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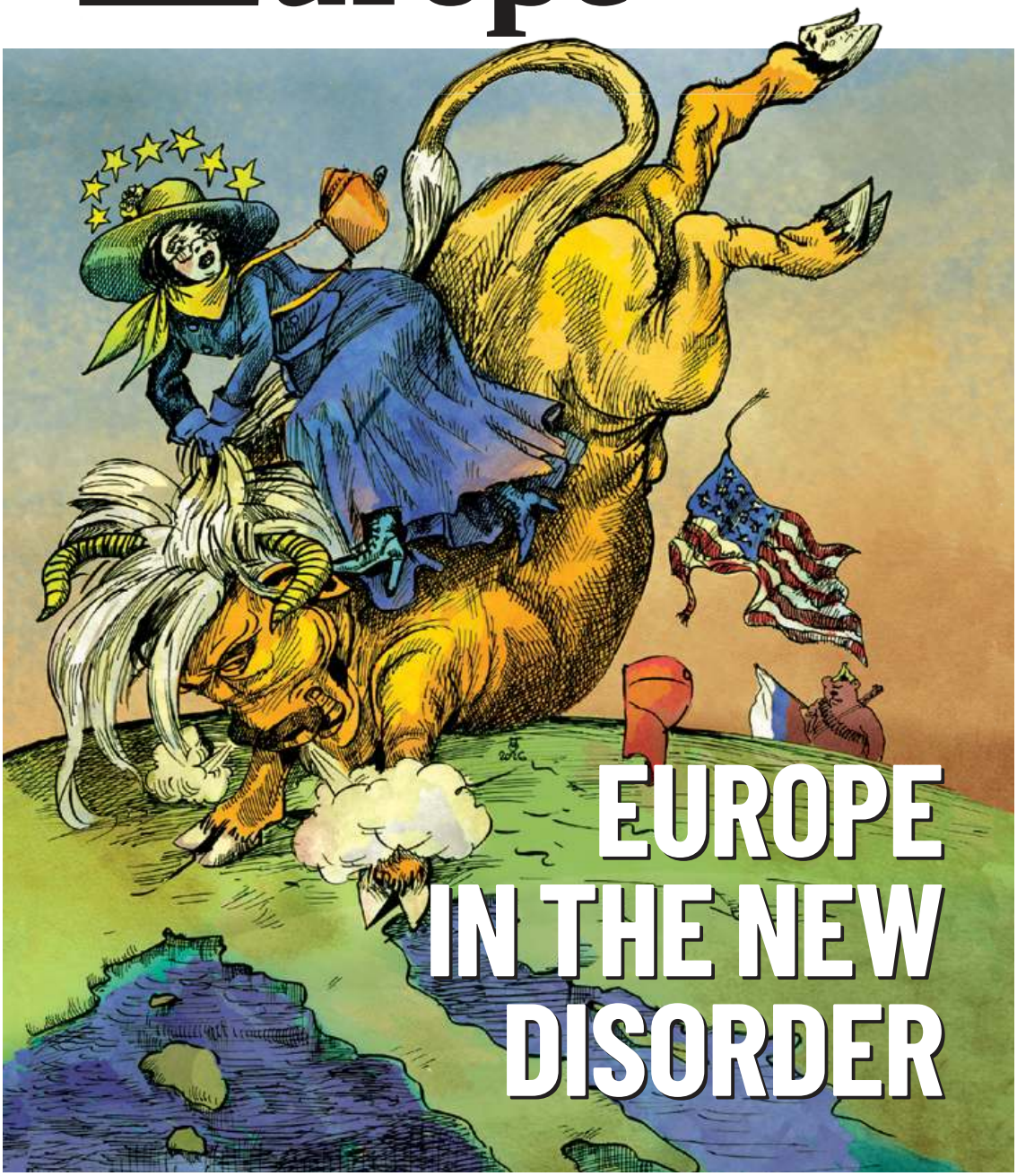

EUROPE IN THE NEW DISORDER

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Dear Reader,

If the past year has shown us anything, it is that the world order many of us took for granted is no longer secure. The basic rules and understandings that kept Europe stable, held the United States and Europe together, and guided cooperation between countries for decades are now being openly questioned, not only by ambitious powers like Russia and China, but increasingly by voices inside the West itself.

The belief that international law can keep power in check is now competing with a harsher view of the world – one in which strength decides what is right, big countries carve out zones of control, and powerful states impose their will on others. For Europe, this is not a distant or academic argument. It is a matter of survival. As our cover image suggests, Europa can no longer allow herself to be carried along by a raging bull. She must find a way to climb down – and learn to stand firmly on her own feet.

Thus, on the pages of this issue, we look at what this growing instability means for Europe. Is this really the breakdown of the security system that has protected the continent for decades, as **Wojciech Michnik** asks? Or are we facing something even more profound – a shift towards a more divided and unpredictable global landscape, as **Andreas Umland** suggests?

Our contributors examine the many fronts on which this struggle unfolds. **Maria Domańska** analyses how Russia has turned war into a national idea and reoriented its strategy towards Europe. **Paul Bell** looks at Europe's psychological battlefield, where resilience and perception will be decisive to survive illiberal pressure coming from multiple directions. **Isabelle de Pommereau** explores Germany's uneasy confrontation with rearmament and the revival of conscription debates. **Justin Tomczyk** investigates the ideological currents of the so-called "Dark Enlightenment" shaping parts of the emerging global elite.

As the fourth anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine takes place at the time of this publication, we also bear witness to the war itself. A special photoreport by award-winning photographer Wojciech Grzędziński captures the daily reality of Russia's ongoing aggression and the endurance of Ukrainians who continue to resist a war that, in truth, began more than 12 years ago.

Finally, we are proud to mark an important milestone: *New Eastern Europe* turns 15 this year. For a decade and a half, we have sought to provide thoughtful, independent analysis of this region at a time when such clarity has never been more needed. We are deeply grateful to you, our readers, for your trust and support that have made this work possible. We hope that you will continue to help us continue this mission in the years ahead. Please support *New Eastern Europe.*

The Editors

Contents

Europe adrift in the new world order

Essays and analysis

Interviews

Stories and ideas

Art, culture and society

History and memory

New Eastern Europe

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

College of Eastern Europe in Wrocław

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

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

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Towards a new world disorder?

ANDREAS UMLAND

The post–Second World War international order appears to be nearing its end. It is increasingly being replaced by a system that openly presents itself as non-liberal, if not outrightly anti-liberal. Should this emerging (dis)order remain nominally rules-based, its rules will differ fundamentally from those established after 1945.

The international system forged in the aftermath of the Second World War is unmistakably in decline. What was long described as a "liberal" or "rules-based" order emerged from the founding of the United Nations in 1945 and was gradually reinforced over subsequent decades. This architecture expanded through a dense network of UN bodies and affiliated institutions, alongside regional collective security frameworks such as the Conference – later the Organization – on Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE. Arms control and non-proliferation agreements, including the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention, and the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention, became key pillars of this order, shaping international relations well into the late 20th century.

The rise and fall of a system

To be sure, contrary to labels such as "liberal" and "rules-based", the world order after 1945 was neither particularly orderly nor completely liberal nor well regulated. Outside Europe, there were numerous international military conflicts

as well as civil wars, sometimes with global consequences. After the Second World War, some regions of the world remained dominated by hegemonic powers. Until 1989, for example, Central and Eastern Europe suffered under the notorious Yalta system, i.e. Moscow's political, economic and military dominance.

Nevertheless, the international system that emerged after the Second World War differed from that before 1945. The latter had been characterized by blatant imperialist rule, ruthless colonial exploitation, world and regional wars, fascist and para-fascist regimes, concentration and extermination camps, and frequent territorial expansion of states by force. As imperfect and only partially rules-based as the order that emerged after 1945 was, it still represented an achievement compared to its immediate predecessor and within the context of world history. Wars were still fought after 1945. However, the expansion of a country's official territory by invading a neighbouring recognized state, and the perpetration of interstate genocide – commonplace until the end of the Second World War – became rare occurrences.

Today, this order may be coming to its end. It is being replaced by a system that openly presents itself as non-liberal or even anti-liberal. If the new world system nevertheless remains rules-based, the new rules will differ from those established after 1945. They could be mere expressions of the current whims of powerful rulers rather than a new list of stable guidelines of conduct.

The most consequential development that has been driving the erosion of the post-war order over the past 12 years has been the behaviour of Russia – a permanent member of the UN Security Council and official nuclear-weapon state under the NPT. For more than a decade, Moscow has been forcibly implementing a land grab on the internationally-recognized territory of Ukraine. As a former Soviet republic, Ukraine was a co-founder of the UN and is since 1996 an official non-nuclear-weapon state under the NPT.

At the end of February 2014, Moscow began its military attack on Ukraine with a poorly concealed occupation of Crimea by regular Russian troops. In March 2014, Russia officially annexed the Ukrainian territory after a rigged referendum. In April 2014, Moscow brought the war to mainland Ukraine with infiltrated Russian irregular fighters and secret agents. In August 2014, Russia began sending the first larger contingents of regular troops into eastern Ukraine. In February 2022, Russia's previously covert military intervention turned into an open and full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In September 2022, Russia annexed four regions of mainland Ukraine and amended its constitution a second time accordingly. The longer Russia's expansionist war and genocidal "special military operation" in Ukraine continue, the more the structure of current international relations changes.

Serious implications

Worse, the foreign and domestic policies of the United States and China are also in flux, and both are reshaping their roles in global affairs. Since its founding, communist China has signalled its intent regarding Taiwan and, by many assessments, may soon attempt to take the island by force. Meanwhile, early this year, the US took the unprecedented step of launching military strikes in Venezuela and capturing its leader, Nicolás Maduro, in what it framed as an effort to secure access to strategic resources. This represents a new chapter in US interventionism and constitutes a direct challenge to Venezuela's territorial sovereignty and the established norms of non-intervention. Since both revisionist powers – China and the United States – are, like Russia, permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and official nuclear-weapon states under the NPT, their actions too have serious implications for the moral, legal and political legitimacy of the existing international order.

Despite assertive rhetoric, neither the United States nor China has thus far pursued formal territorial expansion through annexation or permanent border revision.

Yet, despite increasingly assertive rhetoric and, in the American case, the use of military force abroad, neither the United States nor China has thus far pursued formal territorial expansion through annexation or permanent border revision. Both Washington and Beijing have relied primarily on coercive diplomacy, military posturing, hybrid instruments, and non-kinetic pressure, while stopping short of openly incorporating foreign territory into their sovereign domain. Russia, by contrast, has for more than a decade employed large-scale conventional warfare with the explicit aim of territorial enlargement and demographic incorporation. Moscow is therefore undermining national sovereignty and territorial integrity – the core principles of the post-war international order – not merely rhetorically or indirectly, but materially, politically, and through pseudo-legal acts of annexation.

From the Kremlin's point of view, Russia has, since 2014, merely modified its traditional imperial policy. Moscow's Soviet and post-Soviet approach was originally to create Kremlin-controlled "republics", such as East Germany, Abkhazia or South Ossetia, or "people's republics", such as Poland, Hungary, Donetsk or Luhansk. This older modus of enlargement has now been replaced with the official annexation of Ukrainian territories. Russia's former political, cultural, economic and cognitive warfare aimed to bind Ukrainians and other nations to Moscow with softer instruments. In February 2014, this approach was supplemented by the massive use of hard power, which culminated eight years later in the start of a full-scale invasion of, and of large-scale state terrorism in, Ukraine.

Russia's current leadership may view its actions in Ukraine since 2014 as merely a continuation of Soviet and post-Soviet policies in Eastern Europe after 1945. Beijing and Washington, perhaps, also consider their announced interest in an annexation of neighbouring territories to be unremarkable. However, many medium and small powers may not be amused. They are likely to be alarmed by these changes, as they see themselves potentially in the role of Ukraine, Taiwan, or Greenland. For weaker countries, the expansionist ambitions of Russia, China and the United States, and especially Moscow's ruthless actions in Ukraine since 2014, will lead them to change their geopolitical calculations.

Is might right again?

While Iraq's annexation of Kuwait in 1990 was reversed by an international military coalition a year later, nothing even remotely similar has ever been considered with regard to the Ukrainian territories that Russia annexed in 2014 and 2022. The international sanctions imposed on Russia since 2022 are nominally extensive and constantly increasing. However, due to numerous exceptions, errors and loopholes, they have had only limited effect so far. Several countries, including China and India, have increased their trade with Russia since Moscow's escalation of the war against Ukraine in 2022. Much of the foreign armaments Ukraine has received from the West was and is old. The often second-rate weapons were and are mostly delivered with delay and/or in insufficient quantity.

These and other half-hearted measures, the inaction or complicity of various major powers, as well as the irrelevance of international organizations during the Russo-Ukrainian War, have consequences. The central lesson to be learned from them is that military might may seem to be right again. Many observers suspect that if Russia gets away with its current territorial expansions and mass crimes, it will make further attempts at conquest in the future. Some also fear that governments of other revisionist countries that are relatively powerful in their regions could not only start talking about Taiwan, like China's leadership, or Greenland, like the US. They could also follow Vladimir Putin's example and go right for the jugular. If Russia can expand its already vast territory at the expense of another UN member state, why shouldn't other countries do the same?

If a country has – unlike Iraq when it annexed Kuwait in 1990 – a sufficient arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, it can do whatever it wants, as Russia has been demonstrating since 2014. In Ukraine, Moscow is openly annexing territories; torturing prisoners of war; abducting, deporting and Russifying unaccompanied children; terrorizing civilians; bombing residential buildings, hospitals, churches,

libraries, universities, etc. Moreover, the Kremlin is threatening the outside world with the use of nuclear weapons if third powers become militarily involved on Ukraine's side.

At the same time, Putin remains recognized by or is even moving closer to the world's most powerful heads of state and government, such as China's CCP Chairman Xi Jinping, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi or President Donald Trump. Russia's expansionist war is not only supported by rogue states such as Belarus, Iran and North Korea. The Russian aggression would not be possible without China's economic and technical assistance and India's increased imports of raw materi-

als from Russia. And Putin's demonstrative disregard for international law and his manifest ruthlessness in Ukraine has not diminished respect and support for Russia in many countries. In some circles, it has even increased. These and other repercussions of the Kremlin's behaviour on like-minded governments around the world are accumulating with every passing day.

What has drawn less attention is that they are also affecting medium-size and small powers. Some would argue with Thucydides that it has always been the case that "the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must". But in 416 BC and until a few decades ago, there were no nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. For most of human history, the only form of warfare was conventional. An attacker who was stronger than his victim had little to fear for his own existence when threatening, preparing for, or starting a war.

Putin's disregard for international law and his ruthlessness in Ukraine has not diminished respect and support for Russia in many countries.

The advent of weapons of mass destruction in the 20th century changed this situation. It could have led to a global arms race between states acquiring and/or manufacturing WMDs, spreading such weapons across the entire planet. This risk was mitigated by the UN system, global conventions limiting the proliferation of WMDs, bilateral and multilateral disarmament and mutual aid treaties, collective security systems, and other instruments. After 1945, borders between states were mostly changed through international bilateral or multilateral agreements, rather than through unprovoked, unilateral, and violent annexations. Deliberate inter-state mass violence against civilians, comparable to Russia's targeted bombing of Ukrainian towns and villages and its calculated mass terror against Ukrainian non-combatants, remained the exception.

How Putin ended the rules-based order

The international legal and political order that has developed is today being undermined by several factors, including recent moves by the US in the Western Hemisphere. The most consequential action remains Russia's annexation by force of five Ukrainian territories in 2014 and 2022. Moscow's demonstrative land grab and mass terror against civilians in Ukraine would not have happened if the rules-based world order had remained in place.

Russia is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, an NPT depositary and nuclear-weapon state, and a guarantor of the inviolability of Ukraine's borders

and sovereignty under the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. At the same time, Ukraine is as an official member of the United Nations since 1945 (as a Soviet republic until 1991), a recipient of security assurances and guarantees concerning the recognition of its borders and sovereignty by the NPT's five nuclear-weapon states within the 1994 Budapest arrangement, and a non-nuclear-weapon state since 1996. In view of these and other circumstances, Ukraine should not have had to endure a territorial loss to, and inter-state genocide by, Russia.

As a result of Moscow's actions, the rules-based order designed to protect countries such as Ukraine appears to be coming to an end. Other major powers tolerate Russia's expansionism or offer only insufficient resistance. Several countries are unashamedly taking advantage of various broader effects of the Russian war against Ukraine, such as the repercussions of the Western sanctions regime. Some powers are even themselves, whether inspired by the Kremlin or not, considering territorial expansion and violent border revisions. These reactions and effects contrast with the international response to Iraq's annexation of Kuwait in 1990.

Relatively weaker countries around the world will consequently reassess their national interests, priorities and security. Smaller powers can apparently no longer rely on the UN Security Council, the United States, and international law as guarantors of their territorial integrity. A sustainable solution to their security dilemma through political, diplomatic or conventional military means has become difficult. Thus, weapons of mass destruction could now become attractive to some governments as alternative instruments for securing and defending the independence, territory, and borders of their states. EE

Andreas Umland is an analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies in the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.

The collapse of the European security order

WOJCIECH MICHNIK

The sense that Europe is adrift in the emerging world order reflects both external shocks and internal shortcomings. On the one hand, the United States is signalling that Europe is no longer the central theatre of American strategy. On the other, Europeans remain divided on how far they are willing to go in assuming real strategic responsibility, or the so-called European strategic autonomy.

The future of transatlantic relations looks increasingly fragile, with Europe caught between a less reliable United States, a revisionist Russia, and a more assertive China. The erosion of the post-Cold War liberal order exposes a deep mismatch between Europe's economic weight and its still-lagging capacity to act as a strategic and military pole in its own right.

The post-war Euro-Atlantic security architecture was designed around an American security guarantee, NATO as the central institutional pillar, and a liberal economic order that benefitted not only the West but many non-western powers. That order has been steadily fraying: Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the tightening Russo-Chinese partnership, and the resurgence of great power rivalry have turned what used to be framed as a "rules-based" order into something much closer to a transactional arena. Russia's war in Ukraine has already produced a partial "revival" of NATO, with the Alliance declaring Russia a "long-term threat" at successive summits and moving to rearm after decades of underinvestment. Yet this revival has unfolded alongside a second Trump presidency that openly questions US obligations, making NATO's newfound military ambition, symbolized by the commitment to spend five per cent of GDP on defence by 2035, highly contingent on domestic US politics.

Rogue One?

The US intervention in Venezuela and renewed threats to take over Greenland crystallize why many Europeans now see the post-war security architecture as being in its terminal phase. Both episodes underscore a US leadership that no longer even pays lip service to the multilateral rules and alliance norms on which Euro-Atlantic security once rested, but instead treats power politics and territorial rearrangements as legitimate tools vis-à-vis partners and rivals alike.

In Venezuela, Donald Trump framed the large-scale strike and capture of Nicolás Maduro as an "extraordinary military operation", echoing the language Vladimir Putin used for his "special military operation" in Ukraine and signalling that major powers may be entitled to unilaterally remove unfriendly regimes in their neighbourhood. European think-tank analysts note that the intervention "openly renounces the democratic West's values consensus and the international legal foundations of the post-war order", warning that the Trump administration is "aligning itself with other authoritarian states" by acting in clear violation of international law and inter-American norms. For Europe, this is not a remote Latin American episode but a direct challenge. As Carl Bildt noted in an ECFR commentary, the strike "highlights America's hemispheric turn, its disregard for international law and the president's growing reliance on force", accelerating trends of US inattention to Europe and addiction to kinetic solutions.

The Greenland saga is even worse from the Euro-Atlantic perspective, as it pushes this logic even closer to NATO's core. Trump has repeatedly insisted that "we need Greenland very badly" and refused to rule out the use of military force to annex the autonomous Danish territory, with senior officials stating that it is the formal position of the US government that Greenland "should be part of the United States". Denmark's prime minister has warned that an attack on Greenland "would end NATO". Even if this whole diplomatic mess will not lead to military actions, the threats are already "accelerating the unravelling of US credibility, authority, alliances, and the post-World War II order". In practice, the combination of a law-breaking intervention in Venezuela and coercive rhetoric towards Greenland signals that Washington now reserves for itself a great-power privilege it once condemned in Moscow: revising borders and overthrowing governments within its perceived sphere of influence.

For Europe, this is the clearest possible proof that the old Euro-Atlantic bargain, US security guarantees in exchange for European loyalty to a shared liberal order, no longer functions as it once did. European leaders may close ranks rhetorically behind Denmark and issue cautious criticisms of the Venezuela operation, but there should be no illusions. The current US security strategy is directed against international

rules and multilateralism created after the Second World War, and also against the European Union. Consequently, if Europe fails to "draw the line" now, it will face future crises even less prepared and even more dependent. Some would even argue that it is not too early to ponder the unthinkable: a NATO without the US.

Europe adrift?

The sense that Europe is "adrift" in the emerging world order reflects both external shocks and internal shortcomings. On the one hand, the US is signalling that Europe is no longer the central theatre of American strategy. On the other, Europeans remain divided on how far they are willing to go in assuming real strategic responsibility or the so-called European strategic autonomy. As Angela Merkel put it already in 2017, "the times in which we could completely depend on others are, to a certain extent, over … We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands," a sentiment that has only become more acute under Trump's renewed pressure.

Europeans remain divided on how far they are willing to go in assuming real strategic responsibility or so-called European strategic autonomy.

Paradoxically, it was Merkel that received the most criticism from the US president. In 2018 Trump argued that Germany was effectively strengthening Russia by doing business with it, including buying gas through the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. When the then NATO secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, responded that trade and security were separate issues, Trump rejected the distinction. He questioned how an alliance could function when one of its members depended on energy supplies from the very country it sought protection from, calling the situation deeply problematic for NATO and insisting that it was an issue that had to be addressed directly with Berlin.

French President Emmanuel Macron has tried to capitalize on this moment, arguing that Europe faces "a less dependable America" and pushing ideas such as a European force for Ukraine and "strategic autonomy" that once seemed marginal. Yet the very need for Macron to "seize the moment" underscores the structural problem: Europe's capacity to act collectively lags behind its recognition that it must do so, leaving the continent oscillating between rhetorical awakening and practical hesitation.

The clash over Europe's strategic future is increasingly playing out as a battle of visions and narratives about whether the continent can, and should, defend itself without the United States. Finnish President Alexander Stubb insists that Europe

can, in his words, "unequivocally" protect itself without the US and a growing body of policy analysis argues that Europeans not only can but must learn to stand on their own two feet and prepare for a world in which American protection is no longer guaranteed. In this view, the shock of Trump's threats, from conditioning Article 5 to openly musing about annexing allied territory, should be treated as a catalyst for building genuine European capacity rather than as a reason to cling even tighter to Washington. Standing against this reading, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte has warned that Europe "can't" defend itself without America, dismissing talk of a separate European army or an autonomous European pillar as largely empty, duplicative constructs that risk weakening the Alliance instead of strengthening it. These competing visions do not simply reflect tactical disagreements over budgets or structures; they crystallize a more fundamental uncertainty over whether Europe sees itself as a fully-fledged strategic pole in the emerging world order or remains resigned to being a permanent junior partner in a US-led system that is itself under unprecedented strain.

Partnership's erosion

The current Euro-Atlantic malaise is rooted in at least a decade of erosion in the western-led liberal order and mounting asymmetries within the transatlantic bargain. After the Cold War, most (West) European states reaped the peace dividend, shrinking their militaries and assuming that US power, NATO enlargement, and economic integration would indefinitely underwrite security from the Balkans to the Baltic. Crises in Afghanistan, Libya and Syria exposed both US fatigue and European reluctance to pay the full costs of hard power, reinforcing Washington's perception of "free-riding" allies.

It is worth remembering that the gradual American re-orientation predates Trump. Barack Obama's much-discussed "pivot to Asia" may have been more declaratory than doctrinal, but it signalled that the primary strategic competition was shifting towards the Indo-Pacific, and thus European security would need more European agency over time. Joe Biden's presidency briefly seemed to reverse this trend: the administration framed support to Ukraine as a defence of the European security order and stressed that "America is back" as a leader of alliances. Yet Biden's re-engagement did not erase the underlying structural trajectory in US politics, where bipartisan attention and resources are increasingly oriented towards China, nor did it fully resolve Europe's uneven response to Russia's aggression.

Trump's return in 2025 has sharply accelerated this long-term drift. He has repeatedly described NATO allies as "freeloaders", threatened not to protect Eu-

ropeans that do not meet spending targets, and even raised the spectre of a US withdrawal from NATO. The US president has also deepened the Euro-Atlantic rift at the level of political memory and alliance solidarity. In comments on the war in Afghanistan, he dismissively claimed that NATO countries had sent "some troops" but mostly "stayed a little back, a little off the front lines," implying that Europeans and Canadians had allowed Americans to do the real fighting and dying. The remark sparked outrage in several allied capitals, where leaders and veterans pointed to the numbers of European casualties and to the fact that, for two decades, NATO's first and only Article 5 operation was fought at Washington's request.

At the same time, the Pentagon has reportedly set a 2027 deadline for Europeans to assume most of NATO's conventional capabilities, making clear that if they fail, Washington may "scale back its role in NATO planning", which amounts to a de facto ultimatum.

Europe's responsibility gap

Assigning all responsibility for Europe's predicament to external actors, Russia's imperial war or Washington's erratic diplomacy, would be politically convenient but analytically misleading. Since 1945, and especially after 1989, Western Europeans built prosperous welfare states and deep integration through the European Union while relying heavily on the US security umbrella, creating what many in Washington came to see as a structural imbalance between economic and military effort.

The wake-up call of 2014, when Russia seized Crimea and destabilized eastern Ukraine, produced only partial and uneven adaptation; many Europeans increased spending modestly but did not fundamentally reconfigure their armed forces for high-intensity warfare. The full-scale invasion in 2022 finally triggered more serious rearmament, but even then, internal divisions, populist politics, and fiscal caution often diluted the sense of urgency, particularly in larger western states. The current debate on strategic autonomy might finally produce some serious results, especially now that Europe is forced to "reassess whether avoiding the divisive question of autonomy still serves their interests … given the increasingly antagonistic transatlantic relationship", according to Johannes Nordin, an analyst with the Institute for Security and Development Policy in Stockholm.

Interestingly, the responsibility gap that drags European defensive efforts down is especially visible in the debates in NATO's frontline states. For instance, Poland and the Baltic states, which have invested heavily in defence and pushed for a robust forward presence, are at once the most dependent on US security guarantees and the most vocal advocates of a tougher line on Russia. Their strategic anxiety

Photo courtesy of NATO

NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte (left) has recently warned that Europe "can't" defend itself without America. This begs the question as to whether Europe sees itself as a fully-fledged strategic pole in the emerging world order or remains resigned to being a permanent junior partner in a US-led system.

is understandable, but their political narrative has sometimes reinforced a pattern of (over)reliance on Washington, leaving them exposed when US diplomacy turns coercive towards allies – whether through threats to annex Greenland, transactional bargaining over troop deployments, or open discussion of downgrading NATO to a "dormant" alliance.

Regional and global consequences

This evolving dynamic has both regional and global ramifications. Regionally, the possibility of a "two-speed NATO", with highly exposed frontline states like Poland, Finland, Romania and the Baltics doubling down on deterrence while some Western European countries hedge between transatlantic loyalty and strategic autonomy, could complicate planning and erode the clarity of deterrence signals to Moscow. If US threats to downgrade its role are not matched by rapid European reinforcement, this could leave parts of NATO's eastern border less protected, creating openings that Russia may test through pressure or provocations that stop short of triggering NATO's collective defence clause.

Globally, a transatlantic relationship going sour would weaken the West's ability to manage competition with China and shape the broader rules of the international system. European actors are already recalibrating, with some seeking "cautious and selective re-engagement with China", closer trade ties with India, while distancing themselves from US economic protectionism, a combination that could deepen strategic incoherence inside the West. At the same time, a less cohesive Euro-Atlantic community creates openings for Russia and China to drive wedges, present alternative governance models, and undermine the remaining pillars of the liberal order, from trade regimes to technology standards.

A transatlantic relationship going sour would weaken the West's ability to manage competition with China and shape the broader international system.

European states still have choices, but acting on them will require more than rhetorical claims about a new "geopolitical awakening". Above all, Europe must recognise that security can no longer be taken for granted: remaining influential will mean spending more on defence, better organizing armed forces for serious military threats, boosting societal resilience and being prepared to respond to crises even when the United States is unwilling or slow to lead. This does not imply turning away from Washington – NATO remains essential, particularly for nuclear protection – but it does mean reducing Europe's dependence on a single partner whose future role can no longer be assumed.

Second, the debate on European strategic autonomy must move from semantic disputes to concrete capabilities and institutional arrangements. As one recent study finds, Europe faces "increased distrust vis-à-vis the US … and a greater willingness to pursue strategic autonomy". However, this willingness is uneven, and without convergence on threat perception and priorities, autonomy risks becoming either an empty slogan or a source of intra-European division. Building a genuine European defence pillar, through EU frameworks, mini-lateral coalitions, and deeper integration of defence industries, would allow Europe to negotiate with Washington from a position of greater strength, rather than as a collection of supplicants anxious about the next tweet or tariff. How to achieve this without jeopardizing NATO's credibility is a billion dollar question.

Finally, on the regional level, NATO frontline states will need to recalibrate their own Atlanticism. Their investments in defence and leadership on Ukraine have made them central to the European debate, but relying on US protection while marginalizing European cooperation risks reproducing the very asymmetry that now threatens them. As Trump's second term makes abundantly clear, the question is no longer whether Europe can return to the comfortable certainties of the

post-Cold War order, but whether it can develop the political will and strategic coherence to act as a security provider in a world where guarantees, even from allies, are increasingly conditional.

Bracing for impact?

As the former publisher-editor of *Die Zeit*, Josef Joffe, has warned: "propelled by new visions of unilateral activism, American critics of the 'entangling alliances' regard West European countries as allies in defence of Western Europe's interests only and hence as a drain on American resources better invested elsewhere in the cause of containment." According to those critics, "withdrawal or disengagement will have a salutary influence, reminding West European free riders of their responsibility for their own security and forcing them to assume the heavy burden the United States has for so long carried gratis." These words were not written this year, but in 1984, which could serve as a cautionary tale that in the US anti-European voices go back a long time. Yet, the events and overall political climate in the year 2026 might indicate that this crisis in transatlantic relations is worse than previous ones, leaving Europeans with strategic dilemmas discussed above.

Regardless of the path chosen, Europeans should be careful not to let their frustration with the United States turn into broader anti-American sentiment, which can already be easily stirred in many European capitals. Such a shift would not only damage societal ties between long-standing partners and allies, but would also play directly into the hands of Europe's adversaries, who are eager to see the transatlantic partnership weaken before their eyes. As disheartening as it may be for committed Atlanticists (including this author), the US may no longer function as a European power. Consequently, unless current trends change significantly, Europe's future security architecture may have to be redesigned without the positive role of the United States in this process. EE

Wojciech Michnik is an assistant professor at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków (Poland) and the Transatlantic Project Coordinator of the Central and South-East Europe Programme at LSE IDEAS at Jagiellonian University. He is a contributing editor with *New Eastern Europe*.

The last frontier
Europe's psychological war

PAUL BELL

Europe now finds itself sandwiched between two autocrats, each working to weaken Europe for his own purposes. Those purposes may not be joint, but they intersect and are clear: they want to activate the Trojan horses of anti-EU, illiberal, political insurgency and thus undermine EU policies and democratic values from within. At stake now is the survival of Europe.

They looked so pleased with themselves. There they were, four millionaire soldiers – the top tech executives from Meta, OpenAI and Palantir – their right hands raised, swearing their oaths to support and defend the American constitution as they signed up as lieutenant-colonels and part-time advisors to the US Army's Detachment 201, a new recruitment vehicle for Silicon Valley's further hardwiring into the machinery of war.

The photograph, reproduced in US tech and military media last June, was striking and disturbing. Not because we do not already know how deeply embedded big tech has become in the US military-industrial complex, or how intimately it is allied with the Trump administration. No, what was striking and disturbing about it was the openness, the triumphal brazenness of it. This was an oblique statement of the seemingly unstoppable and of a world beyond limits and nation states in which no alliance is too unholy, no restraint too sacrosanct, no remedy too unpalatable. It said, quite simply: we are in charge now.

Did I read too much into that photograph? I do not think so. These millionaire soldiers and their corporations are building the weapons which President Donald Trump's America will deploy in the psychological war it has begun against Europe's democracies.

On the attack

This past year, which began with Trump's attack on the US federal bureaucracy and ended with his new national security strategy, has been overwhelming. All our old certainties have been dismantled. To be fair, Trump did warn us that the vote that put him in power would be "the most consequential election in the history of his country". He may be right, as 2025 was a year in which – impossibly, inconceivably, bewilderingly – America was not under attack, but on the attack. It was the year in which we, on the eastern side of the Atlantic, finally had it brought home to us the importance of listening carefully to what populists, autocrats and oligarchs actually say. Of not writing it off as hyperbolic rhetoric, but to be treated, if our democracies are to survive, as deadly serious.

A fortnight after the inauguration, on a bitter February evening in London, I stood at Gordon's Wine Bar down on London's Embankment with two old American friends, both superbly creative professionals from whom I have drawn inspiration for more than 20 years. Mark is from New York and latterly Helsinki, while Dana from San Diego. Under the ambient din of the crowded pub we nursed red wine and mused on whether America would "come to its senses". We had different opinions on that, variations on a spectrum of pessimism, with a vestige of hope centred on November's mid-terms. However, in the months that followed, the evidence mounted that things would not turn out in any positive manner.

After all, there has been the tariff war, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids, the invasion of Democratic cities, the boat strikes, the intimidation of universities, media corporations and law firms, the slashing of international aid to the starving and dying in Africa, and to small states defending against Russia's kinetic and psychological attacks. There has also been faithless ambiguity of policy over Ukraine and Gaza. And now there is even Venezuela, as America captured the Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro and his wife in their home, taking them to New York to face "American justice". That hope – that America will come to its senses – is not dead; there are enough signals that Trump's project will be defeated. But when it comes to transatlantic relations, the toothpaste is out of the tube. Europe has to know it can never again rely on America's goodwill and support – especially if the policy aims over Greenland are achieved.

Even before the national security strategy was published, the Trump administration had made no secret of its contempt for Europe's liberal and socialist democracies. Around the time we three were down at Gordon's Wine Bar, Vice President J.D. Vance, without a blush, was in Munich accusing Europe of retreating from free speech and committing "civilizational suicide" by "opening the floodgates" to mass immigration. Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth was telling NATO defence

ministers that America was no longer the primary guarantor of security in Europe. Since then, the Pentagon has been advising that Europe should be ready to take over American's functions in NATO by 2027. Trump has been entirely explicit: between immigration and green energy, he told Europeans, "your country is going to hell." At the United Nations in September last year, Trump told them again: "I'm the president of the United States, but I worry about Europe ... I hate to see it being devastated by energy and immigration, that double-tailed monster that destroys everything in its wake ... You're doing it because you want to be nice. You want to be politically correct and you're destroying your heritage."

Assault on Europe

The Trump administration apparently wants Europe to look more like the US. It wants the brakes on all that soggy welfarism and the brakes off on big capital and big-dog geopolitics – ambitions it dresses up in ethno-nationalism, anti-elitism, and "free speech". In May, the State Department's policy paper on the search for "civilizational allies" in Europe framed European liberalism, multilateralism, and multiculturalism as an "aggressive campaign against western civilization itself". Across Europe, the paper's author wrote, governments have weaponized political institutions against their own citizens. Europe, they claimed, has devolved into a hotbed of digital censorship and "arresting Christians", as though they were some hapless minority. You could hear the shriek from across the Atlantic.

Alongside this rhetorical assault comes the substantive stuff: the tariff assault, the proposed Greenland grab, the squeeze on Europe's position on Ukraine – and just as seriously, on Europe's desire to make the online environment safer and fairer for its citizens. Throughout 2025, Europe's leaders moved on from their initial bewilderment, dismay, anger and sense of betrayal. They became a little more calculated: they appealed to Trump's vanity, called him "daddy", allowed him to treat them like schoolchildren in the Oval Office, tried not to squirm or roll their eyes when he basted them in condescension or gloated over references to his "presidency of Europe". They said little to challenge his bombastic distortion of the facts around the US-EU tariff heist – even if they kind of got the message about upping European defence spending while trying to hold Trump to some sort of line on support for Ukraine – a line that got shakier by the month.

But imagining that they can hold the line by waiting Trump out, flattering him, and reducing their negotiations with the US to the transactionalism that is now the foundation of US foreign policy, would be a mistake. MAGA and the American intellectual right are coming for Europe, supporting radical right parties in elec-

tions across Europe, hosting major conferences to improve their collaboration, and championing prominent right-wing figures. The updated national security strategy elevated all that from political rhetoric to national policy. And that rhetoric has been exported into Europe's political discourse.

Célia Belin, head of the Paris office of the European Council for Foreign Relations, summed up the MAGA agenda: "Trump and his MAGA camp are using the same three methods at home and abroad: elimination, transformation and subjugation ... Abroad, they seek to eliminate alliances and international commitments, transform western liberal democratic allies into nationalist vassals and subjugate opponents into exploitative transactions ... A big plan requires a big response. Instead, they will have to reinvent the rules-based order to work without US leadership."

Psychological war

What we are defending is not the European Union per se, although we know for sure that the MAGA administration would like to see it gone and will be picking away at its soft targets in Austria, Hungary, Italy and Poland. But, in fact, it is deeper than that. We are in a conflict between two entirely different ideas and states of mind about the nature and purpose of our different democracies. We are defending Europeanism, a state of mind centred on society, "the collective", and a sense of mutuality, against a Trumpian state of mind, a radical revanchism in which individualism is at once atomized and elevated to supremacy over the state, and where loyalty is its supreme virtue.

The assault Europeans are experiencing at the hands of a traditional ally comes on top of the intensifying threat from a traditional adversary: Russia.

This assault that we Europeans are experiencing at the hands of a traditional ally comes on top of the intensifying threat from a traditional adversary: Russia. Where Moscow has been traumatizing Europe from outside, the US now destabilizes the continent from within, causing a loss of confidence and more profoundly, a loss of those stories about ourselves which over decades had been absorbed into our political consciousness, unifying Europe and cementing its place in the world.

These factors have converged with, and fed, a long-growing popular disenchantment with governments, institutions and scientific and cultural elites; with migration and multiculturalism that challenges identities; and with the inability of liberal capitalist economies to deal with rising social demands and inequities. The far right capitalizes on emotional betrayal (by elites, Brussels, Pax Americana), cultural

bewilderment (around identity, migration, automation), and existential precarity (felt as humiliation, loss of meaning and economic fragility). Where Europe's democracies hesitate in the face of complexities, the right promises on the basis of simplicities. For the so-called "left behind", the far right promises decisiveness in place of ambiguity, pride in place of shame, purity in place of pluralism – deceptively attractive but hollow-legged.

The dilemma for Europe is that ignoring this ideology does not neutralize it, while confronting it – as with confronting all radicalisms – merely hardens and fuels it. To admit flaws is to admit weakness, and is jumped on by populists, inhibiting a full-throated democratic defence. How do we fight back? On what terrain? Militarily, NATO was built to keep the peace, not fight a war. It simply has too many moving parts and now it has been neutered. If we fight Russia, as well we may have to, it will have to be on our own abilities, as America is not coming.

The critical terrain is elsewhere. This war is being conducted in a fourth domain where the battle space is the states of mind of Europe's citizens – their emotions and beliefs, the value they place in truth, their freedom from manipulation and deceit. This is a psychological war, and it is terrain that Europe can fight on whatever the constraints on its capacity for physical defence.

Fighting back

At least part of Europe's fighting capacity in the psychological domain rests on the Digital Services Act, or DSA, signed by the 23 EU member states whose membership overlaps with NATO. The DSA is the rule of law projected from the physical world into the digital world and its passage caused the Trump administration to react with fury. It sees the DSA as an obstacle to its cultivation of "civilizational allies" in Europe. Trump posted on his Truth Social platform that EU digital protection laws were "all designed to harm, or discriminate against, American technology". Vance accused European leaders of "hiding behind ugly, Soviet-era words like misinformation and disinformation". The tech oligarchs weighed in too; Elon Musk described the DSA as an attack on free speech and an unprecedented act of political censorship.

At the time of writing the EU has not made concessions. They would be right not to. Today's wars are increasingly about the ability to know, understand and influence what people think and feel. Capture one's state of mind and you have (de facto) occupied his or her country. There is no need to squander blood and treasure on a risky military campaign. This is especially true at a time when the digital space so severely challenges sovereign protection, since the content enter-

ing citizens' minds from hostile states can amount to unadulterated psychological warfare campaigns.

Europe's leaders have generally seemed decidedly limp in their response to American pressure. If they decide to get serious about fighting this war, they might look to European public opinion for some backbone. A sizeable proportion of citizens in Europe's leading nations have made up their minds about what they are seeing, and are beginning to emotionally resist. In a poll by Cluster 17 for the European affairs debate platform Le Grand Continent, 52 per cent said their main emotion on learning of the customs agreement signed between the US and the EU in July, was humiliation. Forty-four per cent see Trump as "an enemy", 36 per cent believe the US president behaves like a dictator, and 39 per cent want their leaders to take an oppositional stance toward the US government, rather than compromise or alignment. To be perfectly blunt, those are emotions a counterpropagandist can work with!

