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COVER STORIES Václav Štětka, Adam Balcer, Rastislav Káčer **POLITICS** Paweł Kowal, Marlene Laruelle, Yaroslav Hrytsak **ECONOMY** Oliver Bullough, Jiří Švejcar **CULTURE** Benjamin Cunningham

Ukraine: The Difficult March to Victory

Is the Free Media in Central Europe Under Threat?

ABOUT ASPEN

Aspen Review is a publication in which Aspen Institute Central Europe provides space for a wide range of views on topical issues that resonate in society. Aspen Review publishes on a weekly basis online articles, analyses, interviews, and commentaries by world-renowned and Central European public figures, journalists, scientists and academics.

Aspen Institute Central Europe is a partner of the global Aspen network and serves as an independent platform where political, business, and non-profit leaders, as well as personalities from art, media, sports and science, can interact. The Institute facilitates interdisciplinary, regional cooperation, and supports young leaders in their development. The core of the Institute's activities focuses on leadership seminars, expert meetings, and public conferences, all of which are held in a neutral manner to encourage open debate in three areas:

Leadership Program offers educational and networking projects for outstanding young Central European professionals. Aspen Young Leaders Program brings together emerging and experienced leaders for four days of workshops, debates and networking activities.

Policy Program enables expert discussions that support strategic thinking and an interdisciplinary approach in topics such as digital agenda, cities' development and creative placemaking, art & business, education, as well as transatlantic and Visegrad cooperation.

Public Program aspires to present challenging ideas at public events, such as the Aspen Annual Conference that convenes high-profile guests from all over the world to discuss current affairs, and via Aspen Review Central Europe.

ASPEN Review

Is the Free Media in Central Europe Under Threat?

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Dear Readers,

It is my pleasure to share with you this year's printed edition of Aspen Review, a captivating selection of articles that we've published throughout the year on our website. The articles address some of the most pressing political, cultural and economic challenges facing Central Europe today.

2023 has been a year of elections for Central Europe. Three out of the four Central European countries we operate in (CZ, SK, HU, PL) held elections this year: Slovakia and Poland elected new members to their parliaments, and the Czech Republic elected a new President, Petr Pavel.

As Central Europe undergoes this transition to new leadership, I would like to ask that we, as citizens, renew our commitment to the betterment of this region. I believe we can start here, by considering the questions raised in expert perspectives published in Aspen Review 2023.

In an interview with Małgorzata Nocuń, Paweł Kowal discusses Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Paweł Kowal, a Polish politician and former Deputy Foreign Minister, believes strongly in Ukraine's ability to win, stating that "Putin underestimated Ukrainians and their will to fight." Kowal also emphasizes that Ukraine should not have to fight this war alone: "Western society... should realize that this is also our war." What can we do to support Ukraine and the democratic values it is fighting for?

Aureliusz M. Pędziwol asks Member of the European Parliament Alexandr Vondra about the fate of the Visegrad Group, given the member countries' differing approaches to the war in Ukraine. In the face of complex geopolitical dynamics, how can leaders find common ground in politics, and what happens when they cannot?

Why Science Matters? Pavla Hubálková, a science journalist at Charles University and Alumna of the Aspen Young Leaders Program, argues that scientific data should be at the center of any analysis. Hubálková further emphasizes that data is useless if we cannot make sense of it—thus Czech journalists need to learn how to effectively incorporate scientific data into their writing. One should also ask how we, as media consumers, ensure we are making science-based decisions?

Jiří Švejcar, partner of the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) discusses in an interview with Robert Schuster, Czechia's transition to a green economy. BCG in cooperation with Aspen Institute Central Europe prepared a study on how Czechia should approach the green transformation. Švejcar shares: "The Czech Republic has a unique opportunity to support green sectors and technologies that present a good chance for [the Czech Republic] to become exporters, and thereby increase our GDP." The question remains what we should prioritize as we transition to a green economy.

Benjamin Cunningham, in his article, reflects on two late twentieth century essays by the Czech-French writer Milan Kundera. Entitled "A Kidnapped West: The Tragedy of Central Europe", these essays include Kundera's 1967 speech to the Czechoslovak Union of Writers, and Kundera's 1983 essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe." Cunningham points out that Kundera's perspectives are relevant to engage with today, as he "does not speak or write with a historical outlook of minutes, days or weeks. He is thinking in centuries." And we would like to challenge you to think about what lessons we can learn about engaging in current public affairs by reading the work of historical figures like Kundera.

As you read these articles and others in Aspen Review 2023, I further invite you to continue asking yourself how the authors' points of view connect with your own values and the values Central Europe strives to operate by. We are so grateful for your support of Aspen Institute Central Europe and your willingness to tackle these pressing issues with us.

We hope to see you again at future Aspen Institute Central Europe events. In the meantime, I wish you peace and courage.

Happy reading,

MILAN VAŠINA
Executive Director Aspen Institute CE

The Kundera Epoch

Milan Kundera's death marks the end of an era when Czech writers changed the world

If I had to name one book by Milan Kundera (1929–2023) that everyone should read, it would be his most famous novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Published in 1984 in France, it propelled him to the top of the bestseller lists in Western Europe and the USA and made him a spokesman for Central and Eastern Europe in the most important intellectual debates in the twilight of the Communist era. Like no one else, he was able to make the experience of the inhabitants of the countries colonized by Moscow after the Second World War universal, interesting and comprehensible to readers on both sides of the Iron Curtain. This novel, together with the essay "A Kidnapped West: The Tragedy of Central Europe", published in the *New York Review of Books* that same year, changed perceptions of our part of Europe and made its fate an issue of crucial importance for the future of the whole world.

Kundera was predestined to play a key role in this historical process. Born in Brno, Moravia, he identified with Communism in his youth and dedicated his best books to dissecting his own involvement. This experience made him one of the most penetrating critics of the illusions we succumb to in our private and public lives, no matter when or where we live. "Communism," Kundera said, "was the greatest collective illusion of the 20th century; extreme and therefore uniquely instructive—but not the only one."

Every novel by the Czech writer is an attempt to understand why people, however well intentioned, ultimately bring misfortune on themselves and their fellow human beings; why an innocent joke can turn a person into a public enemy in an instant—whether in the age of the Comintern or the Internet. His characters defend the frontier between private and public life—and generally fail. Each of them clashes with the outside world, which, in the guise of a commissioner, a bureaucrat, a self-appointed guardian of morality, tells them that everything, even who they go to bed with, is political and as such can and even must be of interest to the general public, appearing under the banner of institutions, parties, churches or the media.

"I am a hedonist forced to live in a world politicised beyond all measure." When he said these words, in a conversation with the American writer Philip Roth, he was not just referring to his experiences of living in Communist Czechoslovakia. He never demonized the system there—nor did he idealise Western capitalism. Twice expelled from the party (in 1950 and 1970), he adhered to leftist views throughout his life; during the Prague Spring of 1968, he was one of the proponents of "socialism with a human face" and believed that a third way between the Soviet and capitalist systems was possible. He published his first collections of poems as early as the 1950s; in the following decade he gained recognition as a playwright and prose writer, but real fame came with his 1967 debut novel *The Joke*. Filmed a year later by Jaromil Jireš, it is still regarded today as the best collective portrait of the generation believing that it held the helm of history in the Stalinist era.

The author of *The Joke* did not decide to emigrate after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968. He did not leave the country until seven years later, when he had lost all hope that he would still be able to publish there under his own name or return to lecturing at his alma mater, FAMU, Prague's film school. He settled in France, where he was offered the opportunity to teach literature at the University of Rennes and then in Paris. In France, he wrote two well-received novels, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979) and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), filmed four years later by Philip Kaufman. He also published a collection of essays, *The Art of the Novel* (1986), written, like almost all his subsequent books, in French. By the end of the decade, he was one of the most widely read writers in the world. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* alone has been translated into 44 languages. All his books in total have seen 2,739 editions (by the end of 2021).

I had the honour of attending the grand opening of the Milan Kundera Library in Brno on his 94th birthday, 1 April 2023. I saw all the editions with my own eyes, many of them in languages I could not recognize. The celebration was accompanied by the first reissue of "A Kidnapped West: The Tragedy of Central Europe" in almost 40 years. The Russian aggression against Ukraine brought Kundera's most famous essay out of oblivion and made it relevant and inspiring once again, just as it was at the end of Communism.

May history repeat itself. May Czech writers change the world once again.

ALEKSANDER KACZOROWSKI
Editor in Chief Aspen Review Central Europe

ROBERT SCHUSTER
INTERVIEW

Václav Štětka: Is the Free Media in Central Europe Under Threat?

Without free and pluralistic media, the region will continue to slide further towards authoritarianism, with grave consequences for the future of the entire European Union, says Václav Štětka in an interview with Robert Schuster.

ROBERT SCHUSTER: **Where do you currently see the biggest risks to media freedom in Central Europe?**

VÁCLAV ŠTĚTKA: If we talk about the region as a whole, arguably the most direct threat to media freedom currently stems from illiberal governments attempting to either capture or intimidate independent media, while using their own channels to disseminate propaganda. Hungary and Poland are leading this trend, but there are certainly political actors in other countries who might pose a similar threat if they get to power. After all, we got a taste of that in the Czech Republic when Andrej Babiš was Prime Minister, even if he never went as far as his counterparts in Budapest or Warsaw in attacking the free press. But the pressure exerted during his government, especially on public service media, was a very troublesome sign of where things could go, should

the parliamentary opposition and especially civil society waver in their active defence of Czech Television from political capture.

Media freedom and pluralism has recorded a notable improvement in the Baltic countries over the last decade.

In which countries is the situation most critical? Where have there been shifts and, if so, in what direction?

I guess the answer depends on where we draw the boundaries of Central Europe. Among the Visegrad countries, the situation is obviously the worst in Hungary, and has been for several years now. Directly or through allied oligarchs, Viktor Orbán's government wields control over a significant part of the Hungarian media market—up to 80 percent by some calculations. Poland has been on a downward spiral ever since 2015, and although the independent media camp is comparatively stronger than in Hungary, it is under constant attack from the government, whether by economic means—such as stripping them of state advertising—or by legislative instruments, attempting to force international media owners out of the country. In Slovenia, the ex-PM Janez Janša has recently tried to emulate the Hungarian scenario, but fortunately did not get too far before he was removed from office.

In contrast, media freedom and pluralism has recorded a notable improvement in the Baltic countries over the last decade. In the early 2010s, the political and media landscapes of both Latvia and Lithuania were dominated by oligarchs, and the space for independent journalism was shrinking. Today, Lithuania is ranked seventh on the World Press Freedom Index, maintained by Reporters without Borders, and Latvia is sixteenth. This "Baltic success story" gives us some hope for Central Europe: while we have already learned that democratic transition is, sadly, not a one-way street, the Baltics teach us that neither is democratic backsliding.

What do you consider to be the greater risk: the attempt to take political control of the media or to gain economic control over it? Or, do they go hand in hand?

This depends on the particular context. In countries with a more established democratic tradition and stronger systems of checks-and-balances, the risk of political capture is relatively smaller, and the threats to media freedom and pluralism usually come from the economic powers—especially advertisers or proprietors. In Central and Eastern Europe, where democratic institutions are generally weaker, and the regulatory framework does not provide the media with enough protection, it is much easier for illiberal strongmen like Viktor Orbán, Janez Janša or the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić to assume control over the media, and to make life for independent journalists difficult. Of course, media owners might pose a big risk to media freedom in these countries too, but their power is usually limited to a particular news brand or media house, while political elites can endanger the freedom and pluralism of the entire media system.

Are public electronic media or traditional paper media more at risk?

The future does not look bright for either of those media types. When it comes to traditional paper media, I am afraid they are walking fossils, a species awaiting extinction, which will inevitably come in the very near future. As long as their demise won't be accompanied by the death of journalism as a profession, there is no need to mourn for them. Unfortunately, there are not too many signs indicating that professional, independent journalism could really thrive in the new digital environment, dominated by global platforms. Most newsrooms are struggling with the digital transition, still searching for a sustainable business model that will generate sufficient profit in an oligopolistic digital economy where the rules are set by the likes of Facebook, Google or Amazon (for the Czech Republic, we need to add Seznam to them as well). Of course, there are exceptions, like The New York Times or Financial Times, which have all built an impressive digital subscription base, but these are global brands, capitalizing on the size of their audiences around the world. This is clearly not a model for most European news brands, and even less so for those from Central Europe.

As for the public service media, their survival is threatened by both political and technological developments. Across Europe, they have been targeted by right-wing populists and illiberals for their alleged elitism and liberal orientation, portraying them as being "out of touch" with the people. Under the conditions of the platforms-driven, fragmented communication ecosystem, where information is abundant and highly personalized, it is no wonder that the societal consensus about the need to maintain the institution of public service media—especially one that is funded by a mandatory payment, such as a license fee—is quickly eroding.

I think that safeguarding a meaningful future for public service media and

protecting them from the combined assault of populism, commercial competitors and digital platforms will be one of the biggest challenges for democratic politicians in the nearby future. This is particularly true for Central Europe, where we have already experienced how crucial strong and independent public service media can be as a barrier against authoritarian tendencies—which is precisely why both Orbán and Kaczyński eliminated the independence of public service broadcasters as one of the first steps in their power grab.

This "Baltic success story" gives us some hope for Central Europe.

A year ago, the European Commission put forward draft legislation on media freedom—what are the motives?

I have no reason to suspect that the motives are any different from those officially communicated upon the launch of the Act, namely, to finally obtain an EU-wide, legally binding instrument to protect media freedom and pluralism across the EU. There has been a long history of EU institutions being criticized for not doing enough to safeguard the independence of the media in member states, especially in the new ones, despite freedom of the press being among the core European values. With EMFA, the EU might finally get such an instrument—and thereby add teeth to numerous proclamations that have not been able to make any real difference on the ground. The draft is obviously not perfect, and there is room for improvement, but I believe it deserves a chance. Interestingly, it seems that the public is in favor of stepping up efforts by the EU to protect media freedom—at least based on the results of a poll carried out by the Committee for Editorial Independence in Visegrad countries earlier this year, according to which over 60% of respondents across these four countries agreed that there should be penalties or sanctions imposed by the EU on countries whose governments interfere with media freedom.

There have also been a number of critical reactions on the part of serious newspapers and their publishers, who warn of the risk of restricting freedom of expression...

Yes, there is a strong opposition against EMFA from some Western publishers, especially in Germany and France. For them, the Commission goes too far in prescribing how they should manage their internal affairs, particularly with regards to Article 6 which asserts that media providers should adopt specific measures to safeguard editorial autonomy. However, there are also Western publishers who are backing EMFA, particularly in Scandinavia, and major journalistic associations are in favor of the proposal as well. Generally speaking, the strongest support for EMFA is voiced by media and journalists from Central and Eastern Europe, who see it as pretty much the only chance to defend and foster independent journalism in the region, in the context of rising illiberalism and the weak economic situation of the media, which makes them an easy prey for oligarchs.

The challenge is to convince Western countries that the problems of the media in Central and Eastern Europe are also their problems, because without a free and pluralistic media, the region will continue to slide further towards authoritarianism, with grave consequences for the future of the entire European Union. At the same time, Western media are themselves far from being completely immune to risks to their independence, especially those from ownership pressures. Last year's revelation that the CEO of Axel Springer, Mathias Döpfner, has actively intervened in editorial decisions of the tabloid Bild, to push a particular political agenda before the elections, clearly demonstrates that editorial autonomy can be easily compromised even in the established democracies.

There is also criticism that the planned proposal is too 'soft' towards large internet concerns that could censor/filter content...

The question of whether and how to regulate journalistic content distributed by VLOPs (which refers to "very large online platforms", such as Facebook, Google, X and others) has been one of the most contentious issues within the draft of the EMFA, as it reveals substantially divergent perspectives on media freedom and censorship by different stakeholders, as well as by EU bodies. The Commission's intention, encapsulated by Article 17, was to ensure that VLOPs do not unilaterally and without any previous consultation take down content produced by professional media, if such content is found to contravene their terms and conditions. This is why this article introduces so-called "media exemption", which essentially gives news organizations a privileged position vis-à-vis the VLOPs. In other words, the intention has been to strengthen the media's hand in their dealings with digital platforms. However, by doing that, the draft potentially opens a loophole that might be abused by shady, self-declared "news organizations"

to disseminate disinformation and other harmful content, while leaving it up to VLOPs to decide whether such news producers are legitimate or not. There are also concerns that this provision might give a free reign to the government-controlled broadcasters in Hungary and Poland, which would also receive an automatic exemption as "public service media". So, this particular Article seems like a classic example of a well-intended regulation that might achieve exactly the opposite than what it aims to, simply for failing to secure an adequate mechanism for its implementation.

In Central and Eastern Europe, where democratic institutions are generally weaker, and the regulatory framework does not provide the media with enough protection, it is much easier for illiberal strongmen to assume control over the media.

During the covid pandemic, ideas emerged in some countries, including the Czech Republic, to provide financial support for publishers who were in trouble due to a shortfall in advertising, etc. What do you think of these initiatives?

I think that countries which introduced such programs demonstrated a great deal of sensibility towards the situation of the press, which suffered a sudden and unprecedented decline of revenues throughout the pandemic. In fact, most EU countries supported the media during this period, either by direct subsidies or indirectly, via tax reductions or state advertising.
Of course, in some cases there have been issues around the transparency and fairness of the distribution of such aid. But the very idea of the state offering a hand to the ailing media sector in times of crisis was fully legitimate—after all, most other sectors of the economy have benefited from the same approach, so why not the media? I find it unfortunate that the Czech government decided not to follow the examples from abroad in this regard, not only because it would have helped the media at that particular time, but also because it would have helped to normalize the concept of state support to media, which is somehow still shunned, despite being an established part of the media systems in various other EU countries.

How do you think artificial intelligence (AI) can intervene in the issue of media freedom?

The arrival of AI indeed represents a whole new type of risk for press freedom, and one that we are so far ill-equipped to deal with. Layoffs of journalistic staff, to be replaced by AI, is just one aspect of the problem; the deeper issue is the loss of autonomy in the production of news, which is being outsourced to machines. Already now, news organizations are heavily dependent on digital platforms and tech companies for distribution of content and advertising revenues. With the use of AI, they are giving up another part of their autonomy, arguably the crucial one—the authority to decide how news is written. If the newsroom's control over the use of language is deferred to machine learning models, we can hardly talk about "journalistic freedom" anymore, at least not in the conventional sense of the term. The problem is that under the current economic situation, most media companies are likely to embrace the rise of AI with open arms, because it promises to reduce costs. Some of them are already far ahead on this path—for example, the Australian publisher NewsCorp uses AI to write around 3,000 local news stories per week. However, I think that the media really need to think twice before creating too much of an organizational reliance upon artificial intelligence—they are opening up a Pandora's box, the consequences of which they might not be able to handle.

[1] https://mediafreedompoll.com/

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is a media scholar, since 2016 based at Loughborough University in the UK, where he currently holds the post of Reader in Comparative Political Communication. He previously worked at Masaryk University, Charles University and the University of Oxford. His research interests encompass political communication, the role of media in the rise of populism and polarization, and the relationship between media and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. He is an active contributor to several international research projects and networks, including the Digital News Report (Oxford University) or Media Pluralism Monitor (European University Institute in Florence). He has been member of the Committee for Editorial Independence of the Czech media house Economia since 2019.

ADAM
BALCER

Authoritarianism, Democracy and Central Europe – a Tug-of-war

Within the EU, Central Europe is the arena of the most serious struggle against authoritarian tendencies intertwined with nationalism and Euroscepticism. The outcome of this struggle will determine the future not only of the region, but also of the EU.

Experts, academics, journalists and politicians emphasize that a fundamental challenge for the EU is the rise in support for parties with nationalist, authoritarian and Eurosceptic inclinations. This is occurring in almost all EU countries, but with varying degrees of intensity. Indisputably, Central Europe stands out in terms of the strength of these tendencies. Several years ago, Hungary under Viktor Orbán became the only EU country recognized as an electoral autocracy (by the V-Dem Institute) or a partly free country (by Freedom House). In the January 2023 presidential election in the Czech Republic, Andrej Babiš, leader of the ANO party and a political ally of Orbán—although a soft version of the Hungarian leader—won more than 40% of the vote. According to Freedom House and the V-Dem Institute, after eight years of rule by Law and Justice (PiS), a Eurosceptic and nationalist party, Poland has come close to being relegated to the category of partly free countries and has become the least democratic EU country after Hungary. In autumn 2023, elections were held in Slovakia and Poland, showing that support for parties with authoritarian inclinations continues to be extremely high in both countries (over 35% in Slovakia, around 45% in Poland). The Social Democrats (SMER in Slovakia) and the Liberals (ANO in the Czech Republic), who have almost nothing in common with their partners in the European Parliament, have become regional odd-men-out. They are so peculiar that their removal from the political groups in the EP is seriously considered, especially in the case of SMER. This would mean a repeat of the scenario of Orbán's Fidesz, which left the European People's Party of its own accord.

The growing popularity of anti-democratic groups in Central Europe has been linked to several issues in recent years, e.g. the pandemic, the economic crisis, migration and refugee issue, and Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine.

Authoritarian tendencies make Central European countries stand out with higher levels of corruption in the EU. According to the Corruption Perception Index ranking by Transparency International, Hungary is the most corrupt country in the EU (42 points, 0 meaning full corruption and 100 meaning no corruption). In addition, the country has seen an unprecedented rise in corruption since Fidesz came to power. In Poland, under the PiS government, a similar trend can be observed (the index dropping from 62 to 55 between 2015 and 2022). The level of corruption in the Czech Republic is only slightly lower than in Poland, while in Slovakia it is even worse. Given the political trends, one can expect a significant increase in corruption in Slovakia after the fall elections. The growing popularity of anti-democratic groups in Central Europe has been linked to several issues in recent years, e.g. the pandemic, the economic crisis, migration and refugee issue, and Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, as the example of Hungary shows particularly vividly.

