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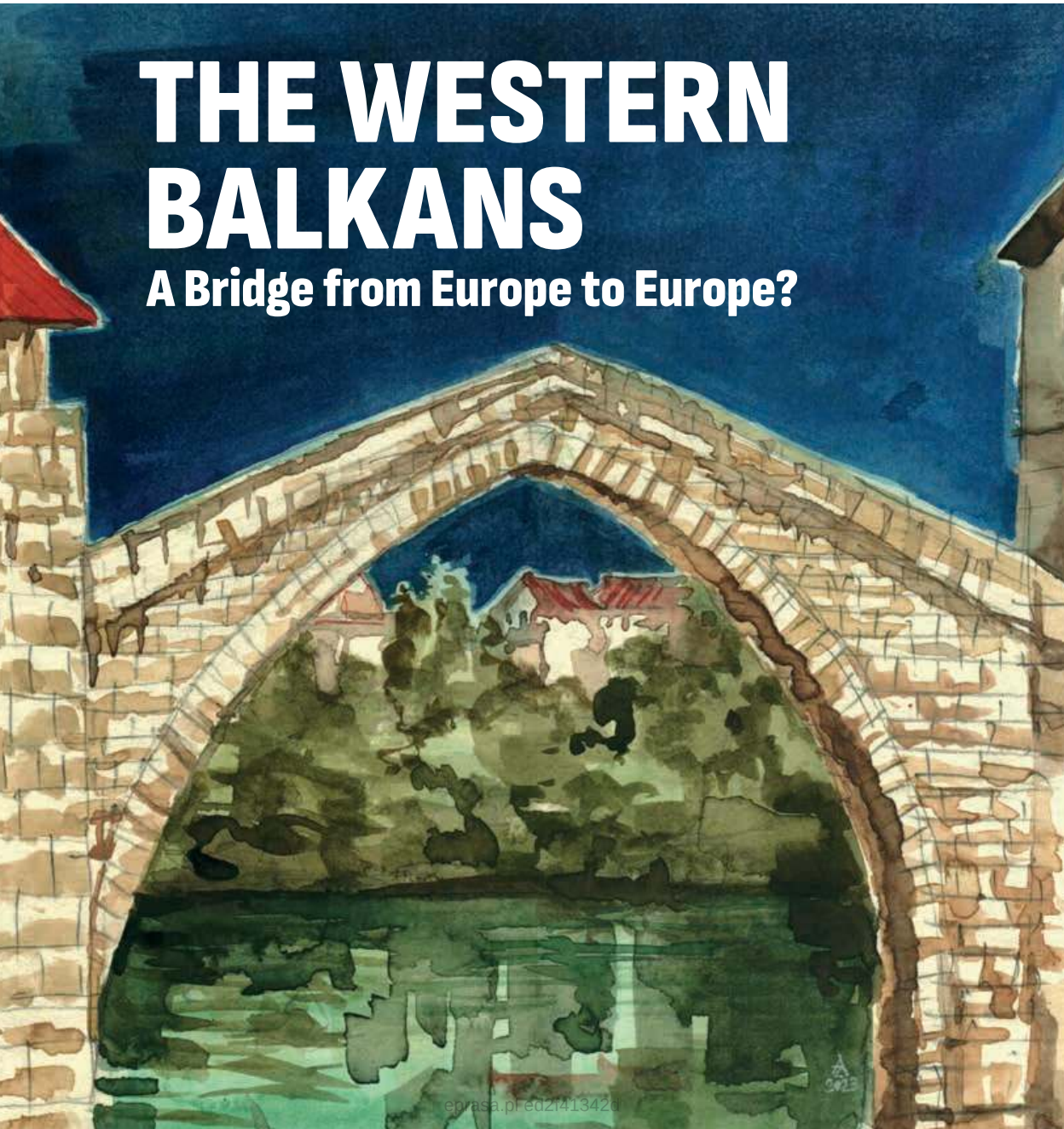
THE WESTERN BALKANS

A Bridge from Europe to Europe?



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DEAR READER,

The ongoing war in Ukraine has brought the debate over the future of Europe back to the region of the Western Balkans, which not that long ago also experienced the brutality of war, mass murder, and hatred, resulting in ethnic cleansing as well as physical devastation and long-term trauma and divisions. Indeed, the Balkan wars, waged in the 1990s between the nations of a once federal state, are a cruel reminder of the dangers of uncontrolled ethnic nationalism and what weapon it can become in the hands of narcissistic leaders. The lands of Europe have seen the consequences of such emotions too many times.

The establishment of the European Community, first, and later the European Union, was meant to ensure that such violence would never come back. In this way, the experience of Western Balkans and the struggle of its states to integrate with the EU is the story of Europe which – at the same time is haunted by its often brutal past, and – through establishing connections with others – frees itself from it. So why, some would ask, are the states in the region still in the waiting room of the spacious European house? Why have they been there for such a long time and does the war in Ukraine have any effect on their European path?

One answer holds that the mistakes of the past (also made by the West) have led to the unfavourable status quo and thus need rethinking. This is especially true for the Serbia-Kosovo conflict which – clearly – needs a fresh look and an approach that would – nonetheless – be acceptable to both sides. Serbia, especially, is a country to keep on the radar, mainly due to the fatigue of its population with the lengthy and mundane EU integration process. The failures of this process can easily and effectively be exploited by Russia, which traditionally holds a strong position within the country and continues to promote the anti-EU and anti-NATO narratives. But, these messages go beyond borders, in many cases reaching even established democracies as Slovenia.

All these topics are discussed on the pages of this issue by our authors who specialise in the region and through their writings shed light on some key developments and phenomena to follow. Their perspectives may differ, yet they all show that while the eyes of the international community are in a great majority turned towards Ukraine, history has not yet ended in the Western Balkans. The experiences of that region should be treated just as seriously and approached adequately. Also in Brussels and Washington.

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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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TRANSLATIONS
Iwona Reichardt

COPYEDITING
Niall Gray

ILLUSTRATIONS AND COVER
Andrzej Zaręba

COVER LAYOUT
Do Lasu s.c.

SUBSCRIPTION:
www.neweasterneurope.eu/subscribe

LAYOUT AND FORMATTING
Małgorzata Chyc | AT Wydawnictwo

EDITORIAL OFFICES
New Eastern Europe
ul. Szlak 26/12A, 31-153 Kraków
editors@neweasterneurope.eu

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Twenty years later

Exposing the hidden cause for the delayed EU integration of the Western Balkans

ANTONIOS NESTORAS

As the Western Balkans mark two decades since the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, an atmosphere of reflection, rather than celebration, envelops the region. Amidst the initial hopes ignited by the summit's commitment to EU enlargement, the journey towards integration has been mired in complexities and frustrations. A deeper exploration into the underlying causes reveals a surprising factor at the heart of the delay – the state of public administration, an often-overlooked linchpin in the ambitious pursuit of EU integration.

In 2003, the historic Thessaloniki Summit marked a pivotal moment for Europe and its enduring commitment to enlargement and unity. At the heart of this gathering in the timeless Greek city was the visionary idea to bring the Western Balkans into the European family. The summit not only reaffirmed the EU's dedication to the enlargement process but also set into motion the integration pathways for countries emerging from a tumultuous past. This was a gesture of hope, signifying that shared values and collaborative efforts could overcome even the most deep-seated challenges. However, two decades after the hopeful summit, the aspirations of the Western Balkans and their integration into the European Union remain, in many ways, unfulfilled.

Croatia is the only country to have achieved EU membership in 2013. Meanwhile, Serbia and Montenegro embarked on their accession negotiations processes

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only in 2012. On the contrary, Albania and North Macedonia still await the formal start of accession negotiations, which were greenlit by the European Council in March 2020. Bosnia and Kosovo, while recognised as potential candidates, are still in the preliminary phases. Kosovo's path is nuanced due to its non-recognition as an independent state by several EU members.

State of limbo

The overarching theme in the region's EU aspirations is that while significant strides have been made, there is little to no reason to commemorate the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit and its accomplishments regarding the expansion of the EU project in the Western Balkans. While the summit had promised a brighter, unified future, a combination of regional complexities, unresolved historical disputes, and internal EU dynamics have stalled the process.

The continued state of limbo has raised questions about the EU's commitment and the feasibility of its enlargement strategy

This continued state of limbo has raised questions about the EU's commitment and the feasibility of its enlargement strategy. The EU has long presented itself as a symbol of unity, cooperation and progress. A project that commenced in the post-war era to ensure peace and economic cooperation in Europe, the EU has since expanded its boundaries, integrating many Central and Eastern European countries. The fact that the Western Balkans countries remain largely outside of the EU raises serious questions about the EU's ability to expand and secure European values in its own neighbourhood, let alone play a global role for the stability of the liberal order in the world.

What are the reasons for this delay? It depends on who you ask. Overall, the initial momentum has been overshadowed by reluctance within the EU, geopolitical complications, and pressing bilateral issues among the aspiring members. In other words, the stagnation of EU enlargement in the region can be attributed to many different factors.

1. Historical tensions and unresolved issues – The 1990s saw the dissolution of Yugoslavia, leading to a series of violent wars and deep-seated ethnic and religious tensions in the Western Balkans. These tensions persist today. The political borders that emerged post-conflict often do not align with ethnic boundaries, leading to internal disputes and tensions. For instance, the Bosnia and Herzegovina constitution, which divides power among three main ethnic groups, is often criticised for its inefficiency and for perpetuating ethnic divisions.

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2. Rule of law and corruption – One of the major criteria for EU accession is the establishment of the rule of law. The Western Balkan countries often rank low in global corruption indexes. Issues ranging from judicial corruption to political bribery persist, making it difficult for these nations to meet the stringent demands set by the EU.
3. Economic disparities – Stability and growth are essential prerequisites for EU membership. However, many Western Balkan nations face economic issues, including high unemployment rates, underdeveloped infrastructure and a lack of foreign investment. Aligning these economies with the more prosperous EU nations remains a challenging task.
4. EU enlargement fatigue – Over the past few decades, the EU has integrated many countries, especially from Eastern Europe. This rapid enlargement has led to "enlargement fatigue", with some member states becoming wary of further expansion, fearing that it might dilute the EU's core values or strain its resources. Similarly, in the context of migration and economic concerns, in some EU countries public opinion on further expansion is mixed or negative. This sentiment can influence the decisions of political leaders when it comes to accepting new member states.
5. Veto power and bilateral disputes – Certain EU countries have unresolved issues with Western Balkan states. For instance, Spain is hesitant about recognising Kosovo due to its own secessionist movements. Similarly, Greece had disputes with North Macedonia over its name for years, which were resolved only recently. A dispute with Bulgaria is now obstructing the same country from starting accession negotiations.
6. Geopolitical factors – Russia and China have significant interests in the Western Balkans. Their influence, through investments and political alliances, often competes with the EU's efforts in the region. This geopolitical game has slowed down the EU integration process.

Thus, the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU is not merely a question of political will. It is a complex puzzle that involves historical baggage, socio-economic disparities and geopolitical considerations. Nevertheless, while the known causes such as enlargement fatigue, internal EU challenges, geopolitical influences and concerns over candidate countries' readiness undeniably play a role in the stagnation of EU enlargement, it is worth noting that similar issues have been encountered and navigated in past expansions. The EU has historically demonstrated an ability to handle complex integration scenarios. This should lead us to suspect that there may be an underlying, less-discussed reason contributing to the delay. This hidden cause, yet to be fully addressed, could be

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the missing piece of the puzzle that explains the protracted integration process for certain Western Balkan nations – a missing piece that could also show us the way forward.

A matter of public administration

Beyond its evident geopolitical, economic and symbolic significance, the EU integration process is, at its core, an administrative endeavour of immense proportions. The journey to EU membership requires a candidate country to undertake vast and comprehensive reforms within its public administration. This is not merely about alignment with the EU's political or economic objectives; it is about ensuring that the administrative machinery of a nation is robust, transparent and efficient enough to conform to the EU *acquis* – the accumulated body of EU law and regulations. This necessitates an intricate intertwining of policies, legal frameworks and institutional practices, making the integration process as much about bureaucratic transformation as it is about political or economic alignment.

An effective public administration stands as the linchpin in this bureaucratic process of EU integration. Why? Because integrating with the EU is not merely about meeting broad benchmarks; it is about the meticulous implementation of thousands of specific regulations, standards and directives that comprise the EU *acquis*. To navigate this complex roadmap, a nation requires an administrative apparatus that is not only knowledgeable and competent but also transparent, accountable and adaptable. Efficient bureaucracies ensure that laws and regulations are applied consistently and fairly, promoting trust both domestically and with EU counterparts. Furthermore, as the EU's policies span diverse areas – from environmental standards to consumer protection – a country's administrative bodies must work cohesively across sectors, ensuring that no detail is overlooked. Without a robust and effective public administration, the foundational structure required to support and sustain the demands of EU membership would simply collapse, making it an indispensable asset in the integration journey.

The path to the EU, commonly perceived through the lens of political will, constitutional reforms and geopolitical nuances, dives much deeper into the granular, yet monumental, task of building administrative capacity. While high-level political decisions and geopolitical alignments are undeniably essential components, the actual execution of integration mandates lies in the hands of public servants and the machinery of bureaucracy. It is one thing for leaders to agree on policy directions and reforms, but it is another for a country's administrative apparatus to translate those agreements into actionable steps, compliant with the vast expanse of the EU *acquis*.

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Photo: European Commission

Proceedings of the EU/Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki in 2003 with (left to right) Erhard Busek, Special Co-ordinator of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, Javier Solana, Secretary-General of the Council and High Representative for the CFSP, and Constantin Simitis, Greek Prime Minister and President-in-Office of the Council.

Without a capable and competent cadre of public servants, the most well-intentioned political commitments can falter in execution. The process requires a deep understanding of EU directives, the ability to draft compliant legislation and the expertise to oversee its implementation across various sectors. This capacity-building is not just about numbers or staffing; it is about training, knowledge transfer, inter-departmental coordination and fostering a culture of transparency, efficiency and accountability.

In essence, while political will, constitutional reforms and geopolitical contexts set the direction for EU integration, it is the capacity of public administration that drives the journey. Delays in integration are as much a reflection of administrative capacity challenges as they are of high-level political or geopolitical impediments.

The real reason behind the delay

Emerging from the devastating wars of the 1990s, the Western Balkan countries found themselves grappling with the remnants of conflict and the challenges of building anew. One of the primary legacies from this tumultuous period, and from

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the times of the former Yugoslavia, was a public administration system that was predominantly influenced by Serbian bureaucratic traditions. While this system was adapted to the centralised governance of Yugoslavia, it was not primed for the comprehensive and nuanced demands of the EU integration process. Several factors come into play when understanding these administrative shortcomings.

First, the region's reliance on a centralised, Serbian-dominated bureaucracy meant there was limited experience and expertise in managing diverse, decentralised administrative structures. In addition, the war left behind deep-seated mistrust among communities. Building an inclusive public administration system that catered to the diverse ethnic, religious and cultural groups in the region became a challenge. Second, the post-war rebuilding meant that many countries in the region were primarily focused on immediate recovery, reconstruction and reconciliation. Building an administrative system aligned with EU standards was not the immediate priority and thus it lagged behind other recovery efforts. Moreover, funds that could have been allocated to administrative reform were often redirected to more pressing immediate needs.

The region's reliance on a centralised, Serbian-dominated bureaucracy meant limited experience and expertise in managing decentralised structures.

Third, the capacity and expertise in public administration was affected by the war. Many professionals either left the region, were involved in the conflict, or were part of a system that was not oriented towards EU administrative norms. This created a dearth of skilled personnel familiar with the rigorous demands of EU standards. The task of transforming public administration in the Western Balkans is monumental. It requires not only structural changes but also a shift in mindset, ethos and values to align with EU principles and standards. And while there is awareness within the EU about these challenges, the lack of efficient public administration capacity in the Western Balkans is not discussed enough as a reason for the delay of EU integration in the region.

What the EU can do

To expedite the Western Balkans path to integration, the EU must zero in on key strategies that not only bolster administrative capacities but also foster a deeper understanding of EU processes:

1. Targeted training programmes – Tailored training sessions specifically designed for Western Balkan public servants can bridge knowledge gaps and

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foster proficiency in EU law, policy formulation and integration requirements. By immersing these officials in specialised curricula, the EU can ensure that they are adequately equipped to navigate the intricate maze of accession demands.

2. Twinning projects – These collaborative endeavours between EU member state institutions and their counterparts in candidate countries can be game-changers. Through direct partnerships, Western Balkan administrations can glean insights, learn best practice, and draw lessons from those who have successfully tread the integration path. This hands-on approach is invaluable, creating real-world synergies and promoting mutual learning.
3. Encourage exchange programmes – Allowing public servants from the Western Balkans to spend time within EU institutions can provide an immersive learning experience. Being directly exposed to the functioning of EU bureaucracies, they can gather practical knowledge, build networks and understand the nuances of EU administrative processes. This experiential learning can be transformative, equipping them to replicate effective practices back home.

By focusing on these strategies, the EU can play a pivotal role in surmounting administrative challenges, thereby streamlining the Western Balkans' journey towards EU membership.

Staged integration approach

A streamlined, efficient and responsive public administration is the backbone of any nation's governance system. For countries aspiring to join the EU, this becomes even more significant. The integration process is not merely about political alignments or economic compatibility; it is an administrative exercise at its core. If EU enlargement is to be expedited, it is paramount that the public administrations of candidate countries be integrated first.

This argument lends credence to the idea of a "staged integration" approach. Instead of expecting candidate countries to overhaul every aspect of their systems simultaneously, the EU should prioritise the integration of public administration. This means bringing administrative structures, processes and capabilities in line with EU standards before delving into deeper political or economic integrations.

The staged integration model posits that a strong administrative foundation will streamline subsequent stages of the accession process. Once the public administration is integrated, it can effectively manage, coordinate and implement the necessary

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reforms in other sectors, whether they are judiciary, economic or social policies. It is akin to building a sturdy base for a skyscraper; with a robust foundation, the subsequent construction becomes more feasible and resilient.

Furthermore, this approach can lead to more tangible, immediate results, thereby boosting the morale and confidence of both the candidate countries and their populations. When citizens see efficient administrative processes, transparency in governance and improved public services, they are more likely to support and trust the broader integration process.

Thus, for a swifter EU enlargement, integrating public administration should be the first order of business. A staged integration approach, anchored on this premise, could be the game-changer the enlargement process needs. As the world continues to evolve, it remains to be seen how the EU and the Western Balkans navigate their shared path toward unity and cooperation – and the very essence of what the European Union wants to represent in the future. EE

Dr Antonios Nestoras is the deputy executive director of the European Liberal Forum. His career spans more than 12 years in the academic, think tank and European public administration fields. He holds a double PhD in social and political science from Vrije Universiteit Brussel and the University of Antwerp.

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Cake doughnuts and western diplomacy

LEON HARTWELL

As September 2023 was approaching, the focus of western diplomacy once again gravitated toward the ongoing Kosovo-Serbia conflict, which appears to have no end in sight. Amid mounting tensions and the uncertain trajectory of the EU's "Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue," a comprehensive reassessment of mediation efforts becomes imperative to bring a definitive resolution to this enduring conflict.

There is a new joke circling around the Balkans: "Why did Miroslav Lajčák (the EU special representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue) and Gabriel Escobar (the US special envoy for the Balkans) decide to open a bakery? Because they thought cake doughnuts would be the perfect symbol for their diplomacy in the Balkans – full of holes and prone to crumbling!" The joke reflects the fact that mediations led by the European Union and the United States in the Serbia-Kosovo dispute have reached their nadir.

An empirical study of 137 mediated disputes found that conflicts about "sovereignty" and "security", the two top issues defining the Serbia-Kosovo dispute, are notoriously hard to resolve. For these issues, mediation leads to success rates of 44.7 and 40.7 per cent respectively. For conflicts about resources, ethnicity and ideology, the success rate is 70 per cent, 66 per cent and 50 per cent respectively. Nevertheless, the bar for "success" is extremely low given that the study defines it merely as "reduced violence" or "securing an agreement". The implementation of actual peace agreements, a more demanding task, occurs in only about a third of situations similar to the Serbia-Kosovo conflict.

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(Dis)agreements

Looking ahead to September 2023, the parties were poised to resume the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue under the auspices of the EU and supported by the US. The insistence on Kosovo's compliance with establishing the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities (A/CSM) is poised to remain a focal point, ostensibly presented as a panacea to the Serbia-Kosovo conflict. However, there is a need to acknowledge the pitfalls of the mediation process and promote a long-term strategic approach rooted in a transatlantic outlook.

Firstly, mediators are taking the approach that any "agreement" is better than no agreement, which undermines the mediation process. The track record of the EU's Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue boasts a collection of over 30 agreements, spanning from the momentous April 2013 Brussels Agreement to the more recent Agreement on the Path to Normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia – also referred to as the Basic Agreement – dated February 27th 2023. Additionally, the Implementation Annex to the Basic Agreement (the March 2023 Annex), contributes to this ever-growing inventory.

Mediators are taking the approach that any agreement is better than no agreement, which undermines the process.

Yet, a palpable chasm remains, as none of the primary agreements have been signed and ratified by both parties. Even as Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, trumpeted the parties' unwavering commitment to uphold all tenets enshrined in the Basic Agreement and its accompanying March 2023 Annex, an unsettling void persists in the form of the conspicuous absence of signatures. This has caused legitimate concerns regarding the enforcement and legal obligations associated with these documents.

Both the EU and the US must confront the reality at hand: agreements lacking the signatures and ratifications of both negotiating parties hold no legal substance. The act of signing and ratifying an agreement signifies a commitment to adhere to its stipulations. In the current milieu, Serbia has chosen not to implement or blatantly breach over 80 per cent of the articles encompassed within the Basic Agreement. Serbia's president, Aleksandar Vučić, even openly ridiculed the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, asserting: "I have excruciating pain in my right hand, I can only sign with my right hand and that pain is expected to continue for the next four years."

The "any agreement is better than no agreement" approach merely undermines the mediation process. It creates the impression that mediation is failing, thereby informing the behaviour of the adversaries with an eye on future

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mediation attempts. Consequently, critical facets underpinning the plethora of these over 30 agreements (however defined) stand to remain unrealised, effectively precluding a resolution to the Serbia-Kosovo conflict through the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue.

Simultaneously, the prevailing trend suggests that the EU and US have, perhaps inadvertently, resorted to pressuring Kosovo – the comparably smaller and weaker negotiating party – to accept the agreements as legally binding. This creates a lopsided process.

Normalisation, a word with little meaning

Moreover, the EU and US mediators exhibit a palpable lack of a clear goal. Anchored within the epicentre of the Serbia-Kosovo conflict are two pivotal issues: sovereignty and security. As explained to me once by Glauk Konjufca, current chairman of the Kosovo Assembly, the intransigence of Serbia in acknowledging Kosovo's sovereignty perpetuates the constitutional assertion of Belgrade's dominion over and intervention in Kosovo. This impasse inescapably consigns both states to a perpetual security conundrum, with the potential to escalate far beyond the current low-intensity tensions on the border.

Recollections from the past couple of years alone bear testament to the volatility of this situation: Vučić falsely castigated Kosovo for orchestrating a "pogrom" against Kosovo Serbs and threatened to respond accordingly; Serbian tanks and formidable military hardware were deployed to the border (and even inspected by Russian Ambassador Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko Stefanović!); nearly thirty Kosovo Force (KFOR) troops, the NATO-led peacekeeping contingent, were injured by Kosovo Serbs; and the Kosovo government found evidence of Kosovo Serb terrorist groups in its territory, operating with direct military support from Belgrade.

Instead of building their goals around the two defining issues of the Serbia-Kosovo dispute, the EU and US are officially saying that the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue aims to foster "normalisation". While mediators often resort to constructive ambiguity to lubricate the wheels of accord, the moniker "normalisation" remains an enigma – an ephemeral concept with elusive substance and a foundation conspicuously devoid of legal gravitas.

Part of why the EU upholds an ambiguous goal for the dialogue has to do with the fact that five EU member states – Spain, Slovakia, Cyprus, Romania and Greece – still do not recognise Kosovo's independence. However, in line with goal theory, a clear goal will increase the chances of mediation success. In

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the absence of a clear goal, the mediation process risks producing a situation that could create greater instability in the Balkans, thereby also posing a serious security threat to the EU.

There is no Plan B

Another key issue is the fact that the EU and US mediators lack a "best alternative to a negotiated agreement" (BATNA). At its core, a negotiator's (and mediator's) BATNA signifies the path available should negotiations flounder. Consequently, a pivotal objective for any adept mediator hinges on broadening and reinforcing their repertoire of options, thus strengthening their BATNA.

At the end of 2021, one high-level US official said to me that Washington unequivocally backs the EU's Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue. Intrigued, I probed further, querying the hypothetical scenario of the dialogue's demise, to which the official asserted in no uncertain terms that "there is no Plan B." Lajčák similarly echoed this sentiment in the early stages of the process, adamantly affirming the exclusivity of the EU-led dialogue. Crucially, the actions, or lack thereof, undertaken by western actors underscore the absence of a tangible BATNA. This dearth in cultivating robust BATNAs culminates in a precarious predicament. The EU and US find themselves relentlessly investing their efforts within a singular avenue, even when it is seemingly failing.

Linked to the above issue is the fact that the mediators are entangled in positional bargaining, a veritable taboo in negotiation circles. The pernicious aspect of positional bargaining is its propensity to entrench parties within rigid stances, engendering a state of impasse. A more astute and effective strategy would involve steering the mediation towards an interest-based framework, one that fervently pursues the main goals (which in this case, as argued, are unfortunately ambiguous).

A quintessential example of this positional bargaining is manifested in the mounting pressure exerted by the EU and US upon Kosovo to establish an Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities (A/CSM) – casting it as the panacea to finally conclude the Serbia-Kosovo conflict. A conspicuous dearth of empirical evidence belies the notion that A/CSM implementation is capable of addressing the sovereignty and security quandaries that underscore the conflict, even when existing agreements are legally questionable. In a peculiar twist, the A/CSM could potentially exacerbate prevailing security concerns, particularly given Serbia's influence over Kosovo Serbs.

The unequivocal link binding Serbia's ruling party – the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) – with the dominant Kosovo Serb party – Srpska Lista – is irrefutable.

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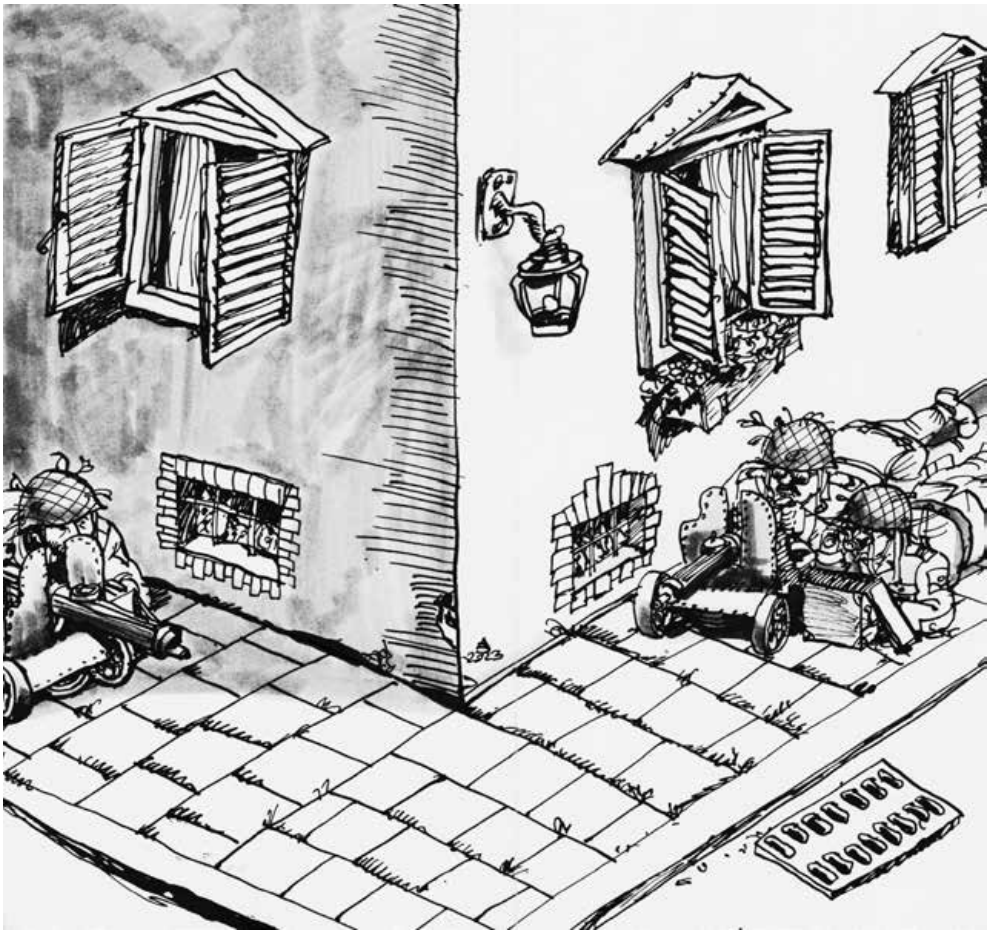

Further compounding this situation is the fact that Serbia provides annual support ranging from 300 to 500 million euros to Kosovo Serbs, who constitute five per cent of Kosovo's 1.8 million populace. In context, this financial reinforcement per head eclipses the 2022 budget of Kosovo, standing at a modest 2.75 billion euros. The ramifications are staggering, as Serbia's assistance to Kosovo Serbs represents 10 to 18 per cent of the entire government budget of Kosovo. The amalgamation of party affiliations, financial leverage and direct military support towards spoilers operating in Kosovo, bestows an astounding power on Serbia, empowering it to escalate tensions at will.

In particular, the prospect of an A/CSM wielding executive powers, which aligns with Serbia's aspirations (rather than focusing on coordination), has the potential to mirror the contentious Republika Srpska scenario in Bosnia and Herzegovina: a breeding ground for secession. Moreover, should Kosovo capitulate to A/CSM

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establishment, Serbia's incentive to compromise on other fronts within the negotiation landscape diminishes exponentially.

By shifting the dialogue from positional bargaining to an interest-based process, the mediators may come to the conclusion that there are alternative ways to meet the needs of both Serbia and Kosovo without establishing the A/CSM. Conceivably, the most effective way to promote and expand minority rights across the Balkans is not by reinforcing segregation as promoted by leftover bigoted politicians from the 1990s (Vučić was Slobodan Milošević's minister of propaganda when his regime committed large-scale displacement and genocide in Kosovo), but by promoting EU integration. Such a trajectory would ensure that minority rights are protected under EU mechanisms and that members of minority groups will have a better quality of life.

Lost on the EU path

Unfortunately, the mediation process rests on too many incorrect assumptions, chief of which is the naïve belief that the tantalising prospect of EU membership will serve as a catalyst for conflict resolution. This notion fails to withstand scrutiny when juxtaposed against recent polling data. These polls shed light on a disconcerting dissonance: while a staggering 95 per cent of Kosovars would undoubtedly vote in favour of EU membership, a mere 33 per cent of Serbians would echo this sentiment. This may seem mindboggling, given that in terms of trade, foreign direct investment, official development aid and pre-accession support, the EU has undoubtedly been Serbia's foremost partner for the past two decades. So what explains these anti-EU sentiments?

Serbian aspirations for EU enlargement have been waning due to perceived lack of enthusiasm from Brussels.

On the one hand, Serbian aspirations for EU enlargement have been waning due to perceived lack of enthusiasm from Brussels. This disillusionment is, in part, amplified by narratives propagated by both Serbian and Russian media. In response to the February 2022 escalation in the Russo-Ukrainian War, the EU imposed sanctions on the Russian state-controlled international news television network RT. However, Serbia allowed it to open a multimedia online website in Serbian called RT Balkan, which will also be launching television broadcasting in 2024.

On the other hand, the Vučić regime exhibits palpable reticence in embracing the necessary reforms required by the EU. Vučić's trajectory appears inexorably authoritarian. Should Serbia's accession to the EU entail the circumvention of seri-

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ous political and economic reforms, Vučić would seize the opportunity forthwith. However, should such reforms remain mandatory, his approach will veer towards caution. Nonetheless, a steadfast 77 per cent of Serbians remain resolute in withholding support for the recognition of Kosovo's independence, even in exchange for an expedited EU accession process.

In this intricate landscape a state of limbo – a perpetual EU candidate country – paradoxically emerges as the optimal outcome for Vučić. This nuanced equilibrium allows him to glean substantial rewards from the EU accession journey while sidestepping reforms that could undermine his autocratic path.

Escalate to de-escalate

Another failing is due to the fact that the EU and US fail to calibrate carrots and sticks. Within the tapestry of the mediation process, instances abound where the EU and US have invoked "both sides" statements, imploring Serbia and Kosovo to "de-escalate" hostilities. Regrettably, such even-handed pronouncements often obfuscate the disquieting asymmetry inherent in this conflict, rendering Vučić's destabilising actions on par with the endeavours of Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti to uphold reciprocity and democratic norms.

Observers familiar with Vučić's strategic playbook are attuned to his penchant for employing an "escalate to de-escalate" strategy. At the current juncture, faced with a domestic crisis, Vučić adeptly navigates the realm of escalating tensions with Kosovo. As such, Vučić is both the arsonist and the firefighter. Curiously, this characterisation sharply diverges from how the EU and US perceive him. It seems that from their vantage point, Vučić embodies the solution to Balkan stability.

Observers familiar with Vučić's strategic playbook are attuned to his penchant for employing an "escalate to de-escalate" strategy.

Adding to the dissonance, the EU and US have taken an increasingly accusatory stance towards Kosovo, rather than Serbia, in matters of conflict escalation. An illustrative case in point lies in the response to violent unrest in May. At the instigation of Belgrade, Kosovo Serbs boycotted the local elections, culminating in a dismal 3.5 per cent voter turnout. As such, Kosovo Albanian officials were elected in areas where predominantly Kosovo Serbs live. It is crucial to underscore that Srpska Lista together with the Serbian government, actively campaigned for the local election boycott. Moreover, the US validated the legitimacy of these elections by asserting their alignment with Kosovo's constitutional and legal requisites.

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When the newly elected mayors attempted to assume office on May 26th, they were confronted by violent protesters. Astonishingly, Viola Von Cramon, the European Parliament's rapporteur for Kosovo, directed a condescending query towards the security situation, encapsulated in her infamous words, "What the hell brought you here?" Yet, the very next day, the tapestry of tension darkened further as Kosovo Serbs unleashed an assault on Kosovo police units, KFOR peacekeepers, and journalists.

Following the injury of approximately 30 KFOR peacekeepers, perpetrated by Kosovo Serbs under the influence of Belgrade, the EU suspended "high-level visits, contacts and events as well as … financial cooperation with Kosovo". At the same time, the US abruptly suspended Kosovo's participation in a military exercise – Defender 23 – which took place from May 22nd to June 2nd. In parallel, the US and EU members surprisingly rewarded Serbia. From June 27th onwards for 12 days, Serbia hosted Platinum Wolf 23, a military exercise that brought together the US and eight other NATO member states.

This recurring inability to calibrate carrots and sticks reverberates as a persistent challenge. For example, in December 2021, only a few months after joint military exercises with Russia and sending tanks to the Kosovo border threatening to escalate the situation, the EU rewarded Serbia by opening up Cluster 4 in its accession process.

Stability above all else

Finally, resonating through the corridors of EU and US foreign policy is an echoing void – a glaring dearth of a comprehensive, long-term strategy tailored for the intricate terrain of the Balkans. The US vision of a Europe "whole, free and at peace" retains a beguiling allure, but in the absence of a clear strategy for how to achieve that dream, serious mistakes are made with long-lasting consequences.

In recent years, the EU and US began to pivot towards the aspirations of "stabilitocrats". Coined as "stabilitocracy", this term delineates the semi-authoritarian regimes in the Balkans that garner western backing under the deception of ensuring stability. This is despite the fact that this approach, as discerned by scholars such as Florian Bieber, inherently grapples with a glaring flaw. This is namely the absence of a foundation based on liberal democracy within the region, which inherently serves as a wellspring of instability.

Embedded within the fabric of stabilitocracy lies an insidious alliance – a western propensity to accommodate the demands of Balkan leaders who perceive the concept of Balkanisation as an enticing prospect. Emblematic instances include the infamous yet unrealised land swap proposal between Serbia and Kosovo,

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championed by Vučić and former Kosovo President Hashim Thaçi. Another example includes recent changes to Bosnia and Herzegovina's voting system in the middle of an election, orchestrated by the High Representative allegedly under pressure from Croatia's Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, which tilts the balance in favour of ethnic groups rather than individual citizens' rights. The unyielding drive by Vučić to establish an A/CSM in Kosovo is therefore understandable in these circumstances.

In the Western Balkans, western diplomacy inadvertently nurtures the incremental birth of illiberal democracy and creeping apartheid.

In these intricate diplomatic entanglements, western diplomacy inadvertently nurtures the incremental birth of illiberal democracy and creeping apartheid. This represents the resurfacing of an unfinished project that involves the participation of familiar Balkan players from the 1990s. Perhaps, one can call this the promotion of "apartheid lite", but these transatlantic actions are reinforcing and hardening the identity politics that led to several bloody wars in the region.

Forging a path forward

In the crucible of this precarious juncture, the EU and US possess a repertoire of immediate and medium-term actions that can be harnessed to navigate towards a resolution in the Serbia-Kosovo conflict.

1. **Acknowledge the stalemate and expand BATNAs**
   Embracing an unvarnished assessment, the EU and US must acknowledge the impasse in the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and utilise this recognition as a springboard to explore and expand their BATNAs. This recalibration amplifies their leverage in the mediation arena.

2. **Define and align objectives**
   Convergence between the EU and US on overarching goals is pivotal. Whether the goals are to get Serbia to recognise Kosovo's sovereignty, or to create an arrangement that would prevent the conflict from unfreezing once and for all, then there are a variety of BATNAs to consider. The point is that clarifying the goals paves the way for innovative solutions. One BATNA to consider is for the US and several NATO member states to enter into a security alliance with Kosovo until the country eventually becomes a NATO member

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state. Examples of such security arrangements include the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, and the Mutual Defense Treaty between the US and the Republic of Korea. Such an arrangement will not resolve the sovereignty issue, but it will deal with the security issue.

3. **Engage EU non-recognisers**
   Concerted efforts to sway the five EU states which do not recognise Kosovo's sovereignty is a dual-pronged strategy. It bolsters Kosovo's trajectory towards EU and NATO membership, underlining the inviolability of its territorial integrity. Such diplomatic cohesion also eases the process of fostering consensus within Serbia. Eventually, it will make it easier for Serbian leaders to sell the idea of Kosovo's independence to Serbians, as they could argue that "If Serbia is serious about EU integration, we will have to recognise Kosovo's sovereignty."

4. **Prevent escalation of the conflict by expanding KFOR and supporting Kosovo**
   Augmenting KFOR's 4,500 troops is essential, particularly in light of Russian threats to escalate the Serbia-Kosovo situation in October. Escalation in the Serbia-Kosovo conflict will not only have implications for the Balkans but also for the Russo-Ukrainian War.

   In Serbia, military expenditure averaged around 823.26 million US dollars between 1996 and 2022, reaching an all-time high of 1.462 billion in 2022. Meanwhile, Kosovo's military expenditure averaged a mere 54.51 million US dollars from 2008 to 2022, reaching its peak at 107.60 million in 2022. As such, on average, Serbia's military expenditure has been approximately 15 times higher than Kosovo. Beefed up with support from western powers, Kosovo's military will help create a greater balance of power between the two states, which will prevent Serbia from taking rash and risky military actions.

5. **Calibrate carrots and sticks**
   Adopting a resolute stance in calling out Serbia's leadership, specifically Vučić, for propagating instability, supporting Putin and indulging in autocratic tendencies is imperative. You cannot feed steaks to a tiger and expect it to turn into a vegetarian. A judicious balance of incentives and consequences is crucial. Swift accountability for adverse conduct ensures that transgressions do not go unchecked. This approach guards against the illusion of appeasement and prioritises meaningful progress.

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6. **Develop a comprehensive Balkans strategy**
   All these steps demand the crystallisation of a comprehensive, long-term Balkans strategy. Rooted in liberal democracy and stability, this framework should delineate clear goals for the region. It should shun creeping apartheid and autocracy and steer the region's trajectory towards a harmonious and prosperous future. EE

Leon Hartwell is a Senior Associate at IDEAS, London School of Economics (LSE), and a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) in Washington DC.

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Kosovo-Serbia dialogue

A perpetual state of stagnation

VISAR XHAMBAZI

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine stressed the importance of engaging the Western Balkans more closely. The strategy behind the West's renewed interest was twofold: bring Kosovo and Serbia closer to a deal to normalise relations and simultaneously move Serbia away from the Russian orbit. Despite initial enthusiasm in early 2023, relations quickly soured once again. What will it take to overcome this impasse?