Beyond strategic autonomy

It was this realization that prompted our group – communications professionals, strategists mainly, bound by shared experiences and friendship – to pull together the Catalyst for European Democratic Autonomy and Resilience (CEDAR). Things have moved on from Emmanuel Macron's original vision; this is no longer just about strategic autonomy. Europe now finds itself sandwiched between two autocrats, each working to weaken Europe for his own purposes. Those purposes may not be joint, but they intersect and are clear: they want to activate the Trojan horses of anti-EU, illiberal, political insurgency and thus undermine EU policies and democratic values from within. At stake now is the survival of Europe as a social, liberal and democratic construct, and of "Europeanism" as that notion that has developed since 1945.

In one dimension, this imperative is military, industrial, political, a technocratic construct –more guns, better tech, cheaper energy. The hard truth is that strategic sovereignty must be paid for materially, not just rhetorically. In another dimension, in that "fourth domain", it is a psychological construct. It is, vitally, about the European state of mind and where the struggle to preserve European democracy will be won or lost. And time is short. NATO experts believe that Russia would not be ready to launch a military attack against Europe in the next four years. But the timeline of US interference to weaken EU values and unpick European liberal democracies is much more immediate and requires an urgent response.

A low-growth, post-welfare Europe faces hard choices and the democratic challenge is not simply to inspire citizens but to prepare them emotionally to accept

new priorities, new burdens, and in some cases, reduced entitlements. Without this maturity, strategic autonomy and the survival of European democracy will remain imperatives built on foundations that cannot bear the weight. Leaders will therefore need to find ways to persuade Europe's disengaged and distrustful citizenry to return to the public square, re-engage meaningfully in their various national discourses, and help decide on how to face future threats and opportunities.

Right now, Europe is awash in cross-cutting waves of emotion. Many citizens have felt a range of emotions inspired by Washington's psychological assault – from betrayal and disgust to abandonment and bewilderment. In the psychological struggle to preserve Europe's democracy and liberal identity, and the distinct values and way of life that so profoundly differentiate it from America and Russia, its leaders will need to recode these emotions through a new grammar of solidarity, maturity and self-respect.

The survival of Europe as a social, liberal and democratic political order is now at stake.

This is where Europe lags behind its global competitors. Europe's initiatives in defence, data and climate may be strategic necessities but they are without emotional and deep narrative foundations. Europe sells some of its most important ideas in rational, elite-driven language that lacks emotional stickiness, which is why popular buy-in for the sustained and deep changes necessary remains fragile. In contrast, its competitors use the full gamut of emotions: fear, pride and betrayal. That mismatch makes Europe vulnerable. As my friend Mark Linder put it in a piece he recently wrote on this same subject, Europe's approach to the deployment of influence and strategic communication is like bringing a press release to a gunfight.

Renewal of trust

It is no more than a truism to observe that democracy, like any system of government, is not mere form, it is a lived experience of habit, custom and practice. It is as cultural as it is political and institutional. And in our systems of representative government, citizens have become too removed from direct participation. A renewal of trust in our democratic processes should be preceded by a renewal, indeed a major overhaul, of those processes themselves, including a greater devolution of the deliberative and consultative aspects of governance.

I recently watched an online discussion between Australian and German democracy activists who work to promote the greater use of civic assemblies as a means of getting citizens re-engaged in the democratic process and policy-making. The Australians set out how they saw their problems: polarization, declining trust

in politicians and institutions, increasing apathy and declining civic engagement, concentration of influence – these issues are universal in our democracies.

In contrast, I looked at testimony into the reactions of people who had been involved in civic assemblies, who had had an experience of deliberative democracy on matters as simple as homelessness in a small town, or the building of local public housing. I watched a woman in a small town in the American northwest describing in tears how her participation in a civic assembly had made her feel, for the first time in her life, that her views on a public matter actually mattered. I read testimony from Ireland in which participants described receiving their invitation as exciting and transformative. "As soon as that letter came to the door, I knew it was something I really, really wanted to do." They felt respected and empowered.

The emotions in evidence were immensely powerful, even life changing. They are at least one way of understanding the ingredients of what it will take to fight the psychological war in which Europe is now engaged with its adversaries, and must win. Inside of it all is the intimacy of truthful human exchange – something the tech bros of Silicon Valley and the bots and trolls of St Petersburg, with great ingenuity and limitless resources, are working to overwhelm with their dopamine tsunami of lies, anger and despair, but can never match. This is our last frontier but we can beat those millionaire soldiers if we try. EE

Paul Bell is a British political consultant and writer who, in Africa, the Middle East and the Caucasus region, has observed societies transitioning from autocracy to democracy and back again. In 2025 he and a group of long-time professional associates, including the psychoanalyst and philosopher David Kenning and strategist and entrepreneur Mark Linder, established CEDAR, the Catalyst for European Democratic Autonomy and Resilience, as a means of influencing discussion and policy on this question.

When war becomes a national idea: Russia's strategy towards Europe

MARIA DOMAŃSKA

If Russia is not stopped in Ukraine, it will double down on efforts to destabilize Europe and may again turn to armed aggression. The safest and cheapest option for NATO is to give Ukraine the financial and military support it needs to block Moscow's imperial ambitions. Meanwhile, the unpunished genocide unfolding in the heart of Europe painfully exposes the weakness and cynicism of Europe's legal and value-based order.

Four years since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the question of Moscow's possible next targets is being raised prominently among governments, expert circles, and societies. There is growing concern that Russia is preparing to attack a NATO member state in the coming years. Although the value of predicting Moscow's next moves cannot be overstated, it is even more important to formulate our own strategy (European, NATO, EU) that answers one fundamental question: how can we actively shape the Kremlin's calculations to avoid a catastrophic scenario? In other words, let us not ask what might happen, but what we want to happen and how can we shape the course of events. Discussions about Russian plans should therefore include the fundamental theme of European agency (empowerment) and active deterrence.

Russia's war against Europe

Russia's aggressive goals remain unchanged, despite the lack of significant progress on the frontlines four years after the start of its full-scale invasion. These goals include not only gaining control over the whole of Ukraine, but also dismantling NATO as a shield for western democracies. Moscow is aware that the strength of NATO and the military might of the United States are the only effective barriers against the political and economic infiltration of Europe by dictatorial regimes such as China and Russia. The Kremlin is also keen to see the collapse of the European Union as an institutional space, economic power and legal system.

In the Kremlin's logic, the only way to maintain the unity of the state and the obedience of society is through a wartime "rally around the flag" approach.

On a global scale, Moscow wants to co-create a global alliance of autocracies capable of changing the rules of the world order. These goals were reflected in demands Russia made to the US and NATO in December 2021 for a fundamental overhaul of the European security order, including a significant reduction of the US military presence in NATO countries and the transformation of Central Europe into a security buffer zone.

Each of these issues could be the subject of a separate article, but at this point it is essential to emphasize that the realization of Moscow's goals would bring chaos, poverty, violence and lawlessness to the people of Europe. Since the nature of Putin's regime prevents development and prosperity within Russia, the country seeks to export instability in order to reap material and political benefits from infiltrating other countries, dismantling the rule of law and corrupting political and business elites. In the Kremlin's logic, the only way to maintain the unity of the state and the obedience of society to the authorities is through a wartime "rally around the flag" approach. The empire requires constant expansion – territorial, economic and political – otherwise it risks imploding.

It seems that this logic became more pronounced after several years of war with Ukraine. The Russian economy has largely shifted to a war footing, the authorities have created a state ideology based on the concept of a "holy war" as a path to national rebirth, and Vladimir Putin himself considers victory to be a matter of political (or even physical) life or death. What is more, Moscow's propaganda has long explained the Russian army's failures in Ukraine by claiming that it is fighting against the entire might of NATO, thereby accustoming its audience to the possibility of escalation.

The same familiarization with war as a normal state of affairs for the state and society is taking place in the process of educating the younger generations of Rus-

sians. In kindergartens, schools and universities, death on the battlefield is presented as the greatest achievement of a patriotic citizen. The idea of geopolitical revanchism, the cult of state violence, hatred of enemies and Russian supremacy have become a permanent part of the curricula. Budget expenditures on war, as well as the apparatus of repression, propaganda and indoctrination, are growing at the expense of the population's standard of living. This shows that the Kremlin is serious about regaining influence in Europe and rebuilding its own society so that it fully identifies with the authorities' aggressive foreign policy.

So does Russia want to attack Europe militarily? It certainly wants to be ready to do so. Meanwhile, Europe is still financing the Russian war against itself. As Swedish Foreign Minister Maria Malmer Stenergard pointed out in November 2025, since the start of the full-scale war, Europe has spent more on importing Russian energy resources than on aid to Ukraine. As the classic Lenin saying goes: "the capitalists will sell us the rope with which we will hang them."

Europe still half-asleep

When thinking about a possible future war, two logical errors are often made, demonstrating a lack of understanding of Russian strategic culture. First, the war is already here. The Kremlin wants conflict; it is stirring it up and actively preparing for escalation. Appeasement in the form of peace negotiations, attempts at de-escalation in response to Russian nuclear blackmail, or endless assurances of readiness for dialogue with Moscow will not help here (the unfortunate statements by President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni in January 2026 squandered months of efforts to strengthen Europe's political role in Moscow's eyes).

Manipulative language is a powerful cognitive tool that comes from the toolkit of active measures used by the Russian secret services.

Second, the use of the term "hybrid warfare" to describe Russian cyberattacks on European critical infrastructure; disinformation; violations of NATO borders by drones and military aircraft; cutting undersea cables; or political sabotage only obscures the picture. The adjective (hybrid) weakens the noun (warfare) and numbs vigilance. For Russia, all these actions are part of a war continuum, with no clear boundary between war and peace. They constitute an attempt to achieve strategic goals by relatively cheap means. Aware of the relative weakness of its army, Russia has always tried to use it only after painstakingly preparing the ground for aggres-

sion through subversion. In this context, the term "phase zero operations" seems more appropriate, suggesting that hostile actions are either intended to replace or prepare for subsequent phases of conflict.

In Russian strategic culture, war is an all-encompassing endeavour with a strong cognitive component. Aggressive cognitive tools include misleading and overloading the adversary with contradictory information (like nuclear blackmail alternating between rhetoric surrounding pseudo-negotiation offers and turning Ukraine into rubble); intimidation; and fuelling internal divisions in western countries. In particular, Russia seeks to influence how its adversaries think and make decisions, subtly steering them toward choices that ultimately work against their own interests. Its aims are not only aimed at shaping certain beliefs but also reformatting the opponents' cognitive apparatus. That is to effectively manipulate individuals and groups and deprive them of the willingness to resist.

Manipulative language is a powerful cognitive tool that comes from the toolkit of active measures used by the Russian secret services. Lies have become an attribute of strong, arbitrary power. In Russian strategic communication, words are most often used to signal an intention contrary to the actual one, laying waste to meaning. Semantic chaos is intended to bring dangerous relativism into public discourse by spreading disinformation among western societies. In particular, propaganda narratives manipulate the cause-and-effect relationship and blame Russia's enemies for its own misdeeds.

Russian propaganda's main task is not so much to convince the audience of the veracity of specific Russian lies, but rather to sow fear, panic, doubt and distrust of democratic governments and institutions; to encourage indifference towards hostile actions ("Europe is rotten, there is no point in defending it"); and to portray the aggressor as powerful and invincible. This last point is a typical element of Russian psychological manipulation, even though the course of the war proves the opposite.

Catastrophic scenario

Russia will decide on a possible attack against Europe not so much (or not only) on the basis of comparisons between its own military capabilities and those of Europe and NATO. Two other factors will be key: Russia's assessment of Europe's readiness to use its military capabilities against the Russian army and its estimation of the Alliance's possible solidarity at the moment of attack. Given that, US President Donald Trump's ultimatums to Denmark and Greenland are a great gift to Moscow. The lack of a unified threat perception within NATO and doubts about Washington and Western European countries fulfilling their Alliance com-

mitments to the north-eastern flank may encourage the Kremlin to take aggressive action to show that NATO is not working – and therefore does not actually exist. Many experts point out in this context that such an attack would most likely only

take place after Ukraine has been defeated (the timeframe given is usually two to three years), at which point Moscow would use that country's human, economic and military resources against Europe.

If such a scenario were to materialize, it would have catastrophic consequences for the daily lives of Europeans and the future of democracy in the world. For many years, it would place global politics in the hands of autocracies and European politics in the hands of radical nationalists. Voluntarism and militarism would flourish on the ruins of international law, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons would only be a matter of time. In the case of Central Europe, Russian aggression and its political and economic consequences would set countries back decades, undoing the work of many generations to transform and break away from Russia's sphere of influence. Moreover, the everyday reality of the people in the occupied regions of Ukraine (terror, political murders, torture, expropriation) would take hold in any other territory attacked or conquered by Russia.

In the face of an enemy that treats foreign policy as a zero-sum game and war as its standard tool, the appropriate solutions in the sphere of deterrence are provided by the West's Cold War policy towards the Soviet Union. The only language that a conflict-seeking aggressor understands is the language of force. This means not only the need to intensify armament (where time and scale are decisive factors), but also appropriate strategic communication, supported by credible actions. The enemies must know that aggressive steps will be cost-prohibitive for them. Instead, the Kremlin has too often heard assurances about European fears of escalation and promises not to cross our self-imposed red lines vis-à-vis Russia.

Overcoming short-sightedness

Ukraine is the natural theatre of European deterrence. The second key theatre thereof is the cognitive sphere: preventing military conflict depends on the will to win and the courage to take the risk of confrontation. The weakest point of European defence is the post-Cold War mentality, which has resulted in de facto disarmament, a zero-risk strategy in an increasingly unstable world, and a weakening of democracy's resilience to hostile active measures. One of the Alliance's key mistakes is to seek to minimize risk on our side instead of shifting it to the Russian side.

If Russia is not defeated in Ukraine, it will certainly intensify its attempts to destabilize Europe and may be tempted to resort to armed aggression. A much safer and cheaper solution for NATO is to provide Ukraine with the necessary financial and military resources to thwart Moscow's imperial ambitions on its own territory. The protracted, unpunished genocide being perpetrated in the very heart of

Europe against the Ukrainian people painfully exposes the weakness and cynicism of the European architecture of law and values.

Belgium's blocking of the confiscation of Russian assets subject to sanctions in December 2025 is one of the most blatant examples of short-sightedness (local financial interests proved more important than Europe's security) and succumbing to Russian blackmail (Russian intelligence orchestrated an intimidation campaign targeting local decision makers). Once again, it turns out that Russia does not need to send tanks to win battles. The result is that Ukraine, instead of Russian money, will most likely be financed from European funds, which, during elections, will provide ammunition for all kinds of anti-EU populists.

While the conditions for a Russian defeat are increasingly favourable, the European fear of punishing war criminals only strengthens the Russian belief in an ultimate victory.

Such short-sightedness also helps to reinforce Russia's image as "too powerful to fail" – at a time when its macroeconomic and budgetary situation is rapidly deteriorating under the impact of sanctions, and while public awareness of the rising costs of war and support for peace negotiations are growing. The calculations of the ruling elite and their loyalty to Putin could change under the influence of a series of defeats on the front and improved enforcement of sanctions. In other words, while the conditions for a Russian defeat are increasingly favourable, the European fear of punishing war criminals only strengthens the Russian belief in ultimate victory and their willingness to make necessary sacrifices.

That is why it is so important to thwart Moscow's ambitions here and now, and punish the aggressor as early as the stage of hybrid actions. Europe and NATO must demonstrate, through kinetic and cognitive means, that further attacks on them will be utterly cost-prohibitive. Such a cognitive strategy may also have an indirect impact on US attitudes towards Moscow.

Real deterrence

Effectively deterring the enemy from further aggression must involve maximizing the costs of war for the elites and society of the aggressor state. In the short and medium term, it is necessary to undermine the financial foundations of the war machine, and in the long term, to entirely discredit the idea of aggressive warfare as an acceptable instrument of international relations. Furthermore, the aim should be to undermine Putin's image as the guarantor of Russia's security and stability – an

image on which he has built his political legitimacy to date. Therefore, an essential element of deterrence is to transfer the war deep into enemy territory, which requires providing Ukraine with all the tools necessary to target military facilities and the economic base of the war on a mass scale. If we truly want lasting peace, we must change the calculations of the Russian political leadership: peace, not war, should become the condition for the Kremlin elite to remain in power.

Opponents of the active deterrence by punishment towards Moscow most often point to the likelihood of Russia using nuclear weapons when feeling too heavily pressured. This is an extremely effective tool of the Kremlin's blackmail, as the risk is indeed higher than zero. But if one looks at it soberly, Moscow has not used nuclear weapons even against Ukraine, which has violated all Russian red lines, including the temporary occupation of the aggressor's border region in 2024. Essentially, in situations such as the tightening of sanctions or the supply of increasingly sophisticated weapons and intelligence to Ukraine, Moscow limits itself to threats that are not followed up with any action. This is also a lesson from which conclusions should be drawn.

It is also crucial to build the resilience of European societies to Russian phase-zero operations. This applies to the spread of disinformation, fomenting domestic divisions, and intimidation. Openly pro-Russian and anti-European views ("it's not our war," "Ukraine provoked Russia," "we can strike a deal with Russia and live a calm life," "The EU is worse than Russia") are dangerously naïve (in the best case scenario) or proof of collaboration with the enemy (in the worst case one).

A society that is aware of threats and prepared to respond appropriately is an unrewarding target for the enemy. Vigilance should be practiced at every level of the state and society. The wisdom of "if you want peace, prepare for war" is proven true. A particular challenge for most governments is communicating effectively with their own citizens: finding a balance between downplaying threats and creating a false sense of stability for the sake of the next election, and spreading panic and deepening chaos in domestic politics. The right strategy requires the involvement of governments, civil society structures, businesses and the media. Navigating between respect for civil rights and freedoms and the fight against hostile infiltration requires cooperation at all levels of the social structure. Measures applied domestically must respect the democratic rule of law. Measures employed against enemies must aim at neutralizing their offensive power and forcing them to comply with international law.

Faced with the biggest security threat since the Second World War, we must think about the right strategy to neutralize it for decades to come. Any decisions taken today will have long-term consequences for the entire continent.

Europe will be much safer and life will be much more peaceful if Russia loses the war in Ukraine and does not reach the stage of seriously considering an attack on

NATO countries. Historically, Russia's neighbours have regained their sovereignty and opportunities for economic development when Moscow was weak and losing wars (whether hot or cold). To achieve this goal, we need not only deployable military hardware. We need human software – minds that are resilient to hostile influence, and the political will to use all our potential in different domains to save our democracies, freedoms, and way of life. ❞

Maria Domańska is a senior fellow at the Warsaw-based Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW). She specializes in Russian domestic politics.

Never again meets a new war

ISABELLE DE POMMEREAU

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has forced Germany into a reckoning that would have seemed implausible just a few years ago. Warnings that Moscow could attack another European country before the end of the decade have pushed Berlin into its most ambitious rearmament effort since the Cold War. However, this shift has not come without resistance.

On the morning in which the German parliament voted in late 2025 to reinstate military service, protests spilled into the streets outside the Bundestag and across the country. The decision, unthinkable just a few years earlier, marked a sharp break with a political culture long defined by military restraint and the post-war mantra of "never again". As lawmakers debated inside, chants and placards echoed for hours outside, underscoring how, more than 80 years after the fall of the Nazi regime, Germany remains deeply, and uniquely, unsettled about the use of force.

In Berlin, more than 3,000 young people joined what organizers called a "school strike against conscription", marching behind handmade signs and chanting, "We don't want to spend half a year of our lives in barracks, be trained in drill and obedience, and learn how to kill." The mood was disciplined and earnest – closer to a climate rally than a Cold War-era anti-war march. For many participants, the choreography of protest felt familiar, repurposed for a new political moment.

Yannick Kiesel recognized it immediately. A long-time environmental activist and 32-year-old geography graduate, he once urged students to skip school for

Fridays for Future. Now, alarmed by what he sees as an accelerating militarization of German society, he has joined the German Peace Society–United War Resisters, or DFG-VK, a historic pillar of German pacifism.

Conscientious objection

During the Cold War, the DFG-VK helped guide a generation of young Germans through a constitutional provision that exists almost nowhere else: the right to refuse military service on moral grounds. West Germany enshrined that right in its Basic Law as a direct response to National Socialism and the crimes of the Wehrmacht – a safeguard intended to ensure the state could never again compel individuals to kill in its name. Over time, conscientious objection had evolved from a legal clause into a socially anchored movement, supported by churches, unions, student groups and, later, the Green Party.

After reunification and decades of relative peace, climate activism had eclipsed the peace movement as the dominant cause among younger Germans. But as the war in Ukraine reshaped Europe's security order, fuelling debates over rebuilding Germany's depleted armed forces, the DFG-VK had seen a surge of interest. On that December day, Kiesel urged protesters to reclaim what he says many see as a distinctly German constitutional right – and to reject the new law.

After reunification and decades of peace, climate activism had eclipsed the peace movement as the dominant cause among younger Germans.

"For me, it's the same thing," he said, standing beneath banners reading "The youth are not cannon fodder." "This is Fridays for Future – applied to peace. Climate protection and peace belong together. Without peace, there is no climate justice." Kiesel views the legislation not as a pragmatic security measure but as a symbolic breach of a post-war taboo, and, he argues, a step towards compulsory service in an army he considers underfunded, outdated and morally compromised. Rearmament, he said, reflects misplaced priorities in a country where social inequality is growing and funding for education, youth programmes and social services is under strain. Young people, he added, are being told they must "do something for Germany".

"No," Kiesel said. "I won't defend my country, because I don't know what there is left to defend."

The mass protests against the return of military service were not just a reaction to a single law. They exposed a deeper fault line in Germany – one rooted in its

post-war history and German society's unresolved relationship with military force now colliding with a rapidly deteriorating security environment in Europe. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has forced Germany into a reckoning that would have seemed implausible only a few years ago. Warnings from political leaders and security analysts that Moscow could attack another European country before the end of the decade have pushed Berlin into its most ambitious rearmament effort since the Cold War – a shift former Chancellor Olaf Scholz labelled a *Zeitenwende*, or change of era, when he announced a 100-billion-euro investment in the armed forces days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine..

Difficult compromise

At the centre of the effort is the *Wehrdienst-Modernisierungsgesetz*, or Military Service Modernization Act – a law that marks Germany's most significant move towards rebuilding military manpower since conscription was suspended in 2011. The legislation establishes a new framework for military service, focused on a volunteer-first model with mandatory questionnaires and health assessments for 18-year-olds, while allowing the parliament to activate a needs-based form of conscription (*Bedarfswehrpflicht*) if volunteer numbers fall short.

The goal is to identify potential recruits more efficiently and reverse a steady erosion of personnel that has left the German military, the Bundeswehr, short-staffed and overstretched. With incentives including higher pay, free driver's licences and bonuses for longer service, the government hopes to raise troop levels from roughly 180,000 towards the NATO target of 260,000 by the early 2030s, while expanding the reserve force from about 50,000 to 200,000.

The law, passed only after months of one of the most acrimonious national debates in recent memory, represents a difficult compromise. It is far more cautious than Chancellor Friedrich Merz had suggested months earlier. Standing alongside NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General Alexus Grynkewich, Merz spoke of turning the Bundeswehr into Europe's strongest conventional army. The legislation, however, stops short of reinstating a full draft, but it explicitly requires lawmakers to revisit compulsory service if too few volunteers step forward.

Even so, the government has struggled to explain to a largely pacifist society – particularly younger Germans – what it is that Germans should be prepared to defend, trying to convince them that defence should once again be understood as a shared civic responsibility, rather than the task of a professional minority. Critics on the left, including many members of the Social Democratic Party, had seen military service as a symbolic breach of a post-war taboo, warning that it risks

sliding towards conscription without first addressing why the Bundeswehr remains unattractive to many young people. Most conservatives had argued that mandatory service is the only realistic way to build a force capable of meeting Germany's obligations. Supporters of the compromise say a volunteer-first approach buys time to rebuild recruitment systems, housing, training facilities and infrastructure dismantled after the draft was suspended.

Public opinion reflects the tension at the heart of the *Zeitenwende*. Rising threats and allied expectations have pushed Germany towards a more assertive defence posture, even as a deeply ingrained culture of military restraint continues to shape attitudes at home. Polls show that while support for higher defence spending has increased, only 38 per cent of Germans say they would be willing to take up arms to defend the country.

Historic shift

Yet, by German standards, the shift is historic. For Roland Bösker, a long-time reservist, the law is less about troop numbers than about changing mentality – an attempt to break what he calls Germany's long-standing "friendly indifference" towards the Bundeswehr, the assumption that "somebody, somehow protected freedom and peace".

Generations raised on peace and the imperative of "never again", he said, never had to confront the question of military service directly. By forcing that question into the open, the new law "makes people think", Bösker said. "And in Germany, that alone is already a turning point."

Michael Harsch, an associate professor of national security at the Eisenhower School of the US National Defense University, sees the legislation as the latest step in a long and uneasy evolution – from an army designed to limit power to one expected to anchor Europe's defence in a major land conflict, and from a society shaped by pacifism to one being asked to confront war as a lived possibility. The stakes, he said, are high. NATO's Eastern Flank measures readiness in months, not decades. As Poland and other frontline states accelerate rearmament, Europe's strategic centre of gravity is shifting eastward and Germany's window to close its capability gaps is narrowing.

"If successful," Harsch said, "Germany may complete its long journey from a country that associates power with guilt to one that understands power as responsibility in a changing geopolitical environment."

The unease surrounding Germany's defence debate runs deep and is rooted in history. For years after the Second World War, the very idea of a German army was

Photo by German Peace Society–United War Resisters, or DFG-VK

On December 5th 2025, the morning the German parliament voted to reinstate military service, protests spilled into the streets outside the Bundestag and across the country. In Berlin alone, more than 3,000 young people took part in a "school strike against conscription".

morally fraught. The Wehrmacht had been dissolved, the country lay in ruins, and a reckoning with Nazism left not only physical devastation but a profound moral collapse. Militarism and nationalism had led to catastrophe. Rearmament was not merely controversial – it was taboo.

Out of that reckoning emerged a strategic culture of self-limitation, later called *Kultur der Zurückhaltung* – a culture of restraint, infused with a distinctly German pacifism. Avoiding the use of force was seen not as weakness but as responsibility. Power was something to be distrusted, tightly bound, and constantly justified.

During the Cold War, West Germany fielded one of NATO's largest and most capable forces, peaking at more than 500,000 active troops and spending up to three per cent of GDP on defence. Yet it rarely deployed soldiers abroad. Military power was accepted as a necessity, not embraced as a tool of statecraft. At the same time, resistance began to take shape, especially in the 1970s and early 1980s, when the legacy of Nazism, the Cold War, rearmament and a rebellious younger

generation collided. Peace and conscientious objection became central political issues. For many young Germans, the new state appeared morally unconvincing when it once again began recruiting soldiers.

The German Peace Society–United War Resisters built directly on this sentiment: conscientious objection was framed as an individual consequence of collective guilt. Peace groups argued that rearmament would make Germany a target. After 1945, the right to conscientious objection had ultimately been recognized as part of freedom of conscience and enshrined in the constitution, giving German pacifism a distinctive quality.

The shock of reality: the *Zeitenwende*

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine shattered assumptions overnight. Days later, Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced the *Zeitenwende* backed by 100 billion euros to modernize the Bundeswehr and meet NATO spending targets. The rhetoric was historic. The reality was sobering. Ammunition stocks were low, while major systems were unserviceable. The army's chief reportedly described that the Bundeswehr was "more or less naked". Defence Minister Boris Pistorius sharpened the message: Germany had to become *kriegstüchtig* – ready for war – not just militarily, but socially and mentally.

Berlin signalled that nearly one trillion euros could be mobilized over a decade and Germany could meet NATO's five per cent benchmark by 2035.

Spending rose rapidly. By 2024, Germany met NATO's two per cent benchmark and became the second-largest military donor to Ukraine after the United States. But recruitment lagged, readiness targets slipped and the culture of restraint – embedded in society and Scholz's own party – proved stubborn. Scholz's coalition collapsed later that year. When Friedrich Merz took office in May 2025, Germany was still halfway through its defence reckoning. The Bundeswehr remained undersized and partially operational, even as pressure mounted from Washington and NATO's Eastern Flank. Merz vowed to build Europe's strongest conventional force.

His first move was fiscal. He loosened Germany's constitutionally anchored debt brake – a milestone in a debt-averse country – clearing the way for a 500-billion-euro defence and infrastructure fund. Berlin signalled that nearly one trillion euros could be mobilized over a decade. Merz pledged to meet NATO's five per cent benchmark by 2035. "Whatever it takes," he said.

Money, however, did not buy societal buy-in. Although an increasing number of Germans acknowledge the threat posed by Russia, few say they would take up arms themselves. In a recent poll, just 16 per cent said they would "definitely" defend the country, while another 22 per cent said they "probably" would. A large Bundeswehr survey showed similar results, particularly among young men. Support for defence spending is broad but support for personal obligation is not.

That tension erupted this past June, when senior Social Democrats published a controversial *Friedenspapier* – a "peace paper" – outlining an alternative vision for Germany's security policy. The paper stopped short of rejecting support for Ukraine but criticized what its authors described as a headlong rush into militarization, urging diplomacy, arms control, and eventual dialogue with Russia. The backlash was swift. Critics accused the authors of naïveté and Cold War nostalgia. Analysts, however, saw it as evidence of how deeply pacifism remains embedded in German political culture.

Return of the objectors

At the offices of the German Peace Society–United War Resisters, the phone rings more often than ever. "We actually have many older people who refused service in the 1960s, 70s and 80s," said Yannick Kiesel. "They're coming back now and want advice. They bring their experiences with them – as if they somehow sensed their stories would be needed again."

Most calls, however, come from families. "Mothers, grandparents who are worried. We get calls from grandmothers calling on behalf of their grandchildren – 13, 14 years old," Kiesel said. "They can only apply for conscientious objection at 17 and a half, but the fear is already there." Kiesel describes a paradoxical situation: a peace movement shaped by two poles: the old, who speak from experience, and the young, who act out of uncertainty. "The middle is missing," he said. "The generation that grew up in peace never felt the need to actively stand up for peace."

At the same time, the Bundeswehr is recruiting more aggressively than ever, with posters, YouTube series, influencers, and around 100 uniformed recruiters visiting schools. "And still they can't make it work," Kiesel said. "Because the army is not an attractive employer. The moment you have to hold a rifle and shoot at someone who looks human, the romance is over."

For him, the political narrative that Germany is defending "our freedom" in Ukraine falls short. "People in Ukraine are dying because they are defending their own country, not our freedom," he said. "That's a fallacy politicians keep returning to."

Pushback

The new military service law is meant to bridge the widening gap between Germany's defence ambitions and public willingness to serve — and in doing so, it has ignited one of the country's fiercest debates over security in decades. In mid-January 2026, the defence minister sought to project momentum. The Bundeswehr, he said, had reached its highest personnel level in more than a decade. "We have the best recruitment results since the suspension of conscription," Pistorius told reporters. "Young people are increasingly willing to contribute to Germany's external security."

Yet beyond official optimism, much of German society remains undecided about what that contribution should look like or whether it should be expected at all. That hesitation has fuelled a broader debate over the meaning of defence, one that has moved beyond parliamentary committees and military briefings into classrooms, protests, conference halls, and conversations like the one Yannick Kiesel helped spark outside the Bundestag.

"Civil defence is not only about soldiers and weapons," Florian Constantin Feyerabend of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation told a packed audience at a recent conference at Berlin's Nordic embassies, held just days before student protests erupted against the new service law. "It's about everyday citizens – preparedness, volunteering, resilience."

The event, titled "Civil Defence and Societal Resilience – Lessons from Russia's War of Aggression and the Nordic-Baltic States", was part of a growing effort to shift Germany's defence debate from troop numbers and hardware to the resilience of society itself. Germany may have grown accustomed to peace, Feyerabend warned, but Moscow is waging a hybrid war that targets societies as much as armies.

"Resilience is not optional," he said. "Ukraine shows it is essential for survival." The Nordic and Baltic states, he added, offer models Germany has barely begun to absorb — approaches that fuse military readiness with social cohesion, trust, and a deeply rooted security culture.

In Finland, Sweden, and the Baltics, defence is treated as a societal project. Civilian preparedness, crisis communication, and resistance to disinformation are core elements of national security. The experience of Russian occupation – or proximity to it – has made defence existential. Citizens are trained to respond to emergencies, protect infrastructure, and support the state in crisis, reducing the burden on overstretched militaries.

Germany, by contrast, dismantled much of its civil-defence infrastructure after the Cold War, betting that peace was permanent. "In Ukraine, resilience isn't something the state hands down," Oksana Huss, a Ukrainian political scientist

now at the University of Duisburg, Germany, told the audience that evening. "It's built horizontally." After the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, she explained, local self-organization rewrote the social contract, networks that later kept towns functioning during Russia's full-scale invasion. "In Germany," she added, "many still expect the state to handle everything. In a real crisis, that won't work."

Changing that mindset will take time. "The will to defend is there," Feyerabend said at a workshop titled *Resilient by 2030: Is German Society Ready for Defense?* "Now political leadership and society have to turn that will into real capability – including in the information space." He warned that Germany must move from a full-service state mentality toward shared responsibility, strengthening cognitive resilience against disinformation without tipping into panic.

The *Zeitenwende* has begun

For Roland Bösker, the tension is personal – and generational. Fresh out of high school in 1989, he decided to do military service and later trained as a reserve officer. When he proudly showed his uniform to his grandfather, the reaction was brutal. The older man had fought at Stalingrad, lost a leg, and carried shrapnel in his body for life. "He said, 'Son, you're an idiot. I lost my leg in a bloody war – why the hell do you want to be a soldier?'"

Germany dismantled much of its civil-defence infrastructure after the Cold War, betting that peace was permanent.

Bösker's response came from the wars that were unfolding in the Balkans. "In Bosnia, innocent people were being slaughtered," he recalled. Turning away was not an option. After completing his service, he trained as a reserve officer, serving in places that include NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Lithuania after Russia annexed Crimea, working alongside Baltic and Nordic forces for whom defence and societal resilience are existential realities, not abstractions.

For his grandfather, military service was inseparable from loss and guilt. Bösker insists his aim is not conquest but protection. One person may defend with a weapon; another in the fire brigade, civil defence, emergency relief, or elderly care. All contribute to resilience.

"The *Zeitenwende* is not a decision," Bösker said. "It is a process – a societal process. What matters is not uniformity, but participation."

He speaks openly about scenarios: NATO's operational plan for Germany, the movement of hundreds of thousands of troops towards the Baltic states in a crisis, civilian hospitals treating the wounded, and bottlenecks affecting everyday life.

Deterrence, he said, is not created through silence, but through preparedness. "The greater this awareness is," Bösker said, "the more resilient society becomes – and the less likely war is".

While that awareness has not reached everyone, it is growing. In the end, Bösker said, the decisive question is not how many young people join the Bundeswehr, but that they are forced to confront the question at all. The *Zeitenwende* is not over. It has just begun. EE

Isabelle de Pommereau is a journalist and reporter. Originally from France, she is based in Frankfurt and works as a correspondent for international outlets, including *The Christian Science Monitor*, die *Tageszeitung*, and *Alternatives Economiques*.

Latin Europe

DAVID HALLBECK

What a future European culture will look like remains an open question. What matters here is the insistence that such a culture must exist at all. Europe should be understood as an idea and a system of symbols, not as a race or a nation. For this to be possible, Europe requires a renewed sense of continuity.

Europe is a continent at the end of a continent, profoundly alone, desperately cornered, at the end of the world. In a recent publication from the Russian foreign ministry the author stated that Russia is ready to burn everything right up until the English Channel and that it is easier to negotiate with Europe when the Russians are in Berlin or Paris.

People surprisingly often mean what they say. In the last few years we have seen that Europe is almost completely dependent, incapable of taking any decisions of its own, and simultaneously characterized by a complete servility westwards and a complete cowardice, the courage being limited to true, but meaningless condemnations, eastwards. The effects of sanctions nobody has really seen.

Ideology and unity

When we hear that Americans and Russians are negotiating a peace agreement for Ukraine and Europe – as if the outcome depended solely on them – we should keep two things in mind. First, Russia is a political culture deeply invested in continuity. Its elites routinely speak of "eternal borders" and the war in Ukraine extends far beyond Vladimir Putin as an individual. It sustains the archaic, hierarchical order that he seeks to preserve. For this reason, the Kremlin has little genuine interest in ending the war. Second, while the United States may sincerely

wish to bring the conflict to a close, history shows that it has often managed its global interests even when Europe was divided. For Washington, European unity is not always a strategic necessity. For Central Europe, however, the consequences of division have been far more severe.

When a genuine external threat emerges – though it remains unclear why it has been recognized only so late – a degree of European cohesion tends to appear. Yet unity produced by danger alone is insufficient for long-term resilience. The United States is shielded by geography and underpinned by a relatively cohesive political community. Russia, by contrast, combines political centralization with a shared repertoire of cultural references stretching from St Petersburg to Vladivostok. Common quotations, slogans and cultural codes – from Pushkin through to late Soviet popular culture – form a linguistic shorthand that most Russians instantly recognize and complete. This creates a sense of collective belonging that makes state propaganda particularly effective.

Crucially, this cohesion is not mobilized for constructive purposes. It is deployed to legitimize aggression against a sovereign neighbour and the mass killing of civilians. Europe, by contrast, lacks a comparable common linguistic space. Beyond a narrow circle of specialists, there are few shared references that resonate across societies and languages.

This system of expressions and stereotypes forms the background against which ideology operates. Ideologies rarely require intellectual coherence to be effective. Their success depends instead on linguistic repetition and recognizable quotations rather than structured argument. While rising levels of education may slowly weaken this mechanism, it is typically accompanied by a growing cult of language detached from practical meaning. In Russia, broader access to education has paradoxically increased mass ideological mobilization, drawing large segments of society into active identification with the war. This makes the country both more resilient and more dangerous than many anticipated. The contrast with the limited popular support for the Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s is instructive.

The course of history seems to be a slow Russian expansion towards the West; it was interrupted in the 1990s and has now started anew. If we do not want to succumb to this expansion, Europe has to be something which goes beyond a common threat. If it is only a common threat, it might even seem rational to give up.

Seeking continuity?

I now turn to one of the reasons why Russia, and a number of states outside the Euro-Atlantic sphere, display a curious mixture of hostility and indifference

towards Europe. This combination is striking in itself. At its core lies Europe's near-complete loss of ideological sensitivity.

Ideological regimes are undoubtedly destructive and show little hesitation in sacrificing individuals. Yet their long-term ambition is not merely domination but imitation. They seek to compel their adversaries to adopt their way of life and ideology, understood less as a coherent doctrine than as a mode of speaking, a particular arrangement of slogans and formulas that ultimately shapes thought itself. As long as an opponent remains ideologically responsive, they remain an enemy, but one still situated within a shared cognitive framework. Such an enemy must be persuaded – by peaceful means or otherwise – but persuaded nonetheless. Ideological systems aspire to universality; they want others to think and speak as they do.

Europe is a quantity of national cultures, an extension of everyday life and everyday language, based on inertia, and the Latin heritage.

This logic helps explain why the Cold War remained "cold" for as long as it did. Communist parties commanded significant electoral support in several European countries, and even their opponents were deeply immersed in ideological language. This produced a discursive environment that Soviet representatives and their allies could recognize and engage with, even when it was overtly hostile. By contrast, the West's declaration of the "end of history" – effectively the abandonment of ideological slogans – is perceived not as progress but as an anomaly. In the eyes of ideological regimes, it signals not neutrality, but absence. It makes Europe seem both strange and inoffensive. Inoffensive it has been, indeed, during the last few years. In order to survive in the longer perspective, it has to create both an intellectual and emotional cohesion and material strength. This needs to be clear in both the industrial and military spheres, not necessarily in an abundance in services that artificially increases GDP and directs the efforts away from real production, which is what one needs in a real crisis, in a real confrontation.

What is Europe? It is a quantity of national cultures, an extension of everyday life and everyday language, based on inertia, and the Latin heritage, not the Roman heritage, not the Roman Church. Today, the countries which unite at least materially against Russia, are those which once did have universities with thesis defences in Latin. Poland was such a country. Belarus and Ukraine were, among others as parts of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, such countries. This sense of unity is something completely unconscious, it is just there.

You can object that this is due to the Roman Catholic Church. Adopting a religion is adopting a way of speaking about continuity, about the eternal and the sacred. As soon as you have a religion or an ideology, the eternal and sacred, that

is continuity, are convertible terms. Ideologies literally speak in the same way. Adopting the Roman Church was essentially about entering a system of concepts in Latin. It is a degree of abstraction that goes beyond the national, the everyday. It means entering a new degree of abstraction when speaking about the continuity of one's physical and intellectual world. Entering a culture is entering a discourse, a symbol of continuity, a way of speaking about continuity.

Contemporary Europe lacks a convincing sense of continuity. Its level of cultural abstraction is largely confined to immediate impressions, shaped to a significant degree by the media-driven, Americanized public sphere. A return to a purely Latin or classical cultural framework is neither possible nor desirable. Yet elements of that tradition continue to operate in the background, as one among several deep structures that still inform European life. Other deep structures – those governing everyday practices, patterns of imitation, and pre-industrial family models – vary considerably across the continent. In countries such as Hungary and Slovakia, these everyday structures can generate a sense of cultural proximity to Russia at the level of social habits and mentalities, though not necessarily at the level of abstract political or normative commitments or at the level of intellectual culture.

Europe requires a renewed sense of continuity – one that transcends daily interactions conducted solely within national languages and conceptual frameworks.