Hungary – a Role Model

The beginning of the authoritarian slide in Central Europe began in 2010 in Hungary, when Viktor Orbán's Fidesz won more than two-thirds of the seats in parliament. The electoral autocracy created by Orbán has become a model for countries all around the world. In 2022, through a hostile takeover of state institutions and mainstream media, anti-Ukrainian rhetoric and amping up fear of war, Orbán crushed the opposition, achieving the best result ever in a parliamentary election (nearly 55%). This result has turned Hungary into an even more authoritarian country and the chances of reversing this trend are very limited. As a result, funds from The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) have been withheld by the EU, like in the case of Poland. Moreover, at the end of 2022 the vast majority of EU countries endorsed freezing of the majority of the EU funds assigned for Hungary. Authoritarian populists all over the world, however, want

to introduce Budapest at home. After the downfall of Communism, no politician from the region achieved the status of an ideological trendsetter on a global scale as Orbán has managed to do. His position was best demonstrated by the rock-star style fete thrown for him by Trump and the Republicans in August 2022 during his US tour.

Poland – Back from the Abyss

After 2010, Orbán became a major source of inspiration for Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice Party, then in opposition. In 2015, Law and Justice candidate Andrzej Duda won the presidential election by a narrow margin. Several months later, PiS won 38% of the vote in the parliamentary elections and for the first time in Poland's history, due to the Left's failure to cross the threshold for a coalition, a single-party government was formed. Kaczyński repeatedly declared that he would like to have Budapest in Warsaw. He encountered, however, much greater opposition than Orbán in Hungary due to socio-cultural conditions (among other things, there are many more large and medium-sized cities in Poland than in Hungary). Consequently, the top result for PiS was slightly less than 45%. During the eight years of PiS rule, Poland has experienced a dismantling of the rule of law and entered into a very sharp dispute with the EU. In addition to withholding the RRF funds due to Warsaw's undermining of EU values, access to other EU funds was placed under great doubt.

Kaczyński repeatedly declared that he would like to have Budapest in Warsaw. He encountered, however, much greater opposition than Orbán in Hungary due to socio-cultural conditions.

As a result, a fierce political debate on Poland's EU membership began on an unprecedented scale before the 2023 vote. In the parliamentary elections taking place on 15 October 2023, the prospect of Poland being transformed during the third term of the Law and Justice party, either ruling alone or in alliance with the even more far-right Confederation, into an electoral autocracy and leaving the EU led to an exceptional mobilization of young people and the middle class. Turnout was the highest in Poland's post-1989 history (close to 75%), resulting in a Pyrrhic victory for PiS. These elections were extremely important because they mean that the democratic backsliding of Poland has been stopped, but the fight against authoritarian and nationalist tendencies is not over. For nearly two years to come, the center and left coalition will be unable to override President Duda's veto. It will govern in a difficult economic situation. PiS will control important state institutions (the Constitutional Tribunal, the National Television and Radio Council, the National Bank of Poland, the Supreme Court, the National Public Prosecutor's Office, etc.) and will be a 'total' opposition—a term that PiS politicians had been using to criticize their rivals. Polarization is the cornerstone of the party's political identity, and once they lose power, they will need conflict even more to maintain the support of its voters; and confrontation with the center-left will be used in order to subdue the Confederation. Poland is also facing an election marathon (local, European and presidential elections from the spring of 2024 until the spring of 2025).

Slovaks are the most pro-Russian nation in the area stretching from Estonia to Bulgaria. More than half see the culprit responsible for the outbreak of the war in Ukraine itself.

Slovakia – the Light Version

Slovakia was the first to experience de-democratization and the construction of a hybrid regime appealing to nationalism under Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar in the 1990s. In 1998, the democratic opposition won the elections and halted the authoritarian drift. Today, Slovakia again faces the threat of a significant weakening of democracy. On 30 September 2023, SMER (23% of the vote), the party of long-time Prime Minister Robert Fico (2006–2010 and 2012–2018), won the elections in Slovakia. Its campaign was based on xenophobia directed at Ukraine, Ukrainian refugees and migrants, especially Muslims; hate speech against liberal media, political opponents and the LGBT community; admiration for Orbán; and a decidedly pro-Russian narrative that is very popular among Slovaks. According to the annual Globsec Trend survey, Slovaks are the most pro-Russian nation in the area stretching from Estonia to Bulgaria. More than half see the culprit responsible for the outbreak of the war in Ukraine itself, since it allegedly oppressed the Russian-speaking part of the population, or in the West which provoked Russia. In contrast, only 40% held Russia responsible for the war. Fico formed a coalition government with the nationalists and the Hlas party, which is a soft version of SMER founded in 2020 by a splinter group. The formation of this coalition means that there will certainly be an end to the serious fight against corruption in Slovakia and some restrictions of media freedom (takeover of public TV and radio). Having said that, Slovakia is a small country belonging to the Eurozone and its economy is strongly interconnected with world markets.

The Fico government will also have only a narrow majority in parliament and may come up against the unpredictability of nationalist party MPs. Moreover, Hlas's relative pragmatism may have a moderating effect on the government. Private media are also strong in Slovakia. A great deal will depend on the outcome of the presidential election (spring 2024). Thus far, Slovaks have twice elected liberal presidents to counterbalance the influence of populists and nationalists.

East Germany and Austria – *Mitteleuropa* Leaning Towards the Far Right

The concept of Central Europe first appeared, not coincidentally, in the German political tradition in the early nineteenth century. The region was historically always very closely linked to German lands. As a result, eastern Germany (from the Elbe) and Austria are often considered part of Central Europe. Today, the future of Central Europe depends to a large extent on the processes taking place in countries, which are worrying to say the least. Since Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, support for the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) has risen in the polls from around 10% to 23%. AfD is a hard Eurosceptic party advocating the dismantling of the EU. AfD enjoys the largest support of around 30–35% in the eastern Länder (excluding Berlin), roughly 2–2.5 times higher than in the western states. Next year will be particularly important for the future of Germany with local elections in Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Thuringia, Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt, and state elections in Saxony, Brandenburg and Thuringia. The Liberals and Greens may not exceed the 5% threshold in these Länder. As a result, forming state governments without the AfD may prove to be an enormous challenge. Success at the Länder level could have a snowball effect favoring a further increase in AfD support and a very good result in the federal elections in fall 2025.

The worst-case scenario for the region is the further anti-European radicalisation of groups with authoritarian inclinations, perceiving the EU as a straitjacket hampering their moves.

Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine has also led to a near-doubling of support for the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria, for which nearly a third of Austrians now want to vote. This rise can be explained by the public mood. A large proportion of Austrians oppose sanctions on Russia and economic aid to Ukraine, and a majority rejects military aid. FPÖ already governs in coalition in three of the nine Austrian states. In fall 2024, FPÖ will most likely win the parliamentary elections and form a coalition with the Christian Democrats, playing a dominant role in it. Should this happen, it is to be expected that Vienna's cooperation with FPÖ allies in Central Europe (Orbán, Fico, Babiš) will intensify.

The EU and the US – the End of Safeguards?

Important factors preventing Central Europe from sliding into authoritarianism are the membership of the region's countries in the EU and NATO, and the transatlantic alliance between Washington and Brussels. Therefore, the worst-case scenario for the region is the further anti-European radicalization of groups with authoritarian inclinations, perceiving the EU as a straitjacket hampering their moves. The idea of leaving the EU, as at least the lesser evil, may become a key element of their political identity built in opposition to liberals and "cultural Marxists". Developments will depend largely on the outcome of the US presidential election in the fall of 2024. A victory by Donald Trump will mean that Orbán, Kaczyński, Fico and Babiš will gain a powerful protector making no secret of his antipathy towards European integration and... democracy. Then, in a worst-case scenario, we can even expect the greatest horror, namely the withdrawing from the EU of some countries in the region. Due to the very strong economic ties between Central Europe and Germany, the largest EU country, this scenario would be a very serious blow to the Union.

ADAM BALCER
Program Director at the College of Eastern Europe and National Researcher at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

ŁUKASZ GRZESICZAK
INTERVIEW

Rastislav Káčer: Elections in Slovakia, or Russian Roulette

"I find it hard to imagine a good, strong, reform-oriented and dynamic government emerging after these elections. But even avoiding disaster will give us reason to rejoice," says Rastislav Káčer, Slovak head of diplomacy from 2022 to 2023 and former ambassador to the United States, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

ŁUKASZ GRZESICZAK: In your opinion, could the unexpected decision of President Zuzana Čaputová, who effectively announced her withdrawal from political life a few months before the early parliamentary elections, affect the outcome of the September voting? Will her decision strengthen anti-system and populist candidates attacking Čaputová herself and the pro-Atlantic liberal democratic values she represents?

RASTISLAV KÁČER: The President's decision did not surprise me, I understand and respect it. I don't think it is meant to strengthen the position of anti-system and populist parties, rather the opposite. It may rally voters who would like to see a candidate representing similar values replacing President Čaputová.

The results of the parliamentary elections will be crucial. If a large number of votes are won by Robert Fico and similar extremists, this will increase the chances of a candidate with values close to President Čaputová. However, in the event that a coalition of democratic parties headed by Progressive Slovakia [Progresívne Slovensko] emerges, it is difficult to predict how much store voters will set in having a candidate similar to the President. I would say that Slovaks do not want to "put all their eggs in one basket".

What we have here is a really different Robert Fico. We have a Fico speaking openly against the values on which the European Union and NATO are built. He is not anti-system. He is a cynical, crude politician who can smash our country to pieces.

Observing the Slovak election campaign, you get the impression that the Slovak elections are being presented in the category of a cultural battle between East and West. And this not for the first time, as it was the case, for example, during the previous parliamentary elections. Are Slovak democratic institutions, checks and balances really so weak? Or is such an argumentation simply a smart and effective electoral tool against Fico-type populists?

You are right. Elections in Slovakia often are of a fatalistic and existential nature (laughter). The fact that this 'fatalism' repeatedly hovers over subsequent elections follows from the immaturity of Slovak society. We have a bad electoral law and a bad law on party financing, and when the legal foundations are badly constructed, mistakes abound throughout the system.

In 1994, the democrats underestimated Vladimír Mečiar, with bad, even fatal consequences. If the 1998 elections (again quite decisive), after which the Dzurinda government was formed, had ended with another four years of Mečiar's rule, Slovakia's fate would have turned out very differently. We would not be in the EU or NATO and we would be a defenceless, vulnerable country.

Today's fatalistic mood is similar to that of 1998. What we have here is a really different Robert Fico. We have a Fico favoring Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orbán, and speaking openly against the values on which the European Union and NATO are built. He is not anti-system. He is a cynical, crude politician who can smash our country to pieces.

He is no longer the populist we knew so well. He used to criticize America, but in fact sucked up to the Americans as much as possible to earn a photo-op from the White House. Today's Fico is different. He is potentially as dangerous a politician as Orbán, to whom,

incidentally, Fico's victory would be very convenient. A coalition led by Fico would not just be a disaster for Slovakia. It would be bad news for the whole of Central Europe, a threat to our European institutions, our alliances and our security.

Robert Fico is open to extremists, talking to them, with the result that the extremists' way of thinking is becoming less and less shocking. This is an insidious tactic, reminiscent of the boiling frog syndrome.

I know that the elections are still a few weeks away, and you are not a seer. Nevertheless, I would like us to try to grapple with possible post-election scenarios. How realistic do you think a SMER and Hlas government is?

Perhaps Fico and Pellegrini—perhaps Fico himself—will need the votes of the Republic's MPs to get a majority. What would their participation in forming a government mean for Slovakia?

It is difficult to predict for the time being. If Fico gets a good result (e.g. 25 per cent) and Hlas performs poorly, there will be increased pressure to put together a SMER–Hlas coalition. They could of course form a coalition without the Republic, with someone else. Hlas is losing support and could get a very small number of votes. Progressive Slovakia may get a good result—in slightly different circumstances I could even imagine them winning the elections. A coalition led by Michal Šimečka could be formed. It would, however, be a complicated mix of several parties with quite diverging agendas.

Fico's coalition poses a huge threat to Slovakia. A much better option would be a coalition without Fico, but this too would be complicated, fragile and incapable of introducing much needed radical changes and reforms. In short, I find it hard to imagine a good, strong, reform-oriented and dynamic government emerging after these elections. But even avoiding disaster will give us reason to rejoice. At the moment, Fico's chances are increasing rather than decreasing.

Let me ask you a cynical question. Earlier, in the case of the SPD in the Czech Republic or Marian Kotleba in Slovakia, there was a demand to cordon off these parties, i.e. not to cooperate with them. Is this a wise idea? Or does it increase these parties' share in the vote?

Should the democrats, with a view to stopping SMER rule, be prepared to cooperate with anyone—including the Republic? An analogous question arises in Poland in the context of possible cooperation between the Confederation and the democratic opposition.

I know of no other country in the EU where a former three-time Prime Minister would so openly spread Russian propaganda. And on top of that, he has gathered a whole team of pro-Russian fake-news spreaders around him.

Arguments about cooperation were once used by Viktor Orbán. He said: "Give me a blank check, don't criticize me for extremist statements, I just want to weaken Jobbik, after all you know I am not an extremist..." This all ended up completely changing the scope of what is acceptable in politics, and Orbán is now a bigger extremist than Jobbik ever was. On top of that, he has a constitutional majority and unlimited power in his country.

Robert Fico is following a similar path. He is open to extremists, talking to them, with the result that the extremists' way of thinking is becoming less and less shocking. This is an insidious tactic, reminiscent of the boiling frog syndrome—it ends in acceptance of all kinds of extremism. Democracy loses its ability to nip extremist thought in the bud. But many are beginning to fall for that. It reminds me of the 1930s. Even state institutions are failing as defenders of the constitution. But this is another complex issue.

Opinion polls (including, for example, the report "GLOBSEC Trends 2023: United We (Still) Stand" show that Slovak society is susceptible to anti-Ukrainian or NATO-hitting propaganda. That being the case, what might the foreign policy of a possible SMER government look like? Is there a real danger of weakening Slovakia's position in NATO or the European Union—or perhaps even withdrawing from them?

The Russian disinformation campaign would not be so successful in Slovakia if it did not have an effective ally in Robert Fico, and if many political leaders (like the former Premier Peter Pellegrini) did not panic and succumb—calculatingly—to the narratives of pro-Russian propaganda. I know of no other country in the EU where a former three-time Prime Minister, according to opinion polls heading the strongest party, would so openly spread Russian propaganda. And on top of that, he has gathered a whole team of pro-Russian fake-news spreaders around him.

Public opinion is not scripture, it can easily be changed. Apart from the intense and carefully targeted Russian campaign, the state of public opinion

is also the result of the cynicism, opportunism and immaturity of the Slovak political elite; and the naivety of many public figures.

Our elites today are failing. They downplay the threat posed by Putin's neo-imperialism. They ignore the danger posed by Orbán's corrupt autocracy with revisionist tendencies—linked to a subservient role to Russia.

If the democratic parties succeed in forming a government, is it possible—given the public mood and the uncertainty about who will replace Čaputová—to maintain the current course of support for Ukraine? Grigorij Mesežnikov, head of the Bratislava Institute of Public Affairs (Inštitút pre verejné otázky, IVO) calculated that the per capita value of Slovak military support for Ukraine is one of the highest in the EU.

I was a member of a government that pursued a good foreign and security policy—despite the fact that it was a rather complicated government, in many ways ineffective and unpopular. It unequivocally kept Slovakia on the right side of history—even at the price of some of our justified decisions not being appreciated. We were the first to break the taboo when it came to the supply of air defence systems. And more recently, we were also the first (along with Poland) to break the taboo regarding the supply of fighter aircraft. We are aware that supporting freedom and territorial integrity is a key issue. We also understand the risks of a possible loss of Ukraine. However, as I said, we have very immature and strategically confused political elites. Some of them are unscrupulous cynics. They know that they intend to steer the country in the wrong direction. They deliberately lie. Robert Fico is one of them. He is not a stupid man, but so cynical and unprincipled that he is sacrificing the entire state for the vision of power and impunity of his associates (many of whom are on trial and some of whom have escaped responsibility as a result of the Attorney General's abuse of power).

If a Fico-led government started pursuing pro-Russian policies and withholding aid to Ukraine, it would have no practical consequences. But it would reflect badly on the EU and NATO consensus. These institutions cannot afford to have another Orbán in their midst. And above all, Slovakia cannot afford to get on the wrong side of history. That would not mean only one own goal but a few. Or simply forfeiting the game. That would be Russian roulette not with one bullet, but with a full magazine.

The country is devastated, their economy in tatters, the state is on its knees even though they're fighting very valiantly and fiercely to say the least. But economically they're just devastated.

Where do you think these anti-Ukrainian and anti-American sentiments of a sizable proportion of Slovaks come from? Next to the Bulgarians, they are regarded as the biggest Russophiles in the EU. In the long term, is this not a threat to the Slovak presence in European and Atlantic structures?

As I have already mentioned, public opinion is not something static, unchangeable. On the contrary. It is just a reflection of what politicians and public figures say and do. And our elites today are failing. They downplay the threat posed by Putin's neo-imperialism. They ignore the danger posed by Orbán's corrupt autocracy with revisionist tendencies—linked to a subservient role to Russia. It is a bad mix.

Of course, an irrational sentiment from as far back as the nineteenth century, when to politicians with a romantic bent the "Russian sturdy folk" seemed a possible ally in the fight against intense Magyarisation, plays a role here. Of similar importance is the erroneous but lingering myth of 'liberation' by the Soviets. The defeat of Fascism followed by a bloody Communist dictatorship can hardly be called liberation. But three successive generations saw it that way.

Poor teaching of recent history, little emphasis on instilling democratic values and mechanisms, brain drain of young and talented people... There are numerous factors at work here. It is bad. And unfortunately this applies not only to Slovaks. We see bad public opinion dynamics in Hungary, Greece, Slovenia and Austria. We are not unique in this... More than 100,000 people came to the pro-Russian demonstration on Wenceslas Square in Prague. Poland and the Baltic states are thinking soberly. The rest of Central Europe, however, is susceptible to manipulation.

RASTISLAV KÁČER
Slovak diplomat and politician. From September 2022 to May 2023, he served as Minister of Foreign Affairs in Eduard Heger's government. Prior to that, he served as Slovak ambassador to the United States, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

AURELIUSZ M. PĘDZIWOL
INTERVIEW

Alexandr Vondra: Russia is no Upper Volta with Nuclear Weapons

MEP Alexandr Vondra is unequivocally in favor of helping Ukraine and its admission to NATO and the European Union, but only when the war is over. He is convinced that the Union will turn to the right after the European Parliament elections in 2024 and his group will become stronger. He also fears that if Donald Trump wins the US presidential election, he may be driven by a desire for revenge, which will affect the policies he pursues.

AURELIUSZ M. PĘDZIWOL: **Four years ago in Wrocław you said: "I was a co-founder of Visegrad, so if someone smashes it, they will have to deal with me." Aren't you afraid that moment is coming?**

ALEXANDR VONDRA: No, I don't think so. I don't remember saying those words, but anyone who has built a house defends themselves when someone wants to tear it down.

What is the point of maintaining the Visegrad Group if Hungary, and soon probably Slovakia as well, is on the opposite side from the Czech Republic and Poland on the most important issue today, the war in Ukraine?

First of all, with Slovakia this is not true for now. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. As far as Hungarian policy towards Russia is concerned, of course I fundamentally disagree with it. Budapest's attitude is the reason why our relations with Hungary have cooled down considerably. This applies to Prague, but also to Warsaw, which does not like Viktor Orbán's stance very much either.

However, this does not mean that we will demolish Visegrad, which survived Vladimír Mečiar, survived Miloš Zeman and Andrej Babiš, and I think will also survive Orbán.

We are united by geography. We are here in Central Europe, and it is always better to talk to each other than to

allow ourselves to be divided against each other. We have paid for this more than once throughout history. Besides, there are a whole range of issues where we have common interests. Western Europe has significantly changed its unreservedly open immigration policy, and a great deal of the credit for this goes to the firm stance of all the Visegrad countries. So we know how to identify areas of common effort.

Let us return to Ukraine. In the Globsec Trends poll, 51 per cent of Slovak respondents blame the West or Ukraine for the outbreak of war. Two-thirds of Slovak respondents believe that arms supplies to Ukraine provoke Russia and expose their country to war. The Czechs gave diametrically opposed answers, almost the same as Lithuanians. But couldn't this change?

We have always had different perspectives on Russia. One important reason is the different experience of the 1968 invasion, which hit society and the intellectual elite much harder in Bohemia than in Slovakia.

After the outbreak of the war, the Czech Republic acted like Poland or Lithuania and started supplying arms to Ukraine while others were still hesitating. Was it the initiative of the government itself or an impulse from NATO or the US?

There was certainly no impulse from NATO or the US, because the Americans were hesitant themselves in those first days. President Biden even seemed to be giving Russia the green light to attack with some of his awkward statements.

In that case, what is behind the Czechs helping Ukraine in this way?

The Czech stance stems from three impulses. The first is the before-mentioned memory of the Russian occupation of 1968 and the subsequent devastation of our country.
The second is the delight of some Czech opinion leaders with the determination of the Ukrainians, headed by President Volodymyr Zelensky, their resolve to defend their freedom and sovereignty from the first minute of this aggressive and unprovoked war. For me, this was absolutely admirable, right and worthy of our support. Twice in their recent history, Czechs did not seize the opportunity to defend themselves, in 1938 and in 1968. If we failed twice, we will succeed now, at least in the sense that we will stand behind Ukraine as strongly as we can.
And the third impulse: leaders who took a very strong and unequivocal stand at the beginning of the war. Like Petr Fiala, who went to Kyiv with Prime Ministers Mateusz Morawiecki and Janez Janša. They were the first major politicians to do this when it was risky and required courage. It was so convincing that it had an impact on public opinion.
The Slovak Prime Minister Eduard Heger at the time, who certainly cannot be lumped together with Robert Fico, also received the proposal to go with them. However, he hesitated and ultimately did not muster the necessary courage. I think he later regretted it.

We have always had different perspectives on Russia. One important reason is the different experience of the 1968 invasion, which hit society and the intellectual elite much harder in Bohemia than in Slovakia.

What scenario of the war do you think is most likely? What are the chances of it ending?

