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BALTIC WORLDS

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Lecture. "Better stories"
in higher education

Feminist
Anti-War
Resistance
in Russia

Independent
media in Dagestan

Street art and
murals against war

Solidarity in
everyday life in Lviv

Anti-war activism

also in this issue

SAMIZDAT IN GDR / KOLKHOZES IN BELARUS / HOHENSCHÖNHAUSEN PRISON / PROPAGANDA IN RUSSIAN SCHOOLS

editorial

Taking back the initiative

This issue is very much about resistance, activism, solidarity, and the need for better stories.

In Ukraine, in Lviv, Svitlana Odynets takes us to visit a city that has become a Noah's Ark for many: Crimeans, East Ukrainians, Belarussians, and now Ukrainians from the whole country, some returning from abroad. The missile attacks are worrisome, but life is busy in the city: Volunteers are weaving camouflage nets for the front, new cafés are opening, and people are inventing new ways to cope with shortages of electricity and batteries.

Another busy city is Berlin, where some of the refugees from Ukraine turn up. Annamaria Olsson describes the work of providing aid and shelter and also shares stories from the volunteers and their background – with their own experience of oppression in controlling GDR.

State control and silencing are very present in Belarus, writes Olga Bubich and describes the scope of the repression and terror the state exercises to erase stories and memories of the past that do not fit the accepted narrative. Yet people are protesting.

ANOTHER SORT OF protest is street art: Official murals are capturing in one sole image the unfairness of the war or the brutality of hurting innocent people (children). Lisa Källström analyzes the role of artworks, such as those of Banksy, in creating resilience in urban life.

In Dagestan today the independent media is under severe stress. Most journalists in Dagestan have not been able to leave, and there are high risks involved in expressing views and criticism against the Putin regime. Elena Rodina describes how media in Dagestan are an active part of the civil resistance against the war in a region that has the highest number of deaths among the Russian soldiers.

Inga Koroleva (pseudonym) writes about

the resistance among the grassroots in Russian civil society, especially the oblasts in Caucasus, and especially among women. The Feminist Anti-War-Resistance movement in Russia published a manifesto against the war February 25, 2022. Alexandra Talaver, one of the coordinators of the movement, is interviewed by Yulia Gradszkova, and here she shares the view of the war as an act of patriarchal violence.

MANY RUSSIANS OUTSIDE Russia are involved in different movement to express their criticism of and distance to Putin's Russia and the war. Alexander Generelov maps a range of Russian anti-war movements globally, and the challenges they meet in their activism.

Disinformation, accusations, and propaganda are part of the war. Alyona Hurkivska presents what Russian children learn in school today about Russia, how ideas of Russian superiority are planted early, and how the children are indoctrinated to be patriotic.

We live in a turbulent and uncertain times when different forces are activated.

In her lecture, Andrea Pető shares her story of being forced to leave Hungary when the Central European University (CEU) was shut down because of the government's decision; and her search for better stories, good endings and how to turn acts intended to repress into an opportunity to express one's own views and take a stand.

The war and its destruction is devastating. Still, we do see a lot of resistance, solidarity, and activism in the region right now. ✖

Ninna Mörner

in this issue



Samizdat in the GDR

“ In the 1980s, the entire Eastern bloc experienced a blossoming of samizdat literature.

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Everyday life in Belarus

“ The best choice for rural people is often to maintain the world unchanged.

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Illustration: Karin Zaric Sunvisson

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DAGESTAN

THE MAKING AND BREAKING OF THE INDEPENDENT MEDIA by Elena Rodina

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and during the ongoing war, questions about Russian civil society – its resistance (or the insufficiency of such), its defeat, its very existence – have been on many people's minds. I suggest that we take a step back and look into something that has existed and, while on the brink of extinction today, has played an important role in forming societal discourse on a regional level: independent media in the republic of Dagestan.

Until recently, Dagestan, a small republic located on the southernmost tip of Russia, has rarely come up in Western European public discourse – with the exception, perhaps, of MMA fans discussing the achievements of a famed Dagestani fighter, Khabib Nurmagomedov. This changed in September 2022.

On September 21, in the midst of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian president Vladimir Putin announced a "partial mobilization" of the reserve forces. Experts saw this decision as a risky one, expecting mass protests to emerge across the country, but those expectations were not met.² While Russia experienced a wave of "exodus" of its male population, and a Levada poll showed that 47% of Russians felt "anxiety, fear, and horror" following Putin's September announcement, only relatively small-scale protests resulted.³

There were, however, a few exceptions – and Dagestan was, arguably, the most impressive one. For several days, hundreds of people were protesting both on the streets of Makhachkala, Dagestan's capital, and in rural areas.⁴ Videos from the protests quickly became viral: on one, a group of women chants "No to war!" into the face of an embarrassed-looking representative of law enforcement, on another, a policeman is running away from an angry, mostly female, crowd.⁵ On September 25, people from a Dagestani village blocked the federal highway Khasavyurt – Makhachkala. The republic was front page news in the international media, becoming the focal point of global discussions on Russia's capacity for civil resistance.

Eventually, the protests were suppressed, and repercussions followed – many people were detained, including five journal-

ists; over 150 people faced administrative and approximately 30 criminal charges. Police used pepper spray and electro-shockers during violent detentions of protestors.⁶

And yet, despite its eventual "failure", such a public mass display of disagreement with the regime was something rare in Russia post-February 2022. How did one of the country's poorest regions manage to place itself at the front line of civil protests in a country where such protests are being so harshly suppressed?

One way of answering this question is by looking at Dagestani independent media.