What a future European culture will look like remains an open question. What matters here is the insistence that such a culture must exist at all. Europe should be understood as an idea and a system of symbols, not as a race or a nation. For this to be possible, Europe requires a renewed sense of continuity and a higher level of abstraction – one that transcends daily interactions conducted solely within national languages and conceptual frameworks. It must learn to imitate differently than it has over the past three decades: to value those who create symbolic continuity, those who produce tangible outcomes, and those who defend political boundaries. Paradoxically, continuity is forged not only through consensus but also through confrontation. Ideas, insofar as they matter, are inherently conflictual. This helps explain why ideas have played a limited role in European public life since the early 1990s.

Until relatively recently, European universities themselves reflected this conflictual understanding of ideas. Research was structured around the defence of theses rather than the mere pursuit of answers to predefined questions. Although the distinction may appear subtle, it marks a profound epistemological shift – away from intellectual confrontation and towards procedural problem-solving.

Searching for victory

There is no way of immediately creating a continuity based on language and culture. The real triumph of American English took place approximately when the European Union started speaking about European multilingualism. In a world without the sense of one's own continuity, the most practical solution will always win.

The past three decades in Europe were marked by the elevation of the service sector and the parallel marginalization of industry and the military – in short, by a preference for forms of economic activity that increased Europe's dependence on forces beyond its borders. This trajectory rested on an implicit belief in the "end of history". It was a unilateral European assumption, never shared by Russia or by other ideological powers outside the Euro-Atlantic world.

These policies proved politically popular, which is precisely why any meaningful change must begin here. In the present context, it is unrealistic to start with appeals to cultural or intellectual cohesion at the European level; such arguments are largely unintelligible to the broader public. The starting point must instead be continuity and strategic self-sufficiency: the long-term reconstruction of European industry and military capacity, understood not as emergency measures, but as projects aimed at restoring strength and independence.

Any undertaking that extends beyond the individual creates incentives to defect. Corruption and obstruction are often rational from a short-term, individual perspective. This is why all successful long-term projects generate a shared narrative: a lore, a system of symbols that makes participation meaningful and advantageous even when immediate costs are involved. It is no coincidence that interest in European languages (with the partial exception of English) and in European cultural traditions declined sharply after the Cold War ended – at the very moment when the external adversary disappeared, the service economy was celebrated, and industrial and military dependence deepened. European languages form part of such a symbolic framework of continuity, one that is far more relevant to production and defence than to services. On this basis, a new European culture can emerge: one that transcends the national, the everyday, the banal, and the tyranny of immediate impressions.

To speak of culture in pragmatic terms does not deny its transcendent dimension. Culture is also a perpetual revolt against continuity, but revolt is meaningful only where continuity exists as the dominant horizon. There can be rebellion against academic classicism, which, as such, is often banal and very down to earth but there is no rebellion against the specific forms of this rebellion, as in Cubism. When continuity disappears as an organizing principle, both its symbols and their negation lose public significance and retreat into the domain of specialists, which is what has happened during the last 30 years in Europe.

The objective, however, is not permanent war. In a nuclear world, such a course would be catastrophic. What is conceivable, and perhaps unavoidable, is a prolonged ideological confrontation with Russia, underpinned by a military posture strong enough to ensure deterrence and sustained by European public support. Limited physical confrontations may occur, but with sufficient determination and clarity of purpose, they can remain contained. Containment must not be confused with moral or political retreat, nor with the abandonment of commitments already made to Ukraine when it relinquished its nuclear arsenal. If Europe claims that Lviv is Europe, that claim cannot be selectively applied.

Victory, in the traditional sense of territorial conquest and unconditional surrender, is no longer attainable. In the nuclear age, victory can only mean something else. Victory will be to unite Europe, which is much more than the European Union, and this has to be based on external strength and inner, cultural cohesion. Attachment to the idea of Europe, and the hostility it provokes in those who oppose it, are the most important things for those who want Europe to unite and survive. LE

David Hallbeck (LL.M.) is an independent researcher and a former scholar (*ancien élève*) of the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris.

In the long shadow of Silicon Valley

JUSTIN TOMCZYK

Once dismissed as an eccentric Silicon Valley subculture, neoreactionary thought has begun to surface at the highest levels of western political debate. Rejecting democracy in favour of authoritarian rule, the "Dark Enlightenment" now influences figures in the American tech sector and government while attracting keen interest from Russian ideologues. The transnational creep of neoreactionary thought reveals a growing alignment between anti-liberal currents on both sides of the Atlantic.

In a public speech delivered on May 5th 2025, French President Emmanuel Macron referenced the coming challenge of an ideology once relegated to the fringes of Silicon Valley. Neoreaction (often abbreviated "NRx") and the associated concept of the "Dark Enlightenment" are anti-egalitarian political concepts that emerged in the 2000s. Over the course of nearly two decades, neoreactionary thought has seeped from a pseudonymous blog and loose collection of academic writing to the upper echelons of tech, finance and government in the United States.

At its core, NRx thought is grounded in the complete rejection of democratic governance and the reforming of the state around a single monarch-like executive. Neoreactionaries are fixated on the role of the so-called "Cathedral", a nebulous grouping of elites in government, academia, journalism and private industry that direct society and advance progressive causes. Prior to being elected to the Senate and becoming Vice President of the United States, JD Vance cited the writing of a neoreactionary writer as a potential guide for the second Trump administration. The spread of this ideology and its increase in popularity within Silicon Valley and among

younger members of the American conservative movement suggest that neoreaction may maintain a presence in American and European politics for the foreseeable future.

As this ideology crept into the American mainstream, neoreaction has attracted the curiosity of several Russian writers and academics. Through a small but growing cottage industry of Russian-language translations of neoreactionary texts, Russian internet users have begun to analyse and interact with this predominantly American ideology. The core political concepts of NRx thought have resonated greatly with the Eurasianist ideologue Alexander Dugin, who has provided not only commentary on the so-called "Dark Enlightenment" in the United States, but has also published a long-form conversation with the progenitor of neoreactionary thought.

From Warwick to California

In late 1995 a group of English academics established the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) at the University of Warwick. Few projects produced by the CCRU resembled traditional scholarship. Instead, the cohort embraced the abstract and abrasive nature of early internet culture and blurred the lines between academic study and performance art.

One of the most noteworthy members of the CCRU was Nick Land, a continental philosophy lecturer who had published *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* before joining the group. In an interview filmed for the documentary series *Visions of Heaven and Hell* produced by the English network Channel 4, Land described the growing similarity in the behaviour of computers, organizations and individuals. As part of the CCRU, Land laid the intellectual framework for the concept of "accelerationism" – the belief that a system should be pushed to its limits rather than gradually reformed. Instead of trying to ease problems or reduce harm while keeping the existing order intact, accelerationists argue that real change only becomes possible once a system is driven to a breaking point and collapses under its own weight. This strategy of intentional self-destruction and agitation has been deployed by a variety of fringe political groups, including white supremacists and "eco-fascist" far-right environmentalists.

Land's writing was noteworthy in the way that it framed the relationship between man and technology. In the essay "Meltdown", Land presents the notion that a sudden explosion of technological capabilities spurred on by an independent, semi-conscious force of capital acting outside of human control has allowed the future to "arrive" into the present. This same force is driving mankind towards an all-encompassing "technocapital singularity" and the implicit obliteration of humanity in its current form. In 1994 the visual arts collective Orphan Drift would

release a video collage featuring a robotic narration of Meltdown paired with electronic music. Orphan Drift would later provide the visual accompaniment to "SYZYGY", a performance art piece from Land and the CCRU presented in 1999.

Following a period of increasingly erratic behaviour, Land relocated to Shanghai. Land's already hermetic writing grew increasingly misanthropic and critical of the concept of democratic governance during his first years in China. In 2012, Nick Land published "The Dark Enlightenment", a manifesto that served as the first example of what would now be known as neoreactionary thought. Land rejects the notion that democratic governance is the end-state of political development and argues that democracy is a doomed concept that is inherently corrosive towards the long-term stability of society. In presenting this argument, Land cites Peter Thiel's declaration that "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible" as a turning point in the perception of democratic governance among elements of the American political elite. A recurring theme in the Dark Enlightenment is the necessity of an "exit" by neoreactionaries from the doomed experiment of democracy.

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Cathedral

In exploring an alternative model of governance, Land cites Bay Area programmer and blogger Curtis Yarvin – then known by the pen-name "Mencius Moldbug". Yarvin regularly published reflections on society and political structures through his blog "Unqualified Reservations", which were largely influenced by the works of Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle.

The first major piece of neoreactionary theory produced by Yarvin was the 2007 Formalist Manifesto which referenced the economic success of city-states like Dubai, Hong Kong and Singapore as being evidence of how prosperity does not necessarily need to be tied to democratic governance. A four-part blog post titled "Patchwork: A Political System for the 21st Century" outlined a rudimentary system of neoreactionary international relations theory. Instead of adhering to the concepts of statehood and national sovereignty established in the aftermath of the Second World War, Yarvin proposes instead that the world be divided into thousands of corporatist microstates governed by all-powerful executives.

A crucial element of this model is that individual residents of a microstate would have no input in the decision-making process, but are theoretically free to

Photo: Gage Skidmore (CC) commons.wikimedia.org

Peter Thiel is a venture capitalist and considered one of the main financiers of the Neoractionary movement. He is also considered to be the lead donor for JD Vance's Senate campaign in 2022. He is co-founder and chairman of Palantir Technologies.

exit and relocate to another microstate. Additionally, Yarvin lays out the concept of "neocameralism", a modern interpretation of mercantilism where countries act as profit-seeking enterprises. Nick Land cites Yarvin's vision of authoritarian governance as a potential alternative to modern democracy and draws heavily from Yarvin's concept of "The Cathedral" as being the primary driver of progressive political causes in modern society. As mentioned earlier in this piece, "The Cathedral" refers to a grouping of elites spread across private industry, government, media and academia that steer the direction of society and shape public thought. Yarvin argues that members of The Cathedral do not intentionally coordinate their actions with one another, but nonetheless advance progressive causes through their shared backgrounds and mutual political interests.

Silicon baggage

By the early 2010s, neoreaction had developed a small, but growing, following in Silicon Valley through the readership of Yarvin's blog. The corporatist model of governance fixated on a single all-powerful executive resonated with many start-

up founders who saw no reason not to extrapolate their system of management to the administration of a country. However, the connection that ultimately elevated neoreaction from an intellectual curiosity to an ideological project was Yarvin's relationship with venture capitalist Peter Thiel. According to the investigative journalist Corey Pein, Peter Thiel provided 1.1 million US dollars in funding to a start-up run by Curtis Yarvin named "Tlon" in 2013. Tlon's main project was the development of "Urbit", an operating system designed to create a decentralized, peer-to-peer network without using any of the established protocols and infrastructure of the modern internet.

A compilation titled *Neoreactionary Canon* was released by self-described "anarcho-papist" Bryce LaLiberte in 2014. This digital compendium stitched together the works of Land and Yarvin with secondary figures to the nascent neoreactionary movement, such as the Machine Intelligence Research Institute board member Michael Anissimov. In 2014, the software engineer and former Occupy Wall Street figure Justine Tunney submitted a letter to the White House demanding that all government employees be retired and that Google CEO Eric Schmidt be appointed chief executive of America. Tunney's proposition was partially lifted from a public talk delivered by Yarvin in 2012 titled "How to Reboot the US Government", where Yarvin claims: "If Americans want to change their government, they're going to have to get over their dictator phobia". Yarvin recommends the implementation of the acronym "RAGE" - "Retire All Government Employees".

By the mid-2010s, Yarvin's writing had found an audience among several figures close to the first Trump administration. According to the investigative reporter Joe Bernstein, Yarvin reportedly watched the results of the 2016 election with Peter Thiel and claimed to be "coaching" Thiel. Thiel reportedly viewed Steve Bannon's war against the so-called "administrative state" to be a rough approximation of Yarvin's vision of "RAGE". Balaji Srinivasan, a former managing partner at Andreessen-Horowitz and potential pick for head of the FDA under the first Trump administration, had spoken favourably about Yarvin's corporatist microstate model in a 2013 talk titled "Silicon Valley's Ultimate Exit". Srinivasan would later publish *The Network State*, again advocating for Yarvin's vision of high-tech city-states detached from current concepts of statehood and nationality.

Unlike many far-right movements, neoreactionaries do not make populist overtures and do not seek popular approval. There is no interest in electoral politics from neoreactionaries given the inherently anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian foundations of the ideology. Instead, neoreactionaries are focused on courting small groups of elite actors capable of operating within the organs of the so-called "Cathedral".

In an essay published in 2019 titled "The Deep State vs. The Deep Right", Yarvin argues that art and aesthetics would be the most effective tool for subversion against the political establishment and cites the pseudo-anonymous author Bronze Age Pervert as being the first example of truly subversive reactionary art (during the first Trump administration, "Bronze Age Mindset" was identified as a foundational text among young White House staffers aligned with the far right). Later in 2022, Yarvin argued that neoreactionaries must view themselves as being part of a small, select circle of elites within institutions and circles of power that must covertly work against their peers in order to protect the political and cultural interests of mainstream conservatives. In presenting this strategy Yarvin draws upon fantasy tropes, referring to conservatives as "hobbits", progressives as "elves", and neoreactionaries as "dark elves".

After the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, Yarvin would begin a public relations campaign that would extend neoreaction beyond the confines of Silicon Valley. In 2021 Yarvin spoke with former Trump appointee Michael Anton in an interview titled "The Stakes: The American Monarchy?" hosted by the California-based Claremont Institute. Later that summer, Yarvin appeared on an episode of *Tucker Carlson Today* titled "American Degradation".

Laboratory of reaction

Following the invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, Yarvin provided several reflections on the Russo-Ukrainian War through a neoreactionary lens in a series of Substack posts and conversations with former Atlantic Council fellow Vladislav Davidzon. According to Yarvin, the war in Ukraine should not be viewed as an interstate war or attempt at imperial conquest but instead be considered a civil war between two centres of historic Russian power – Kyiv and Moscow – concerning the future of the Russian people. Yarvin refers to Ukraine as "a country as old as New Order is a band" and argues that the state is stitched together from the historic lands of Ruthenia and Malorossiya. Through this framing, the war in Ukraine is seen as being the product of outside interference by the US State Department, while the continued supply of weapons is framed as a malicious effort by the US to prolong the conflict. As outlined in a Substack article published shortly before the invasion, Yarvin's vision for Europe is the full withdrawal of American military bases and diplomatic missions. Instead of promoting a mutual belief in liberal democracy and free markets within the transatlantic community, Yarvin instead calls for Europe to become a "laboratory of reaction" with Russia having full dominion over the continent.

Several neoreactionary concepts have been embraced by decision-makers in tech, finance and government in the United States. After making several references to the "Antichrist" during an interview at the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, Thiel delivered a series of seminars where he described the so-called "Antichrist" as being regulatory forces in society that limit the boundless growth of technology – echoing the descriptions of the "Cathedral" in much of Yarvin's writing. Venture capitalist Marc Andreessen wrote glowingly of the "techno-capital machine" described by Nick Land in the 2023 "Techno-Optimist Manifesto" and listed Land as a "Patron Saint of Techno-Optimism". Other approximations of neoreactionary concepts can be seen within the policies of the second Trump administration. The decimation of the federal workforce by the so-called Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, can be viewed as a partial attempt to implement the RAGE policy prescription. JD Vance's engagement with groups like the far-right Alternative for Germany party, the endorsement of Eurosceptic political forces in the 2025 National Security Strategy, and the reference to the need for "Civilizational Allies" in a Substack published by the American State Department all echo Yarvin's writing on the necessity for the US to abandon its current commitment to liberal democracy and instead shape Europe into a so-called "laboratory of reaction".

Several neoreactionary concepts have been embraced by decision-makers in tech, finance and government in the United States.

An alignment of the margins

From amateur translations of Yarvin's writing shared on Russian social media to proper Russian-language publications of Land's interviews and political theory, neoreactionary thought found an audience within the wider Russian internet. In 2023 a collection of texts titled "The Dark Enlightenment: American Conservatives Against Empire and the Cathedral" was published by Rodina press with a forward by editor Marat Nigmatulin, a former philosophy student at Moscow State University who was reportedly tortured by Russian police in a library reading room after allegedly distributing flyers in support of a school shooter. Although the book lists Yarvin as the primary author and contains several Russian-language copies of his work (such as the Formalist Manifesto and a translation of his interview with the pseudo-anonymous figure "Lomez"), many of the texts included appear to be entirely unrelated to neoreaction and are presented without proper authorship,

such as a Russian-language copy of a Breitbart article published by "Sputnik and Pogrom" and an essay from the feminist journal *Knife* on the colonial dimensions of Western feminism in the Middle East.

The largest exposure of Yarvin's work to Russian-language audiences was the publication of an op-ed by the neo-Eurasianist ideologue Alexander Dugin in *Ria Novosti* in March 2025. Having already explored Yarvin's place in the wider ideological coalition of the second Trump campaign, Dugin claims that the populist politics embraced by the first Trump administration were viable for delivering electoral victories yet unable to grapple with the limitations and challenge of the so-called "Deep State" during Trump's first term. Dugin argues that the models of accelerationism and authoritarian consolidation described by Land and Yarvin have resonated with the elite in Silicon Valley, who allied themselves with the second Trump administration and now operate as an "Even Deeper State", guided by the anti-egalitarian concepts of the so-called "Dark Enlightenment".

Thiel and Elon Musk are specifically named by Dugin as being members of this grouping. The "Even Deeper State" is working to not only oppose liberalism but also dismantle the entire process of globalization and create a caste system of neo-feudal governance in its place. Dugin directly references Land and Yarvin as being the ideological architects behind the "Dark Enlightenment" and the anti-egalitarian trends visible within Silicon Valley.

On October 6th 2025, Dugin spoke speak directly with Land in a two and a half hour conversation streamed on YouTube. A transcript of the discussion was published by "Katehon", an off-shoot of the ultranationalist "Tsargrad Institute". After an initial agreement between both men on liberalism's roots in the secularization of English, Protestant society, Dugin recognizes that a "paleoliberal Anglo-Saxon" England can still exist within a multipolar world. Dugin expands upon the neoreactionary concept of the Cathedral and describes the ruling model of "The Republic", claiming that politics must pass "...from the republic through principate, through dictatorship, to the empire".

Later in their conversation, both men reference a recent guest on Tucker Carlson's interview series that spoke on the topic of demonology and artificial intelligence. Dugin claims that artificial intelligence and modern progressivism both represent vestiges of the so-called "Antichrist" and calls for himself and Land to overcome "geopolitical boundaries" to exchange visions and philosophical positions. Towards the end of the conversation, Dugin endorses Elon Musk's "Grokipedia" and calls for the creation of a Wikipedia that is removed from modernity and grounded in traditionalist perspectives.

Just as it would be inaccurate to consider Alexander Dugin or "Eurasianism" to be a major political force in Putin's Russia, it would be incorrect to view the

second Trump administration as a strictly neoreactionary presidency or Curtis Yarvin as a major source of policy within the White House. However, NRx thought serves a similar role to Dugin's Eurasianism in that it lays bare the political "id" of the modern American right. Just as white supremacists and far-right ideologues in Russia and the US have historically sought cooperation with one another, we can expect that American neoreactionaries and Russian Eurasianists may continue to seek out new avenues of cooperation to agitate towards the collapse of the post-war order. EE

Justin Tomczyk is a graduate of Stanford University's MA programme in Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. From early 2022 to late 2023 he worked as a Subject Matter Expert at the event detection firm Dataminr and later wrote for the *Economist Intelligence Unit*. His work may be found at justintomczyk.com. He is currently based in Brooklyn.

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Ukraine's post-war labour dilemma: Who will fill the jobs?

STANISLAV STOROZHENKO

Discussions are beginning to grow with regards to the shape of Ukraine following the end of Russia's current invasion. This is particularly true regarding the economy, as well as the labour force that will power reconstruction. While experts all agree on a need for new thinking, the future in this sphere remains uncertain.

Since 2022, the Ukrainian economy has suffered so many hits that it is now virtually incapable of functioning independently without cash injections from other countries. The destruction of Ukrainian industry, and even entire regions, along with the outflow of millions of citizens, is already forcing Kyiv to develop a vision for a new, economically-reformatted version of the state after the end of the hot phase of the full-scale invasion. While Ukraine has already faced changes in its economic structure, the problem of labour shortages will only grow with each day of peaceful life, and here the Ukrainian authorities are already proposing a solution: attracting migrant workers. According to Tetiana Berezhna, a former deputy minister of economy, over the next ten years, the country will be forced to invite about 4.5 million people, and this process has already de facto begun. Citizens from India, Bangladesh, and other Asian countries are increasingly and more actively finding employment in Ukraine.

Thus, for the first time in decades, Ukraine is facing a previously unimaginable reality: a country from which millions have left over the past 30 years is beginning to need millions of new workers from abroad. But is this migration shift a

temporary measure, or is it a symptom of a profound post-war transformation of the state, the consequences of which will determine not only the economy but also the social landscape of the country for years to come?

Learning to be a country of immigration

The population of Ukraine has been declining steadily since 1993. This is due not only to low birth rates, high mortality, war, and the occupation of about 20 per cent of the country along with its people, but also to a high level of economic and institutional instability, which provokes a steady outflow of the working-age population abroad in search of a better life.

Labour migration has gradually become a natural way of life for many individual Ukrainians and entire families, where short-term trips abroad for work are perceived as something completely normal. Residents of western Ukraine even have their own idiom: "Go strawberry picking" – a reference to short-term summer jobs in Poland, where many Ukrainians, including young people, go to earn more money than they would in Ukraine. It is noteworthy that until 2014, Russia was considered another lucrative destination for Ukrainians looking to earn quick money.

Alex Kartsel, vice president of EWL Group, one of Central and Eastern Europe's largest outsourcing companies, which also hires Ukrainians, cites the figures: in 2010, the total number of people from Ukraine working abroad was about 2.5 million.

"It was around ten to 13 per cent of the total population. If we look for data from 2020 or after 2020, there are more than six million people who were working already. So that is triple within ten years," he mentions. However, before the war, in most cases, such migration took place as pendulum migration – in the form of short-term work contracts for three to six months, and in some cases, up to a year. The war has changed this model, Kartsel argues.

Since 2022, those Ukrainians who have left the country as refugees are increasingly finding work in Europe, especially in Poland, which contributes to their further assimilation. Another factor that significantly influenced the migration flow at the beginning of the war was the decrease in the number of job offers in Ukraine.

"After a couple of months, people begin to integrate more into life abroad. In the European Union, most countries allow people to find work without a special work permit, etc. So more than 70 per cent of all refugees arriving from Ukraine were able to start working in Poland within a year. We conducted a similar study for Germany, the Netherlands, and other markets where we operate, and in fact, the percentage there was much lower, around 30-40 per cent," he states.

The exodus of millions of Ukrainians to Europe, as well as the initial rapid decline of the economy, came to an end in 2022-23. The country's GDP has begun to grow gradually again, as has the number of job offers. Oleksiy Poznyak, an expert at the Migration Policy Office, says that as a result of the departure of a large number of skilled workers, along with the war, which reduced the proportion of the unemployed male population, the quality and quantity of the workforce in Ukraine has fallen significantly, prompting many employers to look for workers abroad. This is despite the country's low migration attractiveness. He emphasizes that there is no significant migration boom in Ukraine yet, but in 2024 and 2025, the number of work permits issued to migrants has stabilized.

There is no significant migration boom in Ukraine yet. But in 2024 and 2025, the number of work permits issued to migrants has stabilized.

"Even before the full-scale invasion, Ukraine had an average level of attractiveness for foreign workers. Now, after the invasion, its attractiveness has declined sharply. In 2024 and 2025, there was a slight increase in the number of permits issued, but this increase did not even reach the level of 2022, due to security reasons. In other words, there has been a certain stabilization," the expert notes.

Shortages across the board

According to data provided to *New Eastern Europe* from the Ukrainian state employment service, as of December 2025, there were 232,000 job offers in Ukraine, along with 132,000 job seekers registered on the labour exchange. In other words, there was a shortage of 100,000 workers, most notably in the areas of trade, industry and transportation. The data reveal deep labour shortages across multiple sectors. Trade and retail alone account for a gap of some 20,000 workers, while cafés and restaurants and the transport sector face even starker mismatches between vacancies and available labour. Manufacturing, finance and banking are also struggling to fill thousands of positions, and even traditionally stable fields such as healthcare and construction are experiencing persistent shortages.

Stanislav Pavlenko, deputy director of the State Employment Service, notes that the greatest shortage of personnel is observed among technically qualified employees, such as locksmiths, fitters, electricians, plumbers, seamstresses, and electric and gas welders. He also says that there is a significant shortage in the medical sector, among general practitioners and paediatricians.

"Due to significant changes in the economy," he says, "structural unemployment is becoming more acute. We now see that while before the war the main problem in the labour market was a lack of sufficient vacancies, today it is a shortage of personnel. Migration has had a significant impact on the Ukrainian labour market." Pavlenko adds that according to the United Nations, 5.9 million Ukrainian refugees are currently abroad.

Poznyak points out that after the hostilities, there will be a stronger demand for workers in the construction sector, as well as in light industry. Among the factors that further exacerbate the structural crisis in the labour market, mobilization plays a key role – the fear of being mobilized directly influences the behaviour of a significant portion of the working-age population. In many cases, this manifests itself in a reluctance to take formal employment or accept jobs that require daily commutes outside of large cities, through checkpoints where citizens can be mobilized. Formal employment is perceived by many Ukrainians as an additional risk, as it makes their location transparent to the state. Even where companies have legal mechanisms to partially protect 50 per cent of their staff from mobilization, this does not always ease tensions. "No one wants to be in the other 50 per cent," argues an interlocutor, familiar with the case of labour migration in Ukraine.

Obstacles and barriers

Against this backdrop, businesses are increasingly considering attracting foreign labour as an alternative, but this tool is not yet capable of systematically closing the staffing gap. The main obstacle remains the complex and lengthy legalization procedures. The processes of obtaining permits and approvals often prove unpredictable in terms of timing and results, even when all the formal grounds for employment are in place. For example, the legalization of employees from Pakistan remains extremely problematic, as even when all the necessary documents are in place, they are often refused entry by Security Service of Ukraine.

A source working with foreign workers notes that companies are forced to incur high costs even before employees enter the market – from organizational expenses to logistics – without any certainty that the process will be completed successfully. As a result, attracting migrants becomes more of a high-risk experiment than a sustainable staffing mechanism.

"We paid a very high price for logistics, including fast visa processing, but some candidates wait more than a month and do not receive a decision. So, at the moment, we feel like we are throwing money down the drain. If Ukraine needs these workers, I believe that immigration policy needs to be changed," the source argues.

Poznyak from the migration policy office concludes that the issue of attracting migrants will become more relevant after the war ends, but only if the investments promised by Ukraine's partners materialize. Then the country will have a foundation for sustainable development, in which the shortage of people will be critical.

"We have no other choice. We will not be able to maintain the necessary level of labour supply for the economy solely from internal human reserves. In my opinion, attracting migrants is inevitable," the economist believes.

According to Alex Kartsel, the total number of foreign migrants in Ukraine who have been attracted to the country during the full-scale invasion remains low – no more than a thousand people. However, he agrees that the end of the war and investments in the post-war economy will trigger the arrival of more workers.

"I think that this is something that will happen anyway. Because the economy will grow, and the Ukrainian people are not something you can produce quickly. So, yes, Ukraine will need those people," Kartsel concludes.

Unclear future

The European migration crisis which began in 2015, caused by troubling situations in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, went virtually unnoticed in Ukraine. The country, which at that time was in the midst of a heated conflict in eastern Ukraine and in the initial stages of European integration, watched the chaotic flow of people seeking to reach the European continent only on television screens, hardly able to imagine that it would itself likely become home to foreigners in the future. Yet, the Russian invasion changed this paradigm, reshaping the model of how Ukrainians had seen their country over the past ten years. Perhaps one of the most provocative statements of 2025 in Ukraine was made by Tymofiy Mylovanov, the former minister of economy and current head of the Kyiv School of Economics, who said that the country might need ten million migrants. It is difficult not to say that this assessment caused a stir, both in the Ukrainian society and among experts.

Oleksandr Gladun, an academic at the Institute of Demography and Social Studies of the National Academy of Sciences, is sceptical about such assessments, although he does not deny the need for post-war labour migration to Ukraine. In our conversation, he summarizes that there is no consensus in the academic community regarding what kind of migrants are needed, how many, and under what conditions they should be attracted. He, like Poznyak, disagrees with the above estimates of possible migration, primarily because of a lack of understanding of what they are based on.

"How did they calculate this? For what economic structure? Within what borders of Ukraine, and with what population? It is unknown. But they justify it by saying that GDP will grow by at least seven per cent, per year, although there is no normal justification for this figure," Gladun adds.

Ukraine has managed to grow mainly because workers have become more productive, not because the economy has been structurally modernized, and that is a problem.

The key problem, according to him, lies not in the figures themselves, but in the logic behind them. In the Ukrainian public sphere, the conversation about migration is often replaced by a conversation about GDP growth, while the structure of this growth remains outside the scope of discussion. Gladun warns that Ukraine should not follow an extensive model of economic development, in which the labour shortage will be compensated for only by the influx of new people. In his view, the Ukrainian government should move towards restructuring the economy as such and reassessing the number of people needed for it to function, as well as increasing automation and labour efficiency. He believes that Ukraine has managed to grow mainly because workers have become more productive, not because the economy has been structurally modernized, and that is a problem. A separate factor, which complicates any assessment of how many people may be needed to build a new Ukraine, is the lack of understanding of how many of those who left will return. Estimates in this area are extremely subjective and can only be based on the experiences of other countries that have survived war.

Is there a long-term vision?

Bogdan Kytsak, a representative of the Servant of the People faction in the Ukrainian parliament, believes that increasing automation could be a way out of the labour shortage and give Ukraine an advantage over its competitors. However, he confirms that labour migration to Ukraine is a necessity, particularly because the state should not expect a rapid influx of Ukrainian migrants returning after the war.

"The chance of them returning to Ukraine in the short term is very low because we cannot currently offer incentives or measures that would motivate people to leave the lives they have adapted to and return to Ukraine," Kytsak argues. "This means that the labour market will need a fresh influx, and this issue will be resolved by migration from other countries."

The lack of a long-term vision for post-war development and the role of migrants in it is a key problem pointed out by all the experts surveyed. This is exacerbated by the fact that Ukraine still lacks an up-to-date census – the last one was conducted in 2001, and any estimates of labour force needs inevitably remain approximate. Despite this, teams of scientists, including Poznyak and Gladun, are already working on estimating the approximate number of people in Ukraine.

Kytsak insists that a unified strategy is already being developed by the of social policy together with the ministry of economy, and that the priority will be to return as many of its own citizens as possible. The deputy acknowledges that the country currently lacks the infrastructure to attract large numbers of migrants, but estimates that around one million people may be needed in the coming years.

The parliamentary representative says that "4.5 million is a figure spread out over time, but the conditions for such a large influx of labour have not yet been created because there are certain regulatory issues regarding employment. And the biggest problem will be housing, because they will need to be physically accommodated somewhere against the backdrop of an already critical shortage, even for internally displaced persons. Where can we find the space? And this is against the backdrop of the return of some Ukrainians, so I would not set such high figures. I think we can still physically absorb a million and create the right conditions so that there is no major shortage or tension."

Ultimately, the question of hundreds of thousands or even millions of migrant workers from Asia or, as Kartsel notes, Africa, another promising source of migration, moving to Ukraine boils down to a more complex dilemma: what will the Ukrainian society be like after the war, and is there a risk of blurring the country's social and ethnic landscape?

Poznyak is convinced that such fears are not unfounded and that the integration of migrant workers into Ukrainian society will not be quick. In his opinion, given the state's insufficient control over migration processes, there is a risk of creating "enclaves" of foreigners.

Gladun takes a similar position. He points out that the sharp increase in the influx of migrants to Canada under Justin Trudeau's Liberal government has led to abnormal growth in housing prices, and he believes that short and medium-term migration could be a compromise solution for Ukraine.

"We need to resolve some issues in the economic sphere. They came, earned money, and left the results of their labour in various forms in our country. "Thank you and goodbye." That's all. Attracting them for permanent residence carries too many risks. If migration takes place in the format of 'came, worked, left', then it is more or less normal," says the academic.

Is this option realistic for labour migration to Ukraine? It depends on whether the Ukrainian state can transform migration from a forced response to labour shortages into a conscious policy with clear rules, affordable legalization costs, and adequate infrastructure. The key question here, however, is not migration policy as such, but how large-scale inflows of foreign labour will interact with Ukraine's already fragile social and economic landscape. EE

Stanislav Storozhenko is a Ukrainian journalist and producer. He worked as a news editor for Liga.net and Ukraine's public broadcaster Suspilne. He also cooperated as a fixer with *The Telegraph*, *The New York Times*, Al Jazeera and the Danish Broadcasting Corporation.

The return of Siarhei Tsikhanouski and what it means for the Belarusian democratic forces

HANNA VASILEVICH

The re-entry of Siarhei Tsikhanouski into the Belarusian political scene has revealed fault lines within the opposition movement. His symbolic role, carefully maintained by his wife Sviatlana and the broader opposition, has now collided with the structured, diplomatically-oriented political architecture built in his absence.

The return of Siarhei Tsikhanouski to the political stage in 2025, following five years of imprisonment in Belarus, marks a significant turning point in the configuration of the Belarusian democratic movement. His release, reportedly facilitated through diplomatic channels amid cautious overtures between Minsk and Washington, took place in a profoundly altered political landscape. In 2020, Tsikhanouski's arrest on the eve of the presidential campaign transformed him into a personal symbol of political repression. Yet, during his imprisonment, the leadership of the opposition was consolidated around his wife, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who emerged as the internationally recognized face of the Belarusian democratic forces. Her political office, headquartered in Vilnius, gradually became an institutionalized actor with established diplomatic relations and strategic partnerships.

Tsikhanouski's re-emergence was therefore not merely the return of a political activist but the reintroduction of a populist figure into a space that had already

acquired structure, strategy and international legitimacy. This sudden collision between symbolic capital and structured political leadership has produced friction, most visibly during their joint appearance in the United States in the autumn of 2025. What had been for years a relationship defined by symbolic solidarity became a contested terrain between differing visions of leadership, political communication, and legitimacy.

Symbolic capital versus political legitimacy

Tsikhanouski's role in 2020 has often been overstated in retrospective narratives of the Belarusian uprising. His YouTube activism, critical rhetoric against Alyaksandr Lukashenka, and brief pre-arrest campaign certainly contributed to the mobilization dynamics. Yet he was detained early in the electoral cycle and his subsequent absence meant that the 2020 mass protests unfolded without his direct participation or leadership. Unlike Maria Kalesnikava or Viktar Babaryka, whose campaigns were more structured, Tsikhanouski became a symbolic presence rather than an operational actor. This symbolic importance was primarily maintained and amplified through Tsikhanouskaya's actions. She carried his photograph on her folder during negotiations and appearances, repeatedly invoking his name to highlight the suffering of political prisoners. This personal symbolism mirrored broader patterns in political movements in which imprisoned figures retain moral weight even when excluded from strategic decision-making.

However, as Ales Bialiatski's example demonstrates, not all political prisoners are equally central to opposition leadership. Bialiatski's prominence stems from his decades-long role in the human rights community, while Tsikhanouski's visibility was largely mediated through Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's platform and international recognition. In contrast, her political legitimacy was not spontaneous but accumulated through sustained institutional and diplomatic work over five years. Her office established regular relations with western governments, international organizations, and the Belarusian civil society in exile. Despite internal criticism and occasional factional tensions, it gradually consolidated its position as a stable representative interlocutor in the eyes of western capitals.

This process of institutionalization produced a structural asymmetry: Siarhei Tsikhanouski returned to public life with strong symbolic visibility but limited organizational capacity, while his wife possessed international legitimacy, operational experience, and access to strategic networks. His first public actions following his release exposed the gap between symbolic expectations and political readiness. His early statements were marked by emotional intensity and a sense of urgency,

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the leader of the Belarusian democratic forces, holds a picture of her then jailed husband Siarhei Tsikhanouski at the European Council in Brussels in 2022. Since his release, Tsikhanouski's symbolic role has now collided with the structured, diplomatically oriented political architecture built in his absence.

but offered little strategic direction. This was most evident in his announcement of a campaign to raise 200,000 euros to "fight Lukashenka". The initiative remained undefined: it lacked a clear political objective, mechanisms for implementation, and transparent accountability. When the appeal failed to mobilize the anticipated support from the Belarusian diaspora, Tsikhanouski responded with visible irritation, publicly accusing Belarusians abroad of indifference and betrayal.

The episode revealed both his populist mode of communication and a broader mismatch between his rhetoric and the practical realities of contemporary Belarusian opposition politics. In exile movements, populism often takes the form of moralized appeals that frame insufficient mobilization as a failure of collective will rather than a structural constraint. Tsikhanouski's reaction followed this pattern closely. Although he later issued a public apology, the incident undermined perceptions of his political reliability among diaspora communities and established opposition actors alike.

Moreover, his language bore a striking resemblance to early post-Soviet populism, notably the emotionally charged, confrontational style associated with Lukashenka in the 1990s. Several commentators, including Belarusian political

analysts and members of the civil society, noted this parallel, which visibly irritated Tsikhanouski himself. The comparison exemplified how his rhetoric – shaped in the pre-2020 environment – now clashed with the more diplomatically oriented tone of the opposition leadership in exile.

Exposure of the conflict in the United States

The tensions between the two figures became particularly visible during their joint visit to the United States last autumn. Public appearances that were intended to signal unity instead exposed diverging roles and political instincts. Tsikhanouski, unfamiliar with diplomatic protocol and the calibrated language expected in meetings with US officials and policy institutions, repeatedly departed from agreed messaging. Several of his statements, while resonating with parts of the Belarusian diaspora, directly contradicted the carefully constructed positioning of Tsikhanouskaya's office.

The situation reportedly escalated during a meeting with the Belarusian diaspora in the United States, when Tsikhanouski publicly urged his wife to remain and "stand with him". His appeal invoked not only political solidarity but also their personal relationship. This moment blurred the boundary between the private and the political, reinforcing patriarchal assumptions in which a female political leader is implicitly framed as subordinate to her husband rather than as an autonomous political actor.

Tsikhanouski appeared to approach politics as if returning directly to the emotional intensity of the 2020 campaign.

The incident triggered an intense debate within the Belarusian political community. A particularly revealing discussion, titled "Sexism in democratic forces – are Tsikhanouski and Stryzhak abusers?", was hosted on the channel of Deutsche Welle. Participants interpreted the episode as a collision between entrenched patriarchal expectations and the political reality of a woman who has, over time, become the central figure of the democratic opposition. One of the discussants, Sasha Ramanava, emphasized the gendered dimension of the conflict, describing Tsikhanouski's behaviour as an "attempt to reassert a private hierarchy within a public political space".

More broadly, the US visit revealed a clash of political temporalities. Tsikhanouski, emerging from the temporal suspension of imprisonment, appeared to approach politics as if returning directly to the emotional intensity of the 2020 campaign. Tsikhanouskaya, by contrast, had spent five years operating within shifting geopolitical conditions, the constraints of exile politics, and the routines

of institutionalized leadership. This temporal dissonance helps explain why their personal relationship has increasingly functioned as a site of political tension rather than a source of unity.

Disrupting the image

Over the last five years, Tsikhanouskaya's office has undergone a gradual transformation from a loosely organized exile group into an institutionalized political actor. This evolution involved building relations with western governments, coordinating with EU institutions, maintaining links with the Belarusian civil society, and acting as the central point of communication for the democratic forces. Some analysts have described this process as a shift from charismatic leadership to institutionalized representation. While her office has been criticized for being overly bureaucratic and cautious, it is also recognized as the only opposition structure with significant external legitimacy.

This position rests on several pillars: predictability, coherence of messaging, credibility in negotiations, and stable relations with donors and partners. Populist rhetoric and impulsive decision-making — such as those demonstrated by Tsikhanouski in the fundraising controversy — are fundamentally at odds with this approach.

Moreover, Tsikhanouskaya has developed a diplomatic persona that relies on the careful balancing of moral authority with pragmatic engagement. Her leadership has been framed in western capitals as legitimate precisely because it offers stability in an otherwise fragmented opposition landscape. The arrival of a second, highly visible but strategically uncoordinated actor disrupts this carefully maintained image.

Tsikhanouskaya has developed a diplomatic persona that relies on the careful balancing of moral authority with pragmatic engagement.

The emergence of this rift has multiple implications for the Belarusian democratic movement. First, it risks fragmenting the symbolic unity that the opposition has relied upon since 2020. For many Belarusians, especially in exile, Sviatlana and Siarhei have been intertwined symbols of resistance: she as the leader, he as the prisoner. Their visible conflict threatens to fracture this symbolism. Second, the discrepancy between a structured diplomatic actor and a populist activist undermines external perceptions of cohesion. Western partners, already fatigued by the protracted stalemate in Belarus, are sensitive to signs of internal discord. Populist outbursts can be interpreted as instability, complicating efforts to secure consistent international support.

Third, these tensions highlight the gendered dynamics within exile politics. Tsikhanouski's behaviour in the US can be read as an attempt to reassert traditional gender roles, an impulse at odds with Sviatlana's established political authority. This has provoked critical reactions from feminist and democratic activists, who view such behaviour as symptomatic of deeper patriarchal tendencies within parts of the Belarusian opposition.

Finally, Tsikhanouski's lack of updated strategic knowledge – a consequence of five years of imprisonment – renders his interventions often misaligned with current political realities. His statements evoke a 2020 vocabulary, but the Belarusian movement has since experienced significant shifts: the repression in the country has deepened, the war in Ukraine has reshaped geopolitical priorities, and exile structures have institutionalized. This strategic anachronism limits his effectiveness and risks alienating both international partners and segments of the opposition.