I don't know, I'm not a fortune teller. I think today nobody knows what will happen. It's very good that we stand behind Ukraine, that we help it. Ukraine is going through hard times because its enemy is simply big and strong. Russia is no Upper Volta with nuclear weapons, as it used to be said. Ukraine is in a rough patch, and we politicians are expected to say that we will support it for as long as it takes. There is no other answer.
As an analyst, I would add that Ukraine needs to set itself some achievable and realistic goals. But it is not up to us—now I am speaking again as a politician—to advise Ukraine on what goals to select.

The Czechs have taken in a record number of Ukrainian refugees. Would there still be room for more if a new wave started arriving?

I think there would still be room in our hearts. The question is whether we have the capacity to admit them. Should such a situation arise, we would have to deal with it. If I were to extrapolate from the experience of countries that have been able to absorb large numbers of immigrants, such as Israel, I think some reserves still exist. But it always depends not only on the possibilities, but also on the public mood, on the ability to face it with an open mind and with empathy.
So far the Czechs have been able to do that, but of course society has a right to be tired. It is also a question of resources. More for one person may mean less for another. So there is a lot of explaining to be done here.

Are you in favor of Ukraine joining NATO and the EU?

I am in favor of Ukraine's admission to NATO. But this will only be realistic

when the war is over. Now let's help Ukraine wherever possible. Also militarily, by supplying weapons. However, admission to NATO will only be possible when everyone agrees. The crux of Alliance membership is Article 5. Admission now would mean questions in the parliaments of the member states as to whether their soldiers are prepared to fight for Ukraine. I think that at least a few members, by no means only Hungary, would not be ready for such a debate.

And when it comes to membership in the Union, I think this process will not be easy at all, and there will be very difficult negotiations ahead of us. But I am in favor.

Twice in their recent history, Czechs did not seize the opportunity to defend themselves, in 1938 and in 1968. If we failed twice, we will succeed now, at least in the sense that we will stand behind Ukraine as strongly as we can.

And what will the relations with Russia be like after the war? Will the West go back to business as usual?

Business as usual is out of the question. On the other hand, Russia is where it is and will stay there. Nobody is going to move it anywhere.

It could fall apart.

I don't think it's realistic to hope for what perhaps some in Poland dream of, namely that Russia will break up into separate states. Moreover, that could bring more questions than answers and a whole host of other problems.

Russia will remain an important and influential country. And you will have to talk to it, bearing in mind that this country is capable of ruthlessly pushing its imperial interests.

And how do you assess Polish–Czech relations? I keep hearing that they are great, but I remember the recent dispute over the lignite mine in the border town of Turów. If it wasn't for low prices in Poland, Czechs wouldn't visit their neighbours. How do you see it?

I don't see it badly at all. I think that Czech–Polish relations are actually better than at any time in recent history. And it is not true that Czechs only go to Poland for shopping. This year the Baltic Sea was one of the very popular destinations for Czech tourists, certainly not because of cheap shopping.

Turów is an example of a genuine dispute that has been resolved. This agreement brings a lot of good to the people on our side of the border, new waterworks are being built. In fact, it is an example of how Poles can resolve difficult disputes today.

However, the key thing, that is efforts to help Ukraine, would not have been possible without Poland. Poland deserves great credit and thanks for this.

And what is it like in the European Parliament? Who do you talk to there? With MEPs from your faction, the Law and Justice party, or also with others?

Of course, I work a lot more with Law and Justice, as it is the largest national group in our European Conservatives and Reformists group. We have similar, and sometimes identical, views on many issues. But there are also some where we differ. On economic issues, we are probably more liberal.

For me, Poland is important, which is why I also talk to Poles from the other side, from the Civic Platform. For example, with Radek Sikorski, with whom we are in the Delegation of the European Union to the US.

One thing is constant for us: Poland is a key neighbour. We have to cooperate with all the parties in Poland that want good relations with the Czechs.

The majority of Czechs are against the switch from the koruna to the euro, but many Czech companies have already done so using the existing possibilities. Three of the four parties in the coalition are in favor of the conversion, but your ODS is divided on the issue. And what is your opinion?

That we should not rush. I would wait until the Eurozone has successfully gone through a second crisis, as big as the one a decade ago. Then it will be sensible to discuss it. For now, I consider it premature.

Over the past year, exporters have been pushing to adopt the euro as the koruna has appreciated. But this has now stopped, and in recent weeks the koruna has weakened somewhat.

I don't think it is still such a hot topic. Sweden or Denmark have been quite successful without the euro, so I don't see why the Czech Republic should rush into it.

And the example of Slovakia?

I don't know where the argument comes from that Slovakia is better off than we are. Inflation has nothing to do with the euro, it is rising throughout the West and the East. We lost cheap Russian natural gas and that is why it was higher in our country.

So I don't see any advantage in Slovakia having the euro and us not. Maybe with one exception, that when someone from there visits a eurozone country, they don't have to exchange money.

But he or she is also not afraid that this trip might become more expensive.

But the euro has nothing to do with that. I have no doubt that when the immediate consequences of the energy crisis have passed, the Czech central bank will continue to act decisively and the koruna will remain the stable currency that Czechs trust in. We have always trusted in it. Even under the Bolsheviks, with the exception of the crazy currency reform of 1953, Czechoslovakia did not plunge into an inflationary spiral like Gierek's Poland or Kadar's Hungary.

I therefore see no reason to treat the euro as a geopolitical lifeline to save us. I perfectly understand that this is how the Baltic countries perceive the euro. But I don't see a security factor for us in it.

Next year there will be Euro elections. How much will the Union change after them? In what direction will it go?

I firmly believe that the European Parliament will have a better composition than it has today, which has been the greenest and most left-wing for as long as I can remember. Second, we have perhaps the worst European Commission in history. The Commission has always been an ally of the smaller and medium-sized countries, a guardian of the integrity of the rules of the game, making sure they are respected. The current commission is styling itself as a kind of imperial government that wants to impose its will on others. And this really must stop.

I am counting on the right to grow stronger at the expense of the green left, and I am counting on our group to increase in number, so that we can take third place. So I expect the next European Parliament to be more realistic.

Next year there will also be a presidential election in the US and it looks like it will again be a duel between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. What might this mean for Ukraine, Europe and the Czech Republic if Trump wins?

I don't know. I make no secret of the fact that I have some concerns. I'm somewhat afraid that more than anything else Trump might be driven by a desire for revenge on the American political scene. And when something like that sets the tone for politics, of course it can also have consequences elsewhere.

Finally, a personal question. You were a friend of Václav Havel, his advisor when he was President of Czechoslovakia. But you also served Prime Minister Václav Klaus. How did you manage to reconcile fire and water, Havel and Klaus?

In that crucial period, from 1990 to 1997, when we were seeking to anchor ourselves in NATO and the European Union, when we were debating key democratic and economic reforms, the foundations were well laid. The fact that we had both Havel and Klaus proved to be a blessing for our country. Yes, clearly, it was something of a yin and yang principle. They disliked each other, they competed and disagreed with each other. But they also had so much state-building wisdom in them that they were able to work together in the interests of the country. This was something that, for example, Ukraine did not have the capacity for after the Orange Revolution, when Yushchenko and Tymoshenko waged an internecine war against each other and buried the revolution in ruins.

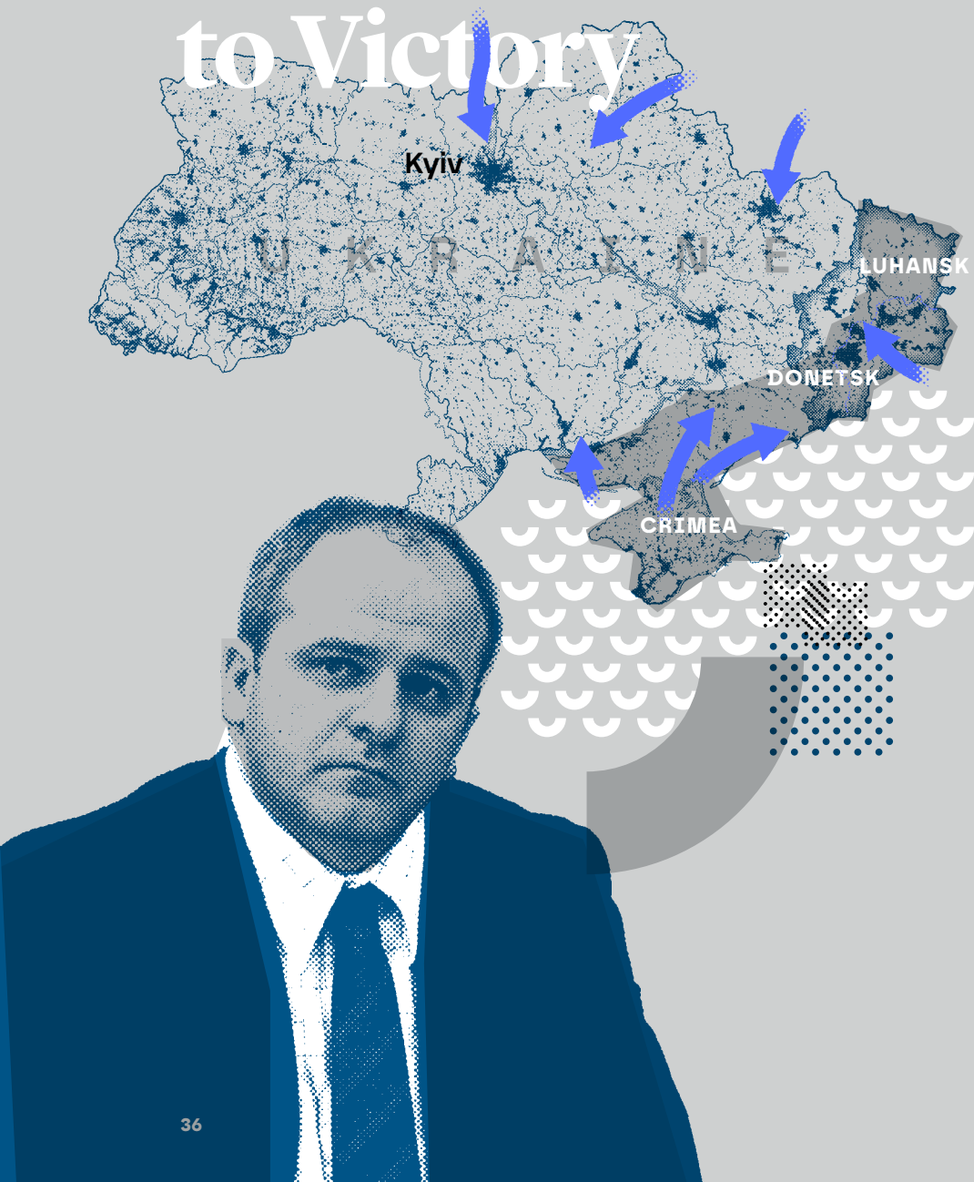
I suspect, however, that Václav Havel was closer to you.

As a person, of course he was. But this is not about hanging out together in a café or a tavern. In democratic politics, people don't choose their buddies. It is the people who vote, and we have to work with those they have elected. This does not mean that we should cave in when they elect a dictator. But despite all the criticism of Václav Klaus, it cannot be said that he was a dictator. He was a free-thinking man who left space for people. He was clearly on the side of freedom and not some kind of dictate.

ALEXANDR VONDRA

signatory and one of the spokespersons of Charter 77, and member of the Polish-Czechoslovak Solidarity, was President Václav Havel's foreign policy adviser (1990–92), deputy head of Czech diplomacy (1992–97), ambassador to Washington (1997–2001), government plenipotentiary for the NATO summit in Prague (2001–2002), Minister of Foreign Affairs (2006–7), European Affairs (2007–9) and Defence (2010–12), and senator (2006–12). Since 2019, he has been a Member of the European Parliament for the Civic Democratic Party ODS, of which he has been Vice-President since January 2020.

Paweł Kowal: Ukraine: the Difficult March to Victory



The prevailing conviction in the West was that President Volodymyr Zelensky would be unable to manage the situation, and the world's political establishment believed that he should be evacuated as soon as possible. Later, American support emerged, even greater than expected, says Paweł Kowal in an interview by Małgorzata Nocuń.

MAŁGORZATA NOCUŃ: **You have been studying Ukraine for many years. You know the political elite there, like few in Poland. Were you surprised by the full-scale war when Russia declared against Kyiv on 24 February 2022?**

PAWEŁ KOWAL: I had believed that war would break out, but I thought it would take a different form. I was of the opinion that there would be a repeat of the 2014 scenario in an expanded version; that Russia would try to make greater territorial gains, but it would be limited to the east of the country. Of course, I did not exclude a large-scale attack. From an analyst's point of view, there were many indications that Putin would go all-in (redeploying troops to the border with Ukraine, replenishing missiles with fuel, etc.). But that was what reason told me, and there were also emotions, saying something quite different. Namely, we as the West have become weary of full-scale war. So I did not believe that we would experience something like that in Europe.

We have even lost the "language of war" in Europe, meaning that Western societies are unable to debate serious threats, such as the use of weapons of mass destruction. All this made me shrink from the thought of a large-scale war. However, if I had been a high-ranking official in a European country, I would have given orders to my subordinates to prepare for war and an influx of immigrants, because the signals of an imminent war were all too numerous.

Do you think that this decision was irrational on the part of Moscow?

Given the rationality that Putin is guided by, this step was justified. Perhaps when deciding to use force against Ukraine he already felt strongly that his position was weakening. And the fact is that as the ratings are falling, the Kremlin uses war as an instrument to help stay in power. So in the Kremlin's calculation, war was a rational move.

It is an intense conflict the likes of which Europe has not seen since the end of World War II, but it is controlled: it is still being fought within the borders of a single state. A certain rationality is therefore preserved in Russia's warfare, although war always

involves danger and can even accidentally spill over into neighboring countries. This is evidenced, for example, by the explosion of an Ukrainian rocket that fell on Polish territory and killed two people.

You have always been a great ambassador for Ukraine—not only in Poland, but also in European corridors of power. You've repeatedly faced accusations and you've heard that pragmatism should rule the day in relations with Kyiv. Don't you think that Western elites—especially in Germany, France, the United States—did not react adequately in the first days of the conflict and even later?
Politicians and analysts like me, guided by marked scepticism and suspicion of Russia's policy, had been present not only in Poland, but in all the countries you mentioned. Outside Poland and Lithuania, however, they did not set the tone of public debate. Their voice gained prominence only after 24 February. At the beginning of the conflict, Zelensky dramatically sought support from anyone. In the first two weeks of the war, a Ukrainian-Polish alliance was born, although the Polish political elite (represented by the Law and Justice party) had not previously pursued an eastward-looking international policy at all. The Ukrainian president could not fully count on anyone.

Later, American support emerged, even greater than expected. Unusual commitment—I would say even of a personal nature—was also shown by Ursula von der Leyen, as well as by the EU institutions. I didn't expect much from Berlin and Paris, but what surprises me most is that the turnaround in German politics still hasn't fully taken hold. After 24 February, it's hard to justify Berlin's policy of getting along 'somehow' with Putin. However, I think everyone already knows that regardless of when this war ends and regardless of who wins it (although there are many indications that it will be Ukraine) Putin will no longer be a legitimate partner for anyone. Today, the policy of "understanding Russia" and dialogue with it seems not only unreasonable, but even completely inadequate.

It also contradicts German politics, which has been famous for its rationality for centuries.
It also contradicts the German tradition regarding relations with Kyiv. Few remember that after the collapse of the Russian Empire, Germany was the first country to recognize the Ukrainian government headed by Pavlo Skoropadskyi. Berlin also recognized Ukraine's borders along with Crimea. So Germany has some very laudable moments in its history of relations with Ukraine. Today they can invoke them. Unfortunately, the transformation of German policy is taking too long and is becoming incomprehensible.

In the first two weeks of the war, a Ukrainian-Polish alliance was born, although the Polish political elite had not previously pursued an eastward-looking international policy at all.

And what do the behind-the-scenes conversations with German politicians look like? Can they somehow justify this behavior?
I have had more than a dozen such meetings in recent months. Behind the scenes, no German has defended Olaf Scholz's policies, both the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats are critical of him. They claim that soon there will be a change in policy toward Moscow and the impression that Berlin is incapable of strategic thinking will be erased. It's just that time is passing, and yet this is not happening.

Emmanuel Macron has also long relied on negotiations and rational talks with Putin.
Yes, for too long he thought it was necessary to maintain contacts with a tyrant who pursued a policy of war crimes. In this way, he legitimized Putin's policies to some extent. The words that were spoken in their bilateral talks don't matter so much. In fact, this dialogue was nothing short of support for the Russian president. France has long regarded Putin as a partner for diplomatic talks. Emmanuel Macron even allowed these talks to be made public. In this context, confidential consultations would be better, they are less ostentatious and do not involve publicly legitimizing Putin's Russia. I believe that neither before 24 February nor today is there any room for talks with Putin, as there is no indication that he is interested in peace negotiations, and similar talks only allow him to prolong his rule.

At lower levels, talks are certainly taking place confidentially between the Kremlin and the West.
Every time they occur, we observe (on the Russian side) an escalation of the conflict. Its intensification—from Moscow's point of view—serves to strengthen the Kremlin's negotiating position, mainly with the United States and the United Kingdom. Putin's goal is to bring the talks to a head as soon as possible, but in such a way that the Ukrainians would be forced into dialogue by the West. Such a solution is the safest for the Russian president. Russia's ruler is in a difficult position: he must fear that he may be removed

from office. The Kremlin's political elite may consider that he is exposing Russia to disintegration, and such a process could bring a post-war crisis.

You have had close contact with Ukrainian political elites. How do you perceive Zelensky?

During the war he has shown that he is a charismatic leader. His charisma lies in speaking, and in a dramatic situation, words become weapons. Like Karol Wojtyła or Ronald Reagan, he bases his leadership on his experience as an actor. What he learned on stage came in handy in building a kind of verbal leadership. Let us emphasize that, after all, at the beginning of the war he had virtually no other means of real action in defence of his country. All he could do was appeal to his citizens and Western leaders to behave in the manner he desired. He certainly passed the test of Weberian-type leadership—that is, charismatic leadership, and let's recall that he had a pretty poor standing, even in his own administration.

Do you get the impression that Zelensky and Ukraine's political elite are moving closer to the West in terms of understanding the state as a common good?

One should be cautious in assessing this situation. At first glance, it seems that this change is taking place, but the best instrument for consolidating it will be the process of accession negotiations. In the course of these, the European Union will be able, in such areas as agriculture and business competition, for example, to introduce solutions that will support the Ukrainian middle class and curtail the influence of the oligarchy. But will the post-war reality be conducive to depleting corruption? After all, war always produces moral degradation, trauma and indifference.

Can you imagine Ukraine without corruption?

I can imagine reducing the influence of oligarchs on the state system, building anti-corruption mechanisms and instruments supporting democracy and the rule of law. I would never say that combating corruption in Ukraine is impossible, instead I think it is very difficult, and on top of that, the war does not make it easier to solve such problems. On the contrary, it may even exacerbate certain pathologies.

You have visited Ukraine during the war. What are your impressions, as a man who has been traveling to the East for many years?

A huge social mobilization took place. I was even struck by the fact that there is no division between the military and the rest of society there. There are trained armed formations at the front, territorial defence units behind it, and a network of volunteers connected to volunteer centers spread across the country. Volunteerism, in turn, is ingrained in the living social fabric: people collecting home-made preserves, preparing camouflage nets for the army, etc. This behavior, with great synergy and mobilization, may even look amazing in the West. It also goes a long way toward explaining why the war is going so badly for the Russians.

We have seen that Ukrainians love their state very much.

Yes, they are able to create props for that state where it fails. This is often very effective. I am thinking, for example, of the defence of Kyiv, or the organization of the frontline I spoke about earlier.

Do you believe in Ukraine's membership in the European Union?

Additional questions should be asked: "when and in what form". If I have to answer the question, "Will Ukraine be in the Union?", my answer is 'yes'. I believe that Ukraine will definitely join the European Community. When? It depends on what form it will take. In this context, it also matters in what direction the European Union will reform.
Do these changes have to be significant? Not necessarily. Perhaps, Ukraine's membership will also be different from the existing membership, a little less advanced. I am an opponent of "an onion Europe", but many people on our continent think this way about the future of the Community—as a Europe of concentric circles with different levels of integration. That is, they think that the Union needs to be expanded, but not necessarily according to the old rules; without extending all the privileges connected with membership to the new countries.
As a member of the Community, Ukraine would probably participate in all its political bodies, but its privileges would be slimmer in the economic sense—it would get, for example, less accession or pre-accession funds. I do not share such a view. So it is important that Ukraine, but also Georgia and Moldova find themselves in the EU, but good terms for this membership are also important.

What can the international political elite of the EU and we, the public, do for Ukraine? How to support this country wisely?

Sanctions should be tightened. In recent weeks, 'sanctions' have unfortunately become a forgotten word. The obstacles to effective sanctions should be vetted. The West will not decide to enter a full-scale war, so it has to make

economic methods of pressure on Russia more effective. Another issue is solidarity, i.e. more arms supplies than have been going to the Ukrainian front so far. So that we can say that Ukrainians are able to realistically defend themselves. Solidarity could also manifest itself in the accession talks we spoke about.
Western society, on the other hand, should realize that this is also our war. This is not only about Ukraine, but also about the West. And where government sanctions don't work, we need to ask ourselves if we should continue to maintain social relationships with Russians who support Putin and live, for example, in Poland or the Czech Republic; we have to think about consumer sanctions and so on. In our private lives, let's do what we expect from our governments, because only such an attitude will allow us to expect more from the political elite.

Western society, on the other hand, should realize that this is also our war. This is not only about Ukraine, but also about the West.

Do you find the use of nuclear weapons by Russia imaginable?
Yes, but the probability of this is low. The use of nuclear weapons 'tactically' is possible, but Putin himself is afraid to do it, he knows that by making this step he will reach for the ultimate argument. Also, people around him are not prepared for such a solution.

