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Democracy at War

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Ukrainian Lessons for Central Europe

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 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:

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ASPEN Review

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CONTENTS

Dear Readers,

First, let me thank you for your interest and the time you've taken to read the articles in this year's printed issue of Aspen Review. As you can see from the cover, this issue is primarily dedicated to Ukraine and the urgent need for Euro-Atlantic unity in supporting it. I do not believe Europe can make a difference in this world alone, and I do not think North America can be successful without a broader coalition of like-minded nations, with a strong Euro-Atlantic bond at its center. This commitment represents our shared belief in democratic values and the importance of freedom—principles that create the space for our societies to thrive.

Unfortunately, Europe is struggling to autonomously shape its strategic defense, and I am disappointed by the insufficient support for Ukraine from some European countries. The Russian aggression clearly demonstrates that all European nations should increase their defense budgets, which is currently hindered by political disagreements. These disagreements are driven by Russian hybrid attacks aimed at reducing the willingness of European countries to support Ukraine. Therefore, we need a strong and unified Western stance in response to the current threat posed by Russia. This includes upholding democratic values, as well as the need to adapt European defense capacities and increase weapons production. I believe that effective defense production and logistics would enable Europe to confront the Russian threat similarly to how it did during the Cold War, creating conditions for negotiations with Russia from a position of strength.

According to data from the Ukraine Support Tracker provided by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, Ukraine is currently facing uncertain prospects regarding continued support from its Western allies. Aspen Review is published before the US elections on November 5, leaving us unaware of the potential outcomes and their implications. However, without US aid packages, military assistance could significantly decline, and European efforts alone may not be sufficient—particularly following Germany's recent announcement to halve its contributions.

This is why the world anxiously awaits the US elections. It is up to Americans to decide who will be the next president, but we all know that the world needs a strong and united America to find a new balance and restore international order.

You can read more about these topics from different perspectives in the diverse array of Aspen Review articles that explore pressing geopolitical issues and historical contexts relevant to Central Europe, Ukraine, and its defense.

I would also like to highlight other important topics from noted authors featured in this year's issue, including politics, independent media, culture, finance, science, technology, and religion. The diversity of themes and perspectives is a cornerstone of our platform at the Aspen Institute CE, and I invite you to join us at some of our regularly organized events to discuss the challenges of our time. Open politically inclusive dialogue across our societies is the only way to overcome the high polarization of opinions and stand united in support of Western values.

JAKUB LANDOVSKÝ
Executive Director, Aspen Institute CE

K.u.K. Europe

Few observers expected that Patriots for Europe, an alliance of Central European populists, proclaimed on June 30, 2024 in Vienna, would so quickly become the third political force in the European Parliament. In less than two weeks, the triple alliance of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and the head of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPO) Herbert Kickl was joined by the most pro-Russian and Eurosceptic politicians on the Old Continent.

The 84-person "patriots" faction is headed by Jordan Bardella, leader of the French National Rally. However, no one has any doubts that the "godfather" of the group is the Hungarian prime minister. This undisputed guru of populists and, as he himself claims, a "good friend" of Donald Trump, has been governing Budapest under authoritarian rule for 14 years. He has built a kleptocratic regime that would be a shame for dictators from Central Asian countries. Like them, he is tightening political and economic cooperation with Russia and China, disregarding European values and obligations to NATO allies.

The Hungarian prime minister has had his followers. Herbert Kickl admitted that Orbán is his inspiration and announced that he will turn Austria into an illiberal fortress. Andrej Babis, whose ANO 2011 party is leading in the polls, declares that he will do the same in the Czech Republic in 2025. Orbán has enlisted the cooperation of the leader of the Italian League Matteo Salvini, the head of the Dutch co-ruling Freedom Party Geert Wilders, and nationalist politicians from Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Denmark, Greece and Latvia.

Orbán's project is fundamentally Central European in the very traditional sense of the word. For conservatives, the end of communism in 1989 meant a return to the Europe of 1914, not 1945, as for liberals. This is their ideal, a class society rooted in the past, with the dominant role of wealthy men served by an army of bureaucrats, soldiers, priests and women. This is the common code of national conservatives and populists from Hungary, Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland.

"Make Europe Great Again," the slogan of the Hungarian presidency of the European Union, is more than just a reference to Donald Trump's campaign slogan. Orbán dreams of a Europe that is a multi-system conglomeration of nation states that govern themselves as they please, and none has the right to interfere in the affairs of the others. His point of reference is the K.u.K. Austria-Hungary. The goal of his foreign policy is to transform the European Union into a K.u.K. Europe. It would be a toothless behemoth, where countries governed like Hungary would do whatever they wanted, and European unity would be a fiction. The Hungarian prime minister's chance is that it is hard to find leaders who would and could integrate Europe more.

Hungarian conservatism is best seen on the streets of Budapest. There is no other city in Central Europe that has changed so little over the last 35 years. When I first went to Hungary in 1990, it was a much wealthier country than Poland. Vaci utca looked almost like Kudamm in West Berlin.

Today, Budapest looks as if Orbán had immersed it in formalin. And that is the best testimony to his conservatism.

ALEKSANDER KACZOROWSKI
Editor in Chief Aspen Review Central Europe

EDWIN
BENDYK

Emergency State: Ukrainian Lesson for Central Europe

We have nowhere to retreat to, explained Serhiy Zhadan at Kyiv's Yalta European Strategy conference. The writer and poet, today wearing the uniform of the 13th Khartiya National Guard Brigade, explained that defending the state and its sovereignty meant defending everything they had. Without a Ukrainian state, there will be no Ukrainian culture; in case of defeat, artists like me will either be killed or have to flee.

The vast majority of Ukrainians have no doubt that the stakes of the war with Russia are the highest possible. In surveys conducted since the beginning of the invasion in February 2022, there is a recurring belief that Moscow's goal is the elimination of Ukrainian national agency, and genocide, even if not biologically, then culturally and in terms of identity. This belief is not a Russophobic fantasy; Russian goals were clearly communicated by Vladimir Putin in speeches preparing for the aggression. Also in the Russian press at the beginning of the war, one could read unambiguous descriptions of the technology of conquest: after seizing territory, symbols of statehood are eliminated, then local elites are eliminated, and the rest of the population is subjected to 'perekovkas' using propaganda and violence.

This technology was experienced by the residents of occupied Kherson, a regional center in southern Ukraine, which Ukrainian forces managed to liberate in late fall 2022. Yuri Kerpatenko, the conductor of Kherson's Mykola Kulish Music and Drama Theater, did not live to see freedom. When he refused to let the Russians play to their order, he was executed. So were many others.

So Ukrainians have no doubt that they are fighting for everything. And they have no doubt that if Russia is not broken, sooner or later it will attack again fulfilling its eternal imperial goal. Because the current war is not the implementation of Putin's psychopathic inclinations, but a repeat of the historical pattern set by such tragic events as the destruction of Baturyn (then capital of the Hetmanate, or Cossack state) in 1708, and the slaughter of Kyiv by Mikhail Muravyov in March 1918.

Ukrainians have no doubt that if Russia is not broken, sooner or later it will attack again fulfilling its eternal imperial goal.

The power of resistance

These few basics explain Ukrainian determination, but they do not explain the ability to resist a much stronger opponent. The Russian army is still among the strongest in the world in terms of human potential and weaponry. The Russian state, fed by revenues from the sale of oil, natural gas, grain and raw materials sold abroad despite sanctions, is still able to finance the war and provide a decent standard of living for its people. For Ukraine, the shock of the war meant the collapse of the economy and a drop in GDP by nearly 30% in 2022, the forced emigration of millions of people and the occupation of parts of its territory.

Ukraine, however, did not collapse. The Russians failed to carry out a blitzkrieg and conquest in a few days in February 2022. Volodymyr Zelensky did not flee, although allies offered assistance in evacuation. And Ukrainians did not greet the Russian 'liberators' with flowers. The symbol of their response became the loud "Russian man-of-war, go f... yourself!" heard by the crew of the cruiser 'Moskva' attacking a Ukrainian border guard post on Zmiiny Island in the Black Sea. The Russians not only failed to capture Kyiv, but also quickly began to retreat from near the capital, then had to leave from near Kharkiv succumbing to the offensive led by General Syrsky, the current Commander-in-Chief. The sinking of the cruiser, the recapture of Viper Island, and the liberation of Kherson became achievements showing that it was possible to win against the Russians. In fact, they so warmed Ukrainian enthusiasm fueled by official propaganda that as late as 2022 there was widespread belief in the possibility of a quick, victorious end to the war.

The mobilization issue has highlighted all the problems of the Ukrainian state and society. Most importantly the lack of trust in the institutions of public power.

Back to reality

Enthusiasm faded in late 2023 and early 2024, when the last hopes attached to the Ukrainian counteroffensive, undertaken in the summer of 2023, vanished. It had no effect; rather, it led to the perpetuation of the positional nature of the war, in which progress is measured in terms of individual meters of ground snatched from the enemy. What happened? The answer is complex. The Russians proved more resilient than anyone thought to human and material losses. The Ukrainians, less ready to sacrifice soldiers' lives in "butchery attacks," counted on the firepower of armaments supplied by the allies. Only they did not receive it in adequate quantities, as they fell victim to, among other things, a months-long political blockade in the US Congress. The technology of war has also changed, with drones and radio-electronic warfare methods becoming crucial.

General Valeriy Zaluzhnyi, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine at the time, summed up the conclusions of the counteroffensive in an essay for The Economist: according to NATO's tactical manuals, we should be back and forth in Crimea several times. It's just that given the new realities of war, NATO's manuals have turned out to be less than useful scrap paper, as is being reported today by, among others, US military officials happy to have a laboratory in Ukraine to observe the development of new technologies, tactics and strategy-making.

Democracy at war

The counteroffensive has also failed because, as Professor Yevhen Holovacha, head of the Institute of Sociology at the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, explained to me, in this war the totalitarian state is the aggressor, and democracy is the defender. For Putin, it is still a relatively minor problem to get recruits, for Ukraine the biggest socio-political challenge has been mobilization. Holovacha

points out that it is not a lack of political will. Gen. Zaluzhny asked President Zelensky for an additional 500,000 troops. He didn't get it, and the new mobilization law went into effect after long political tinkering in the Verkhovna Rada in May this year.

Why? Because, as various studies have shown, the mobilization issue has highlighted all the problems of the Ukrainian state and society. Most importantly, it highlighted the lack of trust in the institutions of public power. Yes, in 2022 all sociological indicators skyrocketed, but already by the end of 2023 many of them began to move towards the pre-war 'norm,' reflecting the belief that politicians and government officials are thinking more about themselves and their own interests than the general good. The hot topic identified as the most important next to the war itself became corruption. This belief was accompanied by the conviction that whoever had money or connections need not fear going into the military.

This was confirmed by stories of chaotic conscription services acting according to the principle of least effort, such as, for example, obtaining recruits in villages whose residents had nowhere to hide; and more stories of bribery at border crossings and at conscription committees. Since, despite the war and martial law restrictions, the press in Ukraine is free from censorship, all examples of abuse, as well as arrests of corrupt officials, get to the public. This gives the impression that the scale of these abuses is larger than it actually is, explained Andriy Borovyk, director of the Ukrainian branch of Transparency International. Moreover, the situation is actually improving and the anti-corruption court is, despite the war, the most effective element of the Ukrainian justice system.

Modern societies, including liberal democracies, are driven by a consumption-based economy served by expanded service. They cannot be shut down for the duration of the war, because they have to pay the taxes from which the army is financed.

War of consumer society

Nevertheless, mobilization is still a problem in which, as Prof. Holovacha argues, not only the peculiarities of the Ukrainian state and society, but also the broader problem of liberal democracy become apparent. Its essence is expressed by the following question: how, in a democratic, liberal society that respects freedom of choice, can people be expected to make sacrifices, including the sacrifice of their lives for the sake of common values? It is not about a theoretical or formal answer invoking, for example, the Constitution which imposes an obligation to defend the homeland. It is about everyday social and political reality, when life and death must be decided by invoking a democratic mandate.

But there is also another dimension to this problem. Modern societies, including liberal democracies, are driven by a consumption-based economy served by expanded service, entertainment and cultural sectors. They cannot be shut down for the duration of the war, because they have to pay the taxes from which the army is financed. As President Zelensky said, it takes six people working in the national economy to support one soldier. And it is not just about numbers, but also about the structure of employment. Should a good IT specialist be on the front lines, or should he be writing drone software?

Ukrainians negotiate the answer all the time, both through journalism, and practical debate. Many young men are reluctant to go into the military simply for fear of losing their health or lives. If they have not managed to flee abroad, they hide in Ukraine. One way is to avoid official employment, which spells trouble for Ukrainian businesses. Difficulties with conscription are prompting creative responses from individual military units. Frontline brigades are recruiting with modern marketing tools, convincing people that service does not have to be hell, but a job that allows them to realize and develop their passions and skills. And there is still no shortage of people who, like Serhiy Zhadian, choose to enlist as volunteers.

A system of resilience

The war in Ukraine has shown that an imperfect state and a non-ideal society can build a brilliantly functioning system of resistance and resilience capable of opposing a potentially much stronger opponent. This system would not have existed without the Maydan of 2013 and 2014, which indeed turned out to be a socio-political revolution. It launched, as Ukrainian sociologists write, a process of national and civic crystallization, which accelerated after the invasion transforming into national and civic consolidation. The revolution itself, and then the defense of statehood after Russia's first attack on Crimea and Donbas in the spring of 2014, forced the search for new forms of collective action adequate to the threats.

Public involvement in the creation and maintenance of the armed forces has shaped the special nature of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), which show the characteristics of a people's army always directly connected with society. As a result, today the AFU is the pillar that Ukrainians overwhelmingly point to when asked about the most important factor determining the source of Ukrainian resilience. Thanks to the army and air defense, a near-normal life is possible in Ukraine, outside the frontline areas. And Ukrainians enjoy this life in accordance with the principle of "war-life balance," attributed to the artist Yuri Stetsik, who joined the army as a volunteer in the early days. He argued that war was not the end of life, but a long and arduous job. And as with a job, it also requires moments of respite. Stetsik disappeared in December 2022.

The war in Ukraine has shown that an imperfect state and a non-ideal society can build a brilliantly functioning system of resistance and resilience capable of opposing a potentially much stronger opponent.

War as a job

And it is the approach to the reality of war, both on and off the front lines, that determines that Ukraine not only resists, but also remains a functioning state. Ukrainian railroads somehow handle traffic and boast that more than 90% of long-distance trains arrive on time. And they remind us that this reliability has cost the lives of more than 700 railway men and women. Ukrainian Olympians pleased their compatriots with medals won at the Paris Games, but the sacrifice of more than 500 athletes and coaches killed in the war is behind their successes.

Despite the difficulties, government agencies are at work documenting every Russian crime. Hundreds of prosecutors are collecting evidence on the destruction of the Novaya Kakhovka hydroelectric plant. They are supported by employees of the Kherson State Sanitary Inspectorate risking their lives every day while collecting samples from the Dnieper River. Inspectors and investigators document each bomb attack and its consequences. They are supported in this by civic organizations. Because the goal of the war is not only to regain full sovereignty and territorial integrity, but also peace based on the principle of justice, according to which criminals will be punished for their deeds.

Leap into adulthood

The foundation of the war-life balance principle is the realization that every element of normal life that Ukrainians try to enjoy by going to work, filling cafes and theaters staging premieres, buying new wartime-written books in newly opened bookstores, or going to concerts, costs not only the nominal price paid in hryvnias, but also the highest price paid with the blood of tens of thousands of the fallen and wounded. Hanna Vasyk, a doctor of philosophy and cultural manager, now a sergeant in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, said at the Yalta European Strategy conference that Ukrainian men and women chose to resist in order to defend the values and way of life that are important to them. By taking responsibility for themselves, they have shown that they have become an adult nation and society. She concluded by asking if other European nations were equally adult. Because everybody knows that they are old.

EDWIN BENDYK
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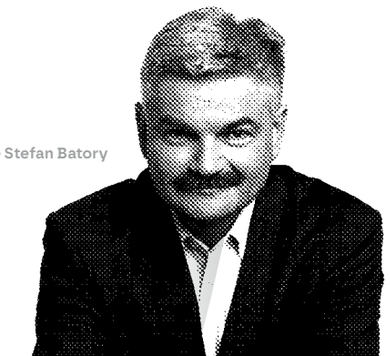

Martin Schulze Wessel: There Will be no Re-establishment of German-Russian Friendship

The best way to help the Russians is to hit them hard. Without a defeat, Russia will remain a country with imperial militaristic ambitions, says German historian Martin Schulze Wessel.

ALEKSANDER KACZOROWSKI:

When did you realize that the war in Ukraine was inevitable?

MARTIN SCHULZE WESSEL: I thought it was a very real danger when Putin published his essay on the unity of the Russians and the Ukrainians in July 2021. Some weeks after that, I wrote an essay in the journal *Liberale Moderne*, where I explained what danger it meant. I said this could be the beginning of a renewed war. There had been war already since 2014, but this would be a new step.

Why did you think so?

Because Putin formulated absolutely clearly that he does not accept an independent Ukraine as a political nation. This was an announcement of a war, and it's astonishing that he was so outspoken. He did not conceal his ambitions and plans.

What are his ambitions?

He wants to open a new era in Russian history. Very few understood that he was ready to sacrifice a lot for that. And that this imperial extension of Russia and geopolitical dominance was more important for him than welfare In Russia and good political relations with European states.
One might ask whether the situation before the war wasn't much better for Russia than now? It had a much greater influence in Germany and France. But if empire-building and the abolition of the Western liberal system is the aim, then Putin had to take this route and was ready to do so.

He thinks that he's the next Peter the Great?

He had a discussion with young economic and academic leaders after the first setbacks in the Russian-Ukrainian War. He said this war was to be compared to the Great Northern War. At the beginning of the eighteenth century there were setbacks as well and it needed time, he said. We have to strengthen ourselves and ultimately we will win. The Great Northern War lasted for 21 years.
This thinking in terms of long-time periods is quite characteristic for Putin. Another feature which he copies from Peter the Great is that he is creating a new elite. There's an old elite, people who have been surrounding him for decades, and there is a new elite connected with the war.

It is typical of Putin's technique of rule that he allows a new elite to emerge, thus threatening the existing elite in their positions.

How would you describe this new elite in a few words? They are younger, they're people from the military? What's similar to Peter's politics?

The old elite that surrounds Putin is a camarilla that has risen with him and has established itself in high state and economic positions and has become rich. Corruption is part of this. The new elite comes from the war. It is typical of Putin's technique of rule that he allows a new elite to emerge, thus threatening the existing elite in their positions. One should not exaggerate the comparison between Peter and Putin: Putin is fascinated by the political and social transformation that Peter achieved, but he himself is far from modernizing Russia. On the contrary, his policies will do enormous damage to Russia, regardless of the outcome of the war.

It's interesting that both Peter the Great and Putin had a German experience in their youth. Do you think that it is important somehow?

I think the German experience is important for Putin. I'm not sure that it can be compared to the experience of Peter, because he dealt mostly with the German minority in Moscow. And then his traveling led him to German territories, to Netherlands and other places. It was a European experience. But I think it is characteristic for Russian culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the Slavs are seen as an 'extended we' community. And the Germans are not really foreign, but also they are not 'us'. They are a zone between the real Western Europe, which begins in France, and the 'extended we' community, which in the nineteenth century meant Western, Eastern and Southern Slavs.

What are the origins of this strange German-Russian relationship? Did it start with Peter the Great?

There's a political underpinning of it. The special German-Russian relations go back to the time of Peter I. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, there was no unified German state. It was a conglomerate of states, and the Habsburg Empire was partly a German state, while Prussia was still a small but militarily strong state. In the last phase of the Great Northern War, Peter the Great felt the pressure of the British Empire. After he defeated Charles XII at Poltava, he became a European geopolitical danger, because he got access to the Baltic Sea, and from the perspective of London his control over it was dangerous. So London wanted to push him back.

Why was London afraid of Russians controlling the Baltic Sea?

Because they would control all the exports and prices of timber, for example, that is shipbuilding material that was so important for Britain. It created a competition between London and Petersburg for an alliance with Prussia. The British government tried to make an alliance with Prussia, together with Sweden, to push back Russia, and Russia tried to prevent this by making an alliance with Prussia themselves. It made Frederick Wilhelm really sick, for a few days he talked to nobody, not even to his Foreign Minister, and then he decided to make an alliance with Russia. He thought, if I have an alliance with Peter the Great, I can always get many soldiers from Russia, and the real reason behind this was, of course, control over Poland. We are not talking about the Partitions yet, but about hegemony over Poland, to prevent it from modernizing its institutions and building a permanent army. This was very crucial for both states, and this was where their interests met.
In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was no war between German states and Russia besides the Seven Years' War (1756-1763). This was an exception to the rule that the Habsburg Empire and Prussia had a vital interest in maintaining their alliance with Russia. This alliance was beneficial for both sides in the very Machiavellian sense that they controlled East Central Europe together. But I would say there was a miscalculation from the very start, because extending Russia westwards and Prussia eastwards made them neighbors. And Prussia, a junior partner of Russia at the beginning of the eighteenth century, turned out to be a major power in the 1870s. This was a very unfortunate situation for Russia.

After 1991, the German strategy was to have Russia as a partner, with a vision of a modernizing partnership. The idea was that Germany would bring technology to Russia, while Russia would bring oil and gas to Germany.

Why?

Having Poland as the western neighbor was much more safe for Russia then adjoining Prussia. Russian diplomats realized then that it had been a miscalculation. It was Alexander Gorchakov, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, who realized that Russia could not have a strategic autonomy within the Russian-Prussian alliance, because it meant that Russia was automatically against the Poles, as well as France. So Gorchakov tried to engineer a rapprochement between Russia and Poland, he tried to launch a new Russian-Polish policy. It was the evil genius of Otto von Bismarck that prevented this. He warned conservative Russians that Gorchakov's policy would lead to revolutionary tendencies instigated by France and Poland, and he succeeded.

And then the Polish uprising of 1863-64 broke out and everything was lost for decades?

But after the unification of Germany in 1871 it became clear that the situation between Germany and Russia was not stable anymore.

Let's talk about what is going on now. How would you describe what Olaf Scholz said and what he really did after February 2022? Is it a zeitenwende in the German attitude towards Russia? What has changed compared to Germany's policy towards Russia since 1991?

After 1991, the German strategy was to have Russia as a partner, with a vision of a modernizing partnership. The idea was that Germany would bring technology to Russia, while Russia

would bring oil and gas to Germany. That would be an ideal match between both countries.
Of course, Germans thought that it would be good for the European Union. Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 were part of this strategy. Germany's Nord Stream policy shows that it was unable to take seriously the justified warnings from Poland. With Nord Stream, Germany created a situation that was threatening, especially from a Ukrainian perspective, and that isolated Germany in Europe.

The Poles were against Nord Stream 1 and 2 from the very beginning, but no one was listening.
And it was not only the German government, but also large parts of the public who did not get the Polish point. For a long time, Nord Stream was seen only as an economic project in Germany. There was talk of diversifying the supply of raw materials, but in reality the country was becoming increasingly dependent on Russia. The problematic geopolitical dimensions of Nord Stream were not recognized in Germany.

Why?
Because Germany is really thinking much more in terms of economy than geostrategy. The only change came with the Russian invasion of 2022.

From the economic point of view, it was a very sensible policy. It worked perfectly, also for Russia. Why did Putin destroy everything? Because of his imperial fantasies?
This is what many Russophiles in Germany do not understand. Why did he destroy it? You are right: he did it because he thinks first of all in terms of accomplishing an imperial project in his lifetime.
I think this is astonishing not only for the Germans, but for all Europeans and Americans, that what he really aims at is establishing a new world order.

Could you describe this new world order? What Putin wants? What does it mean to Germany and Poland?
He wants a farewell to the liberal order in ideological terms. Geopolitically, he is striving towards hegemony in Central and Eastern Europe. The long term goal is a Europe without America and Russian dominance from Vladyvostok to Lisbon.
Putin's ideologue Aleksandr Dugin has formulated this in detail. The goal is to put Europe in a position similar to that of Finland during the Cold War: formally independent but closely tied to the policies of the Kremlin. The consequences would naturally be felt in Poland and Germany as well.

Do you think the war improved or worsened the position of Germany in the European Union?
The war is changing Germany's position. The Russian aggression made it clear that Germany is dependent on European alliances. Of course, the American weapon deliveries are fundamental for Ukraine and for European security. But we Europeans have to be aware of the fact that Russia's war is threatening us more than the Americans. And support for Ukraine is fundamental. Germany's position can be better at the end if it will ally itself with Poland and with the Baltic States. The lesson of the war is that the alliance between Germany and Poland is fundamental from the point of view of building European security. And that the alliance between France and Germany is not sufficient any longer.
Since Tusk's election, Germany and Poland have maintained largely normal relations. In view of the Russian threat to Central European security, however, this is no longer enough. Both countries must become strategic partners. Germany and Poland must play a key role in containing Russia's hegemonic aspirations. Only a strong alliance between Germany and Poland will be helpful for Ukraine. Countries like Spain or Portugal have little interest in Ukraine, and even France is not very engaged. So, I think it's strange that the Polish and German governments are not much closer to each other.

Putin's ideologue Aleksandr Dugin has formulated this in detail. The goal is to put Europe in a position similar to that of Finland during the Cold War: formally independent but closely tied to the policies of the Kremlin.

Why so?
This is a misconception of our government. Scholz said early on that Russian aggression was a momentous event, a turning point in history ('Zeitenwende'), and that we had to rethink our entire policy. But when Kiev successfully shifted the war to the south-east of Ukraine, it seemed to Scholz that this was a regional war again.
But it's not a regional war. In fact, this is a war about security architecture in Europe.

This is why you decided to become the adviser on Eastern policy for CDU/CSU, although you used to be a member of SPD? What is your advice? What do you expect Berlin to do?
I left the SPD long before that. When it became clear that the party would not

exclude Gerhard Schröder, and did not even issue him a formal reprimand, I took that decision. In the area of foreign policy, I believe that the CDU/CSU and the Greens have politicians who clearly recognize the dangers of Russian imperialism.
In my advisory capacity, I warn against regarding Russia as a normal player in international politics. Russia's war against Ukraine has deep roots in Russian political tradition and in Russian culture, which is characterized by imperialism. Therefore, a simple deal with Putin's Russia is not possible, as Donald Trump or the populist and far-right parties in Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht) would like to believe.

What if Trump wins the election?
That's a speculative question. If he wins, there is a high probability that American support for Ukraine will decline. But will American foreign policy be able to afford a Ukrainian defeat in the war? It would be a defeat for the West, much worse than the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan, which has already triggered an anti-western domino effect in international politics. Trump imagines that he can make a deal with Putin. If he realizes that this is an illusion, that is, that Putin is sticking to his goal of destroying Ukraine as an independent nation state, American policy makers may reconsider whether the price of Ukraine's defeat, which would also be a debacle for Western security and prestige, is worth paying. Regardless of the outcome of the US elections, however, the following applies: Ukraine is a European country, and supporting Ukraine is a European task. This means that a different sharing of the burden between the US and Europe is inevitable.

What would you say to the Poles who have fears that Germans want to re-establish good relations with Putin anyway?
There will be no re-establishment of German-Russian friendship, certainly not. This has gone forever. If a democratic politician will lead Germany, be it Olaf Scholz or Friedrich Merz, there will be no better choice than Germany and Poland getting closer. It is our countries who will have to help Ukraine in the end.