Media in Dagestan has been severely underexplored and underestimated outside of the republic. This is applicable to the Russian regions at large: the country, highly centralized and subjected to the authoritarian "vertical power axis", has been seen as an extension of Moscow, with most of the research and reporting focusing on its capital, or a few other larger cities. The North Caucasus region, in particular, has been very much a black box, being somehow further removed from the center, harder to access, and perceived as dangerous. And yet, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and up until recently, Dagestan had one of the liveliest journalistic scenes in the whole country.

Phone sex and political reporting: Dagestani independent media

During one of my research trips to Dagestan, in the summer of 2016, a local friend invited me to visit her native village, high in the Dagestani mountains. After three hours of a bumpy ride in an overcrowded minibus, we emerged into the cover of National Geographic: houses made of rough natural stone, women walking around in long dresses and headscarves, older inhabitants still transporting huge stacks of hay on their backs. A village frozen in time. And yet, when we entered my friend's elderly father's house, the first thing we saw was a fresh issue of an independent Dagestani newspaper *Chernovik* [The First Draft] on the kitchen table.⁷ Her dad was keeping up to date on all the latest political developments.

In Dagestan, a strong journalistic tradition existed even before the collapse of the USSR and the ban on formal censorship. The Soviet regional press, especially that of the country's periphery, was not controlled by the censors as strictly as "central" media.⁸ At the same time, different regions had distinct features in how their journalistic cultures developed; Dagestan, with over 30 nationalities and 14 official languages, had a diverse and prolific media presence. Hence, after the USSR collapsed and formal censorship was lifted, Dagestan had favorable political conditions for media development.

Dagestan's national diversity also meant that the republic did not have one strong power center but a multiplicity of them, formed around different ethnic lines – a "horizontal" rather than "vertical" organization of the local state.⁹ Each of these power centers attempted to control its "own" media outlet – resulting perhaps not in a Western-style media system striving for neutrality and lack of bias, but nonetheless in a plurality of journalistic voices, similar to what Hallin and Mancini label as the "Italian model".¹⁰

DAGESTANI JOURNALISM in the early 1990s was a media equivalent of the Wild West: there were few rules or boundaries and a lot of freedom to experiment with form, style, and content. Dagestan's main independent newspaper at the time, *Novoe Delo*, was a potpourri of genres. A single issue combined an essay by a local Muslim fundamentalist on proper marital relations with a translation of a German article about one day in the life of a phone sex worker. The same newspaper published coloring book materials for children, crossword puzzles, comic strips making fun of local politics, and news about local business developments and Western pop stars.¹¹ Almost none of the journalists had a "proper" journalism degree – these were former engineers, philosophers, philologists, doctors, and economists.

"WORKING IN SUCH VIOLENT ENVIRONMENT, JOURNALISTS LEARNED HOW TO USE SELF-CENSORSHIP FOR SELF-PRESERVATION."

In mid to late 2000s, local journalism took a more defined shape, becoming more political, less genre-confused, with journalists focusing on reporting about corruption of the local politicians and businessmen, challenges faced by the Dagestani population, and failures of the government to resolve them. Local diversity of power became both a blessing and a curse: while the state wasn't able to censor journalists, the rival power centers responded to criticism by doing just that – using fists and bullets.

During that time, journalists in Dagestan were attacked,

injured, and sometimes killed. According to the RFE/RL's project *Kavkaz Realii*, in the period between 1992 and 2016 alone 17 Dagestani journalists were assassinated.¹² One of the most resonant killings became that of a distinguished investigative journalist and *Chernovik*'s founder, Gadzhimurad Kamalov. On December 15, 2011, a masked assassin fired 14 shots at Kamalov when the latter was exiting *Chernovik*'s office in Makhachkala. The journalist was taken to the hospital in critical condition and died shortly after. Prior to his murder, Kamalov had received death threats; he was known for openly criticizing regional government corruption, and *Chernovik*,

under Kamalov's editorship, had published investigations into cases of corruption on the local level.

INVESTIGATION OF Kamalov's murder lasted for over nine years, as a result, four people, including Dagestan's former deputy prime minister Shamil Isaev, were sentenced to 16 to 24 years in prison. Media reports said that state prosecutors did not prove that the alleged mastermind of the killing had a motive, and that three out of four convicted killers had alibis that the prosecution ignored.¹³ New-York based *Committee to Protect Journalists* described the case of Kamalov's murder as having "partial impunity."¹⁴ Even for the volatile Dagestan of the time, Kamalov's



Village in Dagestan.



PHOTO: ELENA RODINA



Investigative journalist Gadzhimurad Kamalov, the founder of the newspaper *Chernovik*, was shot and killed in 2011.

blatant murder was a shock, and caused a chilling effect on the local media.

Working in such violent environment, journalists learned how to use self-censorship for self-preservation. They knew exactly which topics had to be treated more carefully, and how to identify themes that could not be discussed straightforwardly. As one of the journalists who worked in *Novoe Delo* in mid 2000s told me:

In that environment, when you knew that a person was walking around with a machine gun and his gang had a grenade launcher... it was clear that it was life-threatening to write about real truth [...] so we wrote all we could afford to write.

And yet, journalists persevered with their work – fine-tuning their publications, using Aesopian language and writing between the lines when necessary, and still risking their lives when they felt they had to.

Fighting the state in court, and winning (sometimes)

The mid-2010s and onwards marked the beginning of a less volatile and physically dangerous period for Dagestani journalists, but another threat was emerging: the state's increasing pressure. The state and state-aligned power holders didn't use brute force, but relied instead on utilizing legal measures to silence independent journalists. State workers started routinely suing journalists for libel and defamation, while *Roskomnadzor*, the state media regulator, began targeting journalists using accusations of extremism and promotion of terrorism (for which Dagestan, a majority-Muslim republic, was an easy target). The long and costly court procedures were harmful enough for the well-to-do, large Moscow-based outlets, but could be deadly to their smaller regional counterparts. At the same time, the Russian legal system was transforming into a pseudo-system, with courts and judges siding with the state by default, while the laws themselves were being changed to become ever more restrictive.