Putin has now become hostage to his own obsessions.
He misjudged his own capabilities. He underestimated the Ukrainians and their will to fight. Today, he faces the risk of losing power completely. I don't like psychologizing in politics, so I can only say that he simply made the wrong choice. He was probably shown inaccurate data. He overestimated his leadership abilities, perhaps someone tricked him into thinking he was outstanding.

Will Ukraine come out of this war with any territorial losses?
Today, there are no conditions for any concessions; if someone on the Ukrainian side wanted to make them, they would have trouble holding on to power. I am about 80 percent sure there will be no territorial concessions, especially after the cases of genocide and war crimes in Bucha, Irpin and Mariupol. Ukraine will probably show some negotiating flexibility in the context of Crimea. The peninsula has always had autonomy, so it is important for Ukraine to keep it, but inside Ukraine.

How do you envision Russia, its political elite and society after the war?
The year 1991 comes to mind—the collapse of the Soviet Union entailed the dismemberment and decentralization of the country. Today, Russia is a large and poorly administered country, so individual regions may become more autonomous, based on local leaders (very ambitious) or the mafia. Armed conflicts may start in some of the republics that are part of the Russian Federation (e.g., the North Caucasus). There will be attempts to build independent power structures, perhaps with the involvement of external actors, including three countries with interests in the region: Turkey, China and the United States.

Russia underestimated the risks of this war, and did not properly assess Ukraine's strength and determination.
Professor Andrzej Chwalba wrote a book Imperium korupcji [The Empire of Corruption] about this very problem. Well, the scale of corruption in Russia is so large and has such an enormous impact on public life that it can even cause what psychology calls "cognitive disorder" in government institutions. I also question the current belief in the West that Russia has been infallible and precise in its policies so far. The pathologies were obvious, but no one realized their scale—only the war has shown their full extent. Officials, the government administration, the economy, the military—all are dependent on bribes. Western societies cannot even imagine the scale on which data can be falsified. The "client effect" was also at work: Putin wanted to hear from military analysts that Ukraine was weak, so they told him that it was. All this added up to a colossal cognitive error that led Putin astray and its price will be enormous.

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Marlene Laruelle: "Decolonized Russia"? Be Careful what You Wish for

I don't see any realistic prospects for Russia disintegration/ decolonization nor any genuine wish among the peoples living in the Russian Federation to participate in such a scenario. To put it simply, you cannot decolonize people who do not want to be decolonized!—says Marlene Laruelle in an interview with Jakub Dymek

JAKUB DYMEK: **Since Russia's War against Ukraine broke out in full force on 24 February last year, there's been a lot of talk about it eventually resulting not only in the possible military defeat of Russia, but also the collapse of the Russian state and the fragmentation of its territory. You argue that the western proponents of so-called 'decolonization' of Russia are wrong. Why is that?**

MARLENE LARUELLE: Let's start with saying that there's even no agreement as to what the term 'decolonization' means. And while there is a lot of academic discussion about colonial theory and colonial aspects of Russian history, these academic approaches are often conflated with political discussion about Russia's possible disintegration as a result of the military or political defeat of Putin. And while I'm appreciative of these academic or theoretical discussions, at the same time I want to say to those who think that Russia's collapse will be the answer to all of today's problems that they're wrong. So maybe let's start with decolonizing our view of Russia and focus on real issues here: centralization and decentralization, attitudes in the so-called "ethnic republics" of Russia, the situation in Central Asia and more broadly in the region. It is sometimes difficult in the realities of US discourse where the efforts to diagnose the situation are mixed with strong policy positions on Russia and a kind of wishful thinking: that we need to punish Russia, how Russia's collapse is desirable, is this the long-postponed final chapter in the history of the Soviet Empire and so on...

There is an ideological split in Russian society, there are liberal cities and conservative provinces, but it's by no means an ethnic divide of supposedly anti-western Muscovites and pro-western and liberal ethnic minorities in Russia's provinces.

So let's begin with your thoughts on the latter.

I don't see any realistic prospects for Russia disintegration/decolonization nor any genuine wish among the peoples living in the Russian Federation to participate in such a scenario. On the contrary: memories of the Soviet Union collapse are still quite strong as well as the trauma of the 1990s. What unites different groups of Russian society and members of ethnic minorities among them as well is a sense of a common fate and belonging [in this country]. You can argue that we do not really know how many people would in fact support decolonization—because of propaganda, non-representative opinion polls, etc... Sure. But there's no movement for national sovereignty now like it was for ex-soviet states in the 1990s! There is hardly any empirical proof, however, that there's a multitude of nations that have a strong wish for Russia disintegration and independence of parts of the Russian Federation. So, to put it simply, you cannot decolonize people who do not want to be decolonized! I think many people demand more decentralization within Russia and more sovereignty or actual decision-making power on a local and regional level—and these are genuine concerns. Now on to the second point...

Yes?

There's this narrative in the West saying that things will be easier after Russia breaks up. "We will have partners to talk to", people say. And I don't see why? And why do we essentialize ethnic minorities to the point we think that they're at the core different than other Russian citizens? How are they more liberal, more democratically minded and pro-western than the average Russian? We project this image on them, because we would like them to be more like us. In fact there is an ideological split in Russian society, there are liberal cities and conservative provinces, but it's by no means an ethnic divide of supposedly

anti-western Muscovites and pro-western and liberal ethnic minorities in Russia's provinces.

Putin believed for a long time, maybe 10-15 years, that he could not only integrate with the West, but also influence the neighboring countries in the region by a form of soft power.

And finally: "breaking up Russia" as policy advice. I don't see how this is supposed to 'cure' the problem of Russian imperialism. The Russian Federation is 80% ethnic Russian and let's be clear: these people are not by any means awaiting the collapse and disintegration of their country. On the contrary: you'd have a very revanchist mood, much more revanchist than today. And in many future possible "ethnic republics" there are also Russians—sometimes more than 50%—and that has to be addressed as well. What happens then when Russia is partitioned—civil wars, clashes between armed factions, conflicts over possession of nuclear arsenal, Moscow's increased revanchism, a phobia and will to retake lost territories and recentralize everything? This certainly doesn't sound like an easy solution to the problem of Mr Putin to me.

Ok, let me put forward another argument then. The Soviet Bloc and USSR's collapse eventually produced democratic and prosperous countries—be it Estonia, Poland or Czechia—where there's certainly no nostalgia for the Warsaw Pact and the stability of pre 1989 Eastern Europe. Those very countries are strong advocates for a more powerful NATO, a dynamic EU and military support for Ukraine. Why shouldn't we—someone might ask—root for the same scenario in the case of Russia's eventual collapse?

Poland, Czechoslovakia and even to some extent the Baltic Soviet Republics were much more independent members of the Soviet Bloc so you cannot compare their fate as easily with what happened after the rest of the USSR collapsed and what followed in the 1990s. Furthermore, there was a strong consensus and international support for integrating these countries into the West. And, with the exception of the Baltics, you really cannot point to any other successful examples of post-soviet states. Nobody else but the Baltic States have integrated into NATO and the EU. Ukraine and Moldova have not made any clear move towards a functioning democracy and integration with NATO and the EU until very recently. Neither had Central Asia, the Caucasus or Georgia. So we shouldn't dream and project that what happened in Central Europe is the model for how all possible transitions will go everywhere else. Ukraine's is doing its best today, but even Georgia has faced a lot of backlash, Moldova is even further down the road from EU and NATO, not to speak of other countries. So how we can extrapolate from these examples about territories that had been part of Russian statehood for centuries and have no identity or tradition of independent statehood, and expect it to work? That such new entities will not only be more democratic and peaceful, but also more capable of working constructively and engaging with the West? It's all another bad case of projection.

Why do you think then that these proposals are so popular in the western discourse?

Part of the reason is, I think, that they sound somehow familiar and we like what we already know. And the cliches of Russian collapse bring the Soviet collapse—which we know—to mind, as well as the Cold War logic and rhetoric which is also very easy to understand and familiar to audiences in the West. This is how we're reaching for an easy and accessible framework of thinking about the world.

But there's also another tradition of thinking that has been long embedded in the policy spheres. Russia as a big country is by definition an imperialist country and therefore is by definition bad. We can remedy this by breaking Russia up—this thinking goes—and preventing the cycle of Russian imperialism from going on. This is rooted in thinking about how Russia is doomed to behave imperially and that only weakening it will prevent Russia from doing so. This geopolitical tradition is indeed still strong in some corners of the debate. But let's also remember that so-called decolonization of Russia is not a favored solution among foreign policy decision-makers, nor do they think it's probable or possible.

So do you reject the view of Russia as imperialist at the core?

Yes. I think there's this danger of explaining everything by Russian imperialism. Putin believed for a long time, maybe 10–15 years, that he could not only integrate with the West, but also influence the neighboring countries in the region by a form of soft power. In other words, Russia would be economically prosperous, culturally attractive, a magnet for immigrants and an interesting prospect for global tourism. People and investment would come to Russia for all the different reasons. And this resurgence of imperialism today is I think a sort of "plan B"—after the other scenarios failed. So I wouldn't essentialize the imperial identity of Russia.

That said, there's a colonial mindset towards other nations in Russian society, just as there is in other Western societies...

Like in France, Belgium, the UK and United States?
Yes.

So you agree there's a colonial mindset towards Ukraine?
It's more complicated than that. There's a sort of Russo-centrism in everything. For example, the view of northern Caucasus nations, the notion that we civilized them, brought them culture, education, healthcare and industry—this is a typical European colonial attitude. And there's also this colonial mindset towards so-called ethnic republics—"they don't have any better choice than Russia. Where will they go? China, Iran, Afghanistan?". And now regarding Ukraine. You have this long line of public opinion surveys showing the attitude towards Ukraine as one of "a brotherly nation", but also an independent state. You can say for the Russian population that it was like that for a long time and nobody saw a problem with that. It is different, however, with the ruling elite.

How so?
I don't want to get in Putin's head, but in—let's say—the collective Putin, the elite's imagination, Ukraine became a shorthand for NATO's threat against Russia and all hostile intentions. So, this thinking goes, we have to assure the continuity of the Russia state and preempt this—by either retaking back Ukraine or at least having Ukraine unable to make independent geopolitical alliances. The Russian elite's view of Ukraine is more of a socialist bloc state in the former USSR—it can be an independent state without the ability to have a sovereign foreign policy and with deference to Moscow. And when Ukrainian elites don't want it, it is them who are illegitimate and anti-Russian. However, if you look at surveys, for a very long time the Russian population was not asking for Ukraine to be integrated into Russian territory...

The Russian elite's view of Ukraine is more of a socialist bloc state in the former USSR – it can be an independent state without the ability to have a sovereign foreign policy and with deference to Moscow.

It's a rather mild word for 'occupation', if I dare say.
This is how it's framed in polls in Russia. But even when it's framed this way, it doesn't get much support. So we have to understand this imperialism projected by the elites and the broader attitudes of society, which aren't sold on that.

Let me ask you about a positive argument and policy advice... how does this end?
If we want to see some kind of pacified Russia, there will be a need for some degree of decentralization. And that's exactly the argument I'm trying to bring. There will be no democratization in Russia unless people in regions receive a say in their own affairs.

And if this doesn't happen and Russia's central government finds itself in deep trouble, then what?
Well, Russia has the historical experience of a civil war. And in case of the risk of a state collapse, you'll see the effects of a totally militarized political culture in Russia today—exacerbated by popular mobilization. You have these volunteer groups, tons of mercenaries, beneficiaries of paramilitarization of the Russian state, figures like Prigozhin, etc. I cannot imagine these sorts of people not turning to arms in order to prevent the state from collapsing. Because you have to realize, many of them remember this happening only 30 years before and do not want this to happen once again in their lifetimes. There are also security services and paramiliatries. Let's say that such a hypothetical Russian civil war will not be between—let's say—the Chechens and the Ingush, but...

Russian security agencies are trying to defend their positions of privilege using all means at their disposal?
Yes! I cannot imagine these people dealing with the collapse on the scale of one from 30 years ago any other way. Think also of the mafia state, export of drugs and weapons, refugees. What happens with Kaliningrad? The global cost of managing this will be enormous. People can assure themselves it will be an elevated cost for maybe ten years and then everything will be easier, but even in such a scenario, we should be preparing for this. First and foremost, it will generate costs for Europe—and the difference is that the Europe of today is not ready for the cost of such instability. We have to ask ourselves then—is it worth taking the risks?

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WOJCIECH WOJTASIEWICZ
INTERVIEW

Yaroslav Hrytsak: The War Will Not End Soon

Ukrainians have been linked to Russia by various ties: political, cultural and personal. But that bond is about to end. There will be a final divorce with Russia, says Prof. Yaroslav Hrytsak in an interview with Wojciech Wojtasiewicz.

WOJCIECH WOJTASIEWICZ: **How do you assess the chances of Ukraine winning the war with Russia? When will it likely take place?**

YAROSLAV HRYTSAK: I rate the chances very high. I am convinced of victory. The only issue is the price. It is already very high, and it will probably get even higher. It's difficult for me to predict exactly when the war will end, but it will certainly go on for quite a while.

Will Ukraine manage to regain control of its territory, including Donbas and Crimea? What concessions can Kyiv make to Moscow?

At present, there is no question of any concessions. Neither the authorities nor the public are thinking of any compromise. Even if the President and the government were to consider any agreement with Moscow, they would encounter strong resistance from Ukrainians. Public opinion is taking a very tough stance. It is to be a war to the end, to full victory. It is about restoring the borders not even from 2014, but from 1991. In this regard, I believe that the war will not end soon. The most important thing, however, is not the duration of the war, but its nature. It is very conventional. There

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were expectations that it would be technological, but the conflict is run under the same conventions as World War I and World War II. There may not be as many men on the front lines, but the same tactics and the same strategy apply. The war is fought with artillery and tanks. It is positional, just as it was after 1914 in Western Europe. The forces on both sides of the front are not equal. The Russians have more resources, especially human. This is not a war of attrition,

The most important thing, however, is not the duration of the war, but its nature. It is very conventional. There were expectations that it would be technological, but the conflict is run under the same conventions as World War I and World War II.

but of exhaustion. There will be no final victory in such a war. There will be no victory parade. Kyiv is counting on the collapse of the Kremlin authorities, Putin's regime. Of course, it is difficult to predict when this will happen. Every successful offensive by the Ukrainian army brings us closer to victory and delegitimizes Putin's power. We should not expect a blitzkrieg, but if Kyiv manages to succeed sooner rather than later it will only be cause for joy.

But what if the war is prolonged, war fatigue begins to grow in the West, and supplies of military equipment are curtailed? Won't Volodymyr Zelensky then be forced by Western politicians into some sort of compromise with Moscow?

This is quite possible. Even now some European leaders are most eager to force Zelensky to make concessions to Putin, they just don't talk about it openly. This question will be answered after the Ukrainian offensive, either in the summer or fall, when we can see its results. If it does not turn out to be a success, the Ukrainian President will certainly come under pressure from the West. However, I see no justification for this at present. For now, assurances are being given that Kyiv will be supported for as long as it takes.

When Putin started the war, he was convinced that it would be a blitzkrieg. That was his strategy. He has changed it. Now he wants to prolong it because time is playing in his favor. We might ask what to do to prevent this war from continuing indefinitely. Much depends on the attitude of the West and its willingness to support Ukraine militarily. The Russian army is clearly weak. It can be beaten. If the Ukrainians have enough weapons, we can then talk about a radical change. As I said, the current war is conventional. However, with the supply of Western weapons, the war may transform from a conventional conflict to a technological one. Then there will be a real possibility of ending the war later this year. Zelensky wants to bring victory as soon as possible, but on the battlefield rather than through negotiations.

The current war is conventional. However, with the supply of Western weapons, the war may transform from a conventional conflict to a technological one. Then there will be a real possibility of ending the war later this year.

What does the future hold for Russia?

Will there be a disintegration of the state and its democratization?

I have a friend in Israel, his name is Leonid Nezzlin. He fled Russia. He was Mikhail Khodorkovsky's right-hand man. He told me what the shortest Russian joke is these days. It says: "будущее России" ("the future of Russia"). It simply means that there is no good scenario for Russia. The choice lies between a poor and a catastrophic scenario.

Personally, I don't really believe in the disintegration of Russia. I believe that comparing the possible disintegration of Russia to the collapse of the USSR is unjustified. The collapse of the empire occurred after Mikhail Gorbachev's more than 5-year rule. The current situation in Russia is completely different. It was difficult to expect the dismantling of the USSR after the death of Joseph Stalin, and the same is true after the 20-year rule of Vladimir Putin. Putin has done everything to prevent social movements, including centrifugal ones, from emerging. In 1991, there were strong centrifugal tendencies, and, importantly, it was Russia headed by Boris Yeltsin that began the dismantling of the Soviet Union.

Now centrifugal movements could occur in Tatarstan, Chechnya or Dagestan. But even if these three republics were to leave the Russian Federation, Russia as a whole would survive. Russia's largest colony is Siberia, which is home to the main sources of Russian power, namely gas and oil. Siberia is inhabited by numerous nations, but their leaders have long been abroad. Even if we assumed that Siberia would break away from Russia, which is highly unlikely, the country would still be huge in terms of territory. We should talk not so much about the breakup of Russia, but about its transformation.

What would its transformation consist of?

It is about destroying a system that has deep roots. It is a system of centralized and absolutist power: authoritarian or totalitarian. The ruler and the state are inseparable. This tradition stretches from the days of the Russian Tsarist Empire, through the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union to the present day, with a brief interruption under Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. Power in Russia should undergo such a transformation that it does not remain in the hands of one man.

Personally, I don't really believe in the disintegration of Russia.

One Russian opposition figure said that Russia's problems were so deep that Russia couldn't cope with them alone. Therefore, it must be stripped of its sovereignty in certain aspects. Russia must carry out the necessary reforms under pressure from the West, but also with the participation of Ukrainians. I am convinced that no one is as good an expert on Russia as the Ukrainians, except the Poles. I don't believe the claims about the unique mentality of Russians that cannot be changed. It's nonsense. Every society and country can make a change. Take North and South Korea, or East and West Germany as examples. The most important thing is political transformation. All other changes will follow suit. There must be an independent parliament, judiciary and media. All the things that Ukraine has been trying to establish at home, with more or less success, for the past 20 years.

Has the war influenced the emergence of a new Ukrainian identity? Has there been a unification of the western Ukrainian tradition (the memory of independence after World War I, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army and Stepan Bandera) with the eastern one (strong ties with the Russian world)?

There has been a mobilization of the country, but we can't say that a new identity has emerged. I believe that the current Ukrainian identity is essentially the same as it was before the war. It is often said that the current war created the Ukrainian nation. This is foolish. The Ukrainian nation and a sense of Ukrainian identity existed before, of course in its western, eastern and other versions. Ukrainians voted for independence in a referendum in 1991. Support for independence grew whenever the Russian threat increased, such as during the two Chechen wars, the conflict around Tuzla Island in 2003 and the war in Georgia in 2008. However, it culminated with the Russian annexation of Crimea. Vladimir Putin did not create the Ukrainian identity, but caused its transformation. I believe that over the past years, since the last Maidan and the first phase of Russian aggression, a very strong axis has formed in Ukraine: Lviv-Kyiv-Dnipro. The question has arisen whether this axis can be extended to Kharkiv and Odessa. The latter two cities had a rather shaky status, especially Odessa. I remember very well that when I worked on the staff of the Maidan, the biggest concerns were related to the loyalty of Odessa, which is of strategic importance. The current Russian aggression has put Kharkiv and Odessa on Kyiv's side. I was recently in Odessa. On the one hand, the city is depressing, plunged into darkness due to lack of electricity, on the other hand, it is inspiring, all in yellow and blue. Gazeta Wyborcza's editor-in-chief Adam Michnik once said very aptly that Ukraine's European future would be defined not by Kyiv, but by Kharkiv and Odessa. Now these cities are clearly in favor of the country's European integration. The ambivalence is over.

Since the last Maidan and the first phase of Russian aggression, a very strong axis has formed in Ukraine: Lviv-Kyiv-Dnipro. The question has arisen whether this axis can be extended to Kharkiv and Odessa.

More and more Ukrainians are switching from Russian to Ukrainian. In addition, historical memory is changing. Until now, Stepan Bandera was a controversial figure more strongly dividing Ukrainians than any other person. For some he was a hero, and for others a criminal. Now Bandera has for the first time become the national hero of all Ukraine. I doubt that those who have changed their minds about Bandera have read anything more about him. They simply began to see him as a symbol of resistance to Russia. Of course, Ukraine and Ukrainians have been linked to Russia by various ties: political, cultural and personal. But that bond is about to end. There will be a final divorce with Russia.

You mentioned that many Russian-speaking Ukrainians were switching to Ukrainian. Will this be a lasting trend, or will everything go back to the old ways once the war is over?

I am a historian, I study the past. It's difficult for me to forecast what will happen in the future. Linguistic assimilation is a very long and slow process, taking an average of three generations. I don't know if in terms of speaking Ukrainian we should categorize today's young generation as the first or second. But I believe we are dealing with a steady trend.

Do Ukrainians relate to President Volodymyr Zelensky with equal enthusiasm as in the West one year after the new phase of the war?

I have not seen any sociological studies on Volodymyr Zelensky's standing in the West, but I am very familiar with various surveys on his perception in Ukraine. They show that until the outbreak of the war the President was not very popular. Then the situation changed dramatically. Currently, Zelensky enjoys great trust among Ukrainians. Moreover, for the first time in more than 30 years, most of my compatriots have begun to trust the state. This is a great change. Certainly, one of the factors behind it is that in times of war the nation unites around the state authorities and institutions. However, this attitude of Ukrainians was and is influenced by Zelensky's behavior, especially during the first three days of Russian aggression. The current Zelensky is a completely different Zelensky than before the war. He can be described as Zelensky 2.0. The next question is what will happen to him after the war. We don't know if he will be a good peacetime President or just a wartime one. We will see what Zelensky 3.0 will be like. In my opinion, he will ascend the national pantheon, alongside Taras Shevchenko and Bohdan Khmelnytsky.

Does the opposition still support the current government in the face of Russian aggression?