The Kosovo-Serbia dialogue which has been facilitated by the European Union since 2011 has faced challenges in normalising relations between the two countries. However, Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine injected a sense of urgency and provided a renewed impetus to address the dialogue. This led to a new diplomatic offensive that culminated in the finalisation of the second Brussels Agreement and its Implementation Annex in February and March 2023, respectively.

Despite these efforts, the new agreement fell short of achieving its intended outcome as Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić violated its provisions on multiple occasions. However, the EU and the United States remained silent and failed to hold Serbia accountable for its actions. This lack of response by the West undermined the implementation and effectiveness of the new deal and, consequently, there were no significant breakthroughs in the negotiations.

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The EU fails to capitalise

The EU launched the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue in 2011 to normalise relations and foster better cooperation between Kosovo and Serbia. The negotiations had initial success, and in 2013 the EU managed to conclude the first deal for the normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. According to the deal, Kosovo agreed to establish an Association/Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities, granting more autonomy to Kosovo Serbs. In return, Serbia committed to dissolving its parallel structures in the north of Kosovo and integrating them into Kosovo's security and legal system.

The prospect of EU membership was instrumental in facilitating the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo.

For their constructive approach, the EU rewarded both countries. Kosovo signed its first contractual agreement with the EU, the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, the first important step towards the long road of EU integration, whereas Serbia started its EU accession talks. However, the EU did not build on its success as both Brussels and the member states gradually lost enthusiasm for further enlargement, leading to a phase of enlargement fatigue. This shift had a domino effect on the dialogue. Vučić quickly grasped the implications and became less interested in the normalisation process. Consequently, progress in Kosovo stalled, with the implementation of the Association/Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities being actively avoided.

The prospect of EU membership was instrumental in facilitating the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. There was momentum in the dialogue process at the beginning of the 2010s, when the promise of membership was deemed credible. However, the lack of progress made it increasingly more difficult for Kosovo and Serbia to cooperate with one another and fulfil their original promises.

War in Ukraine sparks new momentum

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which started in February 2022, produced shockwaves in Europe and stressed the importance of engaging more closely with the Western Balkans, another vulnerable point in the security and stability of Europe. The strategy behind the West's renewed interest was twofold: bring Kosovo and Serbia closer to a deal to normalise relations and simultaneously move Serbia away from the Russian orbit. Within a few months, news began to circulate that there was a Franco-German proposal to normalise relations between Kosovo and

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Serbia. French and German envoys visited Pristina and Belgrade in September 2022 to discuss the proposal. By the end of the year, the EU foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, confirmed that an updated version had been sent to the representatives of Kosovo and Serbia, building momentum for the new agreement.

After several rounds of meetings and discussions, on February 27th 2023, Vučić and Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti met in Brussels and accepted the EU draft. Borrell stated that further talks were needed to discuss its implementation. However, he stressed that no further discussions were needed on the EU proposal. The EU deal states that Kosovo has agreed to establish some level of self-governance for the Kosovo Serb community, whereas Serbia agreed not to object to Kosovo's membership in any international organisation (Article Four). Furthermore, both parties agreed to develop good neighbourly relations and recognise each other's national symbols and documents, and most importantly, they agreed to exchange permanent missions, among other important provisions.

Three weeks later, Josep Borrell tweeted "We have a deal," announcing that the parties have finally agreed to an implementation annex that constitutes an integral part of the agreement. The annex calls upon Kosovo and Serbia to implement all provisions stemming from the agreement and announces the establishment of a joint committee, chaired by the EU, to supervise the implementation of the agreement.

No real breakthrough

Borrell's initial excitement quickly waned as the Serbian president immediately undermined the agreement. While Vučić verbally agreed to the deal, he refused to sign it. Two days after the agreement was reached, Vučić vowed to oppose Kosovo's membership of the United Nations, violating Article Four. Two months later, Serbia voted against Kosovo's bid for Council of Europe membership, another direct breach of the deal.

Despite these flagrant breaches, the EU and the US remained silent. This caused major disappointment because the EU took the responsibility to chair a joint committee to supervise the implementation of the agreement. The EU and the US failed to keep Serbia accountable for respecting all provisions in the agreement, which created an imbalance in the dialogue and undermined the effectiveness of the new deal. Furthermore, the second Brussels Agreement did not take into account the local elections in four Serb-majority northern municipalities in Kosovo, which were scheduled to take place in April 2023. President Vučić organised an unexpected collective boycott, which resulted in less than four per cent of voter turnout and allowed Albanian political parties to take control of the municipalities.

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The assumption of office by the new mayors was met with swift resistance by the local Serbs, who attempted to storm the municipal buildings, leading to violent clashes with the police.

Following the escalation, the EU and the US specifically called upon Kosovo to immediately halt violent measures. The NATO-led international peacekeeping force, KFOR, was deployed in the north, but it was not enough to ease tensions. Local mobs attacked dozens of KFOR soldiers using grenades and gunfire, injuring 30, with three of them in critical condition. Simultaneously, Vučić put the army on combat readiness and moved troops close to the Kosovo border. Taking into consideration the heightened tensions, the Kosovo government refused to remove the special police units and arrested dozens of Kosovo Serbs involved in violent attacks. Moreover, in a clear act of aggression, the Serbian gendarmerie kidnapped three Kosovo police border guards and refused to release them for two weeks.

The West issued statements demanding that Kosovo withdraw its special police units, but Pristina held its ground. However, neither the EU nor the US were willing to wait for more than a couple of days for their demands to be met. As a result, the US announced a first round of consequences by excluding Kosovo from "Defender Europe 23" – a US-led military exercise – and threatened that they would consider further action. Furthermore, for the first time, the EU issued sanctions against Kosovo. This sequence of events led to the deterioration of the situation in the north and diminished the chances for the implementation of the new agreement.

Unblocking the impasse

Progress in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue hinges on the collective efforts of the EU and US to hold both parties equally accountable and ensure the implementation of all the agreements. The initial breach of the agreement by Vučić and the organisation of the boycott of the elections in the north of Kosovo made it difficult for Kosovo to continue with its plans to establish the Association/Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities. Tensions were further exacerbated by the deployment of Serbian troops near the Kosovo border and the kidnapping of three Kosovo border guards.

While both parties are responsible for being cooperative, it is crucial to factor in patterns of behaviour when assessing the situation. Serbia's unconstructive and aggressive behaviour remains unaddressed. At the same time, Kosovo has been pressured to withdraw from part of its territory for upholding security operations and escorting democratically elected mayors to their posts. This then culminated in sanctions against Kosovo. The EU's disproportionate response represents a

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strategic blunder. This approach undermines the effectiveness of implementing the EU deal and hurts the dialogue.

While the renewed impetus in the dialogue was a step in the right direction, the lack of an appropriate response to agreement violations and even progress has caused the dialogue to lose momentum and credibility. To overcome the impasse, the EU and the US must reassess their approach to the dialogue and hold all parties accountable. Without timely action and meaningful commitment, the dialogue risks remaining trapped in a state of perpetual stagnation, further complicating prospects for the full normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, and threatening regional stability in the Western Balkans. EE

Visar Xhambazi has worked as a researcher, consultant and project manager for various non-profit organisations in the Western Balkans and across Europe. He currently works as a project manager at Sbunker, a non-profit media organisation in Kosovo covering politics, economics, culture and society. In January 2023, he became a member of the Wilson Center's Transatlantic Writers' Group.

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Serbia continues to walk the tightrope

MARTA SZPALA

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has not significantly changed Belgrade's foreign policy. Although Serbia is an EU candidate country, it has continued to exploit its ties with China and Russia to increase its bargaining position vis-à-vis the West and raise additional funds for development projects. Despite this ambivalent foreign policy, Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić is still considered by many politicians in the EU and NATO as a very important partner in keeping stability in the region.

It seemed that a strong and unified western reaction to the Russian aggression against Ukraine would prevent Serbia from continuing its policy of balancing between East and West. Belgrade, aspiring (at least declaratively) to membership in the European Union, would subsequently be forced to decrease its cooperation with Russia. Yet Serbia's leadership has been able to avoid introducing sanctions against Russia and keep its good relations with Moscow, while at the same time fostering an image among western politicians as a guarantor of stability in the region.

Moreover, the war in Ukraine has enabled Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić to enhance his position internationally as a guarantor of Serbia's pro-West orientation. Simultaneously, he has promoted himself domestically as a statesman able to keep the country out of what is perceived by Serbian society as a war between West and East in Ukraine. Additionally, Serbia has profited not only from selling weapons to Ukraine but also from hosting many wealthy Russians, as well as obtaining more EU funding to keep the country on the integration track.

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Tactical manoeuvring

With the exception of Serbia, all other Western Balkan states which aspire to join the EU have decided to align with the West in their policies towards Russia. This is especially true after the aggression on February 2022, with countries supporting EU sanctions against Moscow (only Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to the objection of Republika Srpska, has been unable to implement this decision). Since the beginning of the war, Serbia has strongly opposed joining EU sanctions but voted in favour of five out of six United Nations resolutions condemning the invasion of Ukraine and supporting Russia's suspension from the UN Human Rights Council. Belgrade also has not recognised the referenda that were held in the four regions of Ukraine partly occupied by Russian forces in September 2022 and has not participated in voting over excluding Russia from the Council of Europe.

The Serbian authorities argue that sanctions policy is unpopular among the Serbian public due to their own experience of war.

In front of western politicians, the Serbian authorities argue that sanctions policy is unpopular among the Serbian public due to their own experience of war in the Balkans in the 1990s, when Yugoslavia (consisting then of Serbia and Montenegro) was under UN sanctions. Serbs believe that sanctions are not effective and are only detrimental to ordinary people and not political leadership. Therefore, depending on the opinion poll, between 70 and 80 per cent of the population is against sanctions. Serbia's governing elite also argue that introducing sanctions would have a very negative effect on the country's economy, taking into account its energy dependence on Russia and bilateral trade. Russia is Serbia's fourth-largest trade partner, accounting for 4.1 per cent of the country's total foreign exports in 2021.

Therefore, Serbia supports western positions in cases which are not so important from the political point of view and not so sensitive for the wider public. These tactical concessions were presented to the West in order to counter the arguments of Serbia's critics that the country supports Russia's policy in Ukraine. These also help to decrease pressure on the Serbian authorities to introduce sanctions. Meanwhile, domestically, Serbian politicians downplayed voting in the UN and the local media under government control has not promoted these decisions to the public. Instead, Vučić is often seen emphasising that Serbia has never and will never join sanctions against Russia despite huge pressure from the West, in order to demonstrate his assertiveness.

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Photo: Fotosr52 / Shutterstock

The war in Ukraine has enabled Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić to enhance his position internationally as a guarantor of Serbia's pro-West orientation.

We will not abandon our traditional friends

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Serbian politicians condemned violations of sovereignty and territorial integrity, but without specifying who did what. They also repeated that they want to preserve good relations with Moscow due to energy dependency, Russia's support in the Kosovo dispute, a pro-Russian sentiment among the public, and a traditional friendship. Moreover, relations between the two, especially under the current Serbian leadership, have always been symbiotic and both sides use them to increase their leverage vis-à-vis the West. Moscow pretends that it is able to destabilise the Western Balkans due to its influence in Belgrade and Republika Srpska, while Belgrade pretends that it can abandon the EU path at any time and turn to Russia instead of the West. The leadership in Belgrade seems to hope that the war will soon be over and that most countries will return to business as usual with Russia. This will allow them to keep cooperating with the country.

Despite the ongoing war, Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, was supposed to visit Serbia in June 2022 (the visit failed due to EU countries refusing the Kremlin's requests to fly his jet over their airspace). Instead, in August that year, Aleksandar Vulin, Serbia's interior minister, visited Moscow. In September 2022,

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Serbia's foreign minister, Nikola Selaković, signed an agreement with his Russian counterpart for bilateral consultations over the next two years on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York. While Vučić or Prime Minister Ana Brnabić avoided unequivocal support for Russia, Vulin – a loyal Vučić aide and now the head of the Security Intelligence Agency – is the main person responsible for contacts with Russia and spreading pro-Russian and anti-western sentiments. Although military cooperation with Moscow has halted, collaboration in other areas continues. Serbia recently struck a new deal for a three-year gas supply contract with Gazprom last May.

Serbia's energy dependence on Russia has been weakened due to EU sanctions against Moscow but in the recent years the country contributed to strengthen the Gazprom company's domination in the Balkans as it supported building the second leg of Russian company's Turk Stream gas pipeline, which was excluded from EU regulations. Now, the EU's embargo on imports of crude oil from Russia forced the Gazprom-controlled NIS corporation to halt buying Russian oil in 2023, as it was imported mainly through Croatia's Omišalj oil terminal and the JANAF pipeline system owned by the Croatian company. Serbia has also taken some steps to transition to renewable energy, which in the long term could diminish energy dependence on Russia. However, NIS increased its profits in 2022 significantly due to the purchase of cheap Russian oil. There are also plans to build an oil pipeline to Hungary in order for Budapest to be able to import Russian oil again.

(Not so) safe heaven

Serbia has also tried to take advantage of the war and its consequences for Russia. It is one of the few European countries where Russians are still warmly welcomed without visa requirements. The Serbian national carrier – Air Serbia – is the only European company that maintains frequent flight connections to numerous cities in Russia, which are also a source of significant income. Due to the flexibility of residence permits and business regulations, as well as a similar language, Belgrade became especially popular among tech specialists and skilled professionals who wanted to escape Russia. Already in the spring of 2022, Russian technology giant Yandex decided to open an office in Belgrade and even relocated some employees there. According to data from the Serbian interior ministry, almost 220,000 Russians came to Serbia and 30,000 received a residence permit in 2022.

As of April 2023, almost 7,000 companies are operating in Serbia that were set up by people from Russia. For a country which is struggling with its own brain drain and huge emigration of young professionals, such an influx of well-educated

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people seems like a positive development with the potential to stimulate growth in the IT sector. Wealthy migrants contribute to a rise in rental prices and an increase in revenues for restaurants, hotels and the entire service industry. This migration is also supported because Serbia had a very positive experience with the so-called White Russian migration after the communist revolution in 1917, which contributed to the development of the country. The authorities are planning to ease the requirements for getting Serbian citizenship to convince these new migrants to stay.

While the Serbian authorities welcome IT specialists, harassment against Russian opposition activists has become more evident lately. In July this year, Serbian authorities tried to prevent the anti-Putin activist Peter Nikitin from entering the country, despite the fact that he has a residence permit and is married to a Serbian citizen. Moreover, Serbia refused to extend the residence permit of Vladimir Volokhonski, one of the founders of an anti-war protest group. Already in 2022, prominent opposition leader Vladimir Kara-Murza, now jailed by the Putin regime for political reassons, accused the Serbian secret services of wiretapping meetings of Russian activists in Belgrade and handing over the documentation to Moscow.

State-sponsored anti-western narrative

While Vučić frequently argues that due to public sentiment he cannot cut Serbia's ties with Russia, this attitude was enhanced (if not created) mainly by media controlled by people close to the government. Before the full-scale invasion, Serbian media was spreading narratives about the harassment of Russians in Ukraine and the threats to Russia posed by NATO's "eastward expansion". The culmination of this narrative was a declaration in one of the tabloids that Ukraine had actually invaded Russia on February 24th 2022. According to opinion polls conducted by the Novi Treći Put think tank in 2023, 66 per cent of Serbs think that the West is responsible for the war in Ukraine, while only 21 per cent blame Russia.

The pro-Russian attitude of the society is largely based on anti-western sentiment and the perception of Russia as a counterweight to the EU and United States, which are presented in Serbian media as a threat to Belgrade's interests in the region (especially in Kosovo). The West, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine, is presented as hypocritical, as it has not respected international law and the territorial integrity of Serbia in the case of Kosovo but now refers to these values. Moreover, the media often present Russia in a similar situation as Serbia was in the 1990s, creating greater sympathy for the Russian side.

While Serbian media is very critical towards the EU and the US, it is very favourable towards Russia and China. Consequently, support for the EU in Serbia

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has decreased and is lower than 50 per cent. According to the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability, an independent organisation in Belgrade, 61 per cent of Serbs believe that Belgrade should preserve good relations with Moscow even if that would negatively impact ties with the EU. Although Russian media (*Sputnik* and RT) are present in Serbia, these narratives are ultimately spread rather by local media, as their role is to increase support for government policy. Since Serbian media is popular across the whole region, its narratives also influence perceptions in societies in neighbouring countries.

Is changing the course possible?

US Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Hoyt Brian Yee told the Serbian leadership back in 2017 that they "cannot sit on two chairs at the same time, especially if they are that far apart". Yet, even in these difficult circumstances, with Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Belgrade still finds a way to play the East and West against each other and sit on both chairs.

As the Kosovo issue is one of the main reasons for Russia's influence in the Balkans, the US and the EU pushed for comprehensive normalisation between Pristina and Belgrade in 2022. However, the inconsistent policy of the West has exacerbated tensions rather than resolved them. Stability deteriorated also in Bosnia and Herzegovina due to the actions of Serbian politicians aiming for de facto independence from the central government, as well as in Montenegro, as a Serbian conservative party took power but was unable to establish a government.

Serbia is deepening cooperation with those countries which have a similar ambivalent policy towards the war in Ukraine, such as Hungary and Turkey.

Alongside the attack in Ukraine, Russia has sought to exploit the fragile internal situations in the Balkan countries and especially surrounding unresolved conflict to destabilise the situation in the region. Moscow's ability to do this by itself is limited but local politicians can use this interest to pursue their own agenda to change the territorial status quo in the region. Although Serbia contributed to increasing tensions on the ground, especially in Kosovo, and is a hub for spreading anti-western and pro-Russian narratives, many western politicians still think that appeasing Vučić is the only way to achieve stability in the region. Verbally, Serbian leaders are declaring a cooperative and constructive approach to resolving the Kosovo issue and support western policy in the region. However, at the same time its policy contributed to these ongoing tensions, what strengthen Serbia's regional position.

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Serbia is also deepening cooperation with those countries which have a similar ambivalent policy towards the war in Ukraine, such as Hungary and Turkey, and strengthening relations with China, which could replace Russia as the country's main ally on the Kosovo issue in international fora like the UN.

The West, meanwhile, has decided to offer Serbia more incentives to stay on the right track, which only strengthens Vučić's position. The EU and the US have avoided using the leverage, especially in economic terms, that they have on Belgrade to push for a more constructive approach. The US has recently imposed sanctions against Aleksandar Vulin for his role in "facilitating Russia's malign activities" in the region. This could be the first sign that Washington's policy towards Belgrade might be changing. Yet this signal is too vague to force the Serbian leadership to radically change its position. Thus, the balancing policy still remains very profitable for the country. **PE**

Marta Szpala is a senior fellow at the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) in Warsaw and a PhD candidate at the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Science.

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Russia's (fading) influence

KATARINA TADIĆ

Russia's influence in the Western Balkans is traditionally based on its soft power, the energy sector and its diplomatic support for Serbia's position on Kosovo. The religious, cultural and historic relationship of Moscow with the Orthodox population in the region has been taken as a reason for Russia's attractiveness. However, with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its consequences, the strength of Russian influence in the region is being questioned.

It is commonly said that the Russian aggression against Ukraine has further exposed the fault lines between Moscow and the West in the Western Balkans and that Russia's aggressive posture in the region is only set to grow as a consequence of the war. Is this concern legitimate or is the Kremlin's influence in the Western Balkans going to diminish as a consequence of Putin's invasion of Ukraine?

The soft power of Russia reflected in historic Slavic, cultural and religious ties are often cited as major reasons for a close relationship between primarily Serbia and Russia (even though Russia and Serbia were actually at odds with each other throughout most of the 20th century), along with Moscow's diplomatic support for Serbia's stance on Kosovo and energy ties. The refusal of Serbia to join the European Union's sanctions against Russia is seen as an indicator of Russian influence through media and political associations. However, recent research shows that the perceived role that Moscow still plays in the Western Balkans is often amplified. Instead, Russian influence is to a large degree facilitated and shaped by local leaders who prefer keeping the status quo and capitalising on the pro-Russian sentiments of their voters. Contrary to common belief, the war in Ukraine has in fact exposed Russia's weakness in the region and can serve as an indicator of its global decline.

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Adapting to change

The war in Ukraine has brought a major geopolitical shift that has placed Russia as the country most hostile to the EU's interests, and indirectly or directly affected almost all EU policies. The invasion of Ukraine has altered the defence, security, trade, environment and enlargement policies of the EU, to mention only a few. With more than 50 per cent of gas supplies imported from Russia in 2021, already in October 2022 EU member states reduced it to just 12 per cent and reached a number of deals with alternative suppliers. Despite internal divergences (e.g. Hungary), the bloc has adopted 11 packages of sanctions against Russia, unprecedented in scale and scope, that severed almost all economic, diplomatic and political ties with its largest neighbour.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has also placed the EU's enlargement back on the political agenda. Over the last year, EU candidate status was given to Ukraine and Moldova, with Georgia becoming a potential candidate. At the same time, a new impetus in the Western Balkans has been seen through the opening of enlargement negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia and approving candidate status for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Four out of the six Western Balkan countries aligned with the EU by introducing sanctions against Russia and Belarus.

While it is true that Russia's war on Ukraine has put the ever-unstable Western Balkans back in the spotlight, it is still too difficult to say whether enlargement fatigue in the EU member states exists or not. The EU has recognised that regional cleavages and tensions make the region particularly vulnerable to Russian influence but so far it has been unsuccessful in "rekindling the enlargement flame", as well as resolving the frozen conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and between Kosovo and Serbia. The enlargement debate, however, has become more geopolitical than ever before and the incompatibility of nurturing a close relationship with Russia and advancing on the European integration path has become apparent. Four out of the six Western Balkan countries (Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia) aligned with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy by introducing sanctions against Russia and Belarus. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (due to the objection of the Serb entity Republika Srpska) have not yet joined the sanctions, despite repeated calls to do so.

The available research singles out Serbia as a global outlier in terms of its pro-Russian attitude in the context of the war in Ukraine. For example, 63 per cent of the population of Serbia blames the West for the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which is by far the highest number compared to any of the surveyed

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22 countries. Similarly, a large majority of citizens (78.7 per cent) opposes introducing sanctions against Russia. This, along with the refusal of the Serbian leadership to join sanctions against Russia, is often taken as an illustration of Russian meddling in the Balkans and the influence Russia still possesses to this day. However, the picture is much more nuanced and the dynamic of Russian propaganda in the Western Balkans is much more dependent and conditioned by local leaders than by Moscow.

How strong is Russia's influence in the Balkans?

Russia's influence in the Western Balkans is traditionally based on its soft power, the energy sector and its diplomatic support for Serbia's position on Kosovo. The religious, cultural and historic relationship of Russia with the Orthodox population in the region has been taken as a reason for Russia's attractiveness. With a seat on the United Nations Security Council, Russia guaranteed that Kosovo's independence would not receive legitimacy within the UN. In addition, Russia has traditionally been the most dominant non-EU country in the energy sector in the Western Balkans. However, with the ongoing diversification of energy supplies and diplomatic weakening of Russia due to the war in Ukraine, the question now is what are the real and perceived impacts of Russia in the region?

Recent research by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) portrays a rather nuanced picture of Russian influence in the region. The author, Maksim Samorukov, argues that despite a seeming status quo, with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić signing a new three-year deal with Gazprom, and Milorad Dodik (the head of Republika Srpska) frequently visiting Moscow, the position of Russia is much weaker than it used to be before February 2022.

"Outside the energy domain, Russia has become almost irrelevant to the Balkan economies, and the refusal of Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina … to join anti-Russian sanctions makes little difference," the report reads. More specifically, this and other research points to four major trends. First, when it comes to the energy domain, no new investments and projects are envisaged in the foreseeable future. Countries are already looking for alternative supplies and some energy demands (such as gas) can be replaced already by the end of this year. Second, economic cooperation is either small or non-existent with most of the countries of the Western Balkans. Serbia is the country with the largest share of trade with Russia but that number stands at a mere six per cent. All of the economies are deeply integrated with EU members' economies and even though Serbia did not introduce sanctions on Russia, many companies must adhere to sanctions in order to continue their business in the much more lucrative EU market.

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Third, the invasion of Ukraine and Russia's gross violation of international law, including the war crimes committed, have downgraded the position of Russia on the international stage. Even when it comes to Kosovo, Russia is not a desirable mediator for Serbia anymore. The most recent Ohrid Agreement, a result of the increased diplomatic engagement of the US and the EU, has been negotiated without any Russian involvement. The Serbian president can often be seen in the company of the Russian ambassador in Serbia, Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko, talking about Russian support and military assistance. However, he knows very well that "Moscow is too short of resources to be able to effectively project military force in the Western Balkans."

Similarly, and fourth, according to Samorukov, Russian personnel in charge of diplomacy in the Western Balkans do indeed have knowledge and extensive connections in the region. However, they have no standing among the Kremlin's elite to bring Balkan issues to Vladimir Putin's attention, who was never emotionally attached to this region. Given the repressive and centralised nature of decision-making in Russia, policy in the Western Balkans is more on autopilot than part of some elaborate strategy.

Russia is not the West

All this does not mean that Russia does not play any role in Balkan politics. However, the truth is that it relies on the local elite, who instrumentalise perceived Russian support for their own benefit. The Orthodox and Slavic attachment to Russia has been used by many local politicians to win votes among the pro-Russian segments of the population. Yet, this Russophilia is an atypical example of soft power, where Russia is loved not for what it is, but for what it is not. As explained by Vuk Vuksanovic (BCSP): "Russia is not the West, meaning that Russian soft power capital in Serbia is largely the product of bitter memories of the 1990s, the feeling of being rejected and ostracised by the West, the frustration with Kosovo's independence and the notion that Russia acts as a counterforce to the western primacy."

This resentment and bitterness towards the West have only intensified in the last ten years in Serbia with Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party, which internally had to appeal to a right-wing base while externally posing as pro-West. The aggression against Ukraine intensified pressure on Vučić to break with Russia and join the sanctions, which in turn intensified pro-Russian propaganda produced by the Serbian regime-controlled media. Contrary to popular opinion or experience in other countries, the main producers of pro-Russian propaganda are not *Sputnik* or Russia Today but tabloids and TV stations.

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Thus, while it is true that introducing sanctions against Russia would be a politically unpopular move and difficult for any Serbian ruling party politician to do, it is also true that it is not Russia who is directing the narrative in Serbia but the local regime. The role and influence of Russia has been intentionally exaggerated for years so that Vučić can have excuses for not delivering his promises primarily on Kosovo and playing the card of a man who withstands the Russian challenge.

The biggest threat for regional stability, as well as Serbia's EU aspirations and western orientation, is not Russia, it is Aleksandar Vučić's regime. Similarly, it is Milorad Dodik who is fuelling interethnic animosities by refusing to join EU sanctions and benefiting from the pro-Russian sentiments of voters. Politically, it is more convenient to be accused of being Putin's friend instead of dealing with piling cases of corruption, clientelism and crime, as we saw in the recent example of Aleksandar Vulin. Vulin, the current director of the Serbian Security Intelligence Agency, has been sanctioned by the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control for advancing corruption, including involvement in a drug trafficking ring and illegal trade of weapons, and providing a platform for Russian influence. Vučić spun this story about Vulin being punished only because Serbia has not introduced sanctions on Russia, since a friendship with Russia sounds better than direct involvement in criminal activities. And let us not be mistaken, Vulin is Vučić's – not Putin's – associate, whose role as the head of the agency is to make sure that the regime of Aleksandar Vučić remains intact.

The role of Russia has been intentionally exaggerated so that Vučić can have excuses for not delivering on his promises.

Soft power or smoke and mirrors

Russia has been present in the Western Balkans over the last 20 years. Symbolically, economically and politically it built ties with these countries and exploited their grievances and frustrations with the West. The failure of the EU and NATO to integrate the region and resolve the conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and solve the status of Kosovo has created room for Russian influence and local leaders' reliance on Moscow. Yet, Russia has never managed to establish itself as a dominant trade partner to the region. Thus economic cooperation remained modest and will only be further reduced, while energy ties will inevitably be downgraded.

The war in Ukraine has in fact weakened Russia's position in the Balkans. The only field where we see a strong Russian presence is propaganda, and the stagger-

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ing support and popularity that Putin and Russia have among some segments of the population (Serbia and Republika Srpska) is indicative. Yet, the proliferation of the pro-Russian narrative is controlled by the media that are under the control of local authoritarian leaders, most notably Vučić and Dodik. As long as the latter aim to stay in power at any cost, exploiting anti-West sentiments and fuelling the imagination of the majority of the population with pro-Russian propaganda, Russia will remain present in the Balkans. ■

Katarina Tadić has a ten-year-long experience of working in the civil society sector in Serbia. She has engaged academically and professionally on topics of EU integration and democratisation of Western Balkans, with a focus on citizens' participation, institution building and regional cooperation. She is currently working as a programme manager at the European Fund for the Balkans in Belgrade.

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Nationalism is still a potent force in Bosnia and Herzegovina

HIKMET KARČIĆ

The continued power of nationalist ideas and narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina has all but destroyed any social or political cohesion. Ethnic divisions have hindered the establishment of a unified political system and resulted in permanent political deadlock. Nationalist rhetoric continues to fuel political conflicts, further deepening resentments and prejudices.

More than three decades after the start of the Bosnian War, nationalists are once again threatening instability in the Western Balkans. Milorad Dodik, the pro-Russian Bosnian Serb strongman, recently stated that "We are considering in the most serious terms to bring a decision to declare independence and secede Republika Srpska, unless the property issue is solved." Two decades of undermining state institutions, malign foreign influence and western appeasement have brought Bosnia and Herzegovina to its most serious crisis since the end of the war three decades ago.

Competing nationalisms

Nationalism was one of the French Revolution's most enduring legacies, which went on to frame much of European political discourse for over a century. It remains a sadly relevant ideational force even today. The type of nationalism that arrived

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(and settled) in the Balkan region most successfully was a form of nationalism that focused on the ethnic group as a source of identity. This ethnic nationalism had a far greater impact politically and socially than it did in either the United Kingdom or the United States, and was further inspired by the concepts of (German) romanticism. This longingly sought for a utopia of beauty and untrammelled freedom, inspired by dramatic re-interpretations of the distant past. The nationalisms that developed in the Balkans sought the overthrow of the ancient, capricious, often cruel and now dying Ottoman Empire, and to establish ethnically-bound states. Problems emerged, however, when these newly-forming nations began claiming territory that they felt belonged to them.

This nationalism drove the overthrow of Ottoman rule in the Balkans, and served as the fuel for the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913. It played a central role in both the First and Second World Wars in the Balkans, and following a brief communist interlude re-emerged in the 1990s to engineer the break-up of Yugoslavia. This resulted once again in genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. This nationalism was manifested particularly clearly in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and remains influential today.

Nationalism has manifested particularly clearly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and remains influential today.

Contemporary nationalism in BiH is fuelled by the "Greater Serbia" and "Greater Croatia" nationalisms, which served as the key centrifugal forces that split up Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Both of these nationalisms had (re)emerged from the political penumbra (whence they had been banished by Tito's socialist regime) and were seized upon by the Serbian and Croatian leaders, Slobodan Miloševič and Franjo Tudjman respectively. However, these two competing nationalisms faced a territorial and political obstacle in the BiH state, which at the time had a slight Muslim (Bosniak) majority, alongside Bosnian Croats and Serbs. These competing nationalisms drew Bosnian Serbs and Croats towards their kinsmen in Serbia and Croatia respectively, leaving Bosniaks to their fate, caught between these forces, which frequently manifested more hate towards them than they did towards each other. Much has been written elsewhere about what transpired when the war began. This is not covered here. It is safe to say that it all culminated in the Srebrenica genocide, which saw the genocide of 8,372 Bosniak men and boys.

Following the war, which was brought to some form of conclusion at Dayton, Ohio in 1995, BiH was reconstituted as a loose federal republic comprised of two entities, both at odds with each other. The political structures that started and led the war remained in place – and remain key drivers behind the continuing prominence of nationalism in BiH.

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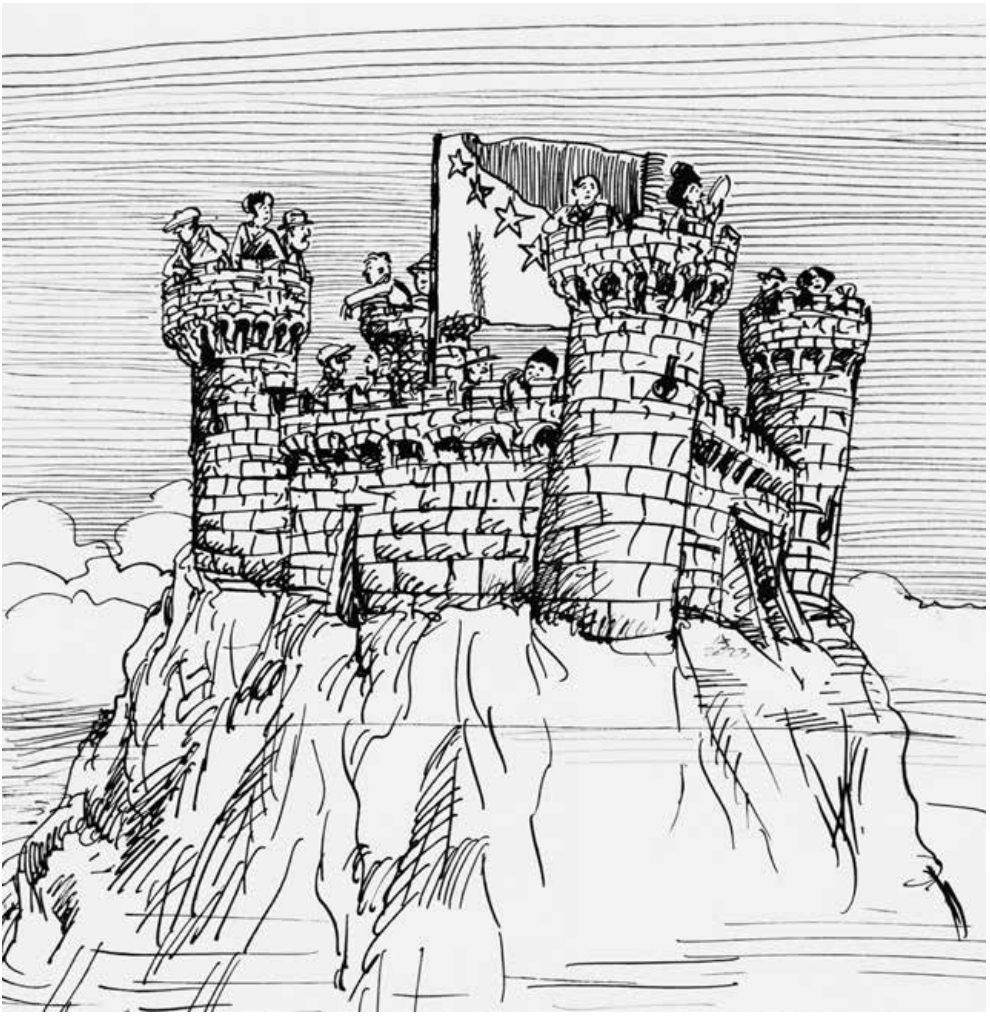
Reinforcing nationalism

Political leaders representing various ethnic groups exploit nationalistic sentiments to gain power and advance their interests. These leaders often promote exclusive narratives that emphasise the importance of ethnic identity and solidarity. Whilst Bosniak political leaders emphasise the continuity of BiH as a unified country, the leaders of Bosnia's Serbs and Croats work continually to undermine and weaken it, driving it to the brink of collapse. Nationalism remains one of the key legitimising political ideas they use to maintain their power. Both this, and the constant concessions made to these nationalists by both the European Union and



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the US, have resulted in the complete absence of a strong central government that represents all ethnic groups equally. This has resulted in the crippling of the state, to the point where it cannot serve its citizens in any normal way. The dysfunctional state, in turn, serves to reinforce nationalism, as it causes great frustration amongst the populace.

Economic factors have also played a significant role in fuelling nationalism in BiH. The country's transition from a socialist economy to a market-oriented one has resulted in economic disparities between different regions and communities, with almost 18 per cent of the population living under the poverty line. The lack of economic opportunities, particularly in rural areas, has led to increased discontent and frustration among certain ethnic groups. Nationalist rhetoric, in the form of Greater Serbia and Greater Croatia, often promises economic prosperity and a better future, attracting support from those feeling marginalised.

Perhaps the most potent source of nationalism, however, remains the lingering legacy of the war, which left a lasting impact on the population's psyche. It reinforced ethnic identities and created deep-seated animosity between different ethnic groups. Memories of the war and the trauma associated with it have often been used by nationalist leaders to manipulate public opinion and propagate their agendas. Nationalist narratives highlight victimhood and persecution, perpetuate ethnic divisions and hinder reconciliation efforts. Serbian and Croatian nationalists, both inside and outside of politics, celebrate and simultaneously deny the crimes they committed against Bosniaks but also against each other. These denials serve to keep nationalism very much alive. In the last year alone, there were 90 incidents of denial by high-ranking Bosnian Serb, Serbian and Croatian politicians.

How to move forward?

The continued power of nationalist ideas and narratives in BiH has all but destroyed any social or political cohesion. Ethnic divisions have hindered the establishment of a unified political system and resulted in an all but permanent political deadlock. Nationalist rhetoric continues to fuel political conflicts, further deepening resentments and prejudices. Inter-ethnic violence and discrimination continue albeit at a low level (for the moment), inhibiting the restoration of trust and hindering progress towards a prosperous and inclusive society.

While nationalism may deliver short-term political gains, its long-term consequences have proven to be detrimental to stability and social cohesion. Overcoming nationalism requires the promotion of inclusive politics, economic development

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and the nurturing of a collective memory that fosters understanding and reconciliation among different ethnic groups. Only through such endeavours can BiH hope to move beyond the perils of nationalism and towards a more unified and prosperous future. EE

Hikmet Karčić is a genocide scholar at the University of Sarajevo. He is the author of *Torture, Humiliate, Kill: Inside the Bosnian Serb Camp System* (University of Michigan Press, 2022).

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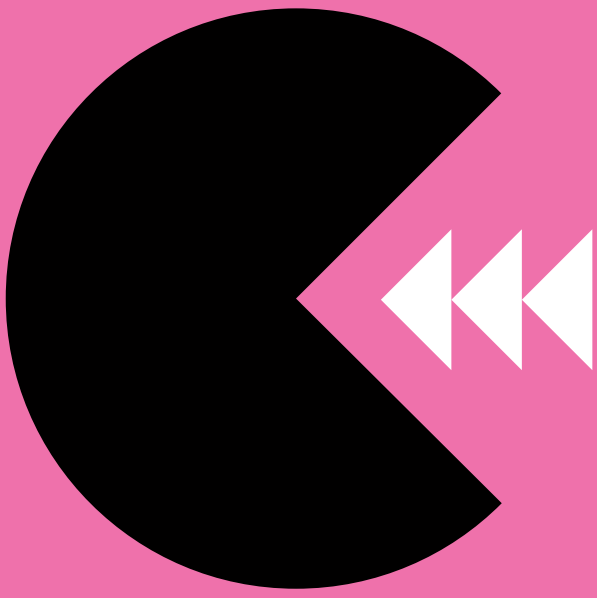

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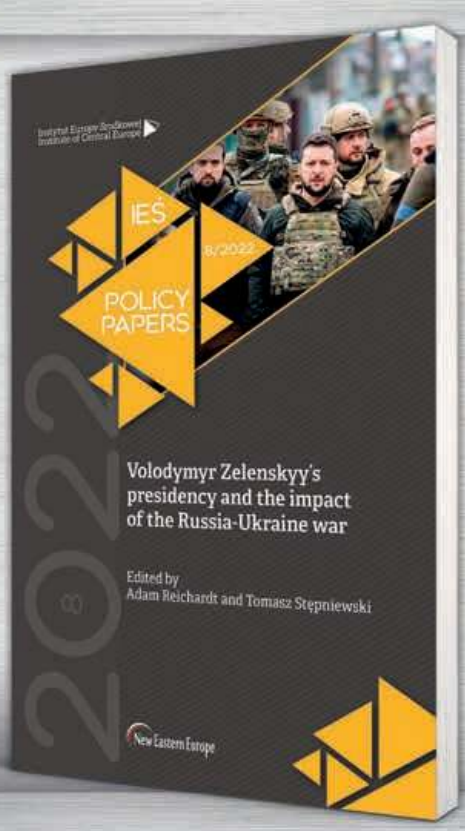

Volodymyr Zelenskyy's presidency and the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war

Edited by
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Jewish connections in the Balkans and Eastern Europe

ADAM BALCER

The great influence that Balkan Jewry had on their co-religionists from Eastern Europe is one of the best examples of the close historical and cultural ties connecting both regions. It also shows how both of these groups were bound to the rest of the continent in a display of Europe's multicultural heritage.

In June 2022, Ukraine and Moldova received EU candidate status and subsequently joined the ranks of the countries of the Western Balkans, which for 20 years have been the main area of EU enlargement policies. The Union justifies the accession of these states through reference to a common European historical and cultural legacy, of which both the Balkans and Eastern Europe are an integral part. Such an approach means there is a tacit acknowledgement that a European heritage devoid of Islam and Judaism is unfathomable. The local awareness of these close historical and cultural relationships is growing in both the regions and the EU, although it is far from sufficient.