Personal and political

Overall, the tension between symbolic figures emerging from imprisonment and structured leadership in exile is not unique to Belarus. Similar patterns have occurred in other authoritarian contexts, including post-Soviet movements and resistance politics in Latin America and Eastern Europe. Imprisoned figures often return with symbolic capital but lack the organizational embeddedness of those who have led movements in their absence. This can generate either renewed unity – when carefully negotiated – or factional conflict, when strategic interests diverge. What makes the Belarusian case particularly charged is the intersection of personal and political roles. Tsikhanouskaya and Tsikhanouski are not merely co-activists; they are spouses. This personal relationship amplifies public expectations and media attention, making their strategic divergences harder to contain or mediate behind closed doors.

The re-entry of Siarhei Tsikhanouski into the Belarusian political scene has revealed fault lines within the opposition movement that had been latent but not fully articulated. His symbolic role, carefully maintained by Sviatlana and the broader opposition, has now collided with the structured, diplomatically oriented political architecture built in his absence. His populist rhetoric, impulsive decisions, and strategic disorientation have highlighted the tension between moral-symbolic capital and institutionalized legitimacy.

The incident in the US served as a public crystallization of these tensions, exposing gendered expectations and conflicting leadership roles. While some of Tsikhanouski's supporters frame this as a return of a "people's voice", others view

it as a destabilizing factor that undermines the credibility and coherence of the opposition's external strategy. Whether this tension will lead to a renegotiation of roles or to further fragmentation remains uncertain. What is clear, however, is that the Belarusian opposition now faces not only external repression but also internal challenges in navigating the delicate balance between symbolism and structured power. ЕЕ

Hanna Vasilevich holds a doctoral degree in International Relations and European Studies. Her research interests include state ideology and propaganda, identity issues, inter-ethnic relations, linguistic diversity, as well as diaspora and kin-state relations.

Punished for being abused: Belarusian controversy

NASTA ZAKHAREVICH

Gradually but decisively, the European Union is folding Belarus into the same category as Russia. The toughest measures are coming from states that share a border with Belarus. How did a society once seen as a victim of Europe's most brutal dictatorship come to be regarded as complicit in its crimes?

Hundreds of thousands of people have left Belarus since the 2020 presidential election. Inside the country, more than 1,000 political prisoners remain behind bars, and the wave of repression shows no sign of slowing. At the same time, western policy towards Belarusians has changed significantly. Unconditional support is gradually being replaced by new restrictions on Belarusian citizens, while Belarus itself is increasingly seen as a black hole, a lost land whose inhabitants are deemed to have brought their fate upon themselves. How is the attitude towards Belarusians in the European Union changing, and how are Belarus's democratic forces responding?

The red carpet

"Hell will freeze over before we even start considering your demands," Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said in 2021 in response to a request from the Belarusian Prosecutor General's Office to extradite Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. "Everyone who has found refuge in Lithuania can feel safe that they will not be handed over to regimes – neither for their struggle for democracy, nor for freedom of speech or religion."

Today, five years later, it is hard to imagine such an emotional, value-based statement. But in 2020 and 2021, things were different: Belarusians were treated as guests worthy of a red-carpet welcome. And there were, and still are, many such guests. Since 2020, almost one million Belarusians have received an initial residence permit in the EU.

In the early stages, the scale of support was striking. On August 23rd 2020, Lithuania organized the "Freedom Way" – a human chain explicitly evoking the world-famous Baltic Way of 1989. The new chain was a smaller version of the original, but still impressive: in a country of 2.5 million people, some 50,000 took to the streets in solidarity with Belarusians. They formed a 32-kilometre line stretching from central Vilnius all the way to the Belarusian border.

In the first year after the start of mass repression, Belarusians mainly fled to four countries: Georgia, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine. Latvia, which also borders Belarus to the north, attracted far fewer people by comparison. Lithuania and Poland had long traditions of supporting Belarusian political exiles, offering special conditions to those arriving. Georgia and Ukraine, meanwhile, were popular due to visa-free entry, low prices and a smaller language barrier than in the EU. Lithuania took in Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, her family and her team, granted Tsikhanouskaya the status of an official guest of the state and her office a form of diplomatic status.

Vilnius's reception of Tsikhanouskaya sent a clear signal to other Belarusians that Lithuania was ready to support those persecuted at home. Between September 21st and December 1st 2020, Lithuania issued humanitarian visas to 1,354 Belarusian citizens. Poland issued 3,356 such visas in 2020. After Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Belarusian migration to these countries reached its peak: in 2022, Poland issued more than 24,000 humanitarian visas to Belarusians, and Lithuania more than 12,000.

Initially, many came to Lithuania on humanitarian visas but did not apply for asylum. Instead, they obtained residence permits on humanitarian grounds. There were several reasons for this. First, not everyone had sufficient evidence of persecution to satisfy the Lithuanian authorities' criteria for granting political asylum. Second, obtaining a humanitarian residence permit was faster, which meant being able to start working sooner – crucial for those forced to flee without savings or preparation. Third, there was an important psychological dimension. In the first years after 2020, many believed their exile would be short-lived and that they would soon return home. Applying for refugee status would have symbolized a definitive break with their homeland, a declaration that they were not going back. A residence permit, by contrast, was easier to accept emotionally: the new identity felt less irreversible, and the associated identity crisis less profound.

In 2020, Poland granted the right to work to all holders of humanitarian visas and responded to appeals from Belarusian IT specialists by launching the Poland. Business Harbour programme. Under this scheme, IT workers could relocate to Poland without spending time obtaining a separate work permit. They could be hired by companies or start their own businesses, including as sole proprietors. Their conditions were the same as those of Polish citizens, which was highly attractive to employees of IT companies forced to leave due to political persecution or a rapidly deteriorating business environment in Belarus.

In the first year after the start of mass repression, Belarusians mainly fled to Georgia, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine.

Poland also eased conditions for Belarusian medical professionals. In 2020, they were allowed to obtain, under special rules, a five-year work permit from the health ministry, without the possibility of extension. The idea was that over those five years they would be able to prepare to meet the standard requirements for practicing in Poland, while the Polish healthcare system could benefit from their skills immediately.

Values or interests?

In the first years after mass repression began in Belarus, western politicians often framed their support for Belarusians in the language of values – even when some measures were clearly driven, above all, by the host countries' economic interests. Under the Poland.Business Harbour programme, for example, Poland issued 93,000 visas to Belarusian IT specialists. Meanwhile, a law adopted at the end of 2020 significantly simplified the procedure for employing Belarusian medical professionals in Poland. As early as 2019 – before the COVID-19 pandemic – hospitals in various regions were warning that entire wards could be shut down due to staff shortages. When the pandemic only aggravated the problem, recruiting foreign medical workers became an obvious solution. In this sense, the mass outflow from Belarus worked to Poland's advantage.

Official rhetoric, however, rarely acknowledged this logic. Instead, the message was framed almost exclusively as rescuing Belarusians from the regime. "We support you and will continue to support you in returning your free, sovereign, independent homeland," Polish President Andrzej Duda said at a meeting with the Belarusian diaspora in late 2022.

A similar dynamic could be observed in Lithuania. In 2022, one of the most profitable contributions to Lithuania's public finances came from the Belarusian-

Photo: Michele Ursi / Shutterstock

A protest sign in Vilnius last year calls for release of Belarusian political prisoners. Many who fled the Lukashenka regime settled in Lithuania. Yet at the same time, former political prisoners have been denied international protection in the country on the grounds that they have already served their sentences and therefore face no further threat.

founded company Wargaming, which paid 19.22 million euros in taxes. Together with EPAM, another major firm that relocated from Belarus, it entered the top three IT companies in Lithuania.

Thus, it was clear that support for Belarusians forced to leave their country was not only an act of humanitarian solidarity on the part of host states. In itself, this could have been a "win-win" arrangement – if two key conditions had been met. First, if governments had called things by their name and openly admitted their interest in attracting Belarusian workers and businesses. Second, if the arrangement had been sustainable. But sustainability is undermined by the fact that many Belarusians – and many Belarusian companies – face a severely limited choice of where they can relocate. This places them in a particularly vulnerable position vis-à-vis their host countries.

In 2021, Alyaksandr Lukashenka issued a decree effectively preventing Belarusian citizens from obtaining passports at diplomatic missions abroad. For many, travelling back to Belarus for this procedure is dangerous. The scale of political persecution has not diminished; media consumption has been criminalized; the sending and receiving of many kinds of donations can lead to prosecution; and

people can be imprisoned even for following an activist or journalist on Facebook if their personal social media pages have been designated "extremist". Faced with such risks, many refuse to return simply to renew a passport and instead rely on alternatives where they exist. Some apply for refugee status, while others obtain an alien's travel document. There is no uniform approach, and each country resolves the issue in its own way. In Georgia and Armenia, for instance, Belarusians are neither granted refugee status nor issued alien passports, which effectively forces many to move on to EU countries. Yet even within the EU – including in countries closest to Belarus – attitudes towards Belarusian political emigrants and refugees are changing. Increasingly, authorities speak less about values and more about risks, pre-emptively projecting potential threats onto people arriving from Belarus.

In 2024, nearly 600 Belarusian citizens were classified as threats to Lithuania's national security. In October 2025, President Gitanas Nausėda stated that migration as such constitutes a security threat. "The scale of migration is indeed accelerating. People are rightly concerned that this poses a threat to our national security," he said. At the same time, according to Lithuania's Employment Service, every tenth worker in the country is a foreign national. Government Strategic Analysis Centre data for 2024 show that the largest group of incoming workers came from Belarus (46,544 people), followed by Ukrainians (39,791) and then those from Uzbekistan (7,199). If economic benefits were a sufficient reason to facilitate Belarusian legalization initially, their potential loss now does not prevent governments from tightening conditions for migrants and refugees from Belarus.

A victory for Russian propaganda

Gradually, the image of Belarusian migrants and refugees in the EU began to shift. Emotional speeches about solidarity and the need to support a "heroic Belarusian people" resisting dictatorship have been replaced by a different – and often deeply contradictory – vocabulary. Belarus is now described, sometimes in the same breath, as an occupied territory and as Russia's key accomplice in the war. Yet while residents of occupied Ukrainian territories are treated primarily as victims of Russia, the attitude towards Belarusians is different. The label of "occupation" or "satellite state" is not treated as a mitigating factor, but as an aggravating one. The occupation of Crimea – a territory for which no one, it is often implied, even tried to fight – is framed as a tragedy imposed on local residents. What is called the "occupation" of Belarus, where hundreds of thousands took to the streets in protest, is framed as the local population's fault.

This inconsistent approach, now evident in many EU countries, has been enabled by the effective work of Russian propaganda. For years, Russia has systematically cultivated a public image in which Belarus is not a victim of Moscow's colonial policy, but a villain in its own right – an active participant in imperial oppression.

The scale of Belarus's Russification is striking. According to the 2019 census, only 28.5 per cent of people in Belarus use Belarusian as the language of communication at home. Twenty years earlier, in 1999, the figure was 41.3 per cent. Closely related are trends in state and quasi-state media, as well as everyday media consumption. According to the Mediameter report, the highest average daily television rating in Belarus belongs to the Russia-Belarus channel, which broadcasts Belarusian news programmes alongside Russian talk shows, films and TV series. There is no independent Belarusian television inside the country, while even following Belsat on social media – although the outlet is effectively based in Poland – is treated as an offence.

Belarus is often described, sometimes in the same breath, as an occupied territory and as Russia's key accomplice in the war.

Russia relies on multiple forms of economic and cultural expansion, placing Belarusians in an increasingly dependent position. Meanwhile, the EU continues to wall itself off from Belarus, effectively nudging Belarusians towards even closer ties with Russia. According to Russia's Ministry of Economic Development, in the first half of 2025 Russia received a quarter more Belarusian tourists than in the same period of 2024.

In 2024, 157,000 Belarusians received visas to various EU countries – not even a quarter of the 2019 level, the last pre-pandemic year, when 643,500 visas were issued. Political hurdles are compounded by financial ones: in addition to consular fees, applicants often have to pay for mandatory visa-centre services, and then for appointment "slots" from intermediaries who snap up newly-released dates within minutes.

For those lucky enough to secure a visa, the next stage of the quest is simply getting into the EU. Belarus has had no direct air links with EU countries since 2021, after the Belarusian authorities forced a Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius to land in Minsk. On board were the prominent opposition-linked media figure Raman Protasevich and his girlfriend, the activist Sofia Sapega. At the end of 2024, Latvia banned entry to all cars with Belarusian licence plates, except for diplomatic vehicles. Lithuania followed with an additional important exception: such a car can enter if the driver holds a Lithuanian visa or residence permit. In the spring of 2024, Lithuania also reduced the number of buses on the Vilnius-Minsk route. Until last summer, carriers were able to circumvent the restriction in practice, but eventually the number of trips between the two cities fell by roughly half. In 2025,

Lithuania and Poland temporarily closed their borders with Belarus entirely. Latvia plans, in 2026, to phase out organized passenger transport to and from Belarus.

Step by step, the EU is increasingly treating Belarus as interchangeable with Russia. The most proactive measures are taken by countries that share a border with Belarus, and not only in the area of mobility. In Latvia, for instance, citizens of Belarus and Russia were first barred from holding management positions at critical infrastructure facilities, and later from working at them at all. They were also prohibited from purchasing real estate, with an exception for those who already held permanent residence in Latvia at the time the law was signed. Such individuals may buy one property for the purpose of living in it. Yet the law does not clarify what "for the purpose of living" means, leaving notaries to interpret the provision at their own discretion. The bill's authors describe Russians' acquisition of real estate in EU countries as a tool of non-military influence and an element of hybrid warfare. Why the ban also applies to Belarusians remains unclear.

There is, in fact, a broader lack of clarity in the EU's approach – both towards the authorities in Belarus and towards those fleeing the regime. In Lithuania, some former political prisoners have been denied international protection on the grounds that they have already served their sentences and therefore face no further threat. In Germany, a Belarusian woman was recently denied asylum, with the authorities citing the release of one of the 2020 opposition leaders, Siarhei Tsikhanouski. At the same time, after the United States lifted sanctions on the Belarusian potash company Belaruskali group, Lithuania almost immediately began signalling it was ready to consider resuming fertiliser transit through the port of Klaipėda if a request were made.

In 2020 it seemed that supporting those suffering under Lukashenka's regime was a long-term commitment. Today, it no longer feels that way. What comes to mind now is the familiar phrase: "it was supposed to last forever – until it didn't." EE

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

Macedonians seek justice to heal Kočani's wounds

JOVAN GJORGOVSKI

Every Saturday in Kočani, North Macedonia, looks the same since last year's tragedy. Parents gather for a weekly march across the small town. It usually starts at the city park, continues to the police headquarters and ends in front of the local court – a reminder for the institutions to do their job. The marches continue, driven not by the promise of answers, but by the fear that those answers may never arrive.

Sixty-three. A number that once meant nothing special to ordinary Macedonians now carries the weight of a national wound. Sixty-three lives lost, destroyed or forever altered by a single night in Kočani. Sixty-three families left with questions that refuse to fade away. Sixty-three reasons why an entire country is watching one courtroom with clenched fists and held breath.

Nine months after the tragedy which tore through Kočani, sending shockwaves across the country, the Macedonian society finds itself confronting not only a tragedy, but itself. Inside a specially built courtroom in Idrizovo, within the country's largest and most heavily guarded prison, a trial is unfolding that has gripped the nation like no other in a generation. The choice of the location is telling, as this is not just an ordinary legal case, but one deemed so significant – so sensitive – and possibly volatile that it required extraordinary measures. This is not simply a trial to determine who failed to act or whose negligence cost irreplaceable lives, it is a trial for the future of the whole society, a trial about the state itself.

A mother's testimony that broke the courtroom

When Marija Petruseva, the mother of 24-year-old Andrej, took the stand, the courtroom fell silent. What followed was not a legal statement but a reconstruction of a night no parent should ever have to relive. She described arriving at the hospital believing she would find her son injured, never imagining she would not see him alive again.

"When I arrived, what I saw was even worse," she testified. The whole corridor of the hospital was full of young people, some lying on the floor, on benches, some blackened beyond recognition, some burned. She explained how she frantically searched the bodies trying to find her son as the medical staff was running everywhere. It was in that chaos then she overheard a doctor informing another mother that her daughter had died. The screams of that woman are something she said still haunts her today.

Just as the realization of the tragedy began to get to her, her older son Kristian found her and informed her that Andrej is dead. Inside room number two, Andrej was lying on the second bed. "He looked okay," she told the courtroom. "He wasn't burned, there was only a small burn on his forearm. He looked alive." Petruseva was convinced the doctors were wrong.

"My husband came. We tried resuscitating him. My mind would not allow me to accept that he was gone." She sent her husband to find a doctor. They have to bring Andrej back, she kept saying while trying to resuscitate him. "My husband and Kristian told me: enough! You are hurting him. We can't bring him back." A doctor passing by was stopped by her husband and he checked Andrej's pulse. "He told me there was no pulse, that he was already gone".

There were three other young people in the room. Petruseva begged the doctor to examine them as well. "None of them had a pulse," she said. She asked for a few minutes. "I asked them to leave me alone so I could hug my son one last time. To lie next to him." It was then, she said, that the police officers entered the room and asked her to leave. At that point the whole courtroom broke down. Parents cried openly, journalists lowered their heads, some wiping away tears as they tried to take notes.

By the time she finished, the courtroom was no longer just a courtroom, it was the bleeding heart of the whole society. Petruseva's testimony was one of several since the start of the trial. The testimonies themselves are not technical, they are not strategic. They are raw accounts of absence, of phones that will never ring again, of bedrooms left untouched, of last messages reread until the screen fades. Some struggled to finish sentences, others spoke with a composure that feels almost unbearable. All of them returned to the same point that their lives were divided into

before and after that night of the tragedy. All of them asked for something very simple, that their children would not become footnotes, that the truth comes out.

The Saturday that never ends

Every Saturday in Kočani since the tragedy looks the same. Parents gather for the weekly march across the small town. It usually starts at the city park, continues to the police headquarters and ends in front of the local court – a reminder for the institutions to do their job. Photographs are held chest high and there are no slogans crafted for television, no choreography for cameras. These Saturdays have become a ritual of resistance against forgetting. The marches continue, driven not by the promise of answers, but by the fear that those answers may never arrive.

Hovering over all of this is DNK, the band whose music once filled clubs and festivals. On the night of the fire, they were on stage, unaware that their performance would become inseparable from the deadliest chapter of the town's history. Months later when Vladimir Blazev, the frontman of the band nicknamed "Panco", died of his wounds, the tragedy lost its final illusion of closure. What might have ended as a single catastrophic night became an extended mourning. Panco and Andrej, his close friend and long-time colleague who died on the night of the tragedy, were not just musicians playing on a stage. They were nationally known as humanitarians, men who repeatedly used their visibility not for status, but for solidarity. They organized charity concerts for children in need, for families and communities struck by hardship. When money was needed, they played. When attention was required, they lent their names. Their work extended beyond music into quiet acts that rarely made headlines but left lasting marks on the people they helped. They were not distant celebrities. They were present, accessible, known by name, gesture and generosity.

The gravity of the case has reached far beyond the walls of Idrizovo, to the very top of public life. In her annual address to the nation, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, the president, placed the Kočani tragedy at the centre of her message, an acknowledgment that the trial has become one of the defining tests of the state itself. Her words carried an unmistakable warning: how justice is delivered in the case that will shape public confidence for years to come.

Kočani, she argued, exposed systemic weaknesses, not only in safety standards and in oversight, but in how institutions respond when they fail. A state that cannot face its own mistakes, she implied, risks repeating them. In a country accustomed to tragedies fading into legal ambiguity, the address stood out for its moral clarity. By placing the Kočani tragedy at the heart of her address, the president made

one thing clear, the trial is not only about the past, but about whether the state is capable of protecting its future, and whether justice can still mean something beyond words. The case now weighs on the entire political system, pressing down on both government and opposition, forcing each to speak carefully, deliberately and under public scrutiny.

"If you want to bury something, create a commission"

From the government, the message has been one of restraint and responsibility. Officials and the prime minister, Hristijan Mickoski, insist that institutions must be allowed to do their work without political pressure, repeatedly stressing the independence of the judiciary. Behind the careful language, however, lies an unspoken understanding that any perception of interference could be politically catastrophic. Despite this, the opposition has chosen a sharper tone.

Opposition leaders accuse the authorities of moving too slowly, of hiding behind procedure while public thrust erodes. In parallel, the Macedonian parliament established not one but two separate commissions of inquiry to investigate the tragedy and assign responsibility. Months later, neither commission produced any results, and among ordinary citizens, a bitter saying has taken hold: "If you want to bury something, create a commission."

The general opinion is that bodies like that often serve as symbolic gestures. The inactivity of such commissions has only deepened public distrust, fuelling speculation, conspiracy theories and anger.

In the absence of immediate answers, speculation about the tragedy has flourished, filling the gaps left by delays from public officials.

In the absence of immediate answers, speculation about the tragedy has flourished, filling the gaps left by delays from public officials. These theories include claims of a cover up, allegations of hidden involvement by powerful figures, and death by cyanide poisoning and medical negligence. Social media amplifies every conspiracy, and in a community where every detail is scrutinized, rumours spread quickly. The authorities have repeatedly warned against taking unverified claims as truth, emphasizing that the trial and eventual verdicts must be the basis for public understanding.

The case has also triggered an internal debate over who can credibly call themselves a journalist, as YouTubers, bloggers and influencers increasingly shape public opinion and, at times, amplify conspiracy theories, knowingly or not, fuelling the outrage that sometimes leads to intimidation and threats of violence.

One such case was the naming of the judge that would preside over the case. Even though at that time of the procedure, an official name was not yet given by the criminal court, information started to spread quickly through news portals and YouTubers that the judge would be a woman that had a brother who took a bribe from the owner of nightclub in Kočani, linking her to the tragedy. Social media erupted and protests were organized. There were even attempts to meet her in front of her house to confront her with the information. The court moved quickly to prevent the situation from escalating, publicly naming the judge who would actually preside – contrary to the name circulating on social media. By then, however, the damage had already been done.

The limits of trust

The prosecution in the case operates under a national microscope, tasked not only with proving guilt beyond reasonable doubt, but with restoring faith in public institutions. The prosecutors maintain that despite contested details, the broader picture is clear – there was a chain of actions and omissions during the years that culminated in this tragic loss of life.

Yet, with nearly 50 defendants, ranging from former mayors of Kočani and government officials to representatives of the public revenue office, as well as institutions charged with ensuring safety, many legal experts question whether such a case can withstand judicial scrutiny. Some have openly warned that parts of the indictment rest on shaky grounds.

The prosecutors maintain that there was a chain of actions and omissions that culminated in this tragic loss of life.

The defence team made up of lawyers well known to the Macedonian public, one of them former Skopje Mayor Petre Shilegov, insist on a single principle: emotion cannot replace law. They argue that procedural gaps and inconsistencies in the investigation amount to reasonable doubt, a position that has made them deeply unpopular with the victims' families. So deep is the resentment that, at the start of every hearing, family members of the victims wait outside the courtroom to confront them verbally, demanding to know how they can defend what they call "monsters". This collision between moral outrage and legal standards now defines the trial, leaving the court to decide not only individual responsibility, but whether justice can be delivered without sacrificing the rule of law itself.

The trial calendar is full with hearings scheduled well into the months ahead, as public attention increasingly turns towards March, and the one-year anniversary

of the tragedy, now looming as a moment of both reckoning and renewed pressure. When the verdict eventually comes, it will do more than determine guilt or innocence, it will shape how families heal, how citizens view their institutions, and whether future tragedies are met with responsibility. Kočani already knows what it lost, now the country must decide what it stands for ❞.

Jovan Gjorgovski is a journalist based in North Macedonia and an editor with the Kanal 5 television station.

When comfort outweighs democracy

ANDREA SCHMIDT

Viktor Orbán's dominance rests not only on power politics, but also on memory. By mobilizing fear, promising protection, and offering small but symbolically charged material rewards, Fidesz has revived a political logic familiar from the Kádár era – one in which security matters more than participation and comfort outweighs democracy. As Hungary approaches another electoral cycle, the question is no longer whether nostalgia still works, but whether it is finally losing its grip.

"You are great, my people, you are great, my people: for a thousand years you have lived in constant struggle with Europe, gathering troops while bleeding. But you did not allow this idea to prevail in the minds of your children, and so you live in the heart of Europe as a living protest against the dehumanization of animal life."

These were the words written by Endre Ady, one of Hungary's most influential early 20th century poets and journalists, in his essay "To the Margin of an Unknown Corvin Codex". In another, better-known metaphor, Ady described Hungary as a ferryboat endlessly drifting between two ports – East and West – capturing the country's enduring sense of political and cultural "in-betweenness" and its unresolved debate over whether Hungary truly belonged to modern Europe.

This ambivalence has resurfaced repeatedly over the past century. During the Cold War, Hungary was often labelled the "happiest barrack" of the Eastern Bloc, a system colloquially described as "goulash communism" or "fridge socialism". Its stability rested on an unspoken social contract between the state and society: the regime guaranteed relative material security and predictable everyday life in ex-

change for political passivity. Citizens were expected not to challenge power, and in return they were largely left alone.

Although this model stood in clear contrast to western democratic societies, it proved remarkably durable as a way of life. Following the brutal suppression of the 1956 revolution, the regime of János Kádár (1957-1989) delivered decades of calm, if colourless, stability. This experience continues to shape public attitudes. More than three decades after the democratic transition, the question remains: to what extent has Hungarian society retained a nostalgia for late socialism? Have social values fundamentally changed, or do elements of the Kádár era still structure political behaviour in today's Hungary? Put more bluntly, can electoral success still be achieved by mobilizing the emotional and material legacies of that system?

Potatoes and Orbán's success

In 2022, the Fidesz–KDNP coalition secured a two-thirds parliamentary majority for the fourth consecutive time. By the summer of 2024, Viktor Orbán had become the EU's longest-serving head of government. Explanations for his political dominance vary widely, ranging from allegations of electoral manipulation to the effectiveness of polarizing rhetoric. Yet one factor frequently underestimated is the persistence of social attitudes that were shaped during the decades preceding Hungary's democratic transformation.

While the Kádár regime is rarely invoked explicitly, its legacy survives in a broader perception of state–society relations formed over more than thirty years. Orbán's political strategists have aptly recognized this and incorporated it into their governing model that aligns with the society's long-standing experiences of insecurity and dependence. This strategy rests on three mutually reinforcing pillars: targeted material incentives, fear-based political communication, and the deliberate cultivation of uncertainty.

A striking example was the recent "potato distribution" campaign, organized in Hungary's most economically marginalized regions. More than a social policy, it functioned as a symbolic pre-election gift, reinforcing loyalty through tangible assistance. Among those voters for whom such gestures were insufficient, aggressive anti-migrant messaging served to activate existential and cultural anxieties, offering a simplified external enemy.

Since 2022, this approach has been complemented by sustained fear-mongering related to the war in Ukraine. This external military conflict has been reframed to serve as a domestic political issue, which allowed the government to present itself as the sole guarantor of peace and stability. In the run-up to the 2024 European

Parliament elections, these three elements converged to produce a political climate in which electoral choices were increasingly shaped not by democratic deliberation, but by vulnerability, fear, and the desire for protection.

This emotionally charged communication elicited social reflexes reminiscent of the Kádár era, where security was prioritized over participation. Public spaces in Budapest and other cities were saturated with war-related posters designed to instil anxiety and uncertainty. While the ruling coalition's result – around 50 per cent – was the weakest since 2009, the strategy nonetheless proved sufficient for Orbán to maintain power. Notably, the mobilization of war-related fears was even more effective during the final weeks of the 2022 election campaign, underscoring the enduring political utility of insecurity in today's Hungary.

History of broken democracies

One may ask about the roots of this perception. While they are multiple, one recurring factor lies in the attitudes that Hungarian society holds towards democratic institutions. In Hungary, political behaviour has historically been shaped by conflict avoidance, a willingness to seek compromise at almost any cost, and – crucially – a limited experience of sustained democratic participation.

This paradox was already visible in the 19th century. Hungary's 1848 Act on Elections was among the most progressive pieces of legislation in Europe at the time. Yet in practice, electoral participation remained restricted and firmly controlled by the political elite. Hungary's first democratic experiment was short-lived: it was extinguished by the defeat of the War of Independence in 1849 and later constrained again by the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, which postponed broader political and social reforms for decades.

Until the end of the First World War, much of Central and Eastern Europe – including Hungary – was embedded in multi-ethnic imperial structures. Their collapse confronted the region with a dual transformation. As one observer has noted, the new states of Central Europe "were built on the ruins of multinational empires; they began as nation-states that were nothing of the kind". Democratization thus unfolded as a form of "assisted democracy": a simultaneous transition from empire to nation-state and from imperial governance to democratic institutions. Border changes and the creation of successor states were shaped not only by domestic forces, but also by external models and foreign political expectations.

The loss of more than two-thirds of Hungary's territory under the Treaty of Trianon left deep and lasting scars on the country's national consciousness. It fuelled decades of territorial revisionism and deeply shaped Hungary's political

culture. In the interwar period, the Hungarian state focused primarily on political consolidation while struggling to manage the influx of refugees from the annexed territories. Beyond territorial loss, Hungary was deprived of key natural resources and many of its major urban centres, leaving Budapest as the country's only large city. This resulted in a distorted relationship between the capital and the remaining mid-sized towns, while much of Hungary's former "urban spirit" was transferred to cities now lying outside its borders.

The partial territorial revisions between 1938 and 1941 proved to be a Pyrrhic victory. While temporarily addressing revisionist ambitions, they bound Hungary to an alliance with Nazi Germany. These gains were annulled by the Paris Peace Treaty, which reinstated the borders established after the First World War. The resulting sense of loss echoed the original trauma of Trianon, but this time without any realistic prospect of revision.

The loss of more than two-thirds of Hungary's territory under the Trianon Treaty left deep and lasting scars on the national consciousness.

The memory of Trianon became even more deeply embedded in Hungary's national narrative throughout the 20th century. Yet within the framework of socialist internationalism, Hungary – now a loyal member of the Eastern Bloc – formally accepted Romania and Czechoslovakia, both beneficiaries of the 1920 settlement, as political allies. At the same time, the fate of Hungarian minorities living beyond Hungary's borders remained a largely unspoken and unresolved issue, suppressed in official discourse but preserved in collective memory. Hungary experienced a brief and constrained period of democratization between 1945 and 1948. While formally pluralistic, this post-war opening unfolded under the decisive influence of the Soviet Union and came to an abrupt end with the establishment of a one-party totalitarian regime. Hungary rapidly aligned itself with Stalinist political and economic directives, with only short-lived interruptions following the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 and during the 1956 revolution.

Forgotten man

The violent suppression of the 1956 uprising by Soviet forces extinguished Hungary's immediate democratic aspirations. In its aftermath, Moscow endorsed a leadership capable of stabilizing the country while ensuring political loyalty. János Kádár emerged as such a figure. His rule came to embody the figure of the Hungarian "forgotten man" and rested on a tactical promise of predictability and social security in exchange for political acquiescence. This arrangement proved

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Viktor Orbán is a politician expected to do more than merely replicate the role of a new Janos Kádár. At the core of his system lies an inseparable alliance between a centralized state and its loyal subjects.

durable: the Kádár regime endured for more than three decades, leaving a deep imprint on Hungarian political culture.

The survival and legitimacy of authoritarian regimes often rest on economic performance, understood primarily in terms of material stability and rising living standards. Democratic legitimacy, by contrast, is grounded in shared beliefs about the political system itself and – above all – the credibility of electoral procedures, as well as the conviction that citizens' interests are represented. In this sense, the Kádár regime offers a textbook example of authoritarian legitimacy.

Having been installed with the backing of the Soviet Union after the defeat of the 1956 uprising – and bearing political responsibility for the execution of its symbolic leaders – Kádár's priority was to insulate the society from further confrontation and violence. Political participation was tightly constrained, but everyday life was deliberately depoliticized.

Kádár's authority rested on two interlinked foundations: the continued presence of Soviet military power and his regime's capacity to meet basic social expectations. In domestic politics, this translated into a strategy of compromise and conflict avoidance; in economic policy, into an emphasis on consumption and material predictability. Even as this approach pushed Hungary into mount-

ing indebtedness by the 1980s, it helped stabilize the regime. Consumption – or at least the promise and visibility of consumption – became a central element of social mentality, reinforcing a form of political loyalty based less on conviction than on material security.

Long shadow of transformation

The challenges of the post-communist transformation generated a new set of difficulties. Economic restructuring proved uneven, the middle class remained fragile, and the intellectual elite became deeply divided. On the other hand, long-standing social patterns – dependence on authority, servility, and informal networks of nepotism – proved remarkably resilient. These structural weaknesses were compounded by the condescending elitism and political irresponsibility of the left-liberal camp, which significantly contributed to the right's landslide victory and the securing of a two-thirds parliamentary majority in 2010.

One of the central sources of Fidesz's success lies in its ability to offer much of Hungarian society what it had known for generations – and continued to seek even two decades after the regime change: paternal guardianship. This appeal was reinforced by the extraordinary instability of Hungary's modern political history. In less than a century, the country experienced nine systemic transformations, most of them abrupt and violent – only the final transition to democracy occurred without bloodshed.

These repeated ruptures prevented the consolidation of stable social norms and trust. Post-feudal social strata and returning communist elites represented fundamentally different social worlds, viewing one another with deep suspicion. Rapid industrialization, the nationalization of land, mass urbanization in industrial centres, and the dissolution of traditional clubs and civic organizations in towns during the 1940s further eroded social cohesion. Large segments of society were isolated from participatory public life, disrupting informal networks and weakening the foundations of civic culture – effects that continue to shape Hungarian political behaviour until today.

These successive cataclysms followed one another with such speed that Hungarian society was compelled to develop a specific defensive mechanism to endure repeated shocks. This mechanism took the form of adaptability and survival-oriented behaviour. Yet this response went beyond mere resilience. It was also shaped by a persistent deficit of trust in institutions that claimed to represent collective interests.

Survey data on value preferences in Hungary suggest that many of these patterns can be traced back to unresolved disruptions dating from 1945. Numerous

analysts argue that Hungarian society has struggled to complete a coherent transformation of values since that period. Empirical data consistently indicate a high degree of social atomization: individuals tend to define their immediate social environment narrowly, often extending trust little beyond the family. Social justice is frequently perceived as a zero-sum game, in which personal advancement is assumed to come at the expense of others. Many voters remain convinced that any improvement in their own living conditions necessarily implies a deterioration in those of their peers.

Within this framework, politics is expected to function as a provider of material improvement without disrupting everyday life. The role of a politician is thus not to mobilize citizens or encourage participation, but to raise living standards through means that preserve routine and minimize uncertainty. In this sense, even under formally democratic conditions, the underlying logic has remained strikingly familiar: the centre is assumed to know what must be done, while the success of reform is believed to depend on limiting social interference in central decision-making.

The lowest levels of trust in the post-communist transformation were recorded in Hungary in 1997 and 2009. In both cases, public scepticism was closely linked to economic performance. In the late 1990s, the social costs of Hungary's shock-therapy reforms – particularly their impact on living standards – generated widespread dissatisfaction. In 2009, distrust resurfaced as a result of the global financial crisis and was compounded by growing uncertainty over foreign-currency mortgage loans. This further eroded confidence in the government.

Security – particularly financial security – has long ranked among the most important social values in Hungary. From 2015 onwards, the government's communication strategy has successfully capitalized on this priority by framing migrants and refugees as unknown threats to economic stability, jobs, and public resources. A similar logic underpinned Fidesz's electoral success in 2022, when the war in Ukraine shifted public attention decisively towards fears of escalation. In this context, anxiety about war outweighed concerns over democratic backsliding. Many voters sought a figure capable of projecting order and protection, and Orbán convincingly assumed the role of a *pater familias* (father of the family) by instrumentalizing public fears.

More than a new Kádár

Orbán is a politician expected to do more than merely replicate the role of a new Kádár, yet he has mastered this role as well – albeit within a distinctly state-nationalist framework. At the core of this system lies an inseparable alliance be-

tween a centralized state and its loyal subjects. Another key source of the regime's stability is Fidesz's construction of a coherent and emotionally accessible ideology of "national self-defence", which has been used both to dominate political discourse and to exert sustained pressure on independent institutions. On this basis, Fidesz expanded its control over public administration, education, the economy, culture, and science, demanding loyalty in the name of defending the country's independence against the perceived "evil forces of the West".

Armed with a two-thirds parliamentary majority, Fidesz was able to marginalize the opposition and even seek to reshape Hungary's representation in the European Parliament in line with the party's broader political vision. However, in February 2024 a sequence of unexpected events disrupted this dominance. A presidential pardon granted to a former teacher implicated in a paedophilia scandal at a foster home triggered public outrage in Budapest and beyond. The ensuing fallout forced the resignation of President Katalin Novák and Minister of Justice Judit Varga.

A key source of Fidesz's stability is the construction of a coherent and emotionally accessible ideology of "national self-defence".

In March 2024, amid continuing protests, Varga's former husband, Péter Magyar, appeared in a viral interview, initially denouncing what he described as an unjust campaign against his ex-wife. From that point onward, events took an unexpected turn: within a matter of months, Magyar emerged as a successful political campaigner and rapidly amassed significant public support as the leader of the Tisza Party.

In the 2024 European Parliament elections, the newly formed Tisza Party immediately secured seven of Hungary's 21 seats and obtained influential positions within the European Parliament, reshaping the configuration of the opposition. At the same time, the party successfully challenged the "old opposition" – the forces currently represented in the Hungarian parliament – and quickly emerged as the dominant actor of a new opposition bloc.

This rapid surge in support for a charismatic opposition leader forced Fidesz onto the defensive. Owing to the partial suspension of EU funds, the government has been unable to revert to its long-standing strategy of mobilizing voters through material incentives. At the same time, mounting economic difficulties have begun to erode Fidesz's near-total control over the public narrative, as unfavourable assessments of Hungary's economic performance can no longer be neutralized through communication alone.

The future consequences remain uncertain. However, there are signs that broader segments of Hungarian society have begun to recognize the necessity of political participation, in contrast to their earlier patterns of disengagement.

The government appears to have received its marching orders: a return to the familiar strategy of appealing to material well-being. Yet this approach is increasingly questionable.

Given the growing difficulties in distributing resources or further tightening repression, the strategy faces clear limits. On the one hand, since 2024 the budget has been marked by an expanding fiscal "black hole". On the other, Hungarian society – previously characterized by political introversion – has awakened to a new sense of self-awareness and, albeit gradually, has begun to take to the streets. ĘE

Andrea Schmidt is an associate professor at the University of Pécs at the department of political science and international studies. She is also a former visiting lecturer at the Josai Institute for Central European Studies at the Josai International University, Tokyo, Japan.

Can a minority become a democratic test?

KAROLINA BENEDYK

The Polish community in Lithuania is often portrayed as an artificial construct, lacking historical or cultural legitimacy, while "real" Polishness is implicitly associated with centres such as Warsaw or Kraków. These attitudes have contributed to a broader erosion of prestige and self-confidence within the minority. They have also encouraged a condescending – and at times openly mocking – view of Polish culture in Lithuania.

Dominika Baniewicz won a silver medal in breakdancing at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games. During the closing ceremony, she carried the Lithuanian flag – a symbol of her civic belonging and civic integration. Baniewicz is a member of the Polish minority in Lithuania. Yet at the moment of her success, the Polish web portal Interia ran the headline: "A Polish woman with an Olympic silver medal, but for Lithuania."

The Polish minority in Lithuania has a history spanning centuries. Yet, in Poland its existence is not often acknowledged. In Lithuania, members of this community are sometimes stigmatized as "backward provincials" or associated with pro-Russian tendencies. This mutual ignorance fuels misunderstandings.

Shared history

One of the leading scholars analysing the historical development of this community is the political scientist Mariusz Antonowicz (Marijuš Antonovič), himself a member of the Polish minority in Lithuania. He completed his master's degree at

the Institute for International Relations and Political Science of Vilnius University, where he now works as a researcher. Focusing primarily on Polish foreign policy, international relations, and Lithuania's relations with its immediate neighbours – Belarus, Russia and Poland – Antonowicz explains how prejudices against the Polish minority in Lithuania have emerged. He also stresses that current challenges are solvable, provided that both political leaders and society at large recognize the Polish minority as an integral part of Lithuania and commit to long-term strategies in education, integration, and intercultural dialogue.

The roots of Polish–Lithuanian relations reach back to the Middle Ages. In the modern times, however, they have been shaped above all by the shared history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a joint state that existed from 1569 to 1795. While this period is viewed positively in Poland, many Lithuanians interpret it as an era of Polish political and cultural dominance. Lithuanian national identity was shaped in part through resistance to Poland, particularly during the interwar period. These divergent historical narratives continue to influence perceptions of the Polish minority in Lithuania today.

The Union of Lublin – which created the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, making it one of the largest countries in Europe at the time – played a key role in the spread of Polish culture in Lithuania. As Antonowicz notes, its influence can be compared to that of England on Scotland. Initially, Polish language, education, and lifestyle were adopted primarily by the nobility. Over the 18th and 19th centuries, these cultural patterns gradually spread to broader social strata. Proficiency in Polish became essential for participation in political, economic, and educational life, especially as written Lithuanian only began to develop in the 16th century.

