war, caused by Russian aggression, that we are meeting on Ukrainian soil. The choice of Lviv as the venue for the Ukraine Working Group is a clear signal that we have been, are and will continue to be in solidarity with our Ukrainian allies and friends. Regardless of the crises erupting in other parts of the world, to which we also need to respond decisively, the

restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity, peace and reconstruction, and its subsequent membership of the EU and NATO, remains our priority."

The importance of the meeting was certainly raised by the presence of Katarina Mathernova, the newly appointed EU Ambassador and head of the EU delegation in Kyiv. The discussion with the EU Ambassador focused primarily on the reform agenda and the prospect of opening accession negotiations with Ukraine. For the representatives of the Committee of the Regions, it was important to learn about the most pressing needs and problems. They asked what challenges Ukrainian local authorities were facing and how Europe could most effectively help local authorities with reconstruction and reforms related to the EU accession process. Lviv Mayor Sadovy had a ready recipe for the latter question: "The training of Ukrainian professionals who need to study and prepare to work for Ukraine should start now. I want to encourage you to invest your time and love in the education of our citizens, who should be the first to be ready for integration. Our communities need your knowledge."

There was a consensus among participants that it is necessary to build competencies through education and training of public administration staff, to continue the decentralisation process, and to adapt the functioning of institutions to current challenges. Rebuilding Ukraine without strengthening human resources and external support, is unlikely to be possible.

During their stay in Lviv, participants visited the rehabilitation centre UNBRO-

KEN, which can count on the solidarity support of the international community. Mayor Dulkiewicz and Mayor Sadovy signed an agreement whereby Gdańsk will join the international coalition for the expansion of the centre. Mayor Dulkiewicz asserted that "By supporting UNBROKEN we want to confirm the truth of the Polish adage that 'true friends are made in poverty'. That is why Gdańsk, a city of freedom and solidarity, has decided to donate one million Polish zlotys for the expansion of this globally unique project. The motto of the centre is to restore hope, joy of life and the possibility of at least a partial return to normality for people crippled by war. UNBROKEN is a real chance for thousands of victims of this terrible war to live and work for a free and independent Ukraine."

The delegates visited the cemetery, which is growing at a frightening pace, where soldiers from Lviv who gave their lives fighting at the front are buried.

The members of the Committee of the Regions also took part in an unusual and sad ceremony to bid farewell to the most recent victims of the fighting, whose bodies passed through the centre of Lviv in a funeral procession. It is in this way that the people and authorities of Lviv each time publicly bid farewell to their heroes.

It was also touching to visit and light candles at the monument to the Heroes of the Celestial Sotnia. It is dedicated to the Lviv residents who, fighting on Kyiv's Maydan Square in 2014, fell for a free and democratic Ukraine.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

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A treatise on guilt

JOSHUA R. KROEKER

Russia, both as a state and a collective of individuals, is guilty of the many war crimes committed in and against Ukraine under the banner of the Russian flag. However, leaving the argument at “Russia is guilty” is both reductionist and dangerous, as it can absolve individuals of their guilt whilst at the same time trivialising the pain and suffering caused at the hands of individuals and their actions.

For over 20 months, Russia has been committing war crimes previously unfathomable on the European continent in the 21st century. Murder, rape, the kidnapping of thousands of children and the bombings of schools, hospitals and cultural sites, are only some of the many atrocities the Russian army and affiliated mercenary groups have committed against the Ukrainian nation. Almost more striking than the horrific images that flow out of Ukraine on a near-daily basis is the deafening silence coming from Russia and Russians. It is almost as if the entire Russian state – and the many different nations that make up the Russian Federation – are guilty of candidly supporting the countless crimes being committed in their name.

Can that be? Are all Russians guilty of what is happening in Ukraine, or are only the Russian state and military responsible for such crimes? In the first weeks and months of the war, western leaders such as Germany’s Olaf Scholz were careful in their rhetoric to refer to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine as “Putin’s War”. For a time, Ukrainians themselves even followed this rhetoric, many of whom deeply hoped their friends and family in Russia would take to the streets and finally put an end to Putin’s regime. This never came to fruition. Bucha then happened: 458 civilians were killed in April 2022 in what the world now knows as the Bucha

massacre. It quickly became obvious to Ukrainians – and many in the West – that this was not just Putin’s war.

How to determine guilt?

A year and a half later, Russia’s senseless killing continues, whereas an end to the war does not seem to be in sight. Though their effectiveness is debatable, the West continues to pile sanctions on Russia in hopes of punishing those responsible for the war. The Russian state has been demonised throughout international institutions and organisations. Yet one pertinent question remains: who, exactly, is guilty of the war against – and war crimes committed in – Ukraine?

The answer, unfortunately, is hardly straightforward. Without a doubt, Putin, his generals, and those who pulled the trigger are guilty of war crimes. This assessment quickly runs into problems, however, when considering groups such as the mothers from Bashkiria, whose sons were forcefully sent – or misled – to fight on the front lines. Some of the educated middle class of Moscow and St Petersburg, who genuinely oppose the war but take no action, offer another convoluted example. Is the entire country, made up of each and every one of its individuals, in what has been termed “collective guilt”, somehow responsible for what is being done in the name of “Russia”? These questions are impossible to answer, as philosophy, history, politics, law and human subjectivity differ too much for objective, positivist

Without a doubt, Vladimir Putin, his generals, and those who pulled the trigger are **guilty** of war crimes.

answers. Nevertheless, some of the facets of this debate can shed light on the complex discourse of Russia’s war guilt and the responsibility of each and every Russian citizen vis-à-vis Russia’s criminal war against Ukraine.

In recent months, journalists and experts alike have attempted to unravel the question of whether “good” Russians exist in the era of a neo-imperial – even fascist – Russian regime and its war of destruction against Ukraine. Each and every article on the topic

has come short of a sufficient conclusion due to the simple fact that concepts like “good” and “bad” cannot be objectively defined, let alone placed on an entire society. The question of good and bad Russians is underpinned by a deeper debate on guilt: the guilt of a nation and the guilt of an individual. This topic was dealt with by the Heidelberg philosopher Karl Jaspers shortly after the Second World War.

In his seminal work, *Die Schuldfrage* or “The question of German guilt” from 1947, Jaspers dove into the legal, moral and philosophical underpinnings of the concept of guilt in Germany, two years after the end of the Holocaust and Germany’s

war against civilisation. Jaspers outlines four different and independent types of guilt that must be considered in any discussion on the topic:

- Political guilt – or collective guilt – is the result of actions of the collective citizens of a country who, in the name of the state, collectively commit a crime;
- Criminal guilt is a sentence pronounced by a court of law;
- Moral guilt, rooted in each and every individual's conscience, cannot be determined by others but only by the self;
- Metaphysical guilt is one's guilt before God, a result of not acting to prevent evil and wrongdoing.

As Jaspers explained, whereas war criminals are criminally guilty for the crimes they commit in the name of the state, civilians cannot be criminally guilty of the same. Rather, to different extents, the entire collective as individuals carries within them a political guilt. Jaspers argued that “it makes no sense to accuse a people as a whole of a crime. The criminal is always the individual” and that “[it] is also absurd to morally accuse a people as a whole. There is no character of a people in such a way that every single member of the people has this character. ... A people as a whole does not exist. ... People and state do not coincide, nor do language and common destinies and culture.” In his theory, a people cannot commit a crime, but rather only the individuals that make up that people. As a result, the people in and of itself cannot be criminally or morally guilty, but they can be politically guilty.

The Russian collective. Who is guilty?

Political guilt, unlike its criminal, moral and metaphysical counterparts, is a material form of guilt that stems from a collective – in the current context, Russia – committing a crime against another nation or state. The horrors of the crime, committed by the state and criminal individuals but enabled by the (oftentimes silent, but in many cases supportive) masses, transfer a dimension of political guilt to each and every individual member of that collective or state. The collective, then, is in and of itself guilty, though each and every individual that makes up that collective may or may not be morally guilty or have committed a crime. Without understanding these differences, it is impossible to commit to discourse on the very real question of Russia's war guilt – and the limitations thereof. In postulating that Jaspers' philosophical reasoning is correct, we come to understand that although Russia as a state, its political leaders and the many individuals who commit crimes in Ukraine are all without a doubt guilty, the criminal, moral and metaphysical guilt of much of the Russian collective is far more difficult to prescribe. Considering a number of examples should help to make this problem easier to understand.

There should be no doubt that the majority of Russians support the war in Ukraine and Putin as president. Though war-time polling in an authoritarian state does have its complexities and a margin of error, the numbers, obtained by various independent pollsters, continuously demonstrate support between 70 and 85 per cent and therefore testify to a predominant opinion among Russians. Of the 15 to 30 per cent that do not support the war, silent assent reigns supreme. Protests and anti-war actions seldom take place, given the state's draconian laws against dissent.

Collective
guilt remains
a controversial
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which to evaluate the
guilt of individual
Russians.

Though the vast majority of Russians have not stepped foot into Ukraine or picked up a gun, here they share the political guilt of the country in having allowed – or at the least not prevented – the crimes committed by the state. But is that enough?

Collective (political) guilt remains a controversial, if not ineffective, framework with which to evaluate the guilt of individual Russians. This is for three reasons. Firstly, the concept of collective guilt can absolve individuals from responsibility, as guilt is attributed to the nation as a whole, and foremostly its political leaders, rather than looking at the individual destinies that led to the crimes having been committed. Secondly, it simplifies historical processes and removes individual agency, as it implies a dimension of historical determinism and ignores actions, crimes, bottom-up support for the state, and even the dissent of individuals. Discussions of collective guilt often reduce individual guilt to reasoning involving state propaganda, the army's actions, and what the people think. Third, it complicates any discussion of individuals who have taken real actions to oppose the state and the crime in question. Considering the individual and his or her actions provides a much better lens through which to view the responsibility and ultimately the guilt of Russians. For this, I will consider four examples that go beyond the clear case of the soldier-murderer and politician-general. Each reader should draw their own conclusions.

Guilty actions?

First, anyone who uses Telegram has likely noticed the thousands upon thousands of brazen Russians who take to this and similar social media in order to “like”, respond with fire emojis, and comment on the bombings of civilians. Comments such as “cooked meat” and “dead pigs” can often be found after the announcement of a Russian bombing on a civilian building in Ukraine. Though such a phenomenon is both repulsive and infuriating – especially for this author – it must also be

taken into account that such clicks account for less than one per cent of the entire Russian population, although they are often attributed to the whole. Nevertheless, this is reflective of a terrifying opinion within Russian society that openly supports, although does not commit, war crimes.

Second, a 25-year-old woman from Moscow personally opposes the war but does not wish for Ukraine's victory. She considers Ukraine to be part of a greater, post-Soviet society and dislikes Volodymyr Zelenskyy. She believes in the Russian propaganda of "Ukraine committing genocide in Donbas", and frequently travels to Crimea. She opposes the use of violence, does not see the point in the war, and hopes for an immediate end. She has never protested against the state and refuses to be involved in politics.

Third, a 40-year-old woman works for a private corporation in St Petersburg. She is well travelled, belongs to the upper echelons of Russian society and is the classic portrait of the middle class that has benefitted from decades of hydrocarbon profits. She opposes the war and internally wishes for Russia to withdraw its troops and even leave Crimea, but does not voice this online or publicly. Rather, her Instagram posts complain of the difficulties of obtaining an EU visa and the effects of sanctions. When asked why she does not protest, she responds: "And risk my job for nothing?"

Fourth, and finally, a 30-year-old man living in the Urals primarily reads foreign media and deeply opposes the war. While many of his friends have gone to fight in Ukraine, he does not voice his opinion or attend protests. Instead, he takes matters into his own hands. He has sabotaged train tracks that carry provisions to the front and has burnt down a local conscription office. He is filled with feelings of guilt for all the crimes that his country has committed.

Though each person from the above examples shares in the political guilt as a result of their belonging to the larger Russian collective, they also demonstrate the complexities and ineffectiveness of concentrating only on collective guilt, rather than the individual. Political, criminal, moral and metaphysical guilt will all mean something different in the case of each individual. It is therefore impossible to reduce them

to a whole. The only certainty here is that there is no effective framework that allows us to determine which type of guilt, and to what extent, should be attributed to each of these individuals. Although example four secretly fights against the regime, he pays the taxes that fund the war. One of the many Telegram enthusiasts may have emigrated, taking with them their neo-imperial hatred for other post-Soviet nationalities, but effectively harming the state via brain drain and a lack of

Though most Russians share in the political guilt, "collective guilt" as a concept is far too **complex**.

taxes. On the other hand, none of the above examples share the same level of guilt as the Russian soldiers who perpetrated the massacre of Bucha. Here it is simple to observe that though most Russians share in the political guilt of their country, “collective guilt” as a concept and framework is far too complex, ineffective and reductionist in judging Russians’ guilt.

A paradox of guilt

Similar to the dozens of articles before it, this commentary upholds the conclusion that Russia, both as a state and a collective of individuals, is guilty of the many war crimes committed in and against Ukraine under the banner of the Russian flag. However, leaving the argument at “Russia is guilty” is both reductionist and dangerous, as it can absolve individuals of their guilt whilst at the same time trivialising the pain and suffering caused at the hands of individuals and their actions. Finally, it does not allow for differentiation between various dimensions of guilt.

Without a doubt, the Russian state, its institutions, and its military are politically and criminally guilty of the war crimes, and possibly genocide, committed in Ukraine. Bucha, Irpin, Hostomel, Uman, Odesa, Iziium, Bakhmut, Dnipro, Kryvyi Rih and countless other tragedies can be pinned on the Russian government which makes the decisions, the soldiers who commit the crimes and drop the bombs, and the civilians who cheer them on. It remains an open question – for which I have no answer – to what extent the apolitical, the silent and neutral, or even anti-war

Focusing on the criminal guilt of individuals will better serve the development of an international tribunal for war crimes.

populations of Russia share in the guilt of the crimes committed in their collective name – the Russian Federation. Axiomatically, the entire country and each of its citizens share in the collective, political guilt resulting from Russia’s war against Ukraine. As Jaspers argues in his work, in a post-war scenario, that realisation may help transform Russia from a totalitarian state committing war crimes into a developed, moral democracy – though that is likely many years away.

In what can be seen as an insurmountable paradox of Russian wartime guilt and responsibility, by attributing guilt to the entire nation, the distinct crimes of the individual become blurred as the crimes pass over to the responsibility of the collective, rather than focusing on the war criminal. Though criminals must be judged and sentenced, it is impossible to do the same to an entire collective made up of millions of individuals. The concept of political guilt is useful in demonising the Russian state, but it is at the same time reductionist in

its considerations of individual crimes and horrors. Russia, after all, cannot serve a prison sentence. The never-ending discourse of Russian guilt, though entirely understandable in the current context, serves little purpose beyond philosophical considerations. For societies seeking to support Ukraine – which can be the only true judge of the crimes Russia has been and is now committing – focusing on the tangible criminal guilt of individuals rather than philosophical musings of political and moral guilt will better serve Ukraine's claims of war reparations and the development of an international tribunal for war crimes. This will also help us to better understand the specific political and historical processes that have occurred over the past three decades within Russia that allowed for the promotion of – and lack of opposition to – the atrocities and war crimes committed in the name of the Russian state. ~~EE~~

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A common red line?

Limits of European engagement in Russia's war against Ukraine

CHRISTOS KATSIOLIS

The Russian war against Ukraine has substantially changed perceptions of conflict and crisis in the European Union. As a **recent comparison study** shows, the conflict has encouraged fears of war, awareness of developments in Ukraine, questions concerning the broader frame of this war, and the involvement of the respective countries in it.

A major war is taking place in Europe. Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine on February 24th 2022 has brought the dangers of war back to the continent. More than a year into this war, questions are now being asked concerning Europeans' role in it. Currently, they support the Ukrainian defence by sanctioning and isolating Russia, delivering weapons to Ukraine and supporting the country financially. However, the provision of weapons includes the risk of Russian escalation against the supporting states, even by accident, as we were sharply reminded when a missile fell on Polish soil in November 2022. One of the defining factors in the ongoing war will be the sustainability of European support for Ukraine, which rests on popular consent.

Looking at polling numbers in several EU member states can help us understand the potential, but also the limits of this support. This analysis concentrates on German, French, Polish and Latvian perceptions of the Russian war against Ukraine, based on two surveys conducted in September 2021 and September 2022.

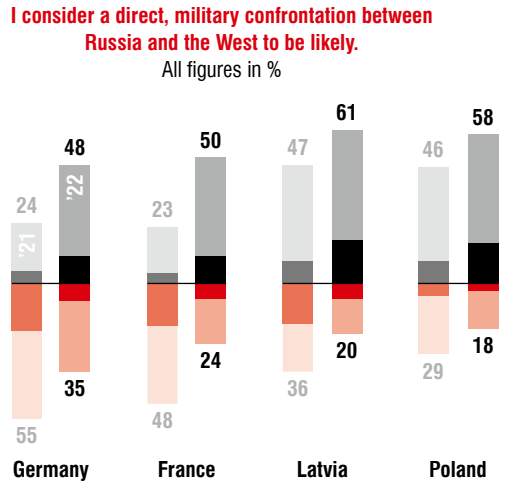
These show how the war has encouraged a common threat perception and similar awareness of dangers.

New fears and a new awareness

The Russian war has had a considerable effect on citizens' fears and concerns in the four countries. The probability of new wars in Europe has risen especially in the eyes of EU citizens. This is most significant in France and Germany. In both countries the level of concern about new wars in Europe nearly doubled between the two surveys. The same applies to concerns about a direct military confrontation between Russia and the West. The possibility of a major interstate war has clearly become more salient to the citizens of Europe. This helps us understand the major political changes in German and French foreign policy towards Russia and Ukraine. In Berlin's case, this has been conducted under the banner of *Zeitenwende* – a turning point.

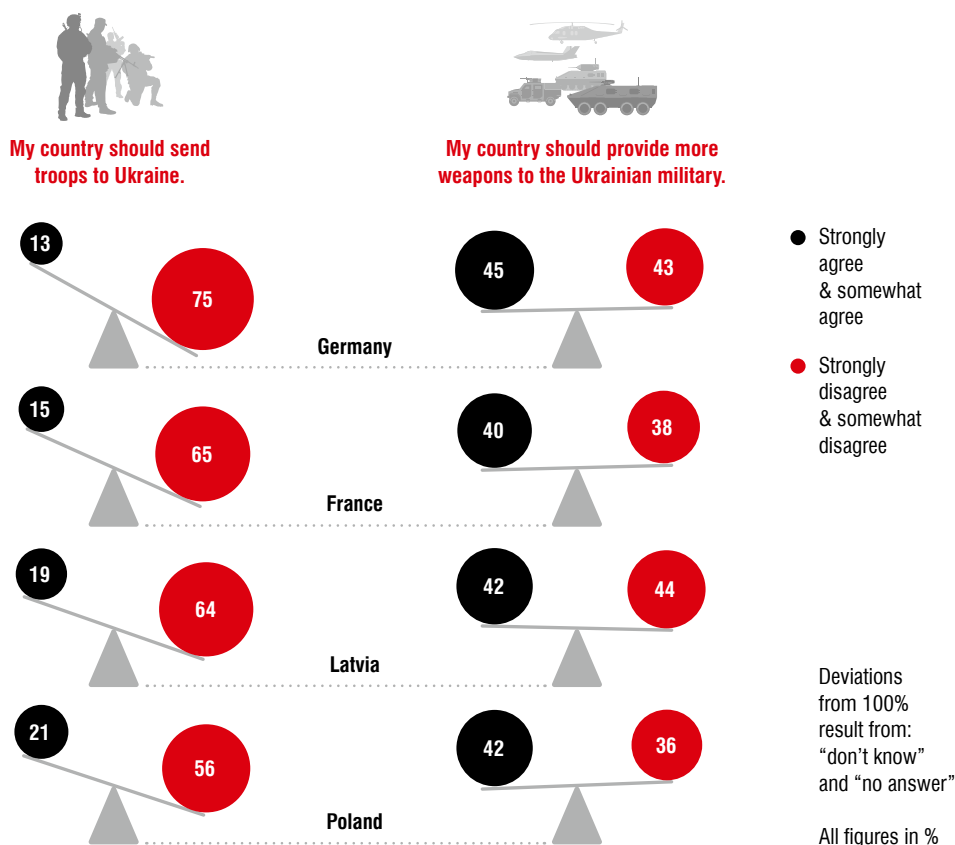
Nonetheless, there are differences within Europe. The threat of a direct military confrontation with Russia seems more likely for respondents in Latvia and Poland, where the level of concern reaches approximately 60 per cent. At the same time, in France and Germany it remains a little lower, at around 50 per cent. We also see changing perceptions of Russia and Ukraine after the Russian attack. One key conclusion from comparing 2021 and 2022 is that more people now have an informed opinion on questions surrounding Ukraine. In 2021 the share of respondents answering “don't know” to questions on the nature of and responsibility for the conflict was around 20 per cent, while in 2022 the share halved to about ten per cent.