One of the greatest representations of this network are the Balkan Jews. They had great influence concerning the history and culture of the Jews of Eastern Europe. The interaction between these two groups was the result of the growth of trade between different regions of Europe and between continents. It was especially intense in the borderlands between Ukraine and Moldova, an area which could be dubbed a transition zone between the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

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Ancient colonies and medieval globalisation

The Jews arrived in the Balkans during antiquity alongside the conquests of Alexander the Great (fourth century BC). As a result, this region can boast one of the oldest Jewish presences in Europe. They would gradually become Hellenised. As part of *Magna Graecia* – the Greek colonisation of the Mediterranean and Black Sea – these Jews left the Balkans for the coast of today's Ukraine in the first century CE. The Jewish history of Ukraine is therefore much longer than that of the Slavs, the main ancestors of the Ukrainians. The Balkan Jews of the Byzantine Empire (the Roman Empire's successor) took on the name "Romaniotes" (Romans). Their language – Yevanic (from the Hebrew name of Greece which refers to the Ionians, one of the ancient Greek tribes) – was very similar to Greek. In the tenth century the Romaniotes in the Balkans and Ukraine were joined by the Karaites, adherents of Judaism who had come under strong influence from Islam in the Middle East. They would gradually form a separate monotheistic religion with strong connections to Judaism.

In the ninth century intercontinental trade emerged on a scale never seen before. It would connect Europe with Asia and Africa, and its development was closely linked to the Islamic expansion. John M. Hobson, author of *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation*, named this period an "oriental globalisation". Intercontinental trade would see an unprecedented rise in the 13th century during the Mongol conquest. The Romaniotes and the Karaites would also join this "oriental globalisation". They would carry their goods northwards deep into Ukraine. They would travel along the Dnieper, Europe's key trade route, nicknamed the "Route from the Varangians (Vikings) to the Greek". This is because it ultimately connected Constantinople with the Northern Europe. In Kyiv, this trail intersected with the arterial roads leading to the Silk Road, running from Northern Italy and Southern Germany through Central Europe, Ukraine and the Great Steppe on to China through Central Asia. Another arterial road went through Iran and Anatolia towards the Middle East and back through Anatolia up into the Balkans.

As a result of the northward migration of the Karaites, this group would end up speaking a Turkic language similar to Crimean Tatar. It was on the Ukrainian section of the Silk Road that Balkan Jews encountered Ashkenazi Jews, who had arrived in Eastern Europe from Germany and spoke Yiddish – a language similar to German. The great significance of this Eastern trade in Ashkenazi history is underlined by the fact that this self-applied term comes from the biblical designation for the Scythians (an ancient Iranian nomadic people that ruled the Great Steppe from the eastern Balkans to Lake Baikal at the height of their power). Over the next centuries the nomadic peoples that would roam the steppes of Ukraine

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and the eastern Balkans would also be known as Scythians. In claiming that they were descendants of the Sarmatians (another Iranian nomadic people), Poles and Ukrainians would indirectly refer to the Scythians, as according to Greek mythology the Sarmatians were the sons of Amazons and Scythians.

Sepharad and the Balkans

This "oriental globalisation" led to the creation of numerous colonial trade outposts on the coastlines of the Black Sea and the Balkans. These were established by Italian maritime powers such as Amalfi, Ancona, Gaeta, Genoa and Venice, as well as the Croatian Dubrovnik. Just like during the time of the ancient Roman Empire, the Balkans and the Black Sea were once again connected with the Mediterranean through a sea route. Furthermore, the sea routes would expand from the Mediterranean further up to the countries of the North Sea, especially the Netherlands. Many population centres of the Low Countries belonged to the Hanseatic League, a trade union of cities located alongside the North and Baltic seas. This would develop into a dense network of trade routes that would cover the entire coastline of Europe in the late Middle Ages. Jews would also participate in this trade. These maritime trade routes would have a crucial role in their history, as they would use them to escape persecution in the Iberian Peninsula towards the end of the 15th century. This expulsion was a disaster for all Jews, as this region had been the most important centre for Jewish culture. It had experienced its Golden Age thanks to an intense absorption of the achievements of Islamic and Christian civilisation, but also through holding the role of intermediary between Muslims and Catholics. The Jewish refugees from Spain would become known as Sephardic Jews, meaning that they hailed from *Sepharad* – the Hebrew Biblical name for the Iberian Peninsula. Their native language was Ladino ("Latin"), a language very similar to Spanish. The Sephardic Jews would mostly find safe refuge in the Ottoman Empire and Morocco but they would also reach the Netherlands and Italy. One of their greatest points of concentration became the Ottoman Balkans. Over the following centuries, the Sephardic Jews absorbed a majority of the Romaniotes. The unofficial capital of the Balkan Jews became Thessaloniki. For a few centuries, it had a Jewish majority and was also known as the world's largest Jewish city for some time. The

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Sephardic Jewish poet Samuel Usque called it *Madre de Israel* (Mother of Israel). Other important Jewish centres in the Balkans were Vlorë (Albania), Skopje and Bitola (North Macedonia), and Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina).

"Polish Corridor" and borderland

In the late Middle Ages, the trade network surrounding Europe would come full circle with the expansions of the union between Poland and Lithuania (known as the Commonwealth from 1569) and the Ottoman Empire. Consequently, the region between the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean Sea in Eastern Europe came under the control of Poland-Lithuania and the Ottomans. A new land-based trade route would then emerge connecting Central and Eastern Europe with the Balkans, through the Vistula, Dniester and Prut rivers, all the way to Istanbul. Fernand Braudel, a prominent French historian, named it the "Polish Corridor". One of the most important towns located in this corridor was Lviv, which had earlier been a crossroads for trade caravans just like Kyiv. It is not a coincidence that Lviv was the second largest city of the Commonwealth for some time, while also being the largest Jewish centre in the Polish-Lithuanian state. Sephardic Jews from the Balkans would migrate through this "Polish Corridor" in the northern direction alongside other traders and craftsmen settling in Lviv, among other places. They would come to create their northernmost community in Zamość, located on the lands of the Kyivan Rus' (in today's eastern Poland). It was there that they would encounter fellow Sephardic Jews who had arrived from northern Italy. Over time these Sephardic migrant communities became assimilated with local Ashkenazi Jews. Meanwhile, Ashkenazi Jews would themselves leave for the Ottoman Balkans as "economic migrants", captives or refugees fleeing the Cossacks. The Ottoman Turks called these Ashkenazi Jews *Lehli* (Poles). It was in the borderlands between the Union/Commonwealth and this so-called *Pax Ottomana* that wars were waged, trade flourished and an unprecedented cultural *métissage* simmered. More precisely, this took place in the regions of Podolia and Pokuttia (Ukraine) on the one side, and the Ottoman vassal of the Principality of Moldavia (today's Republic of Moldova, eastern Romania, and the region of Bukovina divided between Romania and Ukraine) on the other. This borderland of religions, languages, cultures and ethnoses was also the frontier between the Balkans and Eastern Europe, between

Sephardic Jews from the Balkans would migrate through the "Polish Corridor", alongside other traders and craftsmen, settling in Lviv.

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the Great Steppe and the Carpathian mountain range, and finally between the Balkan Sephardic Jews and the Eastern European Ashkenazi Jews.

Painted hipped roof synagogues and klezmers

Among the most spectacular material representations of this cultural melting pot in Podolia and Pokuttia were the painted wooden hipped roof synagogues, of which the oldest were located along the Prut and Dniester rivers. Several dozen such synagogues were constructed in the lands of the First Polish Republic. Unfortunately, none remain today, having been destroyed during the world wars. The first paintings on the wooden walls were made in the middle of the 17th century, although the number of synagogues with such features grew significantly in the 18th century. It could be said that a separate Jewish school of painting emerged, with artists reaching all the way to Bavaria, where painted wooden synagogues were called "Polish synagogues". The only remaining original can be found in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, where it was moved from Horb am Main. The paintings depict a typical town from Podolia or Pokuttia with Greek Catholic churches right next to the walls of Jerusalem. The hipped roof style had biblical connotations, as it was inspired by the tents where the Hebrews dwelled once they had escaped Egyptian slavery, crossing the desert towards the "Promised Land" led by Moses. The tabernacle essentially functioned as a temple in the desert. However, the shape of the synagogues and their colourful paintings are especially reminiscent of the tents of Crimean Tatars and Ottoman Turks. Their interiors featured a beautiful array of tapestries and other forms of woven carpets. Ottoman art was an inspiration for all the citizens of the Commonwealth regardless of ethnicity and religion. Not only did they import a vast range of artefacts, but they also produced them on a large scale, especially in Lviv and the surrounding towns.

The Jews would also take part in this endeavour. In 1659 Lviv presented the Polish King John II Casimir Vasa with a beautiful Turkish tent made by the Jews of the city after they had won a competition. The Polish architects Maria and Kazimierz Piechotka noted that "the walls and vaults of synagogue rooms were covered with polychromes imitating the interiors of representative eastern tents. ... The walls were divided into vertical fields, resembling the 'fences' of tents. In these fields, framed similarly to mihrabs, tablets with texts of psalms and prayers were placed. ... The flat way of painting resembled tent appliqués and embroidery. The impression of textile character was emphasised by carved decorations: cut out of boards, hanging dentils, pelmets and fringes." (*Mihrab* is a niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the direction of Mecca).

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This Ottoman influence was further enhanced once Podolia became part of the empire for a few decades towards the end of the 17th century. Meanwhile in Khotyn, a frontier fortress on the banks of the Dniester, a large Ottoman garrison was stationed. It was composed mainly of Balkan Muslims (Albanians, Bosniaks and Turks). The architecture of the hipped roof synagogues was also influenced by the wooden Orthodox churches found in the Ukrainian and Romanian parts of the Carpathian Mountains (the ancestors of the builders often came from the Balkans), or the Polish baroque, which was influenced by Italy. In neighbouring Moldova and Pokuttia this mix of cultures was mostly seen in Jewish music. It is here that "klezmer music" was born in the 18th century, combining Ashkenazi and Sephardic music. However, one could detect a true "Tower of Babel" if one listens carefully: a combination of Ukrainian folk music, the sounds of Balkan highlanders, the rhythms of Istanbul, Roma melodies, Cossack dumkas and the vibrations of Tatar instruments. From the legendary *hora* danced in the Balkans and Anatolia, to the *Bulgar* (Bulgarian), *Sirba* (Serb) and Ukrainian *Kolomeike* (from Kolomyya, the capital of Pokuttia), the music form possessed many influences. Klezmer music confirmed its syncretism also through the *Kozachok* (from the Cossacks), *kasap* (Turkish for butcher) and *Terkisher dobriden* or *dobranich* (a Yiddish-Slavic name for "the Turkish good afternoon " or "good night"). This was all played in the rhythm of the Greek *sirto.*

Sabbatai Zevi and Jakub Frank

Sephardic Jews of the Balkans also had a great influence on the Ashkenazi Jews of Podolia and Pokuttia in the sphere of religion. Towards the end of the 17th century the Jews of the Pokuttia region became attracted to Sabbateanism, a religious movement created by Sabbatai Zevi (1626-76), a rabbi born in Izmir in a Romaniote family from the Peloponnese. It was in the Turkish coastal town that he joined a Sephardic community influenced by the teachings of a rabbi from Skopje, the modern capital of North Macedonia. Zevi announced himself as the messiah. The phenomenon of Sabbateanism is connected to the Khmelnytsky Uprising (1648-54), which was a tremendous shock for the entire Jewish community. Ukrainian Cossacks murdered, expelled or forcibly converted large numbers of Jews. When Sabbateanism emerged it was supported by many Jews around the world, but in the end it was rejected by the majority.

It was then that Zevi converted to Islam, combining its mystical tradition with that of Judaism and Christianity. Zevi spent some time in the Balkans residing in Istanbul, Thessaloniki and Ulcinj, where he died and was buried. The wife of Sab-

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batai Zevi Sarah was an Ashkenazi Jew from Podolia. She was a central figure in the Sabbatean movement, having prophecies of her own. Many incredible stories were told about her. After she lost her family in the Khmelnytsky Uprising she had been forced to convert to Catholicism and was raised by Polish nuns. Later she was also adopted by a Polish noble family. According to one of the legends, an angel visited her in a dream before she was about to be wed. He made it clear that she was the daughter of a rabbi who survived and escaped to Iran where he died. The angel took her to his tomb in Iran and revealed she would become the wife of the messiah.

Sarah was clearly a person of many contradictions. According to one tale, she had been a prostitute before becoming Sabbatai's wife, while another claimed she was a virgin. Her position in the movement was not a coincidence. The Sabbateans promoted a greater role for women in religious and social life. According to the Israeli-British scholar Ada Rapoport-Albert, a source of their "feminism" was the Bektashi Order – an influential non-orthodox Muslim brotherhood with members among the Janissaries (the elite units of the Ottoman army). The members of the Order were mostly Balkan Muslims. The capital of the Sabbatean movement became Thessaloniki, where its members became known as *Dönme* (Turkish for turncoat). The city became a magnet for the movement's supporters from around the world, including Podolia and Pokuttia. One particular battleground between the Sabbateans and their opponents who also came from Eastern Europe (Ashkenazi and Sephardic, from both Podolia and the Balkans) was Amsterdam. In the 16th and 17th centuries this city became a refuge for many Jewish refugees from both the Iberian Peninsula and Ukraine. At the same time, Amsterdam was a global metropolis with strong trade relationships with the Ottomans and the Commonwealth.

The most important Sabbatean in Podolia was Jacob Frank (1726-91), who lived and roamed the "Polish Corridor" on to Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Greece (Thessaloniki) and Turkey, connecting Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jewry. His first language became Turkish and he converted to Islam during his stay in the Balkans. He became both a janissary and a Bektashite, and later returned to Poland where he converted to Catholicism in Lviv. It is also possible that he died as an Orthodox Christian. The followers of Frank would convert to Catholicism in the Commonwealth and Islam in the Ottoman Empire. Frank saw no issue in this split. On the contrary, he justified it by saying that "when a man holds on with one hand and does it for several years, his hand will become numb and fall down, but when a man holds on with two hands to two places, when one hand becomes numb, the other still holds on. When the second hand becomes numb, he can hold on with the first. This is why many men fell, because they did not think about it and held on to one place. These two (places) are Ishmael and Esau." Ishmael was

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the personification of Islam, while Esau symbolised Christianity. Many outstanding writers, poets and politicians from Eastern Europe and the Balkans have Frankist ancestry. The character of Jacob Frank became known worldwide thanks to *The Books of Jacob*, the magnus opus of Olga Tokarczuk, the Polish recipient of the Nobel Prize in literature.

Hasidism

In the 18th century a new movement was formed in Podolia and Pokuttia based on Jewish mysticism. Some researchers believe Hasidism was based on Sabbateanism, but others claim it was developed as a reaction to it. The truth might be in the middle, with Hasidism being both for but also against it. What remains clear is that Hasidim did not condemn Sabbateanism. Israel Ben Eliezer (1698-1760), also known as "Besht" (an acronym for "Master of the Good Name" in Hebrew), was of the opinion that Sabbatai had a spark of the messiah in him, hoping to attract his followers to join his own movement.

Although Hasidism was formed among Ashkenazi Jews, its rituals and rules are mostly based on Sephardic Judaism. This is understandable if we take into account that "Besht" was a Sephardic Jew from the Balkans. He was born in Podolia when it was under Ottoman rule. His biography notes his visits to the Balkans, including a crucial visit to Istanbul on his way to Jerusalem. It was at the Bosphorus that he decided to turn back towards Podolia and become a mystic. "Besht" had been inspired by Muslim mystics in the Balkans (Sufis/Dervishes), who pray in an ecstatic way combining song and dance. According to scholars on religion, Hasidism also includes Tatar influences, including shamanism from the Great Steppe, and Orthodox, even Ukrainian Hutsul (Carpathian highlanders) beliefs from Pokuttia. It is worth noting that the centre of Orthodox mysticism at the time was in a Carpathian monastery in Ottoman Moldova, in close proximity to "Besht's cave". The holy man in that monastery was the Ukrainian Paisius Velichkovsky (1722-94), who himself had Jewish ancestry. Just like the Jewish mystics of Podolia, he would frequently search for the spark of the messiah in the Balkans.

Although Hasidism was formed among Ashkenazi Jews, its rituals and rules are mostly based on Sephardic Judaism.

It is possible that Besht learnt to enter a state of trance in other ways than dance. He would frequently smoke something known as a Turkish pipe. Jan Doktór, a renowned researcher of Hasidism, does not rule out that there was more than tobacco in the pipe, namely hashish. The grandson of the mystic wrote that "when

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'Besht' wanted to elevate himself to higher worlds he smoked the pipe. Whenever he inhaled, he moved from one world to another." According to one of the stories, the pipe was a gift from Oleksa Dovbush (1700-45), a famous Ukrainian Hutsul highwayman from Pokuttia. Besht and Dovbush met there because the Jewish mystic meditated in a cave, fasting and eating one loaf of bread a week.

The Ottoman influence from the Balkans also influenced the Hasidic garment. A cape used by Hasidim on most days is called a *khalat*. This is an Arabic word that came through Turkish from the Balkans. It is modelled on the Turkish *zhupan*. Hasidim also wear Turkish *kapce* without ankles. Yarmulke is again a Turkish word. On holidays a Hasid wears a *shtreimel*. It is a round hat made from fox fur based on the Turkish *kalpak*. The Hasidim were not unique in this regard. Turkish and Tatar fashion also had a great influence on the dress of the nobility, burghers and even the peasants in the Commonwealth, which again proves just how deeply the Ottoman Balkans shaped the culture of Eastern Europe. EE

Adam Balcer is the Programme Director at the Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe in Wrocław, a think tank and publisher of *New Eastern Europe*.

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Former Yugoslav nations deserve peace

An interview with Gojko Božović, a Belgrade-based Serbian poet, literary critic and publisher. Interviewer: Nikodem Szczygłowski

NIKODEM SZCZYGŁOWSKI: It has been 30 years since the break-up of Yugoslavia. In an essay published in 2021 titled *Yugoslavia. 30 Years*, the Slovenian writer Drago Jančar compared the countries that once made up Yugoslavia to islands in an archipelago. The publishing house which you head is also called Arhipelag, which in English means archipelago. What is your mission and what kind of literature do you opt to publish?

GOJKO BOŽOVIĆ: The Arhipelag was founded in 2007. At that time the reality was very different from the one we live in today. It was before the global economic crisis, before the great wave of populism that swept the world and still has no intention of leaving it. At that time, there was much more democracy in Eastern European and Balkan states and societies, especially in Serbia. Overall, social, political, economic and cultural conditions were better. Then, in Serbia, we had an economic crisis and a crisis of social institutions caused by populism. Finally, we came to the authoritarian political system we have today. This is our reality, which is also the main topic of the books published by Arhipelag. We want to offer our readers a comprehensive selection of contemporary Serbian, European and world literature and, at the same time, show where we are in the humanities. To understand our world and play a role in it, we need to read the best books of our time. Thus, we put a lot of effort into publishing good books, but we also need to find readers for them. We do not publish the so-called popular books or books that are guaranteed commercial success. For a book to be published by our house it has to be a good book, as cliché as it sounds. In this sense, Arhipelag pursues something that many publishers are increasingly moving away from. We want culture to be the criterion for selecting the books and ideas we present.

Are Serbian readers interested in the works of Croatian, Slovenian or Macedonian writers?

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The Serbian book market and Serbian readers are very open and read books from all over the world and from different European countries. A lot of books in various fields are translated in Serbia, but mainly fiction. They are also translated from different languages, although English is of course the dominant one. In this sense, the Serbian book market is not very different from other European countries. The main difference is that Serbia is a poorer country, so book prices are much lower here than in the European Union, and the number of copies printed is even several times lower than the EU average. Overall, Serbian readers are open to different literary experiences. Of course, books from the former Yugoslav republics are also available here, but to varying degrees depending on the country. This sometimes is paradoxical because there is a shortage of translators for some of these languages. However, despite the shortage of translators from Slovenian, and especially Macedonian, we still publish quite a few books by Slovenian and Macedonian authors. At the same time, I have to say that writers from Croatia – and even from Bosnia and Herzegovina – are much more popular here than Slovenian and Macedonian writers. Even more, there are some Croatian writers whose popularity, and hence the number of the copies of their books, are much larger in Serbia than in their native Croatia. Such is the case of Miljenko Jergović, who is very popular here. His numerous interviews are published by leading Serbian newspapers and magazines, and he is a frequent guest on popular radio and television stations. In fact, all his books are published in Belgrade at the same time as they are in Zagreb, and sometimes in Belgrade even earlier. And he is not the only example.

Ante Tomić is equally popular but also Zoran Ferić, while Robert Perišić and Olja Savićević Ivančević also have their loyal readers. These authors, like the writers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, often approach topics concerning the wars of the 1990s and the break-up of Yugoslavia, which are very painful and even provocative from the Serbian point of view. To me, it seems unfair that Croatian or Bosnian literature is more often read in Serbia than Slovenian or Macedonian literature. In my view, Slovenian literature is very innovative, very contemporary, with excellent narrators, with top authors. I would like Serbian readers to get to know it better and read more of it. At the same time, it has to be said that the Serbian book market is more open to literature from the countries of the former Yugoslavia than the cultural world in those countries is open to Serbian literature.

That is why we publish many more translations from Slovenian than there are translations from Serbian in Slovenia and, as I have already said before, there are incomparably more Croatian and Bosnian authors published and read in Serbia than Serbian authors published and read in Croatia or Bosnia. Only in Northern Macedonia are there many

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more Serbian authors published than vice versa. I know of only two other countries in Europe where, as in Macedonia, much more Serbian literature is published than vice versa – these are Bulgaria and Ukraine. Although we are also trying to make a difference in this area and recently Arhipelag has published *Karbid*, a novel written by the Ukrainian writer Andriy Lyubka.

Croatia has developed a literary genre known as war literature (mainly referring to the 1991-95 war), while younger Slovenian or Macedonian writers like to explore themes from the period before the break-up of Yugoslavia. What characterises Serbian literature today?

Serbian literature has been undergoing some changes. For a long time, it has mainly focused on historical issues from different periods of our history, which is unfortunately heavily mythologised here. However, somewhere around 2008, readers' expectations changed and many young writers started writing about completely different topics, although we still have many Serbian authors who focus mainly on historical themes: the wars of the 1990s, Yugoslav heritage, the break-up of Yugoslavia, Yugoslav communism, as well as the First and Second World Wars.

However, the majority of our contemporary literature, and I am thinking here especially about the novels, has by and large moved on from these historical but also political and social themes to more deeply explore our inner worlds: intimacy, privacy, emotions. In this sense, our literature reflects the trends that characterise European literature today.

Goran Vojnović's novel *My Fatherland* (original name: *Jugoslavija, moja dežela*), which is popular in Slovenia, is a rather unusual take on the aftermath of the break-up of Yugoslavia. Obviously, the Serbian perspective on this topic is very different from the Slovenian or Croatian ones. Are young Serbian authors also working out the traumas of the not-so-distant past? Is the "Yugo-nostalgia" in Serbia different to that in other Balkan states?

I think that the phenomenon that we call Yugo-nostalgia in the true sense of the word, and on a larger scale, exists only in Serbia. Of course, it also exists in North Macedonia – especially when successive crises erupt there because its neighbours are undermining the Macedonian identity, which, after all, was fully formed during the Yugoslav period. For the Macedonians, therefore, this term Yugo-nostalgia has a somewhat different meaning. In Montenegro, on the other hand, even before the recent change of government, a resolution was passed declaring that the country's unification with Serbia as part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1918 was null and void. This is quite unusual, as nothing like this has happened even in Croatia. It is as if someone had declared the French bourgeois revolution invalid. There is certainly a sense of Yugoslav nostalgia in each of these countries, including Montenegro, but it is not a feeling of the ma-

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Photo: Vesna Lalić

jority. The smallest degree of this sentiment can probably be found in Slovenia, although young Slovenes who did not grow up in Yugoslavia are keen to come to Belgrade, which they see above all as a great metropolis where they can have fun. For certain Yugo-nostalgia exists in Bosnia and Herzegovina – both among the Bosniak or Muslim population and among the Serbian population. In Croatia, it is not, and never has been, a sentiment that is shared by the majority of the population, although some Croatian leftists emphasise attachment to some Yugoslav ideals. Yugo-nostalgia is therefore not dominant in any other former Yugoslav republic apart from Serbia.

This is not to say that Yugoslav nostalgia is also prevalent in Serbia, but it is nevertheless a country where the majority of the population is to some degree Yugo-nostalgic and identifies in some way with Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav idea. This is a very interesting phenomenon, which can be explained by our history. The idea of Yugoslav unity was born in 1918 from the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Serbia's victory in the First World War.

Serbia considered this new state as its own, for which it even sacrificed its name. Thus, the word Serbia disappeared from geographical and historical maps and was replaced by Yugoslavia. Political tensions in the country arose from within and were constantly pushing Yugoslavia in different directions. It must also be honestly said that the political integration within the country never translated into cultural or economic integration. Thus, the process of breaking up Yugoslavia was started by the breaking away

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of Slovenia, followed by Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and finally, in 2006, Montenegro. Only then did Serbia, in a sense, regain its name. Until then, it fully identified with the name Yugoslavia.

Would you say that the former linguistic community of the so-called Serbo-Croatian language users still exists in some form? What does it look like from the Serbian publisher's perspective? Do readers in Montenegro, Croatia or Bosnia and Herzegovina reach out for books that are published in Serbian?

This linguistic community exists in a form that still allows us all to communicate. Of course, Macedonian and Slovenian are different and quite distinct languages, but we still somehow understand them, especially the generation that grew up in the former Yugoslavia. Probably the younger generation now understands Slovenian or Macedonian less, just as in Slovenia the young understand Serbian less, but when it comes to Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro there are no major language barriers between people to engage in mutual communication.

Thus, in linguistic – but not political – terms we can say that mutual understanding is quite high, although each country claims to have its own version of the language, which gives rise to various disputes. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, half of the Bosnians call the same language Serbian and the other half Bosnian. In Montenegro, the language has recently been called Montenegrin, and the alphabet has been supplemented with two or three letters to indicate the sounds used by some local dialects. The problem is yet deeper than that. The break-up of Yugoslavia brought with it above all an identity problem. This problem did not exist in Slovenia – because of the different language – and to a lesser extent it did not exist in Northern Macedonia either, at least not at the time of the break-up of Yugoslavia, when no one had yet seriously questioned the Macedonian identity. The other republics that emerged after the break-up of Yugoslavia, however, sought to create an even greater distance from Belgrade, and which could also be seen on a linguistic level.

Thousands of new words were coined in Croatia to enrich the Croatian language, although most of them have not stood the test of time. When reading Croatian books, one gets an impression that the difference between the spoken and written language is constantly growing. In today's Serbia, this difference between the spoken and written language does not exist. Nevertheless, we still understand each other in linguistic terms with Croats. Generally speaking, Serbia today is probably the most open book market compared to other countries of the former Yugoslavia. For sure, there are more works by Croatian authors published in Serbia every year than Serbian authors published in Croatia in the last ten years. In a similar way, there are also many more translations of Slovenian writers published in Serbia than of Serbian writers in Slovenia.

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So why are the books by Croatian authors that have already been published in Croatian also published in Serbia, and why is it almost impossible to find Serbian books in Croatian bookshops?

There are several reasons for this situation, including customs, economic and market restrictions. However, there is a lack of willingness on both sides to solve these problems on a political level. The world of culture, unfortunately, suffers the most, in contrast, for example, to the world of crime or economic transactions, where Serbs and Croats cooperate perfectly. Serbian books are somewhat easier to purchase in Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, there the problem is the lack of a network of real bookshops in the country. In Montenegro, on the other hand, the problem is an extremely small market.

Serbian is currently using both the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets. How many books are published today in Serbian using the Latin alphabet as opposed to the Cyrillic alphabet?

There are no exact figures to answer this question, but it seems to me that there are now more books published in Latin than in the Cyrillic alphabet. But when it comes to the press, it is evident that most daily newspapers are published in Latin, alongside most political and analytical journals and the entertainment press. And this is the question that is often asked in public: is the Cyrillic alphabet "endangered" in Serbia? Are there laws needed to "protect" the Cyrillic alphabet? Here and there, we see some social and political initiatives aimed at tackling that issue. At Arhipelag we publish books in both the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets, depending on the author's choice. And it happens that roughly half of the books we publish are in Cyrillic, while the other half is in the Latin alphabet. I think most readers in Serbia do not even pay attention to which alphabet they are reading in their book. Although the traditional Serbian alphabet is, of course, the Cyrillic alphabet, the Latin alphabet has been widely used in Serbia for more than 100 years now, and has become widely accepted by the society.

What do you think unites Serbs, Croats and Slovenes today – if anything?

Of course, there are different Serbs, different Slovenes and different Croats. However, I think that we still have something in common. That something is the legacy of Yugoslavia, even if it lives on only in the generations that remember it. This legacy is already fading a little bit away and one day it will probably disappear completely. Nevertheless, I believe that it is important to reach a higher level of mutual understanding between the former Yugoslav republics. This could also serve as the basis for better political understanding. I think that it is culture that can better link us together. Much more than the economy or, in particular, politics. Politics especially has proved to be the source of many different conflicts between the peoples of the former Yugoslavia. I also do not see any need for a new Yugoslav integration because it would only cause

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further conflicts and misunderstandings. I believe that the former Yugoslav nations deserve peace and can only find it if they accept that they live side by side, that they have something in common and that they cannot create their own identity at all costs, denying the identity of their neighbours. We should try to come to terms with our history, with the circumstances surrounding the creation of the first and second Yugoslavia, and with the unfortunate break-up of that country. It is not so much the disintegration of Yugoslavia that is a tragedy, but the fact that it disintegrated in precisely this way – through a whole series of wars, accompanied by serious crimes committed by all parties to the conflict in these wars. Well, except perhaps for the Northern Macedonians, who later had their own armed conflict with the local Albanians, in which there were also crimes on both sides. There are no innocents in war. More than 20 years have passed since these wars. The last act was the bombing of Serbia in 1999, after the wars in Bosnia, Croatia and Slovenia had already ended. It was followed by the – fortunately short-lived – Albanian-Macedonian civil war.

Today the wars are still taking place, but in a different way. There are no physical clashes, no major incidents, no armed struggle, but there are very real political conflicts. All the issues that were open 20 years ago are still open today, and this does not bode well for the future of our Balkan nations, as each nation still feels that it is a victim at least in relation to one other nation. People who have such a strong sense of being a victim and hold a victim complex are not able to fully devote themselves to everyday life. They are not able to do business, engage in cultural activities and other forms of social life. That is why I believe it is culture which could serve as a kind of salvation and help us break out of this vicious cycle of history. Thus, I think it would be much better if we base our attempts at true understanding between the Yugoslav peoples on the work of our writers. For example, Ivo Andrić, Meša Selimović or Danilo Kiš. ŁE

Gojko Božović is a Serbian writer, literary critic, essayist and publisher. He is the founder of the Archipelag publishing house.

Nikodem Szczygłowski is a traveller, writer and reporter. He studied Mediterranean Archaeology at the University of Łódź and at CEMI in Prague. He is fluent in Lithuanian and Slovenian.

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Kundera's warnings are still relevant today

A conversation with Samuel Abrahám, Slovak intellectual and editor in chief and publisher of the Slovak journal *Kritika & Kontext*.

ADAM REICHARDT: Despite the fact that Milan Kundera was a well-known writer with some ground-breaking books and essays, he was quite a private person. You knew him personally, how would you describe Kundera, as a person, writer and a colleague?

SAMUEL ABRAHÁM: True, he was a very private person, but whoever knew him, was struck by his humour and *joie de vivre*. He told us many funny stories about his beginnings in France, often making fun of himself and he managed to catch you in his web of jokes, if unguarded. Above all, it was an amazing picture to see him and his wife Věra, being so close and also intellectual peers and humorous. I would not call myself a friend but someone with whom I could correspond and occasionally discuss things that interested us the most – philosophy and Classical music. I have known Kundera since 2000. The reason I contacted him was quite ironic in retrospect. After the extremist Austrian politician Jörg Haider become part of the governing coalition, my Austrian friends refused to hold a meeting in Vienna and we decided to move it to Bratislava. Having just finished reading Kundera's *Betrayed Testaments,* I suggested Milan Kundera as the keynote speaker in order to make our unexpected event in Bratislava more attractive. With my letter that I sent him, in order to entice him to reply, I added a review that I published about his book of essays. Of course, this was the year 2000 – still in the age of fax machines. To my shock, within a few hours, the fax machine was churning a reply by Milan Kundera! In it he apologised that he wouldn't come to Bratislava explaining that he does not attend conferences or public events. Yet, he was really pleased with my review, writing that I highlighted so well the gist of his essay. Although he did not come to Bratislava for that event, for me it was the beginning of a rich intellectual en-

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counter with the great writer. After the fax ceased to exist in 2004 or 2005, he refused to have his own email address. So I corresponded through his wife's email. Sometimes he wrote and sometimes his wife would respond, quoting his messages. But we had a long correspondence, which often included his wife's added words and thoughts.

This exchange lasted for a few years and then my wife and I finally met him in person in Paris. During our meeting, I expressed my wish to translate those books that were written in French, into Slovak. I argued that if his books can be translated into Serbian, Slovenian and Japanese, then why not Slovak? He laughed and liked the idea that we would pull a few pranks if the Czechs would be forced to read his book in Slovak. A glass of good Armagnac sealed the deal. The reason for this strange arrangement was that he did not allow his French books to be translated into Czech by anyone but himself. But then he added that he does not have time to do it, for he would rather write another book. So, his books written in French were not translated into Czech or Slovak – only recently did the Brno publishing house Atlantis start to translate his books into Czech and simultaneously into Slovak.

He didn't trust any translator to translate his works into Czech?

There are a number of very funny stories regarding this. He told me one about the Russian translation of one of his books. He said that a Russian woman came to see them and she was very nice and they had a very pleasant meeting and agreed for her to translate one of his novels. But when she sent the Russian manuscript, he went through the translation and was horrified. And he told me, "You know, I hate to read Russian but this translation was so awful that I had to read it through and, in the end, I refused it to be published." So this experience made him also very cautious about the translation of his texts into any language. How did he check the Korean or Indian translations? I have no idea but he and his wife, who was his manager for many years, developed a great relationship with their publishers and, I guess, trusted them. For his native Czech, he refused anyone else to translate his French texts. Věra wrote to me not long ago that the Czech translator, Anna Kareninová who is translating the novels, is excellent and, apparently, Kundera was pleased. He was quite ill for a while and, I guess, he gave up at some point on the intention to translate his books into his native Czech.

Kundera never authorised a biography for himself, which means we do not have a full insight into his life and experiences. Why was Kundera against this?

Kundera did not consider his life story as important, only his texts. Moreover, only those writings he approved, like a composer designating opus numbers, were to appear in collected works. In that, as he wrote somewhere, he followed Gustave Flaubert who also wished to be

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hidden behind the novel. Kundera wrote once that "everything I want to express is in my books … me as a person, I am not interesting." For example, he wrote about Hemingway, with some frustration, that more books were written and read about him as a person, than his books. This is what Kundera wanted to avoid. But in fact, there was a large biography written about him in the Czech Republic by an exile Czech author, Ján Novak, who wrote about Kundera's life in Czechoslovakia until he left for France. The book is quite controversial and Věra Kunderová told me after its publication that she would not even show it to Kundera who was quite ill by then. She was horrified that the book describes Kundera's relationship with his father in a very negative way and that would hurt him for, as Věra insisted, Kundera loved and adored his father. And this is most likely why Kundera detested biographies – he knew that once they are written, they take on a life of their own.

Do you think there will be a biography now that he has passed away?

I am sure there will be a lot of biographies. Apparently, the same author is now writing a second part, on Kundera's life after he had left for France. I really have no interest in reading those books, enough for me were a couple of interviews with Novak. More importantly, now that Kundera's books are being translated into Czech (and Slovak) he is being rediscovered by the new genera-

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tion. For now, it is only his novels but I hope the translation of his profound essays would not take too long to publish. In fact, when we met, we discussed the possibility of me publishing his essays in Slovak. Twice he gave me permission to publish his books but after a few weeks he would call or write that he cannot do it to his friends in Brno – Slovak being so close to Czech for him and he felt they should appear first in Czech.

Kundera left Czechoslovakia in 1975 to relocate to France. Why do you think he made this decision? Had he finally given up hope after the failure of the Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact intervention?

We should not forget what the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia meant to us. It was a terrible tragedy, especially after all the hope of '68. The 1960s slowly relaxed the atmosphere in Czechoslovakia, but it really sped up after the memorable Czechoslovak Writers' Congress in 1967, which, by the way, was organised by the editor of the Slovak cultural journal *Kultúrny Život,* Juraj Špitzer. Kundera wrote to me that Špitzer persuaded him to speak at the Congress. Even then Kundera was not really keen on giving public speeches. But he agreed, and gave a memorable speech there, like many others in attendance, including Václav Havel, Ludvík Vaculík and others. In fact, this Congress was one of the most important intellectual events of the time. From that moment on, things sped up, which led to Alexander Dubček coming to power in January 1968. All of a sudden, came an unexpected relaxation of censorship and initiation of Communist party's reforms. Many communists who felt betrayed and who were imprisoned in the 1950s, but were true communists, thought they could revive socialism. This was the origin of the expression "socialism with a human face". Thus, there was a belief, most likely false in retrospect, that socialism could be more humane, pluralistic and free. The level of intellectual discourse within Czechoslovakia was incredible and literary journals like *Kultúrny Život* and *Litrerárni noviny* had a print-run of over one hundred thousand per week. But of course, Russia, then as the Soviet Union, could not allow this democratic commotion to succeed at the periphery of its vast empire. It could have a domino effect among other countries in the bloc to emulate the reforms. And so, on August 21st, 1968, half a million soldiers were ordered by the Kremlin to occupy every village and every town of Czechoslovakia. Although initially there were several victims who were killed, there was no military or violent resistance from the Czechs and Slovaks. The resistance was through peaceful defiance, solidarity and bitter humour. I remember as a small eight-year-old boy that I would walk with my sister around Bratislava for hours. Within two or three days of the invasion, every window and every wall on the street was peppered with posters with jokes, caricatures and texts ridiculing the invaders. The first few months there was incredible solidarity among the population, the Quisling government

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that Moscow hoped to install did not take over. There was still this great hope and amazing energy which emanated from the defiance of the whole population. It was a Gandhian resistance for almost six months.

But all that hope and aspiration was eventually smashed. The regime, led by Gustáv Husák and installed in 1969 by Moscow, gradually initiated political purges of anything related to the reforms of 1968. In particular, it targeted the intellectual elite and party members who supported the Prague Spring. They forced everyone who had some position to sign a humiliating letter, which stated that its undersigned agreed with the "brotherly help of the Warsaw Pact army". Hence, the intellectuals who refused to sign it were expelled and lost their jobs and status. They were forced to find manual work or live without work although there were relatively few prison sentences. One of the millions purged was Kundera. He couldn't publish or teach and became, as many Slovak and Czech intellectuals, an outcast, forced into internal exile. So when he received an invitation to teach at the university in Rennes, he first went there officially. But when he published some books which the regime found unacceptable, he was stripped of his Czechoslovak citizenship and he couldn't return.

Interestingly, he did not become a member of the country's dissident group. Of course, he knew them well, it was a small community. His position to face the occupiers differed from a small group of dissidents, including Havel. In *The Power of the Powerless,* Havel described living in truth – a philosophical approach on how to resist the official lie with insisting to tell and live in truth, whatever the costs. Kundera found it rather pathetic and elitist and believed an outcast must face the cynical communist regime through irony and humour. Some dissidents found his approach rather superfluous and ineffective. So, Kundera became rather isolated within a very intellectual circle. Besides, as Milan Uhde, Kundera's friend and dissident, wrote recently once Kundera's books were published in France with great acclaim, there was much envy from among his fellow intellectuals.

Of course, one of Kundera's most important pieces, which has had a profound impact, is the essay which he published in 1984 titled the "Tragedy of Central Europe". This piece of writing gave an agency to our region during a time in which anything like that was being eaten away by Soviet-led communism. How relevant is Kundera's essay from today's perspective? Can we say that the region has overcome its kidnapping a generation after joining NATO and the European Union? Also, how can we look at this essay through the lens of what is happening in Ukraine?

The original title of the essay was "The Kidnapped West" and first published in the French journal *Le débat* in 1983. It was the *New York Review of Books* which changed the title in 1984 and Kundera was not very fond of that change because it altered the focus of the essay. In the early 1980s, we never thought that we

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would live to see the end of the Soviet empire, yet it was just a few years before its collapse. In his essay, Kundera castigated the West for giving up on its foundations, values, history and principles, stating that it had become complacent with the status quo. He tried to show how valuable Central Europe is, in its historical development, multicultural mosaic of languages, cultures, histories, philosophies, and that this part of the world is as "West" as Berlin or Paris. He was very disillusioned, not only was the West giving up on Central Europe but Central Europe was increasingly a premonition, an early warning of what could happen to the West. Kundera wrote that Europe did not even notice the end of its great cultural home, that Europe no longer feels its unity as a unity of culture. And that is why it was so easy for the West to give up on Central Europe. Kundera was saddened and alarmed by this.