Today, Poles make up around six per cent of Lithuania's population – approximately 200,000 people – making them the country's second-largest ethnic minority after Russians. The community itself is far from homogeneous, encompassing Polonized Lithuanians, Polonized Belarusians, and descendants of migrants from Poland. This internal diversity continues to shape language use, traditions, and competing understandings of identity within the Polish minority.

Mutual prejudices and tensions

The interwar period marked the first major conflicts between the two communities. For many Poles, this was also their first sustained encounter with the Lithuanian language, often experienced as coercive rather than organic. As the newly established Lithuanian state sought to strengthen the role of Lithuanian in public life, Polish schools, institutions, and associations were gradually restricted. Given

their limited prior exposure to the language, many Poles perceived these policies as imposed from above. Older members of the Polish community still recall having had little or no contact with Lithuanians before this period. Such forced encounters reinforced mutual prejudices and generated tensions that continue until today.

These divisions were further deepened by the experience of the Second World War. Polish veterans, particularly former members of the Home Army, frequently viewed Lithuanians as adversaries, largely due to the collaboration of some Lithuanian units with Nazi German forces. These wartime experiences eroded trust and contributed to a long-lasting suspicion towards the Lithuanian state, shaping debates over minority rights well into the 1990s.

However, after the Second World War, when Lithuania became a Soviet republic, a significant part of the Polish intelligentsia and wealthier social strata were repatriated to Poland. Many prominent intellectual figures – including Czesław Miłosz – left Lithuania during this period. Those who stayed largely belonged to less educated, rural communities, which significantly weakened the group's cultural, educational, and intellectual life. This structural disadvantage persisted throughout the Cold War period. But even after Lithuania's independence in 1990, Poles continued to rank as the second-most socio-economically disadvantaged group in the country, when compared to the Lithuanian majority.

After the Second World War, during Lithuania's Soviet occupation, access to books and cultural resources in Polish was severely limited. This created space for growing Russian cultural influence. In the Vilnius region and in Belarus, a Sovietized version of Polish identity gradually emerged, shaped heavily by the Russian language and cultural norms promoted by the Soviet state. Soviet rule ensured the survival of the Polish community, but at the cost of its marginalization. For those seeking social mobility, sending children to Russian-language schools was often the only viable option. Proficiency in Russian was essential for professional advancement and inevitably carried cultural consequences. Polish, by contrast, had little prestige and offered few tangible opportunities. As a result, many members of the minority could read and understand Russian more fluently than Polish. This Sovietized form of Polishness has left enduring traces that remain visible today.

"Not real Poles"

Yet this Sovietized version of Polish identity has proved remarkably persistent. Even within the community itself, the prestige of the Polish language remains relatively low. At the same time, segments of public opinion in Poland question the authenticity of this group, dismissing its members as "not real Poles". As a result,

they are rather viewed as confused or merely Polonized Belarusians. From this perspective, the Polish community in Lithuania is sometimes portrayed as an artificial construct, lacking historical or cultural legitimacy, while "real" Polishness is implicitly associated with centres such as Warsaw or Kraków. These attitudes have contributed to a broader erosion of prestige and self-confidence within the minority. They have also encouraged a condescending – and at times openly mocking – view of Polish culture in Lithuania, both locally and from outside the country. For many members of the community, the post-1990 transformation was experienced not as emancipation but as a loss.

The socio-economic position of Poles in Lithuania was particularly disadvantaged in the early years of Lithuania's independence.

Rural areas were particularly affected. Many Poles had been accustomed to the *kolkhoz* system of collective farming and felt disoriented and disappointed when the farms were dissolved. The closure of Soviet-era workplaces following the collapse of the Soviet economic space led to widespread unemployment. Combined with generally lower levels of formal education, this left much of the Polish community with fewer opportunities in the emerging capitalist economy. Land reforms introduced in the 1990s further fuelled frustration, as many Poles lost property in attractive areas near Vilnius or recovered it only partially.

The socio-economic position of Poles in Lithuania was particularly disadvantaged in the early years of Lithuania's independence. Limited proficiency in the Lithuanian state language further constrained social mobility and access to new opportunities.

Over time, however, this situation has begun to improve. Among younger generations, the proportion of university graduates has steadily increased. Young Poles are now more likely to complete higher education, achieve upward social mobility, and – unlike their parents or grandparents – no longer face significant language barriers. These changes are especially visible in Šalčininkai, one of the country's most economically disadvantaged regions and the area with the largest concentration of Poles. Between 2001 and 2021, the number of residents with a university degree nearly doubled, while the share of those with only primary education declined sharply. According to official statistics, there are now no residents lacking formal education.

Integration largely follows generational lines. Older Poles participate less in general Lithuanian life, while younger generations are more integrated. They speak fluent Lithuanian, pursue educational and professional opportunities, and actively engage in society.

Yet, Russian-language media consumption remains an issue. A survey from 2015 demonstrated that more than 70 per cent of national minority representatives in Lithuania regularly followed Russian news channels. In ethnically mixed regions, access to high-quality media in minority languages is often limited. These informational vacuums are frequently filled by disinformation or foreign media sources, with Russian outlets playing a particularly prominent role.

Overcoming the pro-Russian stereotype

Historically, Poles in Lithuania were perceived as pro-Russian, a legacy shaped largely by decades of Soviet influence. However, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a visibly anti-Putin and anti-Kremlin Polish milieu began to emerge. This group openly identifies as Polish and includes politicians like Ewelina Dobrowolska and Robert Duchniewicz. At the same time, the political party Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania adjusted its position, moving away from overtly pro-Russian rhetoric towards a more pro-Lukashenka stance. This shift has been driven in part by family ties with Belarus and by a broader preference for stability in an increasingly volatile regional environment.

These developments have also begun to affect public perceptions, although distinctions within the community are still frequently overlooked. Thus, Antonowicz notes that you can still hear people make such statements as: "They are crypto-Russians anyway; if they were real Poles, they would support our political goals." In his view, such generalizations are then used to justify far-reaching demands, including calls to close Polish-language schools or dismantle minority institutions.

While these views do not represent the majority within Lithuanian society, they are promoted by a small, yet highly vocal, group that has become increasingly active in recent years. Through public debate and media interventions, this group seeks to shape perceptions of the Polish minority – and those of the Polish culture in Lithuania – in a distinctly negative direction. At the same time, there is currently no evidence of a distinct branch of Russian propaganda specifically targeting Poles in Lithuania. "In the past, when the Russian embassy was more active and had a larger staff, there were even attempts to establish contacts with the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania," notes Antonowicz. "Today, however, this activity has largely disappeared."

In June 2024, students from the Polish minority in Lithuania were able to take their high school final exams in Polish for the first time in 26 years. This long-awaited decision marked a historic moment and symbolized decades of struggle for recognition of the Polish language within the Lithuanian education system.

Shortly thereafter, a public call by the head of the state commission of the Lithuanian language to close Polish-language schools sparked widespread outrage. His subsequent resignation underscored the continued sensitivity of minority rights in Lithuania and the political costs of challenging them openly. The Polish minority continues to advocate for proper education policies, quality instruction, and the preservation of Polish-language schools. Demographic decline in smaller communities also adds to the challenge.

Building bridges

According to Antonowicz, Poland's most significant – though not always openly articulated – approach towards the Polish minority in Lithuania can be summarized by a single question: how to encourage as many highly educated, young, and talented individuals as possible to move to Poland? While rarely stated explicitly, this priority is clearly reflected in scholarship schemes, exchange programmes, and other institutional incentives.

At the same time, Poland also supports those who remain in Lithuania, both culturally and in organizational matters. The Polish government finances a wide range of projects, cultural initiatives, and, in particular, minority media. Without this funding, Polish-language media in Lithuania would struggle to survive. However, the key challenge today is how to make these outlets more attractive and increase their reach to wider – and especially younger – audiences.

TVP Wilno, a Polish-language channel owned by Poland's public broadcaster and operating in Lithuania, illustrates this dilemma. While the channel could not function without Polish financial backing, it currently reaches only a very limited audience. According to available estimates, roughly 1,000 viewers follow it regularly, which shows the urgent need for renewal if Polish media in Lithuania is to remain relevant.

Only through cooperation and pragmatic approaches can the Polish minority become a bridge rather than a fault line in relations between Poland and Lithuania. Historical grievances, post-Soviet legacies, and demographic challenges can be addressed if both sides assume responsibility and engage constructively. Ultimately, however, the future of the Polish community in Lithuania will depend not only on bilateral relations but also on deeper societal attitudes: on how Lithuania understands the place of national minorities in a modern European state, and on how Poles in Lithuania negotiate and reconcile their dual cultural belonging.

The experience of the past decades has shown that integration does not mean assimilation. The younger generation of Poles in Lithuania is increasingly bilingual,

mobile, and actively engaged in public life. They are simultaneously rooted in the local context and connected to Poland and Europe, embodying forms of identity that transcend the nation-state boundaries that once defined the region. Their success illustrates that national identity in Central and Eastern Europe is no longer a zero-sum game, but something that can be layered, negotiated, and shared.

At the same time, unresolved issues remain: the status of minority-language education, the lingering effects of Soviet-era marginalization, and the vulnerability of ethnically mixed regions to external influence. These will continue to shape political debates, especially in times of geopolitical uncertainty. Ensuring that such debates do not become instruments of polarization will require careful state policy, responsible media narratives, and sustained civil society engagement on both sides of the border.

If Lithuania and Poland succeed in addressing these challenges with patience and strategic vision, the Polish minority need not remain a source of tension. Instead, it can become a genuine asset – an example of how historical complexity can be transformed into contemporary connectivity. In this sense, the experience of the Polish community in Lithuania is more than a minority issue. It is a test of democratic resilience in the region, a measure of the political maturity of both states, and a reminder that even in a landscape shaped by centuries of conflict and shifting borders, new and inclusive forms of coexistence remain possible. EE

Karolina Benedyk is a freelance journalist whose work has been published in *Der Spiegel, Neue Zürcher Zeitung,* and *Tagesspiegel.* She has recently finished a six-week fellowship with *New Eastern Europe* as part of the International Journalists' Programmes (IJP).

Reimagining labour in the Eastern Partnership

MARIAMI PAPOSHVILI AND ANA DIAKONIDZE

The application of AI remains a fledgling aspect of working life in the countries of the Eastern Partnership. While there have been numerous promising developments, the region still lags behind its western partners. Overcoming this gap could provide the area with new labour opportunities in a sphere possessing almost limitless horizons.

Artificial intelligence and platform-based labour are rapidly reshaping employment patterns across the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. AI-enabled systems and digital labour platforms are no longer marginal innovations: they are increasingly embedded in everyday work processes, influencing how tasks are allocated, performance is monitored, and income is generated. These transformations are occurring where labour markets and institutions are already fragile and characterized by high levels of informality, skills mismatches, outward migration, and limited enforcement of labour regulation. This has given technological change in the EaP a distinct social and institutional trajectory.

The central risk for the region is not large-scale technological unemployment but the normalization of algorithmically mediated precarity. In the absence of coherent regulation, social dialogue and inclusive reskilling strategies, digital tools tend to intensify work; shift risks onto workers; and disperse responsibility across platforms, contractors and opaque algorithmic systems. For EaP countries, the key challenge is therefore not whether AI and platform work will continue to expand,

but whether labour market institutions can respond quickly and coherently enough to ensure that technological change supports decent work rather than reinforcing existing inequalities.

Artificial intelligence

Across the Eastern Partnership, AI adoption remains uneven and is largely concentrated in sectors with higher levels of digitalization and data availability – finance and banking, telecommunications, information technology, media and communications, and selected areas of public administration. In these sectors, AI is predominantly deployed for narrow, task-specific purposes, rather than as fully autonomous decision-making systems. Common applications include customer service chatbots, fraud detection and risk scoring in financial services, automated document processing, translation and text generation tools, and predictive analytics for internal reporting. This pattern closely mirrors global trends identified by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which emphasize that early-stage AI adoption typically targets routine cognitive tasks rather than complex human judgement.

The public sector adoption of AI is also emerging across the EaP and is most often framed within broader digital transformation and modernization agendas. In Georgia, the government programme for 2025-28 explicitly anticipates the introduction of AI systems to support analytical work and legislative drafting within public institutions, signalling a shift from pilot initiatives towards embedding AI in core state functions. Moldova has similarly positioned AI within a national data and digital governance ecosystem. Its Ministry of Economic Development and Digitalization published a white paper on data governance and AI in 2024, committing to the use of AI in public administration, service delivery, and data-driven governance.

Other EaP countries have taken steps to articulate national AI ambitions. Despite the constraints imposed by the ongoing war, Ukraine has prioritized digital governance and innovation, with the Ministry of Digital Transformation presenting a draft AI strategy to 2030 in late 2025. This is focused on practical applications, domestic infrastructure, and human capital development. Armenia has publicly discussed the need for a national AI strategy as a coordinating framework for economic and governance reforms. At the same time, Azerbaijan approved an artificial intelligence strategy for 2025-28 by presidential decree in March 2025, emphasizing innovation, standards development and public sector use. Belarus

has also engaged in AI readiness assessments and standardization discussions, although its implementation capacity remains constrained.

Alongside state-led initiatives, private sector and public-private efforts play an increasingly visible role in shaping AI adoption. In Georgia, AI Georgia has emerged as one of the first organized private-sector initiatives in the EaP aimed at promoting AI as a driver of economic modernization. Armenia has taken a more infrastructure-led approach, with plans to host an artificial intelligence data factory worth 500 million US dollars. This is scheduled to begin operations in 2026 and will be jointly implemented by Firebird, the Armenian government and NVIDIA. This project represents one of the most substantial AI-related investments in the region to date and anchors Armenia's ambition to position itself as a regional technology hub. In Azerbaijan, AI deployment has been particularly visible in the energy sector, where applications for grid optimization, emissions reduction and efficiency gains align AI adoption closely with industrial modernization and sustainability priorities.

Despite the constraints imposed by the ongoing war, Ukraine has prioritized digital governance and innovation.

AI gap

Despite these developments, the strategic narrative surrounding AI in the region remains predominantly technology and growth-oriented. AI is consistently framed as a driver of productivity, modernization and international competitiveness, while parallel measures to anticipate or manage employment-related impacts are largely absent. National strategies and programmes rarely address job displacement risks; task reconfiguration; algorithmic management in the workplace; or the implications for workers' rights, social protection and skills transitions. As a result, the labour market and social dimensions of AI adoption remain largely unaddressed within existing policy frameworks.

This imbalance is further reflected in the region's research and innovation capacity. An analysis of AI-related scientific publications indexed in the OpenAlex database for 2020-22 reveals a pronounced gap between EaP countries and leading Western European research systems. The UK, Germany, Italy and France dominate AI research output, reflecting strong research infrastructures and sustained investment. Within the EaP, Ukraine stands out as a regional leader with nearly 3,000 AI-related publications (to compare, the UK had nearly 40,000 in the same two-year period. The rest of the region's research into AI stood much less (under

1,000 publications on AI-related research). This reflects these smaller but developing AI research ecosystems.

A similar pattern emerges in high-value innovation indicators. Analysis of AI-related patents filed with the European Patent Office (EPO) between 2017 and 2022, based on inventor residence data from the OECD RegPat database, shows that EPO AI patents remain rare in the EaP. Ukraine accounts for nine such patents, Belarus for six, and Georgia and Armenia for one each. This is compared with Germany (3,028), the UK (1,384) and France (1,122). While these figures underscore a substantial innovation gap, they also point to an emerging – if still limited – capacity to translate AI-related knowledge into internationally competitive outputs.

Employment risks

Available evidence suggests that AI-related employment risks are highly uneven across occupations, with exposure concentrated in specific task profiles rather than entire professions. According to Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research, automation risks in Europe are highest in clerical and administrative roles, where around 45 per cent of tasks could be automated. Manual and craft-related trades, by contrast, remain far less exposed, with only about four per cent of jobs considered vulnerable. Overall, the analysis estimates that approximately 24 per cent of work in Europe is potentially automatable, indicating that AI is more likely to reshape job content than eliminate jobs outright.

This task-centred pattern is already visible in the Eastern Partnership, particularly in office-based work. Recent research from Ukraine shows that more than half of employees already use AI when performing office tasks, suggesting that adoption has moved beyond experimentation into routine practice. Notably, 36 per cent of employees use AI regularly both at work and outside of it, while 19 per cent use it only at work and ten per cent only outside the workplace. This illustrates the rapid diffusion of AI tools in clerical and administrative functions, even in labour markets where formal rules governing workplace AI remain limited.

International research indicates that AI typically automates or augments specific tasks within jobs, leading to work intensification and changing skill requirements rather than immediate job loss. In the EaP context, this dynamic is particularly significant given widespread skills shortages and high levels of informal employment. While AI tools can reduce administrative burdens, accelerate document processing and improve access to information – potentially boosting productivity in both the public and private sectors – these gains are unevenly distributed. Workers

in digitally intensive roles tend to benefit more directly, while others face tighter performance monitoring and higher output expectations without corresponding improvements in pay or working conditions. The OECD has warned that such dynamics risk reinforcing job polarization, with high-skilled workers benefitting from AI-driven augmentation while middle and lower-skilled workers experience stagnating wages and declining job quality.

These asymmetries are reinforced by limited transparency and weak institutional oversight. Algorithmic tools are often introduced as neutral efficiency-enhancing technologies, with little disclosure about how data are collected, how performance scores are generated, or how automated recommendations influence managerial decisions. In environments with weak enforcement of labour and data protection law, workers may not know when AI systems are used in evaluation, scheduling or disciplinary processes, nor how to challenge automated outcomes. Although European frameworks – such as the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence (2024) and the EU Artificial Intelligence Act – establish transparency, accountability and human oversight as core principles, they do not yet impose binding obligations on countries in the Eastern Partnership region. Nevertheless, for EU-associated and candidate countries, these instruments exert growing indirect pressure through legislative approximation, market access requirements and accession-related reforms, highlighting a widening governance gap between the rapid deployment of AI in workplaces and the limited development of protective frameworks for workers' rights and oversight mechanisms.

The future of work in the EaP

Over the past decade, most Eastern Partnership countries have adopted formal data protection laws, which are often modelled on European standards. These frameworks, however, were largely designed for traditional forms of personal data processing. As a result, they often say little about how AI systems should operate in practice. Key issues such as transparency in algorithmic decision-making, automated profiling, the use of large datasets to train AI systems, or the right to human oversight of automated decisions remain weakly regulated. Yet these are precisely the areas where AI creates the greatest risks for privacy, fairness and fundamental rights, particularly in employment and public services.

Weak enforcement further limits the impact of these laws. Although data protection authorities exist across the EaP, many are under-resourced, lack specialized expertise in AI and cybersecurity, and rely mainly on complaints from individu-

als to trigger action. Sanctions are therefore rare and often limited in scope. Even where legislation is formally aligned with the EU's privacy protection regulations such as GDPR, its real-world effectiveness is constrained by the absence of clear, AI-specific guidance on how the rules should be applied.

The EU has made reskilling a central pillar of its response to AI-driven changes in the labour market. It has committed hundreds of billions of euros through a layered system of funding instruments, combining labour market programmes such as the European Social Fund Plus; crisis recovery funding as part of the Recovery and Resilience Facility; dedicated digital skills initiatives like Digital Europe; and broader strategic efforts such as InvestAI. As the European Parliament has emphasized, these investments treat reskilling not only as an economic priority, but also as a social and governance response to technological change.

Although digital skills feature increasingly in national strategies, implementation is often limited to donor-funded programmes or pilot initiatives.

In the Eastern Partnership, by contrast, reskilling efforts remain fragmented and largely project-based. Although digital skills feature increasingly in national strategies and policy documents, implementation is often limited to donor-funded programmes or pilot initiatives rather than being fully embedded in labour market policy. Analysis by the World Bank highlights that successful AI adoption depends not only on technical skills, but also on strong institutional coordination and stable, long-term financing – conditions that remain uneven across the EaP. Across the Eastern Partnership region, reskilling initiatives include Georgia's digital economy training under the GITA–World Bank GENIE project; Moldova's goal of raising specialists to at least two per cent of the adult population; Ukraine's Diia.Education platform reaching around two million users; Armenia's government-backed AI education programmes; and Azerbaijan's C4IR partnership offering online courses to more than 10,000 citizens. Together, these examples point to growing momentum on digital skills, but also to a continued reliance on fragmented, programme-based approaches rather than integrated labour market strategies.

Social dialogue

Social dialogue is a cornerstone of democratic governance and labour relations, providing a structured framework for communication among workers, employers and governments. When effective, it enables the negotiation of la-

bour standards, supports inclusive policy-making and helps societies manage economic and technological change. In the context of AI-driven transformation, social dialogue is particularly important, as decisions about technology adoption directly affect work organization, skills requirements and power relations in the workplace.

The current state of social dialogue for the implementation of social justice and decent labour policies across the EaP region reveals significant variations in effectiveness and implementation. While Moldova and Ukraine have made notable progress in establishing inclusive dialogue mechanisms, other countries face substantial challenges. Belarus and Azerbaijan maintain highly restrictive environments for social partners and civil society engagement, while Georgia's recent introduction of foreign influence agent laws signals a concerning regression in the civic space. The effectiveness of tripartite committees varies considerably, with many operating without sufficient authority or clear mandates for policy reforms.

While Moldova and Ukraine have made notable progress in establishing inclusive social dialogue mechanisms, other countries face substantial challenges.

Against this backdrop, AI adoption across the EaP is largely unfolding outside established mechanisms of social dialogue. Trade unions and worker representatives are rarely involved in decisions on AI deployment, which are typically framed as technical efficiency upgrades rather than changes with significant implications for working conditions. As a result, issues such as task redesign, workload intensification, performance monitoring and access to reskilling are rarely negotiated collectively, leaving workers to absorb adjustment costs individually.

A final constraint on effective AI governance in the region is the absence of reliable data on workplace-level AI use. Labour statistics rarely capture task automation, algorithmic management or AI deployment in either traditional firms or platform-mediated work. This statistical blind spot limits governments' ability to assess risks, target policy interventions or evaluate distributional effects, delaying regulatory responses.

By comparison, the EU has explicitly recognized this gap. Eurostat, national statistical offices and EU-funded research increasingly monitor digitalization and algorithmic management, while the EU Artificial Intelligence Act and EU Platform Work Directive introduce binding transparency and information obligations for employers and platforms. This contrast highlights diverging governance trajectories: while AI diffusion in the EaP accelerates, the institutional tools needed to regulate its labour market effects remain underdeveloped.

Regulatory responses

Digital labour platforms depend on AI-driven systems for task allocation, pricing, performance monitoring, ratings, fraud detection and automated worker management – functions that could not be coordinated through human supervision alone. As these technologies have advanced and become more accessible, platform-based work has expanded rapidly, making platformization one of the most visible labour market effects of AI-driven transformation. Across the Eastern Partnership, platform work has grown quickly at both the lower end of the labour market, such as food delivery and ride-hailing, and the higher end, including freelance work in IT, design and other digital services.

Despite this expansion, no country in the region has adopted a comprehensive regulatory framework addressing platform work as a labour market phenomenon. In contrast to the EU's platform work directive, which centres on a presumption of employment, algorithmic transparency and collective rights, these dimensions remain largely unregulated or absent from national legislation. As a result, most platform workers continue to operate as part of self-employment, civil law contracts or informal arrangements.

Where regulation has emerged, it has followed two narrow and sector-specific paths rather than forming a coherent strategy. First, several countries, including Armenia, Moldova and Belarus, have focused on transport sector rules for ride-hailing and taxi platforms, covering licencing, registration, dispatch systems and fiscal compliance. While these measures support market formalization, they regulate services rather than employment relations, increasing worker visibility to authorities without significantly improving labour protection. Second, limited innovation has occurred in the IT sector through special legal or tax regimes, such as Ukraine's Diia City, which target highly-skilled digital workers but exclude most location-based platform workers. Overall, platform regulation in the EaP has prioritized market governance and fiscal control over worker protection, resulting in fragmented coverage and persistent protection gaps, particularly for low and medium-skilled workers.

The future of work in the EaP therefore depends less on the pace of technological adoption than on the capacity of institutions to govern it. Without stronger data collection, effective social dialogue, coordinated reskilling strategies, and clearer rules on algorithmic accountability, AI risks reinforcing existing labour market vulnerabilities. Conversely, aligning AI and platform work governance with employment policy, worker protection, and skills systems is necessary to allow technological transformation to contribute to more resilient and equitable labour markets. The choices made now – particularly regarding

regulation, institutional coordination, and worker representation – will shape whether AI becomes a tool for inclusive growth or a driver of deeper precarity in the region.

Mariami Paposhvili is a policy practitioner and researcher with over ten years of experience advancing social and economic equity through labour and social policy reform. She is currently based at the Expertise France in Tbilisi, working on Human Capital Development with a focus on employment, labour rights, disability inclusion, social-services delivery, and cybersecurity policy reforms. She holds an MA in International Policy from Texas A&M University (USA) and an MA in European Interdisciplinary Studies from the College of Europe in Natolin (Poland).

Ana Diakonidze is a labour and economic sociologist specialising in new forms of labour, including gig work and the digitalization of labour, with a focus on their implications for workers' social security in less advanced economies and broader trends in social policy development. Currently she is an associate professor of sociology at Tbilisi State University.

The post-war recovery of Ukraine needs to be green, just and European

An interview with Valeriia Bondarieva, co-founder of Rozviy, a Ukrainian feminist climate organization. Interviewer: Emma Novotná

EMMA NOVOTNÁ: What are the biggest current environmental problems in Ukraine?

VALERIIA BONDARIEVA: There are a lot of environmental problems, many of them have been caused by the war. This is why we started to talk about ecocide in the international arena, as the damage will have long-term consequences that put our future and survival at risk. When energy infrastructure – like oil and gas facilities – gets damaged, where do all of those toxic liquids go? They go into the ground, and then into the water, and thus cause massive pollution. The Black Sea and Azov Sea have suffered significantly. Some estimates say that around 50,000 dolphins have died, which is heartbreaking and shows how serious the impact is on marine life. The water keeps getting polluted over and over again, and it also affects our access to clean drinking water. Thus, when the Kakhovka dam was destroyed, the local communities were devastated.

Forests have also been destroyed as a result of military action. For example, when a missile or drone gets shot down, and falls into a forest, it often starts a fire. The same happens to our farmland, to those fields where we grow our food. And right now, Ukraine is the most mined country in the world, which is another environmental threat. However, what's interesting is that some experts also say that since demining can take years, certain areas might actually recover, since they will be untouched by human activity.

So there's a whole range of different environmental issues. They have a long-term impact both environmentally and on the people. We live within our environment: if the soil is polluted, we cannot grow food; if the water is polluted,

Photo courtesy of Valeriia Bondarieva

we don't have clean water to drink or to give to our animals. Everything is connected, and this war keeps reminding us just how deeply our lives depend on the health of our environment.

Can it be said that Russia is right now the biggest polluter in Ukraine and the biggest cause of environmental problems?

There's also another aspect. Since the war is still ongoing, even if we want to restore any part of the environment, we can only improve the situation for some of it. In the occupied territories, there's nothing we can do at all. And the longer these consequences remain untreated the more damage accumulates and the harder it becomes to recover later. It is also important to mention that the production, transportation and overall military activity all greatly contribute to carbon dioxide emissions.

What is the discussion about climate change like in Ukraine today?

If one wants to talk about the environment or climate in Ukraine right now, it usually resonates with people only when it's connected to Russia's actions. Because that's what makes people more united, as we have a common enemy, who kills us, murders us, steals our children and also damages our environment. But when it comes to environmental issues inside Ukraine, for example those caused by Ukrainian companies, it is often much harder to get people's attention. A good example is in the Carpathian Mountains, where a company wants to build a huge ski resort. Environmental activists have

been campaigning against it for years, but there are still many people who believe it would be good for the economy. At our NGO, Rozviy, we are really worried that when the time for Ukraine's recovery comes, huge projects might not be implemented in a sustainable way. There's a real risk of causing further harm: not by Russia, but by our own politicians, businesses and companies. I think it's very important that people stay vigilant about our own environmental responsibility.

In recent history, the civil society has proven to be very important for the democratic development of Ukraine. What is the sitaution with this sector now?

When the full-scale invasion started, there was a huge boom in the volunteering movement. It actually started in 2014, but in 2022, it entered a completely new phase. It played a significant role in how people see themselves not just as victims but as agents of change. Many of those who began by helping others informally later found their place in civil society organizations. The mindset became: something terrible happened to us, and we want to build back better. There are so many conversations about creating something new, and that energy runs across all parts of Ukrainian civil society. I can see how civil society is thriving everywhere right now: in the feminist movement, in gender justice initiatives, in veteran reintegration programmes, and in sectors like energy, agriculture and climate action. I think that civil society is the core of Ukrainian society today, they are the ones who do all the change. Even the environmental movement, which has faced many challenges over the years, including those caused by the invasion, is now reviving. We see new ideas, new collaborations, and we feel a growing sense of purpose within it.

Could you tell us a bit about Rozviy and its core mission?

When the full-scale invasion started, it was a moment of despair and hopelessness for many of us. I remember feeling like my life could end at any moment. Before I used to worry about the climate all the time, but when the invasion started, it suddenly felt meaningless. That changed when we began organizing actions calling for an embargo on Russian fossil fuels. It gave me a new sense of purpose. But by 2023, I was exhausted. What I was missing was hope. Not just resistance, but a vision for what comes after. Since "Fridays For Future Ukraine" kept focusing on the embargo on Russian fossil fuels, I started to feel like I wanted to work on something different. I had a vision that stemmed from what the climate experts were starting to emphasize: if we want Ukraine's recovery to last, it must be sustainable in every sense, including environmentally. We call that the green recovery. That's where I found my hope.

I texted my friend and fellow climate activist and she immediately shared the same enthusiasm about the green recovery. We realized that if Ukraine is to rebuild for the future, it has to involve

those who are the future – young people. In March 2023, with support from the Polish organization *Wschód*, we started building a vision for a just, green and European Ukraine. We want our recovery to be truly sustainable, not just for today but also for the years to come. And the recovery also needs to be just. We come from the climate justice movement, so we clearly see how climate change interacts with other social issues and how it deepens existing inequalities. If there is a green recovery, it must focus on the people who are the most vulnerable and those who will be most affected by these transformations.

So we founded Rozviy. At first it was a youth climate initiative, but now it has also become a youth feminist initiative, because we see the potential of integrating gender justice into the climate policy, which is very lacking. It has been two and a half years of Rozviy, so we are relatively new, but we have already built a community of people who share our values. In a way, we are trying to create a small example of an alternative society: one built on care, equality, and solidarity. Our aim is to fight for a just, green and democratic Ukraine, with the inclusion of young people, especially young women, in climate policy.

There are many progressive discussions about feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, or sex education, but climate is rarely among them. Surveys show that many people do care, but the level of understanding is quite superficial. It needs to be even more present in the media. That's why part of our focus is education, advocating for a green recovery and creating media content that makes these topics easier to understand.

Is your team based in Ukraine?

Because of the war, a lot of our members are now based abroad mostly all over Europe. At the same time, our team has been expanding, and we now have more people in Kyiv as well. This gives us a lot of flexibility. Since we have members in different regions, we can be present at events or initiatives related to Ukraine without everyone having to travel, which makes coordination much easier.

Did the focus of Rozviy evolve since the beginning?

I feel that even though we started about two and a half years ago, a lot has changed in terms of our tools and views. The core focus of our fight remains: a green recovery and youth inclusion. What we have added in the past year is a stronger emphasis on gender justice. Another important aspect of our work is that we also link Russian colonialism with climate and other social issues. That is why cooperation with the Eastern European climate risk movement is very meaningful to us. That is also what we were mostly focused on in the last two years.

Our biggest projects so far have been RCOY Eastern Europe (Regional Conference of Youth, under COP) and then the Eastern European Climate Camp. Now we have decided to focus more nation-

ally, and even locally, working closer with communities in Ukraine. At the same time, it does remain very important for us to bring the topic of Russian colonialism into climate debates. One major way to do that is by being involved in the Eastern European climate movement, which is growing stronger with the support of initiatives such as Lives Over Fossils.

What is the work of Rozviy today, in Ukraine and abroad?

After we organized RCOY Eastern Europe, which turned out very well, we went to COP28 in Dubai. There we mostly worked with the Ukrainian pavilion: we represented young people and tried to bring more with us, so we could be seen. It was also a space where we could directly engage with our politicians. For example, the ministry of environment already knows our team well. We worked to establish a youth council under the ministry of environment, here in Ukraine. And I later became a member of the council myself. However, this summer the ministry of environment was merged with the ministries of economy and agriculture, and the council was restructured. I didn't agree with the new decision-making mechanism, so I decided to step away, while continuing to support the idea of youth engagement in environmental governance.

If we want to recover in a green way, there must be a lot of experts who actually know how to do that. We simply don't have enough of them right now. There are climate experts in Ukraine, but they cannot cover all the areas that a green recovery requires. There must be highly niche experts across different areas. With the war still going on, many young people have left the country, so we are facing a serious brain drain. That's why one of our aims is to encourage more young people to actually engage in climate-related topics in their studies and careers, so they can become those experts and meaningfully contribute to the recovery with their expertise. There are a lot of young Ukrainians who study environment and sustainability abroad right now, but the question is whether they will return. Will there be any incentives for them to do this? That's currently one of the biggest challenges.

And now, we're planning to launch our climate policy and diplomacy school, which will be one of the main projects in our organization, although it's still in development. Another major initiative that we have is to engage young people locally by creating a young people for green recovery network. Through this network, we want to support youth-led projects, especially in the energy sector, where about 50 per cent of Ukraine's energy infrastructure has been damaged. So it's also about grasping the moment. We didn't participate in the Ukraine Recovery Conference itself, but for the past three years we have been doing some work around it doing advocacy and networking to make sure that green aspects of the recovery remain on the agenda.

You mention the Ukraine Recovery Conference which was organized last July in Rome. You were blocked from entering the spaces even though you were accredited, which happened after an incident that your activists had with the Italian police. Could you describe what happened and also how you interpreted what happened?

We were planning a photo action in front of the Colosseum with a big banner in the evening before the conference. The idea was to send the photos to the media, so that when the conference started the next morning, all participants could already see our message. We submitted a request to the police for permission, but it was initially rejected due to some issues with the request. They asked us to come in person to clarify, so I went there and explained everything to them. At first, they said it wouldn't be possible, but when I clarified that it was a photo action, not a protest, they eventually agreed. For the second action that we wanted to register, our plan was to hold speeches in front of the venue of the conference. However, the police told us that it wouldn't be possible because the weather forecast predicted a storm. I suggested moving it closer to the metro station, and they agreed. Apparently, the storm was no longer an issue there. They also asked me who among us had accreditation for the conference, and I said that it was me and another activist.

So we took a photo in front of the Colosseum, but it was very interesting that there were many police officers, more than we expected, around six or seven.

How many people were at the action that you organized?

Seven. So basically one policeman for each person. They checked all our passports and took pictures of them. The next day we came for the second action. Initially, it seemed like a good location, but when we arrived, it turned out to be on the opposite side of the venue. We tried to negotiate for a better spot, but it didn't work. We stood there with our banners and tried to give our speeches as loudly as possible. Again, there was a large police presence for the seven of us, and also a huge police car. After the action ended, they came up to us and asked twice who had the accreditation. I said that it was my friend and I. The police already had our contact details, since both of us tried to register the action. But when my friend and I went to the conference venue, we were told that we had been rejected by security. I had a media accreditation; my friend had an NGO accreditation.

Both of you were rejected?

We were told that we couldn't be let in for security reasons. I overheard the woman at the registration desk mentioning "headquarters". I asked her if this rejection had come at the request of the Rome Police Headquarters, and she confirmed that it had. While we were still trying to understand what was going on, we also found out that another activist from Germany and two others from Austria, and Vlada, our Ukrainian activist from Rozviy,

were being followed by two people in plain clothes. When they noticed, they approached them and asked why they were following them. Those men said that they were from the Italian police but refused to show their IDs. When they finally did it, they covered their identification numbers.

At some point, Vlada made a joke that maybe they were Russian agents. Florian König, the German activist, then said that maybe actually they were, since Vlada and Florian had Ukrainian flags and had already organized two peaceful actions. We sent a message to the head of the Rome Police Headquarters, asking for clarification about why we had been rejected and informing him that our activists had been followed. The head denied that the police had anything to do with the conference access decision, saying that it was made by security, so it was a different police division, although they had been notified about our action. It seems that someone assumed that we were going to do something disruptive inside the conference. It was absurd. We had the right to protest and followed all the procedures. Both actions were registered and peaceful. There was no reason to deny us entry.

Did you find out if those people who followed your activists were connected to the police?

The police said that we didn't need to worry about that. But how can you not worry when there are two men walking around the city, following people and claiming to be Italian police, while refusing to properly identify themselves? The authorities themselves can't, or won't, tell you who they really are?

Did the police tell you that they don't know them?

They said they didn't know anything about those men. Here's how I see it: the Rome police denies that they had any connection to our rejection from the conference, even though they were persistent with asking who among us was accredited. This is the conference about Ukraine and the recovery of Ukraine. So the fact that we were rejected as Ukrainians is absurd. It is also absurd because we did everything according to the rules. We tried to contact our embassies but received no response. As far as I understand, the embassies could help find out if the Italian police have any record on us, but realistically, I don't think the police will ever be held accountable for what happened.

Valeriia Bondarieva is a climate activist currently living in Kyiv, Ukraine. She is the co-founder of the Rozviy Youth Climate Initiative. She is a translator with a background in working with texts related to politics, sociology, environment and energy.

Emma Novotná is a Czech climate activist and a student of Social Anthropology and Ukrainian studies at the Masaryk University in Brno, Czechia.

The future of war

A conversation with Peter Warren Singer, strategist and senior fellow at New America.
Interviewer: Vazha Tavberidze

VAZHA TAVBERIDZE: "No humans crossed the battle line – yet the enemy trench was taken." Writing about the Battle of Lyptsi in Ukraine's Kharkiv region in May last year, this is how you describe what may have been the first fully robotic assault in modern warfare. Where does it rank among the battles in history that have changed the way of warfare?

I may not go as far back as Alexander the Great, but I will go a couple of generations back. I think there are strong parallels between the Spanish Civil War and the war in Ukraine. There are the obvious larger ideological parallels – what it means to stand up to rising authoritarian forces, and the consequences of letting them get away with it. But if we look at military doctrine and technology, the parallels lie in how a series of technologies that already existed were brought together in powerful new ways. That not only changed how battles were fought and won, but also raised new questions for the military and for politics – not just about what was possible, but what was proper. So, if you go back to the 1930s, you had technologies like the tank, the airplane, and the radio, all of which had been used in the First World War. By the 1930s they had advanced, but in the Spanish Civil War they were brought together in a way that became known as a Blitzkrieg, or combined arms. That was a game-changer. It introduced a new way of fighting that forced armies to reorganize, and it raised profound questions of law and politics. Aerial bombing and the story of Guernica are a perfect example, they didn't just spark debates about the rules of war, but also gave rise to entirely new forms of art. We're seeing the same thing now with drones, robotics, AI, and networks. All of these have been used before in wars, but today they are being combined in powerful new ways. The data show that roughly 80 per cent of casualties, maybe more, right now are caused by these new technologies. That is why I think the closest parallel is the Spanish Civil War. That may be how we'll look back on this moment.

Are we talking about technological advancement on par with the introduction of tanks and aircraft? Or is this something even more impactful?

I think it's well beyond that. Yes, there are parallels with the introduction of the tank, airplane and radio combination in 1939, or going back further to the machine gun. But there is something fundamentally different about this new wave of technology. For the first time in human history, the tool – whether it is the tractor on a farm or a drone on the battlefield – isn't just improving. It is starting to do the work on its own. It's beginning to operate alongside the human, and maybe even replace the human. That's the level of change we are talking about. Humans have been imagining this for thousands of years. The ancient Greeks didn't call it AI – they called it *Talos*, the giant bronze automaton that guarded Crete. In old Hebrew texts, it was the *Golem*. In science fiction, over a century ago, it was *Robota* – the origin of the word "robot". All those "what ifs" are now real. A tool that works for you, works alongside you, maybe even replaces you – all that used to be fantasy. Now we're seeing it in our industries, and we're seeing it in war. And that's a big deal.

How close are we to the leap you just described? Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the former Ukrainian general and current ambassador to the United Kingdom, predicted that the technological race in drones, innovation, etc. between Russia and Ukraine would last until 2027. After that we might see "autonomous swarms" – a battlefield with fully robotic attack units on both sides. Are we really less than two years away from fully robotic warfare?

I don't think so. First, a completely robotic war with no humans involved remains science fiction. That's not going to happen in two years, and it's probably not going to happen in 100 years. By definition, for something to be war, it has to involve people. Second, all the evidence, whether on the battlefield in Ukraine, or in medicine, or even in chess shows that it's not the machine that's better than the human. It's the combination of human and machine together that's most powerful. So no, humans aren't disappearing. But their roles are changing.

Another debate is whether this technology favours offence or defence. Which is it?

There's a parallel again to the machine gun in the First World War and the trenches. Right now we see a static battlefield, with two forces that can't move very much. But remember: humans learn, militaries learn, and now AI is learning. What we see in 2026 might not necessarily be what we will see next year, or three, five, or ten years from now. But for now, yes, drones give an advantage to the defence. They've helped create this static nature of the battlefield. And it is not just because of drones – it's also about supply lines, materiel, bullets, people. And drones too, obviously. That's part of why the front has frozen. But just like in 1918, it can break.

Photo courtesy of Peter W. Singer

You also write about the rise of "human–machine teams" (HMTs) in modern warfare. Where are we now? Will we see HMTs in full swing by the end of this war?