What emerges from these observations is a broadly shared conflict perception among the four EU members that holds Russia responsible for the war. In all four states a relative (and sometimes absolute) majority believes that third countries should not stay out of this conflict. This leads to the question of what kind of intervention is deemed acceptable.



Regarding tools of engagement, we examined a series of instruments ranging from widening sanctions, a ban on Russian oil and gas, more weapons deliveries and finally the potential deployment of soldiers in Ukraine. Overall, there is broad support for more sanctions on Russia, with all countries showing absolute majorities agreeing with such a measure. A similar picture emerges on the broader issue of countries' dependence on Russia after the attack. There is clear majority support for becoming more independent, even if this has effects on living standards.

A different picture is discernible regarding more robust support for Ukraine that goes beyond economic means. The question of providing more weapons to the Ukrainian military finds the four countries rather divided. This instrument of support is thus politically contested. But there is a clear red line when it comes to sending troops to Ukraine. Respondents in all four countries polled overwhelmingly oppose sending troops to the country. Here it becomes clear that citizens seem to be very conscious of the distinction between supporting Ukraine and becoming party to the war.



Convergence and differences

As has already been pointed out, there are considerable differences between the two western and the two eastern EU countries. Poland, however, shows a peculiar picture. It seems to be the country most invested in this war, showing the most pronounced support on all questions regarding Ukraine, as well as housing a considerable number of Ukrainian war refugees. Even this final aspect is not politically contested. The issue of grain imports was not on the agenda during the previous survey.

The strong engagement of the population might also be connected with the perception that Poland has been strengthened by this conflict and that the centre of gravity within European security is moving further eastward. The preparedness to send troops is relatively higher than in the other countries and the opposition lower. It is the only country in which the question of weapons deliveries is not polarising society into two equal camps. Instead, the country shows strong support for more weapons deliveries. The widening of sanctions is also broadly backed by a significantly larger part of society than in the three other cases.

The Russian war against Ukraine has substantially changed perceptions of conflict and crisis in the surveyed countries. It has encouraged fears of war, awareness of developments in Ukraine, questions concerning the broader frame of this war, and the involvement of the respective countries in it. There is a clear convergence towards the view that Russia is responsible for escalation. This might seem obvious in light of the unprovoked attack and full-scale Russian invasion, but behind these numbers lies another development. They ultimately form a part of a deeper change in policies at least in Germany and France. Overall, Europeans show a deeper understanding of the war in Ukraine. This allows them to attribute blame for the conflict more easily than in 2021.

The four countries start from different places and this is visible. A convergent tendency is observable, although national idiosyncrasies remain notable. The concerns about war and conflict in general and Russia more specifically were already rather high in Poland and Latvia, even before the Russian attack, whereas France and Germany were far less concerned, with war seemingly far away and improbable. Ten months into the war, differences are still obvious in the survey, but have become considerably smaller.

When looking at how respondents characterise this war and how their countries are related to it, a clear line is discernible between support and direct involvement. We have seen that a higher number of respondents in all four countries do not agree with the notion that this is a war between Russia and Ukraine in which no third country should intervene. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a grow-

ing sense that because Russia is clearly identified as the aggressor, other countries should also play a role in helping the party that has been attacked. However, in the view of respondents this role is clearly limited. Sanctions and greater national independence from Russian fossil fuels are broadly supported, even if there is a hint of caution when price increases are mentioned.

When it comes to more direct support in the form of weapons, the societies appear to be more polarised and cautious. Even in Poland, where support for Ukraine is most clearly expressed throughout the survey, a sizeable share of respondents rejects the provision of more weapons to Ukraine, whereas the other three countries are split equally. Direct involvement in the war by sending national troops is overwhelmingly opposed and represents a red line. Both issues reveal a sense of the risk of unintended escalation through engagement. This is likely related to the increased awareness of possible direct military conflict between Russia and the West. It remains to be seen how the ongoing Ukrainian offensive of 2023 will affect these perceptions.

Outlook

Summarising our findings from a political perspective, four observations emerge. We can observe a common awareness that Russia is the aggressor against Ukraine, as well as a potential enemy. There is also stable support for Ukraine, but no willingness to become embroiled in the war. The softer measures in support of Ukraine are approved of across the board. These are namely decoupling from Russia's oil and gas industry, as well as sanctions. The experience of winter 2022–23 shows

There is stable support for Ukraine, but **no willingness** to become embroiled in the war.

that despite price increases, support for Ukraine has not significantly diminished and the economic decoupling from Russia remains widely accepted in the four countries.

The provision of weapons is already politically contested and divides societies. The red line, however, is the direct involvement of troops. The threshold between being a support act and the main act that seems to guide respondents is also expressed in the framing of this war, which is not defined in ideological or geopolitical terms. This allows the expression of continued but limited support without the danger of becoming party to the conflict.

However, European citizens seem to be buckling up for a longer conflict. Despite that rather grim outlook, there is a clear wish to support a besieged Ukraine against the Russian aggressor, but to stay out of direct conflict. This allows for a

continued sanctions regime, although it might need to be combined with further packages, mitigating the effects on energy prices when these start to hurt personal finances. The ongoing provision of weapons needs to be explained continuously and case by case, as it could become a polarising issue, especially if the Ukrainian offensive is not meeting the (sometimes unrealistic) expectations of the public. Governments need to be aware of the escalatory risks in this conflict, which could be linked to their support for Ukraine. This is especially true given that the key outcome of these surveys has been the red line between helping and participating.

Another conclusion stands out: the responses to the Russian war have been communicated mostly on a national basis. And whereas the Franco-German tandem has tried to work simultaneously on support measures for Ukraine, the PiS-led Polish government sometimes distanced itself from its allies to the west, probably for domestic purposes. The sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit “beauty contest” for the biggest supporter of Ukraine (in Europe) has limited the effects that a more collaborative approach could have had in the long run. Similarly, the election campaign in Poland, where anti-German sentiment was being used, has shown the risks for European solidarity for Ukraine in the long term. It remains to be seen, how a new, less confrontative, government in Warsaw can mend fences in the coming months, since there is enough common ground amongst societies. As the surveys show, citizens in the EU are aware of the challenges the war will pose for their societies. They share an urge to support Ukraine, but similarly fear direct involvement. If there is a common understanding that these challenges will be met in cooperation and not whilst competing with European partners, the task becomes easier to fulfil. European solidarity with Ukraine should be based on a stable foundation of solidarity amongst Europeans. ~~EE~~

This text is a revised version of the report titled “Mind the red line. Limits of European engagement in Russia’s war against Ukraine” written by Christos Katsioulis, Alexandra Dienes and Simon Weiss (2022). It is available for download at <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/wien/19872.pdf>

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From Kyiv to Korea

How the shockwaves of war reverberated across Eurasia

ANTHONY RINNA

The war in Ukraine is encouraging geopolitical change across the world. This is particularly true with regards to the Korean Peninsula, with Russia growing closer to its traditionally quiet ally in Pyongyang. Both North and South Korea are now faced with **navigating an uncertain geopolitical climate** with no end to the war in sight.

“Akin to identical twins” is how one academic expert in Seoul described the Korean Peninsula and Ukraine in 2022, as both occupy locations on the Eurasian landmass where the geopolitical interests of great powers intersect. Other Korean commentators have noted similarities between the 1950–53 Korean conflict and the current war in Ukraine insofar as battle lines have barely moved throughout much of the fighting. Yet while parallels between Korea’s yesterday and Ukraine’s today abound, the arc of geopolitics runs directly between Kyiv and Korea. The conflict that has shattered the post-war peace in Europe has likewise opened up the possibility for fundamental shifts in Northeast Asia’s geopolitical order. Burgeoning cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang in light of developments in Ukraine risks fundamentally altering the geopolitical landscape, a fact that in turn prompted debate in Seoul as to how South Korea can navigate the ensuing challenges to its own geopolitical standing.

Indeed, for Koreans, whereas the bloodshed on the Korean Peninsula heralded the beginning of the Cold War and the division of the Korean nation, the Rus-

sian war against Ukraine has likewise taken on great significance for both North and South Korea as they seek to navigate the uncertainties of what is increasingly referred to in the peninsula as an emerging “New Cold War”. For the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), the war in Ukraine is primarily about how the two Koreas can navigate the strategic shifts in the post-war global order that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has brought about. The two Koreas’ responses to the war in Ukraine, however, could not be more different. While the DPRK has come out in full-throated support of Russia’s invasion, the ROK has taken a more cautious approach in its reaction to the war, balancing its fundamental pro-western alignment and subtly supporting Kyiv, while attempting to maintain cordial if somewhat distant relations with Russia.

North Korea’s view of the war

Whereas many of the countries that have not come out in full support of Ukraine have taken a somewhat neutral or passive stance toward Russia’s invasion, the DPRK has proven to be one of the most fervent supporters of Moscow’s invasion. The North Korean foreign ministry and state media have regularly published statements expressing unconditional backing for Russia’s actions, yet the starkest example of Pyongyang’s support for the Kremlin’s aggression came in September 2023, when North Korean leader Kim Jong Un expressed his backing of the invasion directly to Vladimir Putin himself.

It is clear that Pyongyang, which had largely paid lip service to Russia over the past three decades since the end of the Cold War, is now sidling up to Russia for its own advantage. The primary reason behind Pyongyang’s support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is that the fallout Moscow has faced since early 2022 has put the DPRK and the Russian Federation in similar positions of international isolation. More specifically, the Kremlin’s estrangement from much of the world has now placed Moscow in a position to help spearhead the unravelling of international sanctions against the DPRK.

Moscow had long maintained that it adheres to sanctions against the DPRK, pushing back against allegations to the contrary. Months into Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Georgy Zinoviev, Russia’s top diplomat for Asia-Pacific affairs, stated that Russia continued to abide by international sanctions against Pyongyang “as a responsible member of the international community”. Yet, when North Korea’s ambassador to Russia Sin Hong Chol met with officials from the then-self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk republics in August 2022, the Kremlin responded to insin-

uations that North Korean citizens would work there in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2397 by stating that this would be legally acceptable. This is because Russia considered them at the time to be independent, non-UN member states, and as such were not beholden to such provisions.

Maintaining the pretense of sanctions compliance was likely the motivating factor behind North Korea's reported sale of weapons to Russia's Wagner Group, an organisation whose very existence the Kremlin had long refused to acknowledge. After Ukrainian forces managed to obtain an intercepted shipment of weapons from North Korea destined for use by Russian forces as reported in July 2023, it is now beyond reasonable doubt that the Kremlin has been complicit in violating UN Security Council Resolution 2270, which amounts to an arms embargo against North Korea. The September 2023 summit between Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin, which drew ample assertions and speculation that Russia would seek weapons from North Korea to use in Ukraine, has only increased fears about the potential trajectory of cooperation between North Korea and Russia. To be sure, Kim and Putin did not issue any public statement on the nature or results of their meeting. Yet the fact that several North Korean military officials accompanied Kim to Russia only a month after Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu visited the DPRK to inspect North Korean ballistic missiles indicates that some form of cooperation between the two countries in the defence realm is highly probable. If nothing else, North Korea's apparent willingness to step up and aid Russia's war shows that the heavily-sanctioned pariah state has little to no fear concerning the consequences of aiding and abetting the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine.

South Korea's view of the war

For the ROK, Seoul's response to the war has long taken the form of cautious yet unmistakable support for Kyiv. ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol became the first South Korean president ever to visit Ukraine in July 2023. In contrast to the steady military support Europe and the US have provided Ukraine, South Korea has been more cautious in its approach to military assistance to Kyiv. Seoul has contended with external pressure from both Kyiv and Washington to provide lethal weapons, but has thus far refused to do so, citing domestic law prohibiting the sale of weapons to warring countries. This, however, has not stopped the ROK from selling arms to Poland, with planned combined military exercises between the Polish and ROK armed forces also on the horizon.

In spite of this reticence to arm Ukraine directly, the ROK has consistently offered its assistance in helping Ukraine recover from the destruction Russia's in-



vasion has wrought. Indeed, South Korea itself is a model of post-war recovery. Having faced utter destruction as a result of the direct armed conflict with the DPRK from 1950 to 1953, the ROK transformed within a generation from being an aid recipient to a donor country. This experience is lost on neither the Koreans offering their assistance to Ukraine nor their Ukrainian partners. At the time of writing, Seoul had pledged official development assistance (ODA) amounting to 2.3 billion US dollars, with 300 million to be provided in 2024, and the rest to be granted to Ukraine in the form of long-term, low interest loans. This aid provision follows a steadily-increasing amount of financial aid that Seoul has provided to Kyiv since 2022. Furthermore, South Korean government and political officials have been in regular contact with Ukrainian government and civil society figures to discuss collaboration concerning post-war recovery.

Aside from these tangible manifestations of assistance to Ukraine, the ROK has also offered other subtle yet powerful forms of support, including within the Korean language itself. In March 2022 Ukraine's embassy in Seoul issued a request to Korean language regulators to change the transliteration of Ukrainian place names in Korean to correspond to Ukrainian, rather than Russian, pronunciation. The request prompted discussions between the ROK foreign ministry and the National Institute of Korean Language, leading to an official change in the transliteration of Ukrainian place names in Korean used in the ROK. Thus, the Ukrainian capital, long rendered as "*Ki-ep*" in Korean became "*Ki-yi-woo*". Seoul's adherence to the Ukrainian ambassador's request is more than a mere polite attitude toward Ukrain-

ian sensitivities. Just before the change, one major national ROK news outlet described Korea's use of the Russian-based pronunciation for the Ukrainian capital as akin to English speakers continuing to refer to Seoul by its Japanese name even after Korea's independence from Japan in 1945. Given the bitterness with which Koreans remember the Japanese colonial period, it is hard to believe this parallel did not at least partially factor in to Seoul's decision.

Nevertheless, within the ROK's academic, civil society and media communities, there has been robust debate over the nature and extent of South Korea's support for Ukraine, with many solidly opposing the Yoon administration's support for the West at the expense of South Korea's relations with Russia. Public debate between those who support and oppose the ROK taking steps such as providing

Seoul's response to Russia's war has long taken the form of cautious yet **unmistakable support** for Kyiv.

lethal military aid to Ukraine and aligning with NATO is roughly divided between the left and right ends of the political spectrum. For many on the South Korean political right, support for Kyiv, up to and including providing lethal military support, is primarily about the democratic ROK contributing to efforts that stem the tide of an emerging bloc of authoritarian powers. Those who support Seoul taking a firmly pro-western stance cite Seoul's responsibility to "pay it forward" for

all the assistance the ROK received from the international community during Korea's own conflict. Furthermore, they see the emergence of a "New Cold War", with China, North Korea and Russia forming a concert of authoritarian nations, as a key reason for the ROK to draw closer to Washington and its allies over Ukraine.

On the political left, the primary concern regarding South Korea's position vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine is how explicit support for Kyiv at the expense of Seoul's relationship with Moscow could affect inter-Korean relations. For the ROK, relations with Russia have not been particularly important in and of themselves. Nevertheless, as far back as the 1980s, South Korean policymakers have viewed building relations with the Kremlin as part of a strategic bid to foster economic cooperation between Russia and the two Koreas so as to eventually reunify, or at least reduce the divisions between, the DPRK and the ROK. For the ROK's progressive left in particular, a desire not to damage ties with Russia so that Moscow could help with inter-Korean reconciliation has been a primary point of concern.

One of the main reasons for this divide along the political spectrum, as research on Korean national identity from Hyungryeol Kim of Seoul National University and Stephanie K. Kim of Georgetown University shows, is that national identity in the ROK is roughly divided between a closer identification with the Republic of Korea on the political right, and a tighter identification with the Korean eth-

nic nation on the political left. For South Korea, therefore, the primary question at hand is how, in a reshaped geopolitical order rising from the ashes of Ukraine extending to Northeast Asia, the ROK should approach the greater fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. With the strengthening of DPRK-Russia ties potentially posing an increased threat to South Korea's own security, it is not a question for armchair theorising, but a very real policy issue to be addressed in a context of limited time and diplomatic space.

The closing distance from Kyiv to Korea

Russia's geographic thrust from the borders of Ukraine to the Korean Peninsula, and in particular Russia's raised profile in Northeast Asia, means that the geopolitical distance from Kyiv to Korea is shrinking. The fact that Russia has received unabashed support from North Korea over its invasion of Ukraine, potentially for the sake of the unravelling of the international sanctions regime against Pyongyang, heralds a tectonic shift in the post-war global order. A strengthened North Korea-Russia relationship in and of itself may matter little to Kyiv, but the cohesion between Moscow and Pyongyang that it has brought about ties developments in Eastern Europe to Northeast Asia as well. Likewise, the nature and extent of Seoul's support for Kyiv may not be as impactful for Ukraine as that of Kyiv's European and American partners. Yet the fact that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has prompted so much debate in Seoul clearly demonstrates the reverberations this war has had across Eurasia.

Thus far, the ROK has maintained a steady course of providing non-lethal aid and financial assistance for Ukraine's reconstruction, while also sidestepping sensitive issues such as providing lethal weaponry to the Ukrainian armed forces. As a liberal democracy largely aligned with the West, it is entirely possible that during South Korea's next presidential election, the ROK electorate may choose a leader less inclined to support Ukraine than President Yoon Suk Yeol. Yet no matter what happens, geography will not isolate the Korean Peninsula from the effects of war in Ukraine. Indeed, if North Korea's material support for Russia's actions in Ukraine translates into material Russian support for the DPRK in turn, violence in Europe risks encouraging violence in Northeast Asia. ~~EE~~

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Zelenskyy's formula for peace

ANTON NAICHUK

In October 2022, Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, announced a "peace formula" to overcome the Russian threat during a meeting of the G7. Since then, it has become the **guiding principle in Ukraine's international diplomacy** and efforts to end Russia's aggression once and for all.

As the war continues in Ukraine, claiming lives, destroying infrastructure and undermining the economy, the Ukrainian authorities and people are united by a common desire to stop Russian aggression, the associated daily horrors and suffering as soon as possible. In order to make its own position clear before the international community and within the framework of demonstrating readiness for a peace process, the Ukrainian side has submitted a basic set of principles and approaches which has formed the basis of a "peace formula" – or "Zelenskyy Formula" as it is often called. The Ukrainian peace model is actively promoted by diplomats in the international arena and reflects the frames of an acceptable option of ending the war and ensuring stability in the region.

What does the Ukrainian peace formula mean?

The formula does not act as a classic road map, which includes a clear list of steps, their sequence, or a control toolkit. Rather, it reflects the will of the Ukrainian people and creates a stable platform – the basis of which can be developed

by technical aspects of its implementation (security guarantees, mechanisms for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine, practical means of levelling the humanitarian disaster and so on). In other words, if the formula is a constant, unchanging strategic goal, then the ways to achieve it are flexible and variable tools that can change or adapt to the real situation and circumstances.

For a practical explanation, the end goal of the peace formula is the “necessity of liberating Ukrainian territories from temporary occupation”. Currently, the Russian side does not demonstrate a desire for peaceful dialogue and continues its full-scale aggression – in this case Ukraine has no other options except the use of military force to protect its own sovereignty. However, theoretically, if due to changing circumstances, the Russian authorities suddenly adjust their approach and decide to withdraw their troops, Ukraine will support such a scenario, as well as provide an opportunity to agree to a ceasefire.

Currently, Russia does not demonstrate a desire for peaceful dialogue and continues its full-scale aggression.

It is important to note, nonetheless, that during the development of the peace formula, the Ukrainian side took into account all aspects of the military conflict and its global consequences. Therefore, the Ukrainian plan not only provides for purely military-technical issues, but also a wide list of other urgent problems of a humanitarian, ecological and economic nature. It is difficult to say whether it is possible to reach an agreement on all ten points in a single moment. That is why each of them can be considered a separate track, with its own unique meaning. On each point, Kyiv expects to achieve progress both in the short term at the level of tactical decision-making and at the final strategic level.

1. Radiation and nuclear safety

Stability cannot come only to Ukraine, but also the whole world, as long as there is a threat of using nuclear weapons or artificially provoking a disaster at a nuclear facility. As a result of its large-scale invasion, Russian troops have occupied the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant and Ukraine cannot guarantee security until the plant itself and the territory around it become demilitarised. Kyiv's specialists also need to be able to technically ensure the operation of the nuclear power station without interruption.

The Ukrainian government consistently advocates for the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from the nuclear power station and its stable functioning in order to prevent Russian provocations or catastrophes. It is also important for Ukraine to protect itself and the whole world from Russian nuclear blackmail. Kyiv is now calling on all countries to find mechanisms to deter the Russian Federation.

2. Food security

Despite the war, Ukraine remains a key exporter of grain and other products to international markets (primarily to the countries of Africa and the Middle East). The Russian aggression not only affected the Ukrainian agro-industrial complex, creating problems for ordinary citizens and farmers, but also created new challenges for international food security. Ukraine's plan has been to ensure the operation of the grain corridor with the support of Turkey and the United Nations, and now Kyiv aims at restoring this trade despite the actions of the Russian side. At the same time, taking into account the circumstances, Ukraine is looking for alternative routes to export grain to international markets. In this context, the country expects that its neighbours (first of all, Poland and Romania) will not only provide maximum assistance in expanding transit opportunities but will also refuse to unilaterally limit the import of Ukrainian agricultural products.