This is why the essay was admired by so many western intellectuals who had similar concerns. As the expanded European Union would soon take shape, questions arose as to what truly unified it? Was it just borders, regulations, bureaucracy and economy? And what had happened to the spiritual domain, how would Eurozone define its values, principles, culture or history? Kundera writes in the essay that when he spoke to his French friends about this disturbing issue, they talked instead of TV shows or gossip rather than something that meant so much to him. After the fall of the Soviet Empire, the essay seemed to lose its purpose. The "Kidnapped West" has been liberated. However, after 50 years of publication, it again regains relevance. What unifies Europe now is the fate of and help for Ukraine because its defeat by imperial Russia would represent the defeat of that spiritual realm that Kundera was so fond of and so sad for its gradual demise. So in that sense, I think his essay is still relevant today.

Paradoxically, when I asked Kundera in 2011 to allow his famous essay to be republished in the book *Yet Another Europe after 1984*, edited by Leonidas Donskis, Kundera refused, writing to me rather apologetically a long letter explaining that he considered that essay "an occasional text" (*příležitostní*) which belongs to that time when it was published but should not be republished. So, we published that book dedicated to Kundera and his famous essay without that essay itself. In fact, he insisted that he refused to have it included in his collected works at Gallimard publishing house. It is curious irony but perhaps indicated the relevance of that text just before Kundera passed away, Gallimard republished Kundera's essay under its original title "Kidnapped West", along with his famous speech at the Czechoslovak writers' congress from 1967.

It certainly would be useful to re-read the essay with today's perspective in mind…

I want to add that the essay that was published in 1984 started an amazing debate not only in the West but also in Central Europe among intellectuals

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and dissidents. Regarding the concept of Central Europe, a debate continued on whether the region could re-emerge as a unit that was originally divided and destroyed by the Soviet invasion. If the borders in Central Europe become again fluid and free, many intellectuals asked in the late 1980s, what shape, what structure should Central Europe have? This debate came to a sudden halt in January 1990, when the communist regimes fell. However, the creation of the Visegrád Group in 1991 by three dissident leaders – Havel, Antall and Wałęsa – was, to some extent, an homage to that tested and previously "kidnapped" and in 1989 reborn Central Europe. Renewed interest in that essay today is a sign that the debate concerning Central Europe is worth revisiting because Europe in the 1980s is a premonition to the fate of Ukraine today.

How do you think Kundera's heritage will be remembered in this region and his home of the Czech Republic? Do you think he will be cherished, criticised or forgotten?

There is a big conflagration surrounding Kundera that has been taking place in his homeland since 2008. He was accused by the Czech weekly publication *Respekt* of betraying someone in 1951. This person was returning from the West and was living in a dormitory where Kundera also lived. Apparently, Kundera informed on him. I do not know whether Kundera did this or not – the evidence is very inconclusive – but the way in which it was presented was disgusting. It was published without contacting Kundera and based on research done by someone who had a personal reason to exonerate his uncle in this case. *Respekt* published that issue on the day of the opening of the Frankfurt Book Fair, and the accusation dossier was translated into English and distributed to the participants of the book fair. It was also sent out to high schools around the Czech Republic. Kundera was shocked and felt very hurt by this. I remember talking to him afterwards and he was totally distraught. "This is an assassination of an author!", he exclaimed into the phone. At first, I thought that this was done by the weekly which wanted to sensationalise a story in order to increase profits. But very recently Milan Uhde, a dissident and close friend of Kundera and Havel, revealed that in 1994 Havel organised a petition among the Czech dissidents to not have the Nobel Prize awarded to Kundera. Uhde writes now that if he had known that the petition was not just to support Jaroslav Seifert – who eventually won the prize – but rather was an "anybody but Kundera" petition, he wouldn't have signed it. Uhde found it very disturbing that this was done to Kundera by his friends, colleagues and fellow dissidents from the Czech Republic. So this revelation about him being blocked for the Nobel Prize together with this accusation, which was questioned by many authors and historians, made Kundera very bitter. Evidently, the hostility between Kundera and Havel had been quite palpable – originating back in the

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1960s. A few days after Kundera died, I corresponded with his wife Věra, she wrote to me that they really had wished to have been able to come home, to spend their last years in Brno. But they couldn't because of that horrible 2008 accusation. I cannot confirm it, but she even suggested that Havel was aware of the accusation being concocted by *Respekt* in 2008. It is such a sad story that Kundera had to die in Paris, alone, despite his wishes to return to his beloved Brno. What makes this tragedy even more sad is that many of his books were not translated for decades into Czech and Slovak whereas the whole world could read them in hundreds of translations. It is only now that he is finally returning home as an author, intellectual and a prophet of Central Europe, as another famous son of this liberated "Kidnapped West" who died in exile. I hope that he will be cherished and discovered by each new generation, because there is so much to discover in his novels and essays and his thoughts, as with all classics, will have unique relevance for each subsequent generation. EE

Milan Kundera died July 11th 2023 in Paris at the age of 94. He was born in Brno in 1929.

Samuel Abrahám is the editor in chief and publisher of the journal *Kritika & Kontext* (www.kritika.sk) and rector of the Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts (BISLA).

Adam Reichardt is the editor in chief of *New Eastern Europe* and co-host of the *Talk Eastern Europe* podcast.

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The anatomies of evil

SIMONA MERKINAITE

The ongoing crimes committed by Russian forces in Ukraine have shocked audiences across the world. However, there appears to be a certain banal nature to these seemingly extraordinary events. A reflection on the writing of Hannah Arendt may help us better understand how such unmitigated evil can occur on an everyday basis.

In early spring 2022, as the horrors of the crimes committed by Russia in Ukraine came to light, a picture of a looted house was posted on Twitter. In the image, among the many items scattered across the floor, there was a book with ripped pages titled *Банальність зла. Суд над Айхманом в Єрусалимі* (*Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil).* The book was released exactly 60 years ago by a Jewish refugee, one of the greatest philosophers of our time – Hannah Arendt – after the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a man responsible for the death of millions of European Jews, transported to concentration camps, mainly Auschwitz.

Arendt felt that the Eichmann trial provided a unique opportunity to come face-to-face with monstrous evil. However, the longer she observed the small, bald man in a glass booth, the wider the gap formed between the enormity of the evil committed and the man responsible for it. The banality of evil refers to such a small, seemingly everyday family man, who blends into society and yet is capable of a form of evil that shakes us and our beliefs in humanity to their core. Today, as we are faced with the reality of evil again, it is worth revisiting one of the paramount ideas concerning evil and asking whether its banality offers us insights into the evils done by Russians in Ukraine?

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Evil more chilling than the devil

Eichmann's defence was built on the premise that he was simply following orders. Moreover, he spoke of himself as a good citizen, who under trying circumstances conducted civic duties to the best of his ability, meticulously following orders and rules. Observing Eichmann, Arendt comes to the conclusion that Eichmann was not stupid. He knew exactly what he was doing, yet he did not think. Thoughtlessness, Arendt said, is the inability to reflect on the meaning of one's actions and make judgements about one's standing in the world. Even after hearing over 100 testimonies of survivors in the Jerusalem courtroom, Eichmann refused to feel any remorse, which comes from the internal dialogue we have with ourselves, seeing clearly our own actions and comprehending their meaning. It is this kind of thoughtlessness which enabled Eichmann to sit for months on end facing a German Jew, who was conducting the interrogation, pouring out his heart about the injustices of his life, such as not being promoted above the rank of lieutenant colonel in the SS and that it had not been his fault. Moreover, faced with death, he failed to realise the singular exceptionalism of the moment and deflected to ideological clichés. "In the face of death, he had found the cliché used in funeral oratory," Arendt wrote. "Under the gallows, his memory played him the last trick; he was 'elated' and he forgot that this was his own funeral. It was as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us – the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil."

Such a breakdown of personal judgement, according to Arendt, is the origin of this thoroughly organised political evil. Evil that is not done by evildoers, crazy loners or "lost souls", possessed by the devil but is perpetrated by regular citizens who simply do their job, those who meticulously follow orders, and the bystanders who witness the evil and yet remain shockingly unaffected by it. If there was anything that stood out about Eichmann it was his complete lack of character. As a matter of fact, Eichmann would kill his own father if that was required of him. "Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III 'to prove a villain'", Arendt concludes. She describes Eichmann as a "joiner", an enthusiastic member of a movement terrified of the idea of having to live an individual life, or being someone able and willing to stand out as a person, distinct from all others.

The banality of evil is often misinterpreted as evil reduced to a function. Rather, this sort of evil comes from one's persistent refusal to be a person, a thinking and judging being, somebody who cares about the world and their own place in it. It is perpetrated by people not pursuing evil, but people who never made a decision

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whether to be good or bad. As Arendt notes, the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced communist, but someone for whom the distinction between fact and fiction and the distinction between true and false no longer exists. This banal evildoer is someone who can slip into the role of the good husband and loving father, while going to "work" and gassing children and women. All his identities and roles are assumed and exchanged with certain lightness. Nothingness, a lack of a sense of self is what predisposed Eichmann to become one of the "most proficient" Nazi criminals.

Challenging our humanity

Without the malevolence usually associated with evil, there is something truly mundane and ordinary about it. Hence, Arendt would later note that evil spreads like a fungus, along the surface. It does not need to take root, reaching deep into our sense of self, nor does it require to provide an ideology strong enough to transform or uproot a person and persuade us of evils to be done in the service of some greater good. This is because such persuasion requires someone who would not be apathetic towards the world (even if their idea of the world is one defined by horror, misery or superiority) and a care for oneself in it.

Looking though the collection of testimonies of Holocaust perpetrators, what stands out is their detachment from their own actions.

Looking though the collection of testimonies of Holocaust perpetrators, such as Vaclovas Klimas, what stands out is their detachment from their own actions. Like many others similar to him, he talks about the killing of Lithuanian Jews as if he was transporting wood from the forest to the factory, rather than small town residents to their death in the forest. He accepted his fate as a killer with chilling calmness, just like Eichmann accepted that his civil duties now were being tried as crimes against humanity. Of central importance here is a disregard for who one is, a good citizen and/or a criminal, as well as an ability to remain completely unaffected by horrible crimes perpetrated and injustices witnessed. This detachment separates these perpetrators from the Shakespearean villains who relish in the idea of destroying a world or take delight in the suffering of others.

Evils like the Holocaust challenge our own humanity. Not only because of scale, nature or cruelty. As humans we feel a perpetual need to understand, especially something so violating as evil. And yet, as we peel back the layers, we have nothing to grab on to. The banal evil cannot be comprehended by evil motives, self-interest,

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greed, covetousness, resentment or lust for power. It spreads like fungus because there is no end it aims to achieve, no impulse it longs to satisfy. It is wholly unlike someone's taste for revenge, for instance.

The unbearable lightness of being a Russian

Arendt's banality of evil falls between two opposite perspectives – secular and theological. For our secular political imagination, evil is a rather challenging concept. It offers a sociological/scientific deconstruction of evil, determining political, social, cultural and historical explanations of evil. It makes it rather difficult to talk about evils challenging our bounds of knowledge and understanding. That is why when we start thinking about evil, rather than just crimes, we often reach into the religious imagination.

As Paul Kahn notes: "Approaching evil, we still feel that we are beyond the boundaries of our ordinary forms of experience and explanation. Evil is not just some deficient form of behaviour or a forgetting of the rules. For this reason, the inquiry into evil does not start within the profane and everyday but starts instead with those experiences that touch upon the sacred." Indeed, while evil may be fuelled by conditions like mass terror and repressions, there remains something deeper than mere social and political circumstances.

Together these perspectives capture the mundane as well as transcendental in evil. However, both also tend to disregard the human agency at the core of it. The theological perspective suggests that evil is the work of the devil, as if a person is possessed. It also tends to focus on statesmen and leadership as true evildoers and disregards ordinary people. Evil would never have reached a mass scale and would not be transformed from crimes, usually committed on the fringes of society in the dark of night, into state policy, if it relied only on the hands and minds of the ill-willed, or fanatics and sadists. The secular one turns evil into a faceless, sort of Kafkaesque process. Big, bureaucratic, mechanical states allow for evils like concentration camps because they rely on the processes and functions of bureaucracy. However, following Arendt, it can be argued precisely that because the state relies on so many functions, then the evils done at the scale of the state require a significant number of ordinary collaborators. The mass incarceration and rapid and systematic rise of torture chambers all around the occupied territories of Ukraine, as well as forced-labour camps, require a multitude of people duly executing their

Big, bureaucratic states allow for evils because they rely on the processes and functions of bureaucracy.

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functions. This evil requires collecting, constructing, counting, transporting, and legislating for it to come to fruition.

Eichmann's thoughtlessness, according to Arendt, manifested through the incapability to form authentic speech, replacing speech with ideological clichés. The people across Russia today are insistent on repeating such clichés about the eternal fight against Nazism. There is nothing personal in the way ordinary citizens on the streets of Russia reflect on the war, ignoring the discontent between the fight against fascism and the reality of the destruction of entire cities and burying people under rubble. One day it is a fight against fascism, a defence against NATO attack, the next it is either an existential fight for the Russian soul or a limited "military operation". One day the Ukrainians are brothers needing saving, the next they are the antichrist. All these rationalisations are indeed like fungus, all surface and no substance, which needs to take root, persuade and mobilise to gain support. It spreads along the surface, among people who lack any care for truth and understanding and merge good with evil, truth with fiction, and render any human judgement about what is happening futile. It is the mass indifference towards the evils committed in one's name that allows for the crimes to continue legitimising them as a state policy.

Yet, it is not just wilful ignorance that allows for such evils but a complete misreading of the human condition, as well as the subjectivity and power that comes not from the barrel of a gun or violence but from a sense of our own humanity. For example, when the Russian soldiers encountered a lone soldier, Oleksandr Matsievskyi, in the woods, they did not simply shoot him at point-blank range (after Oleksandr calmly professed his unshakable allegiance to Ukraine) but they also filmed and posted a video online of the killing. It is an act of misplaced self-praise, a total misreading of human power.

Other stories of such misreading of the human condition emerge throughout the testimonies of captured Ukrainians, as perpetrators threaten and torture people demanding that they betray their leadership. It is as if the idea of personal resistance is unintelligible to the occupiers. The simple idea that Ukrainians have their own convictions, that they can choose pain or even death over the order to sing the Russian anthem, seems incomprehensible. This is how evil impacts not only its victims but the perpetrators. The extreme violence and cruelty displayed by the Russian soldiers shows disregard for their own humanity. They are detached from the weight of human suffering in various moments, such as a mother having to bury her son in her own backyard, or a child digging through the rubble, searching for dead parents. These scenes do not crush or deform their souls. This violence in turn forms a sort of cycle. As perpetrators chip away at their humanity, the more detached they become from the human world, and the easier it may become to continue destruction.

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The evil that is spread by Russians in Ukraine is perpetrated and amplified not by the sadists or anti-Ukrainian fanatics, but precisely a lack of care for one's own subjectivity. One moment you are on Ukrainian soil, torturing school teachers and librarians, the next you are back home a decorated Russian veteran butchering your own grandmother. There are no boundaries between permissible and forbidden, because there may not be a person in the middle who would care one way or the other. The lines between good and evil are fused, not only because of propaganda, but due to a lack of care for one's humanity. One has to care for oneself and the world in order to resist the conflation of truth with fiction, of good with evil, of justice with crimes.

Salvation of humanity

In her heated debate with Gershom Scholem on the nature of evil, Arendt notes that only good can be radical. It ought to take root in a person who, in turn, achieves and nurtures their humanity by caring for the world around them. A care which Arendt failed to spot in Eichmann. What unifies the stories of the Righteous Among the Nations is not the fact that these people had better moral guidelines, a habit of moral tradition or vastly different circumstances to consenting and collaborating citizens. Rather, they are bound by a strong sense of self, the impossibility to live with oneself after having done nothing. When faced with impossible choices, they chose to act to preserve the world of compassion, love, friendship, sacrifice and sharing. In parallel, the most powerful images from Ukraine are not the ones that show the destruction but display of humanity – solidarity, perseverance, bravery, love, preserving humanity in the face of soul-crushing and corrupting evils. Good comes not from "being on the right side of history" or good ideas, but from the refusal of Ukrainian people to be defined by the pain, loss, destruction and horrors of evils inflicted upon them.

The most powerful images from Ukraine are not the ones that show destruction, but display humanity: solidarity, perseverance, bravery and love.

The last thing worth mentioning is that the idea of the banality of evil came out of a direct encounter with it and its senselessness, not a philosophical meditation over the nature of evil. This provides a key to our own relationship to evils today. When we bear witness to the many faces of evil, its relentless ways to destruct, crush and destroy, and the mere violation of trust in humanity and human reason; all reasons seem small and banal in comparison. No evildoer is great in the face of the suffering he/she

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imposes. Maybe the truth is that great evils are not only perpetrated by everyday men but also that there are no ideas big enough to justify the evils perpetrated. The banality of evil captures the sense that in the face of its reality and consequence, all reasons that attempt to justify it are insufficient. ❡

Simona Merkinaitė is a chief project officer with the East European Studies Centre in Vilnius. She is also completing a PhD focusing on Hannah Arendt at Vilnius University.

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The Kakhovka Dam explosion as Russia's scorched earth tactic

ZAKHAR TROPIN

The destruction of the Kakhovka Dam aligns with tactics employed by Russian forces in various contexts before. This strategy involves the complete destruction of territories in active combat to gain a military advantage and instil fear in opponents. Understanding the Russian scorched earth tactic, and drawing from Ukraine's experience encountering it, is now crucial when planning operations against Russian military forces.

Russian aggression against Ukraine has gained notoriety due to numerous violations of international law and human rights committed by Russian troops. Tragic incidents such as the events in Bucha, Izium and Mariupol have left an indelible mark on human history. The sheer quantity of crimes committed is staggering, leading to valid assertions of a planned genocide of the Ukrainian population orchestrated by high-ranking Russian officials. The atrocities reached a new level on June 6th 2023, when the Kakhovka Dam was deliberately destroyed in an attempt to impede the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the southern part of Ukraine.

The explosion at the Kakhovka Dam is considered the largest man-made disaster in Europe in recent decades. The devastating blast at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Station resulted in numerous civilian casualties and inflicted significant damage on the environment and economy of the entire region. The full extent of the catastrophe is still difficult to ascertain, as Russian authorities have denied access to international organisations seeking to provide assistance in mitigating the conse-

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quences of the disaster in the flooded territories of the occupied left bank of the Dnipro. The estimated economic losses exceed two billion US dollars, which does not account for the long-term environmental damage, including the destruction of several national parks and the complete disruption of the water supply system in the southern regions of Ukraine and Crimea.

Who's to blame?

From the very beginning, there have been numerous direct and indirect pieces of evidence confirming that Russian troops were responsible for the explosion at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Station. One of the most clear pieces of evidence is that the station has been under Russian military occupation since the start of the full-scale invasion. Ukrainian officials repeatedly warned the international community about the mining of the facility and the occupying authorities' plans to detonate these mines. Many experts have analysed the level and nature of the destruction, concluding that it could only have resulted from an internal blast rather than an external strike. Infrastructure of this kind typically has multiple protective layers against external threats. Consequently, only Russia, with full access to the facility, could have carried out the explosion.

Ukrainian officials repeatedly warned about the mining of the Kakhovka dam and the occupying authorities' plans to detonate those mines.

Moreover, the detonation at the Kakhovka Dam aligns with the military tactics employed by Russian forces in various contexts before. This strategy involves the complete destruction of territories in active combat to gain military advantages and to instil fear in opponents and civilians, thereby breaking their resistance.

Regardless of evidence that points to Russia being guilty of blowing up Kakhovka Dam, initially certain states and international organisations claimed ignorance regarding who was responsible for this tragedy. However, the international community is gradually shifting its position in light of the mounting evidence. International authorities have commenced an on-site examination of the evidence with the goal of providing a precise legal qualification for this tragedy. At present, however, it is evident that a war crime has been committed, considering that a civilian critical infrastructure object, protected under international humanitarian law, has been destroyed.

According to international humanitarian law, it is absolutely forbidden to launch attacks on infrastructure and facilities that contain dangerous elements, with particular emphasis on providing maximum protection to structures like dams, dykes

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and nuclear power stations. This prohibition remains in effect even if these facilities are being used for military purposes. However, in the event that such an attack does occur, every precaution must be taken to prevent the release of dangerous forces. It is evident that Russia took no measures to prevent this catastrophe, mitigate its consequences or rescue civilians residing in the affected flooded areas. These actions directly contravene the obligations of the Russian Federation as an occupying state, which is responsible for managing dangerous installations, as outlined in the Geneva Conventions. There have been allegations in the media suggesting that Russian authorities are denying access to international organisations in order to conceal the true number of victims and the extent of the damage in the occupied territories. Moscow is also potentially engaging in clandestine transfers of bodies to unknown destinations for further disposal.

Pattern of destruction

From an expert point of view, the blowing up of the Kakhovka Dam was not an unexpected move, as it aligns with the main patterns observed in Russian military operations. In offensive operations, one of the primary tactics employed by Russian forces is the complete destruction of cities and towns. The objective is to eliminate anything that should be protected or could potentially serve as a defensive measure for the opponent, thereby forcing them to withdraw. Conversely, when Russian forces are in retreat, they intentionally destroy civilian infrastructure with the aim of hindering its future use by the opposing side and impeding the restoration of normal civilian life in those areas. These patterns of conduct involve the excessive and nonselective use of military force and can be considered as separate war crimes committed by high-ranking Russian political and military officials.

This tactic has its roots in the practices of the Soviet Union, which resorted to the destruction of its own cities and infrastructure during the Second World War to prevent them from falling into the hands of Nazi forces. Examples of this include the blowing up of Kyiv in 1941 and the destruction of the Dnipro Hydroelectric Station in the same year, among others.

Recent examples of this pattern can be observed in the First and Second Chechen Wars. One notable occurrence took place when Russia attacked Grozny, the capital of Chechnya. The consequences were devastating. Experts and witnesses assert that as a result of Russian actions, Grozny was nearly completely destroyed. Aside from disregarding the principle of selectively deploying military forces, these attacks on Grozny violated the principles of military necessity and proportionality, considering the comparative human and military resources of Russia and the Chechen rebels.

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In Georgia, Russia also targeted civilian infrastructure with the intention of intimidating and displacing Georgian military forces and the population from specific territories. However, due to the swift nature of this conflict, these actions did not become as widespread as they were during the Chechen campaigns.

Russia reached a new "level" of employing the scorched earth tactic in Syria, where Russian forces systematically destroyed cities and towns in order to compel rebels to halt their resistance. Aleppo serves as a prime example of such intentional destruction carried out by Russia over several months.

The Russian Federation introduced a new "chapter" in the destruction of civilian infrastructure during the war against Ukraine. It is important to highlight the missile terror campaign launched against Ukraine on February 24th 2022. Throughout Ukraine civilian objects, particularly of critical infrastructure, came under relentless Russian attacks aimed at forcing Ukraine into capitulation. It is not surprising that Russian forces made several attempts to destroy dams in the Kyiv, Dnipro and Kharkiv regions.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning the complete annihilation of towns and cities such as Mariupol, Sievierodonetsk, Kramatorsk, Bakhmut, Marinka, Popasna and others, as Russia attempted to occupy them. For instance, in Mariupol, Russian troops resorted to a nonselective shelling and bombardment of the city in an

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excessive use of military force to overcome Ukrainian resistance. Consequently, the defenders were forced to retreat to Azovstal, while the Russian Federation took control of the remaining parts of the decimated city.

Additionally, Russian retreat tactics can also be observed in Ukraine, characterised by widespread artillery, missile and aerial bombardment of cities, towns and critical infrastructure. The objective is to impede the counteroffensive of the Ukrainian forces and inflict harm upon the civilian population within the liberated territories. Examples of this tactic could be witnessed during the lifting of the blockade of Chernihiv, and the liberation of Kharkiv and Kherson among others. In Ukraine, there is even a sombre joke that if Russian forces begin destroying infrastructure in occupied territories, it signifies their impending retreat.

Why blow up the dam?

By examining the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam through the lens of the Russian scorched earth tactic, the advantages gained by Russia from this crime become apparent. In this regard, the words of Timothy Snyder, Professor at Yale University, are worth noting: "Military history offers an elemental point. Armies that are attacking do not blow dams to block their own path of advance. Armies that are retreating do blow dams to slow the advance of the other side. At the relevant moment, Ukraine was advancing, and Russia was retreating." Alongside this logical conclusion, there exists a wealth of direct and indirect evidence that implicates Russia in the destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Station.

Alongside this logical conclusion, there exists a wealth of direct and indirect evidence that implicates Russia in the destruction of the Kakhovka dam.

This evidence includes the Russian Federation's exercise of control over the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Station since spring 2022, coupled with the fact, as supported by various testimonies, that the explosion resulted from an internal blast rather than a shelling or rocket attack. Ukrainian authorities have also stated that Russia engaged in mining activities targeting the dam. Additionally, Russian soldiers have made statements confessing to their participation in the detonation at the Kakhovka Dam. At the same time, the military carried out an evacuation of personnel prior to the explosion. Furthermore, Russian troops deliberately blew up the dam on the Mokri Yaly river in the Zaporizhzhia region, aiming to impede the Ukrainian counteroffensive. When considering all this evidence collectively, there is no room for doubt that Russia bears responsibility for the Kakhovka Dam explosion.

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The blowing up of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Station and the overall use of the Russian scorched earth tactic cannot be justified by military necessity, as alternative military facilities could have achieved the same advantages. The examples mentioned earlier demonstrate that excessive force was employed in these instances of warfare. The Russian application of the scorched earth tactic serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it aims to gain military advantage at any cost. Secondly, within the context of mounting internal criticism regarding the heavy toll of the ongoing "special military operation", this tactic can also serve to mask weaknesses and shortcomings while in retreat. Thirdly, it is a classic form of terrorism and intimidation, meant to threaten both opponents and civilians. This tactic sends a clear message to Ukraine and the world at large. Given Russia's comparatively weak conventional army, particularly after the significant losses suffered in Ukraine, their primary goal is to cultivate an image of a brutal and merciless adversary that disregards the fundamental principles of conventional warfare and humanity. The purpose of this image is to instil fear within the international community, dissuading them from engaging in direct conflict with Russia due to potential consequences.

The Ukrainian experience serves as a testament to the fallacy of the last notion. While it is true that Russian forces show no remorse in destroying entire cities to achieve their objectives, which may not always have a purely military rationale, the only response capable of deterring Russia from employing this tactic is a military one. When faced with a strong and decisive military counterstrike, Russian forces have been known to retreat, shedding their merciless image and revealing soldiers and commanders who are fearful of their superiors.

A notable example of this is the missile terror campaign that Russia launched against Ukrainian energy infrastructure during the winter of 2022-23. When attempts to destroy Ukrainian energy infrastructure were thwarted by Ukrainian resistance and assistance from international allies, Russian forces eventually ceased their attacks. Furthermore, when these Russian actions resulted in an increase in military support for Ukraine, such as the provision of modern surface-to-air missile systems and precision-guided munitions, Russia began to complain about the escalation of the military conflict, conveniently omitting the fact that their attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure had provoked this response.

Patterns of conduct or systematic actions in certain cases can be considered as evidence of committing a crime. The examples mentioned above demonstrate that the explosion at the Kakhovka Dam cannot be viewed in isolation from Russia's military tactic of targeting civilian objects and critical infrastructure. When considering these collective Russian actions, an undeniable pattern of criminal conduct by the Russian Federation emerges. Russia carries out these actions with a clear and excessive use of force, without military necessity, and in violation of the principle of selectivity.

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Not a random occurrence

Indeed, the Kakhovka explosion fits perfectly within this pattern of conduct. The abundance of direct and indirect evidence leaves little room for doubt that Russian military forces were responsible for the blast. The primary objective was to hinder the progress of the Ukrainian counteroffensive. Additionally, the act aimed to reinforce the ruthless image of the Russian Federation and serve as a warning of what they can potentially do to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.

Furthermore, the systematic nature of these acts confirms that the scorched earth tactic is not a random occurrence, but rather an adopted policy by high-ranking political and military officials within the Russian forces. The decision to employ this tactic on a daily basis is made at the highest governmental level, implicating the highest political and military command. Consequently, these individuals, including Vladimir Putin himself, bear personal responsibility for its implementation.

Understanding Russian scorched earth tactics of warfare and drawing from Ukraine's experience encountering it is now crucial when planning operations against Russian military forces. This becomes especially important when considering recent reports of mining threats to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. While it is essential to acknowledge this threat, it should not become the sole determining factor in the liberation of Ukrainian territories or the provision of military support to Ukraine.

It is important to recognise that Russian officials are anticipating such a reaction. They hope that under the threat of a potential Zaporizhzhia NPP explosion, the international community will agree to peace conditions favourable to Russia and force Ukraine to accept them. This follows a standard terrorist tactic, and it is widely known that negotiations with terrorists are not viable.

In light of these circumstances, the international community should align with Ukraine's approach: to remain resolute and continue to exert pressure on Russia, unequivocally rejecting any consideration of such tactics. By standing firm and united, the international community can effectively counter Russian aggression and support Ukraine's quest for peace and security. EE

Zakhar Tropin is a non-resident fellow at the Centre for Defence Strategies, an independent Ukrainian think tank which focuses on defence and security. He is also a licenced attorney and holds a PhD in international law from the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv's International Relations Institute.

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No school for the children of Izium

KATERYNA PRYSHCHEPA

Ukraine's newly liberated territories still show the scars of war. Critical infrastructure often remains damaged and life remains anything but ordinary. This is particularly true in the case of schools, with the education system in the town of Izium simply unable to provide for the country's youngest citizens.

Almost a year after its liberation, Izium, a town in Kharkiv Oblast, bears the visible scars of the Russian aggression. Heavily damaged by the Russian bombing and having at least temporarily lost the majority of its population, Izium still remains an unsafe place to live. It will take a long time for the town to rise again.

I arrive in Izium at midday on a summer Saturday, accompanying the international project team "Mapping the Russian aggression against Ukraine: Damage to cultural heritage and environment". This group is documenting the damages of the war in Kharkiv Oblast. For the team, Izium is a particularly busy spot. Upon our arrival, however, we see an optimistic sign. There is a christening in the Orthodox Assumption Cathedral.

Signs of normality, signs of devastation

Like almost every building in the old part of Izium, the cathedral had been damaged by shrapnel. There is plywood covering the holes left in the stained glass close to the main dome of the building and some shrapnel marks on the outer church wall. But luckily the cathedral has not sustained major damage and services

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continue there. We see a small group of parents, godparents, a family friend and a sister of a baby boy who had gathered for the christening. The happy group takes a photo at the steps of the cathedral and leaves.

There are other signs of normality. There is a beggar at the church entrance, a scene which strangely gives a sense of reassurance. At a bus stop across the road several women get into a bus going in the direction of Kharkiv. The pharmacy next to the bus stop is open and offers its customers all the usual list of medicines one can request in any pharmacy anywhere in Ukraine. The grocery store next to it is open and looks well furnished with goods. But as the team goes about its work along the plan set for Izium, we see the signs of devastation everywhere in the town.

We began our work with a short visit to the cemetery in the forest just outside of the town, where last September a mass grave of civilians and military personnel was uncovered. By design or just due to a lack of time, the graves had been left uncovered after the exhumation works finished in autumn last year. The primitive crosses made of wooden planks with hand-written information about the person who once was buried in the grave are now put in the open pits, from where the bodies had been exhumed. In some open graves there are open coffins, left there after the bodies had been taken away by forensic teams. Not more than three metres away from the last row of provisional graves there are still the pits where the Russian tanks used to be stationed. The whole place is quiet and solemn and it would seem that if it was conserved in its present state it would be a powerful memorial to the victims of Russian aggression.

Most of the buildings on Izium's main street, many of which were built in the 18th and 19th centuries, have been damaged or destroyed.

The centre of the city also carries signs of devastation. Most of the buildings on Izium's main street, many of which were built in the 18th and 19th centuries, have been damaged or destroyed. The city hall, the main health clinic, bank and post offices in the city centre still have broken windows and burned and damaged walls. But the team concentrates on Izium's schools, most of which had been badly damaged or completely destroyed. Of the nine schools in Izium only two had not been damaged or totally destroyed over the last year and a half. Some buildings had been hit by Russian forces on the days before they occupied the town. Some of the schools, such as Lyceum No. 2, had been hit by Ukrainian strikes during the Russian occupation of the town. The Russian troops and the Russian field hospital had been stationed there and the school subsequently became a target for an attack.

Some buildings had been hit by the Russians only recently. School No. 6 was hit by Shahed drones in May this year. Olena, the school's facility manager, says at least five drones had hit the school premises in different spots. The attack de-

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stroyed the class rooms on the top floor, the sports hall and the library located in the different wings of the building. The hit had also caused a fire on the top floor. It is likely the school became a target because the Russians thought it could host Ukrainian rescue workers. Olena says that some days before the attack a strange man came to the school asking if it was true that some soldiers or demining engineers had been living in there.

Even if the school had remained intact, it was highly unlikely the students would have been able to return to classes there. Olena explains that "Our school does not have a basement which could be used as an air raid shelter, so we would go online anyways."

On a bright and new playground some dozen metres from the school building we talk to two boys, who initiate the conversation by asking a colleague if she is a traveller and came from far away. The boys say they are nine and they did not go to the school this year because their mothers would not let them. "They were afraid of the sirens," one of the boys explains.

Red kalyna

Our route then takes us to Lyceum No. 2, used as a base by the Russian troops and heavily damaged by Ukrainian artillery strikes. On the top of a pile of rubble there is a bright red barrel with the Lukoil company logo on it. The markings on the barrel indicate that its contents were produced in Russia, suggesting Russian troops had brought it there. Behind the school there is a crater left by an artillery shell and just next to one of the walls outside is a pit where a Russian tank used to be covered.

Ironically, the school premises had just been renovated months before the Russian invasion in 2022. The plaques next to its entrance say the renovation was done under the president's renovation programme and financed with the support of a subsidy from the German government. The plaques on the sports equipment outside the school say they were paid for by the Coca-Cola and Klitschko foundations.

The school guard, who happens to be on site, lets us in and the team walks around the less damaged parts of the building. We enter the sports hall, where the concrete roof had fallen in onto the floor. In the corridor leading to the sports hall, one of the team members identifies a room that has clearly been used by the Russian troops as yet another illegal prison. Metal bars had been installed at the entrance to the windowless room and inside it an additional bar had been installed on the wall, which the prison guards had deemed to be too weak and easy to break.

The guard, Mykola, asks if we smoke and if we could give him some cigarettes. I offer him some from a package bought with this sort of request in mind. The

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A school in Izium after a Russian attack. Most schools in the city are still not in proper condition to host classes this coming academic year.

man takes some and thanks me: "I only got the ones without the filter." He says he remained in Izium during the occupation and was lucky not to get taken to one of the Russian prisons established in the town.

The mapping work takes the team to the Izium Palace of Culture which is a community centre in the town. The building was erected in 1929 in the style imitating an aristocratic palace or villa which had also been used as a base by the Russian forces during the occupation. Unlike most of the schools in Izium, it was not damaged substantially, although its interior has been devastated. All the valuable equipment had been stolen, the windows were broken and the floors damaged.

A group of teenagers is sitting under the big chestnut tree behind the building. They are sitting on benches taken from the community centre's concert hall, smoking cigarettes and singing (rather shouting) along to a song by the Ukrainian band Medovyi Polyn. The song "Liokha ty separatyst" (You are a separatist, Liokha) presents the view that only unintelligent people with vested interests and connections to the Soviet communist past would want to have closer ties with Russia. The next song to be played is "Chervona Kalyna", a song made famous way beyond Ukraine in March 2022 when Ukrainian pop singer Andrii Khlyvniuk filmed himself singing it in the deserted Kyiv streets. Later that year he recorded a cover together with members of Pink Floyd.

It seems that the kids are trying to sing even louder when they see us, so we start a conversation. Most of the kids in the group had remained in Izium throughout

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the occupation and want to share their experience. One of the girls tells us how a group of armed soldiers from the so-called Donetsk People's Republic came to her home and demanded the family leave because they would need the house for themselves. "I began shouting at them that I would not go away," says the girl, who seems smaller than most of her peers, "and they decided to go away, probably because they did not dare to hurt a child".

One of the boys who spent some months abroad with his mother – first in Poland and then in Germany – says they returned home as soon as they could because he wanted to and asked his mum about this. While they were away, his father remained in Izium and had been arrested and tortured by the Russian occupation forces because he was in the territorial defence and someone denounced him. The man survived thanks to the speed of Ukrainian operations last September. The Russians did not have time to kill him.

The education ministry announced that in the 2023/2024 school year, only the schools with the proper shelter facilities will be able to conduct in person and/or hybrid classes.

I ask the kids if they know what are the prospects of them having in-person school in the upcoming school year. They begin their deliberations. They say that of the two schools still in condition to hold classes only one has a basement/shelter. It is hard to say if it will be able to host all the students who remain in the city.

One of the group started a vocational school last year, as it has proper premises where they had in-person classes twice a week. But his ultimate goal he says is to go to Kharkiv, enroll in the military lyceum and join the army. He is smiling and tells us about his brother who is now serving in one of Ukraine's airborne brigades and was among the troops that liberated Izium last autumn. His friend says that he will be going to Kharkiv or Kyiv when the new school year starts. He has family in both places and would be able to stay with them and attend in-person classes. The rest of the group do not have plans yet but agree that going away seems to be a reasonable idea.

Due to the risk of the artillery shelling and air raids the education ministry announced that in the 2023/2024 school year, only the schools with the proper shelter facilities will be able to conduct in person and/or hybrid classes (partially online and partially in person). The decisions regarding what form classes should take will be made on a case-by-case basis after the inspection of potential school shelters and their refurbishment and renovation, if and when possible. In the beginning of August the state authorities in Kharkiv oblast announced that only 11 schools in the region would be authorised to hold classes in a hybrid format. There were no Izium schools on the list. Most extracurricular activities for the children in Izium

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have also been put on hold. The community centre where we talk used to host art and sport classes. One of the boys tells us he used to go here for dance classes.

I remember the conversation I had with Vitor, an Izium resident, in September last year just ten days after the town had been liberated. His biggest wish, he told me back then, was to have his three children – all of whom were under ten – back in school. "You cannot imagine how hard it had been for us to keep the children safe and entertained under the occupation. They had spent most of their time inside. I just wish they could have a more normal life now," he told me. It seems his wish will not be granted just yet.

The danger of the mines

When I ask one of the group if I could see his playlist, he shows me his phone screen and says: "You may have difficulties reading it. The screen is damaged a bit. The shrapnel piece had hit it when the mine blew up." And it becomes clear that the fresh scars the boy has got on his forehead and on one of his legs must have come from the explosion. "Yes", he says, "I stood between the explosion and the girl in our group so she was not hit." He says that a small anti-personnel mine, called peliustka ("petal"), had blown up when one of his friends had thrown a stone on it. Seven of them had been injured by the shrapnel as a result of the incident this February. "We were lucky," the boy admits. He knows that it could have been much worse. Last autumn one of his friends stepped on a "petal" mine and had his leg amputated just below the knee.

On the day of our visit to Izium, we also learn that a local woman had stepped on a petal mine the same day. She decided to walk over a patch of grass near her house in the town and did not notice the mine. Her leg was severely injured with the prospect of amputation. The next day we visit Izium and meet the newly-appointed director of the local history museum. She warns us not to step in the high grass. There are still mines there.

The local news report on mine-related incidents in Izium and the neighbouring villages on a regular basis. At least 45 local residents have been injured as a result of them after liberation. The incidents continue despite the demining works carried out in the area. Due to a lack of resources, priority is given to the territories around critical infrastructure sights and public facilities.

Thinking about that conversation on the train back from Kharkiv to Kyiv a few days later, I remember the stories my grandfather would tell me of his wartime childhood. When his native village in Donbas was liberated by the Soviet army in 1943 he was just a teenager, the same age as the boys I spoke with in Izium. He

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and his friends, my grandad told me, would try to dismantle the unexploded shells they would find in the fields surrounding the village, with no tools and obviously no supervision.

During this visit to Izium, I meet several people who fled the Russian occupation of the town but came back after its liberation. However, it seems that the majority of people living in Izium now are the ones who remained there during the occupation. People with children and young adults are not yet reassured enough to come back. Izium's population before the Russian occupation was estimated at 45,000 people. At the time of liberation, it was believed to have been close to 15,000. In spring this year city authorities had reported that some of the residents had returned home and that the city population was estimated at around 22,000-23,000 people. However, it is unlikely that the number of residents will reach pre-invasion levels anytime soon. EE

Kateryna Pryshchepa is a Ukrainian journalist and a contributing editor with *New Eastern Europe.*

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The Five Towers of the Kremlin

VAKHTANG MAISAIA

The Russian system of governance is known for its vertical power structure, with Vladimir Putin at the top balancing all other interests. However, since the mutiny led by Yevgeny Prigozhin in June 2023, some cracks are starting to show in the system. Understanding its current configuration can help us predict in which direction the system may head, as Putin tries to compensate for his state's many failings at home and abroad.