We're only scratching the surface. Both sides are building their own systems, their own doctrines, their own approaches. On the technology side, there isn't one single standard but multiple types, from multiple companies and countries. On the Ukrainian side, their military structure is more decentralized than those in NATO. Each brigade experiments with its own approaches, its own doctrine, often using different types of drones. There's even a points system for drone operators, which is then analysed and mined for lessons. In short: there isn't a single optimal model yet. Everyone is improvising, adapting, constantly trying something new. And remember, this isn't just about Ukraine. Look at a possible conflict in the Pacific between the United States and its allies on one side, and China on the other. China and North Korea are using Ukraine just as much as a test bed as Silicon Valley companies are. Some lessons will carry over, but others will be completely different because of geography, and the scale and sophistication of the forces. A Pacific conflict would bring in far more capable air forces than either Ukraine or Russia can muster. So, yes, HMTs are coming, but what they look like will depend on the context of each war.

But maybe the harder part to grasp is that in any future big pitched battle, we won't just be talking about tens or hun-

dreds of drones. It might be thousands, tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands in the air, at sea, and on land. And again, we can see the preparations that different militaries are doing for that. If we look at the example of a potential invasion of Taiwan, the People's Liberation Army of communist China has gone on a massive buying and building spree of both drones of a wide variety and counter-drone systems. In turn, Taiwan recently launched a building and buying spree of naval drones, essentially mimicking what Ukraine has built.

When you say we're just scratching the surface, what exactly is that surface? What capabilities are we talking about?

I think a very important aspect of this is to not just focus on the armed lethality side, but to understand that we're at the start of the equivalent of an industrial revolution. If we look at past wars, mechanization mattered to everything, from tanks on the battlefield, but it also mattered to industrialization off the battlefield. Same thing here. So when you ask about human–machine teaming, are we talking about infantry and drones working together to defend or take an enemy trench line, or are we talking about using a ground robotic system to evacuate a wounded soldier, bring them back to base to do remote surgery, with a doctor 200 kilometres away, providing guidance? It's more complex than one singular role, one capability, and that is why it is difficult to say we are at any one stage right now.

Speaking of lessons, the phrase "All wars are learning labs of sorts" is in the introduction chapter of your report on military deception, co-authored with General Mick Ryan. Let's talk about the Ukraine lab. What lessons have we learned, especially in the field of deception?

There's been this belief that new technologies like drones, satellites and AI have created a perfectly transparent battlefield, where everything can be seen and no one can be surprised. And yet, both Russians and Ukrainians keep finding ways to surprise each other again and again. So what we're seeing is that new technologies are certainly reshaping how militaries try and trick each other, how they try and avoid being tricked. But the lessons of the importance of deception are enduring.

The goal stays the same, but the rules become trickier, and the game more interesting…

And harder to master. A basic rule of deception is that it is easier to trick someone if you reinforce an existing belief rather than try and make them accept a new one. As an example in history, you have the D-Day operation, where the Allies knew that the Germans thought they're going to invade at Calais, and so they keep reinforcing the German belief that "I am going to go to Calais." I use a fake force. But then they invade Normandy. We saw similar things in Ukraine, where the Ukrainians are making the Russians believe they're going to be invading and targeting one area when

they're actually going to go to another. Now they're doing it with drones, fake cell phones, social media posts, etc. Another example is fake equipment. We had blow-up tanks, inflatable tanks tricking the Nazis before D-Day, and there are equivalents of that in Ukraine, including decoy drones, for instance. One of the conclusions of our deep dive report was don't buy the hype. Don't believe that no one could be tricked. And then you get the other conclusion that you have to be more aware of these new forms of trickery. Or, you've got to get good at these new forms of trickery.

In 2024, especially in the first half of the year, Ukraine seemed to have a distinct advantage in production, innovation, manoeuvrability and utility. How much of that advantage is still intact, and for how long? And how well have the Russians adapted from what you have analysed?

There's an interesting parallel between the drone side of the war and the larger contest between Russia and its allies versus Ukraine and its allies. Ukraine has had and continues to have the advantage of innovation. So if we're looking at drones in particular, it's constantly pushing out new types, new capabilities. It's doing lots of experimentation and learning, constantly so. Surprising Russia with what it's able to pull off. The recent examples range from the strike on Russia's strategic bomber fleet to the downing of Russian fighter jets by naval drones. That said, Russia is the larger power with the larger economy and it is not an unthinking foe. It went from not having great capability in drones and not much production, to throwing lots of energy and lots of money at the problem and building large production facilities. Just as Ukraine has benefited from companies in Poland, the US, and elsewhere providing systems and using Ukraine as not just a place to aid, but as a test ground, Russia is doing the same.

For example, that newly-built production facility is essentially making modified versions of Iranian drones with large aspects of Chinese parts. And that is in addition to the direct purchasing and use of Iranian drones. So Russia has gone from being able to produce in ones and twos, to now producing literally tens of thousands per month, and in turn it is learning. Both sides have gotten better, in everything from electronic warfare to specialized counter-drones. Both sides are deploying them. I think the advantage right now in drones is a mirror of the larger battlefield. Ukraine has innovation, but it doesn't have industry scale.

In the report, you emphasize the growing deception gap between the West and Russia and China. How big is that gap? And what's lacking?

The concern comes from three converging factors. First, when it comes to training and education, there is simply less emphasis on deception operations in Allied militaries. For instance, in their doctrine or field manuals, deception usually gets what we call the "bumper sticker treatment". There'll be a line or

two about how important it is, and then not much else. Secondly, you have this learning/sharing complex that's developed among authoritarian states. Russia, China, North Korea, Iran – they're not just exchanging weapons technology, or in some cases soldiers on the battlefield. Instead, they're also sharing lessons learnt. And then third, you've got an array of new technologies like drones and AI that are changing the "how" of deception and the ways militaries and governments try to trick each other. So when these three forces come together, they create what we call a deception gap, where one side is simply much better at trickery than the other. And trickery matters in war.

And with drone warfare, is the West catching up?

I'd actually put it more broadly. With all these new technologies and tools of war, are we catching up in our defences against them? So that if a conflict came, we'd actually be prepared?

That works too…

That covers everything from: do I have the right defences not just against enemy bombers, but against drones and cruise missiles, and not in small numbers, but at scale? That brings us to another key point: quantity. One of the problems the US faces right now is that we've deployed very expensive air defence systems. We've provided some to Ukraine, sold some, and deployed others to the Middle East defending Israel. But we simply do not have enough of these batteries overall, and even when we do, they're firing off the limited number of missiles that we possess. So, if you think about a scenario like the US versus China, it is not just whether we have enough Patriot batteries, it's whether we have enough Patriot missiles. Then you start to wonder: maybe the answer isn't buying more of the old expensive gear, but to come up with cheaper ways of handling scale. And that's the same thing that Ukraine is wrestling with, and every European military has to wrestle with.

Which means state of the art versus good enough?

Or perhaps "state of the art" shifts to a newer, cheaper, but effective, technology. Let me give you one example. In October last year, Iran launched drone and missile strikes on Israel that essentially mirrored what Russia had done to Ukraine. As it supported Moscow, Tehran was also learning from it. Israel, with help from the US and the Gulf states, successfully defended against that massive swarm of over 300 drones and missiles. It was a victory for the defender. But here's the catch: the cost of the attacking drones and missiles was about 80 million US dollars. The cost of the defending interceptors was estimated to be between one or two billion dollars. And that's not even including the price of the launchers or the air defence systems themselves. So yes, a victory for the defender, but not the kind you want to keep repeating, again and again.

Speaking of AI, you write that artificial intelligence will not only be essential as a tool to counter enemy deception, but will itself be targeted by the enemy to prevent AI from doing just that. So we're talking about AI duels – standoffs, in a sense. That sounds like something out of the *Terminator* movies…

I can stick with that *Terminator* analogy. In the first movie, it's a robot coming back to kill all humans. But in all the later films, it's AI versus AI, robot versus robot, with the human caught in the middle. That's what I'm getting at – that is what the future will look like. You'll see attackers using AI in planning, in creating deception. You'll see defenders using AI to figure out the best way to block or counter-deceive. But also remember: just because you have AI doesn't mean it can't be targeted itself. We may be at the very beginning of this, but already there are reports of hacker groups going after training data, going after open-source software. AI tends to lock in on certain patterns it's trained to detect, and a thinking attacker can exploit that. You can basically sense the certain vulnerabilities and feed it, just like a human. If it's inclined to think X, then you feed it X, while you go off and do Y. The most powerful form of deception is self-deception. And what we've seen with humans, we're now starting to see with AI. And so if you can target that hunt for confidence, that overwhelming sense of self-confidence, you can bend the person, but you can also bend the AI to your will. NE

Peter Warren Singer is a Strategist and Senior Fellow at New America. He has been named by the *Smithsonian* as one of the nation's 100 leading innovators, by Defense News as one of the 100 most influential people in defence issues, and by *Foreign Policy* in their Top 100 Global Thinkers List. Singer is the author of multiple best-selling, award-winning books.

Vazha Tavberidze is a Georgian journalist based in Tbilisi who regularly contributes to *New Eastern Europe*.

Armenia needs to reclaim its bargaining power

A conversation with Dr Eduard Abrahamyan, senior research fellow at the Institute for Security Analysis (Yerevan) and an international relations scholar at University College London. Interviewer: Tatevik Hovhannisyan

TATEVIK HOVHANNISYAN: In your view as a scholar of small states, to what extent did the regional order change in the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War of 2020, and in light of Russia's military invasion of Ukraine since 2022?

EDUARD ABRAHAMYAN: The regional order in the South Caucasus has undergone a profound and sub-systemic transformation since the 2020 Second Karabakh War. This change was further accelerated and structurally consolidated after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. What we are witnessing is not merely a shift in the local balance of power, but the reconfiguration of the region's governing logic – from a conflict managed within a partly western institutional framework to a predominantly authoritarian, post-western security order shaped by hard power, coercion, and transactional alignments underpinned by distinct non-western norms and rules of conduct. First, it is important to stress that Azerbaijan's use of force in 2020 was geopolitically viable largely because it was regionally authorized. A tacit consensus was formed among the key non-western power brokers (Russia, Türkiye, and Iran) that the war would be allowed to proceed and that its outcome would marginalise western instruments of conflict management. Above all, this was clear regarding the OSCE Minsk Group and its foundational principle of the non-use of force. The dismantling of this western-backed infrastructure represented a decisive break with the post-Cold War conflict regulation model in the South Caucasus. Although the European Union has attempted to partially re-enter the region through instruments, such as the monitoring mission in Armenia, this remains at the level of political symbolism. In reality, there is a limited, almost non-deterrent, and essentially compen-


Photo courtesy of Eduard Abrahamyan

satory presence rather than a restoration of Western strategic influence.

The consequences for Armenia have been existential. The 2020 war and the subsequent loss of Nagorno-Karabakh (historically known as Artsakh) in 2023, with the forced displacement of its indigenous population, stripped Armenia of its most critical strategic depth, security buffer, and essential power base providing a geographical advantage and action space. A state that, prior to 2020, functioned as a constrained but resilient small power vis-à-vis Azerbaijan was reduced to what can analytically be described as a micro-state under coercion: militarily exposed, territorially compressed, and structurally vulnerable, especially along its north-eastern and southern borders. The erosion of Armenia's deterrence capabilities, combined with Russia's perceived strategic abandonment of its formal ally, as Russia de facto sided with Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, produced an acute asymmetry that now defines the bilateral order with Azerbaijan. Conversely, Baku emerged from the war not merely as a victorious small power, but as an emerging middle power with agenda-setting ambitions below hegemony. Its newly acquired status is underwritten not only by superior military capabilities still being augmented and demonstrated in military parades, but also by its growing role as a geopolitical bridge between otherwise antagonistic power centres: Russia–Türkiye, Russia–Iran, Türkiye–Central Asia. This "connector" function has elevated Baku's strategic utility and reduced external constraints on its behaviour. The war thus triggered a vertical status shift

in the regional hierarchy: Armenia fell dramatically, while Azerbaijan rose.

What's important for the region is that despite Russia's temporary military overstretch, the 2020 war has normalized the use of force as a legitimate tool of re-ordering the region. The permissive environment created in 2020 – where a democracy lost territory to an autocracy through war without meaningful punitive consequences – arguably served as a precursor to the logic that later underpinned Russia's own escalation in Ukraine. In this sense, the Armenian–Azerbaijani case functions as a laboratory of post-liberal order-making through force.

How would you describe the relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan now, when there are talks about a peace deal?

Today, Armenian–Azerbaijani relations increasingly reflect a hierarchical configuration between a rule-maker and a rule-taker. Baku now seeks not merely political concessions but soft subordination. This is less clear for the international audience but compatible with what Russia considers for Ukraine – an inviable and dysfunctional state, an entity with limited sovereignty, with a means of control or dominance through enduring pressure. Azerbaijan's policy within this logic is exemplified by a sophisticated strategy of contesting Armenian identity that is akin to Russia's identity-targeting approach toward Ukraine. This is further reflected in Baku's demands for the so-called "Zangezur corridor" de facto seeing its fulfilment via TRIPP project. This closely resembles Moscow's pre-2022 corridor demands linking Russia to occupied Crimea. Azerbaijan has also directly interfered in Armenia's domestic affairs, including public calls for amendments to the Armenian constitution – an unprecedented ultimatum prior to 2023. This mirrors the Kremlin's insistence on Ukrainian constitutional changes aligned with Russia's strategic interests. This posture is reinforced by demands to restrict Armenia's defence building, effectively framing the country as a "capitulated state" in a manner reminiscent of Moscow's attempts to impose limitations on Ukraine's armed forces. Finally, Azerbaijan has advanced demands for the restitution of Soviet-era exclaves within Armenia, a move that would critically undermine the country's internal logistics and territorial cohesion in favour of Azerbaijan's continuous consolidation.

These instruments are further entrenched by the newly institutionalized "Western Azerbaijan" concept, which contains implicit elements of ethno-political expansionism framed through the asserted "right of return" of Azerbaijanis who left Armenia during the Soviet-era population exchanges. This post-war paradigm is reinforced by systematic coercive diplomacy. It is repeatedly articulated by President Ilham Aliyev through the rhetoric of the "iron fist" to entrench the fear of war inside Armenian society, which, to a certain extent, is instrumental in the country's political ecosystem. This mirrors the kind of hierarchical order Russia would seek to impose on its

western periphery if it emerges as victor over Ukraine: not one of sovereign equality, but of coerced compliance.

In your view, does the TRIPP corridor (Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity) enhance regional security or introduce new vulnerabilities?

Despite widespread narratives portraying the TRIPP corridor as a breakthrough for peace and connectivity, it is an interesting infrastructural project that predominantly benefits Azerbaijan in terms of its territorial consolidation and the foregoing bridging role. Although the Armenian side frames the implementation of TRIPP primarily in security terms, its significance should not be overstated, as it is unlikely to meaningfully enhance regional security – not only for technical reasons, but also because its principal sponsor, the Trump Administration, adheres to a distinct interpretation of security, rule of law, and order that diverges markedly from traditionally articulated western liberal political thought. On the contrary, TRIPP, if not being managed meaningfully, may institutionalize new layers of vulnerability, particularly for Armenia, while consolidating the post-2020 coercive order that privileges geopolitical winners and major power bargaining over sovereign equality.

First, TRIPP does not resolve Armenia's structural isolation. The project is narrowly designed to provide "unimpeded connectivity" between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan (the Azerbaijani exclave) via Armenia's Syunik region. It does not restore Armenia's own rail or road access to Azerbaijan, Türkiye, or broader regional markets. Crucially, Azerbaijan has made no commitment to reopen the Nakhchivan–Yeraskh railway, which would help integrate Armenia into regional transport networks. Moreover, the ongoing one-sided process whereby Russian and Kazakh supplies are transported not via Georgia but through Azerbaijan is likely to be instrumentalized by Azerbaijan to generate what Joseph Nye conceptualized as *asymmetric interdependence*. A comparable dynamic existed between the EU and Russia prior to the Ukraine crisis, enabling Russia to derive geopolitical leverage from the EU's structural dependence by anticipating political concessions in return. Such dynamics typically emerge when economic interdependence is artificially constructed between fundamentally different regime types – liberal democratic and illiberal authoritarian – lacking a shared vision of history, the present international order, the future, or a common system of values.

The push for the TRIPP route therefore reflects less economic necessity and more geopolitical design, which also bypasses Georgian and Armenian infrastructure. Second, the TRIPP must be understood within the zero-sum logic of the Armenia–Azerbaijan peace settlement itself. The 2025 Washington agreement, though celebrated internationally, reflects a peace imposed by the victorious side. The war was fought on a zero-sum

basis, and the peace is unfolding in the same way: Azerbaijani gains are translated into open-ended political, territorial, and constitutional demands on Armenia. The "connectivity" narrative is less about a mutual public good in practice, but a continuation of the logic of rivalry by infrastructural means. What is framed as a peace dividend is, in principle, another mechanism of asymmetric pressure now through the artificially imposed asymmetric interdependence framework.

Third, TRIPP does not weaken Russia's position in the South Caucasus; in many respects, it strengthens it. Moscow does not perceive TRIPP as a geopolitical threat but as a strategic opportunity to secure an overland railway connection with Türkiye, complementing the existing Russia–Azerbaijan–Iran North–South corridor. This logic was openly confirmed by Russian officials. Far from being displaced, Russia remains structurally embedded in all key logistical arteries. This is reinforced by several hard institutional facts. Armenia's railway system has been fully controlled since 2008 by Russian Railways through its subsidiary, South Caucasus Railway. In parallel, the Russian FSB border guards continue to operate along the Armenia–Iran border, precisely where the TRIPP corridor would pass. This means that even under nominal US "supervision", the physical security ecosystem of the route will remain Russian-dominated.

Fourth, Moscow increasingly interprets TRIPP not only as a regional infrastructure project but also as a potential platform for selective US–Russia cooperation at the expense of EU interests. This logic fits neatly with the broader Trump–Putin interaction model that has resurfaced around Ukraine ceasefire diplomacy and prospective global business arrangements between the US and Russian elite networks. From this perspective, TRIPP is less about integrating the South Caucasus into the western order and more about embedding it into a great-power transactional framework, where Washington and Moscow explore pragmatic coexistence. The EU, which lacks both coercive power and infrastructural control on the ground, becomes strategically sidelined.

Finally, TRIPP intensifies Armenia's internal security vulnerabilities. The corridor is projected to run through Syunik – Armenia's most sensitive geopolitical bottleneck. This region already suffers from Azerbaijani military incursions, the partial occupation of strategic heights since 2022, and chronic insecurity along vital transport arteries such as the Goris–Kapan highway. Introducing a special-status transit route under asymmetric power conditions risks transforming Syunik into a permanent zone of external leverage, rather than a stabilized region of international economic interaction. TRIPP should therefore be superficially seen as a peace-building instrument on the surface but as part of the post-2020 authoritarian connectivity regime, where transport routes serve as tools of domination, status projection, and geopolitical brokerage.

Some argue that Türkiye is the western presence in the South Caucasus. What's your perspective on this?

The characterization of Türkiye as a "western presence" in the South Caucasus is, in my view, analytically misleading. While Türkiye is formally embedded in western institutions as a NATO member, its regional behaviour in the South Caucasus has been guided far less by western strategic logics than by its own autonomous and increasingly civilizational agenda. In practice, Türkiye operates not as a western proxy in the region, but as an independent major power that coordinates pragmatically with Russia and Iran while leveraging Azerbaijan as a strategic partner.

Indeed, Türkiye today is one of the three central regional power-brokers and its ability to maintain a working consensus both with Russia and Iran reflects its mature, post-western diplomacy. Azerbaijan's role as a geopolitical connector between Russia, Iran and Central Asia, as well as Türkiye's bid to join BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, further embed Ankara in an alternative regional architecture.

At first glance, Türkiye's NATO membership might suggest that it could function as a counterweight to Russia in the South Caucasus. In reality, however, Türkiye has consistently avoided any role that would require it to "pull chestnuts out of the fire" for Europe at the expense of its own strategic autonomy. Since at least the mid-2010s, Ankara has deliberately diverged from containment policies and instead cultivated dense geopolitical interdependence with Moscow. Rather than directly challenging Russia's regional primacy, Türkiye has adopted a logic of competitive cohabitation, carving out influence through partnership, bargaining, and selective rivalry, thereby providing additional empirical evidence for the study of collaborative authoritarianism.

The Armenian case illustrates the limits of viewing Türkiye as a western stabilizing actor. Ankara closed its border with Armenia in the early 1990s due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and consistently subordinated Armenian–Turkish normalization to the Armenian–Azerbaijani relationship. Even when Yerevan repeatedly signalled readiness to open communications without preconditions, Türkiye maintained linkage to the Armenian–Azerbaijani track, a stance at odds with western conflict-resolution norms. Turkish officials continue to condition normalization on Yerevan's alignment with Baku's post-war demands, underscoring that Ankara's approach is guided by alliance loyalty and power politics rather than liberal principles of de-linkage or sovereign equality.

Thus, the South Caucasus today is less a theatre between the West and Russia that is mediated through Türkiye. Instead, it is more of a space of negotiated authoritarian coexistence, in which Türkiye, Russia and Iran collectively manage influence while deliberately minimizing western penetration. In other words, Türkiye's conceptualisation of the "Western presence" in the South Caucasus appears

distorted and analytically misguided. It is better understood as a sovereign power-broker in a post-western regional order, whose strategic behaviour is guided by autonomous interests, an alliance with Azerbaijan, and transactional coordination with Russia and Iran – rather than loyalty to western geopolitical projects or a world vision. For declining small states such as Armenia, this distinction is not merely analytical but existential, as it clarifies the true structure of power and constraint within which their foreign policy must now operate.

In this complex situation, what should Armenia, as a small state, do to stay on the surface?

Armenia today operates outside the European security system, in a region marked by the consolidation of a post-liberal order governed by the rule-making illiberal actors of Russia, Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Iran. This situation is further compounded by a major ideational and behavioural rupture within the western system itself, initiated by the Trump presidency, which has unsettled established understandings of security, alliance solidarity, and the rule-based international order. Unlike most European small states, Armenia lacks the protection of a robust alliance system and a community of like-minded democracies. It is essential to recognise that the concept of peace carries fundamentally different meanings within liberal and non-liberal political traditions. In European liberal democracies, peace is generally understood as a condition grounded in reciprocity, restraint, economic interdependence, a shared human rights–based value system, geopolitical like-mindedness, and the non-use of force – elements that together constitute the civilisational self-image of the West. By contrast, in the strategic vocabularies of ambitious autocratic leaders such as Vladimir Putin and Ilham Aliyev, "peace" often denotes the glorification of military victory and the institutionalisation of dominance through hierarchy, coercion, and enforced compliance. In Armenia's case, the term is increasingly instrumentalised within a coercive, zero-sum framework rather than conceived as a mutually stabilising outcome. Under such conditions, the prospect of a genuinely liberal peace between a weaker democracy and a militarily dominant, revisionist autocracy – one that openly treats force as a legitimate instrument of politics – appears implausible. What is presented as peace thus risks becoming a mechanism for entrenching subordination rather than securing stability. In short, the assumptions underpinning democratic peace theory are largely inapplicable to democracy–authoritarian dyads, where the same term is understood in fundamentally different ways, or even employed to mask aggressive intent. As Kenneth Waltz once observed, peace can be touted as the noblest cause of war.

In this environment, Armenia effectively faces two strategic paths. The first is to remain a mute rule-taker: remaining within Russia-centred frameworks; adapting to an Azerbaijani-designed re-

gional architecture; tolerating the military presence of Russia and Azerbaijan on its territory; acquiescing to rules and narrative interpretations imposed by Baku, Moscow, Tehran and Ankara; and gradually dissolving its agency. In other words, this is what I describe as strategic disappearance without formal occupation. The second option is far more demanding but ultimately the only viable one: systematic capacity-building and deterrence restoration. Armenia must treat survival in this field of competitive multipolarity not as a moral appeal but as a power problem. This means rebuilding credible deterrence through out-of-the-box innovative solutions; investing in a smart economy, defence, resilience, and state capacity; and anchoring itself more clearly within a civilizational and strategic partnership with western stakeholders, however imperfect and constrained that partnership may be.

In a multipolar world, peace does not reward weakness. As recent experience shows, victorious small states can behave aggressively when major powers are distracted, while defeated ones are subjected to endless demands. Armenia's task, therefore, is not to chase abstract neutrality or rely on eroding legalism alone, but to reclaim bargaining power – military, political, technological, economic and societal – so that peace does not become a continuation of defeat by other means.

Equally important is a willingness to pursue measured geopolitical ambition: to resist authoritarian consolidation in the South Caucasus by assuming a clearer regional role rather than retreating into defensive nihilism. This, in turn, calls for the construction of "mini-lateral" security and political partnerships with western actors that value civilizational affinity and democratic compatibility over purely transactional projects. Perhaps the idea of a coordinated Armenian–Georgian axis, aligned with like-minded western partners, could serve as a stabilizing democratic counterweight in an increasingly illiberal regional environment. In the absence of such strategic assertiveness, Armenia risks not only marginalization but gradual geopolitical dissolution within a region increasingly shaped by authoritarian rule-making. NE

Dr Eduard Abrahamyan is a senior research fellow at the Institute for Security Analysis and an international relations scholar at University College London. In 2019-2021, he served as an aide to the president of Armenia, Armen Sarkissian, in the realm of foreign affairs. He is the author of the book *Small States, Russia and the West: Polarity, Constellations and Heterogeneity in the Geopolitics of the Caucasus* (Routledge, 2025).

Tatevik Hovhannisyan is a contributing editor with *New Eastern Europe* and a political scientist specializing in political communications and civil society affairs. She is a graduate of the College of Europe in Natolin and Yerevan State University. Her areas of interest include EU neighbourhood relations, civic participation in developing countries, and advocacy.

Hollowed out: the slow collapse of Georgia's city of black gold

POPPY ASKHAM

The Georgian city of Chiatura was once one of the world's most important centres of manganese production. Today, many miners are unemployed and struggling to survive, after a sudden shutdown that has plunged the western Georgian city into economic and social freefall. Set against a background of national political turmoil, their struggle exposes how a town built around a single resource, and a single company, is slowly being emptied out.

A group of miners sit in a small camp erected by the side of the Kvirila river, making jokes and smoking, trying not to think about the fact that they have not eaten for 27 days.

"As time passes it destroys you," explains Mirza Loladze, one of seven men staging a hunger strike in Chiatura, a small industrial city in western Georgia. At the start of the hunger strike, Loladze sewed his mouth together, but he sneezed one day and the stitches burst open. "It takes all your energy, it wrecks your nerves," he tells *New Eastern Europe* on a stiflingly hot July afternoon.

Loladze had been brought to this point of self-inflicted starvation by an industrial dispute that had already been rumbling on for six months. The hunger strikers used to work in the manganese mines that are the centre of economic life in Chiatura. Essential to steel production, manganese is used in manufacturing and military equipment and is increasingly prized as a key material in the global energy transition, particularly for electric vehicle batteries. While large deposits

in Central Africa and South-East Asia have reduced global demand for Georgian supplies, the country still exports significant quantities to the European Union.

Chiatura's "black gold" is controlled by one company: Georgian Manganese. It was granted a 40-year mining licence, giving it exclusive rights to extract minerals across more than 16,000 hectares until 2048. Work in the mines is hard, shifts often last 12 hours in gruelling conditions.

"You can't let your guard down when you're inside, not for a second," says Givi Shergilashvili, a mine electrician who turned up at the protest camp to support his colleagues. "You're mentally exhausted without lifting a finger, plus, the air is so dirty, you'd think you are in hell." But in a mono-industrial town there are few alternatives. "There are no other job opportunities in Chiatura," Shergilashvili says. "Everything is dependent on Georgian Manganese."

The shutdown

Shergilashvili and the hunger strikers have not worked in the mines since October 31st 2024. That day, the company sent out a text, informing workers that mining activities were suspended. Some 3,500 people were told to stay home with the promise of 60 per cent of their wages, according to local media. The company blamed a downturn in the global manganese market and the impact of previous industrial disputes. By February 2025, months of frustration had escalated into active protest – miners were marching through Chiatura and some even travelled the 180 kilometres to Tbilisi, demanding state intervention, nationalization and compensation for lost earnings.

The government refused to intervene. Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze insisted the dispute was a matter between the workers and their employer. The 60 per cent payments were stopped and a reorganization deal was introduced, but it offered no guarantee of re-employment and prioritized open pits – that require fewer workers – over underground mines. It was at this critical moment that four protesters were arrested for allegedly assaulting a mine director. The arrests were a turning point. The protest movement lost momentum, concentrating its efforts on securing their release, and eventually launching the hunger strike. This was not the first time a hunger strike had been held in Chiatura.

"Chiatura just goes through these cycles, from one crisis to another," says Tamara Babuadze, a journalist from the city and editor-in-chief of *Indigo,* an independent magazine, which has been covering the town closely for the last four years.

Founded at the end of the 19th century after the discovery of vast mineral deposits, Chiatura grew rapidly. By 1905, it was supplying around 60 per cent of

Tariel Mitskhadze, examines a faded poster from the miner protests. "I think that if there is the state on one side, there should be human rights defenders to counterbalance it on the other side. I can't imagine them closing, I really cannot," he says in response to the prospect of civil society organizations disappearing as a result of governmental pressure.

the world's manganese. As the industry expanded, so did the population. Under Soviet rule, the town prospered: a theatre was built, and a network of cable cars carried workers across its steep valleys. That stability crumbled with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The industry entered a period of downturn before passing into private hands during the rapid neoliberal reforms of the 2000s. The private era has been marked by frequent disputes between workers and management, and a decline in the city's population.

Year after year, workers have demanded safer conditions and higher pay, most recently they have also called for a plan for the city's future and the creation of a fund to help it reduce its dependence on a finite resource. While protests have won small concessions in the past, periods of calm never last, and relations between workers and management have become increasingly strained.

Black rivers and sinking villages

Environmental damage has become an even greater source of tension. Wastewater runoff from industrial facilities is reported to have periodically tinted the Kvirila river, which runs through the city centre, black. In 2017, a state-appointed manager

was introduced after the company amassed some 130 million euros in fines for environmental damage. The problem has not disappeared. In 2022, Eco Club Chiatura tested samples and found manganese levels 42 times the permissible concentration, according to local media. In 2025, a *POLITICO* investigation reported levels ten times above the permitted threshold. In a statement to *New Eastern Europe*, Georgian Manganese said that a new ore-processing plant has been constructed with a closed water circulation system, meaning wastewater is no longer discharged and that old plants have been shut down. The company did not dispute *POLITICO*'s findings.

Houses lean at alarming angles, while some have already collapsed and stepped scars run through gardens and fields.

Another crisis is unfolding in the village of Shukruti perched in the hills above Chiatura. Houses lean at alarming angles, while some have already collapsed and stepped scars run through gardens and fields. The cause is a vast network of underground mining tunnels beneath the villages that are slowly collapsing. Protests in Shukruti have taken place almost every year since 2019, with residents frequently blocking roads leading to mines.

Georgian Manganese told *New Eastern Europe* that a memorandum had been signed with Shukruti residents, allowing it to continue mining in exchange for compensation on the condition that residents stop obstructing operations. The company says it has paid 4.1 million euros in compensation since 2020, based on property valuations conducted by an independent auditor.

In 2024, protests resumed. Residents said they had not received sufficient compensation and once again obstructed mining activity, something the company says violated the memorandum and contributed to its decision to shut the mines. With residents, workers and the company still locked in conflict, Chiatura's long cycle of unrest shows little sign of ending, even as some mining activity begins again under a reorganization agreement.

Daily survival

The impact of the shutdown has been devastating for the local economy. For sale signs and empty lots dot the streets and a large queue of people waiting to receive their pensions and social security payments regularly stretches out from the city's bank.

In a small bakery selling loaves for as little as two lari, or 63 cents in euros, Nino Macharishvilli said that six months after the shutdown her customers were increasingly struggling to afford basic foodstuffs. "Earlier someone wanted to buy

[bread] but could not because they said they wouldn't have any money left for transport," she explained. "I often help people, but I can't help everyone, I don't earn that much either."

On the other side of the river, a worker in a once busy restaurant serving up traditional Georgian fare said business had dried up. "People have shifted to only covering their basic needs, so restaurant activity has decreased," Khatuna Muthidze said. "People also seem to not be as cheerful or financially secure as they used to be."

As the months passed without pay, former miners were forced into debt. Even before the shutdown, Davit Chinchaladze, one of the principal organizers of the protest, had debts – they've only grown. His father is also unemployed, which he claims is a direct result of his activism. "Debt on debt, loan on loan," he said, "we are in a very bad situation." The shutdown caused nothing short of "economic collapse" in the city, he said.

Georgian Manganese told *NEE* that as of December 2025, 2,456 people are now employed and that an "active retraining process is underway", leaving Around 1,000 remain out of work. Even for those employed, the questions remain: how long before another shutdown? How long can the city survive on a finite resource and a single company?

Emptying out

As financial pressures have grown, many residents have been forced to make hard decisions, choosing between the land they call home and the means to support their families. Population statistics for Chiatura are not readily available and there is no accurate, accessible way of quantifying how many people have left the city and surrounding villages since November 2024. However, almost everyone interviewed had a story of someone who had left – for Tbilisi, for the industrial cities of Rustavi or Zestafoni, or even for Europe.

Upon our return to Chiatura in December just over a year after the shutdown, staff at the bakery said they had halved the number of workers, and whole days could pass with barely a single customer. Macharishvili was no longer working there; we were told she had left the city. She is now living in Germany, she told us over a shakily connected video call on a former colleague's phone.

Givi Shergilashvili was also out of town. He had just started a trainee position working in plastic production in Tbilisi, leaving behind his children and his elderly parents. "What can a person do? I can't survive without money," he said.

When he lived in Chiatura he had used his time off from the mines to help his parents look after a herd of cows. Without his help, they had been forced to sell

The barren city centre in Chiatura reveals an emptying city. As financial pressures have grown, many residents have been forced to make hard decisions, choosing between the land they call home and the means to support their families.

their livestock. "It's a very bad feeling when you leave your home," he said. "When I'm here, I can't sleep because everyone is there [in Chiatura] and I'm here."

Next year, he hopes to bring his children with him to Tbilisi, but he is aware that individual survival decisions like his are hollowing out his home city.

"Chiatura becomes empty like this," he said. "How many others like me who loved their city have left?"

Faltering safety nets

Chiatura's struggles are taking place against a backdrop of political turmoil in Georgia. Protests have been going on daily in the capital ever since the government's decision to suspend EU integration talks. After claiming victory in a contested parliamentary election in October 2024, the ruling Georgian Dream party has passed a slew of repressive laws, prompting accusations of democratic backsliding from European leaders. Among the groups under most pressure from the government are civil society organizations and independent media outlets.

The Georgian Dream parliament passed a law targeting groups that get funding from abroad, a measure often dubbed the "Russian law" by protesters. Critics

warn that the legislation, along with related restrictions on foreign grants, could force many charities and NGOs to fold.

Independent media outlets, which rely heavily on foreign funding, play an important role in Chiatura, conducting long-term reporting on local conditions even outside periods of protest. Tamar Babuadze says her magazine *Indigo*, which has made social issues in Chiatura an editorial focus, is under increasing economic and political pressure.

"Financial resources have become more and more limited," she says. "Maybe we will soon face the reality when we are not able to continue our work anymore."

Minimal state welfare provision and costly legal disputes with Georgian Manganese have left many Chiatura residents reliant on NGOs. *New Eastern Europe* met Salome Shubladze, the social policy programme director at the Social Justice Center, whilst she was visiting miners. The human rights organization has long worked in the area, preparing research and articles about the issues facing residents and recently offering legal support to the arrested miners and residents of Shukruti. It is also helping more than 100 workers who are trying to take Georgian Manganese to court, demanding reinstatement to their positions and pay outs for lost earnings.

Independent media play an important role in Chiatura, conducting long-term reporting on local conditions.

The organization was one of seven major civil society groups whose bank accounts were frozen in June pending an investigation by the state anti-corruption bureau. The authorities accused the organizations, including women's rights campaigners and an election watchdog, of "sabotage" and acting on behalf of foreign interests, allegations they deny as politically motivated.

All of Social Justice Center's workers are now working on a voluntary basis pro bono. "We cannot dedicate as [many] resources as we did in the past," Shubladze said. "But at the same time, we feel that these people have been abandoned by everyone and if we did the same, we just could not [bear] it."

"This attack is not only on civil society organizations, but also people living in places [like Chiatura]," Shubladze said. For the miners, the prospect of a future without organizations like Social Justice Center is daunting.

"In the event of the disappearance of these organizations, complete authoritarianism will develop in the country, from the point of view that there will be no protesting, opposing force," said Davit Chinchaladze.

Fellow protesting miner, Tariel Mitskhadze, agreed: "I think that if there is the state on one side, there should be human rights defenders to counterbalance it on the other side. I can't imagine them closing, I really cannot."

Fading hopes

With ever fewer resources at their disposal and growing financial pressures, the voices of protest in Chiatura are ever fainter. When *New Eastern Europe* returned to Chiatura a month before the sentencing and more than a year after the shutdown, the protest camp showed clear signs of wear and tear. Several tents had fallen out of use, gaping holes in the tarpaulins exposed rusting camp chairs. The group gathered outside was smaller than in the summer, and the mood more subdued. Yet a committed core remained. They were still fighting for their jobs back, the release of their jailed friends, and a better future for their city. A small sign continued to be updated daily, marking each passing day of protest.

"What are you going to do? How are you going to live? What's your vision [for the future?]", Chinchaladze says relatives ask him. He does not have an answer to their questions, but he will not give up the struggle.

"I have faced injustice with my own eyes," he says. "I prefer to suffer like this now, really hoping for God…," he falters. "I don't know. I'm hoping for the future that something will appear, something will happen, that this injustice will finally end."

In January this year, a month later, the four protesters accused of assaulting a mine director were handed lengthy prison sentences of up to six years and three months. EE

New Eastern Europe contacted Georgia's Ministry for Health, Labour and Social Affairs, and the Ministry for Environmental Protection and Agriculture, but received no response.

Georgian Manganese responded to requests for comment with a statement outlining compensation paid to Shukruti residents, measures taken to address environmental damage, and its worker safety protocol. It did not respond to questions about the the economic and social fallout of the shutdown.

Poppy Askham is a Tbilisi-based multimedia journalist covering social and political stories from across Georgia.

Women of the quiet frontline: Four pastors in atheist Brandenburg

ULRIKE BUTMALOIU

Thirty-five years after Germany's reunification, Brandenburg – the rural state surrounding Berlin – shows both promise and peril. Economic modernization has not prevented social fragmentation. Political freedoms coexist with mistrust. In this vacuum, populism thrives. Yet in the quiet, unhurried work of four women pastors, another possibility flickers: that civic trust can be rebuilt from the bottom up, sometimes with beer and a Bible.

On a Saturday night in Treuenbrietzen, a small town of fewer than 8,000 people roughly an hour southwest of Berlin, the sound of bass shakes the fieldstone and Gothic brick masonry of St Mary's Church, which dates back to the 13th century. Strobe lights flicker across its round arches, sweep over its pillars, and glide across the famous Wagner organ. At the altar, before a crowd of music enthusiasts, a woman with long black hair and a clerical collar takes the microphone. As the DJ fades the beat, Pastor Simone Lippmann-Marsch reminds the crowd that they have not gathered to escape the world, but to remember that hope can still sound louder than fear.

Lippmann-Marsch, 42, is not the kind of pastor most people expected. Tattoos run down her arms; a silver ring flashes at her lip; her voice cuts through the rhythm of the music. She does not ask her listeners to be pious, she asks them to listen: to each other, to themselves. This scene could unfold in Berlin's nightlife, yet it happens here, in Brandenburg – the sparsely populated state that encircles the German capital like a patchwork of growing commuter towns and fading vil-

lages. In many rural areas beyond Berlin's commuter belt, villages are emptying, shops have closed, and buses arrive once an hour if at all. In the space left behind, the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, or AfD) has built its strongest bastions. In some counties, more than a third of voters support a party now monitored by Germany's domestic intelligence agency as extremist.

Unconventional

Brandenburg is one of the most secular regions in Europe. Generations have grown up without bedtime prayers, confirmation classes, or even a pastor in sight. Yet across the countryside, small Protestant congregations persist. Their pews are half-empty and their buildings are crumbling. In recent years, a new face has appeared at the pulpit: women in their 30s and 40s, many with unconventional biographies, some newcomers to the region, all trying to keep communities alive.

"My role is to carefully open doors – sometimes also to push them open loudly," Lippmann-Marsch says. Her path was never straight. Raised in Neuseddin, a modest former railway village south of Potsdam, she trained as a beautician, worked as a clerk and event manager. At 28, she chose baptism, late, as a mother of three and already a biker, heavy-metal fan, and tattoo enthusiast. Only then did she turn towards theology, later entering parish service.