There is a generational change in Ukrainian politics. All the people around Zelensky are in their forties. They are the ones who will set the tone of Ukrainian politics in the coming years. In such an environment, both Petro Poroshenko and Yulia Tymoshenko look like political dinosaurs. They have no chance of returning to power. Equally important is the fact that the pro-Russian opposition, the groupings that followed the breakup of Viktor Yanukovych's Party of Regions, has completely vanished. Many of its members fled to Russia or the West after February 24. A gap appeared in this part of the political scene. Poroshenko's situation is very complicated. It is not so much Poroshenko attacking Zelensky, but Zelensky attacking Poroshenko, or more precisely his entourage.
With the war over, a danger of being tempted to a new authoritarianism may appear for Ukraine. It will certainly not be a copy of the Yanukovych, Lukashenko or Putin governments. However, Ukraine may return to its old ways. Sometimes you can hear people saying that Kyiv may win the war and lose the peace. The key issue is whether a new political party will emerge that will not so much compete with the Servant of the Nation (Zelensky), but bring some balance to the political scene to prevent a possible return of authoritarianism.

Of course, Ukraine and Ukrainians have been linked to Russia by various ties: political, cultural and personal. But that bond is about to end. There will be a final divorce with Russia.

How do you assess the prospect of accession to the European Union? Will Kyiv's integration path be shortened?

For the past 20 years, Ukraine had been seeking a European perspective, but never received a positive response. It only took two months of war for Brussels to give the green light. War always works that way: it makes previously impossible things possible. What is crucial for me is that Ukraine will receive Marshall Plan-like aid. I hope it will not just be an economic plan, but also a political one. It is about putting pressure on the authorities in Kyiv to carry out the necessary reforms. The Ukrainians are pragmatists and realize that this process will not be easy. The longer the conflict continues, the greater the cost of rebuilding the country. A sizable number of young people who went abroad will not return to Ukraine. Time works against us. If the war continues for many years, most of them will tie their future to other countries. However, if the West allocates substantial resources, many young Ukrainians will return to their home country to help rebuild it. Their asset will be the social capital accumulated in Western countries. They will be able to act as a link between the West and Ukraine. I see this in my students. Those who seek only a comfortable life will stay in the West. The ambitious ones are returning or planning to return. It will be a chance for them to advance socially and politically.

YAROSLAV HRYTSAK
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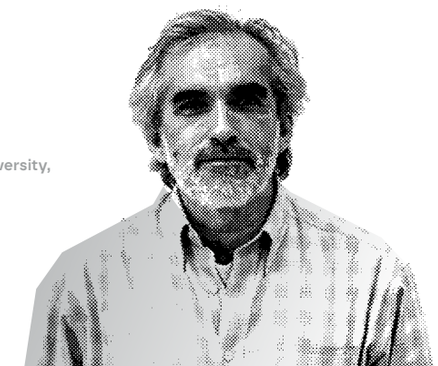

MARCIN
KACZMARSKI

Politics
China
Russia

The New Silk Road in the Shadow of War

While the war in Ukraine has brought China and Russia closer together, deepening the asymmetry between these powers to Moscow's disadvantage, the implications of the conflict for China's flagship initiative, the "Belt and Road", are far more complex.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has presented the authorities in Beijing with a number of dilemmas. On the one hand, China sees the war in terms of a clash between Russia and the West. A possible defeat by Moscow would undermine the narrative, dominant among Chinese elites at least since the 2008–09 global economic crisis, that the West and the United States in particular are in a state of irreversible decline. This must be seen as one of the most important reasons for the extensive Chinese support for Russia.

Politically, China has shown unwavering loyalty, refraining from any criticism and copying the narratives produced by Russian propaganda. Beijing unequivocally placed the blame for the outbreak of the conflict on the United States and NATO. Militarily, the two countries continued joint exercises, although none of them took place in close proximity to the theater of hostilities. Joint bombing and naval patrols were conducted in East Asia, targeting Japan, South Korea and the United States.

Economically, Chinese companies seized the emerging opportunities on the Russian market. Both Chinese energy giants and independent refiners increased their oil purchases from Russian producers, taking advantage of significant discounts. As a result, Russia has once again overtaken Saudi Arabia as China's number one supplier.

Chinese companies have been able to replace their Western counterparts, who have created a vacuum by leaving the Russian market in many sectors. Economic cooperation has also undoubtedly helped to sustain the Russian military effort, as Chinese companies supply a range of so-called dual-use goods. As a result, bilateral trade volumes are likely to surpass the 'magic' $200 billion threshold in 2023, something that seemed unlikely just two years ago. A growing proportion of Russian transactions with the outside world, not only with China, are cleared in Chinese yuan. After decades of delays, rail and road bridges across the Amur River have opened in the Russian Far East.

The authorities in Beijing, in contrast, fear that supporting Moscow too openly could cause serious damage, both undermining China's narrative of neutrality and bringing European countries closer to the United States and thus precipitating the emergence of a common transatlantic policy towards China. The latter factor in particular seems to account for Beijing's lack of open strategic support.

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China has not offered significant financial or economic assistance at the central level. Beijing has not openly chosen to help Moscow bypass Western sanctions. No major investments, mergers or contracts have been announced. Having shut down the Nord Stream pipeline and effectively cut off its European customers from Gazprom's resources, Russia urgently needs a new gas pipeline (even if it will take time to build). Beijing is clearly in no hurry to sign the contract for the "Power of Siberia–2" pipeline, which would lead to China from the Yamal gas sources so far supplying the European market via Mongolia. A deal cannot be ruled out during President Putin's scheduled visit to China in October on the sidelines of the "Belt and Road" summit, although this is unlikely.

Global "Silk Roads"...

While the war in Ukraine has brought China and Russia closer together, deepening the asymmetry between these powers to Moscow's disadvantage, the implications of the conflict for China's flagship initiative, the "Belt and Road" (a modern version of the Silk Road), are far more complex. To understand them better, we need to start by taking a closer look at the different directions this project has evolved into over the past decade.

The shape of China's Belt and Road initiative has remained open-ended since its proclamation in 2013. This allowed the Chinese authorities to adapt the project to the needs of specific audiences, assuring each one of them that a suitable formula for cooperation would be found. As a result, the Belt and Road is now seen as a global project, almost synonymous with Chinese foreign policy, by supporters and opponents alike. For such a concept of the "Belt and Road", Russia's war against Ukraine has minimal consequences, due to the fact that Russia has never been a central element in this global Chinese narrative.

Russia has occupied an ambiguous place in China's Belt and Road project from the very start. On the first unofficial map, published by the Xinhua Agency in 2013, China's overland connection to Europe completely bypassed Russia. The authorities in Beijing quickly backtracked from this undiplomatic gesture and, on subsequent maps promoted by Xinhua, the New Silk Road already led through Russian territory (the original version of the map can now only be found on a few Western blogs). From Moscow's perspective, the Chinese project generated difficult choices. The Russian side did not want to be one of the many cogs in China's megaproject. Most Russian analysts interpreted Xi Jinping's initiative in terms of a direct challenge to Russian influence in Central Asia. However, given the consistently deepening cooperation, Moscow did not want to position itself as an opponent of the New Silk Road.

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A way out of these dilemmas turned out to be the Greater Eurasia concept, promoted by pro-government experts gathered in the Valdai Club and officially proclaimed by Vladimir Putin in 2016. The main role of the concept, which never entered the implementation phase, but is permanently promoted by the Russian government, was to create the impression of equality with China. As the organizer of the Eurasian space, Russia could talk to China on a partner footing. Greater Eurasia was a reflection, but not part, of the Belt and Road initiative. Similarly, Russia promotes the links between the Eurasian Economic Union (EAUG) and the Belt and Road initiative, presenting the two projects as equal, led by two leading Eurasian powers.

The links between Russia's regional political and economic cooperation initiatives and the Belt and Road initiative have limited relevance, however, outside the community of Russian experts and politicians. For the rest of the world, the Belt and Road initiative is a global project, with the largest funding going to countries in East, South and Central Asia. Variants such as the "Digital Silk Road" and the "Polar Silk Road" only deepen the impression of the initiative's globality and move it away from the ongoing war in Ukraine.

The most important practical dimension of Russia's presence in the New Silk Road project is the rail corridor connecting central and western China with Poland and Germany.

...and the "Iron Route" Through Russia

The most important practical dimension of Russia's presence in the New Silk Road project—and one that is rarely recognized outside of the community of experts on logistics—is the rail corridor connecting central and western China with Poland and Germany. Like a large proportion of the projects under the Belt and Road umbrella, the link had already started operating before the New Silk Road idea was proclaimed. The corridor has developed at an astonishing pace, with cargo volumes increasing year on year. Over the short term, the impact of Russian aggression against Ukraine remained minimal. However, over the long term, Russia's role in the corridor is highly questionable.

A year and a half of war has had a limited impact on the China-Europe rail link. After a sharp decline in rail shipping in the first weeks, the link has started to recover. Moreover, according to the Chinese side, further growth was registered in the first half of 2023. One factor favoring this growth is the fact that rail transit through Russia is not covered by Western sanctions. Even before the war, Ukraine was not an important part of the transport corridor. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 thwarted Chinese plans to use the peninsula to build a seaport, and Russia's embargo prevented rail transit through Ukraine. Even Moscow's withdrawal from the latter policy a few years ago did not make transit through Ukraine an important part of the China-Europe connection. In effect, the war has conserved the role of transit via Belarus to Poland.

The long-term outlook, however, is much less clear. The route via Russia was the cheapest and shortest, primarily due to the use of the single customs space within the Eurasian Economic Union. Competing options—via Turkey or Iran—were both less cost-effective and geopolitically riskier. They also required the use of inter-modal transport, i.e. both rail and sea, which further increased costs. The Russian aggression against Ukraine began to change these calculations. The war has accelerated efforts to bypass Russia. The most likely alternative is the so-called Central Corridor, running through Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus and Turkey. Insurance costs, the desire to avoid sanctions or secondary sanctions and the risk of Europe banning transit from Russia make the development of routes bypassing Russia a long-term option. Prolonged conflict and increasing sanctions may reduce the attractiveness of rail transport through Russian territory, especially given the role of the state monopoly, Russian Railways RZD, in controlling the rail route.

The way in which China approaches the subject of individual liberties, data protection, human privacy, and other subjects that present a completely different gravitas in China than in the West, show us how this culture could navigate AI and how it could use it.

China's Growing Role in Central Asia

Such a potential change in the transport corridor would primarily strengthen the position of the two leaders of Central Asia, namely Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan is an essential link in virtually every option for building a rail link between China and Europe. It is also crucial to the development of other infrastructures, such as energy. And Uzbekistan, pursuing a more active policy in the region under Mirziyoyev's leadership, could become a key link for investment in the Central Corridor.

With regard to the countries of the region, China has primarily sought to demonstrate that the "friendly neutrality" it has shown towards Russia—and its complete disregard for Ukraine's interests—is a special case, rather than a new rule for Beijing's behavior in the post-Soviet space. Xi Jinping used visits to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan last year to emphasize Chinese support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of both countries. In 2023, the Chinese side organized a meeting with Central Asian countries in a "1+5" format to send an unambiguous signal that Beijing does not regard the region as a Sino-Russian 'condominium'. The railway line through Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, promoted by China for more than two decades and often resisted by Russia, was supported by Bishkek. Beijing has also renewed its promotion of a fourth Central Asian gas pipeline that would run through Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (undermining the rationale of the "Power of Siberia–2" from Russia).

China has primarily sought to demonstrate that the "friendly neutrality" it has shown towards Russia—and its complete disregard for Ukraine's interests—is a special case, rather than a new rule for Beijing's behavior in the post-Soviet space.

The intensification of Chinese diplomatic efforts in Central Asia does not mean that Beijing will become a regional hegemon. The countries of the region are much more comfortable with limited Russian-Chinese competition than with taking sides. Nevertheless, Moscow's decline in favour of Beijing in Eurasia is yet another manifestation of the deepening Sino-Russian asymmetry, a trend accelerated by the aggression against Ukraine.

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Giorgi Badridze: Georgia Will Do Everything Not to Irritate Russia

"For many years my country was a leader in reforms and getting closer to the West. Now it is trailing behind," says Giorgi Badridze, former ambassador to Turkey and the UK, in an interview with Wojciech Wojtasiewicz.

WOJCIECH WOJTASIEWICZ: **How has the arrival of a huge number of Russian refugees in Georgia in 2022 affected the country's political, social and economic landscape?**

GIORGI BADRIDZE: Life in Georgia has become much more expensive. The prices of necessities and rental housing in major cities, especially in Tbilisi, have increased. Many of my students can't afford to rent a place in the capital after a break of more than two years due to the coronavirus pandemic, when classes were held remotely.

That said, the Georgian government does not call Russians migrants or refugees, but tourists. It compares current numbers with statistics from the best years past, when the number of actual tourists from Russia was the highest. The idea is to show that the number of newcomers from Russia in 2022 has not increased dramatically at all. It's just that in the past Russians came to Georgia for a while, left their money and went home; a few settled permanently in the richer districts of Tbilisi and Batumi. Now Russians do not know when they will be able or willing to return to their homeland. Many of them have no plans to return to their country at all. Comparing the two is therefore completely unwarranted.

How do Georgians relate to newcomers from Russia? Have there been cases of publicly demonstrated dislike?

Many Georgians absorb Russian culture, follow Russian media, watch Western films with Russian dubbing. There is no widespread Russophobia, despite what we have experienced from the Russians in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Just a few incidents have been reported. A Russian in a cab from the airport to downtown Tbilisi told the driver to turn off Ukrainian music. The Georgian drove him to the outskirts of the city and threw him out of the car. However, such incidents have been few, and we are talking about a country where citizens of a country, occupying 20 percent of its territory, come in large numbers.

Why did the Georgian government allow such a large number of Russians to enter the country? It is estimated that 700,000 Russians have arrived in Georgia, and about 100,000 remained. The rest went to Armenia, Turkey and Europe.

The arrival of so many Russians was made possible by the visa-free regime introduced by the previous government to attract foreign tourists. You can stay in Georgia for a year without any permits. The same was true of customs procedures, which were radically simplified. The idea was to strengthen Georgia's position as a transit country. However, circumstances have changed since the war in Ukraine. Today, there are many indications that Georgia may take over Belarus' former role as a country through which Russia seeks to circumvent Western sanctions. This was the case with the first Western sanctions introduced in 2014. Maintaining the previous liberal rules on the borders, including the transport of goods, clearly shows the real intentions of the Georgian Dream government. This is a continuation of the policy of so-called not irritating Russia.

How should this policy be understood?

To get this idea, it is necessary to look at the current political system. In the previous decade, Georgia was classified by most European institutions as a hybrid regime, that is, not fully democratic, but moving toward democracy. It continues to be so defined. However, the country is now moving in the opposite direction. Most of the institutions—parliament, courts, administration—and politicians from the ruling coalition are accountable not to the voters, but to one man, Bidzina Ivanishvili. All these institutions act in his interest.

If my memory serves me well, the grouping of billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili promised to strengthen democracy before coming to power? Moreover, why do you mention the former Prime Minister when he is no longer in Georgian politics?

Yes, Georgian Dream won the elections promising to continue the pro-Western course of the previous administration, to continue the achievements of Mikheil Saakashvili's team and eliminate all the shortcomings, first of all in the areas of rule of law and human rights. But in fact, we are seeing exactly the opposite. All the reforms and projects have been stopped for political reasons, such as the construction of the Anaklia port, which would have definitely strengthened Georgia's geopolitical role as a transportation hub between Europe and Asia. Americans and Europeans stress that Georgia is going backwards in terms of democratic standards. Bidzina Ivanishvili, who was Prime Minister in 2012–2013 and party leader in 2011–2013 and again in 2018–2021, despite officially retiring from Georgian politics for the second time, remains the informal leader of the ruling camp. He is the one pulling all the strings and making key decisions.

Why is Ivanishvili's team acting contrary to its promises?

Because Ivanishvili's goal is to retain power, not to integrate with the West. Ivanishvili stressed that Georgia should not be the subject of a dispute between the West and Russia. This means that it should give up its ambition to be an independent and sovereign country and become a Russian sphere of influence.
If Georgia keeps quiet and vanishes from the international space, Ivanishvili will retain power. By the same token, however, the country will become an easy target for Russia's imperial aspirations. Today, Georgia's biggest problem is that the oligarch's interests are in direct conflict with those of the state. A country that is poor, from which people emigrate for work, is easier and cheaper to control than one with a strong middle class.
In a democratic country, with a strong opposition, independent media, much more resources have to be allocated to win elections and retain power. The economic development of the country is thus at odds with the development of the largest local oligarch's businesses.
All this influenced the Georgian authorities' decision to accept the influx of such huge numbers of Russians.
No other country acts like Georgia. Neighboring Azerbaijan has chosen not to open its borders (they have been closed since the coronavirus pandemic), despite being on good terms with Russia. The arrival of Russians not only results in social and economic problems, but also threatens Georgia's security. It should be recalled that Crimea was taken over by soldiers who appeared there as 'tourists'. However, Ivanishvili considered the influx of so many Russians as less of a risk than opposing Russia, which could threaten his staying in power.

But it was the Georgian Dream government that signed an association and free trade agreement with the European Union in 2014.

That's because the Georgian dream government didn't repeat the mistake of Viktor Yanukovych. The ruling coalition signed agreements with the European Union, but acted exactly the opposite of what their provisions said. Instead of strengthening its economic ties with the West, Georgia intensified its trade with the Russian Federation. And when the window of opportunity opened in 2022 to receive candidate country status, it was unable to meet the basic criteria. At the same time, Georgia has been a leader in reforms and getting closer to the West for many years. Now it is trailing behind. Brussels has officially stated that Tbilisi has failed to meet the criteria for candidate country status. The current government had previously declared that it could not apply for candidate status until 2024 at the earliest, but even that would be too soon with the current political course.

Brussels itself, however, is not very interested in further EU enlargement. The situation is similar with regard to Georgia's presence in NATO. So isn't the obstacle to Tbilisi's path to the West also the geopolitical reality in which Georgia operates?

The geopolitical situation changed with the Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. A transfer window has emerged for Kyiv, Chisinau and Tbilisi. Ukraine and Moldova are official candidates for European Union membership. Georgia has failed.
When I was a diplomat, our Western partners, starting in the 1990s, always prioritized building a strategic partnership with Russia, and ignored Russian aggression against Georgia. It was only in 2014 that they recognized that they had to at least pretend to respond to Russia's aggressive policy toward Ukraine. That was the time when Georgia, instead of seizing the opportunity and standing in a united diplomatic front with Ukraine, decided to shape relations with Russia on its own. Unfortunately, this did not produce any progress. Now, with the onset of a new war in Ukraine, the Georgian Dream government has refused to join Western sanctions.

So has Moldova, and it has been given the status of a candidate country of the European Union.

True, but Moldova is not behaving like an opponent of Ukraine. If we look at the attitude of the Georgian government, we see that it has not voted with the Western community at the UN or other international organizations. It has only occasionally voted in favor of Ukraine. For that, we hear all the time Tbilisi's accusations against Kyiv that it is trying to drag Georgia into the war, which is a lie. Ukraine would not gain much from a Russian military operation in Georgia. Tbilisi would not be able to tie down the larger Russian forces on its territory. In addition, it would need additional support from the West.

The EU is making it clear to the Georgian authorities: if you want candidate status, you must speed up the reforms. But since this is completely at odds with the interests of the country's chief oligarch, the Georgian government is promoting the claim that the West wants to drag Georgia into a war with Russia. And this works for a certain part of the population.

So Georgia has no chance of becoming a candidate country in 2023?

Only if the EU gives up its criteria and standards. Otherwise, there is no chance for the Georgian government to fulfill the conditions.

A not very optimistic future for Georgia emerges from your narrative.

Under the current circumstances, I see no prospects for change. The Georgian Dream government is killing the country's future. It has already weakened Georgia's international position. It has not consolidated democratic institutions—even Armenia has surpassed us in terms of democracy. We have also missed the opportunity to strengthen our role as a transportation hub. Unfortunately, I remain pessimistic about the future of my homeland.

GIORGI BADRIDZE
Lecturer at Tbilisi State University, analyst at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, former Georgian ambassador to Turkey and the United Kingdom. He has been a career diplomat since 1992. He held various positions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia including the Head of the Western European Department (1996–98) and the Director at the Directorate for the Americas (2004–2006). He was also Georgia's Permanent Representative to the International Maritime Organization.

PETRA DZUROVČINOVÁ

What's Wrong with How We Run Public Service? What is the Mission of Public Service?

Aspen Young Leaders Program

As is often the case with the public sector in our region, citizens have very low trust towards the city when providing services.

Among the most impactful books I've read in the past years is Mariana Mazzucato's *Mission Economy*. It takes us back in time to the 1960s and President's John F. Kennedy's speech on taking humans to the moon. It was a great vision for the US and an incredible boost for innovation, research and economic opportunities. At first it was a dream everyone aspired to. There were so many unknowns and dead-end streets along the way, but all the way down to the last janitor, everyone worked towards the mission. Workers were not making bolts, they were putting a man on the moon.

This analogy is a great example on how we can join together to tackle climate change, digital revolution or growing inequalities. These are so-called wicked problems that are not simple to solve, might not even have a straightforward solution and need to be divided into smaller problems tackling specific aspects of the problem.

When the Problem Definition Is Key

It is often said that Albert Einstein would spend 55 minutes defining the problem and 5 minutes coming up with a solution. Starting in the city of Bratislava more than 4 years ago, I quickly learned that public servants are not these evil beings wishing residents a hard time, but are hardworking and caring. However, sometimes they do not understand the complexity of the problem. At the very beginning of our work, we had to define what innovation is for the city of Bratislava and what the most crucial problems are which we can tackle first. As is often the case with the public sector in our region, citizens had very low trust towards the city when providing services. There were some digital systems in place, but they didn't reflect the needs of residents, the opportunities digital offers, it was simply a digital version of the paper process.