You entitled your last book The Curse of the Empire: Ukraine, Poland, and the Wrong Turn in Russian History. Do you see this war as a chance to dispel this curse?
This is a matter for Russia and the Russians. I talk about the curse of the Empire in the sense that in Russia there is this very harmful tradition of seeing Ukraine, and previously Poland and the whole East Central Europe, as part of Russia or as part of a Russian sphere of influence. Russia's claim to domination over Ukraine and Eastern Central Europe has repeatedly led to oppression and even massacres in the affected countries. At the same time, the curse of the empire is damaging to Russia itself. A Russia without an imperial complex could have a strong civil society and abundant resources for education and welfare. It has not fulfilled these prospects because of its military ambitions.
The only way to overcome the curse of empire is through Russia's defeat. Without a defeat, Russia will remain a country with imperial militaristic ambitions. Only after a defeat, in which the Putin regime would be delegitimized, is there a chance of Russia's democratization. Mind you, defeat by no means guarantees subsequent democratization, but it is the condition for its possibility.

American policy makers may reconsider whether the price of Ukraine's defeat, which would also be a debacle for Western security and prestige, is worth paying.

You don't expect it to happen next Christmas...
Think of how long it took in Germany to get rid of the militaristic thinking, of xenophobia and racism. This takes time. We should not expect a renewed Russia in the next generation, but in two or three generations from now.

MARTIN SCHULZE WESSEL
is Professor of Eastern European History at Ludwig Maximilian University Munich. His main research fields are the history of international relations between Prussia (resp. Germany), Poland and Russia since the eighteenth century. In 2015, he founded the German-Ukrainian Historical Commission together with Professor Yaroslav Hrytsak, Catholic University of Lviv. His latest book is The Curse of the Empire: Ukraine, Poland, and the Wrong Turn in Russian History (2023).

WOJCIECH
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Neither David nor Goliath: Perspectives on the Ukraine Defense

For almost a year now, Russia has taken the initiative on the front. Despite their considerable military superiority, however, the Russian forces have not been spectacularly successful. There are also no signs that the Ukrainian defense could collapse in the coming months. Russia is not in a position to claim victory on the battlefield, but is hoping for a favorable political settlement. The outcome of the war depends largely on the West's determination to continue supporting Kyiv.

During the winter and early spring of 2024, the situation remained difficult for the Ukrainian defenders. The exhaustion of an earlier aid package from the United States, which was and is Ukraine's key support country, meant that the Ukrainian armed forces had to significantly reduce their daily use of artillery ammunition. In April, after several months of discussions, Congress finally voted on a new aid program worth 61 billion dollars. This made it clear once again that Ukraine is completely dependent on military, financial and humanitarian support from the West. Without it, the defeat of the Ukrainian armed forces would only be a matter of time.

Unlikely major Russian breakthrough

Recent months have shown that the Ukrainian defence remains effective despite many problems and difficulties. Russia has seized the initiative and advanced a few dozen kilometers on some sections of the front, but without spectacular successes in the form of the capture of major cities or strategically important locations. The biggest Ukrainian problems have been and still are the fatigue of the soldiers, the lack of sufficient new recruits and the fact that the Ukrainians still have less Western weapons and ammunition than they need. Combined with the strengthening of Ukrainian defensive lines, it is therefore unlikely that the Russians will occupy significant new territory in the near future. The front line is likely to remain relatively stable.

This is the reason why Russia has tried to achieve a breakthrough in recent months by systematically firing missiles at Ukraine's energy infrastructure—unfortunately with numerous successes. It is estimated that the aggressor managed to destroy almost half of Ukraine's energy production capacity. With winter approaching, this generates huge challenges for Ukrainian society. Regular Russian attacks on civilian facilities and numerous atrocities are not so much undermining Ukraine's will to defend itself, but rather fueling hatred of Russia and the belief that this is an existential war for Ukraine.

The self-limitations of the West

The West is helping, but it is also a limiting and inhibiting factor in some of Ukrainians' military actions. This is because they do not have full freedom to use selected Western weapons, including ATACMS and long-range missiles. In practice, this means that Ukrainian forces cannot fire them at targets on Russian territory.

Russia understands that its most effective instrument for influencing Western elites and societies is the persistent fear of an escalating war and a nuclear scenario.

This is particularly relevant in the context of one of Kyiv's most important objectives, the destruction of the Crimean Bridge. It is a key supply route for Russian troops operating in Crimea and other occupied territories. Ukraine's repeated regular attacks on Russian refineries, which dealt a painful blow to the oil sector and led to a 8-14% drop in production, has been met with displeasure by the US and some other Western countries.

The Kremlin is aware of the restrictions imposed on Ukraine by the West and is in a position to play them effectively. Russia understands that its most effective instrument for influencing Western elites and societies is the persistent fear of an escalating war and a nuclear scenario. Therefore, Russian politicians and Russian propaganda are playing on these emotions, which is proving to be quite effective. The recent telephone conversation between the Russian and US defense ministers, the first in more than a dozen months, served, among other things, to put pressure on Washington to ‚discipline' the Ukrainians.

The Ukrainians are aware of the stalemate on the frontline, their growing problems and a possible political U-turn by the West. They are therefore looking for an opportunity to take Russia by surprise with non-standard actions.

Not enough to win

The West is trying to keep the war under control and prevent it from escalating beyond Ukraine's borders. It should also be acknowledged that the option of Moscow using nuclear weapons remains unlikely, but cannot be entirely ruled out. Crossing a red line would entail risks, including in terms of the world's reaction, also from countries that currently de facto favor Russia (e.g. China) or wish to maintain neutral relations with it (Turkey and India, among others). Moreover, even if the Kremlin were to break the nuclear taboo, this would not guarantee victory.

The Kremlin retains the nuclear card and pulls it from time to time, but essentially relies on self-restraint, fears, mistakes and Western fatigue to eventually give Russia victory. Ukraine is currently receiving enough military equipment and ammunition to hold the front line, but this is still too little for the Ukrainian forces to think about a counter-offensive. Even the first ten F-16 fighter jets delivered by Denmark and the Netherlands at the end of July, with a further ten announced by the end of this year and 29 by 2025, are still too few to achieve a breakthrough.

Ukraine strikes back

The Ukrainians are aware of the stalemate on the frontline, their growing problems and a possible political U-turn by the West. They are therefore looking for an opportunity to take Russia by surprise with non-standard actions. These

include the aforementioned attacks on Russian refineries or the increasing use of long-range drones. The Ukrainian actions confirm the words of the then Ukrainian commander-in-chief, General Valery Zaluzhny, who said in an interview with The Economist last year that „In order for us to break this deadlock [on the front] we need something new". This approach is shared by his successor, General Olexandr Syrsky, who took the decision to launch an incursion into the Russian region of Kursk at the beginning of August.

The penetration of around two thousand Ukrainian troops into Russian territory without any significant Russian resistance, the capture of several hundred square kilometers and the detention there for several days revealed Russian weaknesses. The aim of this unprecedented operation appears to be to force the Russians to redeploy some units from the front and thus relieve the sections of the front where the Ukrainians are having the most problems (at the time of writing, the Ukrainian operation is still ongoing).

Kyiv also wanted to demonstrate to the West that it is a mistake to condemn it to defeat in this war and that the Ukrainian armed forces are capable of innovating and conducting such smart operations. The Kremlin's surprising decision-making paralysis became clear. Indeed, for several days the Russians were unable to oust professionally operating Ukrainian units, resulting in significant reputational damage for the Russian authorities.

The maximalism of Moscow and Kyiv

Kyiv and Moscow naturally envision the end of the war very differently. Ukraine expects, among other things, the complete withdrawal of Russian troops from all its territories, the punishment of those guilty of crimes and the payment of reparations. This maximalist Ukrainian plan is expressed in Volodymyr Zelensky's 10-point peace formula, presented in November 2022.

Although it is still officially propagated by Kyiv, it is clear that its implementation is unlikely in the foreseeable future. The Ukrainian public is also aware of this. Opinion polls show that within a year, the number of Ukrainians who would be prepared to cede part of Ukrainian territory to Russia in exchange for peace has risen from 10% to 32%. At the same time, the number of those who completely reject concessions to Russia has fallen from 84% to 55%.

The Russian objectives can be divided into tactical and strategic ones. The former consist primarily of forcing Kyiv to recognise territorial annexations, including the withdrawal of Ukrainian forces from the parts of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhya regions that are still under its control and which were incorporated into Russia under Russian law in 2022. Moscow also expects the neutral status of Ukraine, its demilitarization and a change of power in Kyiv.

From the Kremlin›s perspective, however, the aim of this war is not to grab new territory. This should be emphasized, as there is still a widespread belief that Ukrainian territorial concessions could end the war. They cannot, because Russia is not interested in gaining control over this or that country.

Russian expectations are also maximalist. Moscow›s strategic goal is to take control of Ukraine and bring about the collapse of Ukrainian statehood, even if this means a long war of attrition. This, in turn, is only the prelude to imposing on the West a thorough revision of the post-Cold War security system in this part of the world and ensuring Russia›s return to its role as a major player. In doing so, the Putin regime is counting on its ally to achieve these goals as the crisis in the Western world progresses.

Kyiv also wanted to demonstrate to the West that it is a mistake to condemn it to defeat in this war and that the Ukrainian armed forces are capable of innovating and conducting such smart operations.

The political dynamics of the West

The Russian authorities see their chances of victory in a possible revision of the attitude of important Western countries towards the war and further support for Ukraine. This would happen primarily through a political change in the United States. Moscow is waiting for the election of Donald Trump, not so much because it expects a revolutionary change in US policy under his leadership. From the Kremlin›s perspective, the best-case scenario would be a deep and protracted internal conflict, which would result in the US having to deal with itself and at least limit its ability to act in Europe and globally (Moscow has an ally in Beijing for this).

Russia has only limited means at its disposal to achieve this. However, its actions are aimed at sowing chaos in the Western world, supporting anti-system political forces and increasing social polarization, including through numerous disinformation campaigns. The Kremlin's overall goal remains to weaken the West so that, under the influence of its own problems, it is no longer able to confront Russia and is forced to revise its policy of support for Ukraine. All of this according to the logic: the worse for them, the better for us.

Is a similar scenario impossible? The answer must be: it depends. The word that perhaps best describes the international reality today is uncertainty. This applies first and foremost to the policies of the post-Biden US administration, both towards the war and the world in general. Therefore, change will be inevitable, regardless of whether Trump or Kamala Harris is the next president. Both Russia, which sees this as an opportunity for itself, and Kyiv, which hopes that US support will not wane, are waiting for the US political settlement. Ukraine's announcement that it will present a new peace plan by the end of November should be seen in this context. It is clear that its content will depend on the outcome of these elections.

From the Kremlin's perspective, the best-case scenario would be a deep and protracted internal conflict, which would result in the US having to deal with itself and at least limit its ability to act in Europe and globally.

The practice of two and a half years of war shows that Ukraine is neither a David nor Russia a Goliath. The Ukrainians are defending themselves bravely, even though they have been condemned to defeat. They are too weak, however, and Western help is not yet enough to win the war. The Russians, on the other hand, should have been predestined for a quick victory, as they theoretically had all the advantages on their side. It turned out, however, that Ukraine has proven to be a worthy opponent.

Hence, analogies based on history, and even more so on ancient myths, are often unreliable. Every war is subject to its own laws and has its own dynamics. The outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and thus the clash between Russia and the West is still uncertain. What is clear, however, is that the most important Western capitals have lacked the vision and strategic courage to resolve the ongoing war in favor of Ukraine and thus the democratic world. It is not only the future of the Ukrainian state that is at stake, however, in this conflict, but also the credibility and security of its Western allies.

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VLADISLAV INOZEMTSEV

Will Putin Run Out of Money?

When Russia brutally attacked Ukraine in February 2024, the Western powers responded by imposing the broadest and, as it was then believed, the most effective sanctions on Moscow. The Russian Central Bank's reserves of around $290 billion were frozen, all the main international credit card companies discontinued their business in Russia, and a bit later all the major Russian banks were cut off from the SWIFT clearance network.

Between March 2022 and January 2023, many Western nations introduced embargoes on Russian oil, oil products, coal and, in some cases, natural gas. All these measures, alongside with many others, were aimed at a single issue: to make Putin short of money for running his state-managed economy and for funding the Russian army as the military expenditures ballooned from Rub3.6 to 10.8 trillion (or from $49 to $117 billion) between 2021 and 2024. Western policy makers believed that the Russian budget had been filled almost exclusively by the energy export revenues and hoped that the freezing of the reserves would send the ruble into a downward spiral, causing long-term double-digit inflation. After 2.5 years of the war, it seems that all this has been a series of miscalculations. In Q1 2024, the Russian economy grew by 5.4 percent after advancing by

3.6 percent in FY2023; Russian businesses reported an all-time high profit of Rub33.3 trillion, or 19.6 percent of the GDP for 2023; the federal budget recorded a Rub867 billion surplus in March 2024, and there are no signs of the Kremlin being short of money.

The Western sanctions actually helped Russian financiers as the ban on credit card transactions significantly curtailed the capital outflow. At the same time, the start of the war sent energy prices up with Brent breaking through $133/barrel.

Why did the Western political elite fail so profoundly? I would argue that there were several quite important reasons for this (I would focus on the five most obvious), with almost all of them being predictable from the onset of the war.

The first one concerns the currency reserves and the exchange rates. Prior to the conflict, Russia possessed one of the largest currency reserves in the world, estimated at $643 billion. The amassing of reserves has not been all that necessary since at any given time Russia has generated a stable foreign trade surplus and therefore its national currency, the ruble, came under pressure from time to time mostly for geopolitical, and not so much for economic, reasons. The reserves were not used by its Central Bank and many experts repeatedly called them excessive. As a solid portion of them was blocked by the European authorities, the ruble lost close to half of its value in several days—but only until the Ministry of Finance ordered the exporters to sell 80 percent of their hard currency proceeds for the rubles almost immediately after the money was credited to their accounts in Russian banks, and simultaneously imposed a ban on Russian citizens on wiring dollars and euros abroad, on buying foreign cash and even on withdrawing more than $10k from hard currency accounts in Russia. The Western sanctions actually helped Russian financiers as the ban on credit card transactions significantly curtailed the capital outflow. At the same time, the start of the war and the steps by the West sent energy prices up with Brent breaking through $133/barrel, thus increasing Russia's oil and gas revenues. This complicated—and largely unexpected—combination of factors produced an enormous oversupply of dollars and euros in Russia which started to push the ruble up from its lows. In late April 2022, the Russian currency broke through the pre-war rate of Rub 76.2 to the dollar and went further up, reaching Rub51.2 to the dollar in late June—a level not seen since May 2015. This all made the ruble the world's best performing currency against the dollar in 2022.

This tremendous achievement, secured by increasing state regulation of the financial sphere (one should recall that the sell-off of export revenues that had been already practiced in Russia in the 1990s, was abolished back in 2006), heralded a long-term shift from an almost unregulated financial market that existed in Russia between 2007 and 2021, to a more controlled one. Its major outcome was a return to price stability as the monthly rise in consumer prices that jumped to 7.6 percent in March 2022, was evaporated by May and substituted by three consecutive months of deflation from June through August. From this point on there was no doubt that the first assault on the Russian financial system had been countered. Western sanctions against Russian foreign debt later contributed further to the ongoing revival. For a reason which I cannot explain, US authorities banned the servicing of the Russian debt forcing Russia into default, but allowing Putin to save billions of dollars as the Kremlin was consequently unable to wire the interest payments to the Western investors. During 2022 and 2023, the pressure on the Russian financial system increased—but this was pressure primarily aimed at disconnecting it from the global financial system. If, however, the declared task was to strip Putin of 'his' money, who would have thought that it would be achieved by sealing all the leaks through which these funds might leave Russia, draining its finances? Of course, as the Russian financial system became more isolated, Putin unexpectedly found himself in a country full of money from which the budget could borrow almost as much as it needed (I will return to this point later but it has to be mentioned that currently the private deposits in the Russian banks exceed the federal budget deficit for 2023 by almost 13 times—while in the United States the ratio of the FDIC-insured deposits to the current federal budget deficit is somewhat lower, at roughly 10 times).

The second quite important issue was the situation on the crucial 'front' for Putin—Russia's foreign trade balance which the sanctions were inclined to deteriorate. For years, Russia had been selling to the rest of the world more goods than it was buying from it—even in the times when President Yeltsin's government defaulted on its domestic debt back in 1998, everything went well for Russian exporters. The average annual foreign trade surplus amounted to $45.7 billion between 1997 and 2001, rising to $109.8 billion for 2002-2006, and touching $174.2 billion between 2007 and 2011 when it reached a plateau standing at around $170 billion a year between 2012 and 2021—while in 2022 it set a spectacular record of $332.4 billion. This result was mainly caused by

Western actions: on the one hand, the oil embargo announced in mid-2022, and the natural gas crises evolving since March 2022, increased energy prices in Europe from which Russia became the largest beneficiary; and on the other hand, the export restrictions curtailed Russia's imports and therefore expanded the trade surplus. The capital flight, even though it had reached extremely high levels in 2022, was $91 billion less than the trade surplus, and this difference was around 70 percent higher than the 2010s average. This all created a "new equilibrium": while the overall amounts of exports fell in 2023 and will remain at lower levels compared to 2022, for many years to come, Putin feels himself comfortable for two main reasons.

The West, first of all, failed to crush Russia's energy exports during the time of war. Back in October 2022, I argued that the idea of the "oil price cap" was a non-flyer, because everybody in the world needs oil, and its supply cannot meet demand if around 7.3m barrels of Russia's daily supplies disappear from the market. Since Russia had offered hefty discounts to buyers, there was little doubt it could circumvent any kind of sanctions. This is exactly what happened in early 2023 as India alone increased the intake of Russian oil by 31 times succeeding even in reselling it to... Germany. Turkey, Singapore and Thailand, who had never been oil exporters, suddenly emerged as Europe's new sources of gasoline and gas oil. Moreover, starting from mid-2023, discounts on Russian oil began to decline, coming down from more than $30/barrel in early 2023 to less than $16/barrel in March 2024. By early 2024, Russia had more or less restored its energy exports, except for natural gas ones which were harmed by both European policies and US sanctions targeting LNG producers and the "shadow fleet" of outdated tankers Moscow had assembled for remaining safe from restrictions imposed on foreign transport companies (in Q1, 2024 the oil- and gas-revenues of the federal budget stood at a whopping 82 percent above the same figure for 2023).

As the Russian financial system became more isolated, Putin unexpectedly found himself in a country full of money from which the budget could borrow almost as much as it needed.

Additionally, the Russian government almost immediately enacted several steps that decreased the country's dependence on Western rules concerning its import policies. As early as 30 March 2022, the Russian government allowed so-called "parallel imports", the importation of Western goods bypassing authorized dealers. One could therefore buy, for example, iPhones in Brazil and ship them to Russia without the producer's consent and knowledge. The trade flows from the Western economies towards Turkey, Kazakhstan, Georgia and Armenia exploded as these countries became the largest intermediaries in trade with Russia. Simultaneously, the Russian government allowed Russian companies not to pay royalties to Western for using their intellectual property : from the Western software to the Western movies that are shown now in Russia in pirated copies. All of this also cut the cost of imports and increased the profits of the Russian companies from which the government collects more taxes. I would put it firmly: since the start of the war, the losses the Western companies encounter in Russia are becoming the Russian government's revenues, thus fueling Putin's war. And, frankly speaking, I cannot see any effective measures that might change this situation in the foreseeable future.

Additionally, the Russian government almost immediately enacted several steps that decreased the country's dependence on Western rules concerning its import policies.

The third point addresses the core element of Putin's war economy: military expenditures. For years, Western analysts presumed, for whatever reasons, that the Russian government had to oversee the sell-off of Russian oil on the global markets, collect dollars into the state budget, sell them for rubles and then use these funds to pay the industrialists for producing tanks and shells, as well as to disburse salaries and death gratuities to servicemen. This assessment was wrong, however, from the beginning. Russia pays its military equipment producers, as well as its soldiers in rubles, not dollars—and it can print these rubles in significant quantities (I will turn to this point later). The money dispersed drives up the demand for all the stuff needed for manufacturing weapons and ammunition, and increases the consumer demand if one talks about soldiers' salaries. By means of its own version of "helicopter money", the government secured the accelerating economic growth and a 7.8-percent increase in real wages in 2023. I would reiterate: a major part of the cost of Russia's military production does not depend on imports—and that which is supplied from China, is paid in rubles or renminbi as 90 percent of the Russia-China trade is now not dollar- or euro-denominated. Even if there is some need for buying Western-produced double-use goods, which are paid in dollars and smuggled into Russia through third countries, their value is so low no one would expect that the decrease in

Russia's export revenues would ever affect these purchases. The entire Western strategy of "preventing Russia from getting its exports revenues" has in fact had very little impact on the Kremlin's ability to finance the ongoing war.

Moreover, the times when the Russian government secured its revenue through collecting export duties on oil and gas are long gone. Since 2012, the government has been pushing forward a so-called 'tax maneuver' that was almost finalized by 2022. The essence of the move lies in lowering, and in the end, eliminating, export duties on oil and gas, transferring the gravity toward the severance tax which the government collects regardless of the global oil or gas price. With some exaggeration, it would be accurate to say that there is not much difference these days for tax authorities whether oil is exported as crude, processed at Russian refineries, or used domestically. One year after another, the Russian budget becomes less dependent on foreign trade—and even while the Russian oil companies still feel the pain, the Ministry of Finance does not, nor does the military-industrial complex. Many analysts have mentioned that Gazprom, which suffered the most from losing its European market, reported a Rub629 billion loss for 2023 , seeing it as a sign of Russia's problems. This is not the case, however, since Gazprom, despite its poor performance, contributed more than Rub 2.5 trillion to the federal budget. The case applies to the Russian LNG projects: the US sanctions hit them hard in November 2023, but the federal budget did not lose a penny as up until 2028 these projects were exempt from federal taxes, which was needed to attract investments from TotalEnergies and other foreign companies. The American authorities are therefore increasingly targeting the French and Japanese, rather than the Russians, in this particular case. So, once again, the task of undermining Russian revenues looks much more complex than it has been seen from Stanford University or the Atlantic Council.

One year after another, the Russian budget becomes less dependent on foreign trade—and even while the Russian oil companies still feel the pain, the Ministry of Finance does not, nor does the military-industrial complex.

The fourth obstacle deals with the mechanics of Russian economic growth and the budget flows that accompany it. It seems to many people that if the Kremlin spends money for the military, it is simply lost. In reality, however, the funds injected into military production, create new jobs, and increase salaries while the money paid to soldiers, infiltrates into the poorest regions of the country where the contract servicemen come from (Dmitry Belousov, a well-known economist and the brother of the newly appointed Defense Minister Andrey Belousov, already called the veterans "the new young wealthy", underscoring the difference between their pay and the average salaries in Russia). The profits of the Russian industrialists are on the rise, and even the omnipresent Russian corruption should be treated differently these days as the stolen funds are not channeled into offshore accounts but rather spent inside Russia, once again fueling economic growth (a debate broke out last year inside the Russian 'opposition' on whether it is a good time to fight corruption in Russia—and I strongly argued that today the elimination of corruption will not undermine Putin's regime but rather increase its military capacities). It is no coincidence that Putin mentioned the tax hikes in his annual address to the Federal Assembly in February: the financing of the war made this possible, and one may expect that the increase of the profit tax from 20 to 25 percent, together with changing the income tax brackets, will increase the federal budget revenues by at least Rub2.5 trillion in 2025 alone.

It seems to many people that if the Kremlin spends money for the military, it is simply lost. In reality, however, the funds injected into military production, create new jobs, and increase salaries

I have argued in several of my articles earlier this year that the constitution of the Russian 'war economy' has changed the economic logic of the Russian government a great deal. For years, it assumed that the money spent from the budget should be treated as a pure loss and believed that the lesser both the state and corporations pay the employees, the richer the state becomes (because of this, the share of wages in the Russian GDP decreased from more than 46 percent prior to 2014, to below 39 percent in the wake of the war). The Kremlin currently realizes that, in a sealed economy with many financial ties to the world already cut, it enjoys much larger freedom than before, and can opt for financing its needs through growing deficits, since at least part of the money spent will return through increased tax proceeds. This dramatic change in Kremlin's economic worldview is seemingly not understood by either the Western mainstream economists or by Russian opposition activists: quite recently during a public debate hosted by the independent website Verstka, Vladimir Milov, a respected economist with the Anti-Corruption Foundation, seriously insisted the profits of the Russian corporate sector are 'fictitious'

being only 'invented' by their book-keepers—but if that is the case, where do the military spendings originate from? I would argue that as the Russian economy becomes autarchic, the chances for running a sustained federal budget deficit—and therefore the chances for continuing the ongoing war—are increasing, not diminishing.

The fifth, and the last, point I would like to make, addresses some 'creative methods' that were already used or could be used by the Russian government for increasing its funding for Kremlin's military adventures. It might seem crazy, but the Central Bank's reserves arrested in Europe, may in fact be 'spent' in Russia. There is no doubt that some part of the arrested money belonged not to the Central Bank but rather to the government's reserves, known as the National Wealth Fund administered by the Ministry of Finance. The Ministry of Finance has authorized the Central Bank to manage these funds by investing it into reliable financial instruments on international markets. Even the arrest of the Central Bank's reserves did not change anything in relations between the Bank and the Ministry of Finance: in the latter's books, the money it possesses, in euros or in pounds, is deposited with the Bank of Russia. Therefore, it may still sell its currency assets to the Bank which should provide rubles against them. This means that the arrest of the Central Bank's funds affects the ruble exchange rate, but not the budget revenues or reserves. Of course, obtaining real rubles selling fictitious euros means pure money issuance and the increase of the M2 monetary aggregate (which has risen significantly in Russia both in 2022 and 2023), but inflation is not considered Russia's most urgent matter these days.

I would argue that as the Russian economy becomes autarchic, the chances for running a sustained federal budget deficit—and therefore the chances for continuing the ongoing war—are increasing, not diminishing.

The Ministry of Finance also currently borrows money on the domestic market at a rate lower than the Central Bank's key rate (or at around 14.5 percent against 16 percent). If the need arises for borrowing more, however, it can raise the yield offering some premium to the key rate—and this would change the entire picture because of one important peculiarity of the Russian financial system. If, for example, the Ministry of Finance issues its OFZ (or Federal Loan Bonds) yielding 17 percent per annum, the banks can buy them even they do not possess enough of their own funds, as they can immediately deposit the bonds in the Central Bank as a first-class collateral against a 16-percent loan from the Bank. In this case, the Ministry of Finance will pay the yield almost entirely to the Central Bank—and the latter, according to Art. 26 of the Law on the Bank of Russia, has to contribute ¾ of its annual profit to the federal budget, thus decreasing the real borrowing costs to around 5 percent per annum which is far less than the current official inflation rate of 8 percent. And all this, I would argue, are the easiest means to counter the financial shortages in today's Russia as some more sophisticated ones could be offered as well.

In order to therefore answer the question that was posted as this article's title, I would argue that: Putin will not run out of money. He will not encounter any crucial problems with Russian budget resources until the end of his 'new' presidential term, and, in all probability, until the end of his life—which, as the Russian Patriarch Kirill had observed recently, will also mark the end of his stay in the Kremlin. In addition to what has already been said, I want to make several more remarks explaining the general causes of the current condition.

The Russian economy of the 2020s differs dramatically from the Soviet economy of the 1980s. The crucial difference between the two consists in the role the private sector plays in today's Russia. It employs around 60 percent of the workforce and is extremely flexible compared to state-controlled entities.