Similar steps should form the basis of countering Russian attempts to "stifle" Ukraine economically and will be a significant help in countering Russian aggression. The food topic also clearly demonstrates Ukraine's strategic intentions – to restore access to the port infrastructure and create conditions for further safe sowing campaigns. However, taking into account the fact that it will not be possible to achieve these fundamental goals immediately, Ukrainian diplomats, politicians and businesses are looking for other temporary options that will allow them to simultaneously support farming in Ukraine and prevent a global grain crisis before all the southern regions are freed from temporary Russian occupation.

3. Energy security

At the strategic level, Ukraine intends to prevent the type of energy terrorism that the Russian Federation used in the autumn and winter of 2022 to provoke a real social catastrophe. According to various estimates, up to 40 per cent of Ukraine's infrastructure was destroyed by Russian shelling during that period. Ukraine's ultimate goal is to restore its own technological capabilities and force Russian troops to stop shelling, which seems possible in the event of a political-military victory for Ukraine and the provision of effective security guarantees in the future. However, in the mid-term, Ukraine is taking more measures that have already worked in the previous winter season to create conditions to save people from freezing in the future.

The government's policy is aimed at finding additional opportunities abroad to improve and expand air defence systems, which will allow it to protect more energy facilities. Active work is underway to obtain F-16 aircraft, which will also primarily be used in defence functions. At the same time, efforts are directed at finding the necessary technical components for the reconstruction and restoration of the energy system of Ukraine.



Photo: Review News / Shutterstock

President Zelenskyy's has been promoting his "peace formula" since its launch at the G7 Summit in 2022. The end goal of the peace formula is the "necessity of liberating Ukrainian territories from temporary occupation".

On a parallel track, a special expert group headed by Andriy Yermak and Michael McFaul is looking for effective mechanisms to limit opportunities for the Russian Federation to obtain foreign equipment used in the production of long-range missiles. With the support of the United States, attempts are being made to limit the supply of military drones from Iran. The main principle is the fewer weapons Russia has, the less shelling of civilian objects there will be.

4. Release of all prisoners and deportees

One of the most important challenges for Ukrainian diplomacy is ensuring an all-for-all exchange. Today, Ukrainian soldiers are in captivity on the territory of the Russian Federation or in the temporarily uncontrolled territories, and one of the main goals of Kyiv is to get them back. In addition, there are many public activists in Russian prisons – people who openly condemned the Russian military aggression in the occupied regions, those who fought for social rights, exposed war crimes or simply called on Russian troops to cease operations. At the level of the

Ukrainian Ombudsman's Office, active work is being carried out for their return. This sphere of exchange is the only one where direct communication between the Ukrainian and Russian sides sometimes takes place.

The return of children who, due to various circumstances, were taken by Russian troops outside of Ukraine, separated from their families and illegally detained by the Russian side, has acquired special importance for Ukraine. Kyiv's approach is based on the fact that regardless of the situation on the battlefield and the continuation of the active phase of military operations due to the position of the Russian Federation, dialogue on the exchange of prisoners should not stop and specified goals should be achieved.

5. Implementation of the UN Charter and restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity

The basic principle of Ukraine's strategy is the generally accepted international legal system, upon which the basis of security is guaranteed and relations between countries are regulated. By its own actions, the Russian Federation has violated the

Ukraine's demands to return to the borders of 1991 are dictated not only by political will, but also by international law.

UN Charter and disregarded any respect for Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. This creates a dangerous precedent which brings us back to the historical analogues of the world wars, when one state tries to change the world order by force.

Ukraine's demands to return to the borders of 1991 and restore its territorial integrity are dictated not only by political will, but also by international law that has no exceptions or alternative interpretations. This position is fully justified and legally supported. Achieving Ukraine's declared goals will not only lead to the stabilisation of the situation in the region, but it is also a guarantee of preserving the world order. Otherwise, the international system could enter a new stage of turbulence and chaos.

6. Withdrawal of Russian troops and cessation of hostilities

The Ukrainian side is ready for a political and diplomatic settlement and an end to the active phase of hostilities as soon as possible. However, this cannot be implemented while the leadership of the Russian Federation intends to continue the war. In Ukraine, any interpretations that consist of "trading" territory in exchange for something or refusing their legal return are unacceptable. As soon as the Russian Federation displays a willingness to negotiate, taking into account the requirements of international law which correspond to the Ukrainian position, including the restoration of the territorial integrity of Ukraine, Kyiv will support peace ne-

gotiations and will react very positively to the withdrawal of Russian troops. Otherwise, the president's position is quite clear – to achieve legitimate goals by any means possible.

7. Justice

The Ukrainian side calls on the international community to recognise the need to punish those guilty of war crimes, those politicians and statesmen, military personnel from the command of the armed forces and others who deliberately resorted to criminal actions against the Ukrainian population and caused damage to the country. In order to achieve this strategic goal, active diplomatic work is being carried out within interstate relations and international organisations (primarily the UN).

8. Ecocide, protection of nature

The war started against Ukraine is accompanied by the destruction of civil infrastructure and chemical and energy enterprises, as well as environmental pollution and the destruction of the ecosystem. One of the most telling examples is the man-made disaster at the Kakhovka Dam, which led to the flooding and pollution of large nearby areas. The Ukrainian side is taking measures to draw the attention of international partners to this specified aspect of the war. Kyiv wishes to develop effective mechanisms for the restoration of critically important infrastructure and deter the Russian Federation from further actions that bring an environmental catastrophe of an international scale even closer.

9. Security guarantees and non-escalation

A strategic victory and stability in the region are only possible if the situation becomes settled on the basic principles of the UN, and on the condition that reliable security guarantees can be established. This will make it impossible for the Russian Federation to repeat its aggression. Otherwise, the risk of war returning to Europe will remain, even in the case of Ukraine's restoration of territorial integrity and the political-military defeat of the Russian side.

Of course, Ukraine's strategic goal is full integration into NATO, but the Ukrainian authorities fully understand the impossibility of such a scenario before the end of the war. That is why the president and foreign ministry are looking for intermediate options, such as specific agreements with international partners regarding the supply of weapons, the provision of technologies, training of the Ukrainian military, etc. These specified mechanisms will preserve the fighting capacity of the Ukrainian army and create conditions for the protection of sovereignty and national interests.

10. Fixing the end of the war

According to discussion concerning the implementation of the clauses on ending the war and ensuring justice, the Ukrainian side is ready to confirm a stable peace on a document basis.

International reaction to Ukraine's plan

Thus, the “Zelenskyy Formula” is designed to find partners and encourage support and understanding from all international actors. Some states support all of the points of the peace plan, while others just nuclear safety (for example China and India) or food security (for the countries of the Middle East, Africa and again China) are elements of special interest.

Special hopes in Kyiv are placed on the prospects of the acceptance of the Ukrainian model by the countries of the so-called Global South. That is why the Ukrainian side pays attention to summits like the one that took place in the summer in Saudi Arabia. Ukraine forms its own positions based on the principles of international law and global needs. As a result, neither the Ukrainian authorities nor civil society have any intention of departing from the fundamental principles of the peace plan – the foundations of which will make it possible to end the war as soon as possible. ~~EE~~

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Ukrainians' complicated embrace of NATO

OLEKSII LIONCHUK

Throughout almost the entire period of Ukraine's independence after the fall of the Soviet Union, the idea of NATO membership remained **a contentious topic with little support** among both society and politicians. It was not until the Russian aggression in 2014 and full-scale invasion of 2022 that Ukraine's perspective on its place in the transatlantic Alliance decisively changed.

During the Cold War, there was often a risk that tensions could escalate into a "Third World War". The presence of nuclear weapons on both sides of the confrontation, led by the United States and the Soviet Union, respectively, as well as the creation of NATO in 1949 and the Warsaw Pact in 1955, were meant to act as deterrents to this escalation and successfully avoid direct confrontation. US President George W. Bush and USSR General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989 announced the end of the Cold War during a meeting in Malta. Then the countries of the socialist camp, one after another, began a return to the principles of democracy and the rule of law. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union also put an end to the Warsaw Pact.

Thus, it seemed that NATO, as a political-military alliance, would also fade into history, or somehow change its functions. However, the countries of Central Europe, which still recalled their experiences with Moscow, declared integration into NATO and the European Community a key priority in their foreign policy. To achieve this goal, Poland, Czechoslovakia (since 1993 the Czech Republic and Slovakia) and Hungary created a regional association – the Visegrád Group. The

Kremlin tried to protest against the future expansion of the Alliance to the East, but to no avail. The strategy for future cooperation between the Alliance and the countries of the former socialist camp was adopted during NATO's summit in Rome in 1991. To implement such cooperation, it was decided to create a North Atlantic Cooperation Council, which became a platform for dialogue between NATO and partner countries.

Quite different were the prospects for future cooperation with the former post-Soviet republics, including Ukraine. In the first period after the collapse of the USSR, Brussels and Washington saw much of Eastern Europe through "Moscow glasses". In other words, almost all events in the former Soviet republics were interpreted from the point of view of the old metropole. Even most respected news media had their representative offices only in the Russian Federation. Therefore, the formation of Ukraine as an independent state was a complex process that was difficult for many westerners to fully understand. This complexity has ultimately played a role in shaping Ukraine's engagement with the West, including NATO.

First steps towards NATO

From the beginning of Ukraine's independence, most international experts predicted the imminent demise of Ukrainian statehood. Samuel Huntington in his work *The Clash of Civilizations* predicted Ukraine's rapid split into two parts, western and eastern, and even a Russian-Ukrainian war. Unfortunately, he was not mistaken about future conflict. However, it is the multiculturalism of Ukraine that is its advantage and disadvantage at the same time. After independence, both the Ukrainian state and society found themselves at a crossroads, hotly debating whether to draw themselves closer to the western powers of NATO and the EU who were previously adversaries. Even though cooperation with the European Community did not cause resistance at the beginning, heated debates on cooperation with NATO continued not only within the walls of the parliament, but also within crowded cafes and university hallways. Most still remember the Soviet media narratives about NATO as an aggressive and imperialist bloc. However, the military leadership of the newly created Armed Forces of Ukraine was very clearly aware of the need to establish cooperation with NATO and the further prospect of integration into this political-military alliance.

At the beginning of the formation of Ukrainian statehood in 1991, illusions reigned among the Ukrainian establishment that no one would attack the country. Thus, the focus was instead on disarmament while cooperation with NATO was far from people's minds. Favourable conditions for establishing cooperation with

the Alliance were challenged by the situation surrounding the Black Sea Fleet of the former Soviet Union in Crimea. It was here that Russia once again demonstrated its aggressive stance and Ukraine felt that there was no one to rely on in the international arena. Then President Leonid Kravchuk and his successor Leonid Kuchma launched an active policy of rapprochement and cooperation with NATO. This was also facilitated by a change in the geopolitical situation in the region. After the forceful dissolution of the Russian parliament in 1993 and peaceful settlement of the Donbas miners' strike in Ukraine, it was Kyiv that was starting to be seen by Washington and western allies as a key partner in the region, not just Moscow. In February 1994 Ukraine joined the NATO Partnership for Peace programme, which offers cooperation with non-NATO partners. The First Chechen War unleashed by the Russian Federation became another factor which may have pushed the Ukrainian leadership closer to NATO, after witnessing Russia's brutal tactics.

A new level

In 1997 relations between Ukraine and NATO reached a new level – a charter on a distinctive partnership was concluded and signed. The practical consequence of this was the creation of a special NATO-Ukraine Commission. The document also states that the Alliance is open to accepting new members, referring to Article 10 of the Washington Treaty. The Charter clearly defined the principles on which cooperation between both parties would be built and outlined areas of future cooperation. It also detailed practical mechanisms through which consultations and cooperation would take place.

One of the last European crises in the 20th century was the war in Kosovo. The growing conflict between Belgrade and Pristina had all the signs of a new ethnic cleansing and a war between the Serbs and Kosovo Albanians. In order to prevent escalation and having received a UN mandate to conduct a peacekeeping operation in 1999, NATO began bombing military facilities on Serbian territory, after all diplomatic opportunities were exhausted. In Ukraine, most of the media covered these events in a similar way to Soviet ideological dogmas about an aggressive NATO bloc that interferes in the internal affairs of sovereign countries. Thus, without a full sense of the cause-and-effect relationships that led UN-backed peacekeepers to the point of military involvement, the majority of Ukrainian society condemned this mission. However, the Ukrainian political leadership,

Kuchma sent Ukrainian forces to Kosovo as part of a **peacekeeping** mission together with Polish soldiers on the NATO side.

led by Kuchma, viewed the conflict differently. Kuchma sent Ukrainian forces into a post-conflict peacekeeping mission together with Polish soldiers on the NATO side, as part of the KFOR unit. Thus started today's Polish-Ukrainian military cooperation and the beginnings of a joint Polish-Ukrainian battalion.

At the NATO Washington summit also in 1999, a Membership Action Plan was developed and adopted. The key criteria included military and technical standards; socio-economic (standards of living among the population, zero tolerance for corruption, etc.); and socio-political standards within the country (freedom of speech, rule of law, free and democratic elections, etc.). There was a complete consensus in society and among experts at that time that Ukraine did not meet these conditions. At the same time, the vast majority of Ukrainians were against the country's accession to NATO. In 1999 presidential elections were held in Ukraine, as a result of which Kuchma was re-elected for a second term. The president and his entourage subsequently decided to move towards European and Euro-Atlantic integration. But in 2000 there were significant events that led to the temporary isolation of the Ukrainian establishment in the West.

Between Russia and the West

Changes in Russia's political and state leadership have significantly affected relations between Moscow, Kyiv and Brussels. The new Russian President Vladimir Putin initially adopted pragmatism in his foreign policy. One of the priorities of this approach already was to prevent any integration of Ukraine into western structures. The success of this policy was facilitated by the disappearance, and later as it turned out the murder, of journalist Georgiy Gongadze and the subsequent "tape scandal". This led to the first mass protests throughout Ukraine. The scandal further weakened the Ukrainian leadership on the international stage and led, accordingly, to a cooling of relations between Ukraine and the West. The situation only worsened when news broke that Ukraine's defence industry was supplying Saddam Hussein's Iraq with "Kolchuga" radar systems, which are able to detect advanced stealth technologies.

One of Putin's first priorities was to prevent any **integration** of Ukraine into western structures.

Around this time, Kyiv initiated a policy of balance between Moscow and the West. As international observers in Ukraine and the Russian Federation aptly emphasised, the presidents of both countries (Kuchma and Putin) met 18 times during 2002 alone. A draft agreement on the Single Economic Space between Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakh-

stan was also being prepared. This geopolitical project was later transformed into the Russian-led customs union, under the auspices of the Kremlin. In the same year, another NATO summit was held in Prague. Due to the aforementioned scandals, Kuchma was not a welcome guest on the side lines of the event. Yet he still went to the summit. The president of the United States and the prime minister of the United Kingdom did not want to sit next to the odious Ukrainian president, so guests were seated according to the French alphabet, and not English, as usual. Thanks to this, Kuchma was at the end of the table during the summit.

Mistakenly believing that the Ukrainian political leadership was completely isolated in the West, Putin made his first attempts to capture Crimea by starting the construction of a so-called dam from the Taman Peninsula (the territory of the Russian Federation) to the island of Kosa Tuzla (territory of Ukraine). The attempt was made in 2003. In response, Kuchma decided to return to the policy of Euro-Atlantic integration, recalling the 2002 Strategy of Ukraine for NATO, which provided for deepening and expanding cooperation with the Alliance. Guided by this document, Ukraine sent a contingent of soldiers to the Polish zone of responsibility in the peacekeeping mission in Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

One of the joint Ukrainian-American programmes within the framework of NATO's "Partnership for Peace" was the US Navy's Sea Breeze exercises, which have been held since 1997, mainly in Ukrainian territorial waters in the Black Sea. Russia was not invited to partake in these exercises. The last Sea Breeze operation during Kuchma's presidency took place in 2002 with the participation of three warships of the Naval Forces of Ukraine, as well as the American destroyer Roosevelt in the Mediterranean. Such exercises resumed during the presidential term of Viktor Yushchenko in 2007 and took place in the Mykolaiv and Odesa regions. In 2008 and 2009, the exercises were accompanied by protest actions in Crimea and Odesa. Protests were carried out by the pro-Russian forces of the Party of Regions, the Communist Party and other marginal entities, including *Russkoye yedinstvo* and a number of others.

At the same time, supporters of Ukraine's accession to NATO became more active. A number of events were organised by civil society organisations and with the financial support of western partners under the general name "NATO Academy". This involved the participation of representatives from the embassies of NATO members, experts from Ukraine and Denmark and public activists. Similar events were held by local activists in the regions of Ukraine with the aim of promoting Ukraine's accession to NATO.

Believing that Ukraine was isolated in the West, Putin made his first attempts to capture Crimea in 2003.

For many, Russia's aggression against Georgia in 2008 only emphasised the need for the Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine. However, public sentiment continued to remain generally anti-western, especially in the densely populated eastern and southern regions of the country. This was also one of the reasons why France and Germany refused to provide Ukraine with an Action Plan for NATO membership during the Bucharest summit in 2008. However, the event did confirm that the door for Ukraine remained open. Then President Viktor Yushchenko, returning from Bucharest on a plane, signed decrees on the immediate dismissal of ambassadors in Berlin and Paris.

From Yanukovych to Zelenskyy

After the victory of Viktor Yanukovych in the 2010 presidential elections and the creeping usurpation of power, Ukraine declared itself to be a non-aligned or neutral nation. This announcement was a clear rejection of further Euro-Atlantic integration. In the same year, the infamous Kharkiv Pact was signed on the extension of the Russian Black Sea Fleet's presence in Crimea for another 25 years until 2042 (according to previous agreements, the Russian fleet was supposed to leave Crimea in 2017). Despite such moves, cooperation with NATO did continue. Further joint exercises and other projects were regularly taking place. However, this did not add much credibility to the new Ukrainian government, or help its image among western partners.

A clear turning point was the issue of signing the Association Agreement with the European Union, which Yanukovych refused to sign at the last minute during the Vilnius summit in 2013. This refusal was met with mass protests throughout Ukraine, which ultimately led to the shameful flight of Yanukovych and his associates to Russia in 2014. These events were followed by Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and war in Donbas. The aggressive actions of the Russian Federation forced opponents of Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration to reconsider their position. While in 2013 only 18 per cent of respondents were in favour of joining NATO, by 2014 that number rose to 47.8 per cent. At the same time, around 30 per cent of Ukrainians remained opposed to Euro-Atlantic integration. The new president, Petro Poroshenko, led the charge to amend the constitution to include Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th 2022, public sentiment in Ukraine finally changed in favour of joining NATO. According to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, as of May 2023, the level of support is now at a record high of 90 per cent. Despite this public consensus, which was reached

at the cost of tens of thousands (if not hundreds of thousands) of Ukrainian lives, the Ukrainian leadership, led by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the first part of the full-scale Russian aggression, stubbornly searched for an alternative to NATO regarding security guarantees for Ukraine in the future. Only after six months of fruitless work did Zelenskyy's team finally realise that the best security guarantee is full NATO membership.

The Ukrainian authorities should also realise that the military component is important for NATO, but not the main focus. While the Ukrainian military on the battlefield has already proved itself worthy of joining the Alliance, issues such as democracy, freedom of speech, transparency, judicial reform, a real market economy and the complete de-oligarchisation of public life are no less important for Ukraine itself and for NATO. Without success in associated reforms, Ukraine is doomed to remain in the "waiting room" for full membership in NATO and the EU for years or even decades.

Ukraine has already spent decades searching for its identity. Today, amidst full-scale war, the country is still at the stage of working out its security values. As a result, it cannot move to consider its development values. This is a terrible price to pay for a long farewell to the Soviet Union. At the same time, this moment is a chance to accelerate anti-corruption reforms, assert the rule of law, protect freedom of speech and ensure transparent democratic procedures in social and political life. The last NATO summit confirmed all this, as the final communiqué stated that Ukraine would become a full member of the Alliance.

Yet according to US President Joe Biden, this path will be long. Recently during the NATO summit in Vilnius, the first meeting of the newly established NATO-Ukraine Council took place (instead of the commission, which has been working since 1997). The allies announced then the provision of another package of assistance for Ukraine in the war with Russia. Therefore, both sides will continue to work hard in order to achieve the set goals, which will ultimately result in the final accession of Ukraine to NATO. ~~EE~~

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Off-SHORE politics

How Gagauzia was sold to a pro-Russian oligarch

IRINA PERCEMLI

The Gagauz minority in Moldova represents a unique blend of Turkic ethnicity and Orthodox Christian identity. But it was neither its authentic culture nor mysterious history that brought it into the media spotlight recently. Instead, it was a number of outrageous events signalling that Gagauzia is increasingly becoming a destabilising force for the pro-European government in Moldova.