The Invisible Work

As with Einstein, we have dedicated a large portion of our efforts to defining problems we are solving for and with residents. We have started with our own problem definition based on quantitative data and the first interviews and observations with residents. My team went to the front office, listened in to what residents asked for and what front office staff needed and missed. Then we came up with the first prototypes that have been tested and improved. This process is not linear, sometimes it is incredibly frustrating to come back to the drawing board, but at the end of the day, the simplest solutions are hardest to achieve. You have to cut down all the unnecessary fluff to keep it important and relevant. Steve Jobs famously said that he wants everything on the iPod to be reached in 3 clicks. That was our mantra, from simple and easy language, to a predictable user journey, to an easy way to reach what you came to do, we have simplified and tested every step of the way.

One of the hardest parts of innovation work is killing your ideas, simple because after some time you fall in love with them. However, you need to razor focus to be able to deliver, implement, evaluate and scale.

Secret Ingredient

One of the key elements of success are people, public servants doing great work. As Eric Ries suggested in his book *The Startup Way*, you can draw benefits in mixing different skill sets in public service. Being able to attract talent and use the spill-over effect of the structured business world or innovative startups, you can bring out of the box solutions to problems challenging administrations today.

Change is not always welcome, since it brings uncertainty and removes the comfortable status quo. We have to challenge the current systems and always ask why and sometimes why not.

Think Big, Start Small

There is no silver bullet solution that will make all your problems disappear. In the mission economy and in innovation practice, you want to fail fast and have multiple ideas ready to be tested. When we started our work on digital services, we spent six months on research and preparing prototypes to be tested. With every round of testing, we have narrowed down the number of prototypes we would develop further. One of the hardest parts of innovation work is killing your ideas, simple because after some time you fall in love with them. However, you need to razor focus to be able to deliver, implement, evaluate and scale. In our digital services work, we knew from early research that residents didn't know and didn't care about which department or agency provides the service, they want consistency and efficiency as they are used to in the private sector.

We have found a need for one umbrella, which we have called Bratislava ID. Before we invested time and money into building a huge service, we mocked the experience with one of our key services—property tax payment. It affects over 210,000 residents, who have to pay the tax every year. Before our intervention, the process was paper based and required residents to visit the post office, pick up an envelope and pay. It was cumbersome and ineffective. We decided to create a safe and simple residents' zone, where residents after validating their identity could see and pay their taxes. This service has been improved year over year and consistently reached a Net Promoter Score of about 90. On top of resident satisfaction, we have also improved payment discipline with over 50% of residents paying within 3 days. As Mike Bloomberg said, in God we trust, everyone else brings data. We have decided to measure and consistently improve on metrics that are relevant to residents (user satisfaction) as well as the city hall (payment discipline).

Defining Success

Digital transformation are big words, but they mean different things to different people. During our ASPEN Young Leaders Program, we spent three hours defining the meaning of the words we use and understanding that we all come from different backgrounds with different life experiences that have shaped our understanding of the world, the same way we can see in the diverse residents of the city.

Our goal was to define the first principles we adhere to and how they are reflected in our everyday work. The principles for us were transparency, working out in the open, being inclusive and resilient.

Engaging residents in the process also increases trust and removes the feeling of despair we can so strongly feel in our society. It is one of the most powerful tools for democracy and debunking myths in the public sphere.

Digital, Resilient and Just City

Looking back it seems straightforward and simple. Change is not always welcome, since it brings uncertainty and removes the comfortable status quo. The majority of our work concentrates on people, technology is often the easier part. We have to challenge the current systems and always ask why and sometimes why not. Any great change requires a holistic approach and connecting the dots. I attend a lot of conferences and sometimes I see this industry blindness. For example, when you look at the World Health Organization's goals on priorities for healthy people, they are the other side of the coin of sustainable and active mobility goals in the city. They both aim at healthier air, more cycling and walking infrastructure, safer cities for pedestrians and children, slower traffic and streets for people. These are complex, but beautiful problems to solve.

The trust we have been able to build over the past few years through our digital services could be scaled to help Bratislava with resident engagement when facing the climate crisis. Bratislava ID could help us engage residents across different demographics, interests and locations and empower them with targeted participatory actions.

Co-creating the Future

Coming back to the Mission Economy, for all this to work you need to have a strong and competent government. You need to have public servants that are equipped with new skills, willing to test and fail and be a good partner and guide to the private sector and researchers. The vision to go to the Moon didn't start with a visionary entrepreneur, but with the President of the strongest nation in the world. It has focused public funding, engaged researchers and private companies to come up with new solutions to problems ahead of them. They failed, worked together and came up with solutions we are still using today.

Engaging residents and other stakeholders in the process also increases trust and removes the feeling of despair we can so strongly feel in our society. It is one of the most powerful tools for democracy and debunking myths that are raging in the public sphere. It requires a systematic approach and long-term commitment. When we are spiralling into despair, it is always good to remind ourselves that we are the richest and happiest of human generations. Taking some inspiration from Hans Rosling's work, it is always good to equip yourself with data and add a human layer to it, so you can explain and educate your stakeholders on the wonderful world we live in.

What does it mean for us? It means daring to imagine a better future, designing policies that would allow for that future to be probed, tested and put to life. As with any concentrated innovation activity, it will attract creative minds and have spillover effects we cannot predict now. Let's start dreaming together with razor focus.

We invite alumni of the Aspen Young Leaders Program to present their projects, thoughts and inspiration in Aspen Review.

1 marianamazzucato.com/books/mission-economy

2 skift.com/2017/02/14/how-airbnb-turned-steve-jobs-three-click-rule-into-design-brilliance/#:~:text=And%2C%20based%20on%20the%20famous,clicks%20away%20from%20a%20booking.

3 www.thestartupway.com/

4 www.gapminder.org/

PETRA DZUROVČINOVÁ
is an experienced strategist, business designer and innovative thinker driving digital transformation in the capital of Slovakia. In her free time, she co-hosts a radio show about cities on Slovak National Radio. Petra is also the founding CEO of the Slovak Alliance for Innovation Economy. She lived in Adelaide, Australia, helping promote science communication and co-organized various TEDx events in Adelaide and Bratislava. She participated in the Aspen Young Leaders Program.

Minka Halász, Anka Sušická: We Need to Make Environmentally Conscious Choices Every Day

Aspen Young Leaders Program

Minka Halász from Hungary and Anka Sušická from the Czech Republic were among the many participants at the Aspen Future Leaders Climate Summit, which took place in March 2023 in Miami, Florida. In conversation with Robert Schuster they expressed appreciation for the opportunity to confront their ideas with other participants with different backgrounds and gain new perspectives or inspiration for their own climate action.

What was the biggest benefit for you from the Future Leaders Climate Summit in Miami?

MINKA HALÁSZ: Despite the ever-rising impacts of the global climate crisis, conveying the seriousness of climate change has proven to be the hardest challenge of all time—something I also have first-hand experience with. At the Summit, I finally experienced what it is like to meet other young professionals with like-minded attitudes and similar mindsets. Meeting young leaders from all around the world and making long-lasting friendships is something I will be forever grateful for. I learned a lot from my peers and I am excited to see what each of them will achieve on local and global levels.

ANKA SUŠICKÁ: I was very hesitant to go to Miami. I wasn't sure if the benefits of the conference would outweigh the emissions caused by flying across the ocean. But in the end, I'm very glad I went. It was a huge benefit for me to meet a lot of young people from all over the world who are involved in different ways—looking for sustainable solutions for business, advocating for the rights of minorities who are more vulnerable to the effects of the climate crisis, joining activist movements or working in environmental research. They have given me a new perspective on many topics but most importantly a strong kick-start to my future engagement.

> **Everybody experiences climate change differently, depending on our homes, our socio-economic backgrounds and our own perspectives.**

What did you take away from it—also for your current profession/social involvement?

MH: The Summit gave me hope. Connecting and collaborating with people who share the same mindset has empowered me to learn, act and teach others to do the same. Ever since the Summit I have been in touch with other future leaders, exchanging knowledge about opportunities, projects and initiatives and I am eager to learn more about their achievements, innovative ideas and solutions from all across the world.

AS: In addition to the contacts, I took away a lot of new ideas for the topics of the lectures I organize at my university. Examples include sustainable finance and architecture. Thanks to the panel on green finance and the importance of not investing in fossil fuels, I learned about the situation in America and got information about who is leading the sector in Europe. At a lecture by the architect Michael Green, I was again introduced for the first time to the concept of using as little material as possible through biomimetics and that the most sustainable buildings are those that are already standing.

Did different views on solving global issues, ecology, and climate appear at the conference? If so, how were they discussed there? Did it end with some kind of consensus?

MH: Many different people with different backgrounds were invited to the Summit. Inevitably, that also meant that everybody had to step

out of their comfort zones and we ended up engaging in discussions that have probably never happened before. Everybody experiences climate change differently, depending on our homes, our socio-economic backgrounds and our own perspectives. One of my favorite experiences at the Summit was a workshop where all the participants were assigned a different role in a climate crisis related problem and we had to reach common ground together. It was interesting to see various perspectives and different visions, every individual had a strong but very different role to play.
For me, the key takeaway was that change can only be achieved when people listen to each other and act through collaboration—even when it does not seem like the easiest path.

AS: Most of the panels during the conference were mainly occupied by people from the corporate world. And most of them also had a very similar rhetoric of people from business trying to document how much they are doing for the climate. Thus, there were no major differences of opinion. Personally, I saw this as a shortcoming of the conference. Populating the panels with people coming up with more radical ideas could have led to broadening horizons not only on both sides of the panel, but also for us in the audience. One of the more interesting discussions was a panel on sustainable transportation, where the moderator, while applauding the efforts of the auto companies to electrify auto-transportation, also noted that the solution that doesn't suck up the supply of precious metals for batteries is to reduce auto-transportation or encourage car-sharing. That would mean less profit for the companies selling the cars, of course, but it would be much more sustainable. These are precisely the points that I think are crucial: if corporations are invited to a climate conference whose only interest is the expansion of their business, but who are directly involved in greenhouse gas emissions, it is appropriate to remind them of this.

What is your position on climate change?

MH: My position on climate change is one of urgency, responsibility, and advocacy for sustainable practices. As an individual, I am committed to making environmentally conscious choices every day and raising awareness in my community—something I am truly passionate about in my career choices as well. As we navigate the challenges posed by climate change, I try to stay optimistic that through collective efforts, innovative solutions, and a shared commitment to preserving our planet, we can pave the way for a more sustainable and secure future for all.

If corporations are invited to a climate conference whose only interest is the expansion of their business, but who are directly involved in greenhouse gas emissions, it is appropriate to remind them of this.

AS: I consider climate change to be the biggest threat of our time because I think it will amplify all the problems we are already facing—social inequalities or the imbalance between the rights of people from the global North and South, as well as the lack of protection of the natural realm. When the effects of the climate crisis start to be felt (as they already are), the first to pay will be those who are on the short end of the stick in the current system. This is why my position on climate is very much linked to the fight against social stratification. I think it is right to boycott companies that do not pay enough attention to the environmental and climate consequences of doing business. I am completely opposed to companies that profit from the extraction of fossil fuels in unsustainable ways or in countries where it is not strictly necessary for the survival of their citizens.

Do you have the impression that politicians sufficiently reflect the views of the young generation, or those who will one day replace them?

MH: I come from a region where my country's politics have historically excluded the voices of young people. I firmly believe that giving a voice to young people starts with providing them with proper education thus giving them the power to act. Every child has a right to learn and take part in the decisions affecting their future. Unfortunately, climate education has faced several challenges in Hungary that have contributed to its limitations leaving little room for comprehensive climate science education. I, however, have hope that young people's voices and the growing recognition of the urgency of climate change may pave the way for a greater emphasis on climate education, creating an opportunity for the younger generation to participate in the decisions affecting them.

AS: I have the impression that politicians do not perceive the climate crisis as fatally as my generation. My perception is that there is an attempt to accommodate the interests of many generations through the electorate, but young people are only a relatively small part of that. Their demands are also usually the most radical, and are therefore also under-represented.

This is a pity, because I think radical solutions are necessary for the situation we are in.

Unfortunately, climate education has faced several challenges in Hungary that have contributed to its limitations leaving little room for comprehensive climate science education.

The Climate Summit was held in Florida, how do you think the venue affected the course of the event? Was the division of society in the United States today somehow reflected there?

MH: Florida is known for its vulnerability to climate change impacts, including rising sea levels, hurricanes, and coastal erosion. I believe that holding a climate summit in a location directly affected by these issues served as a tangible reminder of the urgency of addressing climate change. Participating in various excursions, meeting local communities, stakeholders and decision-makers contributed to understanding the social, political and economic implications of the climate crisis in the United States.

AS: I didn't notice anything major, but many of the Future Leaders attendees were from Florida and I understood that this conference was one of the few places for them to be with people of a similar worldview. Many people were from Florida universities, where Governor Ron DeSantis had initiated changes in education in the spring—such as banning the teaching of theories that claim racism and oppression are inherent in American institutions, or limiting investments in increasing diversity and inclusivity in universities. This was a big issue, just as local political struggles in Miami city government were being addressed.

How do you perceive the current situation in the USA? And compared to that in Europe?

AS: In terms of the climate crisis, the US is clearly more technocratic and uncritically believes in green growth—that we can solve the climate crisis through innovation and market incentives, see the Inflation Reduction Act mentioned countless times at the conference. In contrast, it seems to me that in Europe, the idea of no growth and, above all, savings and regulation is much more popular, which I find more sympathetic. At the same time, I was surprised at how much it is taken for granted in activist circles in America that the climate crisis is also a social and human rights crisis. It seems to me that this aspect is not emphasized so much in the Czech Republic, for example.

Which of the speakers appealed to you the most?

MH: At the Summit, I had the chance to meet hundreds of leaders and climate innovators and I am more than certain that all of them had an impact on who I am today and who I am striving to become. I was excited to listen to speakers whose work I had followed in the previous years and who had served as role models in my personal and professional life. As a young leader, I was equally amazed to meet other young professionals of my age and listen to how they are fighting to reshape our world in all different forms. I could not be more excited to continue working with them!

AS: In addition to those mentioned above, I was also very impressed by Katherine Viner, editor-in-chief of the UK Guardian, who described the ways in which the Guardian is advocating for a responsible approach to climate change. Aside from providing their articles to all, without paywall, and regular climate reporting, for example, the Guardian is not funded by any mining companies. She also described how hopeful climate reporting motivates people to be active and environmentally responsible themselves, which is why the Guardian wants to publish more positive news.

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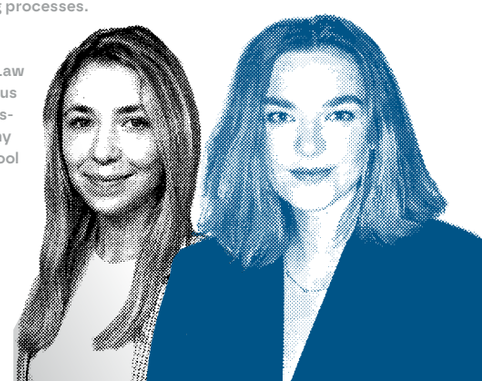
MINKA HALASZ
is a young professional, highly committed to child protection, climate education and migration issues. She holds an LLM degree from Maastricht University and is currently working as a consultant for Deloitte. In 2022, Minka was responsible for organizing UNICEF's first climate education conference for young people in Hungary. She is most interested in the human rights impacts of climate change and youth participation in high-level discussions and policy-making processes.

ANKA SUŠICKÁ
is a third-year bachelor student of PPLE (Politics, Psychology, Law and Economics) at University of Amsterdam. Her academic focus lies in circular economy and degrowth. Furthermore, Anka is passionate about composting and waste management, which is why she spent this summer interning for Kokoza. During her high school years, Anka was an activist in Fridays for Future. She currently leads her university's student office for sustainability.



PAVLA
HUBÁLKOVÁ

Data Over Good Feelings: Why Science Matters

Aspen Young
Leaders Program

When it comes to "science communication to the public", what first comes to mind? Is it entertaining experiments and various curiosities, or something complex and boring that doesn't interest you? Science is all around us and within us, and when communicated effectively, it can be useful and comprehensible. This is crucial because data and scientific knowledge offer solutions to many societal challenges and should be the primary arguments in our decision-making.

When choosing a new phone or washing machine, you'll probably look at what's on offer, compare models, and choose one based on the data available. So why don't we, as individuals or even as a society, use the same method more often? When making decisions about our health, the environment or the economy, we often don't. Science has something to say about all of this—whatever the issue, the chances are that there are scientific studies about it. But the available data usually remains in laboratories or filed away in desk drawers. All too often, we make our decisions based on other factors, such as a gut feeling or public sentiment.

The Missing Bridge Between Science and Practice

We're faced with decisions every day, from choosing to be vaccinated or figuring out our daily finances. It turns out that providing people with expert opinions or well-timed relevant information frequently leads to better decision-making. The research of Julia Chytilová and Michal Bauer, economists from CERGE-EI and the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University, provides simple and practical solutions to many challenges facing societies today. In their study[1] published last year in the prestigious journal *Nature*, they found that, during the pandemic, the public believed that only about half of doctors endorsed vaccines against covid-19. In reality, the figure was around ninety percent! "We showed that simply informing the public of experts' consensus is a simple, inexpensive, and long-lasting way to increase willingness to be vaccinated," the authors explain.

People's distrust of vaccines stemmed from the mistaken assumption that doctors themselves did not trust vaccines. This distortion was probably directly contributed to by the media, which, in their attempt to be objective, provided equal space to extreme opinions without emphasizing their frequency and the majority opinion of experts. It is highly likely that better communication of expert opinions—clearly, in context and with an emphasis on factual information—would also help in other areas. "Scientists are often expected to not only provide knowledge but also its application. We try, but it is hard to find the capacity for it, and sometimes it requires a different set of skills than scientists typically have," says Bauer. According to him, it is important to support specialists who understand science and know how to effectively communicate findings to the general public, as well as politicians or representatives of organizations, to ensure their practical implementation.

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Czech Science Journalists

How many science journalists do you know, and does your favorite media outlet have a separate science section? Science communication does not have a strong tradition in the Czech Republic; there are no opportunities for formal education, and science as a topic does not have a permanent place in many newsrooms. Science, along with culture, is most often found in weekend supplements as a point of interest.

Yet, science should be present across all topics and sections. A prime example is the science editorial office at Czech Television, which has about fifteen members (some only part-time); they prepare roughly two hundred scientific topics for broadcasting each month and publish more than a hundred articles

about science on their website. "Science is all around us, and our goal is to popularize it in various formats and lengths across the news," says Daniel Stach, a popular TV host at Czech TV, who has become a symbol of cutting-edge science communication over the past decade.

The novelty of the field also relates to the term 'science journalist'—how do you recognize one, and what should they know? "In the Czech Republic, a science journalist is anyone who labels themselves as such," aptly summarizes Karolína Poliaková and Tereza Klabíková Rábová from the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University, who approach science communication scientifically. They are involved in the international research project Trust in Science and Science-Related Populism,[2] led by researchers from Harvard and the University of Zurich. Thanks to Czech researchers, an international study mapping people's trust in science in 65 countries will also include data from the Czech Republic. We will find out more next year.

During the summer, these aforementioned researchers also published the preliminary results of the very first study on science journalism in the Czech Republic. They use data to confirm the conclusions we all kind of suspect—that science is not a priority for the media and that there is a lack of specialized journalists. Yet these are key to successful science communication. Writing about science requires knowledge of the context and the specifics of how science works. It is essential to be able to distinguish high quality research from poor research, as well as to have the trust of scientists. In short, you have to have insight and know who to call.

Science communication does not have a strong tradition in the Czech Republic; there are no opportunities for formal education. Science, along with culture, is most often found in weekend supplements as a point of interest.

The shortcomings of (not only) the Czech media have been fully exposed by the covid pandemic. It showed that some journalists do not know how to work with data, recognize relevant experts, or deal with uncertainty. Perhaps for the first time in history, we watched the emergence of scientific knowledge literally live, and could witness the damage done by journalistic shortcuts that yearned for simple and unambiguous results.

In some cases, however, the covid pandemic paradoxically helped science communication. "We were able to react very quickly, we really made the most of the covid pandemic in terms of communication," says Petr Cieslar, who is behind the success of the social media of the Czech Academy of Sciences. On 11 March 2020, the day when schools were first closed, they published the first video lecture from the Science at Home[3] series. And they were surprised by its success! As a result, they conducted over fifty online streams and more than five hundred "Into-the-Classroom" sessions, where scientists enriched online education. They also prepared many quizzes, podcasts, instructions for home experiments, and other materials, bringing science into even more households across the Czech Republic. "But none of this would have been possible if I had not been at the Academy for two years and did not know its environment in detail," emphasizes Cieslar.

We probably did not learn, however, as much about communication from the covid pandemic as we would like to think. "We entered the research with the idea that covid changed everything, and it meant a harvest for science journalism. But the journalists' answers proved us wrong. Due to the pandemic, the media was forced to focus on science, the same is happening now with the war in Ukraine—political scientists, sociologists, or international relations experts are getting a great deal of media space. The same applies to the current hype in the field of artificial intelligence. However, we continue to repeat some of the mistakes from the beginning of the pandemic, such as the inability to combat recurring myths or effectively debunk misinformation," says Poliaková.

Being One Step Ahead

Where can we find inspiration? "We focus on controversial and complex topics that arouse passion or fear," summarizes Fiona Fox, a media expert who founded the first Science Media Centre in the United Kingdom twenty years ago. Today, similar centers exist in Australia, Germany, New Zealand, Taiwan, Kenya and Spain. Their goal, however, is not to popularize science! "I often like to say that we don't do dinosaurs and space, because that's usually well covered in the media. We function more like independent press offices that strive to write about science in context—and as accurately as possible," says Fox, emphasizing that speed is key. "If some breaking news appears in the morning, we have to react as quickly as possible; by the afternoon, it's too late." They therefore keep a close eye on current events and upcoming scientific publications. If they come across a topic with the potential to evoke emotions and make headlines, they reach out to experts from an internal database containing over three thousand contacts. Their responses are then provided to the media to report more accurately and contextually on news from the world of science.