However, Dagestan could boast multiple examples of journal-



A selection of the issues of a Dagestani newspaper, *Svobodnaya Respublika* [The Free Republic], with an eccentric front page design.

ists winning their court cases against power holders – something rarely heard of, if at all, in Russia at the time. Dagestani journalists just refused to give up.

One such example occurred when in 2007 a local politician, backed up by the money and support of one of Dagestan's powerful political clans, decided to create a new outlet that would gather the best local journalists and produce top-quality analytical content. The journalists who formed that outlet – named *Nastoyashee Vremya* (translated as *Current Time* – no relation to the RFE/RL's later project) were given a promise of complete independence for the first three years. That promise was broken almost immediately, and the politician, who was also the newspaper's CEO, started interfering with content – most notably attempting to censor any criticism of President Putin, who was then serving his second presidential term.¹⁵

Journalists refused to comply. Moreover, in 2008, they sued their CEO for violating the work norms, interfering with the work of the journalists, threatening and pressuring them psychologically, thus breaching part 2 of the article 144 of the Criminal Code. For the first time in the post-Soviet history of Russian media the state investigative committee took the side of the journalists and launched an investigation. The local court denied the validity of the case, but the Russian Supreme Court overturned its decision. Sadly, when the case was passed back to the regional court, the judge dismissed it due to the expiration of its statute of limitations. For the journalists, it was nevertheless a victory.¹⁶

ANOTHER SUCCESS STORY is the 2016 case of the local independent newspaper *Chernovik* that was sued for alleged libel by Dagestan's Minister of the Press, Burliat Tokbolatova.¹⁷ The minister charged the newspaper with falsely accusing her of pressuring a journalist-turned-politician to withdraw his candidacy from the local Duma elections; she demanded one million rubles for the moral damage the publication had caused her. The court not only rejected the minister's claim, but ordered Tokbolatova to compensate *Chernovik's* court expenses, equaling 25,000 rubles.

These cases are not listed here to illustrate the fairness of the courts in Dagestan (there are plenty of cases that Dagestani



Women in Makhachkala protesting against the war in Ukraine.



PHOTO: SCREEN PRINTS FROM RADIOFREEEUROPE

journalists did not win), but rather the tenacity of the local independent journalists, who, being so often sued by the authorities for so many years, trained themselves to fight the state machine with fierceness and expertise. In the meantime, they continued their critical publications: thus, in 2016, when commenting on the Duma elections, a local outlet came out with a cover bearing the headline “The falsification went well, no voting was observed during the violations” (a play on a more classic phrase used to comment on well-conducted elections, “The voting went well, no falsifications were observed during the elections”). After the 2018 presidential elections, several Dagestani newspapers published critical investigations, describing all of the transgressions that were made by the local authorities on election day and observed by journalists – with one of the headlines saying, “Putin, again: How Dagestan, through ‘carousels’ and ‘stuffing’ [types of votes rigging in elections], gave six years to the Russian president.”

The present time

The late 2010s brought increasingly darker times for Dagestani media. In June 2019, *Chernovik*’s editor of the religious section, Abdulmumin Gadzhiev, was detained on bogus terrorism charges.¹⁸ He is still in jail, his trial ongoing. In July 2020 Svetlana Anokhina, Dagestani journalist, human rights activist, and chief editor of *Daptar.ru*, received anonymous death threats over the phone, and local police refused not once, but three times to initiate a case investigating those threats.^{19, 20} In April 2023, however, the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation launched a criminal case against Anokhina herself – for an alleged dissemination of “deliberately false information about the use of the Russian Armed Forces” (by that time, she had already left the country).²¹

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was quickly followed by draconian laws practically imposing war censorship, which forced many of the independent outlets that had remained in Russia to leave the country with all their editorial staff and continue their work from abroad.²² For most independent Dagestani media, this is not an option. They are

too tied to the hyper-local reporting for their local audiences; besides, they wouldn’t have the money or opportunities to relocate en masse.

TODAY, SOME JOURNALISTS in Dagestan have already left the profession, others are trying to survive and continue their work – but their horizon of planning is week-to-week, not even month-to-month. In mid-November 2022, a printing house was threatened into refusing to print issues of the newspaper *Chernovik*.²³ The paper managed to find another printing house and published one more issue, but then the local authorities forced the national distributor to stop selling the paper. On November 28, *Chernovik* ceased publishing its paper edition. It also closed down its popular Instagram account after the Russian state

designated Meta, Instagram’s parent company, an extremist organization.²⁴ And yet, despite all odds, *Chernovik* continues to exist – and its staff continue holding solitary pickets in support of their jailed colleague, Abdulmumin Gadzhiev, every single week. They have been doing it since his arrest in June 2019, staging the longest public protest action in the Russian history.

There are many ways in which one can approach the analysis of the protests that shook Dagestan in September 2022, and looking at the history of its journalism is one of them. It is difficult to predict

whether independent Dagestani media will survive by going deeper underground and finding its way around censorship, or whether it will cease to exist altogether. There is yet another alternative – journalists transforming into activists, as it has been increasingly happening in Russia and is common in other repressive regimes, such as, for example, China.²⁵ One thing is certain: Dagestan has experienced over thirty years of intense, fierce, sometimes wild, but always brave and exciting journalism, and its impact on civil society cannot be underestimated. ✕

Elena Rodina holds a PhD from the Department of Media, Technology, and Society at Northwestern University.

**“TODAY, SOME
JOURNALISTS IN
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Alexandra Talaver, coordinator of Feminist Anti-War Resistance:

“War represents a culmination in the continuum of patriarchal violence”

A conversation based on an e-mail interview with **Alexandra Talaver** conducted by **Yulia Gradskova**

Alexandra Talaver is one of the coordinators of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR), that was promptly launched on February 25, 2022, with a manifesto that was later translated into dozens of languages. The manifesto called for peaceful resistance to the war and Putin’s regime, support for Ukraine, and solidarity with feminists in Russia resisting the invasion (see next page). Together with the manifesto, social media accounts were launched on Telegram, Instagram, and Twitter as the main means of mobilization. FAR immediately gained dozens of thousands of subscribers due to the number of feminist media activists joining FAR, and due to a strong and clear anti-war stance, while many political forces and organizations in Russia failed to articulate it that fast.

The Telegram channel and telegram-bot became our main tools: via telegram-bot, activists in Russia could send their suggestions or reports about their actions to be published anonymously. At the very beginning, FAR focused

About anti-war activism

The roundtable “Anti-war activism in Russia and among Russians abroad – strategies, challenges and potentialities” was organized on January 31, 2023, at CBEES by Yulia Gradskova in collaboration with *Baltic Worlds*. The aim was to discuss different aspects of civic activism against the Russian war on Ukraine, bringing together

researchers and representatives of several networks and digitalized platforms, as well as organizations created by Russian emigrants outside of Russia. The roundtable informed on strategies of protest against the war, anti-war solidarities and challenges that the activists are meeting. The discussion had a special focus on feminist anti-war activism and civic activism in the

Northern Caucasus. It also invited participants to reflect on the next questions: Who is participating in anti-war activism? Which tactics were most successful? What are the main problems?

Alexandra Talaver, Elena Rodina and Alexander Generalov participated at the roundtable and are also contributing in this issue of *Baltic Worlds*.

mainly on different types of street action: demonstrations, individual pickets, laying flowers, etc. That lasted for a first month or two – steadily, FAR grew into a rhizomatic infrastructure with numerous directions of work: media, agitation, digital security education, labor rights protection, psychological support, volunteer work, etc.

YG: Maybe we can start from the context in which FAR is acting: how much does the drastic decrease of possibilities for more traditional forms of civic activism in Russia since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine influence the forms of FAR organization and political action?

AT: During the first weeks after the invasion, we followed the most common tactics of peaceful protest: mass or individual street actions. However, activists soon faced such a high level of violence and repression that we had to re-think the formats of the protest and our goals. Thus, we started focusing more on supporting infrastructures (psychological support; Antifund for protection of labor rights; manuals on digital security and protest safety; creating a safe online platform for communication). And another important direction – supporting ways of protest that would mark the presence of the anti-war position in the city landscape but hide the actor behind them. For example, mounting crosses in commemoration of civilians killed by the Russian army in Mariupol within the action “Mariupol5000”; anti-war statements on banknotes; changing price tags in supermarkets to ones displaying war-related numbers disguised as prices; spreading our newspaper “Women’s Truth”, etc. We also platformed different types of de-centralized street action that would be more difficult for police to trace: laying flowers at monuments, women in black, gatherings on streets/squares/prospects of Peace. Finally, we put more effort into different types of online agitation, for example, digital anti-war postcards for WhatsApp that look like ordinary digital postcards but have an anti-war message. We developed a telegram bot that allows you to download your own poem/text and create such a postcard (<https://t.me/antiwarpostcardbot>).

YG: Why do you think it is particularly important to combine feminist activism with anti-war activism?

AT: First, for us as feminists, war represents a culmination in the continuum of patriarchal violence we live in.¹ The war was steadily growing in society, rooting itself in budgetary preferences for defense and propaganda over healthcare, education, and the social sphere; the war was fed by domestic and sexual violence that is rarely prosecuted in Russia and very much normalized in Putin’s rhetoric. All these are aspects that women* and vulnerable groups know best and always fight against them. The situation deteriorates at the time of war – and more problems appear, such as displacement, an increase in single motherhood due to mobilization and displacement, and the danger of trafficking grows. We think of the anti-war struggle as an essential part of the feminist fight against violence against women* and vice versa. And they should go hand in hand: we cannot postpone questions of domestic violence for later, just as we cannot see them as separate from what Russian militarism does to the Ukrainian population. The research shows a correlation between women’s physical safety in the country and its tendency to solve international problems with military means.²

Another important aspect is that we know that with a ceasefire or peace agreement, the war will not end for us: military crimes (including sexual violence) should be punished; people coming from the frontline should have access to rehabilitation; the mechanisms for protection from domestic and sexual violence should be implemented.

Finally, as research shows, it is crucial for feminists to influence the peace negotiations as such – that is the only way to guarantee a longer and more sustainable peace. Thus, we want to promote the idea that negotiations with Russia can happen only under the condition of the inclusion of Russian anti-war initiatives, Indigenous peoples, displaced people, legitimate representatives of the peoples of Russia, etc.

YG: What do you see as the main challenges for now?

AT: Our main challenge is how to build a political movement and resistance under the current authoritarian and militaristic rule. It entails a lot of problems. First, safety: it is crucial to support our activists, to secure their freedom, to nurture the community in a caring and safe environment. Thus, we actively cooperate with different human rights (OVD-info) and evacuation initiatives (Vyvozhyk), as well as attending courses on digital security (“Teplitsa. Technologies for Social Good”) to make sure we follow all the necessary protocols to care for each other’s vulnerabilities. Second, most of us grew up under conditions of undeveloped democracy and basically the



Alexandra
Talaver

“The war was fed by domestic and sexual violence that is rarely prosecuted in Russia.”

“Political co-education is an important task for us for imagining other futurities and political tactics.”

absence of political opportunities. How much can we imagine and do? Thus, political co-education is an important task for us for imagining other futurities and political tactics. Finally, the norms of wartime penetrate social life more and more: new laws, new conservative gender expectations, forced patriotism in schools and workplaces, and more severe surveillance over the public sphere. This poses additional challenges for our fight for “common sense” and demilitarization.

YG: Can you tell a little bit about the coordination of activities between those FAR members who are outside and inside of the country?

AT: In our group of coordinators (people responsible for different aspects of our work), we have activists both inside and outside the country. We also have a bigger anonymous space with many chats in Element (a messenger that allows registration without a phone number), where activists from Russia are the majority. Whenever we are planning anything, we have an anonymous Jitsi Meet call (a software for video conferences that does not require even e-mail to join the call) to which everyone from our numerous chats is invited and activists based in Russia are invited to talk first. Activists outside the country have some additional responsibilities such as taking care of digital security (buying SIM cards, for example) or establishing contacts with media and other anti-war and political initiatives; etc.

YG: FAR showed itself to be one of the movements that follow the intersectional perspective: including networks from non-Russian parts of the Russian Federation and stating the importance of a decolonizing approach. Why is this important? How does it function in practice? Do you have any difficulties in cooperation with different networks?

AT: Feminism in Russia had a strong decolonial and antiracist line even before the invasion; it was very pronounced in such initiatives as feminist translocalities, distributed cognition cooperative, femtalks, and agasshin, to name just a few. These initiatives did a lot to show the violence and discrimination the Indigenous and non-white people in Russia encounter on a daily basis. From the very first days of the invasion, when many Buryat men were sent to the war, it became obvious to everyone how racism relates to the economic exhaustion of certain regions of Russia. Army service is one of the few employment options in economically deprived regions, and the war made this economic inequality even more visible and much more tragic because it led to people's involvement in this bloody war because of poverty or the mass death of people in certain regions.

Different systems of hierarchies support each other; thus, for us, it is crucial to tackle all of them simultaneously without postponing some of them for the future. It is important to make visible the struggles and pain the Indigenous peoples of Russia live in. We cooperate with many decolonial initiatives from the national republics: New Tyva, Free Buryatia, Free Yakutia and others.

YG: Due to growing interest in FAR, including among the researchers, could you comment on how and by whom this research should be realized? What would be ethical and security considerations?

AT: I do not think I can say who can do research about us, but whoever does it should, I think, follow simple research ethics. One cannot be part of our chats simply as a researcher because these are closed online communities: We had a very bad episode when one researcher joined our group as an activist but did not do anything as an activist, bombarding us with interview requests instead. One should respect our time too because most of us are in a very precarious position, struggling to find means to survive in Russia or in emigration, and we do activism during our scarce leisure time. Again, we encountered a researcher who took several hours-long interview with one of our comrades – and said that it was useless at the end of it or made our activists wait and never showed up for the interview. Finally, I think for feminist research, it is crucial to reflect on the power dynamics between a researcher and the research object: while some of our activists risk their freedom, the researcher can profit from the papers and publications. So, I think it is crucial that the researcher does something to support the activists they took knowledge from. This support can take many different forms, sometimes even simply emotional support. ✖

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Russia's feminists are in the streets protesting Putin's war

Feminist Anti-War Resistance

The text below is a manifesto by Russian feminists who have united against the occupation and war in Ukraine. Feminism is one of the few opposition movements in contemporary Russia that has not been destroyed by the waves of persecution launched by Vladimir Putin's government. At the moment, several dozen grassroots feminist groups are operating in at least thirty Russian cities. In this text, feminists taking part in anti-war demonstrations around the country call on feminists around the world to unite in opposing the military aggression launched by Putin's government.

ON FEBRUARY 24, at around 5:30 AM Moscow time, Russian president Vladimir Putin announced a “special operation” on the territory of Ukraine in order to “denazify” and “demilitarize” this sovereign state. This operation had long been in preparation. For several months, Russian troops were moving up to the border with Ukraine. At the same time, the leadership of our country denied any possibility of a military attack. Now we see that this was a lie.

Russia has declared war on its neighbor. It did not allow Ukraine the right to self-determination nor any hope of a peaceful life. We declare – and not for the first time – that war has been waged for the last eight years at the initiative of the Russian government. The war in Donbas is a consequence of the illegal annexation of Crimea. We believe that Russia and its president are not and have never been concerned about the fate of people in Luhansk and Donetsk, and the recognition of the republics after eight years was only a pretext for the invasion of Ukraine under the guise of liberation.

As Russian citizens and feminists, we condemn this war. Feminism as a political force cannot be on the side of a war of aggression and military occupation. The feminist movement in Russia struggles for vulnerable groups and the development of a just society with equal opportunities

and prospects, in which there can be no place for violence and military conflicts.

War means violence, poverty, forced displacement, broken lives, insecurity, and the lack of a future. It is irreconcilable with the essential values and goals of the feminist movement. War exacerbates gender inequality and sets back gains for human rights by many years. War brings with it not only the violence of bombs and bullets but also sexual violence: as history shows, during war, the risk of being raped increases several times for any woman. For these and many other reasons, Russian feminists and those who share feminist values need to take a strong stand against this war unleashed by the leadership of our country.

The current war, as Putin's addresses show, is also fought under the banner of the “traditional values” declared by government ideologues – values that Russia allegedly decided to promote throughout the world as a missionary, using violence against those who refuse to accept them or hold other views. Anyone who is capable of critical thinking understands well that these “traditional values” include gender inequality, exploitation of women, and state repression against those whose way of life, self-identification, and actions do not conform with narrow patriarchal norms. The justification of the occupation of a neighboring state by the desire to promote such distorted norms and pursue a demagogic “liberation” is another reason why feminists throughout Russia must oppose this war with all their energy.

TODAY FEMINISTS ARE one of the few active political forces in Russia. For a long time, Russian authorities did not perceive us as a dangerous political movement, and therefore we were temporarily less affected by state repression than other political groups. Currently more than forty-five different feminist organizations

are operating throughout the country, from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok, from Rostov-on-Don to Ulan-Ude and Murmansk. We call on Russian feminist groups and individual feminists to join the Feminist Anti-War Resistance and unite forces to actively oppose the war and the government that started it. We also call on feminists all over the world to join our resistance. We are many, and together we can do a lot: Over the past ten years, the feminist movement has gained enormous media and cultural power. It is time to turn it into political power. We are the opposition to war, patriarchy, authoritarianism, and militarism. We are the future that will prevail.

WE CALL ON FEMINISTS around the world:

- Join peaceful demonstrations and launch offline and online campaigns against the war in Ukraine and Putin's dictatorship, organizing your own actions. Feel free to use the symbol of the Feminist

Anti-War Resistance movement in your materials and publications, as well as hashtags #FeministAntiWarResistance and #FeministsAgainstWar.

- Distribute the information about the war in Ukraine and Putin's aggression. We need the whole world to support Ukraine at this moment and to refuse to help Putin's regime in any way.

- Share this manifesto with others.

It's necessary to show that feminists are against this war – and any type of war. It's also essential to demonstrate that there are still Russian activists who are ready to unite in opposition to Putin's regime. We are all in danger of persecution by the state now and need your support. ✖

Translated by Anastasia Kalk & Jan Surman

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This photo, and both above are from Telegram published (not by author) as example on grassroots activism in Russia.



Feminist Anti-War Resistance offer to print and distribute issues of the newspaper *Women's Truth* in their work opposing the war. PHOTO: FAR

Protests, anti-war grassroots initiatives and resistance in Russia

by **Inga Koroleva** (pseudonym)

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the repression of civil society has gradually intensified in Russia. During recent years political activism has been under threat and pressure, and

in the last year activism has largely gone underground due to the escalating level of repression; therefore one sees few mass protests. The Russian authorities have consistently taken restrictive measures against any street protest, and the last permissible form (a single-person action) in the end also turns out to be almost impossible.

Almost all of Putin's political opponents who have enough popularity and credibility to lead the protest have been sentenced to long terms or are under investigation (Navalny, Yashin, Kara-murza and others), killed (Boris Nemtsov) or are abroad (Khodorkovsky, Kasparov, etc.). The largest human rights organizations (Memorial, the Moscow-Helsinki Group, the SOVA Center, the Sphere Charitable Foundation (the operator of the Russian LGBT Network)) were liquidated. Other NGOs were considered undesirable (for example, Transparency International).

IN MODERN Russian history, political protest and activism have always given way to social unrest. One of the largest protest ral-

lies lately were caused by the proposal of a new pension reform – most mass protests against pension reform took place from July to September 2018 in several dozen cities. The protesters' main demand was that the government abandon plans to raise

the retirement age, but there were also call for the resignation of the government and the president who initiated the pension reform.

The number of political protests in recent years has become very low, but the protests that occurred have most frequently been either anti-war statements or about the struggle for the environment.

One of the regions with liveliest protests has been the Khabarovsk Oblast,¹ where in the last two years residents have

been coming out in support of former governor Sergei Furgal, who was sentenced to 22 years after a jury convicted him of attempted murder and ordering two killings in 2004 and 2005. Furgal was replaced by Mikhail Degtyarev, a politician very unpopular in the region, who is not local, has no understanding of the region's problems and was personally appointed by Putin, without regard to the will of the people. Furgal himself pleads not guilty and considers the verdict to be political revenge for winning the 2018 election against the United Russia candidate.

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His supporters also think that the case against him is politically motivated.²

Outside the regional center there were also numerous protests, for instance a rally against development planning in Gendzhik, which violated the rights of residents whose homes were inside the area to be redeveloped, and a strike in the Krasnoyarsk village of Eruda, where people were not paid salaries. About three hundred people took part in each of these actions.

IN MARCH–APRIL 2023, there were numerous rallies against the increase in tariffs for housing and communal services. For example, the rally in Biysk, the second city of the Altai Territory, became the largest in a series of protests against the increase in utility tariffs. Further protest actions were also held in the Novosibirsk, Bryansk, and Kirov regions, Krasnoyarsk Territory, as well as Bashkortostan and Karelia.

The scale of people's discontent must have frightened the authorities – as a result the Federal Antimonopoly Service re-analyzed the decision and presented a new model with lowered tariffs in five regions.

An investigation conducted by Важные истории [Important Stories]³ showed that the Russian authorities are closely monitoring all protests and keeping a register of them. This list included, for instance, a campaign against the closure of the municipal bath in Penza, a protest against the development of the Volga bank in Zabrovye, actions for the preservation of trolleybuses in Belgorod, rallies against the closure of a school in the Yakut village of Chulman, the collection of signatures in defense of the stadium in St. Petersburg, and regular anti-war protests in small towns. But at the same time as disclosing the level of control exercised by the authorities, this register also proves that anti-war rallies take place almost every day in different cities.

Since the beginning of the war, there has been total censorship in Russia and intensified repression against all who speak out against the war, according to OVD-info:⁴

On 305 out of 365 days in 2022, in different cities in Russia, security forces detained people for their anti-war position.⁵

But despite this, people continue to speak out openly against the war. Of all public actions in 2022, one in five is anti-war. At the same time, half of the protests in Russia are single-person actions that do not require prior approval from the authorities (unlike mass actions), but of course, in this regard, they are less visible to residents. Typical examples of “solitary pickets” are standing with anti-military posters in the city center and in crowded places or laying flowers (often in the colors of the Ukrainian flag, yellow and blue) at monuments to Ukrainian writers.

THE DEVELOPMENT of civic engagement in Russia, aimed at stopping the war, is taking place in conditions of severe repression.

According to the new legislation, almost any anti-war activity or demonstration of disagreement with the actions of the Russian army in Ukraine can be considered as “discrediting the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation” (Article 20.3.3 of the Code of Administrative Offenses of the Russian Federation) and entail administrative or criminal liability. Under this article, cases are hastily opened, and people are interrogated and detained. But despite this, since the beginning of the war, many anti-war grassroots initiatives have emerged, and existing NGOs include assistance to Ukrainian refugees who find themselves in Russia.

Some of these initiatives have been relocated outside the country while some have remained in the country, and often work in a situation of “underground” activity and partisanship.

In the wake of the partial mobilization announced in Sep-

tember, several new protest initiatives were formed in the national republics, uniting anti-war activities with decolonial and anti-imperial agendas. In fact, their main statement was that they did not want the war to be waged in their name as Russians; they did not want to be involved in the crimes of the empire. In addition, they recall the acts of deportation, discrimination and colonization that the empire had carried

“OF ALL PUBLIC ACTIONS IN 2022, ONE IN FIVE IS ANTI-WAR.”

out against them. At the same time, it was from the national republics that the maximum number of men was recruited and sent to Ukraine. Dagestan and Buryatia occupy the first places in terms of the number of deaths among Russian soldiers.⁶ According to *Mediazona*, which counts the dead from open sources, central cities and millionaires are less affected by mobilization, while most of the “funerals” take place in poor regions.⁷ It is not surprising that it was in these republics that mobilization caused the greatest indignation. It has a colonial logic. For example, the Free Buryatia Foundation, which grew out of an initiative group in March 2022, describes its mission as follows:

We, Buryats from all over the world, committed to the values of humanism and democracy, have united to make Buryatia free and prosperous. We oppose racism in any form and consider the war with Ukraine xenophobic.⁸

If earlier national movements were mainly in favor of preserving their native language and culture, now their activities have a pronounced anti-war and anti-imperial orientation, such as the association and media *Asians of Russia*, which declared 2023 the year of decolonization.⁹

NUMEROUS PROTESTS took place in Dagestan, often attended by women who were against the fact that their husbands and sons were taken to a war in which they “do not understand what they are fighting for.” Videos have been widely circulated on the Internet, where women surround police officers and fight them, for which they are brutally beaten and detained. The openly anti-imperial statements of local women also caused a great resonance: for example, a resident of Makhachkala, who

participated in a protest rally in an interview with *Kavkaz Realii*, is indignant:

Our mountain people are sent there in the first place. What are they fighting for there? When something is said about Russia, they say: ‘The Caucasus is a separate Russia’, and when it is necessary to go to war, first of all, our Dagestanis are sent!¹⁰

Residents of Dagestan also blocked the Makhachkala-Khasavyurt federal highway to prevent the mobilized from being sent to the front. Nevertheless, the protest was brutally suppressed, and several dozen criminal cases were opened against the protesters. In fact, the protest in Yakutia turned out to be female, with about 400 women taking to the central square, dancing and chanting “No to war!” and “No to genocide!”¹¹

According to average estimates, 400,000–800,000 men have left Russia since the beginning of mobilization; according to Forbes estimates, almost 1 million people have left Russia since the beginning of mobilization.¹² Of course, this situation affects the already existing shortage of men, which has existed in Russia for a long time due to the high male excess mortality. The question arises: how will this affect the economy and public life? At the same time, pro-government officials flirt with the idea of gender equality and women’s emancipation, such as suggesting that now it will be easier for women to move up the career ladder and take men’s places in the labor market. But in fact, no one has canceled the women’s “second shift”, which consists in caring for the household (husband, children and elderly relatives). Therefore, it is not about real gender equality but rather about women performing a double role with a double work load, at least for the time being.

AT THE SAME TIME, the topic of gender has become one of the most politicized. The state is actively peddling the topic of the demographic crisis, blaming it on feminists, LGBT activists and initiatives that promote women’s reproductive rights. The gender theme is actively used by propaganda about the horrors of the Western world, where people are forced to change their gender, and are not allowed to use the words “mom” and “dad”, but only the words “parent no. 1 and no. 2”. President Putin personally speaks about this in his speeches. At the signing ceremony of the incorporation of the annexed territories into Russia, Putin formulates Russia’s need to resist Western values, and in this he also sees the reasons for the current war:

The dictatorship of the Western elites is directed against all societies, including the peoples of the Western countries themselves. This is a challenge to all.

This is a complete denial of humanity, the overthrow of faith and traditional values. Indeed, the suppression of freedom itself has taken on the features of a religion: outright Satanism [...] ‘Do we really want, here, in our country, in Russia, instead of ‘mum’ and ‘dad’, to have ‘parent number one’, ‘parent number two’, ‘number three’? Have they gone completely insane? Do we really want [...] it drilled into children in our schools [...] that there are supposedly genders besides women and men, and [children to be] offered the chance to undergo sex change operations? [...] We have a different future, our own future.’¹³

It is not surprising that after that, the pressure and attacks on feminist and LGBT initiatives intensified. A new law has been passed, effectively banning any mention of the LGBT agenda; books and films have been hastily withdrawn from stores and online. The State Duma is discussing the adoption of a law with a complete ban on gender reassignment for transgender people.

A new reason for hitting feminists was the high-profile murder of Russian war correspondent Vladlen Tatarsky, a propagandist and apologist for the war in Ukraine: 26-year-old Daria

Trepova brought a statuette to a creative meeting with him, which then exploded in his hands, killing him and injuring several people nearby. The young woman was arrested and sent to a pre-trial detention center. In the conclusion, the judge stated that the woman was “fond of the ideas of feminism.” After that, the State Duma deputy from United Russia, Oleg Matveychev, proposed declaring feminism an extremist ideology and prepared a corresponding bill. According to the deputy, feminists in Russia are “agents of the West and act against the demographic policy of the Russian Federation,” that is, “for divorce, childlessness, abortion.”

In response, regional feminist groups launched online education campaigns, as

well as holding separate protests with the slogans “Feminism is not extremism”, “Feminism is a movement in defense of women!”, “Feminism is not terrorism!”, “Let women fight for their rights!” and others.¹⁴

ANOTHER STRIKING example of feminist activism is the group Феминистское анти-военное сопротивление [Feminist Anti-War Resistance, FAR] that was created the day after the start of the war. Initially a small chat room with a few women who discussed how to respond to Russian aggression and help Ukrainians, the movement has now grown into the largest anti-war network project. As of May 1, 2023, they have about 39,000 subscribers in the popular Russian messenger channel Telegram, they publish anti-war statements, organize and coordinate actions in

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Russia and abroad, and coordinate several areas including assistance to Ukrainian refugees and to anti-war activists.¹⁵

Today feminists are one of the few active political forces in Russia. For a long time, Russian authorities did not perceive us as a dangerous political movement, and therefore we were temporarily less affected by state repression than other political groups. Currently more than forty-five different feminist organizations are operating throughout the country, from Kalinin grad to Vladivostok, from Rostov-on-Don to Ulan-Ude and Murmansk. We call on Russian feminist groups and individual feminists to join the Feminist Anti-War Resistance and unite forces to actively oppose the war.” [An excerpt from the FAR manifesto, which has been translated into 30 languages.]

Their website contains the texts of several petitions (for the withdrawal of troops from Ukraine, for the right to abortion), memos on how to safely organize an anti-war protest or rally in their city or online; templates for posters and anti-war graffiti are posted, and they also offer to print and distribute issues of the newspaper *Women's Truth*, aimed at a more conservative audience of older women, which they distribute to mailboxes in apartment buildings. The movement's activists seek to unite not only progressive people who are already clearly opposed to the war, but also to reach a “doubting” audience that so far consumes only the content of propaganda media and does not have access to independent media, many of which are blocked or banned in Russia.

Guerrilla methods of resistance have appeared and persist all the time since the beginning of the war: these include sabotage on railway tracks where ammunition and equipment for the war are transported.¹⁶ (More than 65 people have already been detained in cases of sabotage on railways in Russia; every third is a minor). Another popular method is arson at military registration and enlistment offices and FSB regional buildings – these cases are now qualified as a terrorist attacks and the accused face long sentence – as well as arson of civilian vehicles with Z symbols. Nevertheless, the spontaneous anti-war protest does not subside, although certainly threats and prison sentences stop many from this kind of activism.

MOST OF THE ACTIVISTS who remain in Russia now speak mainly of four issues:

1) A severe psycho-emotional state, shock from the war, from repression and low support from society. The personal psychological background, associated with physical/psychological fatigue, and with a sense of personal insecurity, helplessness, and a sense of horror at what is happening and the futility of efforts,

worries activists and independent journalists as much as the problems of external circumstances.

The initiatives that were formed directly in connection with the outbreak of the war – anti-war and humanitarian actions, helping refugees, as well as helping activists leave Russia – are experiencing great difficulties. Such teams usually work 90% on a volunteer basis; they do not yet have a stable system of management and distribution of responsibilities, there are too many different areas of activity, there is no stable funding, but at the same time they feel obliged to work 24 hours a day. And some of them are already on the verge of stopping activities on a personal level due to overload, financial difficulties and burnout.

2) Lack of resources, both financial (due to the departure of foreign donors and difficulties in receiving money from abroad

because SWIFT is disabled) and a decrease in donations within the country from business, and human, because many activists have left or are overloaded. Small regional initiatives often managed with very little or no budget, – they ran their events and publications on a commercial basis. Or they were helped by local businesses or individual wealthy people. Often their activities are 100% volunteer work, which had to be combined with personal commercial employment. Now these opportunities have been sharply

reduced. The activists were very burned out; they were largely disappointed by their lack of ability to improve the situation in Russia and in the possibilities of democratic education of Russian society. They risk being fired from their jobs because of their political and social stance. Business no longer helps them, and the small amounts of money that came in the form of donor mini grants is now unavailable because they cannot get it to accounts in Russia, and going abroad is too expensive and difficult.

3) The lack of opportunity to be active in the public field worries primarily those who remain inside Russia. Almost any anti-war statements are now considered as discrediting the Russian army or treason, and are punishable by quite serious prison terms. Therefore, it is impossible to express one's position openly, and the voices heard are mostly those of people who have left and can speak freely. This creates a strong frustration among those who remain, a feeling of isolation and the fact that they are in the minority, that there are few like-minded people.

4) Repression from the state. Many initiatives and activists experienced searches or threats after anti-war actions and warnings not to be active in future. Many organizations did not renew their leases, citing formal reasons, but in fact, because the business does not want problems from local authorities. The few remaining independent spaces are also subject to inspections, pressure, and searches.

“FEMINIST AND LGBT REGIONAL INITIATIVES ALSO OFTEN EXIST IN CLOSED ONLINE GROUPS, UNITING FOR ACTIONS AND EVENTS.