There are many rumours regarding how contemporary Russia is being ruled and who is the "unknown puppet master" holding all the "strings". Overall, the Russian political system is more akin to the Byzantine model of governance than the Roman one, and is prone to instability and conflict. The recent mutiny by the Wagner Group, a private military company led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, is a sign that the system is breaking down. The carefully constructed political order that has been overseen by Vladimir Putin since he came to power in 2000 is now in jeopardy, and it is unclear who could emerge as his successor.

Conclusions from the rebellion

The well-organised Wagner mutiny, which appeared to start as early as April 2023, can be compared to the socialist coup d'état in October 1917, with all its demonstrated drawbacks, implications and conclusions. First, Putin quickly became a lame duck and was forced to pursue the political strategy of promoting his favourite successor

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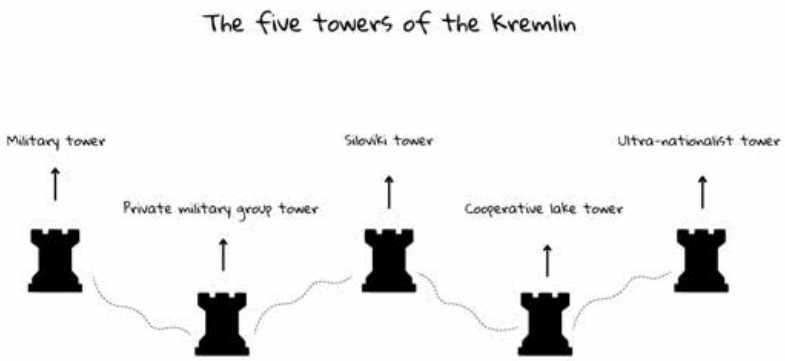
candidate, Tula Region Governor Aleksey Duymin. At the same time, Putin began to lose his personal business assets that previously were protected and managed by Prigozhin himself via his company "Concord". The assets include diamond and gold holdings and profits that transcend Russia's borders and are located in such countries as Mali, Congo, Angola, etc. The Wagner Group received formal legal status as a paramilitary group formation via connections to Gazprom, which was based on the law on special commercial forces created for both Gazprom and Transneft.

In July 2007, Russia's State Duma passed a bill that would allow the energy companies Gazprom (Russia's state-owned natural gas monopoly) and Transneft (which controls Russia's oil pipeline infrastructure) the right to create private, internal armies. The new bill raised concerns internationally and within the Kremlin that such a move would give these companies too much power. In addition to establishing a private army, Gazprom is bolstering the security of its vast pipeline network with unmanned aerial vehicles. Hence, these private corporate security and military groupings have reached numbers of up to 2.5 million servicemen.

The mutiny also demonstrated that the political vertical, which was constructed by Putin, is becoming fragile. The system was wholly based on Putin's personal political ambitions and his coercive charisma. However, the unsuccessful war in Ukraine and the Prigozhin-led mutiny on June 24th are two important cases that have nullified Putin's political omnipotence. Before June 24th, the political vertical, which was based on several influential clans' checks and balances, had been controlled by Putin the same way as during the Soviet period under Leonid Brezhnev, through the politburo or central committee.

The main structures in Putin's political vertical system are the five key military-political-financial groupings (or clans), which could be referred to as the "Kremlin Five Towers" (associated with the original Kremlin building which had five towers). The Five Towers metaphor demonstrates how the system is organised and is based on open-source information. An illustration is provided below.



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The Siloviki tower

The Siloviki is one of the strongest and most influential groupings that probably provided support to Prigozhin's mutiny, at least behind the scenes. The clan name itself is derived from the Russian word *sila* (*сила*), meaning "force". It refers to Russian politicians and officials who have a background in the security and intelligence agencies, special forces or the military – many of whom were recruited to important political posts under Putin. The clan includes the leaders of various power structures: Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of the Security Council; Igor Sechin, a former GRU officer and chairman of the Fuel and Energy Committee; Lieutenant General Viktor Ivanov, leader of the Federal Drug Control Service; Sergey Naryshkin, head of foreign intelligence; and former Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov.

Political lobbying for the clan is effectively carried out by the Liberal Democratic Party founded by Vladimir Zhirinovsky and currently chaired by Leonid Slutsky (a former GRU officer). It is believed that Sergei Ivanov – a former head of the presidential administration and former defence minister – is also a member of the clan. Colonel General Viktor Zolotov, commander of the Russian National Guard, was also an influential member of the grouping (presently he has created his own powerful clan as described below).

The Siloviki is one of the strongest and most influential groupings that probably provided support to Prigozhin's mutiny, at least behind the scenes.

This clan controls several media holdings, including the TV channel NTV and several newspapers, such as *Izvestia*. This clan also controls Rosneft, the state-owned oil company with Igor Sechin as its chairman. One of the clan's main achievements is the aforementioned law regarding the establishment of special services and private protection services for businesses and corporations. Rosneft has a private protection service made up of 3,000 personnel, 600 of which are former workers from the security services.

This clan is the most influential grouping and is ahead of other groupings when it comes to influence. It possesses a conservative ideological concept which can be described as "nationalist corporativism", involving state control over the whole country's economy in order to pursue national interests. The clan is considered hawkish and thoroughly interested in increasing their own power. The clan also has its own potential presidential successor: Nikolai Patrushev's son, Dmitry Patrushev, who is now minister of agriculture. It is interesting that the clan managed to entangle Yevgeny Prigozhin in their affairs. This was probably done via Viktor Bout – an influential member of the clan and in fact "grey cardinal" who met with

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Prigozhin in Omsk, just a few days before the mutiny. Bout and Prigozhin had common interests in Africa (Angola and Congo) and in the MENA region.

The Siloviki tower has much power and could gain leading positions if Putin opts for a form of power transformation akin to Turkmenistan. This would see Putin keep some symbolic role, such as chairman of the State Council or a similar position. The clan also currently controls the interior ministry and has incorporated some representatives of the former liberal clan (which included former President Dmitry Medvedev and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov). The clan generally controls most of the foreign ministry, as well as state and corporate structures like Vnesheconombank and Vneshtorgbank (VTB). Finally, they have influence over Gazprom (Medvedev is chairman of the supervisory board) and control the Russia Today media holding.

The military tower

The military clan is seemingly led by former Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, and Sergei Shoigu, the minister of defence. There was a time when this clan strongly cooperated with the Siloviki, however, presently they are strong competitors when it comes to control over several industrial and financial enterprises. The financial base of the clan is centred on the military-industrial complex and the export of weaponry, which is led by Viktor Chemezov, a close friend of Putin and representative of the former "chekist" clan. In 2015, Russia gained ten billion US dollars through weapons exports.

In addition, separate financing is funnelled through federal programmes and was estimated to total around 1.2 trillion US dollars around 2020. The defence ministry used these resources to invest in high-tech and strategic weapons including the T-50 stealth jet fighter. At the same time, the military clan controls important media holdings such as the TV Channel "Zvezda". They also lead the GRU, the strategic military intelligence agency, and its approximately ten special purpose brigades.

The clan is itself waging war against sovereign Ukraine and has engaged in various black market businesses such as arms smuggling. This is one key reason why the clan has entered into a confrontation with the Siloviki and fiercely clashed with the Wagner Group and Prigozhin. The battle between Prigozhin and Shoigu was not only related to personal, family animosity but also enmity surrounding black market business transactions (arms and oil smuggling). The military clan is still loyal to Putin and that is why the president was reluctant to dismiss the clan's leadership after the deal with Prigozhin. However, the armed

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forces are now in a difficult situation as demonstrated by the mutiny. The clan could also present (with some possibility) its own successor to the presidency in the form of Dmitry Rogozin.

The "private military" tower

The private military clan is led by various people whose common interactions and interests spark many questions and uncertainty. However, now they seem to be teaming up. Generally speaking, the leadership of this clan is army General Viktor Zolotov, who is the commander in chief of the National Guard, with almost 500,000 combatants under his command. The National Guard is one of the strongest security services and Zolotov is thought to be a "grey cardinal" in the Kremlin Five Tower system. According to some sources, Zolotov has managed to collect more than ten million US dollars from real estate.

Ramzan Kadyrov, leader of the Chechen Republic, cooperates with both the military and private military clans through his personal guard (around 10,000). His so-called "death squadrons" answer directly to him and carry out "dirty" orders and special clandestine operations (for instance, the deaths of the famous human rights protector Anna Politkovskaya and opposition leader Boris Nemtsov). The structure of the death squadrons is generally unknown but is very hierarchical. They have separate bases, as well as special burial grounds for weaponry and documents and they also have separate bank accounts through which they receive money. These "death squadrons" are supported by military structures and were operating under cover of the special forces, the so-called *sever*, which were subordinated to the GRU.

The Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov cooperates with both the military and private military clans through his personal guard of around 10,000 people.

The private military clan is also supported by the Minister of Emergency Situations Aleksandr Kurenkov, who during the mutiny flew to Grozny in Chechnya. His ministry actually became the lead for all private military companies engaged in warfare operations in Ukraine, including Prigozhin's Wagner Group. The ministry oversees more than 300,000 paramilitary servicemen. The ministry was actually founded by Shoigu and was supposed to be an ally to the military clan. As a result, the organisation has thus become quite controversial. This clan was associated with Prigozhin and his private company but after the mutiny it has slowly developed contradicting interests. The clan formally expresses support for Putin and has no potential successor for the presidency.

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The ultra-nationalist tower

In comparison to other clans, the ultra-nationalist clan can be considered small and not very strong. It most likely lacks a successor candidate when it comes to the presidency. However, the clan is chaired by two influential tycoons with ultra-nationalist sentiments. The first is Konstantin Malofeev, the Orthodox tycoon and ideologist behind the "Novorossiya" geopolitical project. As a result, he is one of the main architects of the war in Ukraine. Malofeev's most famous investment was a stake in the state-owned telecommunications giant Rostelecom, estimated to be worth one billion US dollars. Thanks to his holding and friendship with the then Minister of Communications Igor Shchyogolev, Malofeev was considered to be one of the most important people in the Russian telecommunications industry. The profit from his 2013 sale of the aforementioned stake was supposedly used to pay off debts to VTB after a years-long corporate dispute. Since then, no significant investments by Malofeev have been reported in the media. Malofeev controls and sponsors almost all the "separatist" forces and groups in Eastern Ukraine and runs his own private military company called Patriot, which has 10,000 mercenaries.

The second leader of this clan is tycoon Vladimir Yevtushenkov, who runs the System corporation. This group is linked with the military-industrial complex, although formally the company deals in the fishing industry. The clan is supported by the political party "Just Russia" led by Sergey Mironov. It has clandestine support from ultra-leftist and communist-oriented political movements, including the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. The clan also operates as a political lobby group on behalf of many separatist movements in the former Soviet space, including the occupied territories of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Overall, the clan's broadly authoritarian ideology focuses on reviving the Russian Empire with a monarchy and leans towards theocratic governance for the country.

The cooperative lake tower

The most powerful clan is led personally by Vladimir Putin and made up of his personal guard. The name of the clan comes from a group of summer cottages on a lake near St Petersburg, where Putin's neighbours were his former political team members who helped him come to power. The clan is composed of the Rotenberg brothers (Arkady and Boris), the Kovalchuks (Yury and Mikhail, who control all the media holdings supported personally by Putin) and the Timchenkos (Gennady and Oleg, in spite of Gennady confronting Putin over a small, local conflict). The clan also includes Putin's personal successor to the presidency Aleksey Dyumin,

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his presidential staff chair Anton Vaino, and the chief of the federal state protection service, Dmitry Kochnev. Putin and his clan personally control key business spheres like the coal, precious metals and gas industries. They also control various military state corporations. The clan has created a wide network, which includes the political and financial corporate elite. The State Council has also brought under Putin's control two other former political clans – the "Liberals" and "Technocrats". Together with the former liberals, the technocrats are intellectual and "technical", mostly from St Petersburg and on the side of the "Cooperative Lake Tower". The most prominent of these figures is Sergei Kiriyenko, the former deputy chief of the presidential staff, an ex-head of Rosatom (Russia's nuclear agency) and a former prime minister. Another technocrat is Vladislav Surkov, the former head of the government executive office and the main lobbyist and ideologist of the Kremlin. He formulated the ideological concept of "sovereign democracy", which believes in adjusting democratic values to Russian traditions and not to the principles which exist in the West. Its main motto is "the state is everything."

This clan has a big impact on regional party leaders and governors on the party lists. They also control the leading party's faction in the State Council, the whole party nomenclature as well as the "People's Front" social grouping and "Young Guard" youth movement. The clan controls geopolitical processes in the so-called near abroad and keeps an eye on the situation in the occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It is quite an influential, flexible and strong grouping but still not stable and solid.

In conclusion, it is necessary to mention that the "Kremlin Tower" vertical power system is composed of a modern Soviet-style politburo governing the country. However, this structure is weakening due to a shaky "checks and balances" principle. This situation is largely due to the prolonged reign of Putin in the political vertical, reflecting Russia's authoritarian regime. To compensate, Putin has become more hawkish, especially since the Prigozhin mutiny, and aggressive in order to divert attention away from internal turmoil towards self-defined external enemies. His personal vow that "Russia has no allies and partners" fully expresses a Soviet-style political culture, in addition to cronyism and kleptocracy. All these ingredients taken together seem to show that Russia is moving towards a new type of political architecture known as the "patrimonial state" – a system of governance in which a single ruler treats the state as his personal property. EE

Vakhtang Maisaia is a professor of the Caucasus International University (Georgia) and honorary professor of the Josef Goluchivski Science Applied University in Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski (Poland).

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Rethinking Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies in the West

VERONICA SNOJ

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine since February 2022 has impacted academic research on the region, forcing students and staff in western university departments to rethink their interests and curricula.

After Teresa Reilly took Russian classes for her bachelor's degree requirements, she was keen to learn more of the language and decided to apply for a master's programme that would allow her to spend more time in Russia. In autumn 2021, she enrolled in the Erasmus Mundus master's degree in Central and East European Studies, Russian and Eurasian Studies, with the aim of spending the second year of her studies in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia. This would allow her to hone her language skills and work on her thesis, which was focused on a post-colonial view of the relationship between NATO and Yeltsin's Russia.

But then half a year into her studies, Russia invaded Ukraine and her programme severed its ties with its Russian partners. Teresa decided to instead spend her second year of studies in Almaty, Kazakhstan, where she also found a new thesis supervisor from the local partner university.

Meanwhile, in February 2022, Philipp Zimmermann was about to take up an internship at the Ukrainian parliament. In fact, he had already arrived in Ukraine, which he had visited many times before, but was advised to leave the country on the same day. Soon after Russia invaded Ukraine it became clear that he would not be able to take up the planned internship. He spent the next couple of weeks in a frenzy searching for another opportunity and was finally accepted for an internship in Georgia.

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Looking beyond Russia

Teresa and Philipp's stories are not rare given the recent turmoil facing Russian, East European and Eurasian area studies faculties. The war in Ukraine has led to the cancelling of funds for collaboration with Russian universities and cut short projects that required travel either to Russia or Ukraine. Several programme directors at universities based in the European Union, the United Kingdom and the United States contacted for this article have also noted that many of their students felt they had to re-shape their research projects, master's theses and even PhD proposals after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This led them to choose a different geographical area or methods, even if their thesis was not directly impacted by the conflict.

The war in Ukraine has led to the cancelling of collaboration with Russian universities and cut projects that required travel either to Russia or Ukraine.

Geographical, financial and moral limitations caused by the war have undoubtedly brought new perspectives to the table and started shaping the discourse in academic research. "The whole area studies field has changed and I think it has to be that way," says Sari Autio-Sarasmo, the director of the master's programme in Russian, Eurasian and Eastern European Studies (a brand new, restructured version of an earlier master's programme in Russian Studies) at the University of Helsinki.

For Teresa and Philipp, the radical change that cut through their academic studies has taken a somewhat positive turn. Teresa received a lot of support from her new supervisor in Kazakhstan to keep the topic for her thesis which, she now realises, might be more difficult to explore freely in Russia.

"Kind of ironically, it is a bit easier to talk about post-colonialism here in Kazakhstan than it would have been in Russia. This is not a popular topic in Russia for a lot of, unfortunately, obvious reasons," she says, noting that influential Russian academics who look at Russia through a post-colonial lens are not in Russia either. When she talks about concepts such as post-colonialism in Kazakhstan, she sees that people are open to discuss them because of the living memory of colonisation.

"They've been on the receiving end of it, as opposed to Russia, which a lot of Russian people don't want to see. They may admit to having an imperial legacy, but they don't want to see it as a bad thing," she notes.

Philipp, who is now doing his master's in East European Studies at the Free University of Berlin, is planning to do a semester abroad in Kyrgyzstan, as he wants to explore topics such as nation-building and collective memory, topics that he has become more interested in since the invasion.

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"Those who didn't care that much about Ukraine or Eastern Europe before, became very interested in the region when the war started, but for me it was the opposite since I couldn't go to Ukraine anymore or relate to my friends affected by the war, who were going through very difficult things," he admits. "I had to redefine my interest in the region, become more flexible and uncover new areas."

He first focused on the South Caucasus but eventually his interests shifted even more eastwards, towards Central Asia. "When I started studying in Berlin, I learned how the invasion in Ukraine has triggered some shifts in Central Asia and the way they think about their Soviet past, and this is why I have become very interested in how the war in Ukraine related to the societies of Central Asia," he explains.

"There are so many people who are interested in Central Asia and it's only growing, which is really nice to see," Teresa notes. "A lot of Kazakh academics are fostering academic relationships with western universities on western research projects. There is a sense like it's building to something."

It seems that Central Asia has certainly been receiving more attention in the last year than ever before, yet it is Ukraine that has truly been thrown into the spotlight, even if sometimes only to discuss security concerns. Western universities have been intensifying their ties with Ukrainian universities by inviting lecturers and incorporating their classes into curricula. This is also achieved through teleconferencing for the scholars that remain in Ukraine. The University of Tartu, for instance, is even planning to set up a Ukraine Centre to support joint research with Ukrainian scholars and academic institutions.

"To help Ukraine rebuild the country after the war, more must be done," says Maili Vilson, the deputy head of academic affairs at the University of Tartu's Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies.

The language question

Russian has often been the only language offered in programmes addressing the region and while the invasion encouraged several university departments to expand their language offerings, it is still too early to measure how the war will impact interest in learning Russian and other regional languages in the long term.

"There was a clear "knee-jerk" reaction last year as many decided not to study Russian, in protest or a degree of peer pressure perhaps," says Renee Stillings, director of SRAS, the US-based consultancy that offers advice on studying in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. This has been the case especially in small liberal arts colleges, where students are experiencing more moral pressure. This is

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less so in programmes designed for aspiring US military officers, where there has been an increased interest in the language for defence purposes.

Does this mean that there is more interest in Ukrainian, or other languages spoken in the region? Kind of. "There is an uptick, especially in Ukrainian," Stillings says on the language picture in the US. Regardless of the percentage change, it is no secret that other language classes relevant to the region are still not reaching the same popularity as those for Russian. This is despite a push since the invasion to launch more Ukrainian classes. Sometimes launching a new course might take more time than expected, as is the case for the Ukrainian classes at Philipp's programme in Berlin. These remain "in the works" nearly a year and a half after the invasion, with the only "alternative" being certain recommended online resources. But even more established courses on regional languages are not (yet) experiencing a higher inflow of students. According to Oxford's Nicolette Makovicky, this extends to her own department's Georgian programme.

Despite the push to launch more Ukrainian language classes since the invasion, Russian still seems to be the most popular language in the region.

In any case, Stillings says that it is difficult to predict how sustainable these new language trends could be. It might happen that if the war disappears from the front pages, then students will rethink what language would be more "useful" to learn in terms of the number of speakers or most published scientific publications, leaving Ukrainian (and other languages) in the shadows again. Or, as a recent survey from SRAS on enrolment in Russian-language classes in the US puts it: "It is unlikely that a significant percentage of those students who elected to not take Russian this year did so in order to take Ukrainian."

Strong Russian skills can open doors for jobs in the US federal government, risk analysis firms, or even NGOs, notes Kathleen E. Smith, the associate director at Georgetown University's Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies. This is why, even when students visit countries such as Armenia, Kyrgyzstan or Latvia, they do so more often to practice Russian than local languages.

Long-term changes

Russian might still be prevalent in Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies, but can we sense any potential long-term changes in research interests that go beyond the language question? My interviewees kept talking about Russia's "near abroad" or "peripheries". Should these Russo-centric expressions be considered

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a slip of the tongue, or a bad habit that has to be addressed even more by higher education institutions that are now finally stepping out of Russia's shadow?

When discussing new research interests surrounding Russia among academia, it seems the closer you get to countries that share a centuries-long history with Russia, such as Finland or Estonia, the more awareness exists of other countries in the region. This also extends to the presence of different narratives, which also reflect a more nuanced understanding of the region that avoids expressions such as "post-Soviet space".

"Being located next to Russia, owing to a long and complex historical experience and relationship with Russia, we in Estonia are well aware of the much more diverse perspectives on Russia, as well as those in other countries of the region," Vilson notes. Yet many of the contacted universities still consider security issues, Russia's state ideology and propaganda, and Russia's relations with China as the main topics of interest among their staff and students. This is not, as controversially as it might sound, a necessarily bad thing. We cannot go beyond the fact that Russia has been an imperial power for centuries. You have to know it well to know how it affected its neighbours and colonies.

There is hope for sustainable 74 in the future for Russian and Eastern European studies.

In the first year of her studies in Glasgow, Scotland, Teresa could not choose a single course on Russia, which she found a bit surprising, given that her master's theoretically covers the whole vast region of Russia, Eastern Europe and Eurasia. She notes that even if there is the desire to refocus our academic research onto other countries, the "basics" about Russia, the common history – and even more importantly, the historiography – are needed and cannot be denied if we are to pursue quality research.

"You need to discuss how Russia has changed its discussion of history, how Stalin had an impact on how you discuss this. Just even this concept of the discussion of history has a history," she argues. Despite all the turmoil brought into academia by the invasion, Russia remains Teresa's main point of interest. "Even though I've really enjoyed the opportunity to learn more about Central Asian politics, people and my experience living here, it has only further reinforced that I want to specialise academically in Russia," she admits.

Her nuanced outlook discussing such a sensitive topic reflects a new trend among younger generations aspiring to join the academic debate on Russia, Eastern Europe and Eurasia. This trend brings hope for sustainable change in the future for academia.

"Students have become more critical towards Russia and the information presented in the courses. They are very sensitive, why are we discussing certain topics

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in a certain way," Autio-Sarasmo notes. She also argues that lecturers have to think even more thoroughly about how they present materials in their classes, and have to be able to defend their approach in front of the students. This is a good thing in times when narratives related to Russia, and especially colonialism, have to be redefined.

Veronica Snoj is a Slovenian-Argentinian journalist and a Russian Studies graduate.

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The weaponisation of music in today's Russia

TATEVIK HOVHANNISYAN

Popular music has become an important propaganda tool to rally Russians in support of the war against Ukraine. An analysis of the ten most popular songs created during the war demonstrates common themes which have emerged, including patriotism, nationalism, religion and feelings for the motherland.

Music is the art most intimately connected to time. Indeed, it serves as a time machine for the transmission of culture, collective memory, concepts, mental states and feelings. But music has other purposes as well. It has a long history of being used as a strong tool for soft power. The Voice of America radio channel in communist countries was a striking example of this. Additionally, artists have utilised it as a form of protest. For example, the Polish rock group "Tilt" found in music the only way to express its rebellion against the communist regime in the 1980s.

However, music can also be used as a means of propaganda or to enhance the influence of propaganda. Since political speeches are heavy and sometimes tedious, music, with its entertaining elements, serves as a supplement to make the messages easier to convey. In fact, music has been used for propaganda purposes for centuries. It was also used during the Second World War, on all fronts, in the United States, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Each and every party was using music for its own objectives, including maintaining social order, boosting soldier morale, inspiring people and instilling a sense of patriotism or nationalism.

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Popular war tunes

The use of music for propagandistic purposes in contemporary Russia does not deviate from historical norms. This is even more so during the time of the war in Ukraine, in which the unwavering resistance of the Ukrainians is challenging the Russian political establishment's control within the country. Indeed, protests against the war appeared in the country during the early stages of the war, but they were promptly suppressed. Moreover, celebrities and once pro-state figures such as the prima donna of Russian show business Alla Pugacheva, her husband and renowned showman Maksim Galkin, or singer Laima Vaikule and others, left the country as a sign of protest. In this context, the Russian government had to turn to music again to reshape the sentiments of the society.

The ten most popular songs created during the war period in Russia are presented below. A content analysis outlines the extent in which the songs are connected to Russian state propaganda and ideology. The selected songs are generally inspirational and emotional, touching upon the war both directly and indirectly from many perspectives. As seen by the number of views on YouTube, some are much more popular than others.

Artist and song title	Date of release	YouTube views as of August 3rd 2023
Shaman, "Let's stand up" / Шаман «Встанем»	February 23rd 2022	50 million
Shaman, "I am Russian" / Шаман «Я Русский»	July 22nd 2022	39 million
Ruslan Bogatyrev, "Powers of heaven" / Руслан Богатырёв «Силы небесные»	December 10th 2022	1 million
Alvi & Vlad Balu, "Homeland" / Альви & Влад Balu «Родина»	January 8th 2023	1.9 million
Oleg Gazmanov, "Soldiers of Russia" / Олег Газманов «Солдаты России»	January 27th 2023	0.9 million
Grigory Leps, "Mother Homeland" Григорий Лепс «Родина-мать»	February 22nd 2023	1.6 million
Shaman, "My Russia" / Шаман «Моя Россия»	February 23rd 2023	7.7 million
Shaman, "We" / Шаман «Мы»	April 12th 2023	4.4 million
Maksim Fadeev, "I will definitely be back" / Максим Фадеев «Обязательно вернусь»	April 28th 2023	4.2 million
Shaman, "My fight" / Шаман «Мой бой»	July 20th 2023	3.4 million

It is noteworthy that although all the songs are clearly related to the war in Ukraine, the word "war" is never mentioned. This choice is consistent with the Kremlin's narrative that has long denied the use of the word "war" in favour of the expres-

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sion "special military operation". Also, the video clips somehow compensate for the absence of the word with the presence of battle-related scenes in 50 per cent of the selected songs. In addition to military actions, the letters "Z" and "V" are present in three of the videos (in Russian "Z" and"за" mean "for" and "V" means "victory") as well as other symbols such as the Russian flag, churches and crosses. A family story is the focus of several songs accompanied by suffering, challenges and reunion after separation. Paying tributes to those who have fallen is present in several songs but in general there is less about loss and more about hope and determination. One song celebrates the camaraderie of soldiers and nations, particularly the relationship between a Russian and a Chechen. The Chechen considers Russia as his motherland and is ready to die for it and for brotherhood. This is not a random choice, as the Chechens who are fighting against Ukraine also need inspiration. Only one time is the word "enemy" used and in two more cases the enemy is "the rest of the world" or "half of the world". The remaining songs celebrate "mother Russia", recalling its brilliance and people's willingness to fight for it until the end.

One interesting observation is the consistent use of the words "Russia" and "homeland" in 80 per cent of the songs.

One interesting observation is the consistent use of the words "Russia" (*Россия*) and "homeland" (*родина*) in 80 per cent of the songs. However, in two songs ("Powers of heaven" and "I will definitely be back"), the words family (*семья*) or home (*дом*) are substituted for Russia or motherland. This phenomenon reflects a perception of Russia as a large family within a social-political context, akin to a typical patriarchal society, where the leader of the country assumes the role of the family's head. In one of Grigory Leps's songs (which has been selected for this analysis), the mention of homeland is reinforced by the expression "mother homeland" (*родина-мать*). The strategic use of these words is essential, aiming to influence the subconscious mind of the listeners. By emphasising the connection between the homeland and family/relatives, it serves as an additional reminder of devotion and duty towards the country in times of need. While not overly frequent, this pattern is present in three songs: "Homeland calls a soldier to eliminate the natsists forever" ("Homeland"); "Homeland calls us: don't let it down" ("Mother homeland"); and "Russia should believe in us. All as one we will fight" ("Soldiers of Russia").

Religious themes

Another key aspect is related to the presence of religious themes in the songs. Here are several expressions used in the songs:

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"As long as the Lord is with us, the truth is with us" (Shaman, "Let's stand up");
"I am Russian, my blood is from my father" (Shaman, "I am Russian");
"Let the word of God help us" (Ruslan Bogatyrev, "Powers of heaven");
"Allah is with us, justice exists" (Alvi & Vlad Balu, "Homeland");
"With faith let us stand up" (Grigory Leps, "Mother homeland");
"God is with us" (Shaman, "We");
"We are connected by one sky" (Shaman, "We");
"I'll be back with a candle on the altar" (Maksim Fadeev, "I will definitely be back").

The church and faith have consistently played a pivotal role in Russian society throughout different periods including wartime. Orthodoxy is considered one of the significant elements of the "Russian world" ideology, which as a socio-cultural phenomenon has been based on the fact that the education and development of the Russian world is historically based on the spiritual community of people extending beyond a common language. In this regard, the Russian world aims to synthesise the spiritual root of the community of people professing Orthodoxy both in Russia and beyond its borders.

The presence of faith-related vocabulary in the songs is an illustration of a deeply ingrained conviction about the connection between God and society. In addition, the intentional use of certain terms may enhance the transmission of specific propagandistic messages: to believe in God, pray and hope for a bright future, etc. Regular incorporation of these expressions serves a dual purpose: fostering unity within society and attempting to engage others who share the Orthodox faith. Notably, the Ukrainian authorities not only seek to erase historical and cultural ties with Russia but have also eliminated the influence of the Russian-led Orthodox Church in Ukraine. This is because Patriarch Kirill openly supports the war in Ukraine.

The emotional components in songs are another aspect that is frequently present. Ninety per cent of the songs analysed include some sort of emotional expression, including such words as "heart", "love" and "hope" – mainly related to the country and sometimes to family and brotherhood. The sentiments conveyed by these words have the power to move the listeners and elicit a range of emotions, including suffering, crying, resentment and, when combined with other phrases, a sense of national pride and determination to carry on a common struggle.

Patriotism and nationalism

Similarly, patriotic and nationalistic expressions can be found in 80 per cent of the songs. These include such phrases as:

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"Let's stand up for the dead Russian heroes" (Shaman, "Let's stand up");
"I am Russian and I am lucky" (Shaman, "I am Russian");
"I will protect my motherland with honour" (Alvi & Vlad Balu, "Motherland");
"Protecting the motherland is honour" (Grigory Leps, "Homeland");
"There is no better country" (Shaman, "My Russia");
"We are eternal in our blood" (Shaman, "We").

The distinction between patriotism and nationalism is blurred in these lyrics. This is observed especially in the songs by Shaman, one of the most active artists since the beginning of the war. His songs immediately become viral as soon as they are uploaded. Notably, his most recent song, titled "We", articulates numerous ideas at once: national pride, exceptionalism, determination, and the notion of being chosen by God.

"We are eternal in our blood,
And my generation,
We are connected by one sky,
We will never be broken by anyone,
We do not live on our knees,
We are the truth alone in the whole world,
Our heart burns with words,
Truth and strength are behind us,
Our people will proudly survive everything."

Another song, which gained 50 million views in one year is "I am Russian" performed again by Shaman. The chorus does not need any explanation:

"I am Russian, I go till the end,
I am Russian, my blood is from my father (Author's note: God),
I am Russian and I am lucky to be so,
I'm Russian, in spite of the whole world I'm Russian."

The songs often incorporate elements of determination and inspiration, which are frequently linked to victories and the glorious past, such as the "Great Patriotic War" and the belief in the possibility of repeating those achievements. These expressions draw from deeply rooted proverbs in Russian culture, such as "We persist till the end," "No one can defeat / break us," "We may endure hunger, but we shall never surrender," and "We defeated the Nazis." These narratives find their origins in historical records, creating a sort of unbreakable spirit for Russia and Russians. Here are some more expressions which encapsulate such resilient thinking:

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"I cannot be broken" (Shaman, "I am Russian");
"I go till the end" (Shaman, "I am Russian");
"I will not give up" (Shaman, "My fight");
"No step back" (Shaman, "My fight");
"Victory and strength" (Oleg Gazmanov, "Soldiers of Russia");
"Wounds make me stronger" (Shaman, "My fight").

To fully embody the unwavering image of the unbreakable character, one must also possess the determination and willingness to prioritise love and devotion to your country above your own personal well-being and existence. In fact, these elements can also be found in several songs:

"Until the last breath I will fight for you" (Shaman, "My fight");
"Protect Russia by all means" (Alvi & Vlad Balu, "Homeland");
"I will give everything for my Russia to live" (Shaman, "My Russia");
"I will stand up for you mother Russia" (Grigory Leps, "Mother homeland").

Duties of man

For centuries religion, the homeland and the family have constituted the three fundamental pillars for social construction in Russian society. It is the same slogan as the one created by Giuseppe Mazzini in 1860 in his *The Duties of Man*: *"Dio, patria, famiglia"*, to which the Italian patriot later added "humanity". Mazzini explains that except for rights, citizens must also have duties towards God, homeland and family. This expression was later used by the fascists, who manipulated the initial meaning of this philosophical approach, erasing the ideas related to rights and making the duties the foundation of nationalistic ideologies. Analysis of the lyrics of these Russian songs evidently shows the existence of a nationalistic ideology focused on serving the homeland.

The idea of devotion to the homeland was typical in the Soviet Union. An ordinary Soviet man, among other characteristics, should be selfless and his life would have belonged to the homeland and/or the leader: "For the Motherland! For Stalin!" This slogan emphasised the importance of defending the Soviet Union and the leadership of Joseph Stalin during the war. Other slogans such as "No Step Back!" and "Courage, Bravery and Victory!" again conveyed the idea of standing firm against the enemy's advance and never yielding ground. These ideas passed through time and were reinterpreted in these songs nowadays.

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Everything that has been used successfully in the past is still in use now. The popularity of a particular piece spreads according to the same logic: Shaman's phenomenally popular song "Let's stand up" was later covered by a number of other singers as a joint effort, and it received nine million views over several months. Russians can be heard chanting Shaman's "I am Russian" song all throughout the nation. There are even video clips of this phenomenon. The words "Russia is the greatest country in the world" and "I am not going to leave Russia" were used in a flash mob in reaction to people who were fleeing the country right after the start of the war in Ukraine.

However, what is difficult to measure is the effectiveness of Russian musical propaganda. The only information available is found in discussions and comments on YouTube and apparently positive feedback predominates. At the same time, it is also known that Aleksandr Gudkov, a comedian, developed a parody of Shaman's "I am Russian" in August 2022, which also received great feedback. The song is titled *"Я узкий"*, literally translated as "I am narrow." This is a play on words in Russian: *Я Русский* ("Ya Russkiy") versus *Я узкий* ("Ya uzkiy").

Even at the level of the State Duma and in many TV and radio outlets, this parody was widely criticised. Yet the facts are still there: Shaman, who is the leading propaganda artist today in Russia and considered "the favourite of Putin", has received a humiliating parody, which has eight million views and 83,111 comments (the nationalities of the commentators are not known). The majority of these commentators support the parody's creator and ask for an end to the war. EE

Tatevik Hovhannisyan is a political scientist specialising 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.

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Slovaks seek a sense of normalcy

MICHAELA TERENZANI

In the autumn of 2023 Slovaks will elect a new parliament in an early election. Since March 2023, Smer, the party of former Prime Minister Robert Fico, has been leading opinion polls and is expected to win the election. What would Fico's return mean for Slovakia, the region and the rest of Europe?

There was a time when you almost never heard talk of emigration in Slovakia. Just before the pandemic hit, discussion about the big return of Slovaks who had left in the 1990s was still the topic of the day. Not in the summer of 2023. Nowadays, people buying flight tickets for their foreign holidays would more often than not utter the running joke that perhaps they should only take the one-way fare. The mood in the country as it prepares for the snap election scheduled for the last day of September reeks of resignation and something that one hesitates to call despair – only to not sound too desperate.

One of the words that resonates in the ongoing campaign is "normal", which only shows what people really crave in the next election term. The previous governments have left the country feeling like it lives in prevailing chaos, and the promises of normalcy from parties from across the political spectrum reflect the mood among the electorate – to feel things are "normal" again.

The return of Robert Fico, who was ousted from power in 2020 following a series of revelations that came on the heels of the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak in 2018, is the main concern among democratically-inclined voters and observers, but the concerns extend beyond the country's borders. Fico, who once dreamed

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of Slovakia being at the core of the EU and whose governments saw the country join the Schengen and euro zones, now speaks against EU unity when it comes to vital issues like support for Ukraine.

How we got here

Slovaks will elect their new parliament this autumn in an early election, although for many observers the election is not as early as it should have been. The regular term of the current parliament ends in March 2024, so the MPs will only serve a shorter term by less than half a year. Yet, the country has been functioning without a properly installed government since before the start of 2023.

The government of Eduard Heger, then a prominent politician of the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO) party, which ruled the country for one and a half years, lost a no-confidence vote in parliament in mid-December 2022. The ruling coalition crumbled even before then, when one of the original four partners, Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), left both the cabinet and the coalition. While the coalition partners spoke of unbearable and constant explosive conflicts among the leaders, particularly the OĽaNO leader Igor Matovič and SaS leader Richard Sulík, SaS insisted it was leaving because they were unable to work with Matovič.

The return of Robert Fico is the main concern among democratically-inclined voters and observers.

Political analyst Grigorij Mesežnikov also pointed his finger at Matovič when the *SME* daily asked him about the dissolution of the coalition. "He brought problems that affected the cohesion of the ruling coalition. There were conflicts until the last moment," he said. Matovič's peculiarities and his "alternative" ways of dealing with problems were behind his forced resignation as prime minister in April 2021, following a coalition crisis that was triggered by the decision of Matovič and his then Health Minister Marek Krajčí (both OĽaNO) to procure the Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine. They even welcomed the first supplies of the Russian vaccine, which then Foreign Minister Ivan Korčok called a tool of hybrid war, in person at Košice Airport.

When Heger took over after Matovič, he was welcomed as a man of consensus. A preacher rather than a politician, Heger became known for some of the figures of speech he tended to repeat, the "culture of respect" being one of them. But in reality, he had not achieved much in terms of calming the conflicts among the ruling parties, which eventually led to him losing his parliamentary majority and subsequently losing the confidence of the parliament in December last year.

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Disappointment after hope

Thus ends a term of the parliament that started off with high expectations. In the 2020 election, voters got rid of the Smer party that had ruled the country, with one short break, since 2006. But a government led by Smer became unsustainable following the murder of investigative reporter Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in February 2018. Faced with massive street protests, Fico stepped down with a government reshuffle that saw his then crown prince, Peter Pellegrini, rise to the position of prime minister for the remainder of the term. The murder shed light on the murky entanglements between the government and the underworld. A large number of former high-ranking officials from the Smer governments, the judiciary and the police force, as well as businesspeople with alleged ties to Smer, have faced criminal charges of corruption and abuse of power. Some, most notably former Special Prosecutor Dušan Kováčik, have already received prison sentences.

Civil society played an important role in the process. The 2018 street protests that took place on a weekly basis throughout the spring of that year, were only matched in the country's history by the street demonstrations that toppled the totalitarian government in 1989. Eventually, Smer was completely removed from the government in the 2020 election. The efforts to oust Fico and his people from power were led by several parties back then – most notably the Progressive Slovakia and Spolu parties, emboldened by the victory of their presidential candidate Zuzana Čaputová the year before. They were also joined by the Za Ľudí party of her presidential predecessor Andrej Kiska. In the end, to the surprise of many and to the dismay of some observers who had recognised the populism of Igor Matovič long before he had the chance to exercise it from a position of power, most voters picked OĽaNO. The party won more than one-fifth of the vote, with its promise to rid the country of Smer and its legacy or, as Matovič (still) puts it, "the mafia".

Smer is back

Many observers of the Slovak political scene saw Smer's defeat in 2020 as Robert Fico's political end, especially after Peter Pellegrini and some of Fico's other former allies deserted him to form the Hlas party soon after. Those predictions turned out to be premature and Fico once again proved he is the most skilled politician in the country. In the last three years, Smer politicians focused much of their political work on questioning the legitimacy of the criminal prosecutions against their former nominees, alleging that the charges are politically motivated. When Fico

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Photo: Alexandros Michailidis / Shutterstock

In the upcoming Slovak elections, Robert Fico pins his hope on a return to power. After his defeat in 2020, many predicted Fico's political end. Those predictions turned out to be premature.

himself was charged, he repeatedly alleged to be the victim of a fabricated case orchestrated by his political opponents, and that he was on his way to becoming a political prisoner.