The Russian economy of the 2020s differs dramatically from the Soviet economy of the 1980s—which, I would say, might have collapsed if facing the challenges the Russian economy now encounters. The crucial difference between the two consists in the role the private sector plays in today's Russia. It employs around 60 percent of the workforce and is extremely flexible compared to state-controlled entities. Back in 2022, when sanctions were first imposed and thousands of supply chains broke down, private entrepreneurs did their best to restore them as soon as possible since no one could afford her or his business to collapse. These private enterprises emerged from the Western-inspired 1990s reforms—but today they are the most important pillar of Putin's regime since their owners are ready to do almost anything they can to save their companies—and, through this, the entire Russian economy. Classical Western economics still insists that private property is the basis of political freedom, but in Putin's Russia it has turned into a ground for serfdom, as the owners decide to serve Russia's Fascist regime rather than lose all they have earned

over the last thirty years. These private enterprises employ people and pay taxes thus subsidizing the Russian state rather than being subsidized by it, as it was during Soviet times. Therefore, the money spent on the military appears to be not a deduction from the national wealth, but the cause of its increase, as it happens in other market economies (One should recall that in the US the economy received a huge push from the First and the Second World Wars as the enormous military spendings fueled private enterprises). I would argue that in today's Russia the military allocations are by any standards not too excessive for a developed market economy—at 6.7 percent of GDP they equal the US ratio of military spendings to GDP in 1986—during the times when the Cold War was basically over.

Classical Western economics still insists that private property is the basis of political freedom, but in Putin's Russia it has turned into a ground for serfdom, as the owners decide to serve Russia's Fascist regime.

The Russian economy these days is all that dependent on its energy or agricultural exports as many Western analysts used to think. The government may collect enough money for the war from domestic economic activity even if the exports are seriously disorganized. When, ten years ago, the late Senator John McCain called Russia "a gas station masquerading as a country" he might have been right, but he forgot that a gas station is a business everyone needs on a daily basis, so it may be possible to sustain the global economy without Russia as a consumer of most part of the Western-produced goods, but it is much more difficult to imagine the world without Russia as a supplier of different kinds of commodities to the global markets. And I will add that even the Soviet Union went bust, not because of the low oil prices, but collapsed due to profound failures in its economic organization; to the failures the Russian leadership has constantly avoided. I would admit that if Russia cut off all of its exports, if millions more Russians leave the country, and if the sanctions that prevent the capital flight from the country are lifted, Putin might face severe challenges—but for this to happen, the Western world should come to terms with the fact that its own losses will greatly exceed Russia's ones (the energy crisis of 2022 is proof as it increased Russian exports by $98.4 billion and the Russian budget revenues by Rub2.5 trillion while costing European nations up to €800 billion). If such perspectives are not pleasing to Western policymakers, the task should be rethought as soon as possible.

What would this rethinking look like? In my mind, we need to address the issue from a slightly different angle. When the experts argue that the task is to strip Putin of his money, they indicate just part of the problem—and not the most important one. Money is only a means of securing some productive resources—for buying new technologies, hiring people, producing armaments and ammunition. Therefore, the final aim is to disable the Russian government from achieving all these goals, and not so much making it short of gold or dollars. Moreover, even if the task is put only in its current manner—how one can diminish the amount of money Putin commands—there are two methods for succeeding in this enterprise: on the one hand, we can try to decrease the inflow of funds into Russia, and on the other, we can accelerate its outflow from the country: both trends in fact lead to the same desired outcome. Taking all this into account, we should reformulate the task.

The right goal, which needs to be placed on the current agenda, consists of minimizing the amount of any productive resources Putin's Russia is in possession of.

The right goal, which needs to be placed on the current agenda, consists of minimizing the amount of any productive resources Putin's Russia is in possession of. So, if the attempts to cut off the money flows into Russia fail, we can employ at least three alternative measures.

The first would be to counter the technology transfers to Russia and dry out as much of the trade in high-tech goods with Russia as possible. For this, both the secondary sanctions imposed on third country banks and companies can be used, and some economic stimulus for the nations that comply with the new regime on a voluntary basis. In the case of China, which has emerged as Russia's most important ally, the US and Europe may use banking sanctions which would force the local banks highly dependent on international business to comply with new regulations or face the closure of all their corresponding accounts in Western financial institutions and exclusion from the SWIFT system (some of these actions have already been taken, causing months-long processing of Russia-related payments in many Chinese financial institutions). In the case of post-Soviet states such as Kyrgyzstan or Armenia, the Western powers can offer either fast-track integration into the Euro-Atlantic community (which would be a sweet prize for Yerevan) or some extended assistance programs that would be welcomed all over Central Asia. But in all these cases the aim has to be the same: to cut Russia off from Western technology and

high-tech goods built through its use. This will reduce the effectiveness of Russian military production and destroy (at least in some sense) the common living standards (here I would also mention the disconnection of the Russian Federation from Western IT solutions and, if possible, disablement of all the Western-produced hi-tech devices until they are physically located inside its borders). The reason for these proposals is that the losses originating from the complete loss of the Russian market for Western goods will be many times smaller than the loss stemming from the ban of Russian exports to the world. Without discontinuing the hi-tech supplies to Russia, no one can expect the Russian economic conditions to deteriorate.

The first would be to counter the technology transfers to Russia and dry out as much of the trade in high-tech goods with Russia as possible.

The second measure should consist of immediate lifting of all restrictions concerning the use of foreign-based accounts and property by Russian citizens. Most of the sanctions, except those imposed on people that should rather be qualified as war criminals, should be lifted, and the outflow of money from Russia should be encouraged. Both European and US authorities should clear all mid-size deals made by the Russians: for example, the purchases of real estate valued at less than 2-3 million dollars or euros and depositing cash funds by less than 500k dollars or euros. The simplest calculation, made in 2022, indicates that in that year alone Russian citizens had transferred not less than $70 billion from their accounts into mostly Georgian, Armenian, Kazakh, and even Kyrgyzstan banks only in order to obtain payment cards and secure their access to global e-commerce. Would European regulation allow Russians to open accounts in web-based banks—like Revolut, for example—tens of billions of dollars would flow out of Russia every month. One should recall that there are at least Rub47 trillion of private funds deposited in Russian banks and more than $100 billion in dollars and euros held by the public. The opening of the legal capital flight would cause a sell-off of the Russian privately held assets and residential property, thus worsening the business climate, and increasing the pressure on the ruble as the demand for foreign currency rises. I would add that not much here depends on the Russian financial authorities: a well-organized system allowing Russians to send their money out of the country using cryptocurrency transactions is already in place, and the change in strategy will result in formidable consequences.

The third initiative, which might be even more painful for the Kremlin, could target Russian emigration. After Putin announced the so-called 'partial mobilization' back in September 2022, up to one million Russian citizens, 80 percent possessing master's or PhD diplomas, rushed out of the country. Most of them are young and self-made people, sharing Western values and able to integrate into European society. Their exodus had caused profound problems for Russia, and leading government officials confessed by the end of 2023 that the labor force shortage is the most acute structural problem the Russian economy has encountered since the start of the war. Instead of integrating these people, however, European countries (the Czech Republic not being an exemption) restricted visa issuance, banned entrance for Russian passport holders, and even sealed their borders with Russia. By the start of 2024, a substantial part of those who left the country in 2022, had returned—and Bloomberg reported that this reverse flow accounted for at least one third of Russia's encouraging economic growth of 2023. In my mind, if the West wants to dry out Russia's resources, it has to open its borders to Russians who should be granted residence and work permits (but not citizenship for at least 10-15 years) without a right to obtain access to social security payments from European countries for, at least, five years after they come to Europe. This kind of measure could result in the move of from three to five million Russians to European countries in two to three years, bringing with them not less that $500 billion in cash and assets (I have been analyzing, along with two colleagues, this strategy in a policy paper for the French Institute for International Relations to be presented to the public on June 11). The growing emigration might actually force Putin to close the borders—and this move will significantly contribute to his regime's decline and demise as it will reinforce internal popular resistance and might provoke a massive move for freedom. This is something which would be quite unexpected in Russia as the quite individual exit from the country remains the most effective personal strategy for resolving the problems caused by Putin's repressions.

The second measure should consist of immediate lifting of all restrictions concerning the use of foreign-based accounts and property by Russian citizens.

I would not go further with my arguments since it seems clear enough that the task of stripping Russia of its resources was taken in a very straightforward and one-dimensional manner by those responsible for drafting the response strategy to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. I will not talk here about the

obvious fact than no aggression was ever effectively countered by economic sanctions alone, and therefore most efforts should be aimed at securing military assistance to Ukraine and not on producing illusions that the Russian military industry will run out of steam (many of the texts arguing that it would appeared in 2022, but now they are quite rare)—but if one wants to drain Russian finances, it can be done much more effectively through accelerating the outflow of money from the country, than by ineffective control over the inflows into it.

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In conclusion, I would like to state that countering Russia is a difficult task, and if Western policymakers get serious about it, they need to reflect thoughtfully on all the pros and cons involved. Such an analysis has to address various issues and has to be based on the results the sanctions policy produced over the last two years. Western powers should bear in mind that the sanctions can be regarded as an effective measure and will only be backed by people if they inflict more damage on the aggressor country than to the European nations. Otherwise, it is better just to fund Ukraine's defense while continuing to purchase cheap Russian oil and gas without any administrative restrictions. Without a critical reevaluation of everything that has happened since February 2022, effective protection of the liberty of Ukraine and Europe looks impossible...

All resources for the article can be found at
www.aspeninstitutece.org/article/2024/will-putin-run-money/

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The land that came out of the footnotes

Ukraine was recognized too late and at too high price.
And the account is still not final.

On the early days of March 2022, as the Russian troops were approaching the outskirts of Kyiv and international media were focused primarily on Ukrainian frontlines, the informal meeting of the EU leaders at Versailles did not attract much attention of journalists, nor the document they adopted was carefully scrutinized. The insipid language of the Versailles declaration did not differ much from the past EU statements about Ukraine, reduced essentially to non-binding "acknowledgement" of Ukraine's "European aspirations and European choice" and vague promises to "further strengthen our bonds and deepen our partnership to support Ukraine in pursuing its European path". This time, however, a short phrase was added to the ritualistic curtseys to mark a real breakthrough in long and ambiguous EU–Ukraine relations. Seemingly simple and ordinary, it was absolutely unfathomable just a few weeks before. "Ukraine", the document stated, "belongs to our European family."

This might be too obvious, even trivial, unless we remember that throughout the past decades the official language of the EU had been watchfully cleansed of any wording that may have hinted at Ukraine's Europeanness. Because such a hint, the EU officials believed, may have implied, at least theoretically, Ukraine's eligibility for membership. And this was a real nightmare for the EU, as a French diplomat once told me, comparable only to the possible accession of Turkey. This is why not a single EU document has ever referred to Ukraine as to a "European state", but employed instead tricky euphemisms like a "partner country", or "neighboring country", and cautiously pushed it on mental maps into a safe distance, within a nebulous space called "western NIS", "western CIS", or "western Eurasia". This is why all Ukraine's overtures vis-à-vis the EU were met with a polite "acknowledgement" of its European aspirations—a frustrating catch-phrase that meant something like "give me your phone number, I'll call you later".

The real meaning of this politeness was revealed in less formal statements of many EU officials. Suffice to mention the notorious Romano Prodi's remark that Ukraine "has as much reason to be in the EU as New Zealand" (because New Zealanders, in his words, also have European identity). Or, even more scornful Günter Verheugen's quip that "anybody who thinks Ukraine should be taken into the EU should perhaps come along with the argument that Mexico should be taken into the U.S." For many Ukrainians who overwhelmingly, under all governments, supported the EU accession, it was really a cold shower. Especially for those who stood with the blue EU flags in Maidan under the police batons and snipers bullets in 2014, and who cherished their "European belonging" as a key element of their Ukrainian identity.

Ukraine is, "anti-Russia" inasmuch as its national identity is incompatible with the Russian imperial identity. And it is, an "existential threat" for Russia as an empire, though it is also a chance for the emergence of Russia as a nation.

Two denials

The persistent Western denial of Ukraine's Europeanness went hand-in-hand with the Russian denial of Ukraine's existence. Politically, these two denials were framed differently and had incomparably different consequences—purely institutional in one case and military-genocidal in the other case. (To what degree the first denial contributed to or facilitated the second, is another matter). Epistemologically, yet, both denials stemmed from the same root that can be defined, after Michel Foucault and Edward Said, and certainly after Ewa Thompson, as the "imperial knowledge"—a system of narratives that any empire develops about itself and the colonies to strengthen and legitimize its hegemony. In both cases, it was the *Russian* imperial knowledge that informed both the Russian and Western view of Ukraine, though in the latter case it was supplemented, of course, with some local experience and ideological-cum-ethical constraints.

Russian "Ukraine denial" has much deeper ontological roots, being strongly connected to the way in which the Russian imperial identity was constructed—by appropriation of Ukrainian (and Belarusian) history, territory and identity, and placing Ukraine/Kyiv in the very center of the imperial myth of origin. Independent Ukraine, by its very existence, undermines that mythology and challenges foundations of the Russian (imperial) identity. Ukraine as a sovereign nation-state provokes, within the imperial Russians, ontological insecurity and anxiety. Putin, who calls independent Ukraine "anti-Russia" and define it as an "existential threat" to his country, is correct in a way—with due caveats. Ukraine is, indeed, "anti-Russia" inasmuch as its national identity is incompatible with the Russian imperial identity. And it is, indeed, an "existential threat" for Russia as an empire, though it is also a chance for the emergence of Russia as a nation—as Brzezinski aptly remarked long ago.

Western nations who uncritically accepted and normalized, since the 18th century, the Russian imperial knowledge, largely accepted also "Ukraine denial" as a part it. The Westerners shared that "knowledge" through the 1990s and many still share, but their "Ukraine denial" had not been driven by any kind of ontological insecurity and anxiety. It simply mirrored the Russian mythology that suited perfectly their own cynical, a.k.a. "realist", policies vis-à-vis both Russia and Ukraine. When the Soviet Union collapsed, they accepted Ukraine's independence as a *fait accompli*, buttressed by the legal norms and procedures rather than cultural and historical arguments (so dear, in a perverse form, for Putin and his acolytes).

Ukraine's pronounced desire to "return to Europe", i.e., to join Euro-Atlantic institutions, was a different story. One may argue, more generally, that desire of East Europeans (and Ukraine in particular) to join the EU and NATO had challenged the established notions of "Europeanness" and provoked, in a way, some sort of ontological turmoil. While Russians' anxiety stemmed from the feeling that their imperial identity without Ukraine is incomplete, Europeans' anxiety stemmed from the opposite feeling—that their identity (not only well-being)

would be threatened by dubious, alien body. It was quite natural for them to re-adapt the old, epistemologically induced "Ukraine denial" into a more suitable denial of Ukraine's European identity and belonging.

To support this new, essentially anti-Ukrainian narrative, some elements of the Russian imperial knowledge (that had never been properly revised and dismissed in the West) were employed again. One of them, perhaps the most important under the new circumstances, was the overblown narrative about primordial Russian-Ukrainian closeness, proximity, affinity, interconnectedness and their virtual inability to exist without each other. This argument was beneficial also in practical terms since it justified a cynical "Russia-first" policy at the cost of its former satellites, assigned tacitly into the Russian "legitimate sphere of influence", a.k.a. Russian "backyard".

Ukrainians may have good reasons for anti-Western (re)sentiments since they had been rather betrayed and neglected than recognized. But the only alternative was Russia, a rogue autocratic state, determined to either assimilate Ukrainians

So, the former US ambassador to Moscow Jack Matlock explained to the readers of the reputable *New York Review of Books* that Ukraine was a "Nowhere Nations" and its language was derived from Russian [sic] in the 16th century; the German and French foreign ministries concluded in a joint classified report that "the admission of Ukraine [to the EU] would imply the isolation of Russia", so "it is sufficient to content oneself with close cooperation with Kiev"; the former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing argued that only "a part of Ukraine has a European character" while the other part has "a Russian character", so that other part "cannot belong to the European Union as long as Russia is not admitted to the EU"; and his German colleague, former chancellor Helmut Schmidt assured the readers that "as late as 1990, nobody in the West doubted that Ukraine had for centuries belonged to Russia. Since then, Ukraine has become an independent state, but it is not a nation-state". (Fans of critical discourse analysis would certainly appreciate the latest manipulative twist: rhetorical transformation of a dubious common wisdom—"nobody doubted"—into a proved fact: "Ukraine [still] is not a nation-state").

In a recently published article, Timothy Garton Ash recollects how in 2004, after the spectacular Orange Revolution, he urged the president of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, to say publicly that the European Union wished Ukraine one day to become a member. "If I did that," Barroso replied, "I would immediately be slapped down by two major member states [France and Germany]." "There will first have to be a discussion of whether a country is European", a spokeswoman for the EU external-relations commissioner candidly clarified the issue.

Unrequited love

Only within this context one may properly appreciate the tectonic change in the EU attitude toward Ukraine, indicated in passim, in a short phrase of the Versailles Declaration. It came too late, however, and at a too high price: vast swaths of the Ukrainian territory were occupied, cities destroyed and thousands of citizens killed. Ukrainians may have good reasons for anti-Western (re)sentiments since they had been rather betrayed and neglected than recognized and supported by fellow Westerners throughout all their history. But the only alternative was Russia, a rogue autocratic state, determined to either assimilate Ukrainians or physically destroy them. Ukraine national identity was fundamentally incompatible with the Russian imperial.

Ukrainians nation-builders of different colors perfectly understood this and leaned to the West, even though their desperate love remained unrequited. They saw there at least a chance, however small and improbable, while no chances remained whatsoever on the opposite side. Ukraine's pro-Western orientation was its *modus vivendi*, its *sine qua non* for survival vis-à-vis a hostile neighbor who made the "Ukraine denial" into the imperial creed. One may say that Ukrainians became "Westerners by default": they had little choice but to accept Western values and discourses, even though not always felt comfortable with them.

One may say that Ukrainians became "Westerners by default": they had little choice but to accept Western values and discourses, even though not always felt comfortable with them.

We may trace this since the mid-19th century when Shevchenko and his fellow Ukrainophiles from the SS. Cyril and Methodius Brotherhood broke the ranks of imperial Slavophiles with the subversive ideas of federalism and republicanism; we may find this in the official documents of the short-lived Ukrainian National Republic (1918-1920) and programmatic articles of its head Mykhailo Hrushevsky, one of which was titled remarkably "Our Western Orientation". We may discern the same rationales and imperatives in pro-Western positions

of Ukrainian dissidents of the 1960s and 70s, and in the predominant stance of Ukrainian politicians and population at large since independence.

It was not mythical nationalists (or "Nazis", in Putin's parlance) but the postcommunist president Leonid Kravchuk and the communist-dominated parliament who rejected Ukraine's full membership in the Russia-led Commonwealth of Independent States in the early 90s, and fenced off eventually many other integration initiatives promoted by Moscow. It was another postcommunist president (and a Russian-speaker, if anyone cares, from the south-eastern city of Dnipropetrovsk) Leonid Kuchma who, in 1998, signed a decree "On Reaffirming the Strategy of Ukraine s Integration into the European Union" and, five years later, signed the law "On the Fundamentals of Ukraine's National Security". The article 6 of that law, inter alia, stated that Ukraine "strives for integration into the European political, economic and legal space with the goal of membership in the European Union, as well as into the Euro-Atlantic security space with the goal of membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization". Remarkably, Kuchma's prime-minister at the time was the former Donetsk governor Viktor Yanukovych, who eventually himself, as the president, mused on the Association Agreement with the EU and shelved the idea only after the strong pressure from Moscow (that provoked mass protests and ultimately Yanukovych's downfall).

The Russian invasion did not change much Ukrainians' predisposition toward the EU since it had always been positive, but radically improved their attitude toward NATO.

Contrary to the commonly mediatized Western wisdom, some consensus about Ukraine's "European integration" had existed in Ukrainian society long before the "Euromaidan revolution" of 2013-14, even though many people hoped (rather naively) to combine Ukraine's westward drift with good relations with Russia. They did not support Ukraine's tentative membership in NATO, being fully aware of sensitivity of that issue for Moscow, but they did not expect at the time that the purely economic agreement with the EU would evoke a similar wrath. To placate Moscow, president Yanukovych adopted officially non-allied status for Ukraine in 2012 and extended the rent of the Sevastopol naval base to Russia for another 25 years but to no avail. In 2014, Russian forces occupied Crimea and staged a fake "rebellion" in Donbas.

The Russian invasion did not change much Ukrainians' predisposition toward the EU since it had always been positive, but radically improved their attitude toward NATO—as all the opinion polls since 2014 confirm. This reflects, to a certain degree, the exclusion of a substantial portion of the Sovietophile population of the Crimea and Donbas from surveying (and from voting in the national elections), but first and foremost this results from radicalization of the remaining part of the population. Moscow brutally taught Ukrainians that neither non-allied status nor staying off NATO would provide them security vis-à-vis the rogue neighbor.

Shortly after the Euromaidan, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology carried out a nationwide survey, asking the people which values Ukrainians, in their opinion, share with Russians and which with the Europeans. In both cases, the respondents were allowed to pick up three the most applicable features from the list. It appeared that Ukrainians believed they shared with Russia: "history and traditions" (46%), "culture" (26%), "ethnicity" (18%), "religion" (15%), and "language" (12%). It was in 2015; today they would probably not even bother to consider this question. But, remarkably, they compiled fundamentally different list of values they presumably shared (or, rather, would like to share) with the West: "rights and liberties" (28%), "democracy" (27%), "rule of law" (14%), "respect for the people" (14%), "economic development" (12%). (The last rather than first place of economic prosperity on the list is also remarkable). All in all, the results clearly indicate that Ukrainians perceive their real or mythical closeness to Russians as determined exclusively by the past, while their proximity to the West is seen as desirable for the future.

Kundera pursues two clear goals: first, to persuade Western readers that the so-called "Central Europe" shares the common culture and history with the West. And secondly, to remind the Westerners their debts and sins vis-à-vis "Central Europe", primarily the sins of neglect and betrayal,

Kundera's playbook

The Versailles Declaration of 2022 that has finally recognized Ukraine's belonging to "our European family" and opened a thorny way to its eventual EU membership, has brought Ukrainian "European dreams" as close to reality as never before. In the same year, however, with the Russian all-out invasion, Ukrainian "Eurasian nightmares" became also as real as never before. This enormously raises the stakes of the current struggle, making the need for mobilization of all the resources, including symbolical, highly important.

Public opinion is certainly such a resource, both domestically and internationally. At home, it is easier to exploit this resource since Ukrainians are well aware of what the war is about and what they are fighting for; with the past few years, they lost whatsoever ambivalence they used to have vis-à-vis Russia, the West, or national independence; they know today that this is a war of national survival—an existential war, and they do not use lofty words to express their feelings—like freedom, dignity, sovereignty; it is rather intellectuals' business to discuss these things, while common people articulate the war in mundane categories of "our land", "our country", "just-unjust", "right" or "wrong", "true" or "false". Or, as the mayor of Kryvyi Rih Oleksandr Vilkul (one of many Ukrainian politicians and Ukrainians in general who were labeled "pro-Russian" but fight today for Ukraine) explained his choice: "We were born here. The graves of our relatives are here. We have nowhere to go."

Today, in their messages to the West, Ukrainians employ all the narratives once used by Kundera. They emphasize their "Europeanness", their cultural affinity and historical interconnection.

Ukrainians simply feel it and do not need many words to be persuaded and mobilized. But international opinion is a different matter. And Milan Kundera's seminal essay may provide us here some lessons on which rhetorical strategies can be employed and which probably should not, which effects can be achieved and which side-effects should be avoided.

Throughout his essay, Kundera pursues two clear goals: first, to persuade Western readers that the so-called "Central Europe" (essentially, only three nations from the former Habsburgs empire occupied eventually by the Soviets) shares the common culture and history with the West to such a degree that Western Europe (= Europe in general) without them remains incomplete, ontologically insecure. And secondly, to remind the Westerners their debts and sins vis-à-vis "Central Europe", primarily the sins of neglect and betrayal, to evoke the feeling of guilt and empathy, and to channel it into a higher public awareness of Central Europe and stronger support for its "European", effectively anti-Soviet/anti-communist aspirations.

There was also the third, supplementary narrative that supported the main two discursive lines. It was a recurrent reference to Russia and/or Soviet Union that provided, as a dark "Asiatic" force, a suitable contrast to the impeccable Europeanness of Kundera's three chosen nations, and, on the other hand, reminded implicitly about the Yalta betrayal and other Western misdeeds, contributing thus to the blame-game and the Western feeling of guilt.

There are no clear proofs, however, that Kundera's essay had a significant impact on Western readers beyond a narrow circle of intellectuals who knew something, indeed, and cared a bit about the East European matters. Some of them ran in defense of the sacred cow called the "Great Russian Culture" allegedly undermined by Kundera, some pointed out at numerous overstatements, mistakes and manipulations in his text, and some aptly discerned in his essay a courageous challenge to the post-Yalta discursive conventions and the cold-war status quo.

Timothy Garton Ash, one of the most committed and perspicacious observers of Central East Europe, appreciated Kundera's concept as a timely reminder to the Westerners that the region is something more than the "footnotes to Sovietology". "East Berlin, Prague, and Budapest", he wrote, "are not quite in the same position as Kiev or Vladivostok", and "Siberia does not begin at Checkpoint Charlie". (Whether Siberia really begins in Kyiv and whether Ukraine's capital is exactly "in the same position as Vladivostok" was not discussed at the time, with some dramatic consequences apparent today).

In Eastern Europe, Kundera's essay, transmitted illegally, played probably much more powerful mobilizing role at the time than in the West. It was broadly perceived as an argument for the region's "European belonging" and a passionate claim for "return to Europe", to "normalcy", for liberation from the Soviet dominance. In Ukraine, I remember, we read the text typically in Polish translation (the Ukrainian translation was less accessible since it was published in Canada, in a diasporan journal "Dialog"), and we did not pay much attention to its exclusivist character at the time, noticed eventually by many critics. Kundera wrote off Ukraine from history as an exemplary case of a disappearing nation and downgraded it to the footnotes, but we had no hard feelings against the author: the threat of a complete disappearance was quite real. We celebrated the essay as a manifest of freedom, and call for emancipations, a roadmap to the West, away from Moscow.

The exclusivist essence of Kundera's concept came to fore much later, in the 1990s, when the notion was instrumentalized by the chosen "Central European" nations to elbow their ways to the elite clubs of the EU and NATO, bypassing less "Central" and less "European" co-prisoners from the same Soviet camp. As a Ukrainian philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko has noticed bitterly,

"the idea of the 'stolen West' may have been liberating for central Europe, but for the Europe situated further east it was disastrous. Instead of breaking down the wall between East and West, it simply shifted it further eastwards. The idea should have been used to fight totalitarianism everywhere, but instead localized it geographically in the territories of the former USSR, thereby placing a permanent 'curse' on our east European lands... Instead of remaining faithful to his own dictum and seeing just how much diversity there is on the whole of the European continent, [Kundera] chose to split it into two parts, in opposition to each other—the humanist West versus the demonic East that had stolen [Central European] part of the West."

Ukrainians may have the same illusions about the West that Kundera and his generation had, but they certainly have more self-confidence stemming from the newly acquired historical agency.

Today, in their messages to the West, Ukrainians employ all the narratives once used by Kundera. They emphasize their "Europeanness", their cultural affinity and historical interconnection. They remind Westerners their faults and blunders vis-à-vis both Ukraine and Russia, their long-time appeasement of the rogue regime, their betrayal of the Budapest memorandum and many other wrongdoing, striving apparently to wake up the guilty consciousness of their interlocutors. They construct Ukraine's image as thoroughly opposite to demonic Russia, and argue that nowadays this is the country of liars and killers rather than great composers and writers, as too many gullible Westerners still prefer to conveniently believe. And last but not least, Ukrainians use one more argument that Kundera mentioned only once, at the very beginning of his essay, when referring to the last words the Hungarian broadcaster during the 1956 Budapest uprising: "We are going to die for Hungary and for Europe." The phrase seems to become the main Ukrainian message now: "We are dying for your security, your freedom, your values. We are dying for international order, principles, justice".