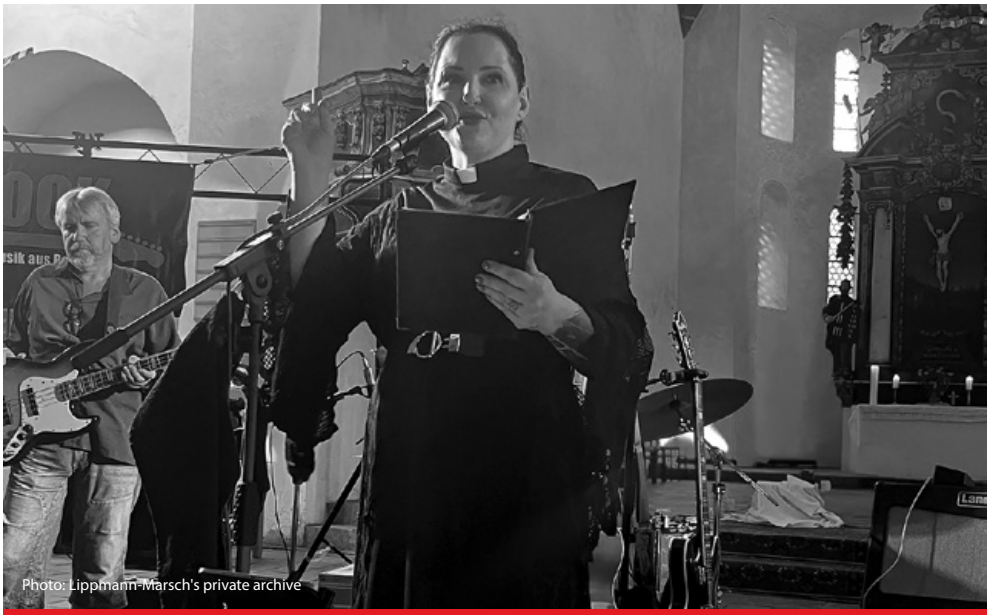
Today she insists, "Church has to leave its walls." For her, worship belongs as much in pubs, biker rallies, and techno clubs as in the centuries-old church at the centre of Treuenbrietzen. "I don't preach to spread a feel-good atmosphere. I preach because I believe in a hope that doesn't hide in Sunday phrases."

Lippmann-Marsch's services are bold. They include techno masses with DJs and lights, memorial rides for fallen bikers, or spontaneous weddings on the marketplace. Some shake their heads; others are moved to tears. "People who had left the church told me they finally felt addressed again," she recalls.

Her style divides opinion even within the church. Some colleagues whisper that she is too political, too loud. But she is undeterred: "I speak out against racism, for queer visibility, against right-wing hate. Some call that politics; for me, it's a spiritual stance."

Her sermons are direct and sometimes uncomfortable. She avoids platitudes, asks questions, names what is wrong. "When parties start turning human dignity into a bargaining chip, the church must respond. Silence makes us complicit."

In a state where the AfD often leads in elections, such clarity carries weight. Her audiences are mixed: refugees, queer couples, motorcyclists with AfD stickers on their helmets – all under one cross. "I don't take away anyone's right to be here," she says. "But I take the right to call things by their name."



Pastor Simone Lippmann-Marsch delivers a sermon in her church. Lippmann-Marsch's services are bold. They include techno masses with DJs and lights, memorial rides for fallen bikers, or spontaneous weddings on the marketplace.

Her services blend music, spirituality, and frank conversation. "Young people sense instantly when we hide behind clichés," she says. "They ask: why don't you talk about what really matters?" Even if she doubts she can change the world, she believes in small shifts: "I can create spaces where something starts – a conversation, a change of perspective, a small turnaround. Sometimes that's enough." Her model is Jesus: "He preached on mountains, in boats, in houses – not in palaces. He didn't negotiate with systems; he spoke with people."

In much of Central and Eastern Europe, churches remain bastions of conservatism, shaping national politics. In Brandenburg, the church has no such power. Precisely that weakness allows experimentation: techno beats under a cross, or beer beside the communion wine. Where others guard old certainties, Lippmann-Marsch searches for new languages of belonging.

Building bridges

On a grey morning near Werder an der Havel – a lakeside town southwest of Berlin that has seen steady growth as commuters and families move out from Potsdam and the capital – a handful of parishioners gather in a small village church.

The place sits where city sprawl gives way to fields and forests, a landscape that feels both connected and remote.

Here, a 33-year-old pastor named Marula Richter leads three small parishes during her probationary service. Berlin-born and cosmopolitan, she is still learning what faith and community mean in a region where everyone knows who comes to church – and who doesn't. She arrived only two years ago, new to both the region and her profession. Born in Berlin, she spent her adolescence in Uzbekistan and later in Britain. She studied Korean Studies in London before turning to theology in Germany. "What I knew from Berlin, diversity, visibility, activism, doesn't automatically translate here," she says. "In the villages, everyone knows who comes to church and who doesn't. It's a boundary line."

In much of Central and Eastern Europe, churches remain bastions of conservatism, shaping national politics. In Brandenburg, the church has no such power.

Her presence unsettles some. Parishioners remember her predecessor's wife, who baked cakes and visited the sick. At a funeral, a man sneered: "And which little mouse are you?" After Christmas service, another remarked that such a "young thing" should not bless anyone.

These comments sting, but she remains calm: "I cannot be the pastor's wife. I am the pastor."

To build trust, she attends local festivals, birthdays, and kindergartens, not just for her congregation but for the whole village. "I see myself as the pastor of everyone here," she says.

Her sermons focus on everyday concerns – loneliness, migration, doubt. On political issues she is careful, but not silent. "I want to keep conversations open, even with people who vote for AfD. But I say clearly where I stand: against racism, for refugees. Not everyone likes that."

Sometimes her biography makes her feel like an outsider. Preparing for a funeral, she stumbled over the abbreviation LPG – the socialist farm collectives of the GDR. "I had to Google it," she admits. "That's when I realized how West German I actually am."

Still, many see her as a sign of hope. If a young woman has come to live among them, perhaps the church has not given up. "People say that because I'm here, there's a sense of renewal again. That's a lot of pressure when membership keeps shrinking and we struggle to maintain the village churches."

Richter's dilemma echoes across Central and Eastern Europe: how to embody authority where institutions have lost credibility. For Richter, the answer is persistence: being visible, being present, offering words that connect. "I see church not as a place of exclusion but as a network leading into the world."

The diplomat

In Langerwisch, near Michendorf, Juliane Rumpel's sermons take the form of questions. "How can we live as Christians, with one another, for one another?" she asks. Forty-six years old, she has led the parish since 2014. With around 800 members, it is large by Brandenburg standards. She is the fourth woman in a row to hold the post since 1979.

Rumpel grew up in Brandenburg, where being Christian meant belonging to a minority. In East German schools, her mother was mocked for her faith. "It was normal for me that we were always few," she says. That minority experience shaped her humility. "Nothing here is self-evident – not even a church stall at the Christmas market. We have to renegotiate everything." Perhaps, she says, that is an advantage: "Maybe we simply don't take ourselves too seriously."

Her diplomacy does not mean silence. Her parish is the only one in the region officially supporting the alliance *Michendorf bekennt Farbe* ("Michendorf Shows Its Colours"), which advocates for refugees and democracy. "That's not political, it's human," she insists, though she regrets being the only parish to do so.

Rumpel lives a Christianity that invites rather than divides. "We're taken seriously when we don't proselytize, but listen," she says. "I care as much about the 85-year-old neighbour sitting alone at home as about the woman from Cameroon who arrived here with her child."

"I'm not a political preacher," she adds, "but when it comes to human dignity, justice, and respect, I will not remain silent." She welcomes the 2023 decision by the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD) to distance itself publicly from the AfD, though she knows the move is controversial. "We are losing conservative Christians," she says. "That troubles me. One can be a conservative Christian, that's fine. We need to be broader."

In her parish council, East and West Germans, young and old, progressives and conservatives sit at one table. "It's not always easy, but it works, because we talk." During the pandemic, when only outdoor services were allowed, people gathered in the cold. "We were like a forest kindergarten for adults," she recalls. "People who had long left the church came back, for the singing, the togetherness." Her goal is simple: "I want people to see that faith can do them good."

The connector

Stücken is a village of 500 people that lies among fields and forests south of Potsdam. Three years ago, Nadja Mattern, 38, moved here with her husband and three children. With half a position, she serves six villages. "I'm the contact person

for everything, because there's no one else," she says. She is a pastor, organizer, neighbour and counsellor.

After her studies, Mattern had the choice between Berlin-Neukölln or rural Brandenburg. She chose the second option. "Of course there was uncertainty. I didn't know what to expect – leases, forestry, kindergartens. But I figured it out." Mattern sees the church not as an "answer machine" but as a space for resonance. "Pastors used to be so moralistic. That doesn't help. We younger ones don't do that anymore."

Her services are conversational. People read, sing and discuss. On Palm Sunday, she quoted Pilate's question: "What is truth?" The discussion turned to responsibility, Russia's war against the people in Ukraine, and the AfD. "Church here is often the last place where people meet without immediately trading slogans," she says.

Mattern also organizes concerts, art projects, and readings. Children who are not baptized join her choirs. Farmers talk with her about land prices, and sometimes about God. These are small bridges, but vital in shrinking communities.

Politically she stays cautious. The AfD wins high percentages locally. "I avoid taking political positions, but I talk with conservative farmers, sceptical neighbours, and people who say they want nothing to do with church." The load is heavy, structural, personal and emotional. Yet she looks ahead, training as an experiential educator: "Church must be a living place in the middle of the village."

Together, these four female pastors sketch a church that is neither nostalgic nor dominant, but experimental, fragile, and unexpectedly political. Their methods differ – from techno beats, quiet diplomacy, dialogical sermons, and cultural projects – but they share a conviction: in times of polarization, the church must not retreat.

Their impact is modest but visible. One reconciled quarrel, one shared meal, or one conversation can change a village's atmosphere. "We will not change the world," Lippmann-Marsch says, "but we can create spaces where something begins". EE

Ulrike Butmaloiu is a freelance journalist based in Berlin. Since the 1990s, she has been reporting from South Africa, Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Latin America on various topics, including climate change, biodiversity, energy policy, religion, migration and indigenous cultures – often with a critical, solution-oriented perspective. As a media trainer, she gives workshops on conflict reporting and solution journalism for journalists from across Europe and the Global South. She wrote her doctoral thesis on Russian media's coverage of war.

The challenge for Ukrainian veterans returning to civilian life

TÉO MANISIER

Going to the front line is a challenge. Leaving it is another. For Ukrainian veterans, returning to civilian life is a painful process. After the war, Ukraine will have to reintegrate more than two million former soldiers.

With his lips tight and a distant look buried deep under his camouflage bucket hat, Serhii Velychansky wanders through the forest of yellow and blue flags at the military cemetery in Berkovetske, near Kyiv. He stops in front of the grave of a smiling young boy. "This is Anton. He went to war with his father, who was also killed. Now they are both reunited here."

Serhii talks about the mines, the phosphorus bombs, and the memories of his eight brothers in arms buried here, but he still struggles to find the words to describe his war. "No civilian can understand what we went through over there," he whispers. The 50-year-old spent almost three years in the 130th Territorial Defence Battalion.

When medical reasons forced him to give up his uniform on December 24th 2024, he faced a new challenge: reintegrating into civilian life. Like him, more than 1.56 million of his compatriots had veteran status in July 2025, according to the Ukrainian veterans' affairs ministry. As fighting continues in the east of the country, Ukraine is preparing to welcome back up to 2.5 million veterans. Counting their families, they could represent up to six million citizens, which is about 20 per cent of Ukraine's population and almost half of the available workforce.

Brothers in arms

Before the war, Serhii had nothing to do with the military. The cheerful bearded man was a famous host, and was the drummer of the Ukrainian entry for Eurovision 2005 with his band, Greenjolly. After a trip to the United States in 2009, he imported the culture of improvisational theatre to Ukrainian society, and created "Improv Club". Four years later, he founded "Improversity" in order to teach English through improvisation training sessions organized in restaurants.

In January 2022, as Russian troops massed around the Ukrainian border, Serhii joined the 130th battalion, where he received military training. At that time, everyone feared a large-scale invasion, without imagining that it would actually occur.

"If the invasion doesn't happen, I'll have a new hobby. But if something starts, I'll be ready," he told the Ukrainian media group *Censor* at the time. That "something" started on February 24th at 6:30 in the morning, when he was awakened by a loud explosion at his home in Hostomel. Russian airborne forces had just stormed the airport in this city in Kyiv Oblast in an attempt to eventually seize the capital and assassinate President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Serhii, freshly trained, was sent to Zhulyany Airport and then took part in the Battle of Irpin.

"The first trench I had to go to during my first few days was opposite the park where, a few months earlier, we had been barbecuing kebabs." In 2023, he became an officer and joined the 72nd Moral and Psychological Support Centre of the armed forces, where he put his experience in improvisation and entertainment to good use. Throughout his service, Serhii built a community of brothers in arms. "We understand each other. Their problems are your problems," he says.

When a thyroidal gland problem forced him to leave the army at the end of 2024, demobilization felt like a second uprooting.

"When you come home and people ask you how you are, how do you answer that? By telling them about your brothers in arms who were killed two days ago? About the hell it is to go out in the cold to take a shit? There is no common ground to talk about. We don't understand each other anymore. So you smile politely, simply answer that yes, you're fine, and you leave." To hold it together, the veteran community acts like a necessary comfort zone, and allowed Serhii to keep his head above the water.

Disrupted by war

At the Lviv Warrior's House, a veteran support association, a psychologist is responsible for helping veterans and their families reconnect. "It's difficult for families to reconnect with their loved ones after years spent on the front lines and

Veterans Anton, Dmytro, and Brandon take a cigarette break on the roof of the Superhumans rehabilitation centre in Lviv.

find a common ground with them," explains Viktoriia Halandzhovska. She herself lost her partner in combat in 2016. "When our son, father or husband comes back from the front line, we ask ourselves a lot of questions: Why is he so distant, so emotionless? Why are his comrades more important to him than his family?"

According to her, it is the soldiers' entire psyche that has been disrupted by the war, making the return to civilian life so unbearable: "Over there, you have to develop a certain emotional detachment to stay alive," she says. "Everything is dreadfully simple: you live or you don't. You kill or you die. Everything is binary, there is no room for nuance. Returning to the hassles of everyday life when you leave the front line also means returning to a bunch of trivialities that you have to learn to accept all over again."

Serhii overcame these difficulties thanks to his improvisation project. Upon his demobilization, he wanted to make himself useful to other veterans, and created the association *Improv 4.5.0.*, named after the code used in the army to say that "everything is fine." From the stage to the trenches, Serhii began organizing improvisation sessions in military clinics and hospitals. There, he met soldiers who were sometimes barely recovered and often traumatized.

Among them was Andrii, a veteran suffering from shell shock, who did not say a word in the hospital where he was receiving treatment. Serhii included him in a session with other former soldiers. One day, he burst out laughing, opened up about his story for the first time, started talking about the future, and forgot to dwell on his disability.

Another soldier, also traumatized, stopped stuttering during an improvisation session. These small miracles left the psychiatrists speechless. With his camouflage uniform, his gift of the gab, and his attentive listening, Serhii reassures his brothers and finds the right words. His improvisational theatre sessions are an outlet for former soldiers, an opportunity for them to focus on something other than their disability, all in a cocoon of trust where everyone shares the same experience. Today, the veteran is called upon every month by hospitals in Kyiv and veteran NGOs to organize improvisation workshops.

Veteranphobia

While Serhii has managed to help his community of brothers in arms transition to civilian life, the journey is even harder for those who have wanted to reinvent themselves. For Yevhenia Bondini, who returned to civilian life in 2022 after ten years of service in the military, Ukrainian society is far from ready.

"Every day I hear that we have to readjust to civilian society. But it's not up to us to adapt! We've already broken our lives for the good of this country, we've already adapted to every kind of cruelty. It's up to society to learn to welcome those who have given part of their lives for this country!" she exclaims. "Veterans have faced situations that have given them skills that civilians struggle to develop. They can handle a lot of stress, they are organized, punctual, efficient – these are very valuable qualities!"

Yevhenia has been serving in the Ukrainian border force since 2012. Five years later, she met her future husband at academy.

Yevhenia has been serving in the Ukrainian border force since 2012. Five years later, she met her future husband at the border force academy. The two were then mobilized to Mariupol, working in intelligence for the Joint Force operation in 2018. It was during this time that Yevhenia became pregnant. "Just before going to Mariupol, we made an agreement. As a woman, it is easier for me to be demobilized. I promised him that if a full-scale invasion really happens, I would resign from military service to stay with our son. We decided that if something, if the worst happens, our son has to have one of his parents. When Russia launched its full-scale invasion, it was a shock. But we were waiting for the full-scale invasion. When it really happened, it was a huge surprise for us. Somehow, I saw my brothers in arms and I felt the same as them. We were somehow lost in our emotions."

On February 24th 2022, Ukraine became a country at war, and Yevhenia became a veteran. She left Mariupol with her three-year-old son, took refuge in Transcar-

pathia, and began the war in her own way, from the rear. She sought proper high-quality ammunition for all her family members who went to the front line. She brought a car from Germany to her husband on the battlefield. She also handled the post-mortem affairs of her cousin who was killed in action.

For two years, Yevhenia juggled the roles of mother, civilian and veteran. In early 2024, she felt she wanted to move forward and return to the military. But a child is a burden for a sergeant, or at least that is how her commanders made her feel – sometimes bluntly, sometimes implicitly. After this initial disappointment, she began looking for a job, this time in the civilian sector. It was the beginning of what she calls the path of humiliation.

"For a year, I got nothing but rejections or no responses," she recalls. During her job interviews, Yevhenia often sensed a certain mistrust of her past as a soldier, despite her rank of captain. It was not uncommon. "Once I was asked point-blank if I still had post-traumatic stress, since I had served in the army," she chokes up. "In Ukraine, there is still a fear of veterans, who are seen as impulsive, unpredictable, and untrustworthy. It was as if my past work in intelligence made me corrupt, devious, and untrustworthy."

New start

After a series of setbacks, Yevhenia heard about the Career Consultant Project and turned to Lobby X, an agency created in 2015 to connect companies in need of workers with veterans looking for jobs. That is where she began orientation sessions with her counsellor, Yustyna San.

"I immediately noticed that Yevhenia has leadership skills and can organize anything," the career consultant explains. "Our goal is to reassure [veterans]. To make them realize that their experience in the army or in combat is not a handicap but a strength. After one to ten years in the army, veterans lose professional skills. But at the same time, they acquire unique military skills, soft and hard. Their background has changed. Looking for a job is a job in itself, which is why we help them."

After three months of follow-up, Yevhenia finally landed a job as an executive assistant at a military company that manufactures drones. The defence industry is an ideal gateway for reintegrating veterans into civilian society.

"They have the skills and codes, are already familiar with the equipment they use, and above all, they are among themselves, it's a safe space," explains Olha Brandivska, head of the military department at Lobby X. This is especially true since mobilization has drained the workforce of many companies in Ukraine, and the war has naturally caused demand in this sector to skyrocket, both to fuel the

war effort and to strengthen the defence industry, the fastest growing industry in Ukraine. The Ukrainian labour market will also have to adapt to the population, as 45 per cent of veterans supported by Lobby X are disabled.

Many veterans want to return to the front, to get back to this feeling of military community. And there are those for whom returning to civilian life is an opportunity to fulfil a dream. Ihor Mamchyk had wanted to start his quail farm for a long time. His experience and passion for quail dates back to his early childhood. Already in the sixth grade he was taking care of about 50 birds given to him by his father. At university, he gained experience in internships on family farms in France and Germany.

Before the full-scale invasion, Ihor worked in IT customer support in English and French, and served as a volunteer combat medic during rotations in the army. He then volunteered in the Yana Zinkevych Hospitallers Battalion – a volunteer paramedic organization which provides care under fire to casualties evacuates them from the front. He began taking rotations in 2019 to Shyrokyne, in the Donetsk region, and in 2021 to Vodiane. At the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Ihor immediately volunteered, and his experience allowed him to be integrated as a combat medic in the 8th Regiment of the Special Operations Corps.

"Thinking between missions and combat about what we will do after demobilization helps us keep one foot in civilian life, hang on to stay alive, and fulfil our dreams", he recalls. In 2024, an explosion of a Russian shell in Bakhmut hit him and he was wounded in the chest and eye, suffering a concussion. Unable to return to combat, the veteran decided to devote himself to his family and his project. Ihor is finally able to launch his farm for good, thanks to approximately 10,000 US dollars in military savings he has accumulated, as well as nearly 30,000 dollars in grants and subsidies that enable Ukrainian veterans to start new businesses.

"My dream is to contribute to the family business, where something remains after you, something that will exist in the future, a farm that will serve as a family centre in three locations, where each family member will have opportunities for both living and earning a comfortable and safe life," he adds.

Today, his farm is thriving and Ihor and his wife sell their smoked quail eggs every Sunday at the veterans' market in Lviv. On either side of their stall are two other brothers in arms. One sells bags of coffee in a "military ration" style, while the other sells handmade pottery. Each wears a camouflage cap, khaki fleece, or combat jacket, like an indelible mark of an experience that only they can understand. EE

Téo Manisier is a freelance journalist and photographer. He graduated from the Sciences Po School of Journalism Master's programme and has worked previously with France Télévisions.

Through the lens. Twelve years of war in Ukraine

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY: WOJCIECH GRZĘDZIŃSKI

My first memory of Ukraine dates back to 2004, when, as a young photojournalist, I was covering the political negotiations led by the Polish president, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, during the Orange Revolution. In one of those trips, while sending pictures, I left my phone and laptop in the Verkhovna Rada, the parliament, for just two minutes. Just imagine how surprised I was when the phone had disappeared.

In 2014, the Revolution of Dignity began and my work kept me from documenting the events. Still, two years later, I began photographing this strange war, in which military personnel lived house to house with civilians, gardening and leading everyday lives in the shadow of the so-called contact line. Some people became so used to the war that they spent their free time at their summer homes near the front line. And some of them paid the ultimate price of dying or losing loved ones.

During my travels, I have experienced kindness, selfless assistance, and considerable friendship from countless Ukrainians. Many of their homes are now piles of ruins and memories. Since the first day of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, I have been covering the war for daily newspapers and news agencies. The war has destroyed numerous families divided by the frontline or split by emigration. It adversely affected every aspect of life in Ukraine. The sounds of shelling, drones, and explosions have raised a whole generation of Ukrainians, traumatizing the whole population. Despite the reality, during those years, Ukraine and Ukrainians changed tremendously. Unlike in 2004, when I lost my wallet this time, I got an Instagram message indicating where I could find it, even before I realized it was missing. Not only were all the documents there, but all the money as well.

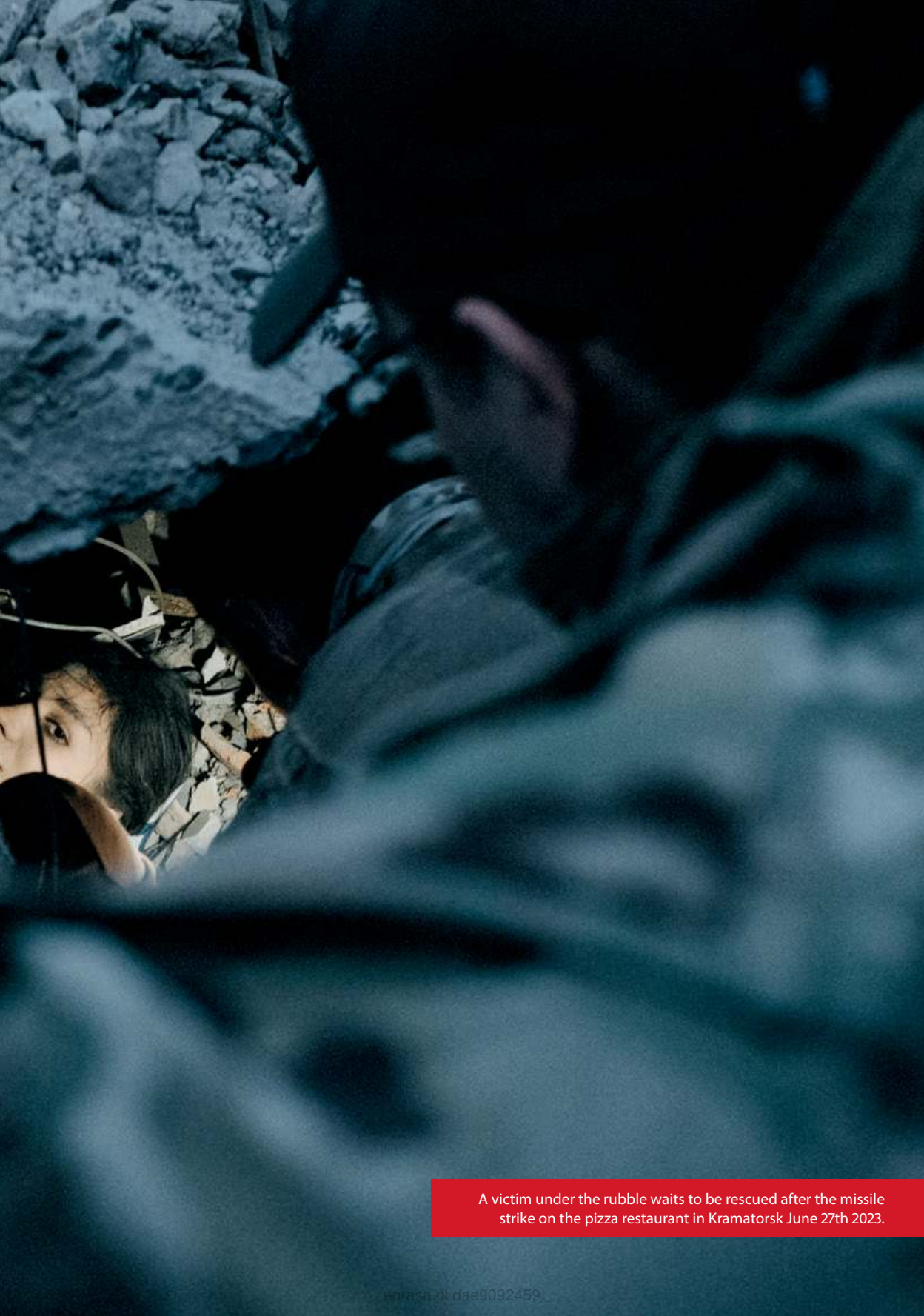
In this photo-essay, I want to present the unpleasant, yet real, face of war. These are scenes that no one wants to consider. Yet, under certain circumstances, they could happen to any of us.

Wojciech Grzędziński is an award-winning Polish photojournalist. For years, he reported on armed conflicts and their consequences in Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Georgia, and Ukraine. During 2011-15, he was the official photographer of the President of the Republic of Poland. His work was awarded in competitions such as World Press Photo, Visa d'Or, Sony World Photography, Grand Press Photo, and many others.

Irina Maniukina plays piano in her damaged home in a residential area of Bila Tserkva. More than ten homes were practically destroyed due to one explosion caused by a Russian bomb. There were no casualties on the March 5th 2022 in Bila Tserkva, Ukraine.

Daily life of Ukrainian soldiers from 54th brigade, 1st battalion, 1st company, based and fighting in the Luganskoye village area. Soldiers are based in a couple of abandoned houses and in tranches outside the village. In the picture: Ukrainian soldier fires back after recognizing an enemy fighter trying to overrun his position on July 13th 2016 in Luganskoye, Ukraine.

A Russian Iskander rocket directly hit the Ria Pizza Restaurant on June 27th 2023. The restaurant was a popular meeting place in the city of Kramatorsk. Thirteen people died (seven of them were employees) including the well-known writer Victoria Amelina. More than 61 were wounded.



A victim under the rubble waits to be rescued after the missile strike on the pizza restaurant in Kramatorsk June 27th 2023.

Ukrainian soldiers from the 24th battalion Aidar shoot rounds from a 122 mm howitzer 2A18 (D-30) from the firing position in the Donbas area near Kostyantynivka during the battle of Bakhmut, March 21st 2023.

The "Superhumans Center" near Lviv, Ukraine, provides rehabilitation and prosthetics to victims of war. During the process, they support the victims with psychological help, and they train how to use prosthetics. During a couple of weeks of work, the amputee trains the body to use custom-made prosthetics to become self-sufficient in daily life. In the picture: Vaicheslav Levitsky smokes a cigarette with a fork prepared by his mother Tetyana, January 12th 2024, Ukraine.

Military and police investigators started the exhumation of the mass grave site in Izum on September 16th 2022. According to officials, there were 445 single graves, and at least one mass grave containing 17 bodies.

A woman holding a picture of her killed son stands in the city centre of Zaporizhzhia (30km from the front line) during the daily 9:00am commemoration ceremony of those fallen fighting against Russian aggression, December 5th 2025.

On African university students in Poland. A response

CHRISTOPHER GARBOWSKI

Africans are increasingly becoming a part of the student body present in Poland. While many are attracted by comparatively low tuition fees, there are other aspects making them interested in the country. Such an attraction may ultimately lead to a more permanent link between Poland and the continent.

As someone who has lived in Poland, studied and taught in the country for a number of decades now, I was quite interested in Ray Mwareya's piece in the previous issue of *New Eastern Europe* ("How Poland stole UK universities' lunch in Africa", issue 6/2025, *New Eastern Europe)*. African students are indeed noticeable on many campuses and more generally in university towns. I myself once taught an international seminar in which two African students participated: one from Nigeria, another from Tanzania. This made me more aware of the phenomenon that Mwareya presents. Further experiences and observations followed.

What I wish to discuss, however, is less based on my expertise in this question, which is minimal. Instead, my reflections have been inspired by these experiences and observations in the country, which I believe allow me to add something to the African journalist's account from a rather Polish perspective. Among other matters, I wish to show to some degree why the "unlikely magnet" of Polish universities the author proves has been successful in drawing away African students from those in Western European countries has more going for it than mere "affordability". I will attempt to enhance his claim of a certain kind of "opportunity" for Africans that he begins to describe.

Differences

During my MA seminar on intercultural communication, several years back and referenced above, one thing that was obvious right from the start was that a student from Nigeria and one from Tanzania represent two highly different national identities. Although that description is not quite accurate, since African countries are often post-colonial constructs that have yet to fully develop national communities, except in the notable case of Ethiopia, which possesses a national identity much older than that of most European countries. At a certain level this issue is becoming more noticeable for Poles. For one thing, it explains why a book like Dipo Faloyin's *Africa is Not a Country*, which goes into detail on this question, has been translated into Polish.

Most Poles only have a slight idea of how Africans from different parts of the continent differ from each other, but on the streets it is noticeable that there are differences, sometimes even in physical appearance, sometimes rather cultural. But even these observations no doubt have aroused the curiosity of a fair number of Poles, thus creating a market for such a book as Faloyin's, and so augmenting a slightly better-informed public.

Most Africans that one comes across in the Polish streets speak to Poles, and to each other, in English. Some of them can be heard speaking to each other in their national languages. Again that term is not quite right. To give a parallel example, there are a number of Indian restaurants in Lublin, the city where I live and taught at the state university before I retired. In one of these restaurants, one of the Indian waitresses informed me that when she talks with her coworker from the kitchen – also from India, but a different part – the only language that unites them is English. That is naturally the same with probably most Africans, whose "national" language is often postcolonial. Not too many countries on the continent have an African language for the entire country such as the Kenyans do, which is Swahili, and even so it is likely a second language for many citizens.

In Lublin, the Catholic university has an English mass on Sundays that is primarily conducted by African priests studying at universities in the city, and so it attracts quite a few of the lay Africans who are studying or perhaps working in the city. Many of the Africans if not the majority who are studying in Poland are Christians. I once spoke to a young man from Zimbabwe and he asked me where a church was. He mentioned he was a Protestant but was willing to attend mass at a Catholic church because he knew no alternative – this might be the case of some of those Africans who attend the English mass, but I was able to direct my African interlocutor to a Protestant church in the city, for which he was grateful.

Once I attended the mass when a Kenyan priest was conducting it. Obviously the hymns sung that accompanied the liturgy were primarily in English, but one was in Swahili. Many singing in the choir were also Africans, but not necessarily from Kenya, or even Eastern Africa. So they would have had to practice the hymn to a considerable degree. The few Poles attending the mass would not have noticed any slip ups. Kenya has a Catholic university where the priest likely started his studies before coming to Poland to advance them at the oldest Catholic university in the country. The Church in Nigeria does not have a Catholic university of its own. So one of the bishops who intended to establish such a university sent a number of his priests to study in Lublin to gain qualifications. Not all of them study – or studied – at the Catholic university. This is because the university that has been planned in their country is to have some courses of study not conducted there. I met with one of the Nigerian priests a couple of times and learned about the mission of the Nigerian priests. He was studying business at one of the other universities in the city: Lublin is a university town to no small degree.

In Lublin, the Catholic university has an English mass on Sundays that is primarily conducted by African priests studying in the city.

Flourishing ranking

Besides what Mwareya notes in his piece, what is worth pointing out is that Africans coming to Poland meet a vibrant society, arguably even quite strongly so by European standards. Why is that? It has been noted that the unique role of Catholicism in the country includes ties not only with the culture of the nation, but at the societal level it also provides a framework – and, fortunately, this was largely true during much of the communist period – for the lives of ordinary people. At the same time, many of the key events in the lives of individuals are marked by religious ceremonies and have helped to ensure national identification and cultivate traditions. One might add this form of participation notably contributes to the high ranking of Poland in comparison to other European countries that were examined in a momentous longitudinal study published in 2025 and organized among others by Harvard University's Human Flourishing Program. This study looked at human flourishing and took into account 22 nations, including several European countries from Spain to Sweden. It was determined that religion was a key factor in achieving the eponymous qualitative element.

As Paul Marshall writes in the online *Providence Magazine* in reference to this survey on human flourishing, "Despite frequent press reports about the negative

effects of religion on human life … [the] survey reinforces the conclusion that serious religion generally correlates with human well-being." And notably it was the United Kingdom, where so many Africans used to primarily study in Europe, that ranked at the bottom of the European nations in the survey.

Poland's ranking is all the more significant in that it is held by a post-communist country. Significantly, communism denigrated the traditional family almost to the same extent as it did religion – states were officially atheist – since individuals segregated from the flourishing influence of marriage could be more easily manipulated. The British journalist Peter Hitchens witnessed how devastating this could be during his stay in early post-communist Russia, observing in *Rage Against God* (2010) that "in mile after mile of mass-produced housing you would be hard put to find a single family untouched by divorce."

Many key events in the lives of Poles are marked by religious ceremonies and have helped to ensure national identification and cultivate traditions.

This demoralizing reality affected most of the countries of the Soviet bloc. Not much has likely changed in Russia at this point, which in part likely helps explain why its society seems to be fairly easily manipulated by Vladimir Putin. The radical decline of religion in so many European countries to no small degree explains a pervasive hyper-individualism. This is combined with a consumer society without higher values, which augments what could be labelled in line with John Vervaeke as a "meaning crisis". This is likely a strong component of the comparatively low level of human flourishing the survey detected in significant nations: making them a poor model for post-communist countries, not to mention augmenting a terrible waste of stored human capital of earlier generations that European civilization generated. The Africans who decide to make their way to these countries after their higher education in Poland, as Mwareya notes, are headed to considerably less vibrant societies, at least for the present.

A gateway?

Although it is obvious that many Africans have work permits, I was happy to learn from Mwareya's article that their university studies could actually be a gateway for those who wish to stay in the country – my university studies in Lublin were a similar gateway. And so Doug Siziba, the student from Zimbabwe who with his wife the author reports stayed in Poland after their studies, is quoted by him talking about the rapidly growing African population in the country: "there's a big sense

of Africa shaping up in Poland. I am proud to be a part of it." Among other means of growth, this vibrant Africa includes online kitchens, Siziba informs the author.

Immigrants from a number of different countries have now been coming to Poland in significant numbers. Previously there was a large number of Asian immigrants. During the communist period, Vietnamese workers came to Poland on contracts that were meant to pay off loans drawn by their regime during the war against the Americans. Later in the post-communist period, many of them emigrated to Poland on account of fond memories here from that earlier experience.

That was just the beginning. The Vietnamese community here has now become among the largest from their nation in Europe. Not long after they started arriving, Vietnamese restaurants opened up throughout the country. And a number of Indian immigrants to Poland also shared their cuisine in a similar manner. As to Africans, in Lublin an Ethiopian café was opened, but unfortunately it folded after a couple of years. Yet perhaps these online African kitchens Siziba mentions will expand and help initiate a symbolic opening up of that Africa to Poles, also in part through restaurants. And in that way, it could be the start of a considerably larger beautiful relationship that for Poles goes beyond simply reading books like *Africa is Not a Country*.

Christopher Garbowski is professor emeritus at
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland.

Relabelling paintings, reclaiming history

CRISTINA COELLEN

Throughout much of history, Ukrainian artists or those with some connection to the country have frequently been labelled as "Russian", when in reality their identities were far more complex. Spurred on by Russia's invasion, Ukrainian art historians and cultural NGOs are attempting to change these narratives. But setting the record straight is not as simple as it seems.

In 1879, near Kyiv, Seweryn and Ludwika Malewicz welcomed a son, whom they called Kazimir. To the world, he would mostly be known as Kazimir Malevich, a Russian pioneer of geometric abstract art and the founder of the Suprematist movement. Around 30 years before Malevich entered the world, another family also had a boy, a few hundred kilometres to the east: in Chuhuiv, near Kharkiv, Ilya Repin was born. To the world, he too would be known as a famous Russian artist, a precursor to the techniques used in socialist realism, the main art movement permitted and encouraged by the Soviet regime.

Renowned artists who were either born in Ukraine or worked or lived there, like Ilya Repin, Kazimir Malevich – or Malevych in his Ukrainian spelling – Oleksandra Ekster or Davyd Burliuk have one thing in common: throughout much of history, they and their art were often labelled as "Russian". But this is changing.

"We started our campaign because of this pattern that we noticed of Ukrainian artists being not only misrepresented and mischaracterized in museums, but also our history being erased or overlooked by institutions, and subsequently by the world," said Naomi Nemickas. The young Ukrainian is the content director of The Shadows Project, a Ukrainian cultural NGO and media group mostly present on

social networks like Instagram that aims to educate its audience about Ukraine's cultural heritage. In July 2025, the NGO launched its "Stolen Art Campaign", which seeks to point out the mislabelling of artworks linked to Ukraine in museums and galleries around the world. The campaign is part of a wider effort by Ukrainian organizations and art historians to reclaim their history, thus fighting Russia's long-standing domination of cultural narratives.

Erasing Ukrainian culture, a Russian tradition?

Ukraine's cultural identity, which extends far beyond art, has been the subject of repression and restriction by Russian authorities for centuries. During the Russian Empire, laws like the Valuev Circular and later the Ems Decree both aimed at restricting the Ukrainian language severely, by banning Ukrainian book publishing and the use of Ukrainian in the cultural sphere, including everything from theatre to opera. Ukraine was only able to properly redevelop its cultural and linguistic activity during the tumultuous years of independence and the early Soviet period, when a policy of "Ukrainization" was implemented.

"By the 1930s, it turned out that this was a trap," said Tetyana Filevska. Currently the Creative Director of the Ukrainian Institute Kyiv, Filevska is an art historian and a specialist in Ukrainian 20th century art. "Because of this policy of Ukrainization, the most outstanding people with pro-Ukrainian thoughts and positions, they came forward, they became known, they became leaders. And then, in the early 1930s, there were repressions, and there was this whole generation of artists, creators, thinkers, who were killed in the space of just several months," she explained.

That generation became known as the "executed renaissance". According to various estimations, as many as 30,000 cultural figures from Ukraine fell victim to these Stalinist massacres, which the Soviet authorities justified by branding the intellectuals as "enemies of the people" or "bourgeois nationalists". Soviet leaders then repressed the memory of these purges for decades.

Among the successful artists who did not fall victim to the massacres of the 1930s, many were frequently labelled as "Russian" – not necessarily by choice, but because it corresponded to the Soviet narrative of the "triune nation": Russia, "White Russia" (Belarus) and "Little Russia" (Ukraine) supposedly were one big nation, sharing one language, culture and history. But if the "Russian" label is incorrect, what should these artists be called instead?

"We have been quite careful to not just say, blatantly, 'everyone is Ukrainian,' because, for example, Malevych or Maria Bashkirtseva definitely have more nuanced backgrounds," Nemickas pointed out. The Stolen Art Campaign saw The

Shadows Project's members undertake detailed research into the biographies of various artists who were connected to Ukraine. On Malevych, the NGO wrote on its Instagram that he was a "Ukrainian artist with Polish origins".

With identities at the time of the Russian Empire or the early 20th century often much more fluid than the strict boundaries of nation-states – a concept that only developed in Europe in the 19th century – attributing a new, more accurate label to these artists is no easy task. Identities in Ukraine, whether self-perceived or attributed, were especially complex. This is shown by the example of Malevych, whose family were ethnic Poles but who had lived in Ukraine for around 300 years.

As many as 30,000 cultural figures from Ukraine fell victim to Stalinist massacres.

"Malevych was Ukrainian in the same sense that Pablo Picasso was French," said Filevska. While the academic debate on Malevych's origins is ongoing, art historians like Filevska and her colleagues do agree on one thing: the painter was not Russian. One of the justifications for the tenacious "Russian" label for the founder of Suprematism is that Malevych's career took off in Moscow. But this was not by choice, as Filevska explained: "He could have gone somewhere further like Munich or Paris, but he was too poor to do so, so it was not possible for him. Moscow was as good as he could get. And he didn't have the knowledge of languages, he didn't have any education, he only had classes at a Ukrainian village school. So, for Malevych, it was the only way to become a professional artist."

An act of decolonization

Not all artists connected to Ukraine, however, were forced to work in Russia in order to be successful. Oleksandra Ekster (1882-1949), one of the rarer female painters who identified with movements such as Constructivism and Art Deco, studied at the Kyiv Art School and drew the capital's most brilliant minds to her Kyiv studio. This was before spending the later part of her life in Paris. Yet despite barely working in Russia, Ekster is still frequently labelled as a Russian and French painter.

"She spent less than two years in Russia and 35 years of her life in Kyiv and somehow the Russians managed to call her a Russian artist. And for what? Her father was Belarusian, her mother was Ukrainian, she had no ethnic connection to Russia whatsoever," Filevska explained.