Since March 2023, Smer has been leading the opinion polls with about 20 per cent of the vote, and it is expected to emerge from the upcoming vote with the largest level of support. But the party and Fico, its leader, are different from what their European partners might remember of the party in its heyday a decade ago. Some of its prominent politicians, including Fico, have embraced conspiracy-driven rhetoric, similar to what Viktor Orbán has deployed in Hungary. For the first time, Fico uttered the name of George Soros during the governmental crisis after the murder of Kuciak in 2018. Since then, he has used it with increasing ease as a bogeyman for his voters.

During the pandemic, Smer was at the forefront of the anti-vaccine campaign. Shortly before the start of the war in Ukraine, Smer organised what it called protests for peace, against the Defence Cooperation Agreement with the US that the Slovak parliament was dealing with in January 2023. And after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it has been one of the most reliable mouthpieces of Kremlin propaganda in Slovakia, calling for peace, which in its understanding means for Ukrainians to surrender.

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In fact, there are hardly any differences between the rhetoric of Smer and that of Republika, which was established as a new party by former members of the neo-fascist ĽSNS party. This group now represents one of the strongest parties on the far right of the spectrum. Tomáš Nociar, a political scientist focusing on extremism, has labelled Smer a product of the normalisation of the far right on the Slovak political scene: "It is an example of a radicalised mainstream party."

Smer feels compelled to attach adjectives to its "social democracy" definition, because its values do not really match those of the Western European social democratic family. Smer now calls itself a proponent of "Slovak social democracy", which Robert Fico occasionally branded as a form of "rustic" social democracy. As such, it has already made it clear that it would not mind teaming up with Republika within a future ruling coalition, as well as with the Slovak National Party (SNS), a nativist force that seems likely to make it back into parliament in September.

Why the outcome of Slovakia's election matters

Such a government would be considered a threat to liberal democracy in Slovakia and would be expected to seriously harm the foreign policy orientation of the country. When Fico was prime minister, he used to apply double-faced politics – with one type of messaging reserved for his peers in Brussels and a whole different message for the electorate back home. Smer is known among observers for its nearly religious respect for opinion polls, and their messages are designed to play into the moods of the electorate. Yet, some commentators believe that Fico is now living his authentic self, and might not feel the need to go back to the double-faced strategy. Milan Nič, a foreign policy expert of the German Council on Foreign Affairs, has said that there are fears that Slovakia could become a "little Hungary" after the election.

The mobilising potential of support for Ukraine and a pro-western foreign policy seems to be limited in Slovakia.

Fico does not bother to dispel these fears. On the contrary, he has stressed that he wants the kind of stability for Slovakia that Viktor Orbán brought to Hungary. In an interview with Hungarian public-service television in February, for example, he slammed sanctions against Russia, and accused the EU of promoting US interests in its foreign policy.

"I do not want to be Russia's enemy and I do not want Russia to consider Slovakia an enemy due to the supplies of weapons to Ukraine," he said as quoted by *Denník N.* Fico went on to assure the public that as prime minister, he would halt the supplies at once.

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"They are pretty much on the same page with Russia in terms of maintaining a good relationship with the Kremlin and "advocating for peace"," the Hungarian political analyst and sociologist Edit Zgut-Przybylska told the *SME* daily about Fico and Orbán. "It could at least partly reinvigorate the Visegrád Group, which is in a deep coma now."

There have been attempts, notably by the former prime minister, Eduard Heger, to use the concerns over Slovakia's foreign policy orientation to mobilise voters against Fico. But Heger, who broke away from Matovič and now heads his own party, the Democrats, polls far below the five per cent election threshold. The mobilising potential of support for Ukraine and a pro-western foreign policy also seems to be limited, given the geopolitical confusion that Slovakia seems to be in. For example, a poll by the AKO polling agency published in early August has shown that more than half of people in Slovakia are opposed to sending more military aid to Ukraine.

This is in line with the results of previous surveys, such as the latest Globsec Trends Survey, which has shown, among other things, that only 40 per cent of Slovaks blame Russia for the war and 54 per cent perceive Russia as a threat, an almost equal share to the 50 per cent that see a threat in the US, Slovakia's major ally in NATO. Support for NATO and the EU is going down among the Slovak population too.

Local politicians who do not shy away from abusing people's fears and misconceptions are one reason for these moods, but experts also stress the role of Kremlin propaganda. Slovakia has proved to be particularly vulnerable to its messages.

Who can be the alternative?

President Zuzana Čaputová, the first woman to ever have been elected to the top constitutional post in the country, has consistently stressed the need for Slovakia to stick with its western allies. She remains the most popular politician, but her position is weakened by her political opponents constantly targeting her with hate speech, including anti-American and even antisemitic claims. Čaputová has recently entered the last year of her term and announced that she would not run for re-election.

This does not have an immediate effect on the parliamentary election or the campaign but, despite the fact that the president does not have a strong executive position in Slovakia, another term with her would have provided some assurance that there is someone to secure the nation's pro-western policy orientation. The part of the society that realises how much of a problem a government made up of Smer and some of its like-minded parties on the far right would be is now looking

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for a politician who can defeat Fico. Andrej Kiska and Igor Matovič both managed to do that in the past but both failed to convince the public that it would be better off without him. Kiska had limited possibilities to do that as president, which is an important but mostly ceremonial post in Slovakia, and Matovič proved unable to bring about substantial change.

Progressive Slovakia (PS), the party that brought Čaputová into politics, suffered a fiasco in the 2020 election and now, consistently second in polls, appears to be gearing up for the final election battle with Smer. However, Slovakia's future government will likely not depend on whether Smer or PS wins the vote. One decisive factor will be the performance of Peter Pellegrini's Hlas and its subsequent willingness to join a coalition with either Smer or PS. Hlas has so far tried to leave most options open, and did not directly exclude a coalition with Smer, though they did say they were not willing to cooperate with the far-right Republika. The latest surveys from mid-August show that a Smer-led coalition without Republika might be an option, one that Hlas would not mind participating in.

Another factor is the results of the small parties now polling around the five per cent parliamentary threshold, and how many and which of them make it into the parliament. Some observers do not rule out that the election may result in a stalemate, and may have to be repeated – which has not yet happened in Slovakia's history. That would not exactly bring an end to the chaos and a return to normalcy – whatever that means – for the people in Slovakia. And though the campaign has so far been rather slow, things are expected to intensify towards the end of summer. Once again, not just political parties, but also civil society organisations are calling on the voters not to be indifferent. One campaign involving personalities from different walks of life, including social media influencers, runs under the motto "I want to stay here, therefore I vote."

"The civil society in Slovakia has shown many times in the past that it is capable of mobilising people to achieve higher turnout, especially among the younger voters," asserts Fedor Blaščák, head of the Open Society Foundation in Slovakia. EE

Michaela Terenzani is the leading editor of the foreign news desk of the *SME* daily. Between 2015 and 2023 she served as editor in chief of the *Slovak Spectator*. She comments on events happening in Slovakia in her weekly newsletter: "Last Week in Slovakia".

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A regional player?

NIKODEM SZCZYGŁOWSKI

Following the elections in April 2022, the new Slovenian government has displayed ambitions to make the country an active regional player and an intermediary between the Western Balkan states and Central Europe. However, the geopolitics of the wider region, including Russia's war in Ukraine, may force it to face some uncomfortable trends.

In the Balkans July and August are always the peak tourist season, with flocks of North European vacationers coming here to enjoy the beauty of the Adriatic coast and the warm Mediterranean sun. Traditionally, their preferred destination is Croatia, with its stunning Dalmatian beaches, beautiful Istria, numerous islands and national parks. Neighbouring from the north Slovenia is less popular. It is more often used as a transit country for travellers who are en route to Croatia.

Regardless of their perception as attractive (or not), these two countries are often unjustifiably treated together and labelled as "former Yugoslavia". Yet, there is nothing more erroneous than this definition. Slovenia and Croatia are more different than they are similar and this is true not only with regards to their touristic offers or positions on Europe's vacation map. While explaining the differences between the two states, the Slovenian editor and historian Luka Lisjak Gabrijelčič suggested that their origins date back to the 19th century, when they started to pursue two different development models. These tendencies were further reinforced in the 20th century, mainly because of the different experiences these societies faced during the Second World War and its aftermath, as well as the collapse of Yugoslavia and the Balkan wars in the 1990s.

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Green. Active. Healthy

Croatia joined both the Schengen and euro zones on January 1st 2023. As a result, we can say it has eliminated the last tangible differences (border and currency) that distinguished it from Slovenia. On a side note, Slovenia was the first country from the group of states that joined the European Union in 2004 to introduce the euro currency. It also joined the Schengen Zone quite early, in 2007. Thus, when asked about the role of the Croat-Slovenian border in the shaping of relations between the two states, Gabrijelčič points to some similarity with the border that exists between Spain and Portugal.

"It also splits two similar, yet different, nations which have their own languages and cultures, and which historically built two separate societies that have developed in parallel, but separate from one another nonetheless," he explains. As the tourist season is not fully over at the time of the writing of this article, I will attempt a short analysis also of the different approaches that Slovenia and Croatia have adopted with regards to their tourism development strategies and the large gap that has emerged between them as a result.

There is no doubt that with the largest share of income obtained from tourism among all EU states, Croatia really profits from foreign tourism. In 2019 tourism generated 11 per cent of the country's GDP, which exceeds other popular tourist destinations like Portugal, Spain or Greece. Slovenia, on the other hand, is in this regard below the EU average: only 4.5 per cent of its GDP is generated by tourism, which is much less than Germany and only slightly more than France. Interestingly, Slovenians make up the largest tourist group visiting Croatia, especially when counted in the number of nights and money spent.

Slovenia was the first country from the group of states that joined the European Union in 2004 to introduce the euro currency.

More importantly, Slovenia and Croatia have two very different strategies of tourism development. Thus, while we can say that the Croat approach, represented by the works of its national agency, *Hrvatska Turistička Zajednica*, has been focused on "quantity" (i.e. the number of tourists), its Slovenian counterpart, *Slovenska Turistična Organizacija*, has opted for "quality". Its vision of development is based on the concept of a "boutique country", which is contrary to the "supermarket" (come and go) tourism model. Slovenia has thus started to focus on attracting tourists who seek something more than "sun and sea". It now tries to sell its offer through three words: "Green. Active. Healthy".

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A visit to Zagreb

Following the elections in April 2022 the Slovenian political party Svoboda formed a new coalition government and has been ruling the country since. The time it has been in power has shown that the ambition of the authorities is to make Slovenia an active regional player and an intermediary between the Western Balkan states and Central Europe. This means that Slovenia aims at developing closer and deeper cooperation with its southern neighbours, including Croatia. This is not something that is very obvious and relations between the two states have seen both better and worse days, depending on who was in power in either capital.

Slovenian Prime Minister Robert Golob's first official visit to Croatia took place on July 14th 2023. As expected, his talks with his Croatian counterpart, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, focused mainly on energy cooperation, illegal migration and the overall situation in the Western Balkans. The topics for discussion also included the nuclear power plant in Krško and the LNG terminal in Krk. In Slovenia it is hoped that the modernisation of the terminal will make it a transit hub for all of Central Europe. Both countries also support the construction of the second Slovenian unit at the electric power plant in Krško, which is located around 20 kilometres from the Croat border and which could provide electric energy also to Croatia, a country that was more dependent on Russian energy sources than Slovenia.

Although it marked Golob's first official visit to Croatia, the meeting was in fact the third one between the two prime ministers, and as such a continuation of earlier talks which took place in Brdo pri Kranju in late March 2023. The very first meeting of both prime ministers was held much earlier, in August 2022. This took place at the Strategic Forum in Bled, shortly after the swearing in of the new Slovenian government.

Slovenia sees increased cooperation with Croatia as an important method for the better management of migration, which has significantly increased since Croatia joined the Schengen Zone this year. During his visit to Zagreb, Golob reiterated Slovenia's expectation for the EU's border agency, Frontex, to help control the border between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is something that Croatia has been refusing to do. Another issue discussed was trans-border cooperation. Its development could, for example, allow residents of Croatian Istria access to emergency medical assistance and hospital care in neighbouring Slovenia.

Most importantly, it seems that the long-time dispute over the borderline along the Dragonja river could finally come to an end. Golob voiced this by saying, "Slovenia and Croatia will remove the arbitration issue from their political agenda to prevent the further worsening of relations between both states." He was joined

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in this commitment by the Croat prime minister, however no time framework to achieve this goal has been established yet.

The issue in question is the so-called Hague arbitration of June 29th 2017, which granted Slovenia three quarters of the Gulf of Piran and access to open sea, as well as part of the village of Brezovec by the Mura river and the territories with land ownership split between Croats and Slovenians. In these final areas, Slovenia was more active in developing its power and consequently national economic activity. The arbitration was meant to end the land dispute that was as old as both countries' independence, which was actually declared on the same day – June 25th 1991. However, while Slovenia has recognised the arbitration decision, Croatia continued to express some reservations towards it.

And a visit to Vienna

Golob's visit to Zagreb was preceded by another important official trip, namely to Vienna. This trip made in 2022 was in fact the prime minister's very first visit to Austria. During his stay in Austria's capital, the Slovenian prime minister did not refrain from publicly criticising the continued controls that the Austrian border guards have been implementing at the border with Slovenia. In his view, these measures were unjustified and non-effective. Thus, Golob's meeting with the Austrian chancellor, Karl Nehammer, which in the end was described as friendly, concentrated mainly on migration and the interstate border. However, it also involved the topics of energy and the EU integration of the Western Balkans.

On the Austrian side, Nehammer made it clear that the issue of illegal migration was high on his government's agenda and border controls were seen as a key policy for the country's security. Since their introduction during the 2015 migration crisis, all subsequent Austrian governments have used rhetoric referring to the need to "stop the Balkan migration trail". However, even though Austria has indeed been extending the requirement for these controls every six months, it is now ready to consider a different form of oversight, once the number of asylum seekers decreases.

"Should the number of asylum application go down, we can start talking about next steps. We could then decrease border controls, but only if the system works well," Nehammer said, pointing to an increased pressure that is felt on the Schengen Zone's external borders.

This statement was criticised by Golob, who rhetorically asked: "Can someone imagine that Slovenia would introduce controls at its borders within the Schengen Zone and apply them to, for example, Austrian tourists who are travelling through

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Slovenia on route to their vacation destination in Croatia? This is the rationality behind these controls." With these words uttered at a press conference, Golob questioned the point of border controls. He argued that available data clearly show that these measures do not stop migration. To back his arguments, he said that Slovenia has seen an increase in the number of illegal immigrants since Croatia entered the Schengen zone in 2023. Yet, to reassure the Austrians, he also stated that his country was not planning to suspend the Schengen Agreement but wants to manage migration in other ways. Neighbourly cooperation was mentioned as one of them. Thus, instead of classic border controls, Slovenia now opts for controls over its whole territory.

As stated above, the talks also focused on Austro-Slovenian cooperation in the energy sector, and especially alternative energy sources like the gas obtained from the LNG terminal at Krk island in Croatia. It was planned that this gas would be sent through Slovenia to Austria and Bavaria. Golob warned that such an initiative would require an intervention into the existing gas network. However, it would also reduce Austria's dependence on Russian gas. For this reason, it was well-received in Vienna.

As Golob also put it in Vienna, Austria and Slovenia are "natural allies in supporting the Western Balkans". The two countries share the same view on the future of the region and support its EU integration. This may come as somewhat of a surprise given Austria's record with blocking Bulgaria and Romania from becoming members of the Schengen Zone. Slovenia's position is different in this regard, which could be interpreted from Golob's statement about the current state of the EU enlargement process, which he bluntly described as not working. For the Slovenian prime minister, the integration of the Western Balkans with the EU should take place as soon as possible, even though it does not need to mean their full membership.

Another important topic that found its place on the agenda prepared for the meeting with the Austrian chancellor was the Slovenian minority in the Austrian Carinthia region. The situation of this group has entered public debate as a controversial issue, especially after the Austrian youth group affiliated with the right-wing Freedom Party started publishing Facebook posts with calls to "stop Carinthia's Slovenianisation". Despite many years of political commitments, the issue of Slovenian-language education in Austrian Carinthia remains inadequately addressed, which is especially true for bilingual kindergarten education as it practically does not work. This situation contrasts sharply with the reality of the Slovenian minority in the neighbouring Italian autonomous province of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, as well as the situations faced by the Hungarian and Italian minorities in Slovenian Prekmurje and Primorska. The rights of these groups are guaranteed by the Slove-

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nian constitution. Thus, before his meeting with Nehammer, the Slovenian prime minister held talks with representatives of the Slovenian minority in Austria and ensured them of his government's commitment to support their rights in Austria.

All said, Golob's visit to Zagreb, which took place following his earlier trip to Vienna, was thus interpreted as a natural step in Slovenia's policy to become an important regional player and power broker between Austria (but also Germany) and other countries in the region, especially Croatia.

Challenges of migration

Slovenia's aspirations are quite justified, especially economically. Seen from a regional but also European perspective, the Slovenian economy exceeds not only other countries of the former Yugoslavia but also some states in Central and Eastern Europe, which joined the European Union in 2004, 2007 or 2011. In terms of GDP per capita, Slovenia remains the wealthiest country in the group of all "new EU" states and shows higher economic growth than some "older" EU members, including Spain, Portugal and Greece. It is also one of the only states in this group which shows positive demographic trends.

At the same time, to continue its growth Slovenia has started to increasingly rely on a foreign labour force. And while this trend has been present since the beginning of Slovenia's independence, the composition of this group of workers has changed overtime. While in the beginning foreign workers employed in Slovenia were mostly people from other states of former Yugoslavia, now this group is much more diverse. Data from 2022 show that Slovenia had over 48,000 foreign workers come from at least 43 countries. The majority of them indeed came from the states of former Yugoslavia: almost half of them were from Bosnia and Herzegovina, followed by Kosovo (almost 15,000) and Serbia (over 5,000). In addition, work permits were also granted to (Northern) Macedonians, Turks, Russians, Montenegrins and Chinese, as well as migrants from India, Albania, Bangladesh, Belarus, Nepal and Ukraine.

This new migration clearly has an effect on Slovenia's public services and especially its education system, which has not been entirely prepared for it. Until recently it was actually believed that the foreigners who live in Slovenia have, at least to some extent, some command of the Slovenian language (even if passive) because it resembles other South Slavic languages. This approach has been outdated for quite some time now, and especially since the fastest growing group of migrants in Slovenia is now constituted by workers from Kosovo and the Albanian minority in North Macedonia. Research shows that these people usually only speak

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their own native language and have limited knowledge of Serbian or Macedonian, which does not make it much easier to learn the Slovenian language.

War in Ukraine and NATO

On top of everything, Slovenians are now seeing another wave of migrants who are coming to their country from Ukraine and, surprisingly, Russia. These are now the fastest growing groups of migrants, especially when we take into account the number of children signed up for Slovenian public schools (both primary and secondary). For Russians, Slovenia was an attractive and safe location for capital even before the outbreak of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine, but since February 2022 this tendency has only grown.

When it comes to the war in Ukraine, Slovenian society is split. While the majority indeed support Ukraine's fight against Russia and condemn the wrongdoings of the Putin regime, a not so small part of the society perceives the war as one that is being waged between the West and Russia. As such, it is a conflict that is better avoided. In fact, the outbreak of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine served almost as a spark for anti-American sentiment that emerged from below the surface in almost all states of former Yugoslavia. Yet, while in Serbia these sentiments are known and in a way understandable, in Slovenia (and even more in Croatia) they are not so easily explainable, although increasingly growing in popularity. They are especially seen among the anti-vaccine and extreme left movements.

Before the last NATO summit in Vilnius, Slovenia's support was the lowest among all NATO members.

A good illustration of this mood is found in opinion polls which show the level of NATO support in Slovenia. Before the last NATO summit in Vilnius, the country's support was the lowest among all NATO members. One opinion poll carried out in April and May this year and published before the July summit showed that Slovenians were more sceptical than any other nation when it comes to different aspects of their NATO membership or NATO policy towards the war in Ukraine. While in all member states over half of respondents confirmed that they would vote for membership in the Alliance should there be a repeated referendum in their country, Slovenia recorded the second lowest percentage of such responses (56 per cent). This was only higher than Bulgaria. Also, when compared to the 2022 opinion poll on the same subject, the share of Slovenian respondents who expressed support towards NATO membership has gone down by six per cent, while the number of respondents who wanted to leave the Alliance remains steady

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at 30 per cent. At the same time, the number of people who did not answer this question has increased by five per cent. What is more worrisome is the fact that less than half of Slovenians think that their country should defend another NATO member state if attacked.

Another surprising trend that has come to the surface recently shows that a mere 30 per cent of Slovenians trust media reports on the Russian invasion in Ukraine, while a high 67 per cent do not trust media coverage of this conflict. This stands in large contrast to other European countries, where the highest trust rate was noted in Finland (83 per cent) and only three countries (Hungary, Greece and Bulgaria) recorded lower trust than Slovenia. These data become less surprising when put together with the 2022 Freedom of the Press Worldwide ranking, which showed that Greece and Slovenia had recorded the biggest fall in media freedom in the region.

A distant war

Where does this scepticism come from? Surely, it has many sources and they all require a separate and thorough analysis. First, it needs to be said that in Slovenia the population feel almost no threat of Russian aggression in the country. This makes the experience of the current war waged against Ukraine similar to that which was felt by Central Europeans in the 1990s with regards to the war in the Balkans. A war that is distant and far away from home. In this way, the Slovenians resemble the Italians or the French more than they do the Czechs or the Poles.

Second, Slovenia lacks historical experiences (including negative ones) related to Russia or the Soviet Union. Instead, there are more abstract pan-Slavic ideas, which were promoted by the Slovenian national movement at the time of the Habsburg Empire and which are still deeply rooted in the thinking of Slovenian society.

Put together, these factors allow many Slovenians to indulge in a seemingly philosophical approach, reflecting over the causes of this war in "global" terms far away from its everyday brutal reality. This of course is not tantamount to a lack of empathy towards the Ukrainian fight, which explains the current government's continued support, also militarily, to Kyiv.

As a matter of fact, when it comes to supporting Ukraine there has been no departure from the policy that was started by the previous government led by Janez Janša and followed by the current prime minister, Robert Golob, who uttered strong words during his visit to Bucha in 2022 which are still remembered in both Ukraine and Slovenia today. In his speech delivered in Ukrainian, the Slovenian prime minister quoted the Ukrainian anthem and said: "now we are all with you

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the 'brethren of the Cossack people' and let us together do everything to ensure that you will be able to 'govern in your own state'".

Even though Russia is getting weaker in the Balkans, even in its traditional bastions like Serbia or Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the narratives about "traditional values" or anti-American rhetoric are increasingly growing in many of the region's societies. The spread of these narratives obviously contributes to greater polarisation expressed in large social and political divisions. As a result, local politicians, be it in Ljubljana or Skopje, eagerly exploit such sensitive issues as migration, energy security, inflation, political instability (especially in Montenegro and North Macedonia), frozen ethnic conflicts, Kosovar-Serbian relations, relations between Banja Luka and Sarajevo, EU integration fatigue, etc.

Three decades ago, in the early phase of its independence, Slovenia managed to quickly and painlessly transform from a Yugoslav republic into an independent state. The price for this transition was relatively low and took the form of the Ten-Day War, which lasted from June 27th to July 7th 1991. Compared to what took place in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and in the end also in North Macedonia following an attempted military coup organised by local Albanians in 2001, Slovenia has indeed turned itself into a "success story" and a peaceful oasis. This has convinced its people that the problems of the "South" are not their problems and that they can afford to keep their distance from what is going on in other former Yugoslav states. That is why Slovenia's current ambition to become a regional player will depend not only on the activities of the government and its recognition of power arrangements in neighbouring states, but first and foremost on the regional effects of the current war that Russia is waging in Ukraine. This is despite the fact that for the majority of Slovenians this conflict seems to be distant from their homes. EE

Nikodem Szczygłowski is a writer, essayist, translator and traveller. He is fluent in English, Lithuanian, Slovenian, Ukrainian and other languages. He is a recipient of the award for achievements in journalism from the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania and a graduate of Mediterranean Archaeology at the University of Łódź. He also holds an MBA from the Central European Management Institute in Prague.

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Orwell's warning of totalitarianism for today

LUKE HARDING

A review of *George Orwell and Russia.* By: Masha Karp, published by Bloomsbury Academic

In the mid-1970s some of Masha Karp's friends gave her a copy of an illicit text. Over a couple of days she devoured it. "Is it safe to keep the book at home overnight?," her mother asked at the family's flat in Leningrad. Her mother knew that searches and arrests inevitably happened at night. True, this was now the Brezhnev era. But the experience of Stalinism cast a long shadow.

The novel was George Orwell's forbidden *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It was not until 1988 and *perestroika* under Gorbachev that the Russian authorities allowed it to be officially published. Karp, a future political journalist, was dumbstruck by the obvious parallels between the "bleak and cruel life" endured by the book's protagonist, Winston Smith, and life in the Soviet Union.

Orwell's intuition

Orwell had rendered in fiction the experience of individuals under totalitarian rule on the "wrong side of the Iron Curtain". He understood the communist system of organised lying, the dumbfounding back-to-front slogans, and the state's falsification of history. He knew the gloom and squalor. And he comprehended the secret interior world of those oppressed: the enforced duality of a private self and a conformist public one.

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And yet Orwell never set foot in the USSR. Nor did he read Russian. When the October Revolution erupted in 1917, Orwell was a 14-year-old schoolboy at Eton, in Berkshire. Seen from the perspective of a communist citizen, he was an outsider. As Karp writes, Eastern European readers who were able to get hold of *samizdat* versions of his last novel, between the 1950s and late 1980s, all wondered the same thing: "How did he know?"

Karp's book, *George Orwell and Russia*, answers this question. It is published in the context of Vladimir Putin's full-scale attack on Ukraine, which has made the question on Orwell brutally pertinent. The similarities between today's Russia and Orwell's Oceania are overwhelming. Putin's dictatorship is killing thousands of people and razing cities in a war that cannot be called a war, as it was launched for spurious reasons. As Karp observes, the Russian state is sinister and absurd.

A leading Orwell scholar and a translator of *Animal Farm* into Russian, Karp points to key figures who influenced the young Eric Blair's views. They include his mother's eccentric sister Aunt Nellie, a communist and enthusiast for the international language Esperanto. In 1923, in her early fifties, she met Eugene Lanti, the founder of a global Esperanto association. Its aim was to overthrow the capitalist order. Lanti visited Petrograd full of radical fervour. He was disappointed by what he found: poverty, prostitution, bureaucracy and a Bolshevik ruling class. By the late 1920s he concluded that Moscow was uninterested in a progressive world revolution. It wanted to promote the "national state" interests of Stalin's dictatorship. The USSR had become a nightmarish "prison", he told Orwell, who at the time was inclined to believe it represented definitive socialism.

Naïve idealism

Another person who changed his view was Myfanwy Westrope, Orwell's London landlady between 1934 and 1935. Westrope was a suffragette, pacifist and Esperantist. She travelled in 1931 to the Soviet Union and – thanks to Esperanto – was able to talk to ordinary citizens. One of her contacts, a professor in Omsk, subsequently disappeared, leading her to think wrongly that he had been shot. In fact, terrified of arrest, he broke off contact.

Westrope and Lanti were disillusioned by what they found in the land of the Soviets. Karp points out that their negative attitude was unusual among members of the British left. Other representatives – George Bernhard Shaw, Beatrice and Sydney Webb – returned from trips to the Soviet Union proclaiming they had seen the future. All were guided by "ideology and considerations of internal politics", Karp writes, rather than what Orwell dubbed "the moral nose".

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In a 1935 letter, Orwell complained of "English intellectuals who kiss the arse of Stalin". He regarded them as little different from fans of Hitler and Mussolini, "all of them worshipping power and successful cruelty". Their ignorance and naïve idealism led them to ignore the actual horrors of communism, including the state-engineered 1932-33 famine in Ukraine (Holodomor), in which around four million people died, and the disaster of agricultural collectivisation.

It was Orwell's time in Spain that had the biggest impact on his political views, and which led to an enduring rift with the pro-communist left. In late 1936 he went to Barcelona and joined the POUM militia, a small party in the popular anti-fascist coalition. It was one of three groups fighting in the civil war: revolutionary

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anarchists who controlled Barcelona; Spanish communists directed by Moscow; and General Franco's fascists.

In May 1937 Stalin decided to crush POUM and its supporters, many of whom had spent months fighting in freezing trenches against a common fascist enemy. Orwell was appalled. The Spanish police, at the behest of the NKVD, arrested POUM leaders. Several were tortured and executed while others disappeared. Orwell's hotel room was searched. Letters about his book, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, were confiscated and ended up in a Moscow archive. His experiences in Spain – of Soviet mendacity and ruthlessness – played a key role in his later fiction.

"His writer's sensibility helped him to imagine the feeling of the inmates," Karp remarks. She notes that Orwell – who got out of Spain just in time – was able to identify with those who were Moscow's victims. He had direct experience of communist practices: censorship, torture, frame-up trials, and the activities of the secret police.

In the following years Orwell frequently struggled to print what he thought about the Soviet regime. It took him three months in 1944 to write his "fairy story'" – *Animal Farm* – but another six to find a publisher. Editors were reluctant to bring out books which criticised Britain's valiant war-time ally. And the English intelligentsia swallowed and repeated Russian propaganda, Orwell complained, much of it fuelled by Soviet agents.

One of Orwell's influential friends was the Vienna-born sociologist Franz Borkenau. A convinced Marxist, Borkenau wrote secret reports for the Comintern in Berlin. In 1928 he broke with Moscow, which had identified Germany's Social Democrats rather than its Nazis as the main enemy. Orwell and Borkenau reviewed each other's books. It was Borkenau who argued that Bolshevism and fascism were slightly different specimens of the same dictatorship.

Old habits

Seven decades later, authoritarian habits returned to Russia. A handful of experts, human rights activists and journalists tried to draw attention to the Kremlin's reversion under Putin into a repressive war state. Karp was one of them. "They were not heard," she laments. There was plenty of evidence: the murder of critics at home and abroad, two Chechen wars, and the 2008 invasion of Georgia. Of course, later this was followed by the 2014 annexation of Crimea and Putin's covert takeover of a part of the Donbas.

Karp suggests that it was western analytical error and complacency which made Putin's attack on Ukraine possible. Contemporary policy makers and politicians

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were guilty of "an incredible lack of political judgement coupled with unfettered greed". Deputies, British peers and other unscrupulous individuals "grabbed profits" offered by the Russian authorities. On top of this came Russia's "skilful propaganda" and "deep infiltration" of our democracy.

Karp's book is fascinating, well-written, timely and original: a necessary reappraisal of what Orwell's work meant, and its relevance today. She is scathing about the mistakes made by the West in failing to see Russia "as it is", in Orwell's indispensable phrase. In recent years, she notes, the British media interpreted *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a message against surveillance overreach, rather than as a warning about the ever-present "danger of totalitarianism". Totalitarianism, Big Brother-style dictatorship, "War is Peace", and the "shifting phantasmagoric world" described by Orwell are back. Not that they ever went away. ЕЕ

Luke Harding is a British journalist with the *Guardian* and served as the *Guardian's* Moscow correspondent between 2007 and 2011. His latest book *Invasion: Russia's Bloody War and Ukraine's Fight for Survival*, shortlisted for the 2023 Orwell Prize, is published by Guardian Faber.

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The spirit of Estonia's tradition of song

TEXT AND PHOTOS: ISABELLE DE POMMEREAU

The Estonian song festival, *Laulupidu*, has taken place every five years for over 150 years. It is one of the largest choral events in the world and involves almost all of Estonia. The festival embraces the power of singing, which has become a national symbol for Estonia, especially in the most troubling of times.

That recent stormy night in Europe's eastern frontier still reverberates for a 19-year-old student and much of her country. It happened during the closing hour of *Laulupidu*, Estonia's biggest national gathering, a quinquennial choral event that had helped Estonia free itself from communism. Under pouring rain that July 2nd, before a crowd, Hanna Grete Rebane stood in a choir of 23,000 young Estonians singing poetic verses about yearning for one's homeland despite hardships. As darkness began to settle, the audience began to sway with the singers; people held hands and wept, waving the Estonia flag. Thousands of mobile phones lit the night sky, turning singers and listeners into an illuminated sea of song and rain. Rebane thought of her parents and grandparents, who had kept their flags hidden until 1988, when they came out en masse to sing, leaving the Soviet army powerless.

Chills ran up Rebane's spine, one year after a worldwide pandemic and in the midst of a war launched by Russia, the imposing neighbour to the east. She felt the power of singing to inspire and unify. She felt the boundaries blur, those between the crowd and the singers, the past and the present, her country's rural villages and its digital-minded cities.

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"It was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," Rebane said. "You see an endless sea of stars, the sea in the background, the people, the trees and the sky; and you sing songs that were sung many years before I was born." She added that "We are such a small country. We need to hold together if we want to survive."

The power of singing

That night, Rebane helped carry on an almost uninterrupted tradition dating back 154 years, testifying once again to the power of singing as Estonia's main unifying force. Every five years since 1869, Estonians have gathered around song and dance in one of the world's largest choral events. Born out of a national awakening to resist Russian domination, *Laulupidu* – which alternates between a "general" and a "youth" format – was a force when Estonia won independence from tsarist Russia in 1918, and then from communism during the "Singing Revolution" of the late 1980s. It has become a collective ritual, where Estonians celebrate what they treasure most: their identity, culture and language, all of which successive waves of occupiers tried, but failed, to extinguish.

For more than 500 years (except between 1920 and 1940), this tiny forested country on Europe's north-eastern frontier, south of Finland and west of Russia, was up for grabs: Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Russia and the Soviet Union all staked their claim. But singing helped them keep their language alive. Singing took on revolutionary powers when journalist Johann Voldemar Jannsen orchestrated the first national Estonian song festival in 1869, which featured not only songs for the tsar but also folk songs praising the Estonian fatherland. Set to music, a poem by Jannsen's daughter Lydia Koidula called *Mu isamaa on minu arm*" ("My Fatherland Is My Love") fostered a yearning for self-determination that culminated in 1918 with Estonia's first period of independence.

The 1988 Singing Revolution defied Soviet control and paved the way for Estonia and the Baltic states to become independent.

Independence was short-lived, however. Following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Hitler and Stalin in 1939, the Soviets invaded Estonia, only to be chased out by the German Wehrmacht in 1940. Four years later, the Soviets "liberated" Estonia from Nazi Germany and occupied Estonia for another 50 years. During that time, the Soviets sent a tenth of the Estonian population to Siberian camps. They confiscated Estonian farms, churches and limited freedom of speech. They tried to instrumentalise *Laulupidu* to spread their ideology. But, in the summer of 1988, 300,000 Estonians – roughly a quarter

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of the population – gathered to sing Koidula's "My Fatherland is My Love," reset to music by conductor and national hero Gustav Ernesaks in 1944. The Singing Revolution defied Soviet control and paved the way for Estonia and its Baltic sisters, Latvia and Lithuania, to become independent.

Today, *Laulupidu* is "about cleaning your heart, taking with you the love for your country and its traditions, for the soil you come from, for your friends and family," says Heli Jürgenson, conductor of the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir. "Thankfully, Estonia is not in a war right now, though we are indeed close and it is a scary position, but should there be a time when Estonia needs to be defended, then it is *Laulupidu* that has created the foundation for people being motivated to do so."

Flying to the beehive

The 13th Youth Song Festival was the culmination of more than two years of rehearsals and competitive auditions. On that July 2nd morning, singers – 778 ensembles, 23,139 choristers and orchestra musicians, plus 657 conductors and 8,000 dancers – had paraded over five kilometres from the historic old town of Estonia's capital, to a gigantic open stage along the Baltic Sea. Dressed in the vivid traditional costumes of their villages, unfurling the blue, black and white colours of the Estonian flag, they had formed one great blaze of colour. People cheered on as though they were national celebrities in the opening parade of the Olympics.

Assembled in a giant oyster-shaped arch, they had sung 44 mostly traditional songs in different choral constellations, and were applauded like rock stars. The songs consisted of new tunes, poetry woven into music, and cheerful lyrics speaking of Estonian's landscape and daily life. Others included ancient folk songs, those expressing a special bond with nature that had existed before religious crusaders invaded their country in the 13th century, and songs, banned but nevertheless sung, from the darkest hours of Soviet occupation, such as "My Fatherland is My Love." There was raucous cheering and tears and, in between, a minute of silence for Ukraine.

"*Ta lendab mesipuu poole*" ("flying to the beehive"), a song based on lyrics by the famous 19th poet Juhan Liiv, was perhaps this year's emotional climax. After the song the crowd of young singers erupted into wild applause, cheering conductor Taavi Esko. The cheering intensified when the crowd's enthusiastic demand for an encore was granted despite thundering and rainy skies.

For veteran conductor Esko, 72, who had sung the forbidden "My Fatherland is My Love" in 1969 and during the Singing Revolution, the experience of conducting

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"Homing Bee" for the entire choir twice, and under torrential rain, and feeling the audience sing and sway along, was "one of the highlights of my life."

With its words focused on Estonians' ongoing longing for their homeland in spite of hardships, the "Homing Bee" song is particularly beloved and yearned among Estonians. This year, with the war in Ukraine a reminder of the vulnerability of the Estonian nation, it resonated with particular poignancy.

"Seeing so many young people means so much: it is a very positive expression of our nation, our country, our roots," Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, seated in the front row, says in between songs. Kallas, whose mother had been deported to Siberia by the Stalinist regime as a six-month-old baby, adds "we kept things alive," referring to the singing tradition. She turns to me and points to the crowd behind her and then to the giant choir in front of her, an estimated one-third of all Estonians attend *Laulupidu*, either by participating or watching it. This, she says, "shows we are together, literally. In light of this historical context, it is very powerful. We are a small country, but we are big."

For much of the world, Kallas embodies the fierce resistance to Russian aggression of eastern EU members. At nearly three per cent of the country's GDP, Estonia's defence budget by GDP is larger than most EU countries, and Estonians have been joining the voluntary defence league in droves. Yet, on the day of *Laulupidu*, wrapped in a raincoat to brave the downpour, surrounded by family, conductors, two former Estonian presidents and the current one, Kallas, sometimes dubbed the new "Iron Lady", embodies her country's other bloodless weapon: singing.

Tallinn resident Aiki Haug came to the event because "the singers and conductors are really heroes – they made Estonian free." During the massive singing in 1988 she saw a "gentleman on a bike carrying a flag in one hand, and the Soviets wanted to take the flag down but didn't because they were afraid of all this crowd of people all singing here," she recalls. "We never thought that singing could be such a powerful weapon against the regime."

With nearly three per cent of the country's GDP, Estonia's defence budget by GDP is larger than most EU countries.

Aleksei Kelli travelled from the north-eastern hamlet of Metsanurga to cheer on his 17-year-old daughter, to an event he deems both "political and personal". "*Laulupidu* has deep political meaning: it is part of what gave us our independence: what could be more political?" says Kelli, a professor of intellectual property law at Tartu University. He, too, invokes the milestone events of the late 1980s, when "singing happened everywhere as a form of protest, but for the Soviets it was a problem: what could they do? People started singing, could they put people in prison for singing?"

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But *Laulupidu* is more: it is part of the DNA of Estonian culture: "something stable, a collective way to find ourselves in united singing. It is defining your core values, who you are, what your identity is," Kelli says. It has also meant many one-hour trips to choir rehearsals almost every day, for months, often braving icy, snow-capped roads. For his wife Merike, it has meant spending almost one year stitching an elaborate outfit of linen and wool with the blue, red and yellow colours of her village.

"When there are disturbances, people get more emotional," says Kelli, "but young people don't always think about the Ukrainian war: they just want to sing and be part of this event."

Paying tribute to singing masters of the past

It is 9:30 pm on July 1st, the eve of *Laulupidu*. A group of conductors, composers and lyricists are getting ready for a special trip, to pay a tribute to their past singing masters. It is a tradition. As the bus heads out of the capital the sun gleams red along the Baltic Sea. The forests of Finland lie ahead. Fifteen minutes later, the bus enters a deep, dark pine forest, and the artists disembark. There is something eerily fascinating about Estonia's spacious graveyards, but Metsakalmistu's, in Kloostrimetsa, dubbed "the forest cemetery", is particularly special. It is the home of Estonia's most celebrated political and cultural figures, including the conductors, composers and poets who, in one way or another, helped the tiny country safeguard its most cherished treasures: its identity, its independence.

Konstantin Päts is buried here. He is one of three people who signed the first declaration of Estonian independence in 1918, and ended up being deported to Siberia, where he died in 1956. Alongside him is Lennart Meri, the writer and film director who became Estonia's president when the country became independent again in 1991, after five decades of Soviet occupation.

One by one, slowly, the 25 or so artists make their way to the gravestones engraved with treble clef symbols, lighting candles in the silent forest. There is a feeling of piety. Conductor Raul Talmar of the academic women's choir of the Tallinn University of Technology kneels before a simple stone, its epitaph reads "Gustav Ernesaks, 1908-1993". Ernesaks was the master, the father of Estonia's singing festivals, the man who kept the tradition of song shining under Soviet occupation with "My Fatherland is My Love."

"I come here to say thanks to the people who have been before us," Talmar says. "We have to acknowledge where we come from; it is an important impulse for the future."