With all this rhetorical similarity, there is also a profound difference. Ukrainians today can rely on the arguments that were not available for Kundera at that time. Because the cold war order was based on the Yalta agreements reaffirmed by Helsinki accords that stipulated, as Przemysław Czapliński aptly remarked, "nienaruszalność granic, a więc—nienaruszalność narracji" ("inviolability of borders, and therefore—inviolability of the narrative"). Ukrainians now can employ legal arguments which are fully on their, not Moscow's, side. The cultural and historical and even moral arguments (especially in politics) are disputable while written rules and agreements are much more clear-cut. Whatever Putin may fantasize about Ukraine's "artificialness" and Russia's special entitlement to destroy it, there is undeniable fact of aggression against the sovereign state, there is a blatant violation of the UN charter and bi-lateral and multilateral documents, there is an apparent crime of war and increasingly obvious crime of genocide. This does not make historical, cultural and other arguments irrelevant or redundant but inevitably relegates them to a secondary, auxiliary role.

Ukrainians may have the same illusions about the West that Kundera and his generation had, but they certainly have more self-confidence stemming from the newly acquired historical agency. This was famously expressed by the Ukrainian president on the first day of the war—in his alleged response to American diplomats who proposed him evacuation from Kyiv to a safer place: "I need ammunition, not a ride."

The real tragedy of the new "Central Europe" that shifted eastward, is that it was recognized too late and at too high price. And the account is still not final.

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ALEKSANDER KACZOROWSKI
INTERVIEW

Orlando Figes: Putin Certainly Won't Stop

Russian national identity is based on pride in its armed forces and its ability to defeat an enemy, albeit an enemy largely invented, like the Ukrainians—says Prof. Orlando Figes in an interview with Aleksander Kaczorowski.

ALEKSANDER KACZOROWSKI:

Prof. Figes, have you ever met Vladimir Putin?

ORLANDO FIGES: Yes, at a reception. It was just a very brief interchange of words. The one thing that struck me was he had a very soft handshake. I was expecting a man with a firm grip and he had a very limp sort of soft, pudgy hand. It surprised me at the time.

Where was it?

At the Valdai Conference in 2015. Perhaps I shouldn't confess to having gone there after the annexation of Crimea, but lots of people at that time were still prepared to talk with the Russians.

It's pretty obvious that as a historian you were just interested in going there to see how the system works. But what was the lesson for you from this Valdai event? Were the Russians trying to communicate with the West or was it just a Potemkin village?

I think it was a Potemkin village, as you call it. And the one thing that really struck me at the time, the one sort of depressing lesson I really took from it, was when Putin turned up four hours late for his speech.

We all kept waiting in the hall, unable to leave because of security. I didn't go with the intention of asking a question. I went just as an observer, really. I went

along with some reservations, mainly out of curiosity. But the one thing that I took away from it was that, although they allowed several questions from international journalists, none of them really hit home hard with any critical questions.

Like what?

There were no questions on Crimea. There was a fair representation of Western journalists asking questions, but I think that was a time when somehow they were sort of overwhelmed by the four-hour wait to hear Putin speak. They were cowered into an element of almost submission, really. That was my one takeaway, that this power play by Putin was still effective.

Russia had just intervened in Syria, so that dominated the discussion. The questions were around Syria. There was quite a lot of questioning on the domestic front, about the need to diversify the economy and stuff, but it wasn't really anything very hard hitting.

In the same year, I was at the German-Russian forum in Berlin. There was a panel with Chatham House, NGO type people. The Putin acolyte, Fyodor Lukyanov, was there. And I remember on that occasion asking a question about Crimea. And I think I pitched it on the question of the Tartar population and the atrocities being committed against them and the rest of their leaders and stuff. And I was told by both Russian and Western sides of the panel that Crimea was a fait accompli. That there was nothing to be done about it now. It was off-limits. It was out of bounds. It just had to be accepted.

I was quite shocked by that. But now looking back, it does remind me how the West went along. What did we do in reaction to the Crimean annexation? Not a lot, really. The sanctions were very weak. Business went on as usual, etc.

I'd say that the mythologies involved in Putin's view of history, particularly the history of Russia and Ukraine, are not new post-1991. You can find in any nineteenth century Russian imperial history.

So, what were the reasons that Putin started the war?

I think he's firmly ideologically committed to his vision of Russia, not being Russia without Ukraine as he mapped out in that essay of 2021. And I think he firmly believes, and it's a long line of thought in Soviet history really, that if Ukraine comes under the influence of Western ideas, it will become anti-Russia. Stalin said much the same. Putin fits firmly into that ideological way of thinking about Ukraine.

As soon as Putin says Peter the Great reclaimed the Baltic Lands for Russia, not conquered them, they become Russian and that's it.

What would be your advice to Putin then?

There's not very much advice that could be given. One would have to sit him down for a historical seminar and try and just persuade him that this view is irrelevant, because Ukraine has been independent since 1991 and Russia has recognized that many times. And also that the old Russian fear of encirclement by the West, as a hostile anti-Russian force, is a fundamentally mistaken set of ideas. So it would take a whole series of seminars.

Your latest book The Story of Russia was just published in Poland. You say how mythology warms the battle with history in Russian minds, at least in Putin's mind, and how that created the circumstances in which such an act of horror, like the aggression towards Ukraine, was possible. But would you explain to me why mythology won over history in Russia after 1991?

Firstly, I'd say that the mythologies involved in Putin's view of history, particularly the history of Russia and Ukraine, are not new post-1991. The ideas he put forward in that essay of 2021, you can find in any nineteenth century Russian imperial history, Solovyov, Karamzin, etc.

So this is basic to the way the Russians have been taught their history since the nineteenth century. And although there was a very short period after 1991, when schools, for example, were allowed to decide their own approach to history, it didn't last long. One of the first things Putin did, on coming to power, was to reclaim the Ministry of Education's control of the school and university curriculum. They set very strict guidelines for textbooks, and then ultimately took control of the dissemination of textbooks.

The second point is that history has long been subject to mythologization in Russia, partly because of the power of myths in Russian culture, which I rehearsed in the introduction. But more importantly, in terms of the modern intellectual context. History, particularly in the Soviet period, became so politicized that it became a fundamental part of the ideological system. In Russia we have an absence of a normal political agreed discourse over the meaning of such basic terms as freedom, rights, independence, etc. The whole gamut of ideas that we use in our own political discourse has never really had free reign to develop in Russia. History has always

been claimed by states as the basis for building ideological systems. And again, that goes way back into Russian history. The use of the clash between Christian Russia and the Asian people would be just one example.
But it means that political movements, states or rulers, in Russia have used history as the basis to build an ideology about what Russia is and what it should be and what its relationship with the world should be, what its messianic role is and so on. And as soon as rulers do that in Russia, it means that history is put outside the realms of free debate and discourse in Russia. As soon as Putin says Peter the Great reclaimed the Baltic Lands for Russia, not conquered them, they become Russian and that's it.
That locks in a whole set of ideological precepts about the origins of the Rus', the ethnic background of the Baltic peoples, the cold war geopolitics of Kaliningrad and all the rest of it. It locks in a whole series of historical issues that can no longer be discussed. So it's not just a phenomenon of post 1991 or post 2000 under Putin. It's a fundamental problem that in Russia ideology is constructed through history.

And that's why Memorial society is regarded as a foreign agent and history completely disappeared from books, from TV, from the media?

This is a slightly different question and much more complicated. You ask what Putin's reclamation of history for the state entailed and why it gained such traction. Why was there no more free development of historical research?

The Russians were unable to come up with a story of themselves that was detached from the dominant ideology that collectivization was necessary and good.

Why?

Perhaps because the Russians, as opposed to other Soviet peoples, were really ill-equipped and found it very difficult to come to terms with what had happened under Stalin and the Soviet experience generally. It was very uncomfortable for people in the 1990s to face up to the state violence and its consequences and the collaboration of so many people in that violence. In contrast, Ukrainian national identity is based on being not Russian. It's based largely on the Holodomor, right? So the Holodomor was done to us by the Russians, that's the story.

Do you agree with the view that the Holodomor was a kind of genocide planned against Ukrainians as a nation by Stalin? Or is it just an interpretation?

I think it's largely an interpretation. I can see why the Ukrainians feel and argue that, particularly given the strength of the Soviet campaign against any Ukrainian political elites that accompanied the Holodomor. But I think I've yet to be convinced by any of the historical evidence presented by the Ukrainians to suggest that ethnically Ukrainian areas were targeted as opposed to other ethnic areas. Much of North and East Ukraine is highly variegated ethnically. And there's no evidence that there were requisitioning brigades or terror units of one sort or another picking on Ukrainian as opposed to mixed areas. So I think it's more problematic. But the point I wanted to make about this is that the Russians also had a Holodomor, but it was called collectivization.
And collectivization is more problematic for the Russians, because I cite, for example, that television series, Sud vremeni, a historical debate over collectivization. Despite it having killed so many people, despite it having ruined so many families and exiled so many people and destroyed so much in terms of village life, families and so on, about 90% of the Russians watching that program were prepared to say it was a necessary measure.
And this is a problem, because collectivization is built into this historical ideology arguing that Stalinism was somehow a step forward, albeit with mistakes, that it industrialized the country. Thanks to it they beat Nazism, which is the basic historical underpinning of Russian ideology. They beat Hitler and they're going to go on beating Hitler and his descendants in the Ukraine today. That's what Putin argues, isn't it?
The Russians were unable to come up with a story of themselves that was detached from the dominant ideology that collectivization was necessary and good. It's largely the problem of the immense discomfort it causes to people to think about what happened under Stalin: what were my grandparents and my parents doing under Stalin. When I was working there in the 1990s and early 2000s, you came across a lot of hostility, because people just didn't want to confront these questions. In my view, that is the underpinning of why Putin found such a ready audience for his message: we don't need to beat ourselves up over our own history, we should take pride in our own history.
And indeed, under this ideology of sovereign democracy that Vladislav Surkov and others developed in the 2000s, to be a sovereign country, to be a truly independent state and take pride in ourselves as a people, we need to reclaim all of our history, including what happened in the 1930s and 1940s.

Is it still possible to buy or borrow your book The Whisperers in Russia?
Good question. I don't know what the answer to that is. I guess until the war it was possible to get it shipped by Amazon or whatever. I don't think you would have found it in any bookshops. There was a Russian edition, yeah?
No, there wasn't a Russian edition.

In my view, that is the underpinning of why Putin found such a ready audience for his message: we don't need to beat ourselves up over our own history, we should take pride in our own history.

How come?
It was a long, much publicized and acrimonious issue. There was a contract to publish it, to translate it. And then some people intervened. Stephen Cohen wrote an article stirring up a lot of trouble, claiming that it was dropped because there were too many mistakes in it or too many things that were going to cause offense to the people who were giving the interviews to that project.
There were mistakes as they're bound to be in a book where you're drawing on so many interviews. And there are obviously going to be cases where families or some members of the family might think we don't want this written about our relatives. And in many letters to the publishers, I try to get over all of that by negotiation, by correction, and indeed explaining that a lot of the alleged mistakes weren't really mistakes at all or were a question of interpretation. But it was dropped by the Russian publisher without even answering my letters. So that begs the question, why?

And what was the real reason?
Cohen was a Putin supporter, a paid Putin supporter in the West. And I've actually just now requested the materials of his archive that have been made available at Princeton. And I'll get to the bottom of this. But my sense is that Cohen, out of vindictiveness or whatever, was trying to prevent this being published in Russia.
But to get back to your original question, it would have been possible to get hold of The Whisperers in Russia. I have Russian colleagues who have done so. But censorship is effective even at that level, because you have to go out and look for that sort of material, which is different from just passively receiving information and ideas given to you by the mass media in Russia. So the system of censorship works, because it doesn't take much to put pressure on Russian publishers or distributors of books in Russia to just leave something alone, which is I think at the bottom of the story of The Whisperers.

Will Putin win this war?
Putin will win this war if the West buckles under its own internal divisions. And he'll certainly win if Trump wins the next US election. And I think he was always counting on these likelihoods. But first of all, what he was counting on was the fact that Ukraine means more to Russia than to the West. And he was counting on his notion that the West is a decadent, egotistic materialistic place, which doesn't really care what happens in the world as long as people can play on their mobile phones and get their takeaways. And I'm afraid it's beginning to look that way if we consider the polling. So, I'm afraid it doesn't look good for Ukraine.

Putin will win this war if the West buckles under its own internal divisions. And he'll certainly win if Trump wins the next US election. And I think he was always counting on these likelihoods.

What's the one thing that would be the best realistic scenario for Ukraine? A divided country?
I think at the moment that's quite possible, unless the Europeans can make up when the Americans are likely to withdraw in terms of support, whether Trump wins or not. Frankly, I can't see the Americans continuing to finance the Ukrainians at the level they have been for much longer.
Putin isn't going to stop. Then I think a moment will come for the Ukrainians when they have to think, what is the price of a viable state? What is the price of a viable Ukraine? I say that because it seems to me that what Putin cannot conquer of Ukraine, he will try to destroy, and I don't believe that the Russian army is capable of conquering the whole of Ukraine.
I never did. In the first version of The Story of Russia, which was completed in November-December 2021, I said it was quite likely that Putin sends in troops for an incursion into East Ukraine as a way of strengthening his negotiating position. But I didn't think the Russians were capable of conquering the whole of Ukraine. I think whatever he can't conquer, he will try and destroy. He will destroy the infrastructure, he will destroy the energy supplies, he will do whatever he can to make Ukraine a dysfunctional state.
On the other hand, my view has consolidated since the full-scale war started that no peace or any settlement, even with American security guarantees for whatever they're worth, is feasible as long as we have Putinism in power. In other words, in one form or another, this war by Russia against Ukraine will

continue as long as this regime is in power. If Putin drops dead tomorrow, he'll be replaced by someone with the same ideology or maybe even worse, who knows? So it requires the defeat of Putinism as an ideology and as a governing or terror system, as we could call it. And that means a very, very long haul, I'm afraid, to salvage what can be salvaged of Ukraine as a viable state.

An idea was put forward recently that Ukrainians cede to Russia what it has taken, but then NATO troops are in Ukraine. Ukraine joins NATO in some form or some sort of NATO force is in Ukraine to defend what remains of it. Who knows? This is all speculation at the moment, but there will come a point where some such decision could be taken, and it's for the Ukrainians to decide, obviously. It's not for anyone else, but it's for the Ukrainians to decide whether they've had enough and require some sort of settlement, however fragile and unreliable it may be to preserve what they have and hopefully join the EU and NATO on that basis.

Have you been in Ukraine since the war started?

No.

Have you been invited?

No, I haven't.

Putin isn't going to stop. Then I think a moment will come for the Ukrainians when they have to think, what is the price of a viable state? What is the price of a viable Ukraine? What Putin cannot conquer of Ukraine, he will try to destroy.

But you would like to go there?

If I was invited I'd go. How can I put this? The debate is very polarized. So any historian of Russia, and basically I'm a historian of Russia, is regarded with great suspicion by Ukrainians. So I'm not on the list of people that the Ukrainians would think about inviting. Because I would probably be accused by Ukrainian nationalists of basically having a Russo-centric view of the Russian Empire, or a Russo-centric view of the Soviet Union. And I will happily confess that perhaps my perspective on Russian and Soviet history used to be more Russo-centric than I would like it to be now. But the decolonization of Russian history or the shift from the center to the periphery, if you prefer, has only been going on really for the last 10-15 years. So I don't have any sense of shame of owning up to the fact that perhaps with retrospect, if I was to write now A People's Tragedy again, for example, I would do so with some more attention to the periphery, if I can put it that way.

The war changed the Ukrainians, re-defined Ukrainian national identity. But how will this war change Russian national identity?

Let's try and pin it down to empirical data, because the polling shows consistently that whenever Russia declares war, whether it's against Georgia or the Chechens or the Ukrainians, the polling of its leader goes up, and the sense of pride in Russia goes up.

So we're in a situation now, unfortunately, where this war has by and large shown that Russian national identity, if it's based on anything, it's based on pride in its armed forces and its ability to defeat an enemy.

So we're in a situation now, unfortunately, where this war has by and large shown that Russian national identity, if it's based on anything, it's based on pride in its armed forces and its ability to defeat an enemy, albeit an enemy largely invented.

And this is another illustration of the capture of history by the state, the capture of the story of Russia by the state, which since 1945 has basically defined national identity by the victory over Nazism. And so if Russia is to become a more democratic society in any sense, or at the very least a society at peace with its neighbors, it must have a different story to tell itself. And I'm afraid it is no good to go back to Tchaikovsky and Tolstoy and all the rest of it, to form a national identity. That doesn't mean very much to Russians anymore. So the Russians will have to find a story about themselves which is not based on its military aggression and its military victories, but which is based on a sense of who they are as a political community.

And here again, this actually was my message at a big conference in Brussels in June 2023 for the Russian opposition. What can the story of Russia be for the Russians who want a more democratic vision of Russia? I went back to the point I made to you about the Holodomor and collectivization. The fundamental issue here is that collectivization destroyed the basic unit of civic governance, the village. And since 1991, if you go into the Russian village, there's nothing there. In contrast, if you go to a village in most of Ukraine, most of Poland and most of any of the states that were once under Soviet hegemony, there are community-based forms of self-government with accountability. In Russia, collectivization destroyed the village, destroyed any sense of civic responsibility at the most basic unit of society, that is a small village.

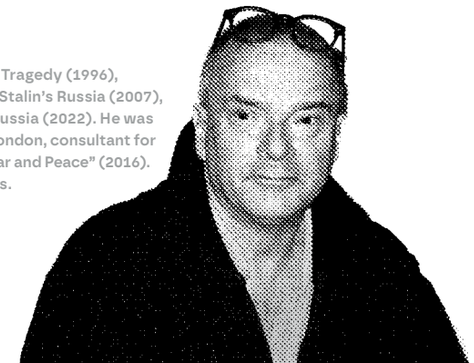
It's very well described in short stories by Vasily Shukshin, published in the 1960s, during the post-Stalinist thaw. He was one of the most favorite Russian writers at the time.

Yeah, absolutely. And that was very much part of the whole 'dierievenshchiki', rural writers phenomenon, as well. By destroying the villages, collectivization just gutted this basic sense of not just responsibility, but accountability. Because the other thing that we have to bear in mind is that Stalin destroyed accountability, which is one of the most important principles of democracy, and this is one of the main reasons Russia is now in such a mess. Accountability means that if you are corrupt, abuse power, make mistakes, you are accountable as a leader. And what Stalin did was turn that on its head.

The Russians will have to find a story about themselves which is not based on its military aggression and its military victories, but which is based on a sense of who they are as a political community.

So that is the Russian system. Putin has people who will take the blame before him and they have people who will take the blame before them and so on all the way down the line. So there's no sense of accountability, which is why power is so connected to property, wealth and abuse of power and corruption, and why people feel so powerless and yet feel no need to take responsibility. All they need to do is go along with what they're told. How do you get out of that mess? I don't know. That takes a long time.

ORLANDO FIGES
is a British historian and author of the books A People's Tragedy (1996), Natasha's Dance (2002), The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia (2007), The Europeans (2019) and most recently The Story of Russia (2022). He was Professor of History at Birkbeck College, University of London, consultant for the British historical films "Anna Karenina" (2012) and "War and Peace" (2016). His books have been translated into over thirty languages.



VERONIKA MUNK

Quick Guide to the Central-Eastern European Media Sphere

The global independent news media is facing a series of crises, including the decline of print journalism, the overpowering influence of tech giants, and the struggle to secure sustainable financing for news production. These issues are compounded by the rapid rise of artificial intelligence, the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation, growing news fatigue, and a broader, troubling loss of trust in journalism. However, the situation in the V4 countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) presents unique challenges that threaten press freedom even further. From political pressures on independent media to shrinking ad revenues and government-aligned media consolidation, the free press in Central and Eastern Europe is facing an uphill battle. While it is simple to focus solely on the negative, there are pockets of innovation and hope. Several media outlets across the region are experimenting with new models of digital journalism, audience engagement, and investigative reporting, offering a glimmer of light in a troubled media environment. In this article, I will explore both the critical challenges and these emerging bright spots that demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of journalism in the V4 region.

I spent over two decades working in Hungary at leading independent media outlets, and more recently, I have been involved with the management of Denník N, a prominent Slovak independent news organization. Denník N is part of a regional media family that includes Slovak, Czech, and Hungarian-language news portals and newspapers.

In both Slovakia and Hungary, government leaders often view the media as either a mouthpiece for propaganda or a formidable opponent. In Hungary, nearly 15 years of Viktor Orbán's administration have left the independent media landscape drastically diminished. Meanwhile, in Slovakia, the return of Prime Minister Robert Fico has raised concerns, especially with his swift takeover of public service media and his frequent attacks when he labels specific newspapers and journalists as enemies. This is particularly alarming in a country still reeling from the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová just a few years ago.

First challenge: when political power influences or dominates the media field

State capture of the media and the implementation of new, distorting laws were first executed in the region by Hungary, where Prime Minister Viktor Orbán implemented the process in an advanced and highly effective manner. Other political leaders in the region have followed, or are currently following, in his footsteps, attempting to replicate his methods.

Media ownership by politically biased institutions and oligarchs is now a feature of all V4 countries to some extent. In Slovakia, the Penta group, which controls several influential media outlets, has close ties to the populist government. In Poland, there are traces of the previous PiS government's media control, for example, much of the regional media is owned by a state-owned company, the Polish state oil company PKN Orlen. Meanwhile, in Hungary, a vast network of online, broadcast, and print media operates as a propaganda machine serving political interests.

However, this was not always the case.

I began my career as a journalist in Hungary in 2002, and I vividly remember when the country ranked at the top of the Reporters Without Borders' press freedom list. In 2006, for instance, Hungary was ranked tenth out of 170 countries. At that time, when I asked questions to high-ranking representatives of authorities, hospitals, political parties, or ministries, they responded. However, this has completely changed. Today, in-depth answers and interviews with non-governmental news outlets are rare. Parallel to these worrying developments, Hungary's ranking in the press freedom index has dropped dramatically. By 2024, Hungary ranked 67th, comparable to Sierra Leone, and second-to-last among European Union countries.

The main driver behind this steep decline is state capture, a phenomenon frequently highlighted by independent organizations concerned about press freedom. State capture in the media occurs when governments build their own media ecosystems and take over once-independent outlets through political or business interests. I experienced this firsthand in 2020, when the management of Index, Hungary's leading quality news outlet where I had worked for 18 years, fired the Editor-in-Chief. As his Deputy, I resigned the next day, alongside more than 90 colleagues, as it became clear we could no longer maintain independent journalism there. We experienced firsthand how swiftly politics can influence our lives and the information sources of the public. This is the core problem with state capture: it makes access to factual, impartial information increasingly difficult for citizens.

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán realized sometime in the 2000s that controlling the media was key to his political strategy. He went beyond distorting public service media into a government propaganda tool, spending this year 360 million euros of taxpayers' money for this purpose. His ambitions extended further, resulting in a fractured Hungarian media landscape: the majority of outlets now align with the ruling Fidesz party, while a minority remain independent.

This is the core problem with state capture: it makes access to factual, impartial information increasingly difficult for citizens.

One of the tools used to control the media and shape public opinion was the creation of the KESMA (Central European Press and Media Foundation) organization in 2018, which the government declared a matter of "national strategic interest." KESMA, technically a foundation, owns more than 500 media outlets—including TV channels, radio stations, online news sites, tabloids, and all county dailies. Such media concentration has not been seen in Europe since the communist era. The scale and centralization of KESMA's control is unprecedented on the continent and unimaginable in the Western world.

KESMA, while technically being an independent nonprofit foundation, has been run by Orbán loyalists since its establishment. Its massive media portfolio was gifted by pro-government businessmen as charitable donations. Although the assets were donated, the corresponding transactions are estimated to be worth around 90 million euros.

An example of this centralization can be seen when all the country dailies published identical content during the Prime Minister's 2019 Christmas

interview, illustrating the foundation's tight grip on Hungary's regional media landscape.

The pro-government media conglomerate is highly organized and has virtually unlimited resources, in stark contrast to the critical media sphere, which operates mostly online. The independent outlets are underfunded, fragmented, and often compete with one another, all while being hit by multiple economic crises.

Beyond media ownership, new laws have significantly shaped the free press in Hungary. The country leads the way in this regard. With Fidesz holding a constitutional two-thirds majority in Parliament, they can pass any law impacting the media landscape. In 2010, a new media law was passed to restructure public service media, transforming it into a platform that primarily serves Fidesz, with little regard for public service.

In 2024, the Protection of National Sovereignty Act established a so-called Sovereignty Protection Office (SPO), ostensibly aimed at countering foreign influence in Hungarian elections. The law was drafted in such a way, however, that it could also be used to target independent media outlets. This legal tool, which rapidly developed, now hangs over the press like a sword of Damocles, enabling the ruling party to restrict democratic freedoms in various ways. For instance, the investigative outlet Átlátszó is already under investigation, and the SPO is reportedly looking to cooperate with the Hungarian National Bank to monitor selected banking transactions at will.

Second challenge: when big tech dominates and influences the media field

In the last 10-15 years, in an accelerating process, very large platforms like Google, Meta, and X have come to dominate the digital advertising market and control how news is distributed and consumed. Media companies are vulnerable to algorithms that operate in a largely non-transparent way, making revenues and turnover unpredictable.

While over the past decade and a half more advertising money has been directed toward these platforms, making them dominant in the distribution of online content, the EU Copyright Directive provided some hope to the media industry by introducing neighboring rights remuneration. In February 2022, Google decided to stop showing snippets (short summaries, previews, images) of Czech news articles in its search results in response to the European Union's Copyright Directive, which had been transposed into Czech law. The directive aimed to ensure that news publishers are fairly compensated for the use of their content by online platforms, as these platforms generate huge revenues thanks to the work of publishers, hardworking journalists, and content creators. Any article summary read on Google's search page actually harms publishers financially because the reader does not visit their site, but rather stays on search engines or social networking sites. There is no direct link to the media outlet, no views, no clicks, and therefore no advertising revenue. A legislative solution was necessary, but its implementation has been fraught with tension and varied from country to country in the region. In some countries, there have been attempts to bring publishers together, but either individual business interests or, in many cases, political interests (as seen in Slovakia, Hungary, or Poland) have led to individual deals between publishers and these very large, influential platforms.

The simplified question in these negotiations is always: how much should tech platforms pay news publishers for using their content to generate revenue?

In a unique move in Czechia, 17 leading media companies joined forces to try and reach a compromise solution through joint rights management, but the attempt failed. The associations of Czech publishers pointed out that Meta and Google's decision was "one-sided and was made with minimal effort to establish meaningful dialogue with the publisher associations representing the vast majority of online news and magazine content in the Czech Republic."

The challenge persists. The trend is for publishers to negotiate individual deals with large platforms to get some money for licensing their content, but often much less than what they are estimated to deserve. If publishers are unwilling to settle, the platforms use their dominance to shut down important services, as seen in Czechia, resulting in reduced visibility for news pieces, lower traffic, and serious revenue losses.

The simplified question in these negotiations is always: how much should tech platforms pay news publishers for using their content to generate revenue?