Constituting only 4.5 per cent of the population of the Republic of Moldova, the Gagauz minority is concentrated in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia in the south of the country. Although Gagauzia, for various reasons, has always been more inclined towards Russia than the rest of Moldova, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 this region has turned into the main stronghold of the pro-Russian opposition.

One would expect this role to be played by Transnistria, the unrecognised breakaway republic with actual Russian troops on its territory. However, while Transnistria, which borders Ukraine's Odesa region, has been keeping relatively quiet, in Gagauzia, an intense and loud pro-Russian power struggle has been unfolding throughout the 19 months of the war in Ukraine. Gagauzian political elites entered into a competition concerning who could voice more support to Russia, passing

controversial anti-LGBT and “pro-Victory Day” laws and supporting numerous protests against the national government. This culminated with the entrance of a scandalous oligarch based abroad into Gagauzian politics.

Power struggles

In the recent elections for the Bashkan (the executive head) in Gagauzia, the “no-name” Evgenia Gutsul emerged victorious as the candidate endorsed by the Shor Party. The party’s founder and leader, Ilan Shor, is a fugitive oligarch who has been orchestrating his political activities against Moldova’s pro-European government from exile in Israel. He was sentenced in absentia to 15 years in prison for fraud and money laundering in the case of a “theft of a billion” from 2014 – the biggest banking scandal in all of Moldova’s history. He was then deprived of his position in parliament and the party itself was declared unconstitutional in June. All of its members were banned from participating as candidates in elections for the next five years.

Even though the investigations and raids by government bodies resulted in evidence of numerous violations in the Gagauzian elections, such as illegal campaign financing and meddling with the voter lists, the People’s Assembly (the legislative body) of Gagauzia, as ever, opted for confrontation instead of cooperation with Chişinău. And Gutsul, only months ago a completely unknown figure in Gagauz society, was inaugurated as the new Bashkan with unprecedented festivities. By this point such a loud approach has become Shor’s signature (the source of financing is still unknown).

Immediately after Gutsul’s victory, a two-month-long saga of struggle for executive powers emerged between the People’s Assembly and Shor’s henchmen. On September 20th, the People’s Assembly finally approved the composition of the Executive Committee, which was a clear win for Shor, even though, in practice, it gave control of both legislative and executive organs to Dmitry Konstantinov, the speaker of the People’s Assembly. But this is clearly not the end of the story. There are some pressing questions to be asked here. First, why is Gagauzia now Russia’s main tool of influence in Moldova? Second, how did Shor gain support in Gagauzia? And most importantly, what does it mean for Moldova’s future?

In the April elections won by Gutsul, seven other candidates vied for the position of Bashkan, with most of them advocating for closer ties with Russia. The pro-European government in Chişinău did not even try to nominate a candidate due to the low level of support from among the local population. It may seem strange that geopolitics plays a more important role in local elections than the pressing

issues of social welfare, the redistribution of resources or even the preservation of ethnic identity. The reasons for all this become clear when we look at the historical context.

Identity crisis

The Gagauz are a stateless Turkic Orthodox Christian ethnic group scattered throughout the Balkan peninsula. Their origins are disputed, and there are as many as 21 different theories on where they come from. What history is sure about, however, is that in the 19th century, tsarist Russia offered some of them conditions to move to southern Bessarabia, which it annexed in 1812. Later, this land was allocated to the Moldovan and Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republics. Intensive Russification policies in the region during tsarist and Soviet rule did not exactly help develop Gagauz national identity, but the language was still preserved in informal spoken form.

In the 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and radical nationalisms popping up everywhere, including Romanian nationalism in Moldova, the Gagauz people declared their own republic. Narrowly escaping a bloody civil war, with a great deal of mediation from Turkey, they were granted a special legal status with a degree of economic and political autonomy protected by the Constitution of Moldova. Out of 126,000 Gagauz currently living on the territory of Moldova (according to the national census from 2014), 89 per cent are concentrated in Gagauzia.

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With the whole economy on its knees after the collapse of the USSR, labour migration became a widespread phenomenon across Moldova. Many Gagauz migrated either to Turkey or Russia because they spoke the local languages. Paradoxically, the rediscovery of Turkey did not bring about a renaissance in Gagauz identity. On the contrary, many Gagauz have been distancing themselves from the Turks, stressing their Orthodox Christian culture. Despite the EU and the US

being the main donors in projects designed to promote Gagauz identity and economic development, the sentiments in the region are still primarily pro-Russian. Russian remains the language of education and official communication, while Russian TV channels dominate the media and entertainment landscape.

Since the declaration of the Gagauz Republic in 1989 and throughout the whole history of the autonomous region, Gagauzian political elites have been using geopolitical discourses and manipulating fears of a “unification with Romania” to

distract people from socio-economic problems. This enabled them to get generous financial and political support from Russia while also misappropriating public money from the Gagauzian budget.

But when it comes to Ilan Shor, it was not only the pro-Russian narrative that resonated with voters. After all, other local candidates were also oriented towards Russia. What enabled Shor to consolidate his power in the Gagauz region (normally very cautious towards politicians from outside) was his manipulation of the deteriorating socio-economic situation in Moldova. This has been caused by inflation and the energy crisis, direct consequences of the full-scale war raging in Ukraine. Shor's party promoted anti-government narratives stressing specifically the soaring cost of living and organised massive protests. At one point the party even openly admitted that it had arranged cash payments and transport for the protesters.

Disillusionment and apathy

Shor's tactics did not stop at that, however. Throughout and after the election campaign, numerous grandiose promises were made to the public. Five days prior to the initial round of the Bashkan elections, Shor declared that his party had effectively "secured a special deal on gas and electricity prices in the areas we oversee". The party also promised immediate benefits for voters: 500 million euros of investment for Gagauzia, 7,000 jobs in the region, and an increase in public sector salaries by 30 per cent. Furthermore, shiny 3D models of an airport and an amusement park ("GăgăuziaLand") planned to be built in the area started circulating in social media.

While some parts of the population fell for these promises or the cash hand-outs, a much more concerning trend is the Gagauzians' disillusionment and apathy concerning local politics. This has led to inaction in the face of election fraud and other violations of the law. People increasingly express a lack of trust in politicians and see no point in voting. This enables political actors like Shor to get away with crimes, all the while bribing the impoverished society during election campaigns with mere crumbs of stolen public money. Politicians stealing money has become a norm in the region. That is why the "at least they also share some with us" attitude has become the only way to deal with the situation for some people.

Shor's increasing influence has significant implications not only for Gagauzia but (currently) pro-European Moldova as well. Arguably, Shor's main intention was to gain power in Gagauzia and use it as a springboard to reach national politics. Since the Bashkan is legally also a member of the Cabinet of Moldova, they can be a useful tool in hindering Chişinău's aspirations for Europeanisation. The

position also gives Shor access to the highest level of decision-making. He has now successfully achieved the first step towards his ultimate goal, as Gutsul's role is, as one former Gagauzian MP put it in an interview, "that of a piece of furniture in the Bashkan office".

Along with this grand goal, Shor clearly needs access to the Gagauzian budget, which is possible only through control of the Executive Committee. He also seems to have achieved this. After two months of tensions and bargaining, with rumours about some MPs receiving as much as 200,000 euros for their vote in the assembly, the appointed Executive Committee now includes his loyal servants. Securing control of financial flows is also crucial for Shor because the organisation of aggressive electoral campaigns, dozens of protests and inaugurations with famous artists and red carpets cost a lot of money. Gutsul spent 1,784,841 lei (92,400 euros) in one month in the first election tour, which is almost 12,000 euros more than all the other candidates put together. And these are only the numbers officially declared for the electoral committee, which do not include expenses such as the remunerations for the world-famous artists who allegedly performed "for free".

At the same time, Shor's team understands that it was their glittering but shallow populist promises that enabled their ascent to power. Therefore, his public relations employees are working day and night. On September 20th Gutsul announced that she had made her first official visit to Ankara as Bashkan. She claimed to have talked to many investors ready to cooperate with Gagauzia, but on the Turkish side, the visit was not even duly covered by officials. Moreover, in an interview for Turkish media, she gave promises which are either impossible to keep or are already being implemented through the initiatives of previous legislators. These projects include introducing Gagauz language classes in kindergartens.

Gutsul also claimed that a mysterious "investor" has already agreed to provide 200 million euros to build an airport in the town of Ceadîr-Lunga. However, the investor's name was hidden, and the town administration claimed not to be officially informed of this initiative. Furthermore, since the territory chosen for the airport is located 30 kilometres from the border with war-torn Ukraine, it does not seem possible to get approval in any way for building an airport in this area. A similar shady story is currently unravelling with the construction of the aforementioned amusement park in the village of Congaz.

Wider aspirations

All of the issues above are indicators of Shor's attempts to create an appearance of keeping up with his given promises. This might also signal the party's further

ambitions to win the local elections in Moldova, which are scheduled for November. Using the same tactics and the success achieved in Gagauzia, Shor's candidates might get elected in many more towns and villages throughout Moldova and might even aim for the parliamentary elections. Even though the current central government has been relentlessly trying to purge the political landscape of Shor's influence, banning the party did not help. Shor has already announced three new movements which have been gaining popularity. Some of the Gagauzian political movements have already announced a merger with Shor's new political projects.

Nonetheless, the investigations concerning the illegal financing of Gutsul's campaign are still ongoing, and there are hopes that she will be impeached. However, a proper justice mechanism by nature works thoroughly and slowly, whereas criminal activity is quick. Coupled with an already dire socio-economic situation, these underhanded moves could cause irreversible damage to Moldova's fragile democracy.

The war in Ukraine has shown that it is Gagauzia, not Transnistria, that is Russia's main tool for influencing Moldovan politics. Being a legitimate entity with a legal right to affect local and national elections, Gagauzia is much more influential than the de facto independent Transnistria. While the Kremlin wins in any case, since it does not matter which puppet it gives money to, it is the Gagauz people who are the losers in all this. While relations with Chişinău are rapidly deteriorating, and the budget allocated for the region's development is pouring into some questionable pockets, the degradation of the political class and the indifference of the local community are increasing. All the while, the Gagauz people are becoming depleted, disempowered and stripped of their future and identity. ~~EE~~

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Doom and gloom for Georgia's EU candidacy?

SOSO DZAMUKASHVILI

Despite its claims to be willing to implement all the necessary reforms for EU candidacy, the Georgian government's measures have been slow. Substantial progress has been missing in the areas where **strong political will is required**. While Georgia received the European Commission's recommendation on granting it EU candidate status, much work is yet to be done.

More than a year has passed since Georgia submitted its application to obtain EU candidate status. The announcement followed a similar move by Ukraine in the wake of the Russian aggression, which led to a historic opportunity for other countries which aspired to obtain EU membership. Soon, Moldova demonstrated its interest in applying for candidacy as well. During a crucial summit in Brussels, the 27 leaders of the European Union decided to grant Ukraine and Moldova their much sought-after status as candidate countries. Georgia, on the other hand, was given only a "European perspective", meaning that candidate status will be granted only after the country meets 12 key priorities outlined by the European Commission. Implementing these recommendations would then allow Georgia to move ahead regarding its European integration efforts.

The European Commission reported on the implementation of these recommendations by Georgia for obtaining candidate status – and for Ukraine and Moldova to start accession talks – at the end of October 2023. The EU will make a final decision in December. Initially, this was meant to occur in December 2022, however, the EU postponed the assessment in order to give "enough time" to the

government “to carefully work out its priorities”. Despite that, the Georgian government’s efforts to implement the reforms recommended by the European Commission have been rather slow. Thus far, the ruling party has fully implemented only three out of 12 recommendations and some reforms are still in progress. The Georgian government’s reluctance, as well as its controversial diplomatic moves and statements, significantly undermine the country’s chances of obtaining candidacy. However, there are some possible hopeful scenarios that might help Georgia obtain its sought-after status.

The government’s reluctance

Georgia used to be seen as the leader of the three countries known as the “Association Trio” along with Moldova and Ukraine. These countries signed Association Agreements with Brussels in 2014. Yet in recent years, Georgia’s steady democratic shift has dramatically slowed. While Ukraine has, for understandable reasons, suspended normal democratic practices, Moldova has made a strong case for inclusion due to its pro-western government led by President Maia Sandu.

Georgia meanwhile has been struggling with democratic backsliding. The ruling party has displayed authoritarian tendencies by harassing independent media and politicising the country’s judiciary system. A crisis erupted when opposition parties claimed the parliamentary election was rigged and refused to concede defeat, sparking polarisation and police arrests. Opposition members consequently boycotted the legislature by refusing to take their seats, while the leading party, Georgian Dream, formed a new government. As the crisis hit a deadlock, European Council President Charles Michel personally emerged as a mediator and brokered an agreement to bring all parties back to the table. The deal also proposed a series of electoral and judicial reforms. However, Georgian Dream eventually withdrew, leaving most of the lingering issues unaddressed. This ever-deepening instability was reflected in the Commission’s opinion on Georgia’s EU bid, which did not recommend candidate status for Tbilisi. Hence, the EU put forward a list of issues that Georgia needs to address, including political polarisation, the proper functioning of all state institutions, judiciary issues, money laundering, media freedom, gender equality, civil society participation and organised crime.

Georgia’s ruling party has displayed authoritarian tendencies by harassing independent media and politicising the country’s judiciary system.



Photo: Courtesy of the European Commission

Georgian president, Salome Zourabichvili (left) meets with Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission. As a result of the Zourabichvili's active diplomacy in the EU, the ruling Georgian Dream party announced impeachment proceedings against her, which ultimately failed.

Despite its claims to be willing to implement all the necessary reforms, the Georgian government's measures have been slow. Substantial progress has been missing in the areas where strong political will is required, such as “de-oligarchisation” – one of the most important recommendations for this country struggling with democracy. Initially, the Georgian parliament introduced an anti-oligarch bill which was so weak that it even failed to clearly define the term “oligarch”. Many have considered this deliberate as Georgian Dream's founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili, who is domestically and internationally regarded as an oligarch, is widely seen as the behind-the-scenes ruler of the country. Ultimately, the bill was dropped as per the recommendations of the Venice Commission and Council of Europe. On September 14th this year the government adopted a so-called “de-oligarchisation action plan” more in line with the recommendations. This should serve to put a stop to excessive influence in political, economic and public life interests.

While Georgia received the European Commission's recommendation on granting it EU candidate status, much work is yet to be done. This was reiterated by the EU's top diplomat Josep Borrell during his visit to Tbilisi in September. According to Borrell, even though Georgia fully implemented three recommendations, work on the remaining nine has to continue. Georgia still has some time to obtain full EU candidacy, but the current regime's reluctance to deliver on reforms threatens this historic opportunity. Thus, the window for implementing comprehensive reforms is quickly shrinking.

Ill-timed diplomacy

Since 2012 the Georgian Dream ruling party has been formally pursuing EU integration. However, it has also steadily deepened Georgia's ties with Russia. After coming to power, Georgian Dream followed a so-called "non-irritation" policy towards Russia in order to avoid future conflicts, which resulted in substantial growth in trade relations between the two countries. According to Transparency International, in the first half of 2023, Georgia received two billion US dollars of income from Russia through remittances, tourism and export of goods, which is almost twice as high as the figure for the first half of the previous year. Notably, Georgia has maintained no diplomatic relations with Russia since the 2008 war, which has led to 20 per cent of Georgia's territory being occupied by Moscow. There has been an opening of Russian checkpoints on Georgian-controlled territory, illegal "borderisation", as well as continuous kidnappings of Georgian citizens.

While it would be logical for Georgia to express its full support for Ukraine and condemn Russian aggression, the Georgian government's desire to toe the Russian line is ever more apparent. The ruling party has also abstained from joining sanctions against Russia and emphasised the importance of both sides coming to the table for negotiations to end the war in Ukraine. In the meantime, anti-western propaganda has reached new highs as some members of the ruling coalition have blamed the West for meddling in Georgia's domestic affairs. Ruling party officials, such as the prime minister and ruling party chairman, Irakli Kobakhidze, have been indirectly accusing the West of dragging Georgia into the war and opening a "second front".

The government also decided to renew direct air links between the two countries on May 19th after a four-year break. Amid a sharp warming in relations between

The Georgian Dream has **abstained** from joining sanctions against Russia and emphasised negotiations to end the war in Ukraine.

Moscow and Tbilisi, Russia even restored visa-free travel for citizens of Georgia and lifted a ban on direct flights between the two countries that was imposed in 2019.

In the meantime, the government also decided to elevate bilateral ties to a strategic partnership level with China. In the official document adopted on July 31st, Tbilisi pledged to deepen policy coordination, align development plans, and expand cooperation in the political, economic and cultural domains with Beijing. The pledge to intensify bilateral cooperation could be seen as a logical progression of the relationship, as the ties between Beijing and Tbilisi have been rapidly evolving throughout the past decade within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. Nevertheless, the timing of the new strategic partnership has been controversial. Georgia has been trying to meet key conditions required to obtain EU candidacy

Amid warming relations between Moscow and Tbilisi, Russia restored visa-free travel for citizens of Georgia and lifted a ban on direct flights between the two countries.

but the apprehension about closer linkage with China, from which the EU has been trying to distance itself, has been a diplomatic signal that Tbilisi might be distancing itself from the EU and revisiting its foreign policy. The domestic and international critics of the Georgian Dream party have raised questions regarding the political aspect of the strategic partnership and, more importantly, how it can impact the country's democratic processes in the long run. As Chinese economic engagement with smaller economies often leads to spillover regarding Beijing's political influence, Georgia's willingness to expand cooperation at the political level is concerning.

While Prime Minister Gharibashvili was touring China to conclude the strategic partnership, the government denied President Salome Zourabichvili her plans to tour European capitals to promote Georgia's EU candidacy. The Georgian constitution requires the president to get permission from the government before conducting any foreign policy activities. However, according to the government, Zourabichvili asked for permission for the trip but was refused. On the same day that Zourabichvili was warmly greeted in Brussels by European Council President Charles Michel, who praised her "personal commitment to advancing the European perspective of Georgia", the ruling Georgian Dream party announced on September 1st that it intended to launch impeachment proceedings against her. On October 16th Georgia's constitutional court, which is believed to be under government influence, stated that the president had violated the constitution, authorising the parliament to hold the vote. However, due to a lack of parliamentary support, the impeachment effort failed. The ruling party needed 100 votes but received only 86. Despite that, the government's hostile attitude towards the president amid her

visit to Brussels has been a significant diplomatic signal that, in the whole context of recent developments, further hinders Georgia's bid for EU candidacy.

Possibility of positive scenarios

Even though there are a number of recommendations that the Georgian government needs to readdress, Georgia has made some progress in implementing the 12 priorities. According to the latest report from the Open Society Foundation, one priority is “fully fulfilled” (proactive consideration of ECHR judgments), while two priorities are “mostly fulfilled” (an independent ombudsman and institutional independence of the prosecutor's office, alongside gender equality and violence against women). At the same time, seven are “partially fulfilled” (electoral and institutional reforms, an independent judiciary, anti-corruption measures, media environment, the protection of the human rights of vulnerable groups, the involvement of CSOs in the decision-making process, and the fight against organised crime), and two priorities (de-oligarchisation and political de-polarisation) are “yet to be fulfilled”.

Zourabichvili took some bold moves as well. She has openly criticised the government's “foreign agent” law, which she said would bring Georgia “closer to the flawed Russian model and not to the European model”, before huge street rallies forced Georgian Dream to abandon the draft law. Moreover, in June, Zourabichvili pardoned Nika Gvaramia, the director of an opposition media outlet who had spent more than a year in jail. This occurred amid pressure from western diplomats and international NGOs seeking to secure his release. This move has been seen as a step forward for media freedom and was greatly welcomed by Georgia's western partners. Meanwhile, there have been signals coming from Brussels that Georgia might have a real opportunity to gain candidacy at least as far as it concerns the European Commission's recommendation (the final decision will be made by the Council in December). European Council President Michel has recently voiced his opinions about the need to speed up the enlargement process and has pointedly included Georgia in his remarks.

There have been signals coming from Brussels that Georgia might have a real opportunity to gain EU candidacy status.

Georgia may find it easier to get EU candidacy for another reason: the status has been somewhat “devalued” after Bosnia and Herzegovina obtained it at the end of 2022. Candidacy status was given despite Sarajevo hardly meeting the 14 conditions that Brussels outlined in 2019. The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrates

that the bar has been lowered. All European countries that have aspired to join the EU are candidates except Georgia (with the exception of Kosovo, which is not recognised as an independent state by five EU member states). Considering that EU enlargement is back on the discussion table again and EU officials are actively discussing the future of an enlarged bloc, Tbilisi could obtain candidacy as long as it keeps implementing reforms.