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Set in a sprawling forest, the Metsakalmistu Cemetery has no monumental gravestones, no borders to separate the grave sites. Only simple stones taken from the field and blending into nature. Lydia Rahula, eyes shining, lowers herself in front of Heino Kaljuste's gravestone. Heino Kaljuste, another national hero, founded the famous children's choir Ellerhein.

"He was my teacher," Rahula, who conducts the Tallinn Boys' Choir, says. "Such a charismatic conductor." Kaljuste's son Tonu, a conducting legend, founded the Grammy-award-winning Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir.

The procession moves on. The younger composer, Pärt Uusberg, artistic director of a song festival whose motto this year was "Holy is the Land," stops before a simply-marked grave. "Lydia Koidula: 1843-1886". Koidula is the voice of Estonian nationalism, the poet whose "My Homeland is My Love" lyrics, set to music when Estonia was still a province of tsarist Russia, gave rise to Estonia's call for independence.

Aarne Saluveer, the conductor of the ETV television girls' choir, stops before a rectangular memorial for national icon Veljo Tormis, who died in 2017. Tormis is the one who brought Estonians' ancient folk song tradition, the *Regilaul* runic song which alternates between a soloist and a group, back to life. Along with Arvo Pärt's more spiritual music, his *Religaul* is generally considered to be one of the two spiritual pillars of Estonian choral singing. "*Laulupidu* is a holy moment among us," Saluveer says. "It's a place where all generations meet, where singers tell a story for the next generations."

A force and the heart of a thriving music industry

After the Iron Curtain fell, Estonia embraced western institutions and rebuilt itself as a high-tech society. It gave the world Skype, the first cyber army and the e-residency programme – a way to fend off the influence of its imposing neighbour to the east. And so has it been with singing. Tiny Estonia has the world's largest repertoire of folk songs. With more than 40,000 Estonians singing in choirs, it has more choral singers per capita than most countries. Most Estonian singers are children and teenagers.

Laulupidu, which was added to the UNESCO list of oral and intangible heritage in 2003, is what makes singing a part of the thriving cultural and music industry. It keeps the country's singing repertoire alive and is an important motor of musical creation. But concerns have risen over how to keep the *Laulupidu* tradition alive in the context of globalisation, among Estonians born into freedom. The question had nagged conductor Heli Jürgenson in the years preceding *Laulupidu*'s 150th anniversary. When she was in her 20s, in Estonia's "emotionally-loaded" post-

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communist years, "there was no bread or shampoo on sale, but we had our fantastic night song festivals." Her spiritual mentors had been *Laulupidu* conductors. But the number of conducting students was decreasing and the average age of conductors was creeping up. Estonians, including young creative musical talent, were leaving for better paying jobs elsewhere.

Laulupidu organisers reacted by picking then 24-year-old composer Rasmus Puur to orchestrate the 2017 youth singing event. With "I'll Stay" as its motto, Puur turned *Laulupidu* into a sort of wake-up call for young musicians. "Many of our conductors are getting old, and we don't want to be in a situation where all the old ones cannot do it and the new ones do not know how to do it," Puur said. Dozens of conductors and other musicians, many in their 20s, have debuted at *Laulupidu* since. Music and arts student Hanna Greta Rebane represents *Laulupidu*'s young face at 19. With her lyrics making it to the *Laulupidu* repertoire, set to music and sung by a choir of 9,000 children on July 2nd, Rebane became the youngest composer ever in *Laulupidu*'s history. "Joy has filled the land," about the "joy of singing", is her way to pass on what she had experienced early on. "There is a special feeling that comes from *Laulupidu*, it is the time when you really understand the core of being Estonian," she says.

With more than 40,000 Estonians singing in choirs, it has more choral singers per capita than most countries.

When Estonia's nationalist Conservative People's Party (EKRE) started making big headway after the 2015 refugee crisis, some worried about the far right hijacking of the *Laulupidu* spirit. But that did not happen. While, initially, EKRE's call for a more insular Estonia played on old anti-Russian resentment, the party started to win the hearts of conservative Russian-speakers by endorsing themes shared by most far-right groups, including Euroscepticism and anti-gay and climate-denialist stances.

"EKRE has one major problem though, Russia. Its stance is ambivalent and that's where their growth hits the ceiling," says Maris Hellrand, a Tallinn politician and *Laulupidu* organiser. "It is quite clear that the whole choir network is actually very resilient to this."

These have been tough years for Estonia with both COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine taking a toll – and, at times, a polarised society (the pandemic forced the event festival to be postponed for one year). And yet, *Laulupidu* remains largely unspoilt. It acts as a sort of "shield against this politics of hatred," says Maris Hellrand. Others argue it tends to enjoy more trust than national politicians. It is "very pure energy, nothing negative," says Allan Kaldoja of the Vaba Laba theatres in Tallinn and Narva. "It is a ritual, a pilgrimage that connects the whole nation, purifies your mind and brings back what is important and not important in your life. It is not like "you are better than others," or "there are right Estonians and the others.""

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Revolutionary power

The *Laulupidu* singing model – and its equivalent traditions in Latvia, which this summer celebrated their 150th anniversary, and Lithuania – represents a "beacon of light for all non-political movements of the future," says Guntis Šmidchens of the Baltic studies department at the University of Washington in Seattle, who authored *The Power of Song: Nonviolent National Cultures in the Baltic Singing Revolution*.

"Estonia has more than 30 years of vibrant, sometimes chaotic, but very stable democracy, and it emerged from the Singing Revolution," says Šmidchens. Having "many singers with very different voices, people who have never met before, working together to build something big, something very beautiful," he says, is "a great metaphor for how democracy should work."

"All Estonian children singing the same songs, all knowing that everybody, in every choir and every village does the same, is a very strong thing that brings us together," says composer Rasmus Puur, who describes the process of zigzagging across the country to conduct some 75 rehearsals during the last youth *Laulupidu* "healthy" and "mind-broadening." "Everywhere you go has its own spirit, temperature and energy," Puur says. "It is beautiful to feel that, yes, there are different problems, and yet *Laulupidu* means so much for all the kids."

"And when you stand in front of the children, you're not just conducting. You have to talk to them – about the culture, the spirit of *Laulupidu*, the background and the history of the pieces," he adds.

Twelve-year-old Robin Hosman, who lives in Türi, a village one hour south of Tallinn, is passionate about soccer. He says this year's *Laulupidu* was "big."

"It's a really big part of our culture: we need singing, we will be free in the future if you sing," he says. *Laulupidu* is part of Robin's upbringing. Triin Toom-Hosman, his mother, said she "grew with the emotions of *Laulupidu*", including those of holding hands with strangers during the "Baltic Way", when two million Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians held hands to demand their independence on August 23rd 1989.

Thirteen-year-old Emili Parts came from Narva, in Estonia's most eastern tip, on the border with Russia. *Laulupidu*'s emotions had been so strong she cried that entire July 2nd night. "You felt so connected," she says. "The rain really united people. We sat in a big tent and we sang together."

Most residents living in Narva, Estonia's third biggest city, speak Russian at home. Their families came during Soviet times. When Emili's mother was a child, "people knew about *Laulupidu* but the ideology was different," said Teele Parts. "There were lots of Soviet flags." To her, she adds, "what was important was the friendship, singing together."

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After Estonia regained its independence in 1991, many Narva residents felt like an unwanted minority. The war in Ukraine has revived simmering tensions between Estonia's Russian and Estonian speakers and within Russian-speaking families. "*Laulupidu* is not as important for Narva locals, at least as long as they have not participated," says Teele Parts. "Then the relationship gets deeper."

That happened to Olga Bortsova, who attended *Laulupidu* for the first time with Narva's two-year-old "integration choir". "I had tears in my eyes and I told my son, "next time we all go together,"" she says. "I didn't know it creates such feelings: *Laulupidu* made me feel like I'm Russian and I am part of Estonia."

Time to say goodbye

"My Joy knows no Bound", the final song, is about saying goodbye, until next time. Conductor Aarne Saluveer, 64, is the star. Raucous cheers ring out when the composer and soloist, Silver Sepp, 37, runs up to the conductor's podium. Pärt Uusberg, 36, who did the orchestral arrangement, joins them. The three musicians embrace each other under pouring rain. In Estonia, the national heroes are their composers, conductors and lyricists. They have shaped not only Estonia's musical landscape but also the country's history.

When conductor Niina Esko had sung in the 1988 singing revolution as a young mother, "people didn't know what the outcome would be, but then people sang old songs and we were not afraid," she said. *Laulupidu* is a "holy moment among us," said Saluveer, the conductor of the ETV television girls' choir, who in Soviet times led a famous rock band. "It's a place where all generations meet, where singers tell a story for the next generations."

On that July 2nd as the rain poured over the Baltic Sea and Russia launched bombs against Ukraine, the tune of "Joy Filled the Land" – the song written by young Hanna Grete Rebane – rang out. "The song", she says, means that "we are singing away the rain and the weather, no matter what happens, we sing."

"*Laulupidu* is holy for Estonians, like an oak tree that grows its branches, and that holiness cannot be broken, nobody can take it from us," says Niina Esko. "Perhaps that's the message to Putin: We are small but strong in spirit." EE

Isabelle de Pommereau is a journalist and reporter. Originally from France, she is based in Frankfurt and works as a correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor* and *Alternatives Economiques.*

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Every five years since 1869, Estonians have gathered around song and dance in one of the world's largest choral events.

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On the eve of Laulupidu, a group of conductors, composers and lyricists make a special trip to pay tribute to their past singing masters in Kloostrimetsa, dubbed "the forest cemetery".

Гер
Алексей

adidas

Gagauzian youth contemplate their future

MADELEINE CUCKSON

In the semi-autonomous Moldovan region of Gagauzia, young people seem to be at a crossroads, grappling with issues of identity. The direction the region will take depends on finding a balance between preserving independence, heritage and tradition and embracing opportunities for growth and cooperation at both regional and international levels.

Gagauzia, a little-known semi-autonomous region covering 1,848 square kilometres in Moldova's south, comprises a cluster of cities, towns and villages amongst mainly rural and agricultural landscapes. This unique region is predominantly inhabited by an ethnic Turkic group whose origins remain somewhat enigmatic. Presently, facing significantly worse economic conditions than Moldova's capital (Chișinău) and limited opportunities, young Gagauzians find themselves torn between preserving their community and embracing a more European-aligned lifestyle and outlook. This is leaving them uncertain about their future prospects in a region that is increasingly leaning away from a pro-European government in favour of a pro-Russian agenda.

Gagauzia's history has been tumultuous. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Gagauzia's leadership formed the Gagauz Soviet Socialist Republic, determined to remain a part of the USSR. This led to an almost bloody conflict between the Moldovan authorities and Soviet troops. Both Gagauzia and Transnistria declared independence, sparking the beginning of the Transnistrian War (1990-92). Although Gagauzia has some political and economic autonomy, its powers are limited, and any decisions conflicting with the Moldovan constitution can be nullified. The

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future of Gagauzia would be unclear if Moldova were to merge with neighbouring Romania – although the autonomy of Gagauzia was guaranteed in the 1994 Gagauz Autonomy Act, the law in Romania does not allow sovereignty on an ethnic basis.

Disappearing youth

Travelling from Chișinău to Comrat (Gagauzia's capital) on a sweltering July day I am surrounded by fields of crops on a small but fully-packed minivan with no air conditioning.. Winding through the roads, past traditional Moldovan countryside and shack-style houses, is a stark contrast to the row upon row of communist flats in Chișinău. For the capital city of the region (population of 20,000), there are relatively few people walking the streets of Comrat on a Saturday afternoon. The town itself is inconspicuous but boasts a dazzling white and gold Orthodox church in the town square. One Comrat citizen, 27-year-old Liuda, jokes while giving me a tour of the city centre, "Did you know, Comrat famously has not one single elevator in it?"

On arrival, you would be forgiven for thinking there were almost no young people living in Comrat. National statistics show that 27,518 youth, aged between 15 and 35, live in Gagauzia. This makes up about 4.7 per cent of the 585,104 young people living throughout Moldova. The resident population of Moldova is around 2.5 million, according to recent statistics, and migration in the south of the country is not like other regions, with an absent family member in about one in every three families. Bringing back those who chose to work overseas is a hugely important part of the agenda pursued by Maia Sandu's government. As the country shifts to an EU-focused future, it needs manpower to continue improving infrastructure, the economy and industry. Despite this, the population keeps falling.

The existence of partnerships between Gagauzia's university and Russian institutions presents an appealing opportunity for young people.

I was advised that the best way to speak with young Gagauz adults was at Comrat's only club – Cherdak (*Чердак*, meaning attic). Walking up some dimly lit stairs into a large open room with flashing purple strobe lights on a Saturday evening, excited teens and young adults danced while others smoked hookah from the faux leather booths at the sides of the dancefloor. Not a single Romanian-language song played the whole night. Instead, Russian pop hits, past and present, took their place.

Dima was sitting in one booth at the club – a dark featured 28-year-old vet, working and living in Comrat. "I have always identified as Gagauzian, never Moldovan," he says. Unlike some Gagauz who have Moldovan or Russian origins, Dima is ethni-

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cally Gagauz. Speaking Russian and Gagauz, and not Romanian, it would have been hard for him to study in Moldova. Instead, he studied for free at a Russian university. Dima could have naturalised as a Russian citizen after finishing his studies but chose not to as he does not agree with the political situation there. "Plus, I don't want to do compulsory military service in Russia – I am safer here in Moldova," he adds.

The existence of partnerships between Gagauzia's university and Russian institutions presents an appealing opportunity for these young people, who often lack proficiency in Romanian and therefore find it hard to study or work in Chișinău. President Sandu has emphasised the need for Romanian-language classes in Gagauzia to counter Russian propaganda. However, the prevalence of Russian-language media in the region contributes to its influence. In July of this year, the TV Gagauzia channel was fined for not broadcasting enough Romanian-language programmes. The requirement is that at least 25 per cent of the shows broadcast must be in Romanian.

The issue of language

Language is a contentious topic in Moldova. The "Moldavian" language was officially removed from documents earlier this year and replaced with Romanian in all constitutional forms. The Moldovan president, Maia Sandu, in office since December 2020, has emphasised the importance of Romanian as the official language. "We speak the Romanian language and it is abnormal for something else to be written in the laws," she stated. The term "Moldavian" is believed by many to be a Soviet concept, aimed at severing Moldova from a wider Romanian identity and culture. Romanian-language books were banned under the USSR. Some differences did exist, like the use of the Cyrillic alphabet in spite of the absence of a Moldavian-Romanian dictionary. Hybrid dialects influenced by Russian also exist among the locals.

The town of Comrat stands as a unique place, with its central square home to both Lenin and Ataturk statues, reflecting its Turkic and Soviet ties. Although Comrat has a Turkish-language library due to similarities with Gagauz, the Gagauz language is rarely used officially. It is possibly facing decline among the younger population. "The only time I speak Gagauz is with Turkish clients. But, in general, the Gagauz language has begun to appear less in the life of young people," Dima tells me.

Dima and his Moldovan fiancé live together in his mother's modest two-bedroom flat, located in a city centre bloc. Dima's mother has lived in Greece for the last few years, working on a pig farm. "She would like to return, but due to the lack of work for her here at a comparable salary, she will stay in Greece for at least another five years." Dima's mother is one of many Gagauz who have moved abroad for better wages.

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Regarding their future plans, Dima expressed some uncertainty about Gagauzia's prospects: "I don't have much hope for Gagauzia. I myself haven't fully decided whether I want to live in this country. But if I stay in Moldova, I would like, first of all, for them to increase wages, so that prices for utilities become lower, and the state gives lower interest on loans." As they save money for the future, they contemplate the possibility of staying in Moldova and hope for improvements in the country's economic conditions.

Russia has "pushed our youth away with their actions", Dima says. Despite Gagauzia's general pro-Russia stance, Dima does feel assured that youth culture is shifting away from the Russian sphere of music, films and fashion, towards European influences. However, he believes that language remains the main barrier to this process.

Dividing lines

The Gagauz region operates its own legislative system through the People's Assembly of Gagauzia, whilst the "Bashkan" serves as its governor. Recently-elected Yevgenia Gutsul, backed by the infamous Shor Party, is taking a harsher right-wing approach in comparison to her predecessor, Irina Vlah, a moderate left figure who had served in the role since 2015.

The pro-Russia Shor Party, supported by exiled Moldovan politician and businessman Ilan Shor (currently residing in Israel), conducts its campaigns through screened appearances of Shor at anti-government rallies. Ilan Shor, once the mayor of Orhei in Moldova, received a seven and a half-year jail sentence in 2017, leading him to flee to Israel in 2019. His sentence was doubled in absentia earlier this year, and his Moldovan assets are now frozen.

The recent resurgence of nationalism in Gagauzia has come partly in the form of anti-liberalism, especially since gay pride events were banned in 2022.

On June 19th 2023, the Shor Party was declared illegal and was forced to dissolve due to "unconstitutional" anti-government protests in Chișinău, where some attendees were allegedly paid to participate. However, the move is largely symbolic, as the party is expected to rebrand itself as the *Vozrozhdenie* (Rebirth) party.

The recent resurgence of nationalism in Gagauzia has come partly in the form of anti-liberalism. This is especially true after gay pride events were banned in 2022 for their non-traditional standpoint. However, 21-year-old personal fitness trainer Ekaterina, who was born in Comrat, remains optimistic about inclusivity in Moldova: "I especially want to

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note the importance of freedom. I am very confident that our country will become absolutely free for everyone, especially for sexual minorities – there are young people who want this in our country."

Following the full-scale war, another division emerged between Moldova's reforms and Gagauzia's separatism when Moldova banned the use of the Saint George's Ribbon in April 2022. This was then overturned by the Gagauz People's Assembly. The black and orange striped ribbon, originally a symbol used to commemorate the soldiers of the Great Patriotic War, has now, since the start of the 2022 Russian war in Ukraine, become associated with pro-Russian military propaganda and Russia's 9th May Victory Day celebrations.

Facing challenges

Ekaterina rents her house with her husband in Comrat, but knows the reality on a basic Gagauz salary is dire for most. She explains that "people can scarcely afford daily food." Life for the poorest remains difficult in Moldova – the inflation rate as of this year is 16.3 per cent. There is a sense from talking to Gagauzians that they just want a simple life with enough food for their family, removed from politics and questions of territorial integrity.

Ekaterina, like some other Gagauz I have spoken to, faces challenges in defining her identity as an ethnic Moldovan born in Gagauzia. "I do not feel like myself among the Gagauz, I even encountered bullying and abuse from the Gagauz because of my nationality."

She comments that Gagauz generally have an insular perspective on other cultures and nationalities. "When they go abroad they voice negative comments about other countries, that there is too much freedom and people have no brains, they say that people behave terribly, they don't understand this way of life."

It is theorised that the Gagauz people could have settled in the southern Bessarabia region after fleeing Ottoman rule during the 18th and 19th centuries. Speaking a Turkic language, they are believed to have connections with Turkic nomadic tribes from the Eurasian steppes or have their origins in Anatolia.

The number of ethnic Gagauz today is estimated at around 200,000, with the majority residing in Moldova, Ukraine, Turkey and Russia. Evidence suggests that prior to Ottoman rule the Gagauz may have already lived in the Balkans, as they were already Eastern Orthodox Christians when they settled, not Muslims.

Ekaterina expresses some discomfort about Moldova's future and would not favour any kind of unification with Russia: "My main fear for the future of Moldova is any political ties with Russia and the Russification of the country."

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It is important to interrogate the feasibility of Gagauzia aligning itself with the Russian-backed breakaway region Transnistria in the event of an invasion of Moldova. Although Gagauzia may appear to be a potential primary target, the presence of rumoured caches of arms from the Soviet era notwithstanding, the number of militarily trained individuals with the motivation to overthrow the Moldovan government is likely limited. Presently, Transnistria has approximately 1,500 Russian troops deployed on its soil.

Over the course of the last year and a half, Moldova has witnessed demonstrations both for and against European integration, with the most recent instance boasting an estimated 80,000 pro-EU supporters in a march on Chișinău's central square. During the event, notable figures including Roberta Metsola (president of the European Parliament) and Sandu delivered encouraging speeches, emphasising Moldova's trajectory towards closer ties with western nations.

Gagauzia has also experienced a series of protests in 2022, advocating for continued relations with the Russian Federation and countries associated with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). These demonstrations included protests against fuel prices as links with Russian oil ceased. The People's Union of Gagauzia, allegedly led by Viktor Petrov (a prominent businessman and public figure from Comrat), spearheaded these protests with the goal to "protect the rights and freedoms of Gagauzia and its inhabitants" and to "develop good relations with the historical friends of the Gagauz people – Russia and other countries from the Eurasian Economic Union".

Over the years, Russia's region of Tatarstan, along with other Turkic nations, has supported Gagauzia financially. However, with a left-wing pro-EU government in Moldova, relationships with former CIS countries are waning. Tellingly, Tatarstan's leader, Rustam Minnikhanov, was denied entry to Moldova during a planned visit to show support for a pro-Russia representative during the April 2023 Gagauzian general elections.

No clear vision of the future

For high school music teacher Grigory, a 25-year-old ethnic Gagauzian, governing systems in his country always inevitably lead to the abuse of power. "The more people sit there, the crazier the decisions. Of course, this applies specifically to our country, a country with a Soviet past," he tells me.

Unlike Ekaterina, who wants the complete cutting of ties with Russia, Grigory wants a quiet, simpler existence. "I think in such a small country it is better to be friendly and not bring the situation to a head," he says in reference to the unrec-

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ognised breakaway region of Transnistria and whether it should eventually be returned to Moldovan hands. "Moldova must build friendly relations with all its neighbours, we should show that we can all live here." I have also noted an opinion of indifference to Moldova's territorial situation amongst young Chișinău residents.

Grigory is a proud Gagauz resident. For him, a potential future in the EU should not affect Gagauzia. "I am neither against nor for a European future. Gagauzia should develop individually, without focusing on a European or pro-Russian future."

Gagauz people have historically faced marginalisation, which previously resulted in limited access to education during the 19th century and subsequently led to significant emigration. Indeed, Gagauz nationalism in the past has correlated with shifting territories. For example, in the 1980s this was caused by Moldovan ambitions to separate from the USSR and a general fondness for the economic and cultural progress made under communism. Another element in this surge of nationalism was the fear of being wiped out, that possible integration with Romania might lead to the Gagauz losing their identity. Grigory states his Gagauz school students "doubt the future of our region", making it unclear what prospects await the next generation of Gagauzians.

Gagauz people have historically faced marginalisation, which previously resulted in limited access to education during the 19th century.

Complete independence as a sovereign state is not something Grigory strives for. Having studied at a university in Transnistria, as is common for Russian-speaking Gagauz, Grigory warns that "because of the effects of monopoly there we would not want such a future for our region, I know what I'm talking about because I lived and studied there."

While he admits that the current figures of authority in Gagauzia do not enhance the region's development, "our people do not yet learn from their mistakes and choose people who are not wise or competent." There is an element of spectacle and show to politics in Gagauzia, which Grigory believes people enjoy when electing the Bashkan.

In April 2023, during the Gagauz mayoral elections, Sandu commented that some of the eight candidates for the semi-autonomous region were "agents of the Russian Federation rather than politicians who want to work for citizens". Notably, she did not attend the inauguration of Gagauzia's new Bashkan, commenting that "I consider it wrong to go to the inauguration of a person who was supported by a criminal group during the election campaign and who is a member of a party declared unconstitutional." This led to comments that Sandu is prejudiced against the Gagauz, as well as rumours that the Moldovan authorities could decide to expel the new Bashkan from the country's Cabinet of Ministers.

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Gagauzian youth seem to be at a crossroads, grappling with issues of identity. The direction the region will take depends on finding a balance between preserving independence, heritage and tradition and embracing opportunities for growth and cooperation at both regional and international levels. Gagauzia may now be Russia's main focus in Moldova as a vehicle for causing instability in the country, as the region lies shoulder to shoulder with war-torn Ukraine and an unrecognised Russia-affiliated state. In a rapidly changing global context, what I have heard loud and clear from Gagauzians is that they do not want to, once again, be in a situation in which they have to fight for the autonomy of their homeland. EE

Madeleine Cuckson is a freelance journalist and full-time humanitarian aid worker. She currently heads a Ukraine aid programme in Bucharest, Romania and covers stories from Russia, Romania and Moldova for various news outlets including the *Moscow Times* and *Universul.net*.

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The Long Exodus

WILLIAM FLEESON

The ongoing war in Ukraine has forced many refugees to make tough decisions about their future. This is particularly true in neighbouring Moldova, where many Ukrainians are deciding to settle on a more long-term basis. Despite the difficulties of this new life, a large number of refugees are trying to make the best of the situation.

Olena Mustiats, 41, had only the most basic requirements when she fled Ukraine with her six-year-old daughter last March: safety, affordability and a local language she knew. Leaving from her native Odesa, in Ukraine's southwest, Mustiats settled on Moldova and headed to the capital, Chișinău.

"I chose Moldova because it's closer [to Odesa] than Poland, they speak Russian there, and because prices at the supermarket are cheaper than in Poland," Mustiats said. A year and a half later, Mustiats and her child are still in Moldova, with no plans, and limited options, to go anywhere else.

The Mustiats family symbolises a larger, growing trend of Ukrainian war refugees settling in Moldova for the long term. It is a far longer time than they might have expected, or wanted, at the time of their arrival.

Growing numbers

According to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more Ukrainians are settling down in Moldova than came in the first few months of the war, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022. In April of last year – the first full month of the UNHCR's data on Moldova's Ukrainian refugees – the total number of Ukrainians was just under

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97,000. In 2023, that figure has exceeded 100,000, while rising every month since April. The most recent monthly total, available for August, shows a figure poised to surpass 110,000. That is more than four per cent of Moldova's total population of about 2.5 million.

The same data shows that the "Ukrainians arriving" category outpaced "Ukrainians leaving" for 13 months, beginning from July 2022. This breakdown regarding the overall picture is to be expected, as the number of refugees remaining in Moldova has grown each month since then. Nonetheless, the rising total of Ukrainians staying longer points to a deeper, and more long-term, picture of war-related patterns of asylum in Moldova.

According to data from the UNHCR, more Ukrainians are settling in Moldova than came in the first few months of the war.

In this way, Ukrainians in Moldova are planning a longer exodus. The war at home continues, and with few alternatives, displaced Ukrainians are increasingly confined to a future in Moldova that could span years. The Moldovan government appears to have recognised as much, and in January approved a one-year, temporary protection regime for Ukrainian asylum seekers.

Similar dynamics are at work at a regional level. On a cost-of-living index for Central and Eastern Europe from 2021, which details pre-war prices, Ukraine comes in last of the ten countries listed. In contrast, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary – all EU members – occupy the top three places. Many Ukrainian refugees cannot afford more expensive countries in the West, given the stark difference between foreign costs of living and the modest incomes many Ukrainians earn. Perhaps this is why, according to the data, more than 23,000 Ukrainians now in Moldova – about 21 per cent of the total – came there via Romania, an EU member country whose average cost of living ranks above both its eastern neighbours. In other words, Romania may have been too costly for most Ukrainians to live in – but close enough, in more figurative terms, to bridge the distance between danger and safety.

Mustiats, who in Odesa worked as a beauty products salesperson, provides a compelling example of the longer displacement phenomenon. She and her daughter, Sonya, reside in a charity home, given their difficulty in affording Chișinău rents. The family is able to live rent-free at the charity home, and Mustiats volunteers there, performing "simple work" as part of her place in the community. She runs the communal laundry and sometimes cleans the rooms for when her fellow Ukrainians come to Chișinău, for periods as undetermined as her own, before they leave again.

The Mustiats family's experience is just one story among the many thousands of Ukrainians settling into longer-term plans for living, or at least surviving, in

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Moldova. And many Ukrainians, the Mustiats family included, had much to lose when the war came to them.

"At the beginning of our stay [in Chișinău], I was almost in shock. Gradually got used to it. It took the most effort to adapt to the fact that I live as a 'guest' and not in my apartment, to accept the rules of residence", Mustiats said. "It is really difficult to change a stable, good life for a refugee life, without a definite plan of action for the future."

One day at a time

Mustiats's status as a female refugee reflects other prevailing trends in the UNHCR data. Women, and those with children who have travelled to Moldova with them, make up the strong majority of arrivals and those remaining in-country. At 37 per cent, women are the single-largest group by gender and age. Boys and girls make up 24 per cent and 22 per cent respectively of all Ukrainians currently in Moldova, almost half the total. Far behind are male refugees to Moldova, given wartime laws barring men aged 18 to 60 from leaving Ukraine. Just 17 per cent of all Ukrainians now present in Moldova are male.

Any silver lining in the Mustiats' Chișinău experience is hard to find but real. Sonya has shown progress in speech and development, her mother said. The girl has also made many friends among the Moldovan and refugee children at the school she attends. Sonya likes her time at school so much, in fact, that weekends are a source of disappointment. "Sonya gets so upset on Saturdays, when she can't go to the kindergarten," her mother said.

Women, and those with children who have travelled to Moldova with them, make up the majority of arrivals and those remaining in-country.

As for the future, no one in the Mustiats family can know when, or even if, they might be able to return to Odesa. The outlook darkened this summer, when on June 23rd a Russian rocket attack damaged part of Transfiguration Cathedral, a historic church in Odesa's downtown. The site has suffered aggression in the past, when in 1936 the Bolsheviks destroyed the structure completely. The residents of Odesa rebuilt the church in the post-Soviet period and consecrated it in 2010. Odesa since June has suffered further attacks, including an overnight set of drone and missile strikes between August 13th and 14th.

Strikes on symbolic sites like the Transfiguration Cathedral, where Ukrainian culture is as much the target of aggression as are human beings, further compel Ukrainians to remain abroad for longer.

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To a query about her plans for the years ahead, Mustiats's response was shorter than the question. "That's difficult to answer," she said. "I still don't know how everything will turn out."

From dangerous Mariupol to Moldovan safety

Perhaps unsurprisingly given Moldova's large refugee population, the country's Ukrainians have also settled beyond Chișinău. The town of Orhei, 50 kilometres north of the capital, has offered refuge, and in some cases employment, for the town's new arrivals. Two women interviewed for this story, from the south-eastern city of Mariupol and the Donetsk region respectively, understand the ongoing effects of displacement from their own difficult personal experiences.

Before the war, Lyudmila Omelyanenko, 64, served as head lawyer of the social protection department at a Mariupol metallurgical plant. A proud mother and grandmother, Omelyanenko remembered having "everything a person could dream of" – not least a spacious apartment, a career and a seemingly stable future. When rockets began falling and Russian soldiers invaded the city, Omelyanenko took shelter in basements along with her husband, son and grandson. Their situation, like that of thousands in the famously besieged city, grew increasingly dire as food, water and safety ran short. Her family survived in part by gathering food and fluids themselves, often under cover of darkness to avoid confrontations with the occupying forces.

"We went out at night and collected dirty snow. We filtered it through rags and drank it. We also drank water from muddy puddles," Omelyanenko said. She maintained a shred of hope until learning that a Russian rocket had hit their apartment building, destroying the home of which they had been so proud.

After her apartment's destruction, Omelyanenko remembers simply wanting to die. "I was looking to kill myself. I was searching for the right tree branch," she said.

Sensing their conditions would soon become impossible, even deadly, the Omelyanenko family chose to flee Ukraine altogether. A winding journey from Mariupol, in Ukraine's southeast, to Moldova would require a total of three months, with their escape from the Russian-occupied part of Ukraine taking up a month of that period. The family finally arrived in Moldova last May, eventually settling in Orhei.

Omelyanenko remembers feeling a renewed sense of hopelessness once in Moldova, given her deepening realisation of all she had lost. She began attending a new, small Baptist church in the city, where church workers prayed with her, read encouraging passages from the Bible and offered her a sense of hope for whatever may yet lie ahead. Meeting the church workers and listening to their Bible readings "brought me back to life", Omelyanenko said.

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As her time in Moldova stretches well past the one-year mark, she and her husband continue to attend their Orhei church, while her son and grandson have since settled in Western Europe. Omelyanenko, the onetime head lawyer, now survives on humanitarian assistance.

From Donbas to helping others

Lyudmila Kulikova, 58, fled the town of Kurakhove, in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk oblast, arriving in Moldova last April with her husband, two daughters and three grandchildren. Formerly a staff member at a secondary school, Kulikova lives in Orhei, like the Omelyanenko family. She has found a job working at a cannery in her adopted town.

Kulikova already knows her sojourn in Moldova will be a long one. She has made up her mind not to return to her Ukrainian town in the next year or so, given the hostilities in the Donbas especially. Like Omelyanenko and many other Ukrainians, she has no physical home to return to.

"Our houses were razed to the ground," Kulikova said. Kulikova's decision to leave her country stems directly from the demise of Mariupol, some 120 kilometres from Kurakhove. She, too, endured a time hiding in basements, spending nearly four weeks without easy access to food or water, under shelling and the strain of surviving underground.

She said that "After the Russians took Mariupol, we decided to run away, because living in basements with three small children was no longer bearable!" Their departure from Donbas brought them face-to-face with the human wreckage of the early war. "Everywhere was the sickening smell of burning and decaying corpses," she recalled. "I don't even understand how the [grand]kids survived this."

Kulikova decided with her family to flee their town, despite the fact that her husband and one of their daughters have mobility issues. Travelling mostly at night – when bypassing Russian checkpoints is easier, according to Kulikova – they ultimately found their way to helping hands. The family encountered a patrol of Ukrainian soldiers.

"Thank God they were ours," Kulikova said. If the soldiers had been Russian instead, "they would have killed us."

Once the Ukrainian patrol understood the urgency of the family's needs and how long they had been travelling, they arranged transportation for them as far as Odesa. From there, amid a mass of fellow refugees, the Kulikova family entered Moldova, and later received permission from Moldovan authorities to settle in Orhei.

The Kulikova family likewise attend the Orhei church that helped the Omelyanenkos. They work as volunteers as part of the church's activities. They also vol-

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unteered for three days – they were "lucky enough to help," in Kulikova's words – at a children's festival in Orhei. Thus Kulikova and her kin appear to be making the best of an extraordinarily challenging time. Once settled in safety, they have turned to help others. They seem prepared to do so for some time, since a return home is impossible for now.

Observers of Moldova's refugee situation may find a dose of encouragement by looking ahead. Amid the few certainties of Russia's war on Ukraine, one is that Moldova's more than 100,000 Ukrainian refugees are safer in their host country. Moldova, as a pro-western state still shaking off the poor governance of its Soviet past, may have in its midst a group of Ukrainians with much to offer, such as a burst of new labour, a bump in a declining population, and a slice of the populace grateful to a country that welcomed them in a moment of greatest need.

While Ukrainian forces fight a physical war across their country, Ukraine's refugees continue to wage their own daily battles in their host countries around the world. And if the Mustiats, Omelyanenko and Kulikova families are managing to survive, then perhaps the rise of longer-term stays in Moldova suggests a path for survival for the Ukrainians who have made Moldova home. EE

William Fleeson is a writer and journalist. His writing has appeared or will soon in BBC Travel, *National Geographic, The New York Times, Newsweek*, and elsewhere. His work has been nominated, most recently, for The Best American Essays anthology. www.willfleeson.com

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How vulnerable groups live in Belarus in the era of mass repressions

VOLHA KAVALSKAYA

The LGBTQ+ community faces discrimination and stigmatisation in most countries in Europe. Belarus is no exception. Recent research by the "It's OK" initiative, however, shows that the scale of the threat faced by the LGBTQ+ community is much greater in Belarus than other countries in the region. This is also related to Russian state policies against sexual and gender minorities.

According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, more than 50 per cent of LGBTQ+ people in European countries have faced discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. This includes such forms of discrimination as insults, bans on employment or career advancement, denial of accommodation and access to health care, and physical and psychological violence. The Belarusian Initiative and social campaign "It's OK" recently conducted research to find out how the LGBTQ+ community is treated in Belarus and what stigmas are present in society. The overall aim was to identify and understand why these stigmas exist in Belarusian society and how to better influence them.

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Pressure from the government

At the national level in Belarus, LGBTQ+ persons are deprived of a large number of rights: the right to protection and security, the right to family, the right to health, etc. The report of the International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus, co-authored with the Legal Initiative, shows that in recent years the Belarusian state has been pursuing a homophobic policy. LGBTQ+ people encounter discrimination, as "hate speech is often used against [them], and violence by security forces is encouraged by the state."

Within Belarusian prisons, LGBTQ+ inmates are subjected to heightened levels of violence, harassment and ill-treatment. They face a double burden of repression, as not only are they targeted for their political beliefs or actions but also because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The state's homophobic policies and attitudes contribute to creating an atmosphere of hostility, in which prison officials and security forces are emboldened to perpetrate violence against LGBTQ+ prisoners.

Thousands of people, including those from the LGBTQ+ community, are unjustly detained within the Belarusian prison system.

As a consequence of these repressive policies, thousands of individuals, including LGBTQ+ people, are unjustly detained and suffer under inhumane conditions within the Belarusian prison system. The presence of sexual orientation or gender identity as an additional factor for abuse further exacerbates their plight, leaving them more vulnerable to torture and mistreatment.

Since June 2023, the Belarusian authorities have also been considering passing a bill on the "prohibition of LGBTQ+ propaganda", similar to current Russian legislation. This bill would establish administrative liability for "the promotion of non-traditional sexual relationships, gender transition, paedophilia and childfree".

It is important to note that in addition to state-sanctioned stigmatisation of the LGBTQ+ community, there is also a prevalent indifference among the general population. This societal apathy further exacerbates the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in Belarus, as they encounter not only institutional discrimination but also a lack of empathy and understanding from their fellow citizens. In our research, 62 per cent of respondents believe that LGBTQ+ people are under pressure from the state. Responses to this question often included comments such as:

"It is difficult to imagine any social group that is not currently subjected to governmental pressure in Belarus."

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"Protection of rights in the Republic of Belarus is in principle quite a problem, I think, if a person is deprived of some rights, then it will not necessarily be because of membership in the LGBT community. The government may still be using this to discredit specific undesirable citizens in the eyes of society."

"I have not encountered state violence towards LGBTQ+ groups and I have not heard about such situations, violence against all citizens is used in Belarus in general, but for political reasons."

It appears that there is no stigmatisation of LGBTQ+ people because they belong to the entire population of the country. However, these statements do not fully correspond to reality. Alyaksandr Lukashenka and his regime suppress any dissent, and in this sense, representatives of the LGBTQ+ community are truly under pressure "just like everyone else". However, within this repressed society, they are also a vulnerable group, which virtually reduces their rights to almost nothing. The International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus has released a report titled "Torture of LGBTQ+ People and the Regime's Homophobic Policy". In it, the reader can find testimonies in which victims recount facing additional violence due to the colour and length of their hair and nails, humiliation and the use of physical force based on clothing, torture provoked by the disclosure of their identity, and threats and sexual violence stemming from homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. Outing, the forced disclosure of identity, is also used as a threat. Silencing the problem in society leads to the fact that people who have faced increased repression due to their identity have nowhere to seek protection and support. As a result, they experience pressure from both the government and society.

Pressure from society

Official government policy has an impact on the society. The LGBTQ+ community faces stigmatisation in everyday life due to the state's approach. In our research, 59.9 per cent of respondents believe that LGBTQ+ people are under social pressure in Belarus. This is true especially among the more informed people within cisgender and heterosexual Belarusian society, who privately know LGBTQ+ people and are aware of the pressures they are under from the state and society. A number of common stigmas which public organisations, activists and human rights defenders should deal with have been identified and presented below.

Prohibition on speech

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The most popular stigma regarding LGBTQ+ people among respondents is that there exists a phenomenon called "LGBTQ+ propaganda". This is namely the idea that "sexual orientation can be promoted or imposed." A typical phrase often heard is "I am against the promotion and recognition of the LGBTQ+ norm." This shows that the "recognition of norms" and "propaganda" are viewed as the same thing.

Another example of stigma can be found in the phrase "These people can do what they think is necessary, but do not promote the idea that it is normal and good." The term "LGBT propaganda" indicates that the person is deeply involved in the political and cultural life of Russia, as the term was directly imported into Belarus from that country. Yet, it has little connection to reality. It plays on the fear that a person, after seeing something once or a few times, will somehow radically change their understanding of their sexual preferences and gender identity. According to Tony Lashden, a queer-fem activist, "The fact that we know some people exist does not radically change anything within us. If we study how people come to understand their identity, we will see that it is a gradual process. Questions of sexual identity are not that simple. For individuals to truly understand themselves, they need a lot of time in a safe and supportive environment. They also need information about what it means. Only then can they have the opportunity to gain self-awareness and tell their own stories."

The LGBTQ+ community in Belarus faces stigmatisation in everyday life due to the state's approach.

Prohibition on public conversation and requests for help

"Any parade, whether it's an LGBTQ+ parade or a heterosexual one, is always an attempt to impose one's opinion on others." Here again we return to the idea of imposing an opinion. In this case, the reference for context is pride parades. Our research in Belarus found that statements like the one above make up around 15 per cent of respondents. Other similar comments about pride parades and marches include: "I don't think the march is an acceptable method of expressing a position. Regardless of gender"; "Sexual orientation is a personal matter, I don't think it's necessary to march in support of LGBTQ+ people"; and "Heterosexuals don't organise parades for themselves. In terms of pride parades – definitely not. If there is a rally or a parade in defence of the rights of heterosexuals, then we will talk."