Third challenge: When misinformation and disinformation infiltrate the media field and distort the views of the audiences

"Yes, I'm alive. I never thought I'd have to post this on the Internet. Someone is sending out a fake copy of my website on behalf of my spokesperson with a message about my death," wrote Czech President Petr Pavel shortly before the last Czech elections.

But this is just one of countless examples where either an organization or a branch of the political elite, whether inside or outside a country, spreads fake news to demonstrate power or create confusion within smaller or larger communities. Sometimes it concerns internal or external politics; in other cases, it involves health issues. As a Globsec report pointed out last year, "the impact of health-related disinformation shared during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to distrust towards pharmaceutical companies, health organizations, and vaccinations. Approximately 37 percent of the CEE region believe that COVID-19 vaccines increase the risk of premature death, and 56 percent suspect pharmaceutical companies of concealing effective treatments for diseases like COVID-19 and cancer for profit."

Misinformation in our region is a growing challenge, exacerbated by political polarization, foreign influence, and digital platforms. External actors, especially from Russia, have been implicated in spreading disinformation to destabilize the region, a trend that intensified following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

We can combat this phenomenon through regulatory reforms, but also by returning to the roots of independent journalism: strengthening media literacy, enhancing fact-checking, carefully using sources, and educating the public—especially the vulnerable younger generations—about the nature of fake news.

Misinformation in our region is a growing challenge, exacerbated by political polarization, foreign influence, and digital platforms.

And the promising regional developments that give cause for optimism

Despite the challenges detailed above (and many more), there are also promising and hopeful signs in the free media space in the region, with successful new projects emerging and tens of thousands of readers realizing over the last decade that if they want to consume free, factual, independent information, they need to contribute financially by paying a few euros a month for content—about the same as two or three specialty coffees. They need to understand that they need to contribute financially not just at newsstands on the street, but also online.

Denník N, the independent news outlet where I work, now has 70,000 subscribers in Slovakia, a country of 5 million people. In terms of ratio to population, this is slightly larger than the New York Times' subscriber base in the United States (no brag, but yes, brag).

In Hungary, independent media outlets like 444.hu, Telex.hu, Válasz.hu, and the investigative journalism center Direkt36 also survive on reader donations or subscriptions. Additionally, in Hungary, the system-critical YouTube channel Partizán received just over a million euros from nearly 40,000 viewers in 2024 from 1% tax donations. In Slovakia, Michal Kovačič raised more than 500 thousand euros in two days for his new online television project. Michal Kovačič, a talk show host, left Markíza TV earlier this year after discussing political influence on the broadcaster during a live broadcast.

Moreover, if a government is not hostile to free media, it can help the development of the media space by fostering traditional journalistic values such as transparency, independence, accuracy, and correctness through well-targeted regulation. As the Reuters Institute's Free Media Country Report pointed out, in the Czech Republic, "the amendment to the Act on Conflict of Interests has finally forced the ex-Prime Minister, Andrej Babiš, to sell the media assets that had been 'parked' in his trust fund since 2017."

There is no point in dreaming or waiting for independent media to return to a ‚normal' state that never truly existed. Instead, the focus should be on whether these transformed arenas and inspirational initiatives can gain momentum, strengthen, and eventually become dominant.

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ROBERT SCHUSTER
INTERVIEW

Milan Nič: Scholz's Politics are Lacking in Consideration for Europe as a Whole

Germany is currently struggling with its own crises and does not seem too interested in leading or even setting itself as an example for the rest of Europe, says Milan Nič in conversation with Robert Schuster.

ROBERT SCHUSTER: **To what degree has the war in Ukraine changed Germany's approach to foreign diplomacy?**

MILAN NIČ: I think it has drastically changed its view on security. Germans have suddenly realized that there is an open war taking place on the borders of Europe and that it poses a direct threat. The ones most in the know are the political elites, who quickly grasped that dependency on Russian gas is Germany's greatest weakness and poses a massive risk. To their own chagrin, they massively underestimated what we in Central Europe already knew, that Putin would, in a critical moment, use this as a way to apply pressure.

Within the first year of the war, the German government managed, in record time, the complete redirection of its gas supply from the Russian pipelines to procuring natural gas from

new suppliers overseas in the form of LNG. Much more complicated was how its own society's views evolved, with its established pacifist tradition, on the war in Ukraine and on what Germany can do about it. This had its own temporal, psychological and political dynamics. When Chancellor Olaf Scholz gave his famous "Zeitenwende" speech, he received a round of applause. However, as quick as Germany was in changing its gas supply, it has been much slower in changing its defense and strategic considerations. There is a level of contradiction to this: on the one hand the war in Ukraine is happening awfully close to Germany, with which comes the conviction throughout all the centrist parties that this will dictate the future of the European block and with that even Germany's role in it. On the other hand, there is a prevailing notion that so far this is not primarily a war against Germany, and thus it is not regarded as such an existential threat. German society, exhausted by the covid-19 pandemic, by high energy prices and by the modernization of the current government, has therefore been unwilling to accept more changes, unless they are demanded by circumstances.

Within the first year of the war, the German government managed, in record time, the complete redirection of its gas supply from the Russian pipelines to procuring natural gas from new suppliers overseas in the form of LNG.

How much has Germany's hesitation been influenced by Chancellor Olaf Scholz's own political style, which tends to be denoted as cautious?

I would say it is more so due to existing structural factors rather than to Scholz's character alone. Firstly, the " Traffic Light" Coalition ("Ampelkoalition") had been working together for only a few months when the war broke out. What brought these three different parties together were their policies on internal reforms in Germany, namely in the areas of digitalization, climate and social policies, or the liberalization of Germany's citizenship laws; all of these were domestic issues upon which consensus was possible. It has become apparent that due to the war in Ukraine and the new challenges it has brought, the government, which is the first ever coalition comprising three partners, began to falter. It also soon became clear that they have not agreed upon or have even had clearly unified objectives for foreign policy or for matters of security. Therefore, it is all being done on the fly. This has been a difficult test for them right from the start.

This also applied to the Chancellor himself, who had no experience with foreign policy, having previously been the Minister of Finance. It turned out that they were caught in the tide of events. Initially, Scholz had it set up so that his government would coordinate all important matters with Washington, more so than with, for example, Paris or his other European partners. He set some limits to his escalation and rather than setting a red line against Russia he was more bothered by the possibility that the conflict might escalate into a larger war with the entire West. Scholz adopted into his own belief the fact that Russia sees the war with Ukraine as exactly that. This is one aspect of the situation.
For his party, the Social Democrats (SPD), this was a very difficult shift, since in the past, they were proponents of rapprochement with Russia through mutual trade ("Wandel Durch Handel"), with the Nord Stream gas pipeline project also viewed as part of that. SPD took the changes relatively in stride, without overly excessive soul-searching in the process, and distanced itself from Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, later a lobbyist for Gazprom. Manuela Schwesig, the Minister President of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, who had initially supported the completion of the pipeline, remained in office and soon began to take a very pragmatic approach to helping Ukraine. Simultaneously, the Chancellor came under pressure within the government from the Green Party, whose leaders, with Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck and Minister for Foreign Affairs Annalena Baerbock at the helm, became somewhat hawkish in their approach to the war in Ukraine and to Russia, as well as to China.

Scholz's government also faces a drastic drop in public support, which is currently hovering under 20%. So, when you look at it from a broader perspective, it is hard to tell what Germany, under so much domestic pressure, can actually do.

The other issue that also needs to be addressed is the budgetary and economic side of it all. The solution, which came immediately after the war, namely the creation of a new off-budget fund of 100 billion euros, changed governmental priorities. Until the constitutional court's decision in the Fall of 2023, Scholz and his two coalition partners turned out to have found a trick to achieve their priorities, for example with the Green Party's agenda on fighting climate change, so that the other governing party, the liberal FDP, could claim

that the constitutionally guaranteed debt brake would remain in effect. The solution was a special fund for climate change (KTF), into which the money would be placed. The constitutional court put an end, however, to any such schemes, and today Germany has found itself in a dilemma, where they need to save money wherever they can and are unsure of how to build a budget for 2025, which is missing more than 30 billion euros. At the same time, there is already an agreement in place, that the costs associated with the defense and support of Ukraine are going to be exempt from it. Scholz's government also faces a drastic drop in public support, which is currently hovering under 20%. So, when you look at it from a broader perspective, it is hard to tell what Germany, under so much domestic pressure, can actually do.

I still see only a limited ability on the part of German political leaders, to lead public debate contributing systematically to a change in the public mindset and to openly declare what all of this could lead to.

And when it comes to armaments and strategy? What are Scholz's options?

There is an apparent major clash with the French approach: Paris would like an autonomous European solution, independent of the United States, with the French military industry playing a key role. Scholz, on the other hand, presented an initiative for a European defensive shield, SkyShield, where he wants to buy what is on the market, in other words either Israeli or American systems. In that sense, Germany is forging its own path now, while there is also a noticeable nervousness around the results of the American presidential elections and the possible return of Donald Trump into the White House. Apparently, however, not even this eventuality would make Scholz's government lean away from the Americans and towards wider European defensive autonomy; again he would rather adapt to this new situation.

This is important, since in this regard the current government can build rapport with Poland or Northeast Europe. At the same time, it is also Scholz's SPD that has not yet completely closed its doors to potential future negotiations with Russia. On the one hand, there is a prevailing panic of "how did we get here," and the need to strengthen European defenses against Russia as much as possible. On the other hand, there is still this thin illusion that we will need to co-exist with Russia, as we are more vulnerable to a variety of hybrid incidents that have been happening—and which will significantly test the resilience of our societies and our entire democratic system. And this wave of accumulated discontent, frustration and aggression is simultaneously strengthening the far-right and far-left parties, supported from Moscow.

In summary, I still see only a limited ability on the part of German political leaders, with the exception of a fraction of the Green Party and CDU, to lead public debate contributing systematically to a change in the public mindset and to openly declare what all of this could lead to. This would fundamentally shake German society out of its comfort zone and out of a certain type of complacency which it finds itself in.

Part of the aforementioned comfort zone is that the entire German economic model is stretched and not working as it should. Germans still have their industrial structure built on sectors from the twentieth century, whether it is the chemical or automotive industry. They have to change their entire economic model, and this change will hurt. In the long-term view, it makes them uncompetitive due to the high energy costs of the economy. This requires major changes, which will lead to upheaval, and which the aging population does not want to even consider, as it is nervous about the uncertainty—and that plays right into the hands of anti-system parties like AfD, or Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht.

On top of that, we do not even know what solutions CDU would come up with, were they to win the 2025 election with old guard politician Friedrich Merz at the helm. Germany is focused inward to a significant degree, consumed by its internal crises and does not seem too interested in leading or even setting itself as an example for the rest of Europe. This reflects the expectations of the German voters, who primarily expect solutions which will improve the quality of life at home, and only after would they consider giving the rest of Europe a hand.

Has Germany's view changed over the last two years on Central Europe? Have they perhaps stopped perceiving us as a homogeneous whole and as troublemakers?

Yes, Germany has recognized the differences among the countries of Central Europe, but also its own responsibility for this region. Despite that, society and its politics still find themselves in this somewhat complacent zone stemming from the United States underwriting safety guarantees, upon which everything is built.

Could Germany's view of our region have changed to such a degree that Germany might start seeing it as a source of potential allies?

But that is already happening. Today's political elite, obviously apart from AfD or the far left, considers the Baltic region as part of their own security. As partners in the European Union and allies within NATO, they cannot be left at the mercy of revisionist Russia. On top of that, our region is now an inseparable part of the unified European market, and were it to fall apart, the German economy would also collapse in on itself. What I think we're underestimating, however, is that modern Germany is still predominantly a trading superpower, which is very dependent on the global economy and its rules. It acts more on the principles of trade rather than strategy, although this is gradually changing.

But I would also like to highlight another issue, that our societies, in terms of political engagement, are not only not getting closer to one another, but might even be diverging from each other, and this concerning the question of climate change and the decarbonization of the economy. We in Central Europe are lagging behind, despite our economies having a very large share of industry and emissions, meaning that lowering our carbon footprint will have to be very carefully managed, in order to avoid deindustrialization and loss of competitiveness. These rules are being set on the level of a single market, thus in Brussels, where we are not an adequate player for Germany. Our governments have slightly underestimated this, in the case of Prague we actually actively opposed it. In short, we are too narrowly focused on European sectoral policies, and we're not an interesting partner for Germany in other agendas. There they have the French, Dutch, and Southern European members of the EU for that.

Society and its politics still find themselves in this somewhat complacent zone stemming from the United States underwriting safety guarantees, upon which everything is built.

So the fact that our industry is set up in a similar manner as Germany's, does not give us an advantage and does not present a potential source of cooperation?

It seems to me that we are probably not capable of seizing on it all that well. The war in Ukraine has shifted the gears of European politics so that security and geopolitics are at the forefront. In this respect, Poland has played an important role, and can significantly influence the setting of European security policies within the framework of the new Commission. A great deal will be invested into the revival of the defense industries. But then again, industrial policies as a whole are a different ball game. Within the last two years, it has become clear that our position in terms of supply chains is pushing us a little back towards our old role. We are not sitting at the table when new rules and regulations are being set, but in fact are merely rule takers. Look at the current dispute with China over tariffs on imported electric cars: Berlin doesn't ask about the opinion of Prague or Bratislava, firstly because we do not really have an opinion on it, and secondly because the relevant car companies that are present on our markets are managed from Germany.

What I think we're underestimating, however, is that modern Germany is still predominantly a trading superpower, which is very dependent on the global economy and its rules. It acts more on the principles of trade rather than strategy.

In your opinion, how should German-Polish relations be regarded in light of the change in Polish leadership?

That has changed, and there was a great sense of relief in Germany when at the end of 2023 the eight year reign of Law and Justice (PiS) came to an end, having lost the elections. For the entirety of those eight years, Germany was doing its best to carry out "damage control", minimizing harm, which meant a very operative policy. Even after the start of the war, there were still echoes out of Jarosław Kaczyński's camp full of mistrust of Germany. I will remind you of the incident when Russian invasion rockets fell on Polish territory, and Germans offered their Patriot air defense system. The Polish government hesitated in accepting it. They are fully aware in Berlin that the new Polish government and Premier Donald Tusk was under enormous pressure and that during his campaign he was labeled as a German agent. So here it's more a matter of waiting for when he himself will determine to what degree he wants to develop some bilateral initiatives.

Today's Germany also does not want to deal with questions of the past and feels that it has done enough for reconciliation. They do not realize that in regards to Poland they did not quite hit the mark. Symbolic topics like reparations are something that not even Tusk's government will be able to take completely off the table.

And it is possible that Tusk will not want to take risks before the presidential elections in May of 2025 and that he will wait for the new German federal government under the leadership of CDU, which belongs to the same political family within the European Parliament.

For now it is being replaced by the Weimar Triangle, whose members are Poland, Germany, and also France. I think that a major turning point will be Poland's EU presidency in the first half of 2025, where direct Warsaw-Berlin dialogue will be unavoidable, specifically in the last phase before the presidency itself and also when positions in the new European institutions are being allocated.

I noticed that Tusk went to Berlin for the Weimar Triangle debate, and Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski seems to also prefer this format over direct bilateral negotiations with Germany. And the Germans, in turn, are urging the French that key decisions regarding European security and policy must now be made in coordination with Poland.

So achieving the near ideal state of Polish-German relations, which was prevailing in the pre-2015 election of PiS, is unlikely?

No, it is really not possible. I will explain it with another example, and that is specifically about how the restart of the German armaments industry is taking shape. They are aware that the massive 100 billion euro fund has to be used for the rearming of the military, since that's where they have built a massive deficit, as for decades they have not paid the Bundeswehr much attention. Obviously though, once they kickstart the arms industry, they will have larger production, which will exceed the needs of their own military, and will be able to be the basis for the rearming of other allies.

We are too narrowly focused on European sectoral policies, and we're not an interesting partner for Germany in other agendas. There they have the French, Dutch, and Southern European members of the EU for that.

There was a great deal of expectation there from Poland, to whom territorial defense of the Eastern wing of NATO is vitally important. The previous government was betting on agreements with the Americans and South Korea. Now we can expect some form of flagship project, a unified effort and also that the Polish government will not find itself in hot water were it to rearm with German weaponry. As another example, Bundeswehr is currently building up its military presence in Lithuania, where in order to strengthen the security of its eastern border it is planning on establishing a full brigade. For now, it is unimaginable that Poland will not have an issue with Bundeswehr troops on its territory, when it comes to defending NATO's eastern borders. In order to do so, there is the need for a comprehensive partnership from both sides, and a new Polish-German understanding—that will only be possible with the new German government led by the Christian Democrats (CDU), which ideologically aligns more with Warsaw and Tusk's government.

Have you noticed any vast differences or parallels between the foreign policies of Scholz and his predecessor Angel Merkel?

Foremost, it has to be said that Scholz does not do European politics. It is generally believed that he is not someone who stimulates decisions and mediates compromises within the European Council. At the end of her era, Angela Merkel was the clear leader of the European Council and was seen as more than just within the context of the German presidency. Whenever a problem arose, there was the expectation that she would step in for the somewhat weak president of the European Council, Charles Michel. After her departure, it became clear that the European Council was lacking in leadership. Russia's President Putin had to have counted on this, with the timing of his invasion of Ukraine after her departure. Scholz is a different type of leader, who also has a different approach to the concerns arising from this conflict.

Look at the current dispute with China over tariffs on imported electric cars: Berlin doesn't ask about the opinion of Prague or Bratislava.

What is Berlin's view on the recent developments in Slovakia?

Before the assassination attempt on Prime Minister Robert Fico, there was a general belief that Fico is manageable, that in reality he is more pragmatic than he presents himself in public. A large part of his radicalisms and pro-Russian stances were in line with public statements meant to maintain support of certain groups of voters who are being competed for by the far-right. Olaf Scholz, when he had Fico over in Berlin for a visit at the end of January, personally commended the fact that Fico, unlike Orbán, did not block any European decision regarding Ukraine. Quite the opposite, Fico was attempting to push for even more intense bilateral cooperation with

Kyiv, as demonstrated by two joint sessions with the Ukrainian government in the last six months. Simultaneously, Slovakia offered Germany several interesting projects in the arms industry. Minister of Defence Robert Kaliňák is working together with the Czech arms group led by Michal Strnad, and is quietly preparing a project for the production of ammunition for Ukraine within close distance of its borders, to be finished by the end of the year. Chancellor Scholz is basically set up in such a way that he can address issues operationally. Slovakia is going to be a less important partner, but not as big a problem as the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

Today's Germany also does not want to deal with questions of the past and feels that it has done enough for reconciliation. They do not realize that in regards to Poland they did not quite hit the mark.

It surprises me that in Berlin they look at Slovakia in such a different light from Prague, that essentially, reasonable communication with Fico is possible. The Germans clearly see that Slovakia, unlike Hungary, is cutting itself off from Russian oil and energy, even from their nuclear fuel supplies, so structurally it works.

In addition to all that, Slovakia is in the Eurozone, and I believe that both prime ministers agreed at their meeting that one of the biggest vulnerabilities for Fico's government are the financial markets. This implies the need to consolidate the economy and a dependency on the flow of European money from the Recovery Fund. Fico announced the consolidation of public funds up to one percent of the GDP annually, which is an insane pace. If his government is to manage even half of that, it will need pragmatic cooperation with Berlin. Unlike Orbán, Fico has no reason to begin a confrontation with Brussels or the West, even if verbally he is opposed to them.
The other thing is the party politics aspect. SPD used to be partners with Fico's party Smer. Two years ago, when Fico put himself at the front of Anti-Vaccine demonstrations, SPD distanced themselves from Fico and moved to support Pellegrini's Hlas instead as some sort of modern social democracy. There has been a decision made that both parties will have their European Socialists memberships suspended, but their MPs will be in the new European Parliament, and I think that the partners within this faction will only then decide what will be done with the Slovak representatives. It is also uncertain because the European socialists do not have all that many MPs in the European Parliament to begin with, or prime ministers within the European Council.

Can we somehow predict how things will play out after the assassination attempt on Fico?
He will have more sympathy from the public, but a great deal will depend on the concrete steps his government takes and on the political direction he himself chooses after his return to office. Until then, a lot will be revealed by the decision of the socialist faction in the European Parliament, which is expected at the end of June and beginning of July, and what stance SPD will take towards it. I would say that far more than worrying about Fico, the German government is concerned with the growing influence of misinformation and of pro-Russian narratives in Slovakia and the long-term resilience of society.

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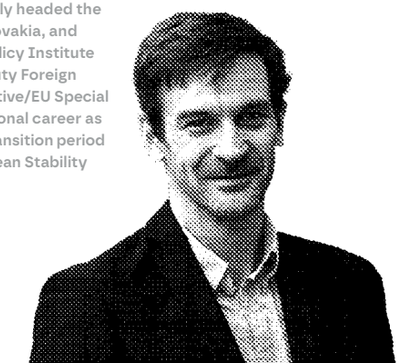

TOMASZ
STAWISZYŃSKI

Conspiracy Inversion

Without taking into account the fact that conspiracy theories explain a reality that other available stories do not explain well enough, it is impossible to understand their growing popularity, says Tomasz Stawiszyński.

I will never forget the fervor of a certain John Stevenson explaining to me over breakfast in a small hotel in Arizona why he and his entire family had unhesitatingly supported Donald Trump in the presidential election. "The matter is simple and obvious," he said, as much with poignancy as with absolute certainty in his voice, "at least since the days of JFK American politics is a total quagmire. Scandals, cabals, machinations of secret societies, dirty deals, cynical games. And Trump is the only guy who can do something about it. He's not part of any establishment. That's why they hate him so much, that's why they will do anything to prevent him."

My arguments that Trump of all people can hardly be called "a guy not in any establishment" did not get to John at all. He just shook his head over his plate heaped with pancakes with maple syrup and slices of fried bacon, and repeated that the corrupt American elites for years had been preying on honest citizens like him and his family. But their time was now coming to an end.

It was the spring of 2018. For several months, conspiracy theories propagated online by a mysterious figure signing himself "Q" had been gaining popularity in the United States. This man, or perhaps a group of people who were speculated to be some kind of high-profile intelligence or military agents (it is now known to be untrue), was relaying to the public the sensational news that an international network of extremely influential Satanist pedophiles were trying to remove Trump from power. Why? Simple, he was going to expose them all and put them in jail.

Less than three years later, on 6 January 2021, people who believed the story—including Jacob Antony Chansley, the distinctive horned "buffalo man" immortalized in many photographs, also known as the "QAnon shaman"—stormed the Capitol; to ensure Trump's continuity of power lost in the 3 November 2020 elections, or to confirm these sensational reports. Such as, for example, that children were being imprisoned en masse in the basement of the Capitol; kidnapped for ritual and sexual purposes by the said Satanists, but also treated as raw material for the extraction of adrenochrome—a substance that the rich supposedly inject to remain fit and strong into old age.

And although no civil war or even local revolution broke out at the time, 6 January 2021 remains a watershed in the history of American—and world—politics. It marks the beginning of an era when conspiracy thinking—a uniquely seductive and dangerous machine for producing beliefs that mimic the cognitive process—penetrated mainstream public debate in the West.

And it remains there to this day, and what is more, it is gaining momentum, developing, growing deeper and deeper.

The question is: what will the consequences be?

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Fallacies and paranoia

Or had it actually happened even earlier? The undoubted breakthrough that made us stop thinking about conspiracy theories as a fringe phenomenon—reducible to extremes, insignificant from the point of view of common practice—was 2020 and the coronavirus pandemic. Perhaps if it hadn't been for the flourishing of alternative narratives to those put forward by epidemiologists and governments at the time, the buffalo man would never have been on Capitol Hill? If conspiracy theory researchers like Mark Fenster and Peter Knight, for example, are to be believed, this tragedy would not have been avoided. They have argued for years that we are dealing with a much more complicated phenomenon than mere cognitive fallacies, as Austrian philosopher Karl Popper believed, or paranoid delusions, as American historian Richard Hoffstadter has argued. And in light of these considerations, what happened with the pandemic and the attack on the Capitol was merely a manifestation of a deeper and more serious crisis.

Popper and Hofstaddter—who published their texts in the 1930s and 1960s—shaped our way of thinking about the issue of conspiracy theories for a long time. Their considerations remain relevant, although it is hard to deny that for understanding today's situation they seem decidedly insufficient.

In *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1934) or *The Poverty of Historicism* (1936), Popper demonstrated that there are peculiarly structured conglomerates of beliefs that are characterized by so-called 'non-falsifiability'. Unlike correctly constructed hypotheses—for example, that the Sun orbits the Earth—which are known under what conditions they can turn out to be false, non-falsifiable hypotheses maintain their truth regardless of the circumstances. A proponent of the belief that the Sun orbits the Earth will have to abandon it if calculations indicate otherwise or if certain physical phenomena do not (or do) occur. But a proponent of a non-falsifiable hypothesis—take the one invoked many times by Bertrand Russell: that there is a small teapot of tea orbiting Jupiter, so small as to be undetectable by any equipment available to science—will always stick to it, regardless of the evidence. For whatever is observed (or not), the teapot's follower will continue to postulate its existence. After all, the fact that it cannot be observed agrees with the presupposition: it is so small that it is undetectable by any devices.

According to Popper's critique, conspiracy theories are thus a peculiar variety of misconstrued beliefs, self-confirming claims, formed as a result of lack of knowledge and ignorance of the rules of correct reasoning. And according to Richard Hofstadter, an American historian and author of the famous essay *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1964), conspiracy theories are simply the product of paranoid minds. There are individuals with a special predisposition to such stories, Hofstadter believed, and these are the ones who become their followers and propagators. So conspiracy theories are simply the expression of a disturbed mind, a disturbed personality—and nothing more.

For whatever is observed (or not), the teapot's follower will continue to postulate its existence. After all, the fact that it cannot be observed agrees with the presupposition: it is so small that it is undetectable by any devices.

Confidence and crisis

Fenster and Knight—as well as many other philosophers and sociologists studying conspiracy thinking today—point out that the propagation of conspiracy theories is a primarily socio-cultural phenomenon, related especially to the breakdown of structures of collective trust: in public institutions and official authorities in particular, and to the community's dominant, sanctioned view of the world in general.

The commonly accepted definition of conspiracy theories today—reiterated in educational materials published by UNESCO in September 2020—says that a conspiracy theory is the belief that the official media and political message is a lie. And that behind this lie is a specific group, acting in bad faith, wielding great power and might, and deliberately concealing its existence. And therefore, that almost all (or simply: all) reality actually looks quite different from what the media and—last but not least—our own senses tell us about it. This is especially true of the official institutions of public life. Doctors and pharmaceutical companies do not cure, but poison; politicians do not act for the common good, but only their own, at the expense of the citizens; elites are not representatives of society, but parasites preying on it, etc. In a word, nothing is what it seems.

Obviously, under conditions of manifold crisis—economic, political, and finally, as in 2020–2022, sanitary—conspiracy theories become excellent tools for temporary stabilization of the individual and collective mood. Where uncertainty prevails, they introduce a clear division between the good guys and the bad guys. They level out unpredictability by providing a perfectly functional pattern that can be discerned in everything seemingly random—and therefore not liable to predictions. They explain the inefficiency of institutions, and the injustice and brutality of the economic system by pointing out the guilty parties—usually those at the top of the social ladder. By doing so, they also allow you to regain a sense of dignity, which in the neoliberal universe, where "every man is the architect of their own fortune," depends primarily on your own position in the social hierarchy. In conspiracy stories, the individual recovers an elementary value: I work hard and honestly, and if I do not achieve success, it is not because I am inferior or insufficient, but because the rules of the game are extremely unfair.