Both Moldova and Ukraine have only met several conditions outlined by the European Commission, three and two respectively. If this progress allows both Ukraine and Moldova to open accession talks, it would be logical and fair for Georgia to obtain candidate status. Since the three countries applied for membership, the EU has been addressing them together as a group. Similarly, it can be expected that Tbilisi will not be isolated from Kyiv and Chişinău within the Associated Trio. In another possible scenario, Georgia could advance with its candidacy but with certain conditions, meaning that opening accession talks would require meeting them. This, however, does not mean that the Georgian government should stop moving forward with the reforms outlined in the Commission's key priorities. In this situation, it is crucial for the country to send positive signals similar to the release of opposition journalist Nika Gvaramia. Georgia cannot afford to be denied candidacy, as it could be a big frustration for a society that overwhelmingly supports EU integration. ~~EE~~

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Mapping scenarios for Belarus

STEFANO BRAGHIROLI AND ANDREY MAKARYCHEV

A recent study sought to design and investigate possible alternative (and mutually exclusive) futures for Belarus. The scenarios from that study presented here can **act as a compass** to help observers make sense of Belarus's future direction. This is in spite of the dense fog of regional geopolitics and Lukashenka's often unreadable black box of repression.

“Marco enters a city; he sees someone in a square living a life or an instant that could be his; he could now be in that man's place, if he had stopped in time, long ago; or if, long ago, at a crossroads, instead of taking one road he had taken the opposite one, and after long wandering he had come to be in the place of that man in the square. By now, from that real or hypothetical past of his, he is excluded; he cannot stop; he must go on to another city, where another of his pasts awaits him, or something perhaps that had been a possible future of his and is now someone else's present. Futures not achieved are only branches of the past: dead branches.”

From Italo Calvino's *Invisible cities*

As in the case of Marco, a country's future developments are a function of its past choices and experiences. This inescapable path dependence, affecting both internal developments and relations with other countries, implies that past events or momentous decisions constrain later events or decisions and make certain futures more likely than others. Given the intricacies and structural imbalances of the international system, some of these events and decisions are shaped by coun-

tries, while others are beyond their control and ultimately shape countries' policies through a varying mix of internal and external factors.

With this context in mind, a recent study sought to design and investigate possible alternative (and mutually exclusive) futures for Belarus. These are summarised in this piece. It takes into account the geopolitical and security landscape in Eastern Europe, which was drastically transformed by Russia's war against Ukraine, as well as the political developments in the aftermath of the 2020 fraudulent presidential election. After all, this was followed by mass scale protests and violent repressions.

In the context of war

Belarus's domestic stability and international *liberté de manoeuvre* have been severely affected by the war in Ukraine. Three main implications can be highlighted in relation to the present status quo. First, Belarus's international isolation and pariah status have worsened greatly with the start of the war, as the regime has been increasingly identified as Moscow's partner in crime. Second, because of this, Minsk's dependency on Moscow as a vassal has grown more apparent. Third, while the regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka has attempted to trigger a "rally around the

Belarus's domestic stability and international *liberté de manoeuvre* have been severely affected by the war in Ukraine.

flag" reaction to the war in Ukraine, this has proven generally unsuccessful. Belarusians' disapproval of Lukashenka's rule appears widespread. Additionally, negative feelings towards Russia and sympathy towards Ukraine are also growing in the country.

Despite Lukashenka's diminished role, the regime's agency has not completely disappeared and can re-emerge in unpredictable formats or contexts. These include Yevgeny Prigozhin's march towards Moscow and the partial relocation of the Wagner group to Belarus. In addition, developments directly connected to Lukashenka's vassal status, such as the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, can be instrumentalised by the regime to secure its position, given Minsk's augmented relevance in Putin's eyes.

Setting the framework and designing alternative scenarios for Belarus

In drafting the future scenarios for Belarus, we began with two general presumptions. First, the scenario matrix views possible domestic transformations and foreign policy developments related to Belarus's statehood and external relations

as two variables of equal weight. Secondly, along the lines of analogical reasoning, all probable scenarios are based on identifiable patterns that have previously taken place under structurally comparable (but not identical) political conditions in the former Soviet space. We propose to single out three domestic and three international options that, with a reasonable degree of probability, might affect – in some shape or form – political change in Belarus and affect its relations with neighbours.

The domestic options of development include:

- The **Putin story**: a life-long presidency of Lukashenka regardless of any constitutional or institutional changes;
- The **Nazarbayev story**: a guided soft transition of power to a loyal successor;
- The **Yanukovych story**: another wave of mass-scale protests triggering Maidan-like repercussions in Belarus.

Meanwhile, the external options include the following geopolitical possibilities:

- The **Union State**: the status quo within the framework of the Union State with the current degree of relative autonomy for Belarus;
- **Multi-vectorism**: a more independent foreign policy, within which Russian influence might be balanced (or reduced) by the EU and/or China;
- **Belarus no more**: Russia’s political-military absorption of Belarus means that it de-facto ceases to exist as an independent state.

As we cross domestic and external options, a matrix of potential future scenarios for Belarus emerges.

	Union State	Multi-vectorism	Belarus no more
The Putin story	1: The regime survives and keeps its vassal status in relation to Russia.	2: Lukashenka gains more freedom vis-à-vis Russia and opportunities to engage with other actors.	3: Lukashenka is downgraded to the head of a Russian federal district.
The Nazarbayev story	4: Fresh faces in the regime might attempt to reduce Belarus’s vassal status, while preserving the special relationship with Russia.	5: A changing regime engages in a more independent foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia and engages with other actors, also in the West.	6: A chosen successor is incorporated into the Russian elite with some administrative autonomy.
The Yanukovych story	7: Following the toppling of Lukashenka, Moscow accepts change if protests do not become anti-Russian, and tries to shape the transition and maintain the status quo.	8: The new “revolutionary” elites try to balance Russia’s influence and conduct an independent foreign policy. Attempts to break away from Russia are possible.	9: The new “revolutionary” elites pursue rupture with Moscow and Russia reacts by occupying Belarus (with or without a role for the CSTO).

Unpacking the nine scenarios

As we designed the setting of our alternative scenarios, we tried to address several underpinning questions related to the main shapers of change, the timing of the potential change (i.e. short, mid and long-term perspectives), the potential implications for the EU and NATO, the impact of escalation or de-escalation around Ukraine on the scenarios, and the effect of potential “black swans”.

From a static perspective, the scenarios presented below are considered mutually exclusive. However, from a more fluid perspective, initial scenarios can evolve into different ones, as we move from short to mid or long-term considerations.

Scenario 1: Lukashenka has more chances to stay in power in the case of a negative scenario for Russia in Ukraine, since it will not be in the Russian interest to dethrone him in times of geopolitical trouble and perceived insecurity for Moscow. In the short-term perspective, it is military might that matters the most here. Yet in the long run political and economic factors will prevail.

Scenario 2: This might be a mid to long-term scenario, subject to Russia’s weakening due to the costs of the war, new packages of sanctions, and international isolation. The more Russia is busy with overcoming the effects of the war against Ukraine, the fewer resources it has to invest in Belarus and the more incentives and freedom Lukashenka has for distancing himself from Moscow and finding new room for manoeuvre. While a turn towards the EU is out of the picture, given western unity on isolating Lukashenka’s Belarus, engagement with China might – in the long term – represent a way to overcome over-dependence on Russia.

Scenario 3: Under this scenario Belarus ceases to exist as a sovereign state, with the implicit approval/acceptance of the current leadership of the country. The probability of such an option is low during the war. However, this might become more feasible in the long term following Russian success in Ukraine or the stabilisation of the war. Three sub-scenarios might be envisioned here:

- 3A:** Lukashenka relinquishes Belarus’s statehood as he grows increasingly distrustful towards his state framework (i.e. praetorianism) that might not be able to guarantee his protection from societal pressure. He may also be fearful of a palace plot from within his power circle (i.e. Lukashenka as “governor of Belarus”).
- 3B:** Russia intervenes without consulting Lukashenka but keeps him as a powerless puppet, fearing mass protests and a “colour revolution”.
- 3C:** Russia creates a neo-imperial entity under its leadership to include de-facto states and recently occupied regions (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, occupied regions of Ukraine following illegitimate referenda, and Belarus). This scenario implies the tangible possibility of the further esca-

lation of existing tensions, and a more accentuated western policy of containment.

Scenario 4: Lukashenka steps down for a number of reasons, ranging from health conditions to growing societal unpopularity and/or the dissatisfaction of the Kremlin. This scenario is more likely in the mid to long term. Due to increasing vulnerabilities and in an attempt to preserve a convenient status quo, Lukashenka may start a guided transition. The Kremlin might support this plan, given Putin's declining faith in Lukashenka. While the war in Ukraine is likely to further reduce Lukashenka's independence, its impact on the likelihood of this scenario is unclear. However, the more the current state of things progresses, the more Lukashenka himself becomes a passive actor, rather than an active player in the transition. New faces within the regime might also prove difficult to control in the mid and long term. Despite these new elites' strong reliance on Russia, in case of growing difficulties in Ukraine, the possibility of contacts with the West could emerge (even with Moscow's blessing). In this case, the West can try to influence the new generation of power holders in Minsk with political and economic incentives, though with rather modest outcomes.

The scenarios are based on **patterns** that have previously taken place under comparable conditions in the former Soviet space.

Scenario 5: In the mid to long term, a new group of decision makers in Minsk manage to diversify Belarus's foreign policy, which is preconditioned by Russia's weakness and disengagement from close ties with the new regime, along with pressure from civil society (further development of scenario 4). China might start developing a more consistent policy toward Belarus, offering new openings. The West might also condition the country's de-isolation on reforms by using economic and political sticks and carrots. A Russian reaction would be expected. In the case of the successful conclusion of the war with Russia, Ukraine might become a strong pole of attraction across the entire region of Eastern Europe. Under this scenario, the role of Belarusian civil society might prove key.

Scenario 6: Under this option Lukashenka is hesitant to change the status quo himself and intentionally delegates this function to a successor, unable or unwilling to preserve Belarusian statehood. This powerless figure politically surrenders to increasing Russian pressure and agrees on the Russian conditions of de-facto capitulation (i.e. liquidation of Belarusian statehood). This is a long-term scenario and implies a relatively strong and self-assertive Russia after the war in Ukraine.

Scenario 7: A highly unlikely scenario in the short term. It might hypothetically be driven by domestic factors (i.e. worsening economic conditions or increased domestic repression) or by tectonic shifts in Belarus's stance towards the war (i.e.

the direct intervention of Belarusian troops in Ukraine). In the short term, although anti-war sentiments are very strong, they are unlikely to lead to significant societal mobilisation and, with Moscow's support, Lukashenka's repressive state framework can successfully deal with future protests. In the long term, if Lukashenka becomes too weak and societal mobilisation gains momentum, Russia will either intervene militarily (scenario 9) or agree to a controlled transition (scenario 4). However, if Russia grows increasingly weak due to disastrous outcomes from its war in Ukraine, it might have to accept the transition – provided that the revolution does not take an openly anti-Russian stance (i.e. Nikol Pashinyan in Armenia) – and try to influence its direction towards co-opting some opposition figures. Limited engagement with the West and other international actors is compatible with this scenario.

Scenario 8: Based on the Ukrainian experience of the Euromaidan, the more radical protests are, the stronger the demand for Europeanisation with openly anti-Russian overtones. These events can lead to radical political changes both domestically and in terms of international alliances. In this context, multi-vectorism

The **outcome** of the war in Ukraine will most likely to affect the likelihood of the scenarios identified.

might become either an alternative to full-fledged (and potentially dangerous) Euro-Atlantic integration, or military neutrality. For this scenario to become conceivable in the mid or long term, Russia should be considerably weakened and unable to prevent the loss of its monopoly over Belarus. Western institutions should be willing to engage with and integrate Belarus. Alternatively, China could show an interest in increasing its economic, financial and technological influence over

Belarus at the expense of Russia. In the case of a Russian military intervention triggered by this state of affairs, the situation could evolve towards scenario 9 or scenarios defined by rows one or two of the table.

Scenario 9: This is an unlikely scenario in the short term. Even if a rupture with the Kremlin is pursued by new “revolutionary” elites, this scenario is only possible if the society and elites converge in their disdain for Moscow's policies. In the mid-term, Russia's war in Ukraine and its outcome will play a big role. In the unlikely case of Russia's success in Ukraine, there is a bigger possibility of a “Belarus no more” scenario by the time Minsk holds the next election. This is because Russia will have more repressive energy to invest. Questions remain as to how the people of Belarus and the West would react to such an event. If Russia dramatically fails in Ukraine or the war effort drags on, the probability of societal mobilisation increases. Depending on how much Lukashenka gets dragged into the war, his involvement might also alienate the elites. A combination of Russia's economic and geopolitical decline, resistance of the Belarusian population, and pressure from the

West will make the “Belarus no more” scenario less feasible. The situation could then evolve towards scenarios 8 or 5, depending on the leverage of the *ancien régime*.

A few necessary caveats

We view the scenarios presented here not as a crystal ball, but as a sort of compass that can help observers to make sense of Belarus’s future direction. This is in spite of the dense fog of regional geopolitics and of Lukashenka’s often unreadable black box of repression. We do not imply in any way that other scenarios (or sub-scenarios) are implausible, but we tried to base our exercise on trends and dynamics previously identified in the post-Soviet space. We also limited our imagination to realistic limits as much as possible, with an eye on regional and contextual path dependency.

Of all the possible external variables, the outcome of the war in Ukraine and Moscow’s defeat or success are the most likely to affect the likelihood of the scenarios identified. These will determine Belarus’s future distance from the current status quo. Lastly, it was our deliberate choice to avoid direct references to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, her team, or other opposition figures as we designed the nine scenarios. While this was done to guarantee an appropriate level of conceptual abstraction within our typology and not to deny their key impact in opposing the regime, their role in shaping Belarus’s future direction fits well with the logic of the scenarios we propose. ~~EE~~

This study was conducted within the framework of the project “Raising awareness on civil society of Belarus through learning and research activities” supported by the 2020–2023 Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid programme of the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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Roma refugees from Ukraine face additional adversity

MADELEINE CUCKSON

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a large portion of Ukraine's Roma population escaped as refugees alongside their fellow Ukrainians. However, they **were not always met with open arms** and many faced additional challenges and discrimination.

In the face of Russia's war on Ukraine, the subsequent hardships of Ukraine's Roma population, both as refugees and internally displaced people, has drawn the world's attention to the double standards refugee host countries hold even in the face of danger and destruction. It is estimated that of the approximate 400,000 Roma living in Ukraine (this rough figure is due to migration and lack of Roma documentation), 25 per cent have fled since the beginning of Russia's February 2022 invasion. Yet, unlike non-Roma Ukrainians, who have generally felt welcomed when seeking refuge in Ukraine's neighbouring Eastern European countries, Roma Ukrainians have oftentimes faced prejudice and distrust. This is similar to that which they face in their homeland.

From the start of the war, Roma have seemingly had to prove their legitimacy as Ukrainians – demonstrating overt solidarity with their nation. The Ukrainian Roma rights group “Roma and Youth Roma Council”, issued a statement to this effect just days after the start of the full-scale invasion. “Roma have lived on the territory of Ukraine for more than 600 years, and consider it their Motherland!”

the statement declares. They went on to list specific acts of Roma Ukrainian bravery, including when one group “requisitioned a tank of the Russian invaders” and “along with everyone else... stand on the front lines”.

History with oppression

The origins of the Roma people are somewhat uncertain. They are considered an Indo-Aryan ethnic group and it is thought that they migrated to what is now considered to be Eastern Europe from India in the 11th century. In the Romani language “rom” simply means “people” and has, in this century, come to replace “gypsy” in official terminology – a name which was placed upon Roma by non-Roma. Estimates regarding the arrival of Roma in Eastern Europe span a wide timeframe, from the seventh to the 13th centuries. This is due to various groups leaving India and migrating to the region at different points. It is believed that the Roma first began their westward journey from Eastern Europe in the 15th century. Their traditions, language and customs, distinct from those of their host regions, have subjected them to centuries of challenges and oppression.

It is thought that Roma first migrated from the Romanian lands to Ukraine and Russia in the second half of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. Ukraine’s surrounding countries (Moldova, Romania, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary) all share histories of Roma oppression. In border areas, such as Hungary’s Transcarpathian region, Roma Ukrainians often speak the language of the bordering country in addition to Ukrainian and Russian, as well as holding two passports. This means that some regard Roma Ukrainians as economic migrants rather than refugees. In Hungary, for instance, tens of thousands of Roma possess Hungarian passports, but this status does not necessarily work in their favour as refugees. The Transcarpathian region (which borders Slovakia, Romania and Hungary), with its complex history of changing borders and multiple occupations, now falls within Ukraine’s jurisdiction. In this region, the Roma population, estimated at 30,000 to 40,000, grapples with high poverty levels.

Notably, it was difficult to persuade Roma Ukrainians to speak with me about their experiences – some Roma Ukrainians I spoke with denied they had experienced prejudiced behaviour, despite aid workers telling me directly about their discriminatory cases. Some were concerned about where and for whom the article will be published, while others said they were on the road and had no clear idea

Estimates regarding the arrival of Roma in Eastern Europe span a wide timeframe, from the seventh to the 13th centuries.

when they might be able to establish a secure connection to talk. Around half of those spoken to could not read or write – all interviews were carried out in person and on the phone.

“They are either scared, or don’t know their rights,” said social worker Oleg, who works at the Roma Education Fund in Bucharest. Oleg is from the Republic of Moldova and speaks both Russian and Romanian. From the start of the war, Oleg was stationed in Bucharest’s main train station and noticed marked differences

It is increasingly difficult to find housing for Ukrainian Roma in Romania, who often arrive with their extended families.

in the treatment of Roma refugees by authorities and volunteers there. “Roma people were sometimes discriminated against even by state social workers or volunteers from various organisations, they were treated with suspicion or more harshly when they tried to access the same services: water, food, clothes or accommodation,” he noted.

It is increasingly difficult to find housing for Roma in Romania, who often arrive with their extended families. Oleg commented that “even a refugee centre organised by a church told me that they do not accommodate Roma.” “Are they Roma?” is now a commonplace question asked by the municipalities working with refugees and aid workers. One church centre has a strict no Roma policy due to apparent previous noise complaints from neighbours.

Personal struggles

Lilia is a 60-year-old Roma Ukrainian woman from Odesa Oblast. She has lived in Bucharest since the outbreak of the war. “All together in my family we are 18 people here, mostly children,” she tells me. “I am trying to find work for my children but it is hard. We can’t seem to find employment.” Due to the size of her family it is difficult to house them all together. Under a now concluded government programme in Romania, in which accommodation for Ukrainians was free, Lilia and her family found an apartment: “it was appealing to the landlord because we are a big family so they got more money.” Now the scheme has ended and Lilia, with her family, is housed in a centre for refugees because they could not afford to rent the apartment.

Oleg often translates at job interviews for Ukrainian Roma refugees in Bucharest and has observed that even for the most willing, there are usually setbacks. “More than once I went with someone to an interview, and as soon as they saw the person’s face, the employer said that they were no longer hiring.” The unemployment

rate for Roma stands at two-thirds – meaning, being both Roma and not speaking Romanian makes the chances of finding employment even slimmer.

27-year-old Svitlana has first-hand experience of racial abuse in the workplace. Originally from Ukraine's Artsyz region, she has three children, speaks some Romanian and moved to Bucharest in August last year due to the war. For a period of time she was employed for some months at a supermarket warehouse. "The manager treated me differently to the others, she shouted at me more, used more vulgar language, swore [at me]." One day, after an inappropriate comment was made by her manager about deceased relatives, Svitlana retaliated, shouting back at her employer. She was fired on the spot. "We are also treated with suspicion in the supermarket. Once my child was accused of trying to steal something, when we were in fact waiting in the line to pay."

According to statistics, there are around 1.85 million Romanian Roma currently living in Romania, which makes up 8.32 per cent of the whole population. Little is said about Roma slavery, which lasted for hundreds of years during the Ottoman Empire (this took place in what was then Wallachia and Western Moldavia (now Romania) and spanned almost five centuries). Roma slavery was only fully prohibited in 1864 and it undoubtedly seriously stunted integration and perpetuated prejudice.

A common misunderstanding is that Roma are one homogenous group. "Sometimes there is no solidarity and unity between Roma from Ukraine," Oleg tells me. Indeed, Roma do not always associate with other groups of Roma (based on location, status, etc.) and have nuanced differences when it comes to religion, language and lifestyle. Some have travelling lifestyles, but the majority in Eastern Europe are now sedentary. This disparate grouping of Roma means there is no collective desire for a homeland and never seems to have been. Instead, Roma across the world comprise an amalgamation of heterogeneous groups. In Romania alone there are thought to be over 40 different groups of Roma, some speaking the Romani language, others not. These vast differences have, over time, incited the question of whether the Roma people can be considered one ethnic group.