What, according to their experience, is the best defense against disinformation? "Many people call for special campaigns targeted 'against disinformation'. For me, however, the best strategy is to focus on the essence of our work—simply to communicate science effectively in every possible way: be on TV, in newspapers, and also on social media. Become a regular part of life. And let's maintain optimism; even though many disinformation and fallacies spread during covid, science has won. In the UK, eighty percent of people have been vaccinated!" says Fiona Fox with hope.

The shortcomings of Czech media have been fully exposed by the covid pandemic. It showed that some journalists do not know how to work with data, recognize relevant experts, or deal with uncertainty.

"In the United Kingdom, science communication is very well developed, including within the Parliament and among politicians. The Royal Society organizes annual exchange programs for scientists and members of parliament, where politicians have the opportunity to experience the work of top scientists and vice versa. As a result of these experiences, understanding and mutual respect are much higher," says Otakar Fojt, Scientific Attaché of the British Embassy.

The British Parliamentary Office of Science & Technology (POST), for example, publishes regular informative research briefings called "POST Notes"[4] on various scientific topics of interest to policymakers as well as the general public. POST also supports select committees with inquiries, organizes events about research for parliamentarians, provides training about using research and research methods, or participates in international collaborations and outreach activities. POST Notes also freely inspired the Czech Academy of Sciences to publish AVEXs.[5]

Czech Efforts and Ambitions

"Modern society is a very complex 'organism.' The use of the latest scientific findings surprises no one when manufacturing cars, but we should approach lawmaking, compiling public budgets, issuing grant titles, designing social programs, and managing education in the same way. If we do all this based solely on general intuition, simplistic ideological precepts, personal impressions, and public opinion surveys, it's almost certain that things won't end well," warns economist Daniel Münich, who with his colleagues regularly prepares various analyses within the think-tank IDEA[6] at CERGE-EI.

"Interest in our analyses has been gradually increasing in society over the years. The smallest progress I see so far is on the side of the state, represented by politicians and government authorities. The analytical capacities of departments remain extremely weak, and the ability and interest to outsource necessary analyses are also not particularly impressive," says Münich. According to him, "most of the political representation still believes that governing is best done politically, i.e., without any regard to data or impact assessments and the like."

"Considering our limited personnel and financial resources, we primarily focus on topics such as taxes, the labor market, the social system, and aging. However, similar research would also be desperately needed in other areas like healthcare economics, energy economics, environmental economics, and the economics of industrial regulation," Daniel Münich lists, who believes that societal pressure could be the driving force for changes.

So, during the next decision-making, let's ask yourself, your colleagues or policymakers what science knows about it and if you do not understand, ask for better explanations. Let's make the science-based decision the new normal, it will help us.

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1 www.ukforum.cz/en/main-categories/science/8429-czech-study-in-nature-shows-how-to-improve-vaccination-rates

2 projects.iq.harvard.edu/manylabstrustinscience/home

3 www.avcr.cz/cs/pro-verejnost/veda-na-doma/

4 post.parliament.uk/type/postnote/

5 www.avcr.cz/cs/veda-a-vyzkum/avex/

6 idea-en.cerge-ei.cz

PAVLA HUBÁLKOVÁ
is a science journalist at Charles University. She also writes about science for Hospodářské noviny, Aktualne.cz, HROT, Vedavyzkum.cz, Universitas and other media outlets. She shares the latest news about science on Twitter as @PavlaHub. She originally thought she would become a scientist. She studied clinical biochemistry at the University of Chemistry and Technology in Prague and completed her PhD in neuroscience at the Third Faculty of Medicine, Charles University. During her Fulbright internship at Northwestern University in Chicago, however, she discovered that she wanted to work in science communication. She also volunteers at Czexpats in Science—an organization that connects Czech scientists with international experience.

ALEXA
WANDERSEE

Stop Blaming AI. Instead, Embrace it

Artificial intelligence may be a rising threat to information integrity in news, but that threat began long before generative AI at the hands of lazy reporting and sloppy journalism, experts said.

Aspen Institute Central Europe and Aspen Digital collaborated on an event on 26 September 2023 to discuss AI and its impact on news and media. I went into the event–as any eager young reporter would–expecting to hear the worst: all the dangers of AI, robots will one day take our jobs, and the journalism field is doomed. Instead, I left with the opposite impression.

"Whatever role you have as a journalist, AI is going to be in it, so you need to know about it to do your job well," Charlie Beckett, specialist in AI and journalism at the London School of Economics and Political Science, advised.

When the generative AI site ChatGPT launched in November 2022, it opened the world up to hands-on AI use. Because of the buzz around the site, generative AI is commonly thought of as the only form of AI when really, AI is an umbrella term. Various technologies and algorithmic functions–none of which are new to the tech world–exist under this "AI" umbrella; generative AI is just one of the newest functions.

The main threat of generative AI is its inaccuracy. AI has creativity, but this 'creativity' often leads to mis and disinformation. Simply put, it likes to make things up. It is incapable of determining fact from fiction when instructed to generate original content. So while it is scary to see this technology generate disinformation with ease, it's important to acknowledge the plethora of disinformation that already exists in the mediascape without AI's help.

> **The goal in journalism is to work quickly and diligently to tell a story. Truthful reporting, fact checking, and source protection will always be essential criteria.**

"I was quite surprised with how much disinformation was out there, involuntarily spread and produced by humans, by journalists who would get something wrong, feeding into their own confirmation bias," Tanit Koch, a columnist for The New European, revealed.

In this context, the panelists discussed that though generative AI does threaten information integrity to a degree, a pre-existing threat to trustworthy reporting is the fallibility of journalists. AI was created to do what humans do, which would naturally include the ability to make mistakes.

"Yes it's biased, yes it makes mistakes, but journalists do that a lot as well," Beckett admitted.

In terms of mis and disinformation, AI cannot be held solely responsible. As long as democratic systems exist, disinformation cannot be eradicated because it is protected by free speech.

"If you want pluralism, if you want a variety of opinions in society, you cannot use regulation so stringently that the problem of disinformation will go away," Johann Laux, tech expert at the University of Oxford, explained.

After we have accepted that humans make mistakes, AI makes mistakes, and disinformation is here to stay, we can shift the focus to a solution-based discussion.

Historically, journalism has always needed to adapt to advancing technology to maintain relevance. The goal in journalism is to work quickly and diligently to tell a story. Truthful reporting, fact checking, and source protection will always be essential criteria in journalism. The panelists agreed that AI is just the newest innovation to be embraced and utilized for these purposes, rather than feared and vilified.

"As a person dealing with the media, you have an incredible power in checking what the media is doing.

So actually, this makes the industry faster, more savvy about what we do, and more careful and precise in our work," Koch stated.
The panelists highlighted AI's efficiency and cost-effectiveness in optimizing resources. They mentioned several specific functions that aid and expedite research like its archive function, which uses key search instructions to identify and pull archives that would otherwise take journalists months to uncover.
The generative function doubles as a useful rough-draft editor capable of fixing grammatical errors and typos without needing a human editor.
Language models are another new development, which have recently allowed the media to translate news and audio into numerous different languages, reaching a wider audience.

AI gives journalists and media great power, which means great responsibility must follow.

"Suddenly, the world is your marketplace. And suddenly, you don't have to be able to speak languages like English or German to be able to understand English or German journalism," Beckett said.
AI gives journalists and media great power, which means great responsibility must follow.
Regulations ensure this power is being used responsibly so all users can enjoy the technology's various benefits while being protected from its dangers, the panelists agreed.
The regulations are based on ethical AI usage rather than content production. When AI is used responsibly and transparently–as a tool rather than a source–the content produced should be trustworthy.

"Users are less interested in whether the text was AI generated or not. They are more concerned with trust, whether they can trust the information," Michal Pěchouček, Technology Executive Gen Digital and Professor of AI (CVUT), revealed.
Though AI's efficiency and generative abilities may be threatening, journalists can rest assured that the risks now are the same risks as before, just in a new form. And while AI can be weaponized and misused, it can also be utilized by journalists to combat those threats.
Journalists have a responsibility to experiment with various AI functions and familiarize themselves with the technology to effectively combat actors abusing it.
The purpose of AI has always been to efficiently mimic certain human capabilities such as understanding, sensing, reasoning, data processing and decision-making. The fear is that AI will potentially outsmart humans in these areas.

"AI is overcoming human communication capabilities...because AI progressed to language and generative AI. Until recently, AI was analytical...they now analyze and generate," Pěchouček said.
The future of AI remains unknown, and this unpredictability is where the pending threat lies. It presents opportunities for both innovation and abuse.

"The greatest AI danger is the same place as the greatest AI opportunities," Pěchouček concluded.
The fight is not against emerging AI tech; the fight lies in who is best utilizing it. Journalists should continue being held accountable for their own reporting without blaming their mistakes entirely on generative AI.
The technology can benefit journalism if the step is taken to understand and embrace it.

How does that age-old saying go?
Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

ALEXA WANDERSEE
is an American journalist based in Prague, Czech Republic; currently studying for a B.A. in Journalism and Media Studies at Anglo-American University.

Oliver Bullough: Butler Britain

JAKUB DYMEK
INTERVIEW

How the UK Helps Oligarchs and Kleptocrats

The Kremlin is deeply connected to the western financial system, and Russia and its elites were able to spend money and benefit from offshore accounts freely. All of that was done with the help of the people in London—says Oliver Bullough in an interview with Jakub Dymek.

JAKUB DYMEK: You have a line in your interviews and articles that might come as shocking to many people in Poland and Central Europe. "Russia can only afford its war in Ukraine because Britain helped raise the cash"—you've written in "The Guardian", pointing out that the UK is as guilty as anyone in accommodating Russian money. And you're saying that although the West doesn't finance Russia's war any longer, it certainly helped make Russia into what it is.

OLIVER BULLOUGH: Surely nobody but Putin is responsible for the assault on Ukraine—that is his responsibility and his crime. But Putin didn't create the Kremlin system without help and Russia of today isn't some sort of closed and isolated authoritarian regime of the mid twentieth century. The Kremlin is deeply connected to the western financial system, and Russia and its elites were able to spend money and benefit from offshore accounts freely. All of that was done with help.

www.Aspen.Review/article/2023/britain-helps-oligarchs-kleptocrats

Whose help?

People who helped turn thieves into oligarchs and oligarchs into philanthropists and entrepreneurs—those are the people in London. Those are accountants, lawyers, bankers, reputation management professionals and politicians. They've sold their services to anyone that could afford them. And thanks to this industry, people whose only skills were murder and theft gained access to the western financial market and legalized their stolen fortunes. Emboldened, they've built an entire system on foundations of crime, plunder and murder—and this created this kleptocratic, murderous regime that we have today. It of course lays on Putin's conscience, but there's a lot left over for the elite in this country too.

By plugging a kleptokratic system into a democratic system, you end up with a system that gives all rights of ownership and legal protection to people who don't deserve it in the first place, because they're just thieves.

How does that work?

If you're a powerful person in a country where institutions are weak—Russia, Nigeria, Malaysia—you can steal almost anything. In a way this is how the world was run for centuries, for millennia even! Somebody would steal, then somebody else would steal it back. But how offshore money works now and what it offers to kleptocrats and oligarchs is that you can keep your stolen riches somewhere where it is safe and nobody can steal it back. Like London. So you don't have to keep your plunder in, for example, Russia. What we're offering thiefs is the best of both worlds: they get to exploit their power at home while enjoying the rule of law overseas. By plugging a kleptokratic system into a democratic system, you end up with a system that gives all rights of ownership and legal protection to people who don't deserve it in the first place, because they're just thieves.

Why then are people mostly mad at the German and French when it comes to "aiding and abetting" Russia and never the UK?

It's a really good question. Partly it is because—unlike for example in Germany—UK politicians have been outspoken in their criticism of Russia for a long time.

Yet taking Russian money.

That's the clever part! There have always been two foreign policies. One was to be an outspoken member of NATO and to always criticize Putin during international meetings. But simultaneously, with the other hand, taking the money. The justification for taking the money always was like this—by integrating Russian money into the global economy, we're educating them, helping them understand how business works. Essentially: we're domesticating them, those savage Russians. And maybe in the 1990s it was forgivable to think that. "Yes, they need a few more years to learn how to really run their businesses in a western way". But we should've realized 25 years ago—if not more—that this was wishful thinking.

You admit in "Moneyland" to believing these fictions yourself at one point.

In my defense—I was a kid. Look, for example, Poland also had its troubles and difficulties in transition to democracy, but is now a full member in the club of western countries. Everybody at some point believed that what happened in Poland, Czech Republic or the Baltics was going to happen everywhere else in the post-soviet sphere. That was naivete coming out of optimism. That didn't happen of course. But there also were many people who were 'naive' long after it was sensible, not out of excess optimism, but because it was profitable for them. They were saying how trying a more free market and more business integration with Russia just a little longer is the way to go. And not even the murder of Alexander Litvinenko, poisoned with perhaps the most dangerous substance known to humans, while in the UK as a refugee, changed their minds. And many other episodes didn't change their minds either. And yet in 2010 David Cameron went to Moscow trying to attract more money and more Russian business to London. Nothing was enough to cure the City's elite of their very profitable belief in the future of Russia.

This was a bipartisan effort, so to speak, in the UK?

Yes, all governments to some extent believed it was their duty to support the City of London and believed that this is "free money". It is only recently that many politicians finally realized there is a price tag attached to it. But, on the other hand, there's also a cross-party campaign to at least curtail some of the privacy this money enjoys. It's depressing though that for such a long time members of both parties supported this system for so long, but it is also hopeful that this didn't become only a partisan issue and there's now a popular recognition that fighting this form of corruption is something everybody can get behind. Including politicians from all parties. We can see this as a glass half full.

Can you explain to our readers, why it's Britain—and not for example France or Luxembourg or Spain—that became such a hospitable place for offshore money?
Britain was uniquely positioned to become a capital of offshore money, because it was also the capital of an empire. When the British Empire collapsed, all the links that had existed between the center and the periphery remained in place: economic, personal, business, financial links. And in a way Britain needed a new way of making money. So the elites looked to their contacts, used their skills and found a new business model—maybe not as profitable, but still profitable enough. Instead of stealing money, we'll help others steal money, show them how to do it efficiently, and help them move their fortunes. What's shocking about so many oligarchs globally is that they've stolen from their countries, brought it to London and then moved to houses which previously were also occupied by the colonial elites who robbed their countries before them! The oligarchs, using the services of butler-Britain, are in many ways behaving in the very same way as the British colonial administrators used to.

How many steps does it take to transform yourself from a foreign barbaric oligarch into a respected philanthropist or a member of the House of Lords?
[laughter] We don't have so many Russian oligarchs in the House of Lords. There's Evgeny Lebedev, who is quite unique. He is British-born, because his father was KGB head in London in the embassy. But, broadly speaking, there's surprisingly few steps between stealing a fortune overseas and becoming a member of the British establishment—you buy a house, establish a charitable foundation, give some money to a university or two, throw parties, maybe give some donations and... you're done. Five, six, seven years—it's easily possible.
There's a whole industry of people who work to accommodate oligarchs here. To show them around, to help them integrate into the establishment. This is surprisingly easy to pull off, provided you can afford it.

Can't such an industry be banned?
No, I don't think so. It can be discouraged though. But we have a huge financial center in our country. Not only banking, finance and legal services. There are private jets and private yachts, elite mansions and designers, art galleries—if you want something, you can buy it. If there's money, everything is available. And the problem is not that it is illegal. Mostly, it's all legal! The problem is the money isn't. And that's the difficult bit. And there's no investigation into the origin of that money...

...how to change that?
We need huge investment in police agencies. Which is not happening. Without that—there's no way for it to stop. Not without cutting Britain away from the world—and that is not going to happen.

Is this the reason you say it is somehow unfair to call Russia or Ukraine "corrupt states" without naming the countries that help in hiding the stolen wealth?
Yes. The way we talk about corruption—that Ukraine, Argentina or Nigeria is corrupt—is just wrong. It is a misunderstanding of how corruption works. Corruption is inherently transnational. The money doesn't stay in Ukraine, Argentina or Nigeria—it moves through multiple different places. And if the place where the money is stolen is corrupt, shouldn't the place where the money lands be equally corrupt too? It's the same money.

Why is there so little outrage surrounding that? When somebody tweets something stupid about Russia and Ukraine, there's endless rage and condemnation. When there are billions looted and sanctions quashed—with the help of western firms and elite—there's silence.
Well, this is complicated. When there's some idiot from the right or left who says something stupid about Putin, it gets clipped and put on Twitter, we can see it and laugh. But when it comes to money, it's not that easy. When somebody structures a company in a way that enables a Russian oligarch to hide his money and invest it in London—did he give him the gun? It's also hard to write about. The people who do this are rich, well-connected and litigious. And if you write about it in a hard and truthful way, they will sue you. These people don't want to be written about. And these stories don't lend themselves easily to a 20 second YouTube clip. It's difficult to write about these things in 280 characters. But it's not all bad—offshore finance and the Kremlin's dealings have received more attention in the last year than in a long time. So there's progress.

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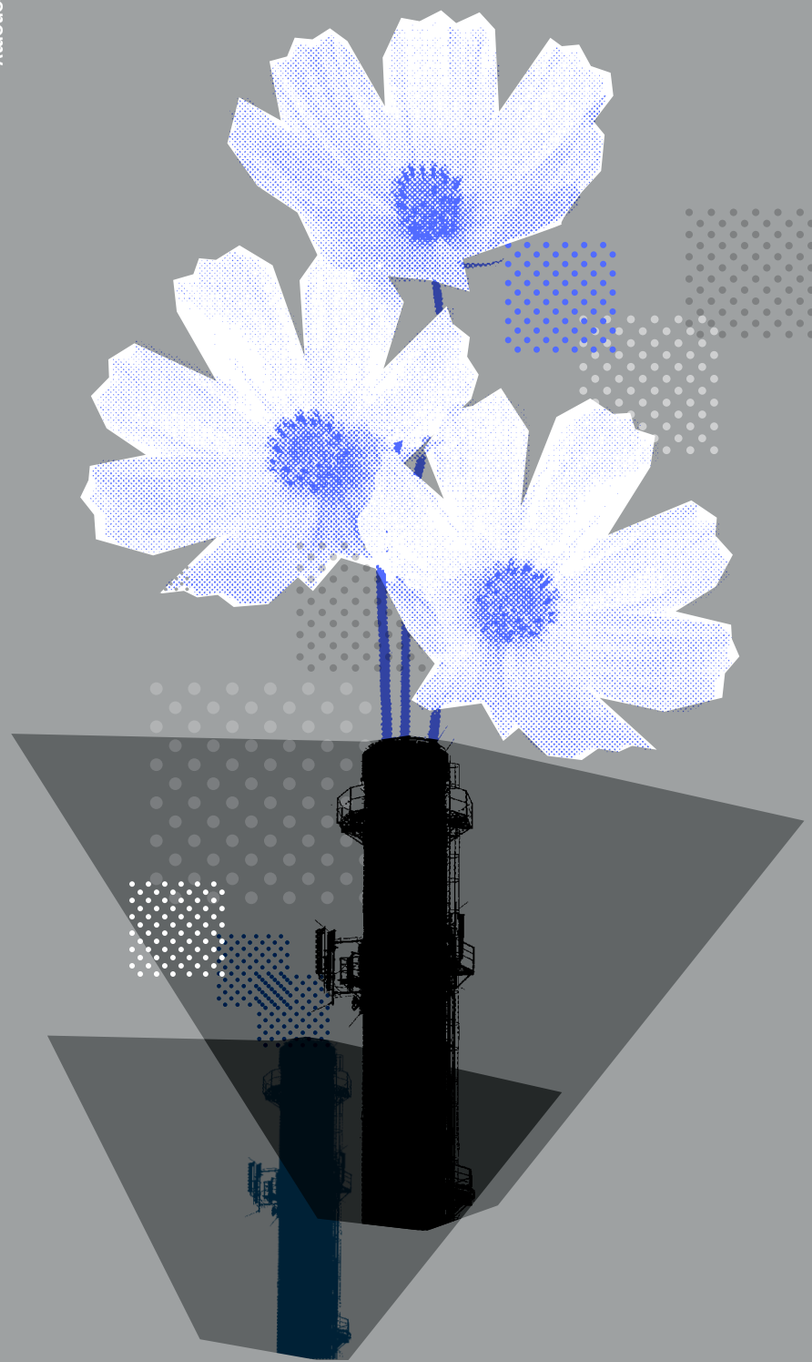

ROBERT SCHUSTER
INTERVIEW

Jiří Švejcar: A Passive Approach to the "Green Transformation" of Our Economy Will Deprive Us of Our Prosperity

The energy industry, transportation, and manufacturing are responsible for three fourths of Czechia's Carbon Dioxide emissions. They are what needs to change the most, says Jiří Švejcar from Boston Consulting Group (BCG).

ROBERT SCHUSTER: **Where would you say Czechia stands in terms of a shift towards a green economy, which makes do without the burning of fossil fuels?**

JIŘÍ ŠVEJCAR: I would say that in terms of how we are doing, it's a mixed bag. We are doing well, in the sense that we have achieved a 55% cut in CO_2 emissions production since 1990, thanks in large part to the shutdown of heavy industries. Meaning, it wasn't so much due to a concentrated effort to drive down emissions, but rather, it was caused by the slump of heavy industries in general, which inadvertently resulted in lower emissions. In comparison to where we used to be, we are actually doing tremendously better. We are falling short of our potential, however, as we are still one of the three highest emitters of CO_2 per capita in the EU. This will mean that, when compared to others, we will have to lower our emissions at a much higher pace, additionally hampered by the fact that conditions for natural sources of green energy are not very favorable in

Czechia, whether it is the amount of sunlight or the option for the development of hydroelectric dams.

The switch to a green economy, which would be associated with the extinction of current job positions, should not be too painful.

What will be the effects of the green transformation on the Czech economy?

About 10% of Czechia's GDP, worth roughly 650 billion CZK, would be at risk, and an additional 20% of Czechia's GDP (worth around 1,400 billion CZK) would be affected by the transformation and even potentially thrown into turmoil, as it will have to at least partially transform with a lot of technology being replaced. Another factor affecting the GDP would be the massive capital investment such a change would require. On the one hand, this risks an imbalance between import and export, as "green technology" is created largely outside of the EU and primarily in China. On the other hand, this brings an opportunity for the creation of prosperity based on newly developing and highly subsidized markets.