False theories, real experiences

In my opinion, it is impossible to understand the growing popularity of conspiracy thinking without taking into account the above functions of it; and therefore, without recognizing that quite real experiences are behind the adoption of false narratives. In recent years, it has become very clear—and this trend has intensified especially since 2022, since Elon Musk 'liberated' the information space at the X portal, making it a rallying point for the strangest sham theories—that the approach in line with Popper and Hoffstadter, while (partially) substantive, fails to provide an answer to the question of how the appeal of conspiracy narratives could be reduced.

Certainly, the following mechanism is at work here: the more deprecatingly and dismissively scientists and politicians speak about them, the more their popularity grows. Undoubtedly, this is also influenced by non-falsifiability, which in a person beginning to use the unfalsifiable thought structures sometimes produces an experience akin to a mystical illumination. Suddenly there are no more problems that cannot be solved, no events that cannot be explained, no developments in social life, history or global politics whose proper and hidden meaning cannot not be gleaned. This is also why it is very difficult to escape from the universe of conspiracy thinking once you get into it. One conspiracy theory is immediately followed by another, due to the irrefutable logic of these beliefs, but also due to the algorithms that today control the distribution of information in the virtual sphere. This encourages the perpetuation of such beliefs in those who find themselves in their range of influence.

Without recognizing, however, that a person who becomes an adherent of a conspiracy theory reaches for it because he or she has previously felt cognitive dissonance between what he or she hears from politicians and the media and what is happening in his or her life, it is impossible either to do justice to the phenomenon or to formulate adequate measures to prevent its spread. Simply put, without taking into account the fact that conspiracy theories explain a reality that other available stories do not explain well enough, it is impossible to understand their growing popularity.

Polarization and conspiracies

There is another, perhaps the most dangerous aspect of the problem discussed here, namely polarization. Under conditions of increasing polarization, that is, in short, the dualism of the political field, where each side believes that the opposing side is wrong and should be eliminated from public life, conspiracy theories are also becoming an extremely handy method of waging political battles. This was very evident in Poland during the final phase of the 2023 election campaign, when both camps of the extremely radicalized dispute—the ruling party and the largest opposition party—traded accusations of being agents for Germany or Russia, respectively. The largest official media—major newspaper titles and television stations, including state television—eagerly participated in this propaganda war. It led to the collapse of the last dams which in a mature democratic system should separate—at least for the duration of the election campaign—reliable from unreliable information, and conspiracy theories, built on non-falsifiable engines, from barely documented hypotheses, conjectures and assumptions.

Yes, conspiracy thinking perfectly supports the mechanism—characteristic of the polarized world picture—of degrading and ridiculing your political opponent to the largest possible degree; defining him as a near-monstrosity devoid of all traces of decency or even humanity; capable of anything, acting only in the logic of self-interest, like the most brutal animal predator. The penetration of elements of conspiracy thinking into the mainstream of public life pushes it further and further away from reality. In place of reliable beliefs—verified by the media, the institutions of public life and other agents—about the world, about the mechanisms that govern it, about what is truth and what is fantasy, what is knowledge and what is mere conjecture, unfalsifiable phantasms suggesting that some more or less organized conspirators, namely our political opponents, are behind every glitch and failure, every unfavorable set of circumstances in general, enter the scene.

The penetration of elements of conspiracy thinking into the mainstream of public life pushes it further and further away from reality.

Taking all this into account, the events of 6 January 2021—like John Stevenson's sincere belief that Donald Trump is "a guy not in any establishment"—cease to be a quirk or aberration, and instead become a consistent expression of civic concern. After all, if you truly believe that the world is ruled by Satanist pedophiles holding kidnapped children in the basement of the U.S. Parliament, then this act of civil disobedience becomes completely obvious: breaking in to free the victims and support whoever acts on their behalf. By analogy with many other acts of violence known to history—including the assassination of JFK, which for John Stevenson represented a defining moment in recent American history—if we truly believe that some group is conspiring to destroy humanity, the assassination of its individual representatives, and perhaps war, domestic or global, becomes a natural gesture in defense of the values most important to us.

And this is precisely the most dangerous thing in all this, and also the most difficult to stop. I mean this peculiar inversion that comes with conspiracy thinking: unreality becomes reality, and reality disappears under heaps of incredibly seductive, but also incredibly dangerous, fiction. This is all the more dangerous because it corresponds much better to emotions and experiences than always imperfect reality.

TOMASZ STAWISZYŃSKI
philosopher, essayist, author of books, including Potyczki z Freudem. Mity, pokusy i pułapki psychoterapii [Skirmishes with Freud: Myths, Temptations and Pitfalls of Psychotherapy], Co robić przed końcem świata [What to Do Before the End of the World], Ucieczka od bezradności [Escape from Helplessness], Reguły na czas chaosu [Rules for a Time of Chaos]; he hosts The Philosophers' Hour on TOK FM radio; creator of the podcast Skądinąd [By the Way]; regular columnist for Tygodnik Powszechny"; on 13 November 2024 his new book Powrót fatum [Return of the Fate] will be published.

ROBERT SCHUSTER
INTERVIEW

Paul Lendvai: Central and Eastern Europe Have Never Been a Homogeneous Entity and Never Will Be

People have short memories and few remember what it was like to live behind the Iron Curtain. Things like visa-free travel, study abroad and harassment-free life are being taken for granted, says Paul Lendvai, an Austrian journalist originally from Hungary in an interview with Robert Schuster.

ROBERT SCHUSTER: **For many years you have been following developments in Central Europe. Would you say that this region has, once again, found itself at an important crossroads?**

PAUL LENDVAI: In short yes, yet this part of Europe has always been at a crossroads, and a crisis of one sort or another is almost part of its DNA. Now the situation is difficult on many fronts and we can see that each country is trying to find its own way out of it.

Is there a country today in Central and Eastern Europe that gives you hope when you consider its future?

There is the Czech Republic, or Poland, for example, that have not jumped on the bandwagon of right-wing populism and appeasement towards the Russian dictator Vladimir Putin. That is why the results of the Polish election were so important for the whole of Central Europe, as it has shown that it is indeed possible to replace authoritarian,

or semi-authoritarian, regimes. Of course, that is not the case for all the countries in the region. Take Hungary, for instance; after 14 years of such government it is almost impossible. When it comes to the Czech Republic I find it extraordinarily positive that the current president is an energetic general Petr Pavel with his unabashedly pro-European agenda, and that the unfortunate experiment with his predecessor seems to be over. On the other hand, there are other less fortunate examples, such as Slovakia or the Balkans. There are time bombs ticking in Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina or in Northern Macedonia as well, so we do have plenty to worry about.

I think that the real importance of each state depends on many factors; its internal situation, its alliances and their stability. Those in particular are not guaranteed even within a body as large as the European Union.

The biggest disappointment for you being your home country of Hungary, I presume....

Unfortunately, that is the case. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has systematically established his authoritarian system so well that there is little hope for a change in the foreseeable future. Neither the collective West nor the EU can do much at this point. I do think that in any given country, real change can only come from within, when its own elites and ordinary citizens actually do something about it. The EU or NATO cannot really do it for them. That's why I consider Hungary such a bad case.

One of the most important leaders of this region is now Donald Tusk, the Polish Prime Minister.

It has been said that the focus of the EU has shifted in recent years towards Central and Eastern Europeans due to the fact that war is being waged in Ukraine, in their own backyard. What consequences do you foresee?

I am of a different opinion. There have been many times when a new slogan takes up center stage which sounds profound and original, yet soon enough it always turns out to be a bubble that unceremoniously pops. I am wary of generalizations and I do not see "Eastern Europe" as a homogeneous entity. In other words, even during Communism there were pronounced differences. It became apparent during the fall of Communism, which every country experienced in a slightly different way and even more so in their subsequent post-communist development. There have been some unpleasant surprises along the way, see the aforementioned Hungary. Who would have thought that one day it would present an obstacle to Sweden becoming a NATO member? It goes to show what is indeed possible in history. So do I believe Orbán when he said "We are the future of the West?" No way. God help the West if it were to have such a future.

I think that the real importance of each state depends on many factors; its internal situation, its alliances and their stability. Those in particular are not guaranteed even within a body as large as the European Union. For its continuous existence and prosperity, it is very important that its two largest countries, France and Germany, cooperate together well, especially after the unfortunate Brexit. Or take a look at the Baltic States, where today their common denominator is a fear of aggressive Russia. Now we have an unexpected turn of events in Finland and Sweden joining NATO. That goes on to show you how Putin has overplayed his hand. Instead of weakening the Alliance by attacking Ukraine, he actually made it stronger. When we talk about the future of the European Union, I do not believe that now it will be the era of Central or Eastern Europe. They are still states with different national interests. A big role is also played by historical coincidences and personalities involved.

Still, wouldn't you say that even within the EU the realization has dawned that it can no longer be reduced to its western part, and that voices from Central & Eastern Europe need to be heard far more?

Yes, that important change has indeed taken place. On the other hand, I have always thought of the debate about the role of the Visegrad Group, i.e. Czechia, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary, as an artificial one. Even Orbán has confirmed this, albeit indirectly, when he stopped mentioning Visegrad altogether after Poland and the Czech Republic had started pursuing different policies. It only shows that he has never cared for the overarching interests of the region, but only for maintaining his power. Take the current relationship between Slovakia and Hungary, for example; both Fico and Orbán are nationalists and pretend to be the best of friends. I remember when my book about Orbán came out, or the book about Hungary, and I personally gave Fico its Slovak edition, and he would then talk about Orbán and Hungary very differently than he does today. That brings me to underscore how important the national leaders are. One of the most

important leaders of this region is now Donald Tusk, the Polish Prime Minister. His political experience in this context is almost unparalleled—under his belt are the mandate of chairman of the European Council, eight years of Polish premiership previously, and now he has returned to lead the government once again. It is thanks to him that Poland will be able to tap into previously frozen European funds. I would not hesitate to call his current role historic; of entirely positive proportions. In this regard, he is a true counterbalance to Orbán; Tusk the builder, Orbán the destroyer.

I would not hesitate to call his current role historic; of entirely positive proportions. In this regard, he is a true counterbalance to Orbán; Tusk the builder, Orbán the destroyer.

When it comes to Tusk and his new Polish government, there are many expectations that it will remedy all that went wrong during the previous administration. Is that really possible during one election cycle, and aren't the expectations too high?
It is a big question whether the current coalition will last. The key will be, in my opinion, if conservatives from the Law and Order party, led by Jaroslaw Kaczyński, continue in their rabid campaign against Tusk and his government, aided by President Andrzej Duda, whose current conduct is far from impartial. My hopes are that the government coalition will last, also thanks to the rapid and active response from the European Commission and Ursula von der Leyen personally. Of course there are, as in any party and coalition, various personal rivalries, vanities and so on. It is therefore difficult to predict what the future will bring. Nevertheless, I do hope that Poland is now charting a correct course. It is important because it is the most important country within the reach of Russia, and that is why Poland is crucial for Ukraine.

Post-communist transformation in Central and Eastern Europe after the year 1989 was, for a long time, thought of as a success story, and there were foreign investors lining up to do business with most of the countries. Yet all that changed. What do you think happened?
Well, on one hand, you have this great burden of history. Let us not forget for how long these states were under Communism. Whole generations came up under this system, and even parts of the new bourgeoisie established after 1989 come from the old Communist elites. On the other hand, I do strongly believe in the role of individual personalities, and also partly in coincidences. The fact is that Hungary was leading the pack, as it were, but then some sort of "Kádár-ist" twist took place. (János Kádár was a long-time leader of Hungarian Communists). When Hungary destroyed its Communist regime in 1956, it did so in twelve days, and then it got reinstated again. What is happening in the country now is that there is a hybrid system being established, clearly dominated by one powerful individual. What is new is that this regime is clearly the most corrupt in the history of the country. This means there are many people in whose self-interest it is to keep the regime going. It is also determined by Orbán's personality. I will put it this way: there are people who possess talent for evil. There's no doubt in my mind that Orbán, who's a very skilful political player, is one of them.
But again, each country needs to be considered separately. One cannot compare Slovenia with Bosnia and Herzegovina, even though for a long time they used to belong, with other republics, in the one federal state of Yugoslavia and shared a constitution together. History plays a big role, who your neighbors are, your economic development or whether there are substantial ethnic minorities in your territory. All these factors together meant that the promising start after 1989 was not fulfilled. Mind you though, even the great German thinker Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel would say that in history, years filled with happiness are blank pages. That's the way it simply is, good times alternate with bad ones. We must also not forget the role that previous democratic traditions played, which is a great bonus for the Czech Republic as it had, after 1989, a sense of continuity in its history.

Then you have some downright stupid decisions made by the states in the West—such as when Austria, for no good reason, kept blocking their full access to the Schengen system. It is a purely, populist game.

Now, who would have thought that Ukraine would one day be going through such a development? Or that power in Russia would be hijacked by a revanchist clique of secret services and siloviki? No one could have imagined then that a KGB lieutenant colonel would one day turn into a pure dictator. Unfortunately, that is exactly what has happened. And what is also worrying is that this development shares features similar to the journey Chinese society has taken, off the course of a once-promising path. Not

to mention the U.S., where there is a real threat that Trump actually returns to the White House again.

With all this populism on the rise could it also be possible that it activates civic society, and that it could actually lead to a strengthening of democracy?

Unfortunately, there's also the reality of short memory. Nobody really remembers what it was like behind the Iron Curtain. The good things, such as visa-free travel, study abroad, scholarships such as Erasmus, and a life free of government harassment are being taken for granted. Then we have a confluence of two or more crises and the balance is off. After the epidemic, there was an economic crisis, inflation, etc. There are wars in Ukraine and in the Middle East; we see that many leaders are very eager to grab more power for themselves. We have just witnessed this in China, which has gone through various stages of development in the last few decades, that there are failures that can lead to regress. One can only hope that this doesn't lead to a large-scale war. Even when things do not go well it is important to not give up. This is an individual task for each and everyone of us, as one is responsible for oneself and for the development in one's own country. What gives me hope is, for example, the attitude of the Baltic countries, namely the role of women in Estonia, Finland and Latvia. They have learned from their history, know the danger they are facing and know what it is to lose freedom.

In my last book, which deals with the issue of hypocrisy in politics, I dedicated an extra chapter to Kurz, where I portrayed him as a virtuoso of hypocrisy. I basically view his tenure as catastrophic for Austria.

And what countries are at the other end of the proverbial spectrum?

Today the worst situation is in Hungary, of course, but one can take a look elsewhere, for example to Serbia. Nominally, its government, along with President Aleksandar Vučić, is still pursuing EU membership, yet keeps up the coziest of relations with Russia and China. Not to mention they might decide to ignite local tensions by attacking Kosovo. Bosnia & Herzegovina itself resembles one giant powder keg. Then there is Northern Macedonia, which is not out of the woods by any stretch of the imagination, yet the premiership there has been recently assumed by an ethnic Albanian—a glimmer of hope. That goes to show you that even intrinsically complicated countries should not be readily written off. Sadly, it needs to be said that in all these above-mentioned instances Mr. Orbán's Hungary chooses to interfere and stoke up the flames, rallying its supporters. Just to give you an example—for many years now Hungary has been providing asylum protection for a corrupt Macedonian ex-prime minister Nikola Gruevski, who had been deposed and found guilty in a corruption trial by a court of law. He continues his lavish lifestyle in Hungary with full government protection. Corruption by itself has been the most problematic, recurring theme, along with a seemingly never ending cycle of political crises. Even the EU member states, such as Bulgaria and Romania, have corruption as their biggest issue. Then you have some downright stupid decisions made by the states in the West—such as when Austria, for no good reason, kept blocking their full access to the Schengen system. It is a purely political, populist game aimed at domestic voters.

An open chapter is going to be Slovakia. It remains to be seen whether authoritarian Fico succeeds in weakening the democratic institutions and brings about even more damage than during his previous years in government. Current demonstrations against his policies seem to show that civic society in Slovakia is still alive.

The last great chairman of the Social Democrats was Franz Vranitzky, who brought Austria into the E.U., and his public reflections on Austria's role during World War II were an important milestone in our modern history.

We have not mentioned Austria yet, where there will be parliament elections in the Fall. Is there a chance that the premiership will be assumed by someone from the far right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)?

There is a real danger that FPÖ becomes the party with the most mandates. I do hope the survival instinct of Austrian democrats kicks in and they will form a coalition. I also hope that Professor Alexander Van der Bellen, who has been elected President for the second term, knows exactly what dangers lie ahead and will chart his course correspondingly.

Do you consider FPÖ to be an extremist, far right party?

For the most part, yes.

Are they even capable of governing? Do they have people for that, an infrastructure?

They have been part of several administrations so far, and from what I have seen there is little reason for optimism when one considers their competence or moral integrity. It is a completely different ball game to be a junior partner in regional government, and to sit in the federal government in Vienna. Their ties to Russia worry me the most.

Do you think that FPÖ in government could form an alliance with Orbán, for example, in the EU?

The chairman of the party Herbert Kickl has said that he views Orbán as an inspiration, and just like him he would like to turn Austria into a fortress. His own convictions are unimportant, he only cares about winning votes. And so he plays the card of migration, refugees, xenophobia and so on.

What is the state of Austrian civic society? Is it strong enough to face off a potential Chancellor Kickl, or FPÖ, in the government?

I do hope that the civic society will make itself heard. We can see that its voice is not strong enough yet when compared to Germany, where huge protests were organized against the plans to expel millions of foreigners out of the country. I do hope though that there will be a similar mobilization as there was in 2000 against the first coalition of Christian Democrats with FPÖ, when other states of EU froze their bilateral relations with Austria. For our freedom it is absolutely essential to maintain the independence of the media, mainly of public service and the newspapers as well. One must not forget that the Constitutional Court has done excellent work so far, in my opinion, along with the Federal Fiscal Court; the whole of the justice system has functioned very well. The recent sentencing of former Chancellor Sebastian Kurz is testament of that.

Now that you have mentioned Kurz, what is left from his era?

In my last book, which deals with the issue of hypocrisy in politics, I dedicated an extra chapter to Kurz, where I portrayed him as a virtuoso of hypocrisy. I basically view his tenure as catastrophic for Austria. He allowed the FPÖ to take over the key ministries, such as defense, foreign affairs, the interior or the central bank. Today when he talks about his time in office there is absolutely zero reflection on what was going on, and one can tell he is still proud of his tenure. I know there are speculations about his return to politics, but I do believe his time is over. The verdict in his sentencing has set an important bar for other similar cases and I am convinced that more of that will come.

For our freedom it is absolutely essential to maintain the independence of the media, mainly of public service and the newspapers as well.

Why don't the opposition Social Democrats benefit from these scandals?

After the departure of the last Social Democratic chancellor Christian Kern, and it needs to be said it was a catastrophic departure, the party found itself in deep crisis.The party nomenclature is, to a large extent, made up of professional intriguers and plotters who instead of creating an environment of solidarity devote their time and energy to making snake pits. Andreas Basler, its new chairman, is perhaps the last chance for this traditional party to play any role of substance in our politics. Their obsession with scheming and personal vanities has reached such a proportion that even the scandals of Christian Democrats, with their corruption and so on, pale in comparison. The same goes for FPÖ's scandals; they now pretend that they weren't even there. On the whole, it needs to be said that it would not be good for Austrian democracy if the parties that successfully built the country up after the war, that means center-left Social Democrats and center-right Christian Democrats, broke up and were replaced by different outfits. There is a real danger this might happen and it needs to be prevented. I try to do my own bit as a journalist who warns against the hollowing out of democratic institutions. A quote from Lessing's Faust comes to mind; nothing in history is faster than switching from good to evil. We have already experienced that in Austrian history and I do not wish to go through it again.

One has a feeling that Social Democratic politicians keep harking back to Bruno Kreisky, the great former chairman and chancellor, in any circumstance possible? What is his legacy in today's Social Democratic Party?

Yes, that is a fundamental question. I even authored his biography. For all his greatness what remains today from his legacy is his portrait on the wall in the party headquarters. Not much is left from his policies or uncanny ability to appeal to voters outside the traditional demographics. The last great chairman of the Social Democrats was Franz Vranitzky, who brought Austria into the E.U., and his public reflections on Austria's role during World War II were an

important milestone in our modern history. Social Democracy is in decline and the question remains whether someone other than Babler would be able to prevent the worst. It also depends whether in case of election defeat there would be another change in party leadership or not.

In general it is a problem that politicians read very few books, quality newspapers and mostly just go through aggregate daily news on the Internet. Another issue are opinion polls as politicians tend to only make decisions based on them.

Kreisky was known for his acumen in foreign policy, especially towards the Middle East. Is Austria following in his footsteps?

No. Austria's foreign policy in recent years has been problematic. Our current Chancellor seeks out questionable characters such as Orbán or Serbian President Vučić. To this day, I have not understood his journey to see Putin in Russia after the invasion of Ukraine, where he went as the only Prime Minister from the EU. I have already talked about the nonsensical blockade of Romania and Bulgaria from Schengen. Unfortunately, little is bound to change until the elections. We should count ourselves lucky if we are going to be spared more political silliness but that, I guess, remains to be seen. In any case, Austria has lost a lot of its reputation due to its sycophantic policies towards Russia in Putin's era. One can only hope the next government will assume a much clearer position.

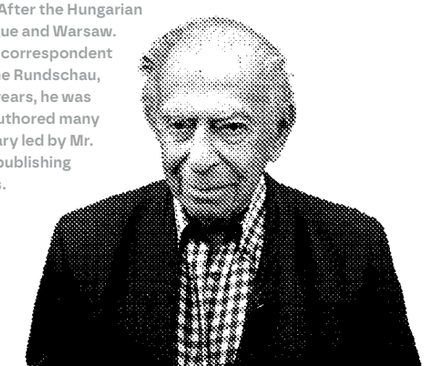
Not only are you a founder of the Eastern European desk in the public service television broadcaster ORF but you were its chair for many years as well. What is your opinion on how Austria is being informed about what is going on in our region?

It is, generally speaking, a problem not only in Austria. There are few reporters out there who know the region and speak the local languages. There are some exceptions, true, but in general the reporting is superficial. And it is a problem. And in general it is a problem that politicians read very few books, quality newspapers and mostly just go through aggregate daily news on the Internet. Another issue are opinion polls as politicians tend to only make decisions based on them. In any case, it is positive that the fear mongering predicting that Austria and the West would be swamped by masses of migrants from Eastern Europe failed to materialize.The people who did come integrated themselves well, in Austria and elsewhere. At the same time, no country should be overburdened. The media, radio and television namely, still play an important role in providing information, and are an important indicator of the health of democracy, as indicated in the report compiled by Reporters without Borders. It is always a warning sign when newspapers are closed down or when established titles are being taken over by new owners with an unclear structure. Freedom of the press and the media in general are the foundations of democracy.

Any idea how to bring traditional media closer to the young "Internet generation"?

This presents a global danger. We can see that in the Middle East, in America. Unfortunately, young people are more under the influence of Twitter/X or TikTok. It is the governments' remit to establish a proper legal framework and then enforce it so the social media cannot be abused for supporting racism or spreading nationalist sentiments. That is the main task of this century for the judicial system and governments. As often in history though, we should not be expecting immediate positive results.

PAUL LENDVAI
is an Austrian journalist, TV commentator and writer of Hungarian origin, who is considered one of the foremost experts on Central and Eastern Europe. In the 1980s, he built and led the Central and Eastern Europe desk in the public television broadcaster ORF, and later he was the main editor of the World Service of Austrian Radio Service. He comes from a Jewish family in Budapest. After the Second World War, he studied law and started working for Social Democratic newspapers. In 1953, he was arrested by the Communist regime and forced to stop working for three years. After the Hungarian uprising was quashed in 1956, he managed to flee to Vienna via Prague and Warsaw. In 1959, he received Austrian citizenship, became a Financial Times correspondent and published for other periodicals. He founded and led Europäische Rundschau, a quarterly review for politics, history and the economy. For many years, he was also a moderator of the TV debate program Europastudio. He has authored many books, in some of which he critically analyzes the situation in Hungary led by Mr. Orbán. In 2001, he founded, along with his wife Zsoka Lendvai, the publishing house Nischen Verlag specializing in translation of Hungarian works.



MICHAŁ SOBCZYK

Unlocking Capital for CEE Region

Aspen Young Leaders Program

To drive the next phase of growth, Central and Eastern European economies must unlock more capital across sectors like innovation, digital and clean energy infrastructure. While past growth has been strong, the region risks stagnation without greater pools private investment to support its transition to a high-income, competitive future.

Navigating through the storms

After successfully shedding the communist system, CEE region underwent a remarkable transformation, fueled by flows of foreign investment and substantial public EU funding. These financial lifelines helped rebuild capital-starved nations, accelerating their modernization and driving convergence with wealthier Western Europe.

CEE countries have emerged as global growth leaders, but the region now faces a turning point. Although making broad generalizations difficult, what remains clear, however, is that all CEE countries need a fresh influx of private capital to drive their next phase of transformation, especially as global conditions grow more uncertain. The need to generate large domestic savings has become even more urgent due to the expected continued decline in transfers from the EU budget.

Aging populations, insufficient investment in research and development and shallow local capital markets represent significant barriers. A "business as usual" approach will no longer suffice if the region intends to secure long-term prosperity and compete successfully on the global stage.

Geopolitical tensions have heightened these challenges. Russia's invasion of Ukraine looms over the region, disrupting capital flows and deterring foreign investment. High uncertainty persists, further delaying the crucial capital needed to drive regional growth.

CEE must confront its structural weaknesses. As highlighted in Mario Draghi's report on European competitiveness, the EU needs to significantly increase investment—equivalent to 5% of GDP—to maintain its competitive edge. Although the report mainly targets Western Europe, it emphasizes the necessity for the entire EU, including CEE, to mobilize capital for strategic initiatives like infrastructure development, digitalization, and the modernization of public services.

This over-reliance on the banking sector and limited use of capital markets leaves companies and in CEE with fewer options for funding and attractive investments, highlighting a lack of financial diversification investors in the region.

Greater Risk Fuels Greater Rewards

In 2023, the CEE region accounted for just 1.7% of total European private equity investment, down from 2.1% the previous year. This is striking when compared to its economic contribution—though the region makes up about 10-12% of the European Union's GDP, it remains underrepresented in investment flows. This disparity points to deeper challenges facing the region, including perceived market risks and the underdevelopment of its financial infrastructure, even as the CEE's economic importance continues to grow. Despite its economic potential, CEE continues to face barriers in attracting the level of investment seen in other parts of the continent, slowing its growth and development in key sectors.

The story is even more pronounced in venture capital. While CEE companies made up 8% of those receiving VC funding in Europe in 2023, the region represented just 3% of the total VC investment value. The same trend holds for private equity: as a percentage of GDP, CEE's private equity investment fell from 2022 to 2023 and remains far below the European average, highlighting a persistent gap in investment activity between CEE and the rest of Europe.

CEE pools of private capital remain smaller and more fragmented than those in the Western European or U.S where investors channel more savings into equity, investment funds, and pensions. Europeans tend to park their savings in bank accounts.

Shallow capital markets in the region remain a significant obstacle, restricting the flow of venture and equity financing that is critical for high-growth sectors. Only Estonia currently invests more than 1% of GDP in venture capital—an outlier in a region where funding remains inadequate. This lack of capital depth forces many promising companies to seek investment abroad, hindering the region's ability to retain and scale its most innovative businesses. Addressing this structural shortfall will be key to CEE's future competitiveness.

This over-reliance on the banking sector and limited use of capital markets leaves companies and in CEE with fewer options for funding and attractive investments, highlighting a lack of financial diversification investors in the region. CEE pools of private capital remain smaller and more fragmented than those in the Western European or U.S where investors channel more savings into equity, investment funds, and pensions. In contrast, Europeans tend to park their savings in bank accounts, limiting the availability of equity financing, particularly in the CEE region.