From what Oleg has observed, for the vast majority of Roma, Romania has served as a transit country to go further west. This is despite "a few successful stories" of integration, due to "the hostility of the authorities here and the intolerant society". Nationalism and its link to "intolerance" has been a part of Romania since its inception as a nation in the 17th century. However, Romania is currently seeing a new wave of nationalism, confounded by the Alliance for the Union of Romanians

For the vast majority of Roma refugees, Romania has served as a transit country to go further west.

(AUR) party, established only a few years ago. Such conservatism does nothing to better attitudes towards Roma. Indeed, one of AUR's leaders has described Roma as a "social plague".

Discrimination from day one

Roma political parties have not yet managed to gain widespread recognition on the political stage. The European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), founded in 1966, was the first large body to combat Roma hatred in Europe. Jonathan Lee is the ERRC's advocacy and communications director. He says that Roma have faced discrimination since the first days of war – "They were denied exit from the country, given unequal access to aid, profiled and segregated at border crossings, and accommodated in sub-standard and segregated centres in several countries."

In Moldova, the ERRC have found segregated Roma accommodation centres and are now working with "local activists and local government to improve conditions inside these centres, but they remain places of ethnic segregation", according to Lee. There have even been cases of physical violence. "We have taken legal action against those responsible for a pepper spray attack on Romani refugees in

one centre in Chişinău." But bringing anyone to justice remains a challenge as "people are afraid, isolated and frequently unwilling to risk taking legal action against their host countries."

Roma people
who lack official
documentation have
found it much more
difficult to access help
during war time.

At the beginning of the war, Romania's refugee housing centres were disproportionately populated by Roma families, and largely still are. Stefania has been the coordinator of a shelter in Romania's capital of Bucharest for more than a year. "There were always strong rules against discrimination, we inform all the staff and volunteers about this obligation to have the same attitude towards all."

Despite training, there were "some volunteers who visibly preferred to help families who are not Roma – those who could not accept our policies on discrimination quit volunteering with us". Stefania points out that one of the main battles in the centre is prejudice from non-Roma Ukrainians – "When they arrived from Ukraine they asked very publicly and loudly not to share a room with Roma. The Roma Ukrainians seem to be used to this attitude of direct discrimination."

Most of those staying at the centre Stefania manages are there long term. "Marginalised people or the ones with high risk of marginalisation don't risk trying other options and they lack contacts, they lack resources. So most of them remain

here long term,” she explains. For Stefania, what the centre can do is to arm Roma with knowledge on their rights abroad. “We asked a feminist NGO which fights for Roma rights to inform them about the law against discrimination, instruments to defend themselves at all levels and their rights in Romania as an EU country.”

Integratory and informative programmes are in place across Romania for Roma Ukrainians. Oleg explains that at the Roma Education Fund there is “a training centre where parents with refugee Roma children come to learn Romanian, English, drawing, driving lessons, etc. We also had psychological counselling for adults to help them integrate into Romanian society and a European state”.

Roma people who lack official documentation have found it much more difficult to access help during war time as internally displaced people. Ukrainians without documents or financial means often fall into the “internally displaced people” category. A registered or permanent address is necessary in Ukraine for most governmental help. This therefore makes it tough for some Roma to prove they moved to a city or town because of attacks on their homes. Not to mention they are sometimes not welcome at shelters. Instead, some are redirected to Zakarpattia, where they are told that more appropriate accommodation is available for Roma people. Zakarpattia Oblast is within the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine, where a large percentage of Roma Ukrainians live and 35 per cent speak Romani as their first language.

Complicated relations

It is certainly not the case that all Roma Ukrainians have negative experiences abroad as refugees. Renata, 33, stays at a free housing centre in Bucharest. “I haven’t received any bad treatment in Romania – people are kind and we are very grateful to this country,” she tells me. Additionally, “passing” as non-Roma seems to be an uncomfortable way that some avoid prejudice. Dina, a 30-year-old mother of two, has been living in Bucharest since May last year. Originally from Kyiv, she has a Roma Ukrainian father and Slavic Ukrainian mother. “People don’t see that I’m Roma, so I haven’t had bad experiences here, my children are integrated in schools and I have been offered help from different organisations,” Dina explains.

The Czech Republic has taken the most Ukrainian refugees, per capita, than any other Eastern European country, standing at around 350,000 – with a population of just 10.5 million themselves. In June 2023, a Hungarian Roma man was stabbed to death on a tram by what the police claimed was a Ukrainian man. This has further complicated relations between Ukrainian Roma, Czech Roma and non-Roma Czechs, and only caused uproar amongst Czech Roma, who believe Ukrain-

ians are taking their places in schools and take precedence over them for other vital resources.

One of the more shocking aspects of Czech Roma history is that from 1966 until 2012, the Czechoslovak and then Czech authorities forcibly sterilised Roma women to combat an apparently excessive birth rate. This was a process often coerced during childbirth – a document would often be passed to the woman in the labour room for them to sign, agreeing to sterilisation – despite the disorienting situation and statistically sizeable number of Roma who are illiterate.

Despite Roma history on Ukrainian territory spanning over six centuries, the struggle for recognition and acceptance persists, both at home and abroad. We have witnessed governmental and non-governmental bodies in Eastern Europe grapple with the balance between assimilation and integration, attempting to accommodate Roma refugees while preserving their enduring and diverse traditions within nations where their ethnicity always constitutes a minority. For social worker Oleg, “It’s not about different training for aid workers to be able to work with Roma – it is about understanding their customs, traditions and accepting those differences.” ~~EE~~

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Fear of Russian drones creates anxiety in Romanian villages

VLAD IAVIȚĂ

As Ukraine has been trying to re-route its crucial wheat and corn exports via its ports on the Danube river, Russia has begun targeting them. Their proximity to Romania creates a **significant risk to the local residents**, who feel their concerns remain unaddressed. Drones or fragment of drones have already crashed on this NATO country's territory, with little recourse.

“The sky was lighting up from the tracer ammunition fired by the Ukrainians and you could see the outline of the drones. The last one crashed at 00:20 – I can show you on my surveillance cameras how loud the bang was. And I told myself: this is one hundred per cent in Romania,” recalls Neculae Marian, a resident of the city of Tulcea who owns a house in the village of Plauru.

Following multiple crashes of Russian drones on Romanian territory around the settlement, confidence is low and frustrations towards the country's decision-makers are at a high. Neculae becomes visibly irate when talking about the government's response and argues that the authorities have been consistently disingenuous about the risks faced by the local population.

Escalation at the ports

At first glance, Plauru is an unremarkable village on the banks of the Danube River with a population of only a few dozen people. Yet recently, it has caught the attention of Romanian and international media after several Russian drones crashed in its proximity. The recent explosions on NATO territory have left many concerned about the risks of the war spilling over from Ukraine, while locals continue to feel unprotected by the already distrusted authorities, who have ignored their most basic necessities for decades.

After Russia withdrew from the Turkey-brokered grain deal with Ukraine on July 17th this year, Kyiv found one of its key economic lifelines jeopardised. Overnight, its main way of exporting its enormous agricultural outputs to world markets became virtually unusable, with Moscow stating that any commercial ships disregarding its blockade would be considered “legitimate military targets”.

As a result, Ukraine has been trying to re-route its crucial wheat and corn exports via EU countries, using rail links, and through Reni and Izmail, its two key ports on the Danube. The strategic importance of the two river ports grew even greater as cheap Ukrainian grain exports have become a thorny issue in some EU countries, with Poland, Hungary and Slovakia still enforcing export bans. They claim these are necessary to protect their own agricultural producers from unfair competition.

Russia was quick to ramp up its attacks on Ukraine’s alternative export routes, striking the Danube port of Reni for the first time on July 24th, only one week after exiting the Black Sea Grain Deal. At the time, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis reacted by condemning the attack and calling the strikes at such proximity to the Romanian border an “escalation”.

After the first attack, Russia soon started to regularly target these port cities with night-time drone strikes, using relatively inexpensive Shahed UAVs manufactured in Iran. In August, the mayor of Ceatalchioi and nearby Plauru, a settlement only 300 metres across the Danube from the port of Izmail, warned that locals saw Russian drones violating the country’s airspace and flying over their houses in an attempt to confuse Ukrainian air defences. These statements were at the time dismissed by the country’s defence minister, who attempted to reassure citizens that at no time did any Russian drone cross into Romanian territory.

When a drone finally crashed and exploded on Romanian territory on September 4th, the immediate reaction from both the government and the country’s president was to vehemently deny that any such incident occurred in the first place. Only after evidence emerged that a drone did indeed crash in Romania, and the Ukrainian foreign ministry’s spokesperson Oleg Nikolenko shared an image confirming an explosion on Romanian territory, did the authorities admit that the in-

cident had occurred. Later in September, one drone crashed in the Danube so close to Plauru that the shockwave destroyed the windows in one villager's house. Since the first incident, two more drones crashed in the surrounding area, the most recent incident taking place in the early hours of October 12th.

Poor communication

Marius Ghincea, a researcher at the European University Institute and a foreign policy expert, points out that this incoherent communication is in line with the general instincts of the Romanian state institutions. Overall, it seems that they are attempting to manage situations in which they have incomplete information. Ghincea states that "In Romanian bureaucratic culture it is problematic to say, "I don't know." It is simpler to just deny that something existed." To him, this sequence of events proves yet again that the Romanian government continues to have limited capacity to monitor the region and even engage in clear, articulate communication regarding security incidents.

The poor communication and engagement from Bucharest are key issues raised by Tudor Cerneagă, the mayor of Ceatalchioi, the settlement that includes the village of Plauru. Leaning in his office chair, Cerneagă notes that it took painstaking persistence for the central authorities to take the otherwise evident security risks seriously.

He insists that the government's initial denials ended up having a negative effect on local residents' confidence: "The fact that they have been denying things with indifference only generated more concern amongst locals." He added that appropriate support did not appear initially, but now, with regular briefing meetings between local authorities and the army taking place, collaboration is moving in the right direction.

Nevertheless, some of the measures taken by the government to reassure people in Plauru have only exposed the chronic underinvestment that has left the village decades behind the rest of the country. In the year 2023, Plauru is a settlement that does not have running water, public transport links with nearby towns, or cellular service. When the army built two bomb shelters for locals to take cover during any future drone incidents, the government intended to show that it is taking its citizens' safety concerns seriously. However, without being covered by Romania's cellular network, no warning messages from the country's emergency signalling service can be delivered.

When asked about the emergency alerts, Gheorghe Puflea, a 70-year-old resident of Plauru, said that they are not getting through to villagers' phones, and

that only one man in his village received the alerts in time. As a result, this man was able to use the shelter during the last drone strike. “To talk on the phone with my wife, I have to go all the way to the back of the garden and behind the shed to catch some signal,” he says.

Ceatalchioi Mayor Tudor Cerneagă expressed his frustration with the government’s apathy regarding this issue. He has raised the problem with the authorities on multiple occasions. At the moment, residents all across the area, within 30 kilometres of Romania’s Danube border with Ukraine, receive “RO-Alert” warning messages on incoming drone attacks. However, the Plauru villagers, who need them the most, do not.

Pessimism and distrust

As the drone strikes persist and local residents continue to be cut off from the rest of the country, all that is left for them to do is wait and hope for the best. Everybody is concerned by the attacks, and about their livelihoods and physical safety if the next UAV happens to crash in the village.

“They keep on insisting that there is no danger, nothing. If that drone fell on my house, who would have paid for it? But even if it killed you on the street, the state would have had no issue with it whatsoever,” concludes Neculae Marian bitterly, before driving off.

When a drone
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Some villagers are so sceptical towards the authorities’ commitment to their well-being that they view the recently erected shelters as little more than a PR exercise with no practical purpose. One villager, who wished to remain anonymous, believes that the shelters were only built for the sake of television cameras: “Can’t you see what it looks like? A real shelter would need to have solid metal doors to protect you from an explosion – if a bomb lands next to this place its shockwave would still crush you inside.”

Despite the overall sense of pessimism and the distrust voiced by locals all around Plauru, nobody plans to leave their home. When asked about the possibility of moving somewhere safer, Gheorghe Puflea is unequivocal in his response: “Here is where my father’s legacy is. Here is the house he left me. After I retired, I tried to raise some animals, I have two cows, two horses. What will I do with all this? Let’s say I move to my flat in the city. Can I take all these with me? Can I take it all to my flat? No, I can’t.”

A Cargo vessel crossing the Sulina Canal, in the Danube Delta.

Photo: Vlad Iaviță





Cranes operating at the port of Izmail.

Photo: Vlad Iaviță





An abandoned bus stop in Plauru. The village has no public transport links with nearby towns.

Photo: Vlad Iaviță





One of the two bomb shelters built in September in Plauru.

Photo: Vlad Iaviță




Plauru and Ceatalchioi mayor Tudor Cerneagă speaking in his office.

Photo: Vlad Iaviță



Following the completion of a government report on the September drone incidents, Romania's defence minister, Angel Tîlvăr, told the parliament's Chamber of Deputies that Russia did not target Romania intentionally and that the UAVs crashed in its territory after direct hits from Ukrainian air defences made them uncontrollable. The minister explained that the country's air monitoring systems did not pick up the drone movements due to "objective reasons" related to their low altitude and erratic flight trajectory.

As long as Ukraine continues to export its grain through its Danube ports, Russia will continue to disrupt the commercial activities taking place there through a variety of means. When asked why the Russian military takes the gamble of sending UAVs right next to NATO territory, knowing this could cause lethal accidents, analyst Marius Ghincea offers an instant assessment: "Because the benefits are higher than the risks and they likely expect based on previous situations that the Romanian government will not react." According to Ghincea, through its hesitant initial reaction, the Romanian government has already signalled a degree of tolerance towards Russia's activities in dangerous proximity to its border, which Moscow will likely continue to exploit.

In the coming months, Ukraine will continue to try everything to successfully dispatch its exports and keep money flowing in. Meanwhile, locals in Plauru continue to wait for connectivity improvements in their village, while keeping an ear out for clearer security guarantees from the government. It is certain that Russia will too. 

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A story about the Elbe

A story about Europe

JAN ŠÍCHA

European civilisation has developed by means of a few large leaps: Rome, Renaissance, Enlightenment and the European Union. Of course, the EU's role is still underway and thus we do not know what its end will look like. But what all these leaps have in common is their **connection to the land**. In this way, the story of the Elbe river and its surroundings is the story of European history as a whole.

I was commissioned to write a book about the Elbe river by the Labirynt Publishing House in Czechia. I have known the publisher – Joachim Dvořák – since 1990. Labirynt is known for publishing good books with very nice covers. That is why I was happy to receive its offer and more than anything else that the topic of my new book would be about the river. In my youth, I was racing in fast-flowing upper rivers. Today, I opt for calmer waters and sail in larger boats. To me, a river is like the stream of life. Before I would kayak in the fast mountain streams, today I float in calmer waters with my children and grandchildren.

Influences that came from Saxony

In Czech the word Elbe has, grammatically speaking, a neutral gender. In German, on the other hand, it is feminine noun. It is as if at the border between Ger-

many and Czechia a girl becomes a woman. The life of a woman is longer, just like the Elbe is longer on the German side. The Elbe allows you to look back in time, into Europe's ancient history. It allows you to ponder and ask questions about the past, but also about the ecology and trade or even the ways in which people like to spend their free time. There is indeed a plethora of topics that the river inspires you to address. This is because when sailing on its waters, you encounter Europe.

In Litoměřice when you turn towards the border, you can see the Central Bohemian Uplands with the beautiful *Labské pískovce* (Elbe sandstones) in the background. This area is known for its canyons, deep gorges and rocky towns. It is difficult to imagine more beautiful scenery. Romanticism and its love of nature came to this area from Saxony, also thanks to the Elbe river. Today, the beauty of the canyons attracts thousands of hikers and climbers who flock here from both countries.

For centuries, the border between Czechia and Saxony was not a language border. The language that was used by the Czech Germans derived its vocabulary and pronunciation from the language that was spoken in Saxony. The border rather marked a division between two religions. While Catholics lived in Czechia, which was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Protestants lived in Saxony. At the moment, this area is inhabited by the fewest believers in all of Europe.

The 17th century Saxon Renaissance left beautiful buildings also in Czechia. But its legacy is also that of great ideas and large reforms. These include state and church reforms, reforms of the means of production and other aspects of life. They all arrived here from Saxony. The Enlightenment and its emphasis on reason and rationality are also seen as products of the Protestant knowledge system, which originated in Wittenberg and Halle and spread throughout Europe.

Therefore, when you are in the place where the Elbe crosses the border, all these interdependencies come to mind and call for reflection. While it was true that Czechia was encountering the great ideas that were coming from the German lands, it was also experiencing aggression and pressure. Polabian Slavs, also known as Elbe Slavs, gradually disappeared because they were the weaker side (they were largely conquered by the Saxons and Danes starting in the ninth century and subsequently included and gradually assimilated within the Holy Roman Empire – editor's note). Now, we, the Czechs, have the chance to live in times when the European Union is helping those who are weaker. This is a unique time for our land. And quite new as well.

The Elbe allows you to look back in time, into Europe's history, this is because when sailing on its waters, you encounter Europe.

Where our river flows

Czech history loves dates that end with eight. One of them is the year 1618, when religious disputes led to the famous Defenestration of Prague, which in turn is said to have led to the Thirty Years' War. Because of the war, Pavel Stránský, a great Czech intellectual, fled the country. He later wrote a book in Latin about Czechia titled *About the Czech State*. This was later smuggled to the Kingdom of Czechia. The book contained a description of the country's geography, nature and politics. Most importantly, Stránský's reflection focused on the question of the degree of Czechia's independence. This question remains valid today and for sure will not lose its relevance in the future. We are a small country with a minority language that has been nestled between Germany and Russia for 15 centuries.

This brings us to Stránský's message, which reads as follows: "The question whether Czechia is attached to the German Reich and is subject to the so-called fiefdom law is indeed complex and difficult. Many make our country a fief to Germany and our dukes vassals or fiefs to the emperors. Others, in turn, are defending a conviction that their loyalty should not be towards any secular ruler but only towards the King of Heaven. They do not grant any rights over them to the German lords and say that the Czech noblemen receive power and they wield it over the nation, which, as they say, is free only thanks to God's grace and the will of the people."

At the moment, we are asked about how independent we are from the EU. This is not a well-formulated question. In my book I would like to broaden our horizon beyond where the Czech eye cannot currently go. In Czech thinking, the Elbe river ends somewhere in Dresden, in Meissen at its furthest. And later the

The **Reformation**
was one event
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on the Elbe river
and which changed
European history.

word Hamburg appears. The word Cuxhaven, which is where the Elbe enters the sea, is too difficult. In that case, for the majority of Czechs, the Elbe enters the sea at Hamburg. I would thus like to focus Czech attention on other cities such as Magdeburg, Dessau, Wittenberg, Tangermünde and Torgau, where "our" Elbe also flows. In all of them there is a piece of Europe which is worth telling – and it is worth telling here.

The Czech Litoměřice, which is one of the most beautiful cities on the Elbe river, was once a seat of the higher court of the Magdeburg (German) law. Before the Thirty Years' War the non-Catholic Czech clergy from here would go to Wittenberg to be consecrated. The more talented ones studied here at the university, while the less gifted ones would be freed from this duty, despite the strict requirements for educating the pastors. The Czechs were the inhabitants of the country of Jan Hus, who had been rehabilitated and appreciated

by Martin Luther. Thus if we were to point to something that took place on the Elbe river and which changed European, or maybe even world, history, it was for sure the Reformation. But also, the very last stage of Bauhaus development took place here. It happened before the Nazis forced some of the main representatives of this school of modern life and thinking to flee to America. Paradoxically, by this act they ensured Bauhaus's global influence.

Looking at the Elbe, we can see more ties and interdependencies. According to historical sources the first saint who lived here by the river was Wenceslaus I, or Václav the Good. Now regarded as the patron of Czechia, he indeed made a great contribution to the Czech state. Since the tenth century, the Czechs have had their saint who came from a royal family, allowing them to become a part of the Christian family of nations. Charles IV proclaimed Václav the Good to be the eternal prince of Bohemia. The crown of the Czech Kingdom is called the Crown of Saint Wenceslas, and all of the Czech rulers who wore it were, symbolically, Saint Wenceslas's subjects. As a result, we could even ask how would Václav the Good view our current government and its members?

The story of the Elbe river and its surroundings is European history. Hence we have had Saint Wenceslas of Stará Boleslav, Saint Benno of Meissen, Saint Norbert of Magdeburg, and Saint Ansgar, who was the first bishop of Hamburg in the ninth century. Benno, in turn, was the tenth bishop of Meissen in the 11th century. Saint Norbert, who was the founder of the Premonstratensian order, was the archbishop of Magdeburg in the 12th century. He is buried in Prague, where he has been revered since the Czechs collected his remains from a burning Magdeburg during the Thirty Years' War. As a result, there is a sad connection between Magdeburg, which was burnt during the Thirty Years' War, and Dresden, which was destroyed during the Second World War.