Ekster is among one of the successes of the Stolen Art Campaign. According to The Shadows Project, the Cleveland Museum of Art in Ohio added an explanation to a painting by Ekster in summer 2025 to better reflect her diverse background

after being approached by the NGO: "Alexandra Exter was born in Białystok (in present-day Poland) but moved with her family to Kyiv when she was two years old. She spent the formative years of her life and career in Ukraine and her work is deeply related to Ukrainian folk traditions and national identity."

De-labelling artists like Ekster as Russian when they had no apparent connection to the country or its culture is part of the wider decolonization aspects of current Ukrainian efforts to reclaim artists and art history. Although scholars frequently point out that colonization in its traditional sense applied to British or French colonies is not quite the case for the relationship between Russia and Ukraine, a different form of colonization and domination did exist. This also extended into art, as the researchers Stefaniia Demchuk and Illia Levchenko write about in their article "Decolonizing Ukrainian Art history", which has been published by Cambridge University Press.

"The limitations that were imposed on the art-historical community, which can be regarded as colonial, shaped the crucial narratives (of the triune nation) and dictated the thematic scope of Ukrainian scholarship," they wrote. In the realm of art history, the imperial and later Soviet colonial policy was one that not only took away physical works such as paintings to display them in Russian museums – of which most famously the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow – but also prevented Ukrainian art historians from accessing and writing their own history in their own country.

This focus and dependency on Moscow had repercussions for how Ukrainian cultural scholars worked, write Demchuk and Levchenko: "Art theory in Ukraine was virtually non-existent, whereas art history was mixed with art criticism, resulting in writing that did not meet widely accepted academic standards. This led to the isolation of Ukrainian scholars, who were confined to the Russian-speaking community and had very limited access to foreign scholarship."

The isolation of Ukrainian art historians up until recently has also been an obstacle to the decolonization process of Ukrainian art and artists. Much of their scholarship has not been made available outside of a Russophone research community.

"I think a big issue is that a lot of research Ukrainian researchers have done or are doing is not published in English, which is unfortunate," said Agatha Gorski, co-founder of The Shadows Project.

How do you relabel an artwork?

Times are changing. A cultural awakening has slowly been taking place in Ukraine since the country's independence. Art historians around the country have been turning their attention towards how Ukrainian culture has been perceived

internationally – and how to dissociate this perception from Russia's centuries-old shadow. Tetyana Filevska and her colleagues recently developed a guide for museums around the world on Ukrainian cultural heritage and how to approach it from a perspective of decolonization. The Shadows Project's Stolen Art Campaign has also been trying to decolonize Ukraine's visual culture. But how are these Ukrainians efforts perceived and received by international museums and organizations?

The Brooklyn Museum in New York, for example, relabelled a painting by Ilya Repin depicting a snowy landscape in his native Chuhuiv in the museum's catalogue from "Winter Scene, Russia" to "Winter Scene, Ukraine" in the summer of 2025. This was after being contacted by members of The Shadows Project. Lisa Small, the Brooklyn Museum's senior curator of European art, explained that the physical painting was relabelled when it was on view in a collection installation taking place from February 2022 to November 2023, but that the painting's label did not change immediately on the museum's website. The NGO contacted the museum regarding the label in its online catalogue, and the institution subsequently changed the label on its website.

"I made the decision as the curator overseeing the European collection to rework our nationality information to capture nuances of changing boundaries, names and empires, a change that was approved by museum leadership. I could implement this quickly for labels for works going on view, but it takes longer for the changes to show up in our database," Small said.

It is emblematic of an obstacle to Ukrainian decolonization efforts: while many major institutions like museums or galleries may be sympathetic to the case brought forward by NGOs like The Shadows Project, implementing changes to their catalogues is no small task. In most cases, it comes with long processes of verifying the provenance of artworks, consulting with experts regarding the biographies of artists and weighing the risks of deciding to make a change. Would changing a label still be in line with the conclusions of international scholarship regarding this particular artist or artwork? How do you avoid a particular political context influencing such a decision?

At The Shadows Project, the long road towards change in cultural institutions is however recognized, explains Nemickas: "These things take a very long time, they can be very bureaucratic. I think there is a lot of reluctance in museums to change labels in case they misrepresent someone, so it's almost easier to go with the status quo rather than change things so dramatically."

The Brooklyn Museum and the Cleveland Museum of Art in Ohio are however not the only ones to have changed labels. Other museums also updated their descriptions of Ukrainian artists and their works following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and independently from the outreach action carried out during the Stolen

Art Campaign. Among them were The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which reclassified Ivan Aivazovsky, Arkhup Kuindzhi and Ilya Repin as Ukrainian, while the Stedelijk Museum in the Netherlands did the same for paintings by Kazimir Malevych.

The Russian invasion: spurring on the cultural reckoning

On February 24th 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. The ongoing war has become an accelerator for Ukrainian efforts to decolonize cultural heritage, but it has also opened new battlefields that extend far beyond the labels of artworks in European or American museums.

"One thing I was very surprised about is that there are all of these fights on Wikipedia over these artists' identities," Gorski said. On the world's largest online crowdsourced encyclopaedia, anyone can contribute to editing pages – and in some cases, this leads to tensions. For the Wikipedia page of Maria Bashkirtseva (1858-1884), also known as Marie Bashkirtseff, a Ukrainian-born artist and writer who lived half of her short life in France, Gorski suddenly noticed that the artist's nationality description kept getting changed to "Russian" by certain page editors.

The ongoing war has become an accelerator for Ukrainian efforts to decolonize cultural heritage

"They cite the Encyclopaedia Britannica, which said that her parents were Russian nobility and that she was a Russian émigré. I did my research about her too, because we looked at her diaries and researched her lineage, and she has no connection to Russia. Her parents were from either the region of Chuhuiv or from the Poltava region, with original Tatar lineage, but assimilated into Ukraine over centuries," Gorski said. The Encyclopaedia Britannica, however, mentions no source for the claim regarding Bashkirtseva's Russian origin. For Gorski, these battles on Wikipedia are a symptom of a more generalized "oversaturation of information coming from Russian sources or even western sources that have been dominated by Russian schools of thought".

While battles rage, whether in online spaces or on the frontline in Donbas, Ukraine's population has quietly, but steadily united behind its shared history and fortified its identity. This becomes apparent in small, but significant acts. Learning about the history of the "executed renaissance" has for example become "a trend" among youngsters in Ukraine, according to Filevska.

"Teenagers are crazy about getting to know these artists killed a hundred years ago. It's really fascinating and it's changing the perception of who we are," she said.

This is why at The Shadows Project, educating others about Ukrainian culture and identity is also treated as a question of national security.

"It's intrinsic. It's a really, really important part of preserving our national kind of idea of sovereignty and passing this along the generations," said Naomi Nemickas.

Contrary to long-term research by Ukrainian art historians, the chapter of the Stolen Art Campaign is soon set to be closed. Nemickas said that given The Shadows Project very much works in cycles, the organization is currently shifting its focus to other initiatives and campaigns. The wider goal of the small NGO, however, remains the same: changing the perception of and preserving Ukrainian culture, especially when it is under attack.

Cristina Coellen is a freelance multimedia journalist specializing in Eastern European affairs and international conflicts. Her work has notably appeared on the Franco-German TV channel ARTE and Euronews.

Double exclusion. How is it to be a queer migrant from Eastern Europe in Poland today?

SVIATASLAŬ KRUK

LGBTQ+ rights in Belarus and Ukraine have remained static for years. The fear of coming out persists, both in one's home country and now within the diaspora abroad. Many queer migrants hide their sexuality, citing political or economic reasons for moving. Although Poland still has a long way to go, its relative openness, access to EU anti-discrimination frameworks and integration into European institutional life create better conditions for social progress and visibility.

In recent years, Poland has experienced a substantial increase in the number of migrants and refugees arriving from Ukraine and Belarus. Currently, the country is home to over one million Ukrainians and more than 100,000 Belarusians. While much of this migration has been discussed in the context of political repression or economic instability, this article focuses on a less visible, yet crucial, factor – queer repression.

Many migrants from Eastern Europe did not choose Poland randomly. Historical and cultural ties between these countries foster a sense of familiarity, making

integration easier. The presence of established diaspora communities, geographic proximity and the relative simplicity of the Polish language for Slavic-language speakers make this option especially attractive.

LGBTQ+ rights in Belarus and Ukraine

Despite differences in how the state treats LGBTQ+ communities in Belarus and Ukraine, both societies share a common problem: deep-rooted social stigma. The situation in Belarus has significantly worsened. In 2024, for example, the ministry of culture expanded the legal definition of pornography to include depictions of "non-traditional relationships", effectively equating homosexuality with zoophilia, necrophilia and sadism. This policy change has contributed to the criminalization of LGBTQ+ individuals. In September 2024, at least 30 people were detained in Belarus for identifying as LGBTQ+. Authorities often fabricate charges such as "petty hooliganism", disseminating "extremist" content, or producing and distributing pornographic materials. During these detentions, individuals are subjected to threats, blackmail, and physical and psychological violence.

The legal status of LGBTQ+ people in Ukraine is somewhat more progressive, though it still lacks key protections. Since the start of the full-scale invasion, a bill proposing civil partnerships for same-sex couples has been under discussion, but has yet to be passed. LGBTQ+ rights in Ukraine remain largely unprotected by law. According to a 2024 study by the LGBT+ Centre *Nash Svit* (Our World), Ukrainian society shows a predominantly neutral (47.3 per cent) or negative (32.1 per cent) attitude towards LGBTQ+ individuals. In Belarus, a 2023 survey by the "IT'S OKAY" initiative revealed that 59.5 per cent of respondents agreed that LGBTQ+ people face social pressure.

In both countries, queer individuals often do not feel safe or able to live openly. This lack of security and recognition is a driving factor in decisions to migrate to countries such as Poland, where there is at least the perception of greater safety and community support.

Ongoing challenges in Poland

Although same-sex partnerships are not recognized in Poland and there is a lack of political consensus on legal reforms, societal attitudes and institutional policies are slowly evolving. Despite being ranked as one of the most homophobic

countries in the European Union, incremental progress is underway. According to the 2025 edition of The Rainbow Map, which ranks 49 European countries based on legal and policy protections for LGBTQ+ people on a scale from 0 to 100 per cent, Poland ranks second to last in the EU. Nevertheless, it improved its score by three points, rising from 17.5 per cent in 2024 to 20.5 per cent in 2025.

Significantly, Poland officially abolished its last remaining LGBT-Free Zone in 2025. At their peak in mid-2020s, these zones covered roughly one-third of the country. Their elimination represents a significant, albeit symbolic, victory for queer rights. Support for LGBTQ+ individuals in Poland often comes not from the government, but from civil society. Organizations such as Lambda Warszawa have been at the forefront of this support for 27 years, offering psychological and legal assistance, increasing awareness, combatting discrimination, and organizing cultural events.

Although same-sex partnerships are not recognized in Poland, attitudes and institutional policies are slowly evolving.

Many queer migrants from Ukraine and Belarus report that Poland offers a relatively freer environment where they feel more supported by local communities and encounter more visible and active queer organizations. They also feel able to speak openly about their identities in schools, workplaces and public spaces. As a member of the EU, Poland has access to EU anti-discrimination funding and social inclusion programmes. These facilitate a gradual shift in societal attitudes and policies towards greater acceptance and equality.

Migration, particularly when it is forced or semi-voluntary, is a disruptive experience. Even Ukrainian and Belarusian migrants, who may find it easier to learn the language and integrate culturally, must fundamentally reconstruct their lives during the resettlement process. From opening a new bank account to finding spaces for cultural expression or community engagement, every routine must be rebuilt. Queer migrants often experience multiple layers of crisis – the trauma of displacement compounded by the search for self and belonging. These conditions significantly increase the risk of mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, PTSD and chronic stress.

These outcomes result from several overlapping factors: social insecurity before departure, trauma during migration and the struggle for acceptance after arrival. As the Belarusian queer artist Pasha Jezhora puts it: “One of the biggest problems in our community is the identity crisis. When you’re a queer migrant, you often feel like a stranger everywhere.”

Queer migrants are often doubly excluded – firstly due to their migration status and secondly due to their queer identity. This dual exclusion makes it difficult to

find like-minded individuals or safe spaces, both within Polish society and within one's own diaspora. The fear of losing oneself is real. Yet, despite these challenges, many fight to assert their identities and reclaim their agency.

How to create a community that helps

Since the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022, queer activists and artists from across the region have joined forces in unprecedented ways to support one another. One example is the Stus Collective, a Belarusian-Ukrainian-Polish community open to all and united by a spirit of mutual aid and solidarity.

"Stus emerged on the first day of the war from a Telegram chat where people were organizing the first solidarity protests with Ukraine," explains Arina Bozhok, one of the collective's founders. "Within days, over 100 people had joined to provide humanitarian aid," she explains. The Stus Collective continues its work by organizing events for migrants and LGBTQ+ individuals in Warsaw, focusing on cultural and creative programming.

One notable project is the performance and zine presentation LIVE, LAUGH, LOVE, which was hosted at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw. The zine was developed as part of KVIR LAB, a queer creative laboratory created as a space for queer expression and reflection. Eight individuals from Belarus and Ukraine, currently residing in Poland, collaborated on the publication exploring the meaning of queer culture in the context of war and repression. These initiatives demonstrate how queer migrants not only survive, but also actively shape Poland's cultural landscape, fostering community resilience and challenging marginalization through creative resistance.

Since the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine, queer activists and artists from the region have joined forces.

As of 2025, the status of LGBTQ+ rights in Belarus and Ukraine has remained static or deteriorated. The fear of coming out persists, both in one's home country and within the diaspora abroad. Many queer migrants hide their sexuality from their families, citing political or economic reasons for moving. Although Poland still has a long way to go, its relative openness, access to EU anti-discrimination frameworks and integration into European institutional life create better conditions for social progress and visibility. Simply being exposed to different sexual orientations in daily life contributes to destigmatization and normalization. Unfortunately, for most queer migrants from Ukraine and Belarus, the prospect of returning home safely remains distant. However, there is hope that this situation will change.

Looking ahead

Today, queer migrants in Poland require more than tolerance – they need systemic, intersectional support that recognizes both their migration experience and their queer identity. The Polish government should prioritize inclusive integration policies, ensuring access to safe shelters for LGBTQ+ migrants and expanding mental health services with culturally competent professionals. They should also introduce anti-discrimination training across public institutions, including schools, the police and healthcare providers. Legal reforms, such as recognizing same-sex partnerships and streamlining asylum processes for queer individuals fleeing persecution, are also essential.

At a grassroots level, Polish society can play a vital role by fostering solidarity through community organizing, volunteering and supporting queer-led migrant initiatives. Integration systems in Poland should become more participatory, centring the voices and needs of vulnerable groups rather than treating them as passive recipients of aid. The EU can support this by providing more funding for cross-border LGBTQ+ support programmes, monitoring compliance with human rights, and encouraging member states such as Poland to implement EU-wide anti-discrimination directives. Ultimately, building a truly inclusive Poland requires both top-down policy change and bottom-up community resilience.

Poland still has a long way to go to achieve full equality and protect minority rights. Slowly but surely, though, steps are being taken. Local NGOs and grassroots initiatives continue to play a crucial role in providing immediate support and pushing for systemic change.

Queer migrants are active participants in shaping their communities and advocating for a more inclusive society, not passive victims of repression. EE

This text was prepared in the framework of the 2024/2025 edition of the Solidarity Academy, an international project of the European Solidarity Centre, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Warsaw, and New Eastern Europe. The project aims to inspire and support the development of young leaders across Europe.

Sviataslaŭ Kruk is a young professional based in Warsaw, where he skilfully manages multicultural events while harbouring a profound love of Belarusian culture. He actively engages as a journalist, fervently advocating for and highlighting the richness of Belarusian heritage while championing the causes of equality and human rights.

Prussia's forgotten heritage

PIOTR LESZCZYŃSKI

After the final partition of Poland in 1795, Prussia emerged not only as a territorial winner but also a multi-lingual state: Polish speakers constituted nearly half of its population and more than half of the kingdom's territory consisted of newly annexed Polish lands. Yet this was also a missed political opportunity.

There is a political map that can be found online. It shows a fragment of Europe from around 1800, just before the Napoleonic Wars, at the dawn of the 19th century. The marked borders of the Kingdom of Prussia cover the largest territory that this state has ever possessed in its history. It is an intriguing map – nearly all of modern Poland falls within this Prussia, even Warsaw! The 20th-century witness, German journalist and historian Sebastian Haffner (1907-1999) was therefore right when he provocatively wrote that the German Democratic Republic and Poland, united into one state, would have been Prussia at the turn of the 19th century. Astonishing, but let us start from the beginning.

Discipline, centralism and military power

Although today the term "Prussia" is mainly associated with German militarism and the power of the Hohenzollern dynasty, the origins of this state date back to the medieval missionary crusade of the Teutonic Order. The Order of the Hospital of St Mary of the German House in Jerusalem, one of the three largest Catholic knightly orders alongside the Knights Hospitaller and the Knights Templar, was founded in

the wake of the crusades that conquered the Middle East and Jerusalem in the 11th and 12th centuries. In the 13th century, the Order of Knights – later known as the Teutonic Knights, named after their white cloaks marked with a black cross – were invited by Prince Konrad of Mazovia to defend Mazovia, the northern frontier of the Kingdom of Poland, against incursions by the pagan Prussian tribes. The Teutonic Knights soon expanded their original mission into a campaign of conquest, establishing their own state with its capital in Malbork, governed through a rigid, centralized order and sustained by German settlement.

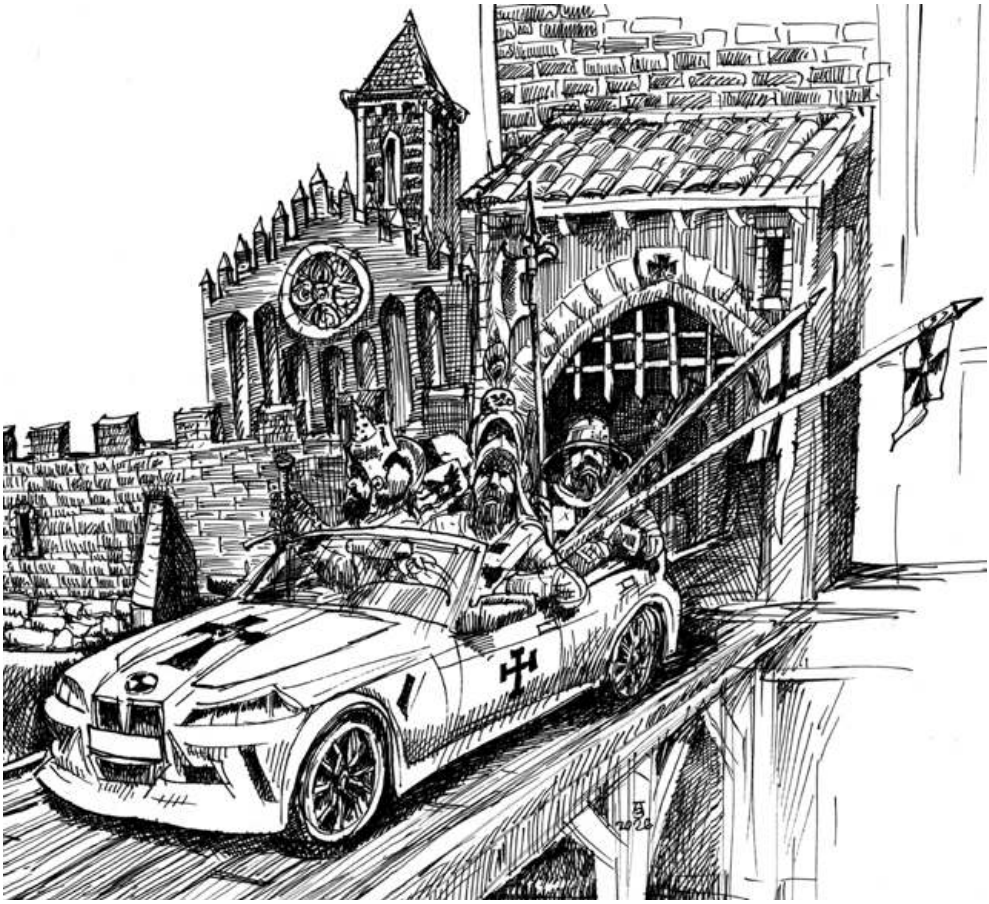
In the 15th century, the power of the Order began to slowly fade. Polish-Lithuanian victories in successive wars with the Teutonic Knights, from the famous Battle of Grunwald in 1410 to the Thirteen Years' War of King Casimir Jagiellon, led to the conclusion of the Peace of Toruń with the Order in 1466, which was favourable to the crown. Only the eastern part of the Teutonic state, known as Teutonic Prussia, survived, and even that became a fief of Poland. Another breakthrough came in 1525. The last Grand Master, Albrecht Hohenzollern, renounced monastic life, converted to Lutheranism and secularized the state, creating the Duchy of Prussia – the first Protestant state in Europe, formally still dependent on the Polish Crown.

Barely a century later, Prussia fell within the sphere of influence of Brandenburg. The personal union under the Hohenzollerns brought the two territories together, giving rise to a new political entity that in 1701 was proclaimed the Kingdom of Prussia. The coronation of Frederick I in Königsberg marked a symbolic moment in the emergence of a modern state – one that would soon become a dominant force in this part of Europe.

Over the next century, Prussia became synonymous with discipline, centralism and military power. The policy of this state, under Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, brought about the unification of Germany in 1871. The history of Prussia, from monastic knights to a modern empire, remains one of the most interesting chapters in the history of Central Europe.

An unwanted legacy

Such development of statehood had a dark side, which affected the fate of the state under the black eagle. From the beginning of its existence, Prussia strengthened its power at the expense of other states – Poland, Austria and Saxony. A consistent policy brought about the unification of Germany – previously divided into small states – and the establishment of an empire under Prussian hegemony. However, Germany's defeats in the First and Second World Wars resulted in the final liquidation of historical Prussia whose population was expelled or resettled



deep within Germany. At the same time, the dark legend of Prussia as the historical source and bearer of German militarism became firmly established.

The post-war settlement agreed at the Yalta Conference and the Potsdam Conference –negotiated by the so-called Big Three (the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union) – determined the fate of millions of Europeans. Through these agreements, which redrew borders and sanctioned population transfers in the name of post-war stability, Poland was shifted several hundred kilometres westward. As a result, after 1945, Prussia was resettled by new inhabitants: Poles expelled from the eastern territories annexed by the Soviet Union. Like the Germans before them, these repatriates were forced into an unfamiliar homeland by decisions taken far beyond their control. Foreign lands had to be made familiar. And, in time, they were.

Today, the former Kingdom of Prussia is located within the borders of Poland and the Russian Federation – its capital, Königsberg, became a Russian exclave known as Kaliningrad, largely a militarized district. After the collapse of the Soviet Union,

there were plans to establish a new republic – the "Baltic Republic" – alongside the returning independent states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, which would be loosely associated with the newly formed Russian Federation. However, these plans were quickly abandoned. Perhaps this was the first rumbling heralding the reconstruction of the empire?

The fall of the Iron Curtain (1989-1991) brought to light previously undiscussed and unprocessed collective traumas, frozen memories that had been waiting for their time since 1945. Every nation east of the Elbe river was confronted with previously censored histories. Prussia was no exception. To whom does the Prussian heritage belong? What to do with the history of the so-called German push to the East (*Drang nach Osten*)? And German eastern history dating back to the early Middle Ages?

In addition, the now reunified Germany was rediscovering the history of the descendants of refugees from the pre-war eastern Germany, whose parents and grandparents were forced to leave their homes as a result of the shifting borders after the Second World War and who contributed to the West German "economic miracle" of the 1950s. Yet, these displaced persons from the East never received any attention or recognition for their difficult fate and attempts to find their place in the new homeland.

Compatriot associations

After the Second World War, compatriot associations (*Landsmannschaften*) were established in West Germany, bringing together former inhabitants of Germany's lost eastern territories, including East Prussia and Pomerania. While their stated aim was to preserve the culture and traditions of their former *Heimat* – their "small homelands" – these organizations also sought compensation and played a central role in sustaining collective memory of the lost territories.

Over the years, the activities of the associations took on a political dimension. During the Cold War and the division of Europe, they were viewed with great distrust and even open hostility in Poland and Czechoslovakia. Members of the associations were often accused of revisionism and seeking to undermine the post-war borders and peace agreement. Although most of them eventually accepted the border on the Oder and Neisse rivers, the issue of displacement remained a sensitive and emotional topic on both sides for a long time.

Today, Erika Steinbach, a long-time member of the German Parliament from the CDU party and chairwoman of the Association of Expellees (*Bund der Vertriebenen*), is the person most associated with this community. Born in 1943 in German-occupied

Rumia, a Kashubian town near Gdynia, Steinbach has sought for years to commemorate the fate of Germans displaced after the war. Her initiatives, especially the idea of establishing a "Centre Against Expulsions" in Berlin, aroused strong controversies, anxiety and resentment in Poland. Many commentators accused her of blurring the distinction between victims and perpetrators of war, as well as lacking empathy towards the nations that suffered at the hands of the Third Reich.

While for some, Steinbach was a symbol of courage in speaking about "German victims of history"; for others, she was a politician who tried to rewrite the memory of the war. Today, the homeland associations are becoming less and less politically significant, but their legacy, like Steinbach's activities, continues to remind us about how difficult and complex the history of German-Polish reconciliation remains.

Artificial entity

The year 2025 marked the 500th anniversary of two historical events related to Prussian statehood. Both were significant in importance, having an impact on historical memory, and at least one of them determined the future of the state itself. In 1525, the aforementioned secularization and conversion to Protestantism took place simultaneously with the establishment of a secular state. The second anniversary was the feudal homage in Kraków (then the capital of the Kingdom of Poland) of the Prussian ruler, Duke Albrecht Hohenzollern, no longer the Grand Master, to the Polish King Sigismund I the Old. It is remembered in history as the Prussian Homage.

The anniversary of the establishment of the secular Prussian state was noted in the German, and to a lesser degree Polish, media, but these were occasional texts which did not generate much emotion. Today, no one cares much about restoring the memory of a non-existent state, one that was entangled in the very complicated political fate of the 20th century. However, the myth of Prussia, perpetuated after 1945, persists. All the odium of militarism and war fell on the forgotten state, which was and still is convenient. It also has political significance to this day. It is used in politics (election campaigns) whenever the opportunity arises. Over time, a "black legend" of Prussia took shape in both Poland and Germany, intensifying as the historical distance from the end of the Hohenzollern dynasty increased. Prussia came to function less as a historical reality than as a political bogeyman – invoked selectively to legitimize particular domestic agendas and foreign policy positions.

In Germany, Prussia is often described as an artificial political entity, created not so much out of national spirit as out of the state apparatus and the army. Unlike other European states of the time, the Prussian society was created thanks to the will and organization of the Hohenzollern dynasty. The most important binding force was not

the nation, religion or language, but statehood and discipline, which, according to researchers, including Haffner, mentioned at the beginning of this text, had a dark side – it was a source of obedience to authority and blind execution of orders, which ultimately enabled the development of German authoritarianism and, indirectly, Nazism. Haffner also believed that the "Prussian spirit" still survived in the mentality of some Germans, especially in eastern Germany. He wrote that East Germany was more "Prussian" than West Germany – centralized, bureaucratic and subordinate to the state.

Over time, a "black legend" of Prussia took shape in both Poland and Germany.

As noted by the distinguished professor of history Klaus Zernack (1931–2017), after the final partition of Poland (1795), the area of Prussian territorial gains constituted more than half of the territory of the Kingdom of Prussia, and Polish speakers constituted half of the population of the Kingdom of Prussia between 1795 and 1806. Thus, every second citizen of Prussia at the turn of the century did not speak German. Unfortunately, the young Prussian state, proud of its sudden territorial leap, far from recognized this great historical opportunity. Prussian officials did not want to share their newly acquired power with their new subjects, who had just lost their country. There was no question of attempting to create a new Prussian-Polish union state with capitals in Berlin and Warsaw. If we let our imagination run wild, we can immediately see other possibilities for the course of history, including world history. But this did not happen, and the possibility of co-existence ended a decade later, during the Napoleonic Wars.

The Hohenzollern Prussia occupies an ambivalent place in Polish historical memory, although negative associations prevail. It was the Prussian state that led to the final collapse of Poland (the partitions); it was on the initiative of Prussian officials that Germanization campaigns were introduced; and it was in Prussia that the Nazi party had such high support when it first began its march to power. On the other hand, the memory of the Hohenzollern Prussians has become an important element of Polish national identity, shaping a sense of community in the face of external threats. In Polish historical consciousness, Prussia symbolizes the loss of independence, but also how it led to the strength of the Polish spirit and the ability of the nation to survive despite oppression.

An undiscovered gem

Meanwhile, in German history, its eastern borders were only a part of "Greater Germany". Today, in Germany, the Prussian heritage is seen as a foreign body to the German spirit and empire. From this perspective, it is not far-fetched to argue that

neither the Teutonic Order's self-proclaimed civilizing mission nor the intellectual legacy of the Albertina – the University of Königsberg founded in 1544 – fundamentally altered the status of this remote eastern province. Königsberg served as an important intellectual centre for both Poland and Lithuania. It was a place where works by writers such as Mikołaj Rej were printed, and where the most prominent poet of the Polish Renaissance, Jan Kochanowski, studied before leaving for Italy. The city was also associated with eminent thinkers and artists, including Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottfried Herder, Hannah Arendt, Käthe Kollwitz, and Nicolaus Copernicus –figures later appropriated for German propaganda.

Despite this rich intellectual and cultural legacy, Prussia was long perceived as a peripheral and marginal space. This perception persisted in spite of the region's remarkable cultural and intellectual vitality. Somewhat naturally, due to the constellation of interests in German politics and the dynastic ties of individual German territories, they lay outside the mainstream of German statehood development. All said, only Poles attribute elements of central political and cultural importance to Prussia due to centuries of history and proximity.

Today, Prussia is simply the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship. It is a place of beautiful nature and an ideal holiday destination, advertised for years as the "Land of a Thousand Lakes". In addition to sailing, there are many charming places that are definitely worth seeing. To name but a few: the beautiful cathedral on the Vistula Lagoon in Frombork, with the burial place of Nicolaus Copernicus; the Teutonic castles in Kętrzyn, Lidzbark, Ryn and Olsztyn; and the tomb of the Fahrenheid family, the so-called pyramid in Rapa.

One of the region's distinguishing features is the high number of small towns participating in the international Cittaslow ("slow city") movement, founded in Orvieto, Italy. Thirty municipalities in the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship belong to the Polish network, reflecting a broader 21st-century shift towards sustainable development of smaller urban centres. The model aligns naturally with the character of Warmia and Mazury, meeting the expectations of visitors increasingly drawn to authenticity rather than acceleration. Yet what makes this approach particularly compelling is the extent to which it is rooted in the region's layered past. As a result, the former East Prussia remains an underexplored cultural reservoir, where historical memory and natural surroundings combine to create a setting especially suited to the slow-city ethos. EE

Piotr Leszczyński is an editor and publisher of *Przegląd Polityczny*, as well as a member of the Polish PEN Club.

Is the past for sale?

GIORGIA MAUROVICH

In Poland, cultural heritage has increasingly become a site where memory, market logic and political power intersect. From urban regeneration projects and nostalgia tourism to digitally-branded cultural platforms and AI-generated public figures, the past is often packaged, optimized and sold.

On a wall of the Museum of Life under Communism in Warsaw, where objects and images that witnessed the commercial application of graphic design in the socialist era are displayed, a rather curious quote from the propaganda newspaper *Dziennik ludowy* can be read: "Looking at nice and aesthetic things lets you see beauty, distinguish trash from art." The slogan, Agnieszka Balcerzak notes in her text "The charm of the PRL: Memory culture, (post)socialist nostalgia and historical tourism in Poland", fulfils the ironic function of highlighting the subordination of graphics and design to the control of the socialist regime, while emphasizing the absence of their marketing role in a system devoid of competition.

It is a truism to note that art and cultural heritage are always shaped by the material conditions of the societies in which they exist. Yet the economic and social transformations of recent decades have brought about a less obvious and more consequential shift in the administration and commodification of culture and memory.

Branding

Cultural heritage is often commonly associated with protection and preservation: practices imagined as timeless, disinterested, and oriented towards care rather than the social and economic forces in which such heritage is embedded. Increasingly, however, journalists, political scientists and sociologists have observed

the subordination of culture to the logic of the commodity, as the management of public memory and cultural institutions comes to resemble economic practices long established in other sectors.

The Polish cultural substratum has increasingly become both the object and the instrument of commercial and branding strategies, of which initiatives such as OFF Radio Kraków – a thematic digital channel belonging to Polish Radio Kraków, broadcasting since 2015 – are merely the most recent manifestation. While the OFF Radio case may appear as an isolated episode, lacking broader statistical significance, it points to a wider trend: the growing branding of culture and cultural institutions. As asset optimization becomes central to funding incentives across the sector, the logic of market efficiency shows a marked tendency to absorb, reshape and mobilize cultural experiences and emotions to the greatest extent possible.

The economic transformation has brought about a less obvious consequential shift in the commodification of culture and memory.

The term branding, used in marketing to define the process of the creation of a recognizable identity linked to a product or service, has also seeped in recent times into scientific research concerned with urban planning or museum curation. Bertram Niessen, who has long been studying urban spaces and the economy of culture, has spoken of the branding of urban spaces as a paradigmatic manifestation of the coexistence of material and immaterial elements in the contemporary economy, as well as a new level of production and consumption of citizen imaginaries that erode the reality of residents in favour of transient, superficial and "Instagrammable" identities.

Although the development of marketing techniques has its advantages, such as the ability to attract investors to develop concrete renewal strategies, the risks involved are narrative flattening, commodification and gentrification. The branding process can even affect entire nations, an assumption from which Agata Pyzik starts her book *Poor but Sexy*, tracing the socio-cultural development and contradictions of the former Eastern Bloc countries after the fall of the Berlin Wall, quoting the very same catchphrase used by Klaus Wowereit to advertise Berlin as a cheap, hip city that could attract the creative class.

The implementation of this tactic initially allowed growth at the urban level, in terms of capital and image, but the ever-increasing privatization and gentrification of areas has effectively bent the city to investors, turning the initial profiting from creative capital into a façade of manufactured authenticity, a process of self-colonialism affecting entire neighbourhoods. In Warsaw, the most frequently cited example is the Praga district, where the tension between development, material heritage and local identity (often developed according to place branding) collides with the concrete dismissal of residents' needs and demands. Studies on the area

note the same paradox raised by Niessen: "The material heritage is at the same time being appreciated and forfeited, as the elements that have always made Praga unique are being gradually lost." The public assistance and protections hoped for after the enactment of the Polish urban regeneration law from 2015 have proven insufficient, both because regeneration interventions in blighted neighbourhoods do not adequately provide for the protection of residents, and because liberal policies have registered a tendency to see cultural and community heritage as an obstacle to capital development, rather than a resource.

Past worth remembering?

There are, however, some notable exceptions, which seem to contradict this either/or in favour of a subtler form of commodification. In the field of urban planning, one of the most emblematic cases is undoubtedly Poznańska 37, the former residence of the poet Miron Białoszewski and risen to collective memory for the verses *Ach, gdyby nawet piec zabrali* ("Ah, if even the stove had been taken away"), depicting a stove *podobny do bramy triumfalnej* ("akin to a triumphal arch"). While in the following decades the apartment was always kept by the tenants with the care a historical monument requires, even contributing to the installation of a commemorative plaque on the façade of the building, in 2012, following the re-privatization of real estate, the entire complex was sold to a group of investors aimed at converting it into a hotel and office space.

The project included a three-storey underground parking garage and an elevator, whose planned route was obstructed by Białoszewski's stove. Little use was made of residents' protests, nor, as local outlets reported, were the concerns expressed by the conservator-restaurateur in charge of advising the developers ever heard. The stove was removed and placed at the entrance to the building, with the apartment refurbished into an office space.

Another tangible example of the friction between collective imagination and speculation can be found in a particular form of tourism centred on the commercial spectacularization of Poland's communist past. As documented by Balcerzak, this niche has developed most visibly in Warsaw through companies such as WPT1313 – an official partner of the Warsaw Chamber of Tourism and a recipient of European Union funding – as well as institutions like the Museum of Life under Communism and the Neon Museum. This market responds to visitors' demand for an experience of "authenticity" of Poland's past, yet it raises significant ambiguities when situated within the broader social transformations following 1989. While these transformations shape the selection, curation and promotion of heritage,

they are themselves susceptible to the influence of tourism-packaged imaginaries that, in turn, redefine what counts as the past worth remembering.

Certain expressions of cultural heritage, even while still subject to collective negotiation, increasingly acquire the form of "cultural commodities", adjusted and packaged for the external gaze of the tourism industry. Representations of life in communist Poland are filtered through nostalgia as a mode of consumption: the vintage cars of WPT1313 parked in front of the Palace of Culture and Science, where the company's headquarters are located; the abundance of gadgets displayed at the Neon Museum's ticket counter; or the thousands of tourists posing for Instagram among the relics and memorabilia of the Museum of Life under Communism. The economic logic underpinning this model is subsequently internalized as a broader socio-cultural phenomenon, one that does not necessarily coincide with the lived experience of socialism itself.

The trajectory of the Museum of Life under Communism is emblematic of the ambivalence of memory when treated as a business model. Originally operating under the name *Czar PRL* (Charm of the PRL) in a former factory building in Warsaw's Praga district, the institution attracted early criticism for both its evocative title and its fashionable location. These objections eventually led to a rebranding and to its relocation to Constitution Square.

As Balcerzak notes, the objectification of socialist heritage as a cultural and touristic resource does not in itself amount to the falsification or glorification of the past. What demands closer scrutiny, rather, is the reciprocal relationship between cultural heritage and economic practices, and the ways in which this interaction reshapes urban spaces and collective imaginaries. Pyzik repeatedly points to the material consequences of this dynamic: across Eastern European cities, to varying degrees and in line with available capital and investment flows, the imaginary can function as a form of power comparable to economic capital itself. Berlin, in particular, illustrates how history can be rendered secondary to the primacy of leisure and consumption, where the "right to party" eclipses historical meaning. Questions of optimal practice, whether framed in political, moral or economic terms, remain open, and continue to animate debates in Poland as elsewhere.

Heritage and profit

The uproar surrounding the OFF Radio Kraków case was triggered by an AI-generated interview with the poet Wisława Szymborska, but the controversy quickly exposed a more troubling constellation of issues: staff dismissals, alleged violations of workers' rights, and the tacit endorsement of the project by institutions such as

the Szymborska Foundation and Poland's culture ministry. Beyond its immediate labour law implications, what animated public debate was the uncritical production of cultural imaginaries orchestrated by the editor-in-chief – this time centred on the commodification of a single, emblematic figure.

The fact that comparable practices already exist elsewhere, such as the use of AI-generated avatars of Salvador Dalí to welcome visitors to an exhibition in Florida, points to a broader trend: the growing subordination of the museum's memorial and didactic functions to the logics of edutainment, spectacularization and promotion. Treating public figures as brands – particularly those central to a nation's cultural memory, as was suggested by plans to "revive" Józef Piłsudski, father of the Second Polish Republic, which was re-established in 1918, in a subsequent episode – aligns cultural institutions with modes of production that extract value from identities and imaginaries themselves. When entertainment and culture, or entertainment and memory, are flattened into a single register, both are diminished in the process. A culture that adapts too readily to the codes of entertainment or profit in order to survive risks forfeiting its value as culture.

As the Jagiellonian University scholar Sławomir Doległo observes, in the post-consumer era culture increasingly assumes the form of a standardized model of thought designed for the average consumer, generating replicable imaginaries that circulate with ease among ever wider audiences. While the recent history of Polish art includes figures such as Natalia LL and Zbigniew Libera, who openly and critically confronted the problem of consumption, the contemporary cultural field appears to lack the material conditions necessary for a comparable form of critique.

In a reflection on the business revolving around the memory of the Warsaw Uprising, cultural critic Marcin Napiórkowski argues that it is as impossible to distinguish the urge to remember from market rules as it is difficult to understand the functioning of the entire market without considering the active role that memory plays in it. A recent book titled *A Sociological approach to commodification. The case of transforming the post-socialist society in Poland* goes further by illustrating this impact. One quote from that book stands out in particular: "If culture is a 'cost centre,' as economists would say, and if in addition it is not at all obvious for many social groups (and decision-makers) that culture is worth the price, then clearly, among those in power the temptation to cut costs on culture must arise."

If economic viability becomes the primary criterion, it is the most profitable figures and imaginaries who will endure. Funding, after all, is closely entangled with the politics of those in power along with ideological tension with direct consequences on decision-making authority and access to capital, which could be reflected in the ways cultural heritage is produced, managed and protected. The

entire field is thus shaped not only by market forces, but by political priorities that determine which narratives are sustained and which are marginalized. “Looking at nice and aesthetic things lets you see beauty, distinguish trash from art”: what remains unresolved is what, precisely, is being selected and placed before our eyes – and by whom. EE

This text was prepared in the framework of the 2024/2025 edition of the Solidarity Academy, an international project of the European Solidarity Centre, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Warsaw, and New Eastern Europe. The project aims to inspire and support the development of young leaders across Europe.

Giorgia Maurovich is a writer, translator and researcher active in the cultural, artistic and literary sphere between Italy and Slovenia. She has a background in foreign languages, majoring in German and Polish, is currently in the field of comparative literature. At the moment she is working on her first collection of literary essays.

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