In 2023, government agencies, including multilateral organizations, remained the largest source of funding in CEE, contributing 34% of all capital raised. However, this was nearly half of what they contributed the previous year in absolute terms. However, there is a pressing need to unlock private capital in the region, as mobilizing these untapped resources will be crucial for sustaining long-term growth and investment diversification in CEE markets.

CEE pools of private capital remain smaller and more fragmented than those in the Western European or U.S where investors channel more savings into equity, investment funds, and pensions. In contrast, Europeans tend to park their savings in bank accounts, limiting the availability of equity financing, particularly in the CEE region. Overall, the data highlights a slowdown in fundraising activities in CEE, with both public and private sources pulling back compared to previous years, signaling challenges in securing capital in the region.

A bold vision

If CEE countries want to compete globally, they must reduce regulatory frictions that deter pension funds and insurers from investing in venture capital. Well-designed tax incentives for R&D investments could also help accelerate the development of a vibrant VC sector in the region. The bank-based structure of the EU's financial system has proven inadequate for funding high-tech startups, as banks typically prefer safer, collateral-backed loans. Venture capital is key to unlocking productivity and growth, and the EU must step up its support.

As we look ahead, one thing is clear: CEE cannot afford to rest on its laurels. The region must continue to evolve, leveraging its dynamic economies to attract investment and drive growth. With the right tools, policies, and investments, CEE can indeed become a key player in Europe's economic future—one that not only catches up with the richest economies but helps lead the way forward.

The Capital Markets Union (CMU) initiative—one of Europe's flagship projects—is essential to unlock the region's full potential and strengthen citizens' wealth. However, the project has so far failed to consider the distinctive challenges faced by the CEE countries and lacks a regional perspective. CMU's success story cannot be written without catering for the CEE region.

This tale of growth is not just about numbers and regulations; it's about nurturing an environment where dreams can take flight, and investments can blossom into success stories.

Imagine a landscape where the vibrant potential of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is fully realized through a thriving financial ecosystem, much like that of the United States. In this narrative, the CEE region embarks on a journey of transformation, drawing inspiration from the successes of U.S. capital markets. At the heart of this story lies the lesson of a robust regulatory framework, akin to the solid foundation that supports the U.S. markets. embracing this principle, CEE can reduce its reliance on traditional banking, opening doors to innovative startups and ambitious ventures that seek to propel the region forward. This tale of growth is not just about numbers and regulations; it's about nurturing an environment where dreams can take flight, and investments can blossom into success stories.

Capital markets in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have struggled to achieve substantial growth largely due to a strong aversion to risk among savers and a general lack of financial knowledge. Many individuals faced significant setbacks during the post-communist transition period, often as minority shareholders in the wake of voucher privatization or as investors in unregulated non-bank entities that ultimately turned out to be Ponzi schemes. This experience was particularly harsh due to the absence of diversification in their investments. Consequently, bank deposits have remained a favored option, bolstered by government insurance against bank failures, which has contributed to their dominant role in household savings. Additionally, the conservative nature of pension fund portfolios, which lean heavily towards low-risk assets rather than equities, highlights the ongoing issues with financial literacy and regulation in the region.

To tackle the structural challenges and unlock the capital essential for long-term growth, the CEE region could embark on an ambitious "CEE Moonshot" initiative. This transformative endeavor would center around bold ideas designed to mobilize both public and private investment in vital sectors such as digital innovation, clean energy, and infrastructure development. By fostering collaboration among governments, multilateral organizations, and private investors, a CEE Moonshot would set the stage for groundbreaking investments. The ripple effects of this initiative could significantly boost venture capital flows, deepen capital markets, and lessen the region's dependence on traditional banking.

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

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BARTOSZ
WIELIŃSKI

The Baltic Sea and Central Europe

Has the situation in the Baltic Sea changed after Sweden and Finland joined NATO? It probably has, if the head of Polish diplomacy says publicly that the Russian Baltic Fleet may meet the same sad fate as the Black Sea Fleet

I enjoy doing interviews with Radosław Sikorski, because the head of Polish diplomacy (and former Defense Minister) will always pepper his cold calculations about geopolitics, Russian influence in the EU and the growing threat of war with a few disarming anecdotes. A few weeks ago, we started our conversation with a question about the situation on the Narva, the border river separating Estonia and the EU from Russia. On 24 May, Russian border guards removed Estonian buoys that marked the border line running in the riverbed. This is an obvious Russian provocation related to Moscow's announcement two days earlier about the expansion of Russian territorial waters in the Baltic. This declaration was interpreted as announcing territorial claims against Finland and Lithuania. And this was compounded by Russian-Belarusian maneuvers to practice procedures for the use of tactical nuclear weapons, recently stockpiled by the Russians in Belarus.

Quite a lot happened for one week, although the announcement of the border change was removed from Russian government websites. "Russia's border announcement could be a sign of weakness and panic," Sikorski reassured me, and when I mentioned (to turn up the heat) that Russia still had intact Baltic Fleet units at its disposal, he replied: "Yes, but we are able to do to it what the Ukrainians did to the Russian Black Sea Fleet."

And all in all, this was not just an anecdote, but a quite brutal diagnosis of the state of the Russian armed forces in this part of Europe.

In March 2013, two Russian Tu-22M strategic bombers (today the same machines regularly fire missiles at Ukrainian cities), escorted by four fighter jets, began approaching at high speed towards Gotland, a Swedish island strategically located in the middle of the Baltic Sea. The planes with red stars on their fins carried out a simulated attack on the Swedish electronic intelligence headquarters and turned back 32 km from the island's shores. The Swedes did not respond. In 2005, they had sent a signal to the world that they wanted to promote peace and friendly cooperation in the Baltic and withdrew troops from the island. And besides, the Russian bombers arrived just in time for Good Friday, when Swedish air force personnel had been sent on a week-long holiday.

The Russians humiliatingly showed the Swedes that they were capable of decapitating their army. A year later, after annexing Crimea and tearing away part of Donbass from Ukraine, the Russians demonstrated to NATO that they considered the Baltic to be their territory. Simulated strategic bomber attacks on Stockholm were repeated. This was compounded by numerous incidents involving Russian fighter aircraft. In 2014, a Scandinavian airline SAS plane narrowly missed colliding with a Russian reconnaissance aircraft flying with its transponder switched off. Sweden learned the right lessons from the Russian provocations. The military has returned to Gotland and the strategically located island is now protected by NATO. Is Russia, in its third year of aggression against Ukraine, in a position to threaten it? I find it doubtful. At the beginning of May 2024, the commander of the Estonian Armed Forces, Gen. Martin Herem, outlined a plan for NATO to conduct a blockade of the Baltic for Russian naval and air forces, so as to prevent Russia from supporting an attack on the Baltic States from the sea in the event of a full-scale conflict.

This is not a crackpot idea. After Sweden and Finland joined the North Atlantic Alliance, the Baltic became essentially a NATO lake. The Gulf of Finland, through which ships from Kronstadt and St Petersburg would have to

pass, is only 60 km wide. The Königsberg region, where the Baltiysk air base is located, is within easy reach for NATO. On top of this, the Russian Baltic Fleet is a mere shadow of the Cold War-era fleet. One Kilo-class submarine stationed in St Petersburg, a missile destroyer based in Baltiysk, two missile frigates, 18 corvettes and some missile cutters. A total of 52 ships, most of them old.

After the annexation of Crimea, Moscow's attention was focused on the Black Sea fleet, which was hastily reinforced and modernized, with particular emphasis on vessels carrying Kalibr cruise missiles. The Ukrainians, although virtually without warships, were able to decimate the Black Sea fleet with missiles and naval drones. Russian ships were already evacuated from Crimea last year to the port of Novorossiysk in Russia, from which they are no longer sailing out. In a Baltic dominated by the enlarged NATO, the Russian fleet would face the same fate.

NATO dominance in the Baltic after the admission of Sweden and Finland is not the Kremlin's only strategic concern. Russia's border with the Alliance has become 1,340 km longer. This is the length of the border with Finland, which starts in the Arctic and stretches almost to Vyborg and the coast of the Gulf of Finland. Russia does not have the military personnel necessary to secure such a large area. Marine infantry units that were stationed in the Arctic had been sent to Ukraine back in 2022—a total of 80 per cent of the troops stationed there at the time, or 24,000 men, were sent to the front according to Western estimates two years ago. These troops were decimated, as evidenced by the wreckage of armored personnel carriers in Arctic camouflage. A similar fate befell the units from the Königsberg District, which had already been deployed in Kharkovshchyna in late spring 2022. Units of the 11th Corps, supposed to keep Poland in check from Königsberg, were demolished in Ukraine. During the fall offensive on Kupyansk and Izium, they suffered more than 50 per cent losses. The result? The Königsberg region is defended by barely 6,000 Russian soldiers, according to NATO estimates. Ditto for the Finnish border.

But this absolutely does not mean that Russia will let go of the Baltic. In the village of Kulikovo, a dozen kilometers from Königsberg, tactical nuclear warheads are stockpiled under reinforced concrete vaults. After 2014, Russia extensively upgraded the site and, in 2018, redeployed Iskander ballistic missile launchers capable of carrying tactical nuclear warheads to the region. Warsaw, Berlin, Copenhagen and Stockholm are within their range. Although Lithuanians shrugged off the information about the deployment of Iskanders near Königsberg, saying that there had always been nuclear weapons in the region, this threat must be taken seriously. All the more so because Putin has set up another nuclear weapons depot in Belarus, and the dictator there, Aleksandr Lukashenko, has announced the adaptation of Belarusian strike aircraft to carry them.

Putin has been threatening the West with his nuclear arsenal since the first minutes of the invasion of Ukraine, and his propagandists at their TV convocations revel in visions of nuclear mushrooms over the ruins of Paris, London or Warsaw. I asked Minister Sikorski about this. "Nuclear weapons are the last card Putin has in his hand. We should not let ourselves be intimidated with Russian threats," he replied. And he threw in another anecdote, about how a dozen years ago, when the Polish-American agreement on the missile defense shield base in Redzikowo near Słupsk was being negotiated, he had to ask Russian generals not to threaten Poland with a nuclear attack more often than once a quarter.

But shouldn't Russian threats to use nuclear weapons change NATO's nuclear doctrine around the Baltic? The only Baltic state where the Americans have so far stockpiled tactical nuclear bombs is Germany. The extension of the Nuclear Sharing Program to Poland is being called for—albeit in an undiplomatic and therefore ineffective manner—by President Andrzej Duda. Sikorski did not want to comment on this particular issue. "The quieter we are about it, the better," he said.

After the annexation of Crimea, Moscow's attention was focused on the Black Sea fleet, which was hastily reinforced and modernized, with particular emphasis on vessels carrying Kalibr cruise missiles. The Ukrainians, were able to decimate the Black Sea fleet with missiles and naval drones.

There is another site of concern in the Königsberg region, namely part of the military base in the town of Pionierskiy, surrounded by an additional high wall. Several sizable parabolic antennas and other equipment are located there. It is a radio-electronic warfare station designed to jam GPS signals. It is currently operating around the clock. Its successful hits include disrupting satellite navigation on a plane carrying the British Defense Minister, who was returning home from Malbork (100 km from the region's border). It is also likely to have contributed to the crash of a US reconnaissance drone at an air base in Mirosławiec (300 km from the border). Interfering with GPS signals must be classified as a hybrid

operation. And it is in this field that Russia, although lacking troops and naval power, is able to harm the countries of NATO's extended eastern flank.

We had the foretaste of hybrid war in 2015. A large number of migrants from the Middle East unexpectedly appeared on the Finnish-Russian border. At the time, the world looked on in horror at the Balkans, where hundreds of thousands of people were heading towards Germany. A gigantic humanitarian disaster seemed to be looming. That migrants could be used as weapons seemed inconceivable. And Russia was then testing such weapons in a place where no one expected a migrant crisis.

Russia and its puppet Alexander Lukashenko returned to this strategy in the summer of 2021. Belarus terminated the readmission agreement with Poland and then began to draw migrants from the Middle East and Africa to its territory and then send them through swamps and wilderness to Poland. In 2015, the Finns reacted calmly to the Russian provocation by professionally sealing the border. The Law and Justice government of Poland became hysterical, however, did not ask for support from NATO or the European Union, and exploited the crisis for heaping anti-immigration propaganda on the public. Despite mobilizing the army, shutting the border off and building a fence along it, thousands of people reached Germany from Belarus through Poland. The route was duly noted by people smugglers. The route through Belovezhskaya Pushcha, although in winter it can end in death due to hypothermia, is less dangerous than crossing the Mediterranean; and simpler than an expedition across several countries in the Balkans.

Putin has been threatening the West with his nuclear arsenal since the first minutes of the invasion of Ukraine, and his propagandists at their TV convocations revel in visions of nuclear mushrooms over the ruins of Paris, London or Warsaw.

A hybrid operation using migrants is currently underway, except that the driving force behind it is not Minsk, but Moscow. According to Sikorski, 90 percent of migrants illegally entering Poland have Russian visas. Donald Tusk's government intends to seal and fortify the border. Unlike its predecessors, it does not intend to act alone, but with Baltic and Scandinavian partners. Russia is sending migrants to the borders of Lithuania and Latvia, as well as Finland. Tusk wants the European Union to develop its defense policy, to finance investment in security and finally to take care of its eastern border. These proposals open up great opportunities for the Baltic states to cooperate.

They also mark a paradigm shift in Polish foreign policy. Even before the Law and Justice government (2015-2023), Warsaw made cooperation within the Visegrad Group one of its priorities. Today, due to Orbán's Hungary slide into authoritarianism and the pending assault on the rule of law in Slovakia, this format is becoming less and less significant. Hungary is pursuing an openly pro-Russian policy, trying to sabotage both NATO enlargement to Sweden and Finland and EU aid to Ukraine. Therefore, it is the Baltic and Scandinavian states that are becoming the main partners for the Polish government, as indicated by the intensity of contacts in the region. The Czech Republic, although landlocked, should also be included.

Russia's hybrid operation against NATO will be gathering force. In May 2024, a Russian sabotage network was dismantled in Poland. That is why it is necessary to stick together.

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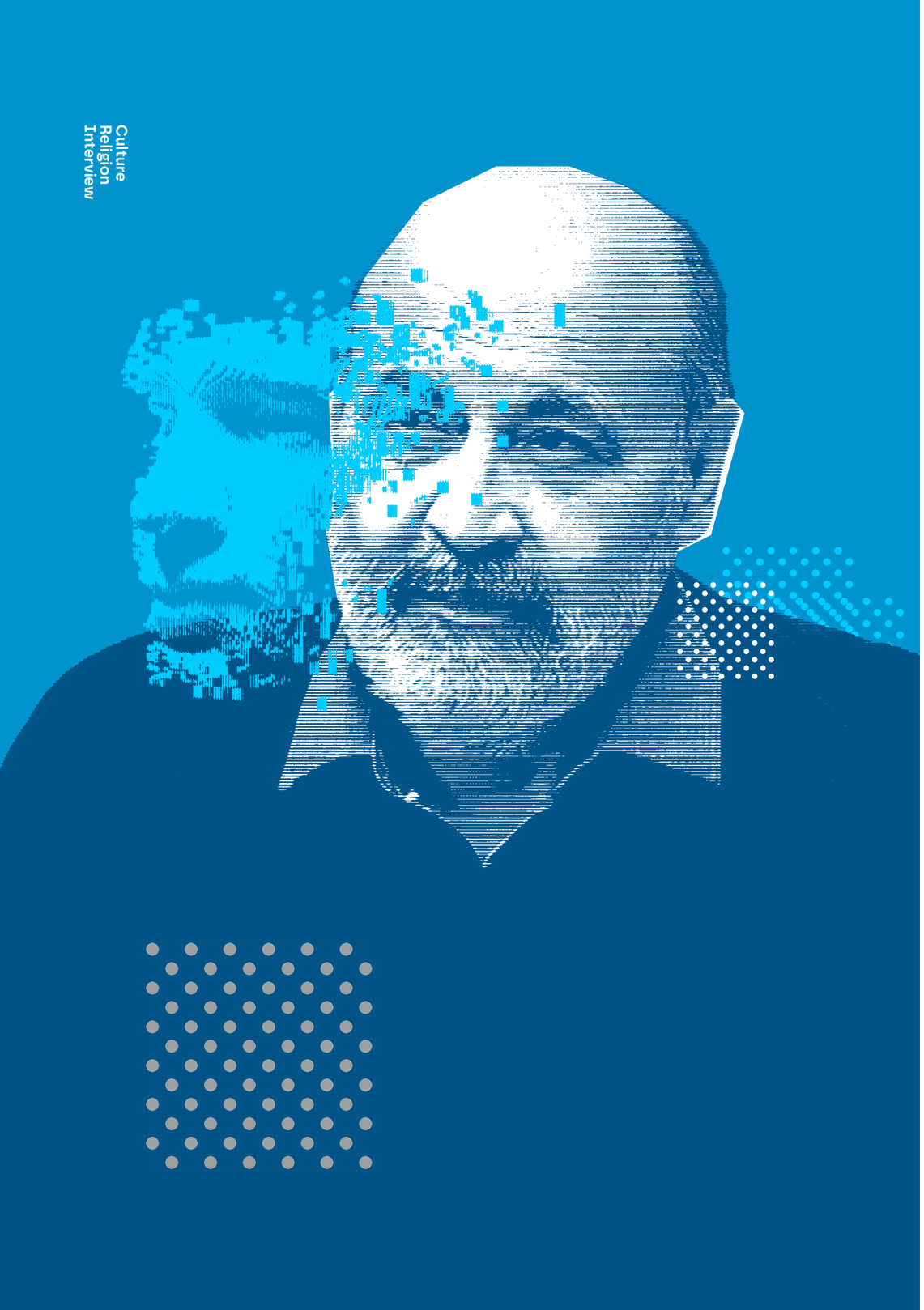

ALEKSANDER KACZOROWSKI
INTERVIEW

Tomáš Halík: The Church Is Somewhere In-between

"Conservative, identity-based piety will not offer people any vision of the future. Certainly, the kind of Church we know from Poland or even the Czech Republic will not do it," says Monsignor Prof. Tomáš Halik in an interview with Aleksander Kaczorowski.

ALEKSANDER KACZOROWSKI:
Monsignor Halik, is artificial intelligence more than a new technological tool?
TOMÁŠ HALIK: I think it is.

And what does it mean for religion?
Here is what I think.
The emergence of artificial intelligence is a paradigmatic shift, an outcome of the process of globalization and the most important cultural development of recent centuries. This process entered a new phase in the age of the Internet, which reached us, in the Czech Republic or Poland, with some delay with the downfall of Communism. Artificial Intelligence represents a new quality in this process, and its most fascinating feature is the speed, the rate of change, it brings with it—and this is what is most problematic. One might even say suspicious.

Why?
Because it leaves us no time for reflection.
Artificial intelligence is incredibly effective—I myself use it in my work, which is all the more reason for us to ask ourselves anew today what is specifically human, inherent to humans, and what is not? What is it that artificial intelligence cannot replace us in?

Is there such a thing?

Of course. That something is a contemplative attitude to reality. And so we come to the phenomenon of religion.

An international sociological survey was recently conducted on what 'non-believers' believe. Non-believers in quotation marks. It revealed that religiosity is undergoing huge changes today. We can no longer talk about religiosity in classic categories: believer vs non-believer. Most people do not fit into them. It's somewhere in between.

If you ask an average Czech whether he believes in God, he will answer you: "No way, I am an atheist." But when you start digging deeper, he will immediately add: "But I'm not some naive materialist!

And that's why religion is in crisis?

No. The crisis affects that sort of religiosity which totally identifies with religious institutions. It is indeed dying. But this does not mean that religion itself is dying. Because there are also fewer and fewer dogmatic atheists and at the same time, there are more and more people who are both believers and non-believers.

Let me give you an example. If you ask an average Czech whether he believes in God, he will answer you: "No way, I am an atheist." But when you start digging deeper, he will immediately add: "But I'm not some naive materialist! I also know that there is something more, something beyond us."

The important thing is that the number of people who are searching is increasing both among those who identify themselves as atheists and among those who declare themselves believers. Also, for many Catholics, religion is becoming a path rather than an end in itself. The great challenge facing the Church today is to learn how to talk to seekers, believers, atheists and those who are somewhere in-between.

Does the Catholic Church still know how to do this? In Poland we are witnessing a mass departure from religious practice, there is even talk of an Irish scenario. Many are performing the act of apostasy. Commentators point to the politicization of the church, its identification with the ruling party, but aren't there deeper reasons for this? After all, this development does not only affect Poland.

What you are talking about—the politicization of the church—is important, but it is not the crux of the matter. It is clear that the identification of religion with nationalism and political power is lethal for religion. This happens wherever the Church has traditionally dominated the public sphere and has not learned to engage in dialogue with people of different views. As a result, it has degenerated and ceased to matter.

Like in Ireland?

It started in Quebec. Then there was Spain, Ireland and now Poland, where the process of secularization is now proceeding most rapidly. In all these countries, the Church had a dominant position in the cultural sphere, it was seen as the foundation of national identity. It is precisely this identity-based understanding of religion that is in deep crisis today.

Why?

Because modern man does not have a clear identity. He is still looking for it. Today, the identity offering goes only to a few who vulgarize it, and then Christianity becomes nothing more than an ideological project. This suits some, and it can be exploited politically, but at the price of degrading the most important element of religiosity, which is spirituality.

This kind of religiosity is quickly becoming sterile, and what's worse, this conservative, identity-based piety is incapable of offering people any vision of the future. Instead, its adherents focus on culture wars; they pick a few catchy topics, such as LGBT and the like, and fixate on them. And the most important existential issues go by the wayside.

The Church has always been prone to such fixations. The early Christians argued about whether believers could share a table with pagans, in the Middle Ages it was a dispute over usury. Today it is the issue of abortion, gays, etc.

Are these marginal issues?

Of course not, but if the Church only fights battles with secularized society—battles it is doomed to lose—instead of inspiring people to seek the sources of spirituality, the sources of hope, to look for a deeper meaning of life, then it will cease to be credible for educated and young people.

We need to learn to function in a pluralistic society; come to terms with the fact that in the legal system of a secular state there is no place for the criminalization of abortion; come to terms with the legalisation of same-sex unions. In a free, pluralistic society, the Church can only preach moral values through inspiration, leading by example, and cannot rely on a state apparatus of repression. We should focus on educating consciences. We can persuade people to follow Christian ethics, preferably by exemplifying it ourselves, but we cannot force them to do so. Today, the most heated disputes concern secondary issues, while we neglect spiritual, existential issues.

I have long studied the phenomenon of Catholicism, which I believe is the opposite of catholicity.

That is, religious fundamentalism?

No. The point is that catholicity is synonymous with openness, the universal. Catholicism, on the other hand, is a reduction to a particular worldview.

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.

I'm not sure I understand.

Let me explain. Modern times, Modernism, brought with it a process of specialization. Religion, too, became a specialized sector of social life. As part of this process, new Christian denominations arose, branching out quite like Linnaeus' plant classification system, that is, according to the intentions and ideas of the philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment. Consequently, religion became nothing more than a worldview. One of many existing worldviews. And it has lost what is most important about it.

Any worldview can become a valid ideology as long as it gains the support of political power. This is the case of Catholicism, which was formed during the period of the First Vatican Council (1869-70), with the Church's fear of modernity at its core. Catholicism became a kind of counterculture to Protestantism and Modernism, to all modern culture, to modern philosophy. This clerical Catholicism dominated the Piuses' era, from Pius IX to Pius XII, that is, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Pope Francis is trying to shake this up today, to point to an alternative model of Christianity, to move out of the ghetto of Catholicism toward an ecumenical Christianity.

And wasn't this already attempted by Vatican II?

Yes, but this new model did not break through in the Communist countries of the time, such as Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Why?

Because they were isolated, cut off from the world and modern theological thought, especially the Czech church. Bishops and priests or even Catholic intellectuals could not properly study and assimilate the achievements of the Second Council. They generally did not have access to the books of the authors who formed its intellectual base, so they could not familiarize themselves with them, and without knowledge of the context, they could not properly grasp the meaning of the reforms. Obviously, they also didn't have any experience of functioning in an open democratic society. So we ended up with formal changes: we will celebrate Mass facing the faithful, replace Latin with national languages. But we missed the most important thing: we didn't change our mentality.

Another thing is that the Second Council did not live up to its hopes anywhere. It happened too late, when the world had already gone its own way and stopped bothering with the Church. But that doesn't change the essence of the matter: we need to liberate ourselves from Catholicism and rediscover our Catholicity. Both in Poland and in the Czech Republic.

The Czechs are regarded as liberal and tolerant in Poland. Are they really like that?

Certainly, Czechs do not identify with the Church as much as Poles do, which does not mean that they are not open to spiritual matters. They are also liberal in many respects, sometimes too much so—this is their way of letting their steam off after the Communist era, when almost everything was forbidden. Sometimes, this has more in common with libertinism than liberalism, so it is a caricature of liberal values. However, there is no dispute that our society is indeed very tolerant. The question is whether this really is an advantage. Is it tolerance or mere indifference?

And what do you think?

The Czechs were formed in the nineteenth century as a bourgeois society. They could not rely on the native aristocracy (that was mostly German or cosmopolitan), nor were they a predominantly peasant society like the Slovaks, Poles or Hungarians. Under the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, education, industry and culture developed in our lands. Czechs lived mostly in towns and were relatively well educated. And since an educated middle class is the foundation of democracy, even in the 1930s democracy survived in Czechoslovakia much longer than in neighboring countries where authoritarian regimes took over. Democratic values never quite died in our country. But it is also true that Czechs don't believe in any grand ideals, in big words. This can be seen in the nature of the language. Polish has a natural tendency to pathos or pomposity, and this doesn't bother anyone, but when

someone starts speaking bombastically in Czech, he immediately seems ridiculous. Bombast is suspect in our country by definition. This, moreover, has been a problem for Bible translators. When a Czech hears the various bombastic passages, of which there are legion, he immediately thinks to himself: Aha, someone is pulling my leg. And he defends himself with Švejk humor.
This national trait of ours is, of course, exploited by populists. A classic example was President Miloš Zeman, who made vulgarity his trademark, brought it into Czech politics. He did it with full deliberation, fully on purpose. He said he wanted to be the President of the bottom ten million Czechs, but in fact he dragged those ten million Czech citizens down with him. And he called anyone who criticised him a representative of the "Prague café".

The dialogue between believers and non-believers is not a dialogue between some two groups of people locked in their bubbles. It takes place within each person.

In Poland, it's called a salon or "warszawka" [little Warsaw].

I don't want to worry you, but liberals in the Czech Republic are as few as Christians. Most Czechs are somewhere in between.
And this is what the future will look like. People who identify with specific values, religious or secular, are in the minority. The number of people who do not identify with any ideology or institution, religion or political party, is growing.
Fortunately, the dialogue between believers and non-believers is not a dialogue between some two groups of people locked in their bubbles. It takes place within each person. Each of us has some kind of primordial faith, without which we could not live. The belief that life has meaning. But in order to see this meaning, critical thinking, scepticism is also necessary. These two elements should complement each other. Faith without scepticism turns into fanaticism and fundamentalism. And scepticism unable to question itself becomes cynicism.
Faith and unbelief are two sisters that need each other. That's why dialogue is so important.

John Paul II was a Pope of dialogue?

It is necessary to see both the positive and negative sides of his pontificate. The Pope appreciated some aspects of the Second Council, and supported inter-religious dialogue, as exemplified by the famous meeting in Assisi in 1986. 'Solidarity', which broke the Communist Party's monopoly on power and made a fundamental breach in the monolithic Soviet system, was an aftermath of the spiritual atmosphere after the Pope's first pilgrimage to Poland in 1979. John Paul II supported parliamentary democracy, the free market and the European Union.