Dresden

We can find some parallels that follow the course of the river. For example, among those who arrived in Dresden shortly after the end of the Second World War was Zdeněk Tmej, an extremely talented Czech photographer. Since his camera had been stolen, he only left us with an oral testimony of what he saw. It reads: "When we were crossing the border and approaching Dresden we thought that ahead there was a sea. Dresden was grounded into powder. We saw a tram which was completely misshaped by the heat of a fire bomb, we could smell a sweet fragrance and hear an army of flies, we saw a crazy, quiet old lady, a river full of human bodies, and charcoaled food that belonged to already non-existing people.

An ‘unbelievably’ destroyed classicist building full of sculptures, picturesque views of the remains of the once perfect ancient bodies which were now looking at us through the wall ruins.” The burning of Dresden must have looked like a glow over the Ore Mountains. The flames were seen by the prisoners of the Theresienstadt Ghetto. For them, the sight meant hope for the end of the war. This story is also the story of the Elbe river.

European civilisation has developed by means of a few large leaps: Rome, Renaissance, Enlightenment and the EU. Of course, the EU’s role is still underway, and thus we do not know what its end will look like. The truth is that at each stage we process the legacy of the preceding stage. The Elbe valley is an area composed of very diverse regions. In the past, their residents were waiting for their neighbours to get weaker in order to knock them down and take over their territories. Today this is no longer the case, which is something new.

There are three capitals located along the Elbe River. Dresden is the capital of Saxony, Magdeburg is the capital of Saxony-Anhalt, and Hamburg is a capital in itself because it is a free Hanseatic city. There are even more capitals of old German lands, which could also be found along the river. Magdeburg in fact is more populous than the cities of Hradec Králové and Pardubice, which oversee two Czech regions. Together, they make up a territory of about half of Saxony-Anhalt and the same is true for their population.

Navigation chain

When sailing along the Elbe river you will eventually reach Hamburg. This second city of Germany, in terms of size, is home to over 1.85 million people. It is an important trade, cultural, media and modern tech centre. It is a city which has always been in the lead. The waterway which leads to Hamburg is strategically important for the Czechs, however, it has been neglected in the last few decades. I believe that after current talks about the Elbe, in two years the river will once again be available for ships, and its harbours will once again be full of life.

In my book about the Elbe, I am examining how this river could become reunited in the 21st century. Back in history there was a very strong uniting link. It was the navigation chain. In fact, “navigation on the Elbe River has enjoyed freedom” since Napoleon’s defeat in 1821. Once the political screws started to tighten, the elite opted for free trade over the sovereignty of local rulers. This means that the development of trade was more important than obtaining money from customs. For centuries, the Elbe river was an artery of civilisational and trade exchange, but it was the industrial era which brought serious changes to transport.

The novelties of the industrial era included both the railways and the mass use of coal. Until then, to travel against the current, people or animals had to drag boats along the river. They also used sails, which we can see in some old paintings and prints. Sailing rafts too could sail against the current, but they were later dismantled and used for constructing buildings. In Hamburg, for example, houses were built with wood from the Bohemian Forest.

In the 19th century the Czech lands were the industrial heart of old Austria. It was here that the technical schools were built and many patents proclaimed. The Prague Shipping Company (*Prager Schiffart-Gesellschaft*) was established in 1822, once it was confirmed that the Elbe was a free river. The entrepreneurs of the time had to trust the politicians, as the investments in navigation were massive and expected to bring back big profits.

Rail transport was faster, independent of weather and, since the beginning, designed in such a way that it could operate without larger breaks. Water transport was burdened with established customs and privileges. Despite that, a chain was placed on the bottom of the river to allow boats to float. At first glance, the functioning of the navigation chain may seem easy. A strong chain is installed on the bottom of the river and throughout the entire length of the vessel, from the peak to the back. The chain is then wound into a reel, which was propelled first by a steam machine and later a wheel propeller. The steam blades, powered by water, were later replaced by the much more efficient ship propeller.

The first five-kilometre-long trial section of this chain navigation was opened on August 15th 1866 near Magdeburg. It was a place with a strong water current. The trial was successful and a 288-kilometre chain was placed on the route from Hamburg to Magdeburg. Anyone who had a boat and wanted to travel faster could attach it to a steam tugboat. The volume of transported goods did not grow by much, however. In Dresden, the concession for chain navigation was granted in 1869, while in Austria the first river trip to Usti using a tug took place on May 5th 1872. Coal consumption was lower compared to railways. Boats were 40 to 50 metres long and seven to eight metres wide. They were also from 50 to 65 centimetres deep. This allowed ships to sail, even in summer when the water level is low.

The example of chain navigation demonstrates the life of a river. The new technology came from France, but the boats were manufactured along the Elbe. This was thanks to a technically talented resident of Dresden. His name was Ewald Bellingrath and he was the director of a local shipping company. It was him who introduced the chain wheel to the river system.

For centuries,
the Elbe river
was an **artery** of
civilisational and
trade exchange.

Nevertheless, chain travel was gradually abolished north of Hamburg. This process began in 1895. The last steam boat was sailing near Usti on the Elbe until 1948. The industrial era on the Elbe ended in the 1990s, but the abandonment of chain transport was its harbinger.

By discovering the Elbe, you can get to know a part of Europe. Our small European continent is a place full of great differences. To cope with them, people had to develop a set of legal and communication rules. This practice could serve as an inspiration for the wider world: how to set rules, persevere and do well, sometimes.

I cannot wait for the summer, when we will sail on the Elbe on an inflatable raft and meet people along the river. We will start beyond Meissen – beyond the border to which the Czech eye usually reaches. I look forward to talking to people who repaired the only remaining chain steamer. They reconstructed it in 2010. It is preserved because it served the rowing club from 1933 to 2005. The steamship can be seen in the port of Magdeburg. The reconstruction was certainly done by enthusiasts who will tell me many stories. I will capture them and save them, and I am sure there will be many more to come.

Europe shown along the Elbe points to both the beginnings of Christianity, the disappearance of the Polabian Slavs, religious struggles, scientific discoveries and the industrial age. It also points to today's efforts in an open Europe to find a balance between entrepreneurship and environmental care, between the depopulation of some areas and the overpopulation of others. On the Elbe, it is easy to see that in Europe we cannot do without a keen understanding of what lies behind us if we want to rationally approach what lies ahead. ~~EE~~

*This essay first appeared in the Czech publication Listy,
a bimonthly magazine for culture and dialogue.*

Jan Šícha is a diplomat and journalist. He comes from Usti and focuses on the Czech-German borderland, Germany and the European Union. He was the head of the Czech Centre in Munich.

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A forgotten tale of violence from Romania's recent past

JP O' MALLEY

The story of violent clashes that broke out in Sibiu in Romania during late December 1989 is one that many have forgotten since the revolution and regime change. Tudor Giurgiu's latest film *Libertate* revisits that turbulent event in Romania. The film not only acts as a reminder of the ruthless terror and chaos of the time but also as a chance for Romanians to reassess their own history.

When Nicolae Ceaușescu's brutal regime collapsed in Romania 34 years ago, Tudor Giurgiu was 18 years old, living in his home city of Cluj-Napoca, in central Transylvania. "For many days and weeks, the country was directionless," the 51-year-old Romanian film director explains from central Sarajevo, Bosnia, where he is showcasing his latest film *Libertate*. "People were not talking normally, they were going nuts and there was a lot of shouting, paranoia, and violence."

The revolt against Ceaușescu began in mid-December 1989, in Timișoara, western Romania. Dissent then spread across the country and hundreds of thousands of citizens began demonstrating in Bucharest against the government. On December 26th 1989, the dead body of Ceaușescu was shown on Romanian television. The broadcast came a day after the leader, 71, and his wife, Elena, 72, were tried by a secret military tribunal and executed by a firing squad. They were the closest any communist regime in Central and Eastern Europe had to Louis XVI and Ma-

rie Antoinette. The provisional government claimed Ceaușescu was responsible for numerous crimes, including genocide.

Power game

Today, this controversial history continues to be contested in Romania. Some claim the people were joined by the army and a popular revolt occurred against an evil dictator. Others are convinced, however, that Ion Iliescu, who succeeded Ceausescu (and served as president of Romania for three terms between 1990 and 2004) staged a coup d'état masquerading as a popular uprising. "The coup d'état was accompanying the popular revolt, but that is another story," says Giurgiu, who is currently the president of the Transylvania International Film Festival (TIFF), and founder of the production company Libra Films.

The Romanian director recalls feeling relieved, and even elated, when he first learned that Ceaușescu had been shot. Today, he takes a more measured and nuanced view. "I now look at the killing of Ceaușescu, and see that he was shot like a dog, without a proper trial, just because the new apparatchiks wanted to keep him silent," Giurgiu says. "It was all part of a power game. It became clear to me, later on, that if you get rid of the 'Big Daddy', then the people will react like sheep without a shepherd. That is what happened in Romania, it was callous."

The assassination of Ceaușescu is referenced several times in *Libertate*, which was released in Romanian cinemas on October 6th. The film tells another story though. Based on real historical events, it is set in Sibiu during late December 1989, when the Transylvanian city became the scene of a violent assault on a police unit. It rapidly escalated into a violent and bloody confrontation between soldiers, policemen, civilian protestors and representatives of the Securitate – Romania's infamous and ruthless secret police, known for torturing and killing political opponents. Overall, 102 people died and 300 were wounded as a result of the politically related violence that led to the bloodbath in Sibiu. Numerous buildings in the city were also destroyed. Many were attacked with heavy military equipment, under the accusation that they were hiding terrorists.

A Romanian-Hungarian co-production, the film premiered at this year's TIFF, where it won the Public Choice award. In August, *Libertate* was shown at the Sarajevo Film Festival, where it won the Award of the International Confederation of Art Cinemas (CICA). The film is produced by Libra Films and Mythberg Films and distributed in Romania by Transylvania Film. The London-based company Reason8 has also acquired the film for international distribution. "Most Romanians will not have heard of this story, where two million rounds of ammunition

were fired in just a couple of days [in Sibiu], so I think the film is going to surprise and shock people when it is released," says Giurgiu, whose previous films include *Love Sick* (2006), *Of Snails and Men* (2012), *Why Me?* (2015) and *Parking* (2019).

Ruthless machinery

The film's central protagonist is a police captain named Viorel Stanese, played by Alex Calangiu. He is captured by the army and made a prisoner in an empty swimming pool in Sibiu. Along with hundreds of other prisoners – including suspected Securitate operatives and their contacts – Viorel is accused by the new regime of being a terrorist. Several conspiracy theories then surface. The army accuse the so-called terrorists of poisoning water, digging tunnels and preparing counter-revolutionary attacks against them.

"It was tricky and challenging to have a police officer as the main character in this film," Giurgiu says. "As most ordinary people in Romania at that time were generally scared by the police. But I thought it would be interesting to make them the main focus of the story."

The director points out that the ruthless machinery of the Ceaușescu regime was not just the work of one man. It was held together by thousands of individuals working for the army, the police and the Securitate. "These people considered themselves to be just turning up for work every day and respecting order," he says. "But in the end, it was their combined effort that contributed to the dictatorship and created all of this terror, which was all over Romania back then."

Giurgiu notes that when the Romanian revolution kicked off in December 1989, a breakdown in army discipline "led to many innocent civilians being killed and to many soldiers being killed by their own peers". This is something we witness in the opening scenes of *Libertate*, which involve confusion, paranoia and ran-

dom bullets being fired amid panic and distrust. The first half is mostly filmed on a shaky handheld camera, giving the viewer a claustrophobic feeling that they are witnessing both the breakdown of law and order and a bloodbath in real time. "I wanted to show the perspective of a country in chaos," the director explains.

"When I was thinking about the aesthetics for this film, I was inspired by Paul Greengrass's *Bloody Sunday* (2002)," Giurgiu adds. "I kept saying to my production team, this is a film we have to try and [emulate]. I also looked at a lot of documentary footage of the Romanian revolution, too."

Giurgiu shows that the **ruthless machinery** of the Ceaușescu regime was not just the work of one man.

In the second half of the film, the pace slows down. There is less action and more contemplation. We witness hundreds of prisoners coming to terms with the grim reality of life under internment, in the empty swimming pool in Sibiu. Some individuals appear to be on the verge of a mental breakdown. Others use comradery, humour and even games as a coping mechanism.

"There is one moment where the captured prisoners invent a crazy football game. I think simple events like this often define us as human beings," Giurgiu explains. "It doesn't matter if one person is a villain, and the other person is a hero. They are all trying to find a way together to live with their mistakes and just stay sane and normal."

A difficult process

Giurgiu says undertaking research for this film at times felt like assembling together pieces of a puzzle. "For more than two years, I was transforming myself into an investigative journalist," the director explains. The main problem was trying to decipher what was true and what was false from historical records. They contained their own personal and political biases. "If I read something by a police officer, it was respecting the police narrative," says Giurgiu. "So it was so difficult to navigate through the evidence. It was also essential to speak to civilians from that time too."

The director says conducting these interviews for research was very emotional. "I met a man whose son was shot in a car [by mistake] during all of the chaotic violence. This scene appears in the film," Giurgiu explains. "Stories like this made me feel responsible for reopening [old] wounds in Sibiu."

Shooting the film also brought its own practical difficulties. "When I arrived on the set to shoot the film, the hardest task was dealing with so many actors and so many extras," says Giurgiu. "Every morning I thought, oh my God, I'm going to go into this empty swimming pool and I'm going to have to explain to 30 actors, 150 extras, what to do and try to explain to them this cobweb of relationships between all of the characters."

Giurgiu co-wrote the screenplay with the Romanian author and journalist Cecilia Ștefănescu. "It was great working with a female script writer because she was fighting a lot to give a woman's perspective," he says. Some viewers may come away from the film with a different perspective though. It is very much a male driven



Photo: 29th Sarajevo Film Festival 2023 (C) Obala Art Centar

Romanian director Tudor Giurgiu at the Sarajevo Film Festival. His latest film *Libertate* is based on events which took place in December 1989. Giurgiu says the research for the film took some time: "For more than two years, I was transforming myself into an investigative journalist."

narrative, with most of the story focusing on male rage and violence. Women play a passive role in the film. "Yes, well Romanian society was very patriarchal back then," Giurgiu explains. "The male energy and power was very dominant."

The film ends on an ambivalent note. There is the suggestion that despite the hardship, violence and suffering, Romania has been freed of its evil tyrant, and the people and the revolution have triumphed. But the viewer also gets the sense that the director is subtly mocking the new party line. To paraphrase the Swiss writer, Jacques Mallet du Pan, "Like Saturn, the Revolution usually devours its children."

Limitations

"One of the sub themes of the film is that revolutions, despite their popular energy, and idealism, often come from a place of manipulation," says Giurgiu. "During revolutions many people are killed by mistake. Civilians are supposedly let free. But at the same time, they are totally confused and are unable to tackle this freedom."

Giurgiu believes it is important that “Romanian people continue to reassess their own recent history.” But art has its limitations, he insists. “If you asked me 15 years ago whether a film like this might begin a new conversation in Romania about our own history and have the ability to change things, I might have been more optimistic,” says Giurgiu. “But now I understand that while documentaries sometimes have the power to create lasting social or political change, fiction films cannot play this role.”

They can, however, help younger Romanians to come to terms with a violent history that many of them have very little knowledge about, the director insists. “I’m pretty sure this kind of film will be seen, maybe in 50 years, as a document about how those moments of revolution were taking place,” Giurgiu concludes. “That is very important: we need to open up this story and make people understand that we did not end this search for truth. We will not be healthy as a society if we do not assess the [past] properly and do justice to the people who were suffering a lot back then.” ~~EE~~

JP O' Malley is a freelance journalist and critic.

Migrants on the border (of the Polish imagination)

PIOTR AUGUSTYNIAK

What makes Poles help Ukrainian refugees yet **indifferent** to the fate of migrants on the Belarusian border? Is this determined solely by the right-wing propaganda, which portrays the Ukrainians in good terms and those in Belarus in essentially bad ones?

The release of Agnieszka Holland's film *The Green Border* (*Zielona Granica*), which depicts the human drama of people pushed across the Polish-Belarusian border and the helplessness of activists willing to help them – helplessness resulting from the specific political decisions of the Polish authorities – has been met with unprecedented heckling and brutal attacks in Poland. The outrage of the country's highest-ranking politicians from the United Right coalition was clear. It is indeed difficult to tell whether their reactions were a planned action as part of the then ongoing election campaign, or rather the hysteria of people lacking control of both the situation and themselves. Equating Holland with the chief propagandist of the Third Reich, while stigmatising the film's viewers with the famous slogan of the Polish resistance during the Nazi occupation ("Only pigs sit in the cinema"), is something unheard of even in Poland's extremely brutalised and irresponsible public debate. All this raises the highest level of concern and poses very difficult questions. That is why, I would suggest restraining emotions, as much as possible, and taking a look at this situation from a critical distance. For it is a unique opportunity to dig deeper into what is actually happening in Poland today.

Neither simply “good” nor simply “bad”

The indifference of most of us to the tragic fate of migrants reaching the Polish-Belarusian border, the excitement of supporters of the Law and Justice party about the wall erected along it, their horror at the influx of alleged terrorists and rapists (a significant number of whom are women and children) and pride in Polish border guards making illegal push-backs – what else can this testify to, if not to the xenophobia and extreme selfish cynicism of Polish society?

Such a conclusion seems obvious, and yet it is not so easy to maintain, bearing in mind the hundreds of thousands, and perhaps millions, of Poles who, in the first days, weeks and months of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, took in and provided assistance to several million refugees from Ukraine. Does this not prove the opposite: hospitality, openness and willingness to sacrifice in order to provide aid?

So what is the truth about Poland and Poles? Is the state of our spirit schizophrenic, with contradiction taking over our thinking? Or is it somehow possible to combine these two incompatible perspectives? To see them in a broader context as two sides of one social phenomenon?

In their own way, right-wing politicians and columnists are doing just that. Here, they claim, when Poles are confronted with real misfortune, they are willing to help and prove to be extremely sensitive to human misfortune. However, they are unwilling to help intruders who try to force their way in, or are to be forcibly relocated from other EU countries. This kind of political dictum assumes that the problems of migrants from countries of the Global South do not concern Poland. And if this is the case, then Poles are reacting appropriately to their influx.

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imagination.

One does not have to be particularly insightful to see the one-sidedness of such a perspective. Perhaps, then, those who claim that the true nature of Polish society is evidenced solely by an aversion to migrants from the Global South are right? They explain the attitude expressed toward Ukrainians through an incomprehensible compulsive reflex. They see it as an exception that confirms the sad rule.

In my opinion, such a way of thinking is equally simplistic. To understand and properly assess the state of the Polish condition and cultural identity, one must not depreciate either of the two attitudes towards migrants. Both should be recognised, even though they contradict each other. We are neither simply “good” nor simply “bad”; neither completely hospitable and open, nor completely closed and xenophobic. But – like all people – both at the same time, oscillating somewhere in between, leaning one way or the other. This is, of

course, a simplified explanation. However, for our consideration, what is the rule of this oscillation in the case of Poland?

Unreal conflicts and hopes

What makes us help Ukrainian refugees and yet indifferent to the fate of migrants on the Belarusian border? Is this determined solely by the right-wing propaganda, which portrays the Ukrainians in good terms and those coming from Belarus in essentially bad ones? I suggest not to overestimate the role of propaganda. If it were the key issue, we could imagine the opposite situation: propagandistic dislike of Ukrainians versus openness to migrants from the Global South. We realise that no amount of media manipulation would be able to convince Poles of this. At most, propaganda reinforces deeply entrenched reflexes in the social imagination. It is not able to create them at will.

Andrzej Leder, a Polish philosopher who has consistently applied the tools of Lacanian psychoanalysis and post-structuralism to the reading of socio-cultural reality in western societies, draws attention to the deepening of the incompatibility of the social “imaginarium” with the dynamisms and their conflicts that really drive our world. The culturally defined structures of our imagination and our thinking, created in the past to describe the world of the time, are slipping away from the contemporary status quo. They continue to function, but being, as Leder says, detached from the “real”, they plunge us into the unreality of collective delusions. They make us live with unreal conflicts and hopes. Ignoring or misreading what is actually taking place.

This situation, according to Leder, applies not only to Poland, but the entire western world. However, in countries like Poland, peripheral and marked by a traumatic, unreconstructed history, the unravelling of the collective phantasm is more far-reaching and acute.

Today’s “Real” is first and foremost global capitalism, which, operating on a scale that exceeds the framework of the modern state, has escaped social control and entered a “turbo” phase. The consequences are far-reaching. These include growing social inequality, dividing the world into a rich North and a poor South, and the climate catastrophe.

Turbo-capitalism, combined with the extraordinary development of technology, exploits resources, emits carbon dioxide on an unimaginable scale and produces waste that exceeds storage and disposal capacity. In social terms, it produces a whole lot of “unnecessary people” who have no chance for a normal life in the warming climate of the South. So they besiege the countries of the rich North.



Photo: Promotional material courtesy of Filma Boutique

A scene from Agnieszka Holland's film *The Green Border* which depicts the multi-layered reality that is unfolding at the Polish-Belarusian border.