Are there any existing estimates as to the number of jobs which would realistically be endangered?

If I make the simplifying assumption about the industries impacted the most with the highest risks posed, they represent about 10% of the GDP. Likely, it would also impact 10% of employees. We have already studied, however, the evolution of the workforce in Czechia's past. We discovered that we do in fact have some cushion in terms of the absorption capacity of the market, and its ability to take on even tens of thousands of jobs with relative ease. So the switch to a green economy, which would be associated with the extinction of current job positions, should not be too painful.

Does the Czech state have enough resources to be able to commit to such a transformation of our economy towards being green and sustainable?

In our study, we calculated a total associated cost of 3.2 trillion CZK by 2050, and around 1.2 trillion CZK spent by 2030. Luckily, we have various funds, namely from the EU, which we could use to pay off large parts of it. The EU gives countries facing the hardest part of the transformation to a green economy, which includes us, half a trillion CZK, and we have access to EU Development Plan funds and others. If we were to tally all of the different sums, then today we have a trillion CZK at our disposal, which we would ideally invest by 2030. If it doesn't happen this way, the funds will not be available to us. Czechia has historically been regarded as not the most efficient in full usage of its EU resources. A typical subsidy would typically pay 30 to 50%, sometimes even 70% of your investment, it does however mean that we have to first make some investments or at the very least plan to, and unfortunately I don't currently see that being the case.

The main chunk of that 3.2 trillion CZK, around 2.5 trillion, would need to be used for the decarbonization of three industries which are the largest pollutants: the energy industry, manufacturing and transportation. The energy industry is responsible for 37% of greenhouse gas emissions in Czechia, 87% of which is due to coal burning. With manufacturing, 44% of emissions are due to industrial processes, 40% due to the burning of coal and 16% is due to leakage by cooling gases. Dividing it further, the largest culprits are iron, steel, cement and lime production, with a 30% share. Another chapter in this saga is presented in the form of the automobile industry, which will require an additional 400 billion CZK.

It has to be acknowledged that the emissions from industrial production are unlikely to disappear entirely. A large share of production requires heat, of various amounts and intensities. Some may be replaced with electricity, but when it comes to higher temperatures, the most appealing alternative would be hydrogen as a heat source. It's always a question of economic profitability. In my estimation, this would impact around 20% of CO_2 emissions. I do not think we shall be able to completely remove it, it will simply have to be compensated for. Another thing that should be mentioned is that we won't be able to get far into the future without needing CO_2 sequestration technology, with the CO_2 subsequently stored underground, likely in disused Polish coal mines, which have a potentially large storage capacity.

If we were to tally all of the different sums, then today we have a trillion CZK at our disposal, which we would ideally invest by 2030. If it doesn't happen this way, the funds will not be available to us.

Is there an agreement across the political spectrum to plan the transition to a "green economy" beyond the ebb and flow of the election cycle?

In my opinion, the key is to make the transition something that people want, so that there is a narrative

going around that we cannot escape this transformation. When put this way, it would be best to do it quickly and maximize our efforts. I think that some basic concordance already exists. We've discussed our study with the individual Ministries, talked about it with the opposition, with the President's advisory team, specifically from the perspective of the need for continuity. I believe that a general agreement—though not on the details—does exist. When an intelligent person regards the whole dilemma, they can't help but want for everything to be done well. This isn't like the pension reform, we have a concordance across the political spectrum and through all the different political bodies with an influence. The one thing I'm missing though is that one individual who would be responsible for the decarbonization strategy, the one who would say: "I will rid us of carbon emissions."

So ideally we would have a government representative for climate change, with the competency across departments to coordinate such a transformation?

Exactly that, and it doesn't have to be one specific individual, it could be one of the Prime Minister's agendas. They should have at their disposition the power necessary to enforce laws, and make sure that different departments work in synchrony. We specifically need someone who would be in charge of the effort, the coordination, who will be making sure the project stays on track and that there are enough resources specifically allocated for the transformation to even take place.

The key is to make the transition something that people want, so that there is a narrative going around that we cannot escape this transformation. When put this way, it would be best to do it quickly and maximize our efforts. I think that some basic concordance already exists. We've discussed our study with the individual Ministries.

What other possible scenarios do you envision with the economic developments of decarbonization?

Basically, there are three approaches we could take: the passive, the reactive and the proactive. With the passive approach, Czechia will simply be waiting, with no public investment. It might very well simply be waiting it out to see whether the green transformation proves to be a bust. From the long-term view, this runs the risk of a decline in GDP. With the reactive approach, some investment will likely occur, and not a small amount either, but only the bare minimum will be done, which would result in Czechia potentially falling behind those with the most successful transformations, and also risk a GDP decline. The ideal would be the proactive approach, where the 3.2 trillion gets gradually invested, actively transforming the most at-risk industries while maintaining the GDP.

Is there a country in our vicinity, or generally in Europe, which could serve us as an example for our own green transformation?

Germany is particularly active in this regard. It has committed itself to green transformation and sees it as a means to economic growth. They are developing new technologies and methods, with exportability a priority. Germany has a quite clear-set strategy in this regard—the transformation of its energy industry, etc—and so are far ahead of us.

Germany, in particular, has an intense discourse on upgrading the housing infrastructure, on the switch to heating without fossil fuels. Where do we stand on this topic?

Several topics exist that are represented a lot in public debate, since most people understand them as they tend to have a direct effect on their personal life, namely the topics of heating, housing insulation and agriculture. When we look at residential homes and agriculture though, they account for 15% of total emissions. Electric power plants, on the other hand, are responsible for 40% of our emissions, industry for around 20% and transportation for 16%. Added up, these three account for roughly three fourths of our emissions, and as such are where it's most important that we focus our efforts. Better thermal insulation of homes and changes in agriculture are important, but at the same time their impact on our carbon production is quite minimal.

I do think that people's views on decarbonization can still be improved upon. It's important to associate it with a vision of opportunity, which runs the risk of being taken over by others if we don't jump on it soon.

Is the importance of decarbonization adequately communicated to the public?

I do think that people's views on decarbonization can still be improved upon. It's important to associate it with a vision of opportunity, which runs the risk of being taken over by others if we don't jump on it soon. Then we would

have to import green technology rather than have our own production. Ideally, our people should understand this and support it.

We would need a gigafactory here, and with time, we could build at least two large factories for batteries, without which our GDP could drop several percent, and which would prove essential for the maintenance of our automobile industry.

You've already mentioned the use of hydrogen. How advanced are our plans regarding the use of this technology?

Here we don't have as clear a vision, such as in the event of a switch in electromobility—the use of hydrogen technology could be viable for long-distance cargo transportation. With hydrogen, a lot depends on its method of production, with various colors of hydrogen based on that mode, from green, to blue, to even gray. Simultaneously, we would need to build an infrastructure appropriate for its transportation, from its production centers to its places of usage. An example would be Saudi Arabia, which could create it thanks to its large amounts of sunlight, and then have it transported to us. There are similar ideas thrown about, but they are so far only half-formed.

It also seems that the countries with the greatest potential for green production of hydrogen are also often suffering from democratic deficit. Isn't there a risk associated with growing too dependent on their resources, such as was the case with natural gas and oil from Russia?

Saudi Arabia isn't the only potential supplier of hydrogen. Norway has similar plans, specifically for wind farms which would create electricity, and the hydrogen formed would subsequently be shipped to Europe. The war started by Russia made the energy market extremely unstable, but it has since mostly stabilized with the price of gas falling. We all had to adapt as a result, but in the year since the war started, we have been quite successful. Of course, other unforeseeable situations may come up in international politics, especially in regards to the actions of China, but I don't think it should change the process of a green transformation entirely.

The Czech economy is, on the global scale, quite small, but with a strong industrial tradition. Do you see any areas where Czechia could, in terms of decarbonization technologies, be a frontrunner?

Yes, definitely. We have a unique opportunity to support sectors and technologies that present a good chance for us to become exporters, and increase in this way our GDP. We also have the potential to "carve out" a stage for the future. Potential battery production would fall into that field. We would need a gigafactory here, and with time, we could build at least two large factories for batteries, without which our GDP could drop several percent, and which would prove essential for the maintenance of our automobile industry. Another area where we could now prepare for the future would be establishing the infrastructure for hydrogen, and its use to propel trains, etc. Unfortunately, there is absolutely no current discussion of these topics. The third area would be smart power grids, which we could not do without if we are to increase the use of renewable resources to generate energy, such as wind and solar parks. The fourth area covers modular nuclear reactors, which are going to be more modern, and therefore more efficient. And the last thing we need to focus on are heat pumps, for which there will be a massive demand across the entire world in the future. Here we could become one of the primary producers and exporters, and that would, again, reflect positively on our GDP.

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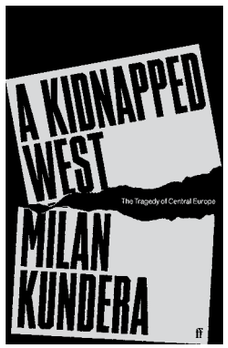
BENJAMIN
CUNNINGHAM

Moving Forward, Looking Back



A Kidnapped West: The Tragedy of Central Europe
Milan Kundera
Faber & Faber 2023, 74 pp

Two priests meet up at U Černého vola. By the time they start drinking their second beer, they find themselves in a deep theological debate. Back and forth the argument goes. But they just cannot come to an agreement. As the priests leave the pub, they decide to write to the Pope and ask for help in settling their dispute.

Back at the monastery, the first priest sits down at his desk. "Dear Holy Father," he writes. "Is it okay to smoke cigarettes while I pray?"

A few weeks go by and eventually the first priest receives a reply."No, it's not okay," the Pope writes. "Prayer is a serious endeavor. When one is communicating with God, it's important to fully concentrate entirely on prayer."

In the meantime, the second priest had also written his own letter. "Is it okay to pray while I am smoking?" He asks the Pope.

The Pope responds to this second letter too."Yes," he replies, "there is never a bad time to pray. God is always listening."

In short, the manner in which a question is formulated very much impacts the answer. Albert Einstein once posited that if he had 60 minutes to solve a problem, he would spend 55 minutes framing the issue and just five working out the solution. In practice, that is rarely how it works. These days hot takes on current events are blasted across the Internet in seconds. When it comes to thinking about geopolitics, the tendency is to dust off an old solution to an old problem and use it again—even in cases where it didn't work that well the first time. Creativity, thinking rooted in inductive reasoning, is entirely displaced by deductive reasoning.

Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán are dangerous, not because their popularity reflects real flaws in the way society is organized, but because they associate with people who have "Kremlin ties".

Today's Tweets, op-eds and podcasts insist that we have entered a 'new' Cold War. Depending on the day, the US-led West is pitted against China or Russia, or both. When it feels too complicated to specify an enemy, it's enough to settle for abstractions like authoritarianism, illiberalism or populism. We can also mix these things together in convenient ways. Anything to avoid self-examination. Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán are dangerous, not because their popularity reflects real flaws in the way society is organized, but because they associate with people who have—in a vague but damning phrase—"Kremlin ties".

This reflexive referencing of the Cold War—a very unusual historical period based on an infinitesimally rare bipolar international system—frames problems in a way guaranteed to produce flawed solutions. Why is contemporary US-China competition not compared to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century rivalry between the British and German empires that helped spur World War I? Is it because your average newspaper columnist has considered this and then concluded that today's conditions better resemble the late twentieth century? Of course not. We don't draw this parallel because the people most inclined to do so have all died. Contemporary governments, media and academia are led by people who came of age in the late Cold War, so they cram current events back into a vintage Cold War box.

If history is any guide, such recency bias will cause many people to die. It's the exact same thinking that led World War I generals to send horse-mounted infantry charging into machine gun fire. In the 1930s, it led the French to assume that constructing defenses along the Maginot Line bordering Germany would

help them prevail in future trench warfare. That future never came, as the Nazis marched around the fortifications and into Paris. During the Vietnam War, the United States replicated World War II tactics, deploying hundreds of thousands of troops while carpet bombing the enemy. By 2003, advocates of the US invasion of Iraq invoked the 1930s appeasement of Hitler to justify deposing Saddam Hussein. US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld also hoped to demonstrate he had learned lessons from the Vietnam debacle. So the US Army tried to occupy a vast country of 438,446 square kilometers with insufficient troops. Rumsfeld had forgotten that he was fighting the Iraq War instead of Vietnam War II.

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has fueled more talk of a Cold War sequel. It has also provoked comparisons with specific events from the Cold War—the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, for example. This general atmosphere no doubt contributed to Faber & Faber's decision to republish two late twentieth century essays from the Czech-French writer Milan Kundera under the title "A Kidnapped West: The Tragedy of Central Europe". The book's first section centers on Kundera's 1967 speech to the Czechoslovak Union of Writers. The second includes Kundera's 1983 essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe," which first appeared in the French journal La Debát before it was translated and published pretty much everywhere. Each section is preceded by a short introduction—written by Jacques Rupnik and Pierre Nora, respectively.

The publisher makes no claim for historical parallels, but they no doubt hope the buying public will. Readers are fortunate that Kundera does not speak or write with a historical outlook of minutes, days or weeks. He is thinking in centuries. Kundera is interested in ideas like 'nation' and 'language' and 'culture'—not scoring points against political straw men or women. In addition to feeding new Cold War delirium, there are no doubt plenty who might wish to harness Kundera's writing to craft simple arguments about the merits of liberalism, globalization or democracy. Though Kundera may sympathize with many of those ideals, these two pieces defy expectations. He is thinking aloud, and even if you disagree with his conclusions, engaging with well-communicated complex thinking is a useful exercise.

Small Nations, Big Thinking

Kundera's 1967 speech—made when he was 38 years old—is a curious historical document that does not easily fit into the 2023 preferred style of discourse. The speech is most relevant today as an artifact representing the culturally liberalizing Prague Spring era that preceded the August 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. At the same conference, another writer, Ludvík Vaculík, gave a much more inflammatory, politically charged, speech condemning the Communist Party's preeminent role in Czechoslovak society. "Not one human question has been solved in the course of the last twenty years," Vaculík said of Communist rule, going on to blame it for the country's "postwar failure".

Contemporary governments, media and academia are led by people who came of age in the late Cold War, so they cram current events back into a vintage Cold War box.

In collective memory, Vaculík's speech has somehow imbued Kundera's cultural argument with additional political weight. Kundera's speech, however, is not overtly political. Nor is it liberal. In fact, it is quite nationalist, and Kundera's nationality is Czech—not Czechoslovak. Given the topic and tenor of Kundera's speech, this distinction is important. At its 1918 founding, Czechoslovakia was a diverse, multinational state. Czechs made up less than half the country's population. That country of 13.5 million housed more Germans than Slovaks, along with Hungarians, Romany, Ruthenians, Poles and more than 100,000 Jews. By the time Kundera spoke in 1967, a good amount of that diversity was gone. The hellish Nazi occupation certainly played a major role, but so too did forced deportations implemented by the Czechoslovak government. In Kundera's telling, Czech culture is a victim of history, but the full 1967 version of the story was more complicated.

Kundera condemns "vast integrationist approaches" that are looking to "bring about a common history" before adding that "culture is important as ever to justify and preserve our national identity." Today, Kundera's nationalism is seen as understandable, even honorable. We know of the brutal Soviet led occupation of the country that would follow. But Kundera does not so much speak of the Soviet or Russian presence as he does glorify the rebirth of culture that began with the eighteenth and nineteenth century Czech National Revival. He implies that the cultural flowering of the Prague Spring carries that spirit forward.

So far as anyone talks this way in contemporary Central Europe, they are figures coming from the political right. In a 2019 speech, for example, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán warned that his country risked "drifting rootlessly away in the storms of history" in a Europe that was being led by people who "do not mind if our continent gives up its culture". Kundera and Orbán do not think

about culture in the same ways, but nor do they sound like adversaries. In 2023, it's hard to believe any progressive Czech speaking the way Kundera does.

As a writer, Kundera is interested in language and literature. He is preoccupied with the fate of small nations, but size is a relative concept. He is addressing the Czechoslovak Union of Writers (not just the 'Czechs' as the book intimates), and yet he doesn't once use the word Slovak in his speech. This focus on Czech language and literature looks ironic decades later, as Kundera ceased to write in Czech, trading it for cosmopolitan French. Incidentally, it is also worth noting that the new English language translation presented in this book is actually translated from an already existing French translation of the speech, not directly from the Czech original.

Kundera, to his credit, seemed to realize that he could be misspeaking even as he spoke. In one of the speech's more profound lines, Kundera notes that historical actors rarely have sufficient perspective to understand their own period in real time. "The Renaissance did not define itself by the narrow naïveté of its rationalism—that quality became visible only after the fact—but rather by a rationalist liberation from earlier boundaries," Kundera noted.

The Spirit of Culture

This book is just 74 pages long and can be read at a single sitting. Such brevity, and the handsome, compact hardcover packaging, was no doubt intentional. Even so, it does feel as if Kundera's pieces could have done with a bit lengthier, contextual, introduction. Though no offense is intended, Rupnik (whose Czech ties are well documented) and Nora are both older French men. Amid the book's thematic overtones (that smaller nations in Central Europe are often left to the whims of bigger countries and cultures, and that these ideas are still relevant today) it does seem like a missed opportunity to have younger Czech, Central European or Ukrainian thinkers provide introductory thoughts instead.

If Kundera's 1967 speech is a snapshot of that era, the second essay in this collection feels more timeless. It begins with an anecdote about a Hungarian radio worker who sent a telex (the precursor to the fax machine, which preceded email, which has since been displaced by the SMS) to the world during the 1956 Soviet invasion of his country. "We are going to die for Hungary and for Europe," the message read. He did die, and Kundera picks up the theme of a man willing to die for Europe. It is no coincidence that similar rhetoric has surfaced amid the recent war in Ukraine. In September 2022, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, for example, Tweeted that "Ukrainians are fighting bravely for their future. They are also fighting for our common values."

Readers content to stop there will be satisfied to have a simple parallel between Hungary in 1956 and Ukraine in 2022. But again in this essay, Kundera makes a more complicated argument. Here he has broadened his perspective beyond Czechness to include all of Central Europe. He argues that "Geographic Europe" has always been divided into two halves. One half is "tied to ancient Rome and the Catholic Church," while the second has been tied to "Byzantine and the Orthodox Church". A contradiction occurred after 1945 when "the border between the two Europes shifted several hundred kilometers to the west, and several nations that had always considered themselves Western woke up to discover that they were now in the East". Those places—Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary—found themselves "culturally in the West and politically in the East". This is the "Kidnapped West" of the book's title.

Kundera goes on to celebrate the cultural vibrancy of Central Europe, a good deal of which was centered on the multicultural Habsburg capital of Vienna—but also including poets, painters and philosophers from elsewhere. Here Kundera's argument is still cultural, not political. "Central Europe is not a state: it is a culture or a fate," he writes. "Its borders are imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation." And though he did not make this argument when writing this in 1983, he leaves present-day Ukraine in this space (a sliver of which was indeed once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). In one footnote, as an aside, Kundera even references Ukraine as "one of the great European nations" and laments that it "is slowly disappearing".

Kundera does not speak or write with a historical outlook of minutes, days or weeks. He is thinking in centuries. Kundera is interested in ideas like 'nation' and 'language' and 'culture'—not scoring points against political straw men or women.

Still, Kundera's two most important points are even broader. The first centers on his disappointment that Western Europe simply ignored, or were too oblivious to realize, that Central European culture was their culture and that it was being stomped out by Communism. Second, Kundera tells an old story of trying to approach Western European cultural figures—not politicians, journalists or academics—who might help rally awareness to the plight

of Central Europeans. As he and a friend tried to figure out the appropriate person to contact, they began to realize, "that this figure did not exist". Serious culture, even in Western Europe, had ceased to matter. There "were great painters, playwrights, and musicians, but they no longer held a privileged place in society as moral authorities that Europe would acknowledge as its spiritual representatives," he writes.

I was a toddler when this essay was first published, so it is hard for me to say whether Kundera was right about the world back then, but this certainly seems to be the case today. Our understanding of the world is now shaped by public relations professionals. Discussion of serious politics is left to think tanks, retired politicians and pseudo-intellectual commentaries. This all but guarantees that we see a caricature of a complex world, and it's exactly how we end up framing things via nonsensical ideas like Cold War II. So far as the republishing of these Kundera essays might accomplish anything, it might go a ways toward reminding readers that complex, critical thought can mediate engagement with public affairs. We could all do with a lot more commentary by the Kunderas of the world and a good deal less from the Applebaums.

Kundera and Orbán do not think about culture in the same ways, but nor do they sound like adversaries. In 2023, it's hard to believe any progressive Czech speaking the way Kundera does.

But I wouldn't hold my breath that this will happen. Rather, I would expect that this book and contemporary geopolitics would continue to be framed entirely in dusty metaphors. The early twentieth century intellectual Walter Benjamin famously wrote about the angel of history, an angel whose "face is turned toward the past". His eyes look back even as a "storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned". In the meantime, "the pile of debris before him grows skyward," Benjamin wrote. "This storm is what we call progress." So far as there is any single lesson to learn from twentieth century European history, it's that preoccupation with the recent past obscures, rather than illuminates, the present—with disastrous results.

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In Central and Eastern Europe, where democratic institutions are generally weaker, and the regulatory framework does not provide the media with enough protection, it is much easier for illiberal strongmen to assume control over the media.
VÁCLAV ŠTĚTKA

Slovaks are the most pro-Russian nation in the area stretching from Estonia to Bulgaria. More than half see the culprit responsible for the outbreak of the war in Ukraine itself.
ADAM BALCER

The current war is conventional. However, with the supply of Western weapons, the war may transform from a conventional conflict to a technological one. Then there will be a real possibility of ending the war later this year.
YAROSLAV HRYTSAK

By plugging a kleptokratic system into a democratic system, you end up with a system that gives all rights of ownership and legal protection to people who don't deserve it in the first place, because they're just thieves.
OLIVER BULLOUGH