These two elements should complement each other. Faith without scepticism turns into fanaticism and fundamentalism. And scepticism unable to question itself becomes cynicism.

And the bad sides?

He was constantly on the road, so he did not oversee the papal curia. He did not control the administrative apparatus and the problems that were growing there, such as corruption.

What else?

He ignored the problem of sexual abuse.

Because?

Because he didn't believe the information about the scandals that came to him. He thought these were slanders. It was not uncommon for the Communists, and before them the Nazis, to accuse unrepentant priests they wanted to remove of paedophilia. So he downplayed these reports, until finally it was too late: a delayed bomb went off and undermined the Church's credibility. It wasn't until Pope Francis acknowledged that this was a systemic problem, and that the root cause was clericalism—perceiving the role of the clergy in terms of power. The priestly estate, which was supposed to serve, became a ruling class. Priests stopped listening, they saw themselves as truth-keepers.
Unfortunately, John Paul II became a symbol of this triumphalism; against his own will. I had the privilege to know him, I appreciated and liked him very much, and I have no doubt that he was a saint. But when Polish Dominicans visited me in Prague on the day of his death, I told them: the Polish Church must now see the face of Jesus Christ again behind the icon of the Polish Pope.

How do you feel about the Catholic Church today?

Its great asset is Pope Francis. Thanks to him, we are presented with a great opportunity for synodal reform, a profound reform not only of the Roman Catholic Church, but of Christianity as a whole. There is a chance that we will go down this road together: Catholics and representatives of other faiths. After all, the process of globalization,

which is in crisis today and has shown us its dark face, must also have its spiritual aspect.
But this will not be done by the kind of Church we know from Poland or even the Czech Republic. It is a relic of the past, it has nothing to offer for the future. That's why it is lashing out in the culture wars.
Of course, we have seen this before: Catholicism without Christianity, which eventually becomes Catholic Fascism. Think of France from the time of the Dreyfuss affair, from the time of the split between republicans and monarchists. The leaders of the ultra-Catholic, ultra-nationalist Action Française were actually atheists, but they really liked Catholicism conceived as a solitary fortress. This self-enclosed Catholicism was completely sterile, fed by nostalgia for the past, for Medieval Christanitas. These people were great lovers of the Middle Ages, but not the authentic era, only the one from the imaginations of the Romantics. They did not create anything new. In architecture, neo-Gothic, in philosophy, neo-Thomism. There was always a retro element to it.
And it hasn't changed, it still characterizes these circles. Recently, an extreme nationalist Slovak politician called for the enthronement of Christ as King of Slovakia. Czech journalists asked me what this meant. I replied that it was a symbol of Catholic Fascism, which the church in Slovakia has never shaken off. It's a legacy of Fr. Jozef Tiso's World War II collaborationist regime, but he wasn't the only one; there was also Franco in Spain, Salazar in Portugal, there was the Vichy regime and the Croatian Ustasha.
Today these people are openly pro-Russian. A few years ago in Gniezno, an Orthodox archbishop called for an alliance of Catholics, Muslims and Orthodox against Protestantism and liberalism. Fundamentalists of all faiths, unite!

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Was it a Russian clergyman?
Patriarch Kirill's aide. Now he is in Hungary, you can see he is keeping an eye on the Kremlin's affairs there.

Pope Francis will not have it easy.
That's why the Church today needs an inspiring vision. One in the spirit of Fr. Teilhard de Chardin, the first thinker of globalization.

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.

Wasn't he excommunicated?
He had problems with the hierarchy, but he remained a son of the Church. That's why he can inspire us: he had doubts, but remained faithful.

Do you expect the abolition of celibacy or allowing the priesthood of women? Is this even possible?
This should not be made a taboo subject. But this is not the most important thing.

And what is?
We must learn to listen to the arguments of others.
I took part in several pre-synodal meetings. Participants are divided into small groups. They are given an issue to consider and are expected to speak quite openly about it. Then there is a moment of contemplation, during which everyone reflects on the interlocutors' statements. And then they say what they thought was most important about them. This is again followed by a moment of contemplation, and then comes the time for joint conclusions.
This is a fantastic method. It would work well in many a parliament.

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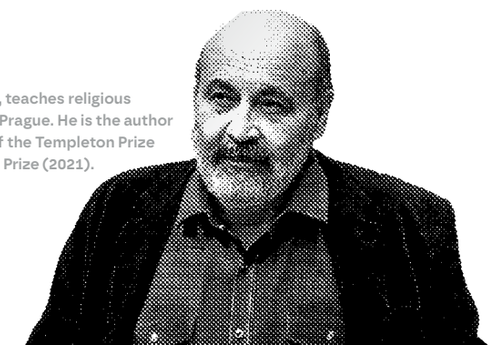

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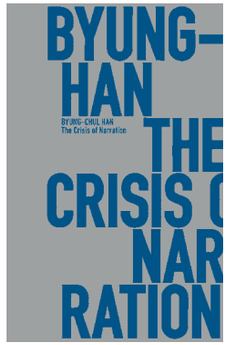
Future Tense



The Crisis of Narration
Byung-Chul Han
Polity Press, 2024, 76 pages

For better or worse, language evolves. The Oxford English Dictionary added the word 'google' as a verb in 2006—as in "I googled it". Along with creating new words, our techno-centric way of life also changes the meaning of existing words. A 'friend' used to be a very close personal acquaintance. But these days, the term can also refer to a digital connection with a near stranger. Once positive and personal, friends in 2024 can also be distant and negative. Like google, friend can also be a verb—deployed in the imperative mood no less. Someone might issue "friend me" as a command, the same way your mother once shouted: "Clean your room".

It's no wonder the world feels less friendly by the day.

Plenty more words are changing too. The social networking platform Instagram has a 'stories' feature. In their words, this allows "you to share everyday moments and grow closer to the people and interests you care about through photos and videos that disappear after 24 hours". On Instagram, stories are about 'moments'. That is to say, an Instagram story is the exact opposite of an actual story, which once referred to the parts in-between otherwise isolated occurrences. For their part, disappearing photos also contradict the concept of a story—which is meant to convey past happenings into the future.

Distortions of language like this are examples of technology attacking culture. In his new book *The Crisis of Narration*, philosopher Byung-Chul Han focuses on the ways culture and technology team up to destroy narratives. Notably, Han distinguishes the concepts of narratives and storytelling. While narratives are an "expression of the mood of time" today's 'micro-narratives'—or stories—"lack gravity". There is a difference in both depth and breadth. Narratives "create a community" while storytelling "brings forth only a fleeting community—the commodified form of a community". Han's argument, and his terminology, is rooted in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, who himself relied on Aristotle in coining the term 'bringing-forth' in his 1954 essay *The Question Concerning Technology*. As Heidegger defined it, bringing-forth is "bringing [something] out of concealment into unconcealment". To Han, narratives bring-forth, while stories do not.

Han is not the first to worry about the decline of narratives or narration. As he notes, another contemporary of Heidegger, the twentieth century intellectual Walter Benjamin, shared similar preoccupations. In Benjamin's estimation, the kind of hyperactivity associated with people relocating to cities, the increased ease of traveling distances by railway and habitual ingestion of radio content displaced the contemplation essential to assembling coherent narratives. In short, he blamed the early twentieth century rise of capitalism and the "complete ascendancy of the bourgeoisie". Han does not totally disagree, but rather than the end of the process he points to Benjamin's era as the starting gun in a race to the bottom that has accelerated in recent years. In our digital Information Age, the pre-existing modernist dilemma has been exacerbated further, prompting Han to characterize our current epoch as 'late-modernity'.

For Han, information is the enemy of narratives. Information is momentary, its relevance exhausted as soon as we move on to the next piece of information. Today, Han writes: "Reality itself takes on the form of information and data." Though there are similarities between the modern and late-modern eras, there are also some key differences. Unlike modernists, we late-modernists "lack the spirit of departure" and the "revolutionary pathos of the new or of fresh

beginnings". Modernist thinkers rejected the Enlightenment concept of rationalism, but in doing so emphasized humans' ability to impact their environment, celebrating humanity's agency to change things. In contrast, in this late-modern era, we are at once unhappy with society while lacking the belief that there is anything we can do about it.

Modernist thinkers rejected the Enlightenment concept of rationalism, but in doing so emphasized humans' ability to impact their environment, celebrating humanity's agency to change things.

Analog issues

As Han argues, we no longer narrate life because we do not have the "courage to create a world-changing narrative". Narratives have been replaced by storytelling, which has become "a matter of commercialism and consumption". Distinct from the overt repression associated with 1930s modernity, our new "information regime works not through repression but through seduction".

For Han, digital tools like social media platforms are not so much the problem themselves, as they make many problems much worse. Social media, he writes, is a "media of information, not narration". Put another way, not only are Instagram stories not narratives but they are not stories either. They are simply information. "For digital platforms, data are more valuable than narratives," Han writes. And the ethos of these digital platforms is contrary to human interests. Han harkens back to another modernist, Sigmund Freud—who once argued that a primary function of consciousness was to protect one's self from external stimuli. But what happens when, as digital platforms do, stimuli attack at a pre-conscious level?

"In the modern age," Han writes, "the shock aspect of individual impressions has become so intensified that our consciousness is forced to be permanently active as a shield against stimuli." The human psyche necessarily evolves new methods to protect itself from external shocks. For one, we increasingly avoid experiences themselves. Second, even when we do have genuine experiences, we have trouble feeling them, because "as the psychic apparatus gets used to the increased stimuli... the cortex of the brain where our defenses against stimuli are located becomes calloused". It is worth noting that, etymologically speaking, the word screen (rooted in the German *Schirm*) refers to a protective barrier. In the Information Age, screens are things that literally separate us from reality.

Polity Press has published 14 of Han's books in English in the past seven years. His previously best known text, *The Burnout Society*, targeted the collective social malaise created by cultures of convenience and multitasking. It has been translated into dozens of languages. *The Crisis of Narration* was published in German in 2023, and is available in English as of April. Han himself is an interesting if elusive character. Hailing from South Korea, he studied philosophy in Germany in the 1980s. As all his books attest, he took a liking to the aforementioned Heidegger, Benjamin and Freud, among others in the Germanic philosophical canon. Han still lives in Berlin and, from the looks of things, wears a cool black leather jacket and long ponytail everywhere he goes. His books are short and his writing aphoristic and thought-provoking, though he does not always justify his propositions with evidence.

Han rarely gives interviews, but *The New Yorker* magazine profiled him earlier this year, labeling him "the internet's new favorite philosopher". For whatever reason, the magazine's resident tech writer, Kyle Chayka, completely missed the point of this book. In that article, Chayka criticizes Han for a failure to "acknowledge that digital spaces can also produce meaningful experiences". To be clear, Han does not seem enamored with Snapchat or Tic-Toc, but his critique is not directed at digital technology itself but at the society building these new technologies. Walter Benjamin once published a book called *One Way Street*, but interactions between culture and technology actually flow in at least two directions.

New technological tools do alter culture, but culture also dictates the types of tools and technologies that are created. Furthermore, culture and politics set the rules for who gets to use those technologies and what for.

Cultural cause

As Andrew Feenberg, another notable thinker in the philosophy of technology, puts it: the development of technology is guided by "social codes established by the cultural and political struggles that define the horizon under which the technology will fall". New technological tools do alter culture, but culture also dictates the types of tools and technologies that are created. Furthermore, culture and politics set the rules for who gets to use those technologies and what for. Technologies are alternately acceptable or abhorrent depending on context. Speaking on a mobile phone is fine, so long as it is not in the middle of the second

act of *Don Giovanni* at the National Theater. In the twenty-first century, it is generally acceptable to use a radioactive isotope for medical testing, somewhat acceptable to use one for generating electricity and unacceptable to use one in explosive devices that vaporize cities. Culture dictates where and when harnessing the power of a radioactive isotope is appropriate.

Contrary to Chayka's interpretation, Han is not so interested in whether or not "digital spaces" are capable of generating meaningful experiences. He is saying that the cultural and economic conditions that animate the development of these platforms virtually guarantee that they are not. Every new device and platform that is created comes about via social activities and as such reflects social interests. Our digital devices are imbued with the flaws of the society around them, and their growing sophistication further distills society's inherent flaws. "Posting, liking and sharing content are consumerist practices that intensify the narrative crisis," Han writes. But, importantly, they are not themselves the crisis.

Writing an autobiography is a conscious act that demands reflection. No autobiography intends to be a complete replay of an individual life. Autobiographers contemplate their lives and decide what to include and omit in the narrative they share. Online platforms are different. Not only do they hope to capture everything about a person, but their main purpose is to collect information about pre-conscious behavior. They want data about people when they are not actively thinking—pure-libido, as Freud might say. They do so to "screen a person" and "control their behavior at a pre-reflexive level," Han writes. This is the most effective method developed to date for getting people to purchase things they do not need and that they never knew they wanted. "Narratives," as Han writes, "now mainly serve commercial interests."

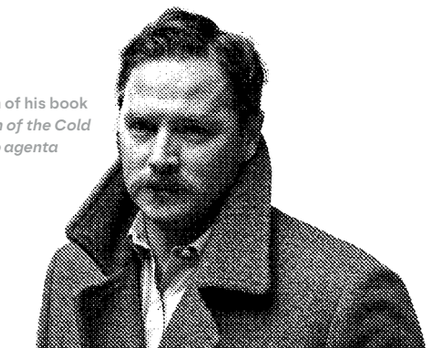
Narratives and stories are not exclusive to digital spaces. No matter the medium, in late-modern society they are primarily a means of commodification—a key feature of capitalism, the dominant cultural-economic system.

This instrumentalization of narratives for profit alters the concept of narratives beyond recognition. And such developments are related-to, but not synonymous-with, digital technologies. As Han notes, in an example unrelated to the Internet, the labeling of products as 'fair trade' serves to 'embellish' those products "with moral narratives". That label imparts a story, but that story does not intend to prompt contemplation. Rather, the intent is to sell something. In this embellished state, storytelling becomes 'storyselling' and one encounters any number of other similar examples in daily life. A favorite of mine is the word 'wellness'—which is little more than a method for commodifying a state of being (well) for sale in gym memberships, massages, spas or saunas. Are you well? If not, you can be for €50.

Narratives and stories are not exclusive to digital spaces. No matter the medium, in late-modern society they are primarily a means of commodification—a key feature of capitalism, the dominant cultural-economic system. So far as this system generates coherent narratives of its own, those narratives fail to execute the essential community building role of narratives and instead "disintegrate into private narratives, models of self-realization". Unlike traditional narration, stories like these divide rather than bind communities together. Though not quite individual in scope, "conservative and nationalist narratives" also fit this pattern. The decline of contemplative narratives, made worse by consumption and the speed of digital communication, has left a vacuum. That space is being filled with "exclusionary and discriminatory" storytelling. "Populist, nationalist or tribal narratives, including conspiracy theories... offer meaning and identity," Han writes, even as they "do not have any strong binding force".

As Han puts it, "narration and advertisement" have become 'indistinguishable' to most people. In the culture of late-modernity, the stories we listen to or tell ourselves target our pre-conscious instincts so that we buy something—a new laptop computer, some fancy sneakers or a rogue political candidate. "Because we lack sufficiently strong communal narratives, our late modern societies are unstable," Han writes. "Without a shared narrative, the political, which makes shared action possible, cannot properly form." In the end, our inability to tell contemplative stories that connect past and present is limiting what might be accomplished in the future.

BENJAMIN CUNNINGHAM
is a Barcelona based writer, scholar and lyricist. The Czech translation of his book *The Liar: How a Double Agent in the CIA Became the Last Honest Man of the Cold War* is forthcoming in 2024 from Dobrovský as *Lhář: Jak se z dvojitého agenta CIA stal poslední čestný muž studené války.*



Vladimíra Petráková: Leaving to work abroad is not seen as an act of betrayal anymore

Says the co-founder of "Czexpats in Science" Vladimíra Petráková in an interview with Robert Schuster. She sees that the biggest obstacle to scientific cooperation is in academic culture, i.e the ability to be open to collaborate with people from the 'outside'.

ROBERT SCHUSTER: **What is the mission of "Czexpats in Science"?**

VLADIMÍRA PETRÁKOVÁ: We aim to bring Czech scientists, and other types of professionals, working abroad together in order to elevate the working environment back in the Czech Republic. We seek to aid people with the difficulties of transition when returning back home and help transfer their previous work experience to new opportunities. We also tend to think that even when actively working abroad one still can improve the state of affairs back in the home country, and we are actively pursuing all avenues in order to facilitate such processes. So yes, we can call it a transfer of know-how back to the Czech Republic.

Our organization was founded in 2018 when me and my two friends from ČVUT (Czech Technical University), Anna Stejskalová and Markéta Kubánková, were working abroad, and considering our next steps. Coming back to Czechia was on the table, yet we were quite in the dark when it came to how the science world actually works back home; the ins and outs of recruitment, grant applications and so on. We felt quite strongly that we were not the only ones not sure about what to do when we tried to build our careers back home.

We decided to organize a conference where we invited scientists either currently working abroad or those who left and returned back to Czechia. Its success convinced us of the huge potential that the scientific diaspora has to offer, to galvanize scientific development and innovation in the Czech Republic.

Before our organization came into existence, to accept a job position abroad was to cease to exist, at least as far as the Czech scientific establishment was concerned. We have managed to change that. We have shown that Czechs abroad can, and want to, stay in touch with their homeland in a professional capacity, whether they consider returning, or not. We developed an online map tool where one can create their individual professional profile, and pin their profile to their global location. The map is accessible to the public, so anyone can find the scientists in their area and start a conversation.

How many people participate in Czexpats in Science? How are the social, technical and life sciences represented?

There are about a thousand people represented in our network, which is run with the help of about twenty volunteers and four paid staff. The balance is currently skewed towards the life sciences, followed by the technical and social sciences. Our plan, however, is to be as inclusive as possible and bring in people from all fields. According to our internal research, about 30% of our community are social scientists. We want to be relevant for them as well; we feel they are in need of support, as, perhaps due to the heritage of communism, their tradition is not very strong in our country. It may very well be that cross border cooperation could really elevate the lot.

Czechs abroad can, and want to, stay in touch with their homeland in a professional capacity, whether they consider returning, or not.

I suppose that among Czexpats there is a prevalence of the "younger generation", shall we say. How are they viewed by their more senior colleagues? How do they react to your attempts to change the system, to how things have always been done; do they see you as just another form of "peer pressure"?

While it is true our members are more on the younger side, people of all ages are getting on...

What is important is that we are a grassroots built organization. When we started out, our careers were also about to take off, so it was only natural that we were joined by colleagues similar in age. Yet we have among us colleagues who emigrated in 1968 or during subsequent 'normalization'. We are also joined by those who had already returned to the Czech Republic, consider their stay abroad as formative, and are keen on improving scientific research here, having drawn on lessons learned elsewhere.
As far as us being perceived as 'disruptors'? We are trying to explain that we are not a pressure group per se, we are here in order to help Czech science. We are not here to take a bite out of the proverbial cake, rather to make the cake bigger for all of us. To improve conditions on the ground, as it were, to attract financing from abroad, European grants, for example. To open up new topics, facilitate exchange among various experts, to lead debates. We aim for rational discourse, to build arguments supported by facts, to focus on positive inspiration, on things we can do better. Our chief ambition is to build something new rather than criticize the system built by our predecessors—built with much effort under difficult circumstances, I should add.

There are differences in the opportunities presented to high school students. On the one hand, we have people from prestigious high schools that have many opportunities.

What is the biggest obstacle scientists face when they decide to return and look for relevant work opportunities?

The barriers are many, and we have run a survey with about two hundred participants from abroad. Finances were, understandably, mentioned a lot. Low salaries remain the biggest obstacle. Apart from that there is the issue of academic culture associated with the lack of transparency and so-called 'inbreeding'. What it means is that there is resistance to new ideas being brought by people from abroad, to new topics, perspectives and customs. For example, how easy is it for newcomers to shape the institutional environment? How easy, or difficult, is it to make themselves be heard? What pathways are there for PhD and post-doc students to grow? How are the leadership positions filled?
It is simply about the environment, whether it is conducive for creative scientific work and publishing. That is the key in its attractiveness for cadres coming in from abroad.

It kind of surprised me that you had not mentioned bureaucracy....

It is true that a lot of scientists do mention bureaucracy as an obstacle after their return, and they are unpleasantly surprised by it. It is, however, important to mention that the volume of administrative work differs sharply among various organizations, or types of grants. Currently, I am working on a project from the Czech Science Foundation (GAČR), and it does not pose a big burden. The grant itself is flexible, our institute offers high quality administrative support, and I can really focus on my research. On the other hand, our colleagues working on grants from operational programs of the Ministry of Education do say that the administrative workload is enormous. There is, generally speaking, a high degree of distrust from people who allocate the finances for research towards the very people who are to conduct the said research. That leads to some quite bizarre rules which tend to hinder the very work they are meant to facilitate. There is also the rather strange method of evaluation where the project's success is measured by the number of outputs, rather than by the quality of the project itself and how it benefits its field.

Do you think that this is the biggest issue of Czech science?

I do think that one of the big problems is openness towards new people, ideas, ways of thinking and working. Also setting up clear admission criteria on how to become part of the Czech scientific establishment when you are not. To be successful in Czech science, or in other words, to be somebody, it is often enough not to go anywhere else. One can stay on since the bachelor's degree, adapt to the system and go through the motions.This all leads to stagnation. My aspirations are that my generation manages to push our universities and scientific institutions' rankings from deep down in the first or second thousand to the first or second hundred. Thanks to Czexpats, I know we have people capable of it. In our network there are hundreds of colleagues who have already succeeded in top institutions and I believe that there are many more out there. All we need to do is to create the right conditions and support to push our institutions forward.

What about your peers in other countries of Central Europe?

We have been in touch with a similar organization in Poland, the Polonium Foundation, which has been around longer than Czexpats in Science. They do face similar challenges in that the aspects of academic culture are similar in its insularity and systemic

barriers towards people coming in from abroad. On the whole, we do not fare that bad, I feel, especially when compared with Hungary, where due to its political situation it is much worse.

We have a good way forward with an increase of teacher's remuneration. Yet we have stopped with secondary education. Now teachers at elementary schools earn a higher salary than university educators.

Scientists are used to working with facts and data. Today we see so-called alternative facts and realities that doubt what was once considered as given and scientifically proven. What can we do about it?

My view is that we, as scientists, ought to communicate as clearly as we can, follow the facts, work with verified information. On the other hand, even for me it is difficult to tell the difference between a quality study and a bad one, unless it is directly in my area of expertise. It is, generally speaking, a difficult topic that will have to be dealt with within the context of Artificial Intelligence. We know now that the so-called Deep Fakes, created with the help of AI, are considered one of the main threats of the future. I do see many young and upcoming excellent scientists dealing precisely with this issue, such as Pavla Hubalková, originally a neuroscientist, now a journalist covering science, or the project " Ask a Scientist!"

Quite often we hear complaints that our education system is in a downward spiral, that the quality of students coming into high schools is lacking, and therefore intake to universities as well. Do you see a quality roster of future scientists?

I do think this is somewhat typical, a traditional view of an older generation when it comes to evaluating the young and upcoming one. I really do not share the view that today's young people are lazier, or forgive me, dumber; or that today universities accept candidates that are not well prepared. What I do see though is that there are differences in the opportunities presented to high school students. On the one hand, we have people from prestigious high schools that have many opportunities and they know how to take advantage of them. They know exactly where to aim, how to prepare themselves, and they do go on to study at the most elite institutions abroad. And then we have smaller, regional or vocational schools where similar opportunities are lacking.
I do think that high school education on the whole is on a better level, but mostly for those who have parents who know how to play the system, as it were. There is relatively low social mobility.

Before an election, we often hear from politicians about how much they want an educated society. Do you see their words put into action?

My view is that society should fund not only science but education as a whole. Election slogans declaring the necessity of support for science and education do not translate into reality. There are some tentative steps, here and there, yet follow up and perseverance is lacking. As an example, we have a good way forward with an increase of teacher's remuneration. Yet we have stopped with secondary education. Now teachers at elementary schools earn a higher salary than university educators.
I have mentioned that there have been new opportunities created for starting scientists, yet those are only partial steps. More needs to be done. For example, there are junior projects of the Czech Science Foundation (GAČR). They are very well designed startup grants, similar to what is usual abroad. Yet there is no scheme of follow-up grants that would support scientists that have already passed the junior phase. (For example, ERC Starting, Consolidator, Advanced; in the Netherlands program Veni, Vidi, Vici) Here in the Czech Republic we have stopped right after starting up. This can lead to young scientists going abroad after completing their junior projects, right in the most productive part of their careers.
What we have is that there are individual decisions made by enlightened people who were at the right place at the right time, and decided to throw their support behind projects in a way that makes sense. There is no long term strategy, system and aim.

How did you end up on the Shortlist of Aspen Institute Central Europe for young leaders?

I was nominated by my colleagues from Czexpats in Science, also I was nominated by the Rector of Charles University Milena Kralíčková with whom we cooperate as well. I am humbled by their support and that our project was nominated. I do see it as in the spirit of Madeleine Albright who gave the prize the name. She never forgot where she came from despite living abroad for many years, and gave us much support.

What does the award mean for you, personally?

It is a great honor and an obligation to keep our organization developing. The award has opened the door for me into the community around Aspen

Institute Central Europe, led to new contacts and increased the impact of our work through garnering more support. It has brought visibility to the topic of Czechs abroad and shown it from a different perspective. For too long it was being viewed as a kind of betrayal when one went abroad and became successful. We are trying to show it in a different light, that one can still stay in touch with the home country and be of benefit. Even Honza from classical fairy tales went abroad to gain experience.

What did Madeleine Albright mean for you?

I admire her accomplishments, that as a woman, and an immigrant to boot, she managed to achieve such a position in the American government. It is almost unbelievable. She was a great stateswoman who never forgot where she came from. Her life story is truly inspirational.

ASPEN Review

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The Aspen CE Madeleine K. Albright Leadership Award is bestowed annually by the Aspen Institute CE to young emerging professionals with outstanding achievements.

VLADIMÍRA PETRÁKOVÁ

is lead researcher at the Institute of Physical Chemistry of Jaroslav Heyrovský at the Czech Academy of Sciences. Her field of study is the interaction of light and matter on the nano scale. She is an alumni of Free University of Berlin where she was a recipient of a scholarship from the Humboldt Foundation. She earned her doctorate in biomedical engineering at Czech Technical University and the Institute of Physics of the Czech Academy of Sciences where she studied the fluorescence of nanoparticles. She is a laureate of many international awards, for example Premium Lumina Quaeruntur awarded by the Czech Academy of Sciences. She is one of the cofounders of Czexpats in Science. She supports equal opportunities for women in science.

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Ukrainians have no doubt that if Russia is not broken, sooner or later it will attack again fulfilling its eternal imperial goal.

EDWIN BENDYK

After 1991, the German strategy was to have Russia as a partner, with a vision of a modernizing partnership. The idea was that Germany would bring technology to Russia, while Russia would bring oil and gas to Germany.

MARTIN SCHULZE WESSEL

Russia understands that its most effective instrument for influencing Western elites and societies is the persistent fear of an escalating war and a nuclear scenario.

WOJCIECH KONOŃCZUK

If you ask an average Czech whether he believes in God, he will answer you: "No way, I am an atheist." But when you start digging deeper, he will immediately add: "But I'm not some naive materialist!"

TOMÁŠ HALÍK

Annual No.
2024