All this means that the model of the liberal welfare state and the middle class that was previously in force in Western Europe has entered a path of decay and end. The hitherto prevailing phantasm, accommodating the notion of lasting global peace and universal security, endless human development and the possibility of self-realisation for everyone, is tottering along with it and unsticking.

The Other is knocking at Europe's doors (or rather, the entanglement-like borders), making it clear that these demands do not include everyone, but are only the privilege of the rich and dominant part of the globe. Here comes the multitude of those to whose exploitation the North owes its prosperity, and who pay the ultimate price in a lack of prospects and elementary security.

Their presence at our borders gives rise to increasing anxiety. The reaction to it is a vicious circle-like oscillation between limited admission and internment, repatriation and expulsion. The process practiced on the Polish-Belarusian border, in defiance of law and ethics, bears a striking resemblance to the psychological mechanism of displacement. Alongside it is denial, rationalisation and ad hoc

attempts to remedy the multiplying and recurring “migration crises”. The unglued phantasm prevents one from seeing the true source of the problem and its scale. And graciously allows one not to see one’s own perversion – a pleasant life at the expense of others’ misery and pain.

Peripheral Polish phantasm

In Poland – as a European peripheral country – it is even worse. This is because the Western European imaginarium is combined here with the native phantasm, formed at the turn of the 20th century. While Western European societies are able to relate to the world in its globality (albeit an incomplete and perverse reference), in Poland the global context is completely – to use the language of psychoanalysis – cut off. We enjoy economic development and (hyper)consume, and our collective psyche accepts this as something basically natural. It is as if the consumed goods grow on trees in Polish orchards, and economic growth falls like manna from heaven. The other, in the form of the Global South, does not fit at all into the space of our collective perceptions, identifications and reactions.

This is how our peripheral Polish phantasm, based on historical trauma, works. It locks our psyche into the space of a local conflict, where Poland was the victim, while the oppressors were the competing, but also cooperating, powers in the destruction of our homeland: Russia and Germany.

Only such a perspective allows us to explain the schizophrenia of the Polish reference to the two migration waves. The Ukrainian one arouses sympathy, solidarity and involvement, because it is the result of an imperial onslaught by Russia, our eternal enemy. Our unstuck phantasm here turns out to be still relevant and “adjacent”. It allows us to understand Russia’s aggression and respond to it appropriately. This is because today’s Russia is living its own superpower past and by its actions is trying to bring it back to life. It is playing for its imperial position in a world where it has long had no place. Waging a war native to the early 20th century, it remains fully legible to the Polish collective imagination, born in the same era. Meanwhile, in the orbit of the contemporary “real”, this war appears as an anomaly and blandly unexplained. That is why its reasons remain unclear to the societies of Western Europe. This is also why countries such as China and India have an obvious problem with it, only secondarily trying to give it real meaning and use it for their own purposes.

The **other**, in the form of the Global South, does not fit into the space of our collective perceptions.

Not much time left

The migratory surge on the Belarusian border is quite different. Although politically provoked by Vladimir Putin and Alyaksandr Lukashenka, in its essence it is the result of a conflict and crisis that is entirely contemporary. However, since the Polish phantasm is detached from the contemporary “real”, it sees the migrants, wandering through the Białowieża Forest, as spectres and wraiths, as a simulacrum. They are something that produces the appearance of its own existence, while in its essence it is nothing. Unfortunately, the consequences of this recognition are dramatic for many migrants. For the Polish phantasm pushes them to the brink of the real loss of existence.

The conclusions are not optimistic. This is true not only when it comes to the fate of migrants on the Polish-Belarusian border but also when it comes to the Polish future.

Let us not condemn Poles for their particular immorality, nor praise them for the heights of nobility to which they have reached. We need to look at Poland as an unfortunate sliver of the European periphery that has become stuck in its traumatic memory, out-of-date perceptions and identifications. As such, Poland is an example of a global problem, only that it has been magnified to its limits. To change it, one would have to modify the Polish phantasm, that is, de facto tear it down and replace it with a new one. So far there is no idea how to do this. This is because its unglued inadequacy is combined with a complete congealment in itself, a complete impregnation with national traumas and catastrophes.

Who is to bring us out of them, when the political mainstream lives by its persistence and fuelling it (the right wing) or, for fear of another electoral defeat, did not dare to violate it (the democratic opposition)? In this near hopeless situation, I nevertheless hope that Holland’s film will be an impulse, contributing to the activation of slow change. We must muster the courage to put the Polish imagination on the edge in defiance of politicians. Perhaps by violating the boundaries of our imaginations, we will finally face the chance to transcend them, that is, to build new perspectives on how we perceive and react to the world? There is not much time left. ~~EE~~

This article first appeared on Forum Dialogu – an online portal in Polish and German dealing with issues related to the political and cultural dimensions of Europe.

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The need for decolonisation

ANTON SAIFULLAYEV

Decolonisation in Eastern Europe is different from other, especially western, decolonisation experiences. There is no one algorithm that would determine in which way a society or country would pursue the process of decolonisation. In Ukraine's case, but also that of the whole region of Eastern Europe, the initial stage of decolonisation showed a return to the alternative centre – the West.

“We will regain Odesa and everything will be back in place! Monuments will get removed and street names changed,” reads a comment on the website of Russia's state-owned information agency *Ria Novosti*. It was placed under an article describing the removal of the Catharine the Great monument in Odesa. In a nutshell, these two sentences present the discourse that has developed in Eastern Europe around the topic of decolonisation. In theory, decolonisation, or a decolonisation shift, refers to a process of denaturalisation of existing (i.e. colonial) order of knowledge. As such, this process eventually leads to a change in the way a society thinks about itself, the world, the past and the future.

In today's Ukraine the process of decolonisation has been accelerated by the changes that have been introduced to the country's legislation, but traces of it can also be spotted in other areas of the public sphere as well as the personal choices that are made by everyday people. This includes: laws on de-communisation, de-Russification and decolonisation of place names which we have been seeing since

the beginning of the full-scale invasion as well as eliminating Soviet elements from the narrative surrounding the Second World War. Sociological surveys also show that the number of people using Russian in everyday life in Ukraine has decreased by ten per cent.

Anti-colonial war

Despite all this, it still is too early to firmly and decisively say that Ukraine has made a complete and irreversible decolonisation turn. For this to happen we would first need to see an ideological consolidation of the ruling populist political elite, local authorities, but also public intellectuals, bloggers, media workers and Ukrainian researchers abroad. A potential decolonisation has everything it needs to start as a social and political process.

As tragic as it sounds, Russia's aggressive imperialism and the full-scale invasion that the Kremlin started in Ukraine on February 24th 2022 have proved to have a significant impact on the decolonisation process in Ukraine. Specifically, we can say that the anti-colonial language in the country's legislation and official rhetoric of the authorities are both a result of the military activities and the atrocities committed by the Russian army against the Ukrainian population and on Ukraine's territory.

However, the dynamics and impulsiveness of these processes explain why the decolonisation is dependent on the war and its outcomes. Namely, should Ukraine win the war, we will have a chance to see a full-scale decolonisation with a large social support. Conversely, if the outcome of the war is not to Ukraine's advantage, there is a risk that some parts of the society will turn back on this decolonisation processes which have already begun.

It still is **too early** to firmly and decisively say that Ukraine has made a complete and irreversible decolonisation turn.

Overall, decolonisation in Ukraine takes the form of erasing colonial, Russian and Soviet heritage as well as the impact it has had on Ukrainian national identity. This means that the society that is experiencing an anti-colonial war and fighting for its freedom understands the decolonisation process. This is in sharp contrast to the Kremlin's belligerent rhetoric about Ukraine's "lack of existence". Thus, this quite impulsive nature of the decolonisation process which is currently underway in Ukraine could have an impact on its outcome. This is especially true in the most "sensitive" regions in the country – the east and the south. The rhetoric of the state political and military leadership who stress the full liberation of Ukrainian territories from Russian oc-

cupiers and return to the pre-2014 borders as well as the complete removal of all signs of Russian and Soviet heritage can, for some people there, be very sensitive.

Overall, Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine has brought deep consequences not only for Ukraine but also the entire post-Soviet space as well as the framework of our academic and analytical knowledge about this region. We can thus daresay that starting with February 24th 2022 the post-Soviet period has come to an end and the perception of Russia as an "older brother" – an image which not that long ago was still present in some post-Soviet states – is now a part of history. The new generation in the region no longer believes in the old myths about the Great Patriotic War nor does it become allured by the fictional stories about the good life in the Soviet Union. Significantly, this generational change is taking place at a time when many people worldwide are rethinking their admiration for the "great Russian culture". These changes, while in place, are nonetheless as Russian propagandists like to say, not so "straightforward and free from ambiguity".

Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine has brought deep consequences not only for Ukraine but also the entire post-Soviet space.

Decolonisation of post-Soviet studies

Russian colonialism is probably one of the latest discoveries in the field of post-Soviet studies. Indeed, until recently and for too long western academic discourse about Eastern Europe was under the strong influence of the old colonial clichés which stressed Russia's civilisational and ethnocultural importance for the development of the region and its states. Thus it is only since last year have the earlier believers in the so-called area studies which, in the realm of international relations, focus on countries such as Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine but do it through the prism of the "greater" Russia, have started to call for the need to decolonise Russian studies and the overall knowledge about the post-Soviet space.

Seemingly, it had to take such a horrendous act as the full-scale war in Ukraine for concepts such as colonialism, orientalisation or decolonisation to no longer be perceived as the theoretical whims used by some scholars engaged in the discourse about Russia. Arguably, even the term "full-scale war" could be seen as a euphemism which is used to describe the gravity of the current situation as well as the need for a change in perception about Russia, its policies, but also in the perception of Ukraine and its agency. All said, we need to remember that in the West many academics saw the outbreak of the war between Russia and Ukraine in 2014 as a

political event. In their view, the annexation of Crimea but also the war in Donbas were more elements of geopolitics and belonging to the analyses of Russia's needs than a reflection of Kremlin's colonial policies.

This takes us to one of the most problematic issues of the decolonisation process which has a meaning not only for Ukraine, but also for the region as a whole. It could be captured in a question as how can the academic knowledge about Russia and the post-Soviet space be liberated from the existing framework, also of the global decolonisation discourse, which reflected and brought on a simplified perception about this region. Evidently, the changes that have taken place in this regard since 2022 can be interpreted as reactive. One may even have an impression that someone wanted to quickly fix the mistakes of the past. Yet, such an observa-

The interest of today's researchers into decolonisation processes skews towards the so-called Global South.

tion also suggests that there has been no overall, complete, plan as how to construct knowledge about the countries that were or have been under Russia's colonial influence. Nor how to change thinking about Russia's civilisational imperialism.

Equally problematic is the overall low level of knowledge about Russia in the area of humanities worldwide, which can be explained by a few factors. First, the interest of today's researchers into decolonisation processes skews towards the so-called Global South. This area has become a certain mainstream of academic investigation, especially among scholars specialising in post-colonial studies, inequality research, migration studies and racism research overall. Paradoxically, the post-Soviet space, which also desperately needs a post-colonial approach, has been excluded from the global community of post-colonial studies. This is most likely the result of the long-lasting perception of Russia (or earlier the USSR) which is presented and seen as the liberating actor in the Global South. The narrative about the anti-colonial policies of the Soviet Union and its fight against imperialism and the creation of a paradise on earth have been widely promoted in Africa, South America and Asia since the 1950s. They also seem to have completely blinded left-wing thinkers both in many Western European countries and their former colonies on other continents. That is why, in the view of the post-colonial states, which were victims to the colonial policies of the European powers, there has always been one main coloniser – the West. Consequently, any arguments about Ukraine's decolonisation are met there with the lack of understanding. The same goes with the arguments that the language used in colonial discourse in other parts of the world does not apply to Ukraine's case. Instead, the support that Ukraine has been receiving from the US and EU is interpreted as evidence of western colonisation of Eastern Europe. Therefore, arguments that

Ukraine has been fighting for its freedom in a neo-colonial war, which was started by Russia, are so difficult to comprehend.

Russia's rhetoric and policies

Vladimir Putin's regime is effectively using the old Soviet anti-colonial narrative in its foreign policy. In Africa, where Russia's policies are clearly driven by economic interests, but also in Latin American, messages about stopping the West or weakening it by means of the war with Ukraine, are not only used as propaganda and diplomatic tools, but also serve the rhetoric that is easily absorbed by local experts and intellectuals.

Since 1991 Russia has been fostering a post-imperial identity which exploits the feeling of nostalgia for the "great" past and former prosperity. It was already during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, which did not last long, that the concepts of *Russkiy Mir*, Eurasianism, or national bolshevism entered public discourse. Since then, social, intellectual and political reactionisms, fuelled by Soviet nostalgia, have become a permanent component of the new Russian identity.

However, the most important factor was the lack of a "unifying" concept which would play the role that Maxism-Leninism had during the Soviet times or autocracy (*самодержавие*) did in tsarist Russia. Things changed when Putin came to power, who found the base for his new regime in some extreme ideologies. As a result, the "uniting" idea promoted by the Kremlin today is a mixture of imperial and colonial sentiments which are composed of both the idea of *Russkiy Mir* and Soviet nostalgia. The most illustrative embodiments of this ideology are the celebrations of the Unity Day, which commemorates Russia's liberation from the Polish domination in the 17th century, and the Victory Day, which is held on May 9th and marks the Soviet victory over Nazism and fascism. These nostalgic reactions have created a situation where Russians no longer think about their identity in national terms and instead opt for values that have been nurtured by the oligarchic economy and Darwinistic social reality.

The "uniting" idea promoted by the Kremlin today is a mixture of imperial and colonial sentiments.

There also seems to be little hope in the Russian opposition, which lost in its fight against Putin in 2012. The actions and writings of this so-called liberal group unfortunately shows that in Russia the process of de-imperialisation has never had a chance to succeed. Not much has changed in this regards even after February 2022 when the image of Russia as a coloniser became internationally more com-

mon, but which did not get rooted in Russian public discourse, including that of the liberals. Instead, there are still attempts to revive the rhetoric about “brotherly nations” and “common past and traditions”. It had to take the Ukrainian discourse that has pushed the Russian intellectual elite to pursue a more structural thinking about its current state of mind in this regards and stop using such excuses as “this is all Putin and his propaganda’s fault”.

Sadly, and surprisingly, in a country as large as Russia there are no intellectual, nor political forces that could change this paradigm and bring an end to the colonial thinking, just as it was the case in many Western European states. Possibly some change will come as a result of Russia’s external decolonisation which we could see as having partially started since 2022.

Difference in experiences

Decolonisation in Eastern Europe is certainly different from other, especially western, decolonisation experiences. Clearly, there is no one algorithm that would determine in which way a society or country would pursue the process of decolonisation.

Decolonisation in Eastern Europe is certainly different from other, especially western, decolonisation experiences.

In Ukraine’s case, but also that of the whole region of Eastern Europe, the initial stage of decolonisation, in the geopolitical sense, showed a return to the alternative centre (in this case the West). In other words, the ongoing westernisation of public (political but also cultural) discourse shows that at least a temporary revision of subordination is now in place. Similar processes were observed in Central Europe after 1989, when the democratic transformation started. At that time among the post-Soviet republics, only

the three Baltic states (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia) developed their own strategies of departing from dependency on Moscow. They opted for both a strong westernisation and a de-Sovietisation of their states and societies. These experiences, as well as that of today’s Ukraine, show that the so-called third way is not an option and only a strong “escape” to the West can allow for decolonisation to succeed in the region.

The West, on the other hand, shows that it desperately needs a decolonisation of knowledge about Russia and the post-Soviet region as a whole. For this to happen, we need to adopt new standards in academic research into the region and completely free it from the still present Soviet or Russian burdens. This will definitely require the adoption of colonial theory towards Russia, its past and present, which



in turn explains why we need to include Russian colonialism into global colonial studies. For the moment this change of paradigm remains to be one of the greatest challenges faced by western academia.

It is certain that a theory is not suffice to create ready scenarios for implementation. Decolonisation is a dynamic and long-term mental process and not a ready solution. Therefore, even when a parliament passes laws it does not mean that the society will immediately stop speaking Russian or abandon Russian heritage and culture. Each country's case is unique and each country's decolonisation requires the consolidation of the elite and the society. In Ukraine, for example, we can see that the anti-colonial struggle is marked by both strong nationalism and a strong departure from having any cultural ties with Russia. The Belarusian society, on the other hand, has clearly shown that is not ready to follow in Ukraine's footsteps just yet. It still has a lot to learn from its neighbour's experience, which could also be a challenge given its completely different political culture, charac-

terised by great subordination and the withdrawal from public life of a large part of the population. Even more, it is evident that a great majority of the Belarusian society is not even aware of the ongoing and crawling colonisation of their country by Russia. As of now there are no signs of such an awakening nor any resources for it to start taking place.

The end of post-Soviet era

The year 2022 could be seen as the end of the post-Soviet era not only for Ukraine but also Russia. Yet, for this to fully manifest, Ukraine's victory needs to bring Russia's unconditional surrender. In addition, for a successful Eastern European decolonisation we need a few things to happen. First, a complete de-Sovietisation of public space and social and political institutions needs to take place. Second, there needs to be a development and acceptance of local version of the Russian language and culture. Just like there is Australian or American English, there could be Ukrainian Russian. Third, there needs to be a complete departure from the "great" Russian culture towards local culture, which should be developed at both the "popular" and high levels. Finally, depending on the state, a collective multi-dimensional identity needs to be developed and rooted. It will be composed of a national (ethnic) identity, a digital identity, gender identity, global and regional identity. These means are a bit radical but not the only ones. Thus if the current anti-colonial approach of the Ukrainian elite and society brings an end to the old matrix, the future decolonisation will need to be grounded on fragmented identities – for example, the incorporation of the Russian-speaking Ukrainians into the new identity project, one that will not include Russia. Such a change would require an appropriate cultural policy to be introduced.

These proposals as radical as they seem are necessary. The changes that they will bring will not only help Ukraine and Belarus but also Russia to depart from the old imperial and Soviet past and to reform, from within, its liberal philosophy and create a true federation. Only these conditions will guarantee that Russia's revisionism is no longer a threat to its neighbours. ~~EE~~

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Valerii Pekar



Photo: Thomas Lohnes / flickr.com

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Nika Sikharulidze

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Wind of change

Daniel Gleichgewicht

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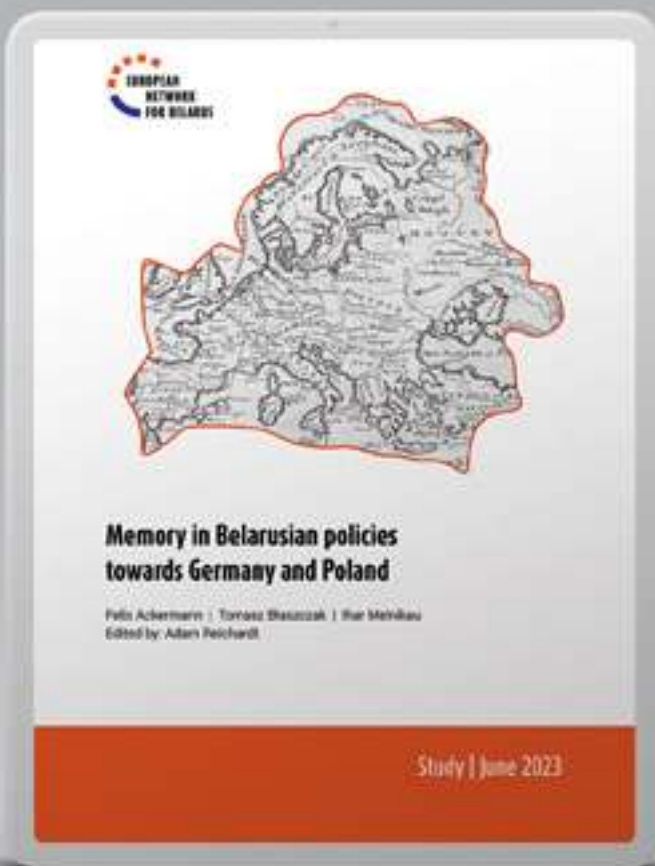
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NEW REPORT ON BELARUSIAN MEMORY POLICIES



The Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe, together with its partners in the European Network for Belarus, have recently released a new report titled: “Memory in Belarusian policies towards Germany and Poland”.

The report is co-authored by Felix Ackermann, Ihar Melnikau and Tomasz Błaszczak.

The editor of the report is Adam Reichardt (editor

in chief of New Eastern Europe).

In this paper, our authors explore the current state of Belarusian historical and memory policies and the role that they play especially in the last several years, including in Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The research finds that the current Belarusian historical memory policy is fragmented, incoherent

and aimed at supporting the regime. At the same time, Russian influence on Belarusian historical policy has gained significant momentum since 2020 and especially since 2022 – imposing its imperial view of history on Belarus.

Download the full report here:





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