Freedom of assembly and peaceful gatherings are a fundamental right of any individual or group. This right is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Constitution of Belarus. The public space belongs to the LGBTQ+ community just as much as it does to anyone else. Yet, the LGBTQ+ community

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is clearly limited in its rights compared to heterosexual individuals, who can marry and have children. Confronted with these rights, the community faces significant obstacles in many countries and often resorts to protests like marches to voice their opinions and be heard by others.

Maryna Shtrahava, co-founder of the Belarusian inclusive organisation "The Others", comments on this phenomenon: "Marches are absolutely not about shouting to the whole world about who I sleep with. They are about shouting, 'Regardless of who I sleep with, I want equal rights with everyone else, and I refuse to be discriminated against.'"

One clear issue for respondents in the research is the life of children in LGBTQ+ families, namely the belief that this affects the sexual orientation and psyche of children. This popular stigma stems from a lack of knowledge and scientific information about how sexual orientation is formed, as well as its lack of dependence on the gender and sexual orientation of parents. Statements from our Belarusian respondents include: "The children of gay couples rarely grow up with 'natural' orientation"; "Children cannot make their own choice: to agree or not to be raised in this family, which, for example, consists of two men"; or "For a man to grow up adequately and psychologically healthy, a mother and father are essential to educate him."

These opinions are stigmatised because they do not correspond to the actual scientific facts. Research conducted in this area shows that parents' sexual orientation is not a determining factor for a child's sexual orientation. Indeed, the main factor influencing a child's development is the care, love and support they receive from their parents. The most important thing for a child is to have caring and reliable parents, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Prohibition on expressing emotions

A large number of responses in our research were related to the right to express feelings in the public space. This question turned out to be very triggering and most of the responses were related to the fact that both homosexual and heterosexual couples should not do this: "Public expression of relationships is not normal for any group of people"; "Excessive expression of intimate moments in relationships in public is completely unpleasant"; "This does not even apply to the LGBTQ+ community at all"; "Let anything happen behind the closed doors of the bedroom"; and "I think it is unethical to publicly express my feelings, and not just for LGBT+ people."

On the one hand, the above responses provide a stigmatisation which is not directly referring to the LGBTQ+ community, but rather to the public expression

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of feelings in general. On the other hand, however, the expression of emotions is a normal and natural part of the human experience. Denial or stigmatisation of the public expression of emotions in the context of LGBTQ+ people can be considered as a form of stigmatisation. Imposing emotional restrictions on public expressions of love or affection according to sexual orientation or gender identity is unequal and discriminatory. Denying LGBTQ+ people the opportunity to express emotions and love on an equal basis creates an atmosphere of stigmatisation and rejection.

Olga Shparaga, professor of philosophy and author, notes that "people who have grown up in Belarus do not realise to what extent the state dictates their physical appearance in public spaces. Authoritarian and totalitarian regimes do not allow us to be spontaneous and regulate us with various practices that turn us into obedient bodies. If we want to live a full and meaningful life, we need to fight for our spontaneity and public self-expression, including friendly, affectionate and sexual expression – all of which are part of this spontaneity, without which there can be no freedom or solidarity."

"It's OK" is a Belarusian initiative against the stigmatisation of the LGBTQ+ community in Belarusian society. This material is prepared as part of the campaign against the stigmatisation of LGBTQ+ people with the hashtags #ItsOK #ГэтаОкей.

Scan the QR code to read more about other stigmas in the full text of the research.

Volha Kavalskaya is a Belarusian activist, cultural manager, co-founder of the initiative "It's OK". She is currently based in Tbilisi, Georgia.

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The recently-released album titled "Polish Legacy. Balkan Heritage. Polish contribution to culture, art and science of the Western Balkans" describes the long history of relations in the fields of art, sciences and culture between Poland and the countries of the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia).

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Multilingual and multiple minorities. Who are the Balkan Jews?

KATARZYNA TACZYŃSKA

The documented history of Jews in the Balkans can be traced back to the early Middle Ages and has been studied by researchers from diverse perspectives. Undoubtedly, it is a vibrant, dynamic and tumultuous story, set at the crossroads of multiple intersecting cultures and social groups. Although the Second World War profoundly impacted the Jewish world, it did not bring about its end.

In less than three years, we have lost three women who had made a tremendous impact on Balkan Jewish culture. The first to pass was Flory Jagoda, who died in January 2021. Born in 1923 in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) as Florica Papo, Flory emigrated to the United States after the Second World War. She was an accomplished singer and composer devoted to the preservation of the Ladino and Sephardic traditions. Then, this year, the literary world lost Gordana Kuić, a popular Serbian writer (and Laura Papo Bohoreta's niece*). Born in 1942 in Belgrade (Serbia), she preserved the history of Sephardic Jews from various post-Yugoslav countries in her numerous books. Soon after, Dina Katan Ben-Zion died in Israel. This Sarajevo-born writer, literary scholar and translator brought the important contribution to the *Studia Judaica* issue on "Strategies

* Laura Papo Bohoreta (1891-1942) was a Sarajevo-born Sephardic activist and writer. She was active mainly in the interwar period, during the period of the so-called first Yugoslavia (1918-41).

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of Survival: Balkan Jewish Women and Cultural Representations of Memory", which I edited with Magdalena Koch.

Documenting a culture

Those who remember the Second World War and have directly experienced its consequences are quickly passing away, and the pace of their passing is only increasing. Additionally, their deaths, especially the deaths of such figures as the aforementioned women, result in the disappearance of a unique aspect of the past – the realm of Jewish women's culture in which their experiences have been documented and which existed outside the mainstream, on the periphery of dominant trends. Within the Balkan Jewish community, Sephardic women are often regarded as being (at least) doubly marginalised. The lives of these women, like lenses, bring into focus the fate and dynamics of the changes experienced by the Jewish community in the Balkans. The trajectories of these lives varied and researchers still find it a challenge to map their detailed courses, which could lead us to a deeper comprehension of the history and presence of Jews in the region. In September 2023, I initiated a research project titled "Jewish, Balkan, Female: The Literature of Balkan Jewish Women as a Minority Experience"*, which is why I feel so acutely the loss of these women that actively helped to safeguard and shape Balkan Jewish culture. Regrettably, I will never have a chance to ask them the questions I had prepared. What remains are the multilingual cultural texts they authored, which I regard as a significant means for conveying not only their personal experiences, but also the experiences of the social groups to which they were linked and with which they identified. How will these writings surprise me? Only time will tell. And as for why exactly are Jewish women worth analysing as a separate group?

When I was writing these words in late July 2023, I learnt about the passing of David Albahari – one of the most prominent contemporary writers whose works were devoted to Jewish culture and the Holocaust, particularly in the context of the former Yugoslavia. He was born in 1948, in Peja/Peć (Kosovo), to a Sephardic family. His academic journey led him to study literature and English in Zagreb (Croatia). During the tumultuous war in the 1990s, Albahari served as the president of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia, playing an active role

* The project is carried out in the Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, and financed by the National Science Centre, Poland (No 2022/47/B/HS2/00584). This article is a part of this research project.

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in the evacuation of the Jewish community from Sarajevo. In 1994, he made an important life-changing decision to emigrate with his family to Calgary, Canada. These biographical turning points held great significance for the formation of his identity as a writer. As a result, Albahari is now perceived as a multi-centric figure, interpreted through the prism of several pivotal cultural categories, including in the context of Serbia, Canada and Jewishness. The passing away of significant figures from the Jewish world of the Balkans was a direct impetus for me to elucidate (to the extent permitted by the limits of this text) the history and nature of the Jewish community in the Balkans as a collective. The diversity of factors that shaped Jewish culture in the region, as a culture of a minority group, suggests that said culture should not be treated as homogenous. On the contrary, it should be understood as a reflection of Jewish cultural pluralism and, as such, invite exploration through the prism of its distinct local manifestations. With that in mind, let us start from the very beginning.

History of Balkan Jews

The history of Jews in the region of the broadly-understood Balkans, and more specifically, in the former Yugoslavia, is a truly captivating tale. They came to the Yugoslav territories in multiple waves, and the oldest traces of their presence date back to antiquity. While pinpointing the exact dates of their arrival is difficult, historical records suggest that Jews began settling in Yugoslavia even before the arrival of the Slavs, i.e. before the seventh century. The earliest Jewish settlers originated from the Eastern Roman Empire and are known as Romaniotes. They had a distinctive cultural identity and used a language known as Yevanic (Jewish-Greek). These Jews are often described in historiography as the autochthonous Jewish community of the Balkan Peninsula. The second major wave of Jewish migration to this region occurred centuries later, following the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 and from Portugal in 1497. Consequently, the Jewish population of the Balkans grew exponentially, giving rise to Sephardic communities.

The second wave of Jewish migration to the Balkans occurred after their expulsion from Spain and Portugal in the 15th century.

Despite the ethnic differences between the Sephardim and the Romaniotes, a process of sociocultural assimilation occurred between these groups. Sephardic culture and the Ladino language (Jewish-Spanish) gained prominence and started to exert influence over other groups existing in these areas. The most significant

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Sephardic centres of that era in the South Slavic areas included Split, Dubrovnik, Belgrade, Skopje, Bitola (Monastir) and Sarajevo. Each of these cities has a distinct historical background that deserves closer attention. For example, Split and Dubrovnik were shaped by Italian influences, while Skopje and Bitola were homes to particularly hermetic and conservative Sephardic communities. However, in this text, I will focus on Sarajevo, as the city that connects the three women I evoked in the introduction.

Ashkenazi Jews started arriving in Yugoslavia in the 18th century. In Sarajevo, the first small group arrived alongside the Muslim population that had fled from Pannonia, which was conquered by the Austro-Hungarian army. Researchers believe that these early Ashkenazi immigrants assimilated into the Sephardic community. After 1878, when the Ottoman Empire lost control of the Balkans and Austria-Hungary took over, a new wave of Ashkenazi Jews began to arrive in the region. Unlike the previous group, these Ashkenazi Jews did not assimilate with the Sephardim. Instead, they established their own separate community.

The history of Jews in the region of the broadly-understood Balkans, and more specifically, in the former Yugoslavia, is a truly captivating tale.

The Austro-Hungarian rule over the territories of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) resulted in significant social and economic changes, particularly in the cities. They began to attract new settlers who saw BiH as a good place to work and earn a living. BiH was economically underdeveloped, lacking industry and a sufficient number of skilled workers. At the same time, there were virtually no incidents of antisemitism in these areas, which made them popular among Ashkenazi settlers. In 1879, Ashkenazi Jews established their own religious community in Sarajevo. Consequently, many educated Ashkenazim, proficient in German, Slavic languages and Yiddish, began to migrate to BiH, where their linguistic skills allowed them to take up positions in various economic and administrative sectors.

For a long time, lasting until the early 20th century, Bosnian Jews maintained their culture and traditions that remained largely unchanged, despite the social and cultural shifts occurring in the region. Interestingly, the continuity of customs and language within these groups was ensured by Sephardic women, who had been regarded as cornerstones of the Jewish identity since the Ottoman period. Their influence was typically limited to the family and the close-knit environment symbolically referred to as the curtijo (“courtyard”) or maale (“quarter”). For this reason, the Sephardic community remained relatively closed off and resistant to assimilation processes, striving to preserve as much of its distinct cultural heritage as possible. Over the centuries, the community developed within its isolated

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setting, steadfastly resisting external influences and preserving the unique identity of the Sephardic community and the Ladino language.

According to Krinka Vidaković-Petrov, the way Jews functioned in BiH differed from patterns observed in other parts of the Yugoslav region, such as Serbia or Macedonia. This distinction can be attributed to the presence of the local Muslim community in BiH, which consisted of Serbs and Croats who converted to Islam during the Ottoman period. The local Muslim community shared the same language as the Christian Serbs and Croats, but they held a privileged socio-economic position during the Ottoman era and maintained closer ties to the Turkish administration. Consequently, a unique Slavic-Oriental culture specific to BiH emerged in the region, in which cultural division was defined on the basis of religion and religious traditions rather than ethnicity and language. Hence, the Bosnian cultural environment reflected a multi-religious society that included Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and native Muslims (still of Slavic origin), but viewed Sephardic Jews as foreign and isolated, lacking any ties to BiH's territories, as well as linguistic or ethnic connections to the rest of their populations.

The Yugoslav experience

In 1918, Jews from various parts of the Yugoslav region, with their own distinct historical experiences, were integrated into the single Yugoslav community. These groups spoke different languages and had diverse cultural identities.

Jews were seen as a stateless minority, bringing their religion, cultural traditions and languages to the new state.

The period of the first Yugoslav state was marked both by the celebration of the diversity of expressions of Jewish identity and by its questioning and re-evaluations. There was a collective search for an answer to a fundamental question: who was a Jew within the context of Yugoslavia? The new Yugoslav state was a blend of different nations, ethnic groups, religions and cultures, bound by the core idea of forging a new Yugoslav identity. Three South Slavic nations (Serbs, Croats and Slovenes), several non-Slavic ethnic minorities from neighbouring countries (Hungarians, Romanians and Albanians), and other groups (Jews and Roma) came together to merge into this new entity. Within this context, Jews were seen as a stateless minority, bringing their additional religion (Judaism), cultural traditions and languages (Hebrew, Judeo-Spanish, German, Hungarian and Yiddish) to the amalgam of cultures forming the new state.

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In the territories of the former Yugoslavia, the Jewish community was comprised of two distinct groups: two-thirds were Ashkenazim, and one-third were Sephardim. After the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918 (renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929), the Jewish community became a minority, accounting for a mere 0.5 per cent of the total population. Ashkenazi Jews resided foremost in Croatia, Slavonia and Vojvodina (formerly part of Austria-Hungary), while Sephardic Jews were concentrated in Serbia, Dalmatia, Bosnia and Macedonia, areas which had been previously under the influence of the Ottoman Empire. It is clear, therefore, that the Jewish community existed as a minority group (albeit not a fully homogenous one) in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Balkans. At the same time, it transcended the political and administrative borders of the region.

The documented history of Jews in the Balkans can be traced back to the early Middle Ages and has been studied by researchers from diverse perspectives. Undoubtedly, it is a vibrant, dynamic and tumultuous story, set at the crossroads of multiple intersecting cultures and social groups. Although the Second World War profoundly impacted the Jewish world, it did not bring about its end. There are still numerous topics that warrant further exploration. One such area of study is the history of Balkan Jewish women who have rarely been the focus of researchers' attention. The biographies, works and activities of such remarkable figures as Flory Jagoda (US), Gordana Kuić (Serbia), Dina Katan Ben-Zion (Israel) and many other Jewish women grant us extraordinary insights into the Jewish traditions of the Balkans. This group offers examples of a variety of intercultural and transcultural identifications, shaped in an intersectional manner and drawing from multiple points of reference, such as gender, religion, education, region, culture, nationality and language. These women kept crossing all the primary divisions underlying the basic ways of understanding and describing the dominant cultures of the Balkans.

In 1918, Jews from various parts of the Yugoslav region, with their own distinct historical experiences, were integrated into the single Yugoslav community.

The analysis of the writings of Balkan Jewish women allows us to explore how the fundamental issues of both general and Jewish ideological movements find expression within this group. Additionally, it allows us to observe the process of defining one's own boundaries – how individuals bond with their "selves" in the act of narration, through self-attribution and exclusion. I firmly believe that exploring this dimension of Jewish culture will offer valuable insights into the Balkan region. Despite the prevalence of the Slavic element, the area has been influenced by the legacies of three distinct political systems – the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-

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Hungarian Empire and the Republic of Venice – resulting in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state. By approaching these women's writings from such a perspective, their words can be interpreted as subversive minority voices emerging from the margins. Such exploration can facilitate a deeper understanding of the complex historical and cultural dynamics of the Balkans.

Katarzyna Taczyńska, is an assistant professor at the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, and a researcher at University College Dublin in the project When Nationalism Fails. A Comparative Study of Holocaust Museums in ex collaborationist countries. Her research interests include contemporary culture in the context of memory in Eastern and Southern Europe, Holocaust studies, historiography, and literature and art created by Jewish women in the Balkans. Among her most recent publications are "(Un) spoken Histories: The Second World War and Yugoslav Jewish Women," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 17 (2023): 104–123, and (with Sabina Giergiel) "A non-existent cemetery: The memory of Germans in today's Belgrade," *Memory Studies* (forthcoming in 2023).

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The anatomy of betrayal

IHAR MELNIKAU

The story of local Belarusians who collaborated with Nazi Germany is often a forgotten page of history. Yet, their brutal tactics and participation in the extermination of Jews and other populations are a sad reminder of life under occupation, as was the case of the Barysau police officers.

I remember when I was a small boy, I used to ride my bike with my grandfather. In one village near Babruisk, my grandfather would start a conversation with a local resident. The villager would ask, "Are you interested in the history of the war?" "Do you see the house on the left? A policeman lived there. So there was a lot of blood on the hands of this policeman. He shot Jews and Soviet POWs. He didn't run away with the Germans; he was hiding here. Caught, and tried. Got a quarter, 25 years. No one else had seen him here."

I listened to that story and imagined that "traitor" who served the Nazis. What motivated these people to turn to the Nazis? Some fiercely hated the Soviet government, others longed to rise above their fellow villagers and realise their paltry ambitions. Others were led to the police by fear of the occupiers and possibly sent to work in Germany.

Establishing a "new order"

On July 25th 1941, SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler issued an order "on the tasks of the police in the occupied territories", which, in particular, emphasised that "it is necessary to create additional security formations from a suitable part of the population of the occupied regions for us." The main task of the auxiliary police, which the Nazis began to create in the occupied territory of Belarus in the autumn of 1941, was to assist the German military and civilian authorities in maintaining

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order and implementing occupation policy. The Nazis divided the territory of Belarus between various administrative districts. Thus, fragments of our country were part of the General District of Volyn-Podillya, the Reichskommissariat "Ukraine", the district "Białystok" (part of East Prussia), the Reichskommissariat "Ostland", as well as the rear areas of the army group "Centre". In this regard, there were "Belarusian", "Ukrainian", "Lithuanian", "Latvian" and "Russian" police on the Belarusian lands, whose occupier was the Nazis.

A network of special police posts was created in occupied Belarus and police forces were consolidated into special battalions.

In July 1941, the commander of the army group "Centre" General Max von Schenckendorff issued an order in Baranovichy to create a local government and police. In the ranks of the police it was originally planned to accept reliable Belarusians and persons of German nationality, the so-called Volksdeutsche. If we talk about the composition of the police, it should be noted that at the end of 1941 about 3,700 policemen served on the territory of the General District "Belarus", and by 1943 there were already about 50,000 people in various police structures (such as the "Order Service" or Schutzmannschaft). A network of special police posts was created in occupied Belarus and police forces were consolidated into special battalions. Initially, the formation of police units was on a voluntary basis.

The cadres were selected for the police after checking the reliability of the candidates. Here is how one of the inhabitants of the Belarusian village Mir described this process: "These policemen were not mobilised, they were all volunteers. They were between 25 and 35 years old. They usually did not enjoy special respect among the locals. Some were prone to alcoholism. At that time, about 25 local policemen and 12 gendarmes were responsible for the territory, which had 20 to 25 villages. The Germans did not know the area or the language, and therefore relied on the local police."

The Belarusian policemen were commanded by German officers. One of them, Captain Max Eibner, described the process of forming the local police in the Baranavichy district as follows: "The Belarusian Schutzmannschaft obeyed me. I took it from the former local commandant. At that moment, there were 250 local volunteers in the Schutzmannschaft. They were distributed throughout the territory." By forming local police, the Nazis sought (especially in western Belarus) to weaken the influence of Poles in this structure. To find out the national composition of the police, the occupation authorities in December 1941 conducted a survey on the subject of nationality. Shortly after which all those who called themselves "Poles" were fired.

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Starting around the summer of 1942, the German occupation authorities began forcible recruitment into the police. One of the policemen described this as follows: "The mayor sent letters to some men from our town and ordered them to come to the police station. There they were forced to join the police. Then they were examined by a doctor, and then sent to the barracks, where they were given rifles and ammunition." Due to the shortage of officers and sub-officers, the Nazis created schools for police training. On the territory of Belarus such schools existed in Malaryta, Vileyka, Stolin and other cities. Cadets of these schools had drill and fire training, study of the German regulation of the guard service, and combat tactics. There were, of course, political lessons. It all ended with them taking the oath of allegiance "to the Führer and the Reich".

Keeping tabs for the occupiers

The local police were armed mainly with weapons seized from the Soviets. The uniform, initially, consisted of an armband, on which, in addition to the inscriptions "Schutzmann" and "Polizei", the personal number and place of service were indicated. Then the police began to receive special uniforms. One of the Baranavichy policemen described his uniform as follows: "Our uniform was black: a soldier's overcoat with grey cuffs, two rows of buttons made of white metal. A black belt with a white, metal buckle."

The main task of the police was to protect public buildings from partisan attacks. Policemen were also used to guard the ghetto, escort Jews to their place of work and "special actions", which, most often, meant the destruction of various groups of the local population: Jews, Gypsies, Soviet activists, prisoners of war of the Red Army, or the Polish intelligentsia. At the same time, the so-called unauthorised shootings were often noted in German documents, when the police killed people guided by a banal thirst for profit. In addition, the policemen had to monitor the collection of taxes, confiscation of warm clothes for the needs of the German army, the timely implementation of agricultural supplies and the registration of residents.

Unauthorised shootings were often noted in German documents, when the local Belarusian police killed people guided by a banal thirst for profit.

Local Belarusian police prepared three lists concerning the population. The first concerned those who lived on the territory before the German attack on the USSR, while the second was made up of those who came to this area after June 22nd 1941. The third concerned Jews, communists, and employees of the Soviet

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state organizations, party authorities and NKVD. These lists also included family members. All citizens over the age of 16, who were included in the first two lists, had to have an "ausweis", the role of which, most often, was performed by a pre-war Soviet passport with the seal of the occupation administration.

In addition, the Secret Field Police (GFP), as well as the "Order Service" had investigative departments. Their staff most often consisted of "local" residents (including former Soviet militia officers, or captured officers of the Red Army who decided to serve the occupiers). It should be noted, however, that there were some differences between those who voluntarily joined the police in 1941 and those who began to be conscripted by coercion already in 1942. Many of the second category had to choose between police service, work in Germany or escape to the forest to join Soviet, Polish or Ukrainian partisans. Among these people there were fewer stubborn anti-Soviets, antisemites and pro-Nazi individuals.

In 1942, the creation of the "Belarusian Self-Defence Corps" began in the occupied territory of Belarus, units that, according to the plan of the German command, were also to be used for anti-partisan actions. There were up to 15,000 residents of Belarus in the ranks of this formation. In January 1943, the 13th Belarusian Police Battalion was formed under the Security Service of the German SS, which was later actively used in the camps and ghettos, as well as bloody actions against Soviet partisans and the destruction of civilians. In 1944, after the beginning of the Soviet Operation Bagration, a significant number of policemen left for the West.

The "bloody" mayor

The German authorities actively used policemen and civilian Belarusian collaborators in carrying out the policy of the Holocaust and repressions against civilians of occupied Belarus. As the Israeli researcher Leonid Rein noted: "The Germans depended on local collaborationist structures, first of all, on the so-called 'local administration' and auxiliary police. These bodies were created at the very beginning of the German invasion. Local burgomeisters were often key figures at various stages of the genocide."

One of the most terrible examples of police participation in the extermination of the Jewish population of Belarus occurred in the autumn of 1941 in Barysau – about 8,000 Jews were killed there. The "action" of the destruction of the Barysau ghetto took place with the active participation of the mayor of this city, the Belarusian Stanislau Stankevich. In 1939-41, this man worked as a teacher in Navahrudak. After the German attack on the USSR, he began to cooperate with the Germans.

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He was the mayor of Barysau and the district and in 1944, he served as deputy president of the Belarusian Central Council in Baranavichy.

On the eve of the destruction of the Barysau ghetto on October 19th 1941, Stankevich participated in a banquet for policemen (future murderers of the Jewish population of Barysau) and "inspired them to serve the Nazis". "Doctor" Stankevich (the collaborator always emphasised his academic degree) personally supervised the census of the population of the Barysau district and the compilation of lists of Soviet citizens of Jewish nationality.

"In order to identify representatives of the Jewish population, on behalf of the German commandant and the mayor of the Barysau district, the well-known nationalist emigrant Stanislau Stankevich conducted a census of the entire population on the territory of the district in July 1941, as a result of which 400 Jewish families were identified. I provided the lists of all these persons to the Barysau district administration," noted David Egof, former head of the Barysau district security department, during interrogation by the KGB. The mayor was personally responsible for the arrest of representatives of the Soviet local authorities and made great efforts to create a police force.

Numerous archival documents, which are kept in Belarusian archives today, testify to the antisemitic activities of the Barysau police officers.

In 1946, Soviet special authorities arrested former policeman Mikhail Stuk. During the interrogation, he admitted that it was Stankevich who offered him to go to the police, and he also appointed policemen who participated in the shootings of civilians. "Mayor Stankevich, after preliminary indoctrination in the anti-Soviet spirit, said that the German army would soon end the Soviet Union and there would never be Soviet power again," Stuk noted during his interrogation.

Numerous archival documents, which are kept in Belarusian archives today, testify to the antisemitic activities of the Barysau police officers. In August 1941, the head of the Security Service of Novo-Barysau, Timofey Bakhanovich, in a letter to Mayor Stankevich wrote: "According to available data, Jews secretly sell their various property to Russian neighbours, such as cows and other livestock, equipment and other contractual things. I ask you to inform me if they have the right to do this and what to do with those Jews who sell and with those citizens who receive property from Jews." Without waiting long, Stankevich issued an order "to take cows and any cattle from Jews". At the same time, the terms "Jewish things", "Jewish cow" and "Jewish goat" appeared in Barysau. The police began to "hunt" Jewish things, and the victims of this hunt were often ordinary Belarusians and representatives of other nationalities who lived in Barysau.

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Passion for killing

When the assistant chief of the Barysau police demanded that the chief of the Novo-Barysau police, Bakhanovich, allocate 15 policemen to organise the resettlement of Jews to the Barysau ghetto, 17 policemen signed up for service. They had hoped to receive additional "bonuses" in the form of things seized from Jews. The American researcher Martin Dean noted: "The police could shoot anyone for every reason. It was enough to say about the future victim that they were a partisan or a communist to justify themselves in the eyes of the gendarmerie. They killed people to convince the German authorities of their commitment. This group had a great passion for killing."

"In August 1941, it is unknown for what reasons the Germans captured a group of 50 Jews and shot them. Following this execution, the German military commandant, Colonel Rosenfeld, ordered all Jews to wear yellow distinctive signs on their chests and backs. The police were ordered to follow this order through the mayor of the city Stankevich. At the end of August 1941, a special camp was organised for the Jewish population, the so-called ghetto, in the area of Krasnoarmeyskaya and Slabodka streets, where the entire Jewish population of Barysaw was settled. The camp was surrounded by barbed wire and a police guard was set up. The execution took place as follows: police officers broke into apartments, grabbed men and women and dragged them to the fields along Krasnoarmeyskaya Street, and from there they were driven by cars to the place of execution. Separate parties of Jews were driven on foot. People were overwhelmed by fear and few of them resisted, and those who resisted were beaten and forced to go. They took whole families and the children went along with the adults."

"The convicts were brought in cars and brought to the prepared pits, given the order to undress. Those who could, undressed themselves, those who could not, the police undressed. They stripped them naked, some children screamed and were thrown into the pits dressed. Egof, the head of the Security Service, beat people with a whip. Before the shooting, drunken policemen raped women. In total, about 7,000 people were shot these days. The organisers and participants of the execution of the Jews of the city of Barysaw included Colonel Rosenfeld, Captain Max Eibner, Police Chief Kavaleuski, Egof David Davidovich (a German from the Volga region), and the policemen Mikhail Hrinkevich, Pipin, Kislyak, Maitak, Budnik, Nikitin and Klimkovich."

"When examining the place of execution and interviewing residents, it was found that in October 1943, the Germans burned the corpses of the executed people. The fire was visible and the unbearable stench of burning corpses was felt. They smoked at night. The burning was done for four to five nights, and then the pits

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were buried, filled in and cars drove over them in order to hide the crime committed." This was all noted in the Act of the Barysau City Commission of the Extraordinary State Commission on the murder of the Jewish population by the German occupiers in the city, drawn up on September 12th 1944. It should be noted that between October 20th and 21st 1941, there was a mass shooting of Barysau Jews. Thousands of ordinary people became victims of the Nazis and their accomplices from among local collaborators.

Black page

After the destruction of the ghetto and its residents, it was Stankevich who was responsible for the sale and distribution of things left behind by the Soviet citizens and Jews. However, the first to gain access to the belongings of the dead were the policemen. During interrogation after the war, the former headman of the village of Korsakovichy noted that "The policemen who participated in the destruction of the Barysau Jews returned with watches and other items that they received as a reward from among the property of the murdered Jews." As for Stankevich, according to some sources, already as a representative of the president of the Belarusian Central Council in Baranavichy, he also joined the activities of one of the most terrible places of extermination in Nazi-occupied Belarus – the Kaldycheva concentration camp near Baranavichy. In 1944, Stankevich retreated to Germany together with German troops, and after the war he escaped to the West.

Belarusians are one of those European nations that suffered greatly during the Second World War. Today, studying the events of the past, it is necessary to consider each historical plot in a multidimensional perspective. Archival documents and eyewitness memoirs prove that in 1941-44 on the territory of Belarus even Germans were amazed by their cruelty of the local people who became collaborators. The participation of the policemen from among the residents of Belarus in the extermination of the Belarusian, Jewish and Polish populations of Belarus is a black page in the country's history. We have to remember it.

Ihar Melnikau is a Belarusian historian, essayist, journalist, blogger and editor of the history portal Historia Pobach. He is the author of various academic and journalistic articles and 18 books, including *The border was near Minsk 1921-1941* and *Forgotten Corps. The Polish Army in the Bobruisk Area 1918-1920,* in which he addresses little-known aspects of Belarusian history and Belarusian-Polish relations during the Second World War.

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The icon and the sarcophagus

Why the Golden Ring matters to the Kremlin in 2023

JAMES C. PEARCE

Vladimir Putin's recent orders to return artefacts to "Golden Ring" cities around Moscow only further reveal the Kremlin's attempts to tie present issues to the past. Possessing histories stretching back to the time of the Rus', these cities are once again playing a highly important role in Russian identity.

"This is Trinity", a religious icon painted in 1420 by Andrey Rublev, is about as high profile as icons come in Russia. The Russian president's order in May to move it back to the Trinity Lavra Monastery in Sergiev Posad was neither accidental, nor anecdotal. Its connection to war, the idea of Russia and the bonds between church and state run much deeper than most realised. The defiance of the Tretyakov Gallery, which said it would not be moved, was symbolic in its own right – though not how one might assume. The timeliness was no accident either. The move came ten days after it was announced that the silver sarcophagus of Saint Alexander Nevsky, in St Petersburg's Hermitage Museum, was to be handed back to the church for half a century. But that was not all…

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Descendants of Rus'

The first thing to note is the crucial connection of the Golden Ring cities to the idea of the Russian nation and statehood. The Golden Ring cities, six to eight in number, are considered to be the Russian heartlands. Once the spiritual, cultural, economic and political centres of Old Rus', the lineage from Rurik runs through here to Moscow. These cities are former capitals, important trading hubs and often what many think of when imagining picturesque Russian landscapes with wooden or gold-topped churches.

Rurik's descendants ended up here as the Kyivan Princes often sent their sons to rule other parts of their loose federation. Yaroslav the Wise, a great moderniser who created the first Russian legal code, was sent to rule Rostov and the surrounding regions in his youth by his father. He went on to found Yaroslavl in this region, which he named after himself, as well as Tartu in Estonia, Bila Tserkva in Ukraine and Jarosław in Poland. His family became one of the four rival lineages descending from Rurik, who all vied for the Kyivan throne. It is from this line that Alexander Nevsky hailed.

Nevsky was born in Pereslavl-Zalessky, a Golden Ring town 140 kilometres northeast of Moscow. Once known for its carpenters, smiths and painters, it is also where Peter the Great played his "war games" on Lake Pleshcheyevo, dreaming of a Russian navy. Nevsky has been a national hero in Russia since his victory over the Teutonic Knights. He defeated them as Rus' fell to the Mongols and refused to convert in exchange for their help. For his loyalty, the Mongols made him Grand Prince of Vladimir. Inadvertently, this protected Rurik's lineage and kept Vladimir the most important city for the time being.

The Russian state today paints itself as the natural heir to this lineage and Vladimir. Russian autocracy was born in Vladimir, and its churches and monasteries were once among Europe's largest and grandest. Vladimir's Dormition Cathedral was built to host a Byzantine Icon said to have repelled attackers. In 1408, its interior was repainted by none other than Rublev. The fact that the Moscow Kremlin also modelled its cathedrals on those in Vladimir and Suzdal shows the need the Muscovite state had to affirm its lineage through Vladimir back to Rurik.

Divine intervention

The Trinity Lavra monastery was founded by Saint Sergius of Radonezh, who was actually from another Golden Ring city, Rostov Veliky. He is said to have lived a modest and humble life in prayer and reflection. It was Saint Sergius

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The Trinity Lavra Monastery in Sergiev Posad, Russia, is one of the many historical and religious sites becoming a part of Vladimir Putin's growing spiritual narrative about Russian history.

who blessed Dmitry Donskoy at the monastery before the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380. This was Russia's first victory against the Mongols. It came at a time when Moscow was still struggling to assert authority over its rival region, Tver, whose princes sought the title of Grand Prince. Not a part of a sacred or patriotic war as such, Kulikovo certainly has deep spiritual connotations in modern Russia. Saint Sergius played an important role in the spiritual strengthening of the Russian people during the occupation of the "demonic force", as some called the Mongols. He became an important unifying force for the Russian nation in times of trouble thereafter.

The same can be said of the icon at the monastery. Nikon, a disciple of Sergius and abbot of the monastery, asked Rublev to paint an image of the Trinity to honour the saint. It depicts a story from the Bible – The Hospitality of Abraham (Genesis 18). Rublev stripped it of all secondary details to symbolise the Holy Trinity (the Father, Son and Holy Spirit). In the icon, three angels sit at a table with a cup, which represents the Eucharist. Besides the relics of Saint Sergius, the icon became one of the monastery's most sacred objects. This is partly because there are few surviving objects depicting the Trinity and Rublev seemed to have a unique understanding of it, depicting them in different ways (not God as an old man, or Jesus as a dove).

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Yet, the icon also came to symbolise the idea of a united Russian nation. On the one hand, there is the connection to a saint who many Orthodox Christians in Russia and abroad have icons of in their homes. On the other is a crucial moment in Russia's history, when Moscow and Russia's heartlands participated in a symbolic military triumph. It was the beginning of a period in which Russia liberated itself from Mongol occupation. Following the re-emergence of Russia under its new capital Moscow, *The Life of Saint Sergius* was one of the first official histories published in the country. It was commissioned by the church rather than the new Muscovite state, but not by coincidence. The new Muscovite-led state, which became the most easterly point of Christianity, needed national figures from triumphant historical episodes. The ruling Muscovite family were descendants of Nevsky and the Vladimir princes. Sergius from Rostov Veliky and Sergiev Posad provided the religious connection. Through the lens of history, Moscow was the legitimate political and spiritual heir of Rus'.

The legacy of 1917

After the October coup, the Red Guard and militias seized the Golden Ring rail stations and nationalised the archives. This meant anything in the monasteries of the Golden Ring now belonged to the state, specifically the Bolsheviks. Many frescoes, relics and church artefacts were removed or looted. Overall, they were lucky to end up in the big city galleries. In Suzdal, for instance, the local Cheka took control of Suzdal's Spaso-Efimiyeva Library, and raided the monastery again in 1920. The Ipatiev Monastery in Sergiev Posad was also seized before being turned into a folk and textile museum. Lenin even visited the museum personally. The city changed its name to Sergiev in 1919, and then to Zagorsk in 1930, which it remained until after the USSR's collapse. Kostroma shared a similr fate, witnessing its main cathedral destroyed in 1933 for its connection to the Romanovs. The legendary Fyodorovskaya Icon of the Madonna, one of the most important icons in the Russian Orthodox Church, allegedly carved by the Apostle Luke and carried into Battle by Nevsky, was moved to the Church of the Resurrection on the Debra River; it would be hidden from the public. Vladimir's Golden Gates were turned into a military history museum. It remained so for much of the 20th century. Many more of the Golden Ring's churches and monasteries fell into disrepair, decay or were even demolished. By the 1960s, many were in danger of collapsing.

Since Putin came to power, there have been several conciliatory moves towards the Orthodox Church and White Army.

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Since Putin came to power, there have been several conciliatory moves towards the Orthodox Church and White Army. In 2005, he attended the burial of White Army General Anton Denikin and granted his daughter in Paris Russian citizenship. Then came the gifting back of Saint Isaac's Cathedral in 2017, which sparked huge protests. Whilst sympathies were no longer with the Bolsheviks, they had not yet turned in favour of the other side. This is perhaps reflected in Tretyakov's defiance and the minor public outcry. Despite tightening censorship laws, the legacy of 1917 remains an uncrossable line and social taboo. Yet, the curators argue it needs the right conditions and complained about the damage caused to the Trinity on its last outing.

There is one final consideration when it comes to the proposed moves: local history. Does this icon not belong to the people of Sergiev Posad? Should it not be returned to its rightful place? Regional identities matter in Russia, especially given the controversial nature of its removal. After all, Vladimir, Rostov, Suzdal and Yaroslavl were principalities first, which operated more or less independently. The boost to tourism it would cause is not of any real consequence. What is more, Sergiev Posad might be a small regional town today, but its significance in the Russian story is up there with Kyiv, Vladimir and Moscow.

The Golden Ring cities are inseparable from Russian political and cultural identity. Saint Sergius and Nevsky are national heroes, and these particular artefacts could not be more significant to the Russian nation and state. The state needs the church today as both a unifying force and to provide spiritual justification for the invasion.

That Patriarch Kirill wants this "good endeavour" (referring to their proposed returns) to continue shows that more icons and artefacts will return home – or find new ones. Yet, public outcry is certain to accompany it. The fact that Tretyakov initially defied the state's orders just as the people of St Petersburg did in 2017 is significant. Meaningful and common-sense conversations about national history can still happen in Russia today. For that, we should celebrate. EE

James C. Pearce is a historian at the College of West Anglia and author of *The Use of History in Putin's Russia* (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2020).

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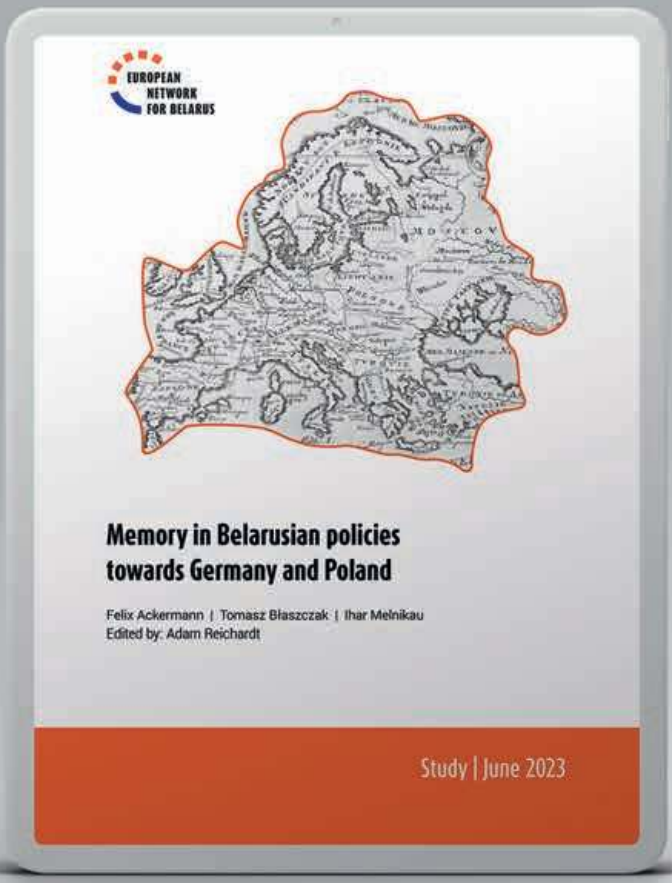
NEW REPORT ON BELARUSIAN MEMORY POLICIES



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

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

The editor of the report is Adam Reichardt (editor in chief of New Eastern Europe).

In this paper, our authors explore the current state of Belarusian historical and memory policies and the role that they play especially in the last several years, including in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The research finds that the current Belarusian historical memory policy is fragmented, incoherent and aimed at supporting the regime. At the same time, Russian influence on Belarusian historical policy has gained significant momentum since 2020 and especially since 2022 – imposing its imperial view of history on Belarus.

Download the full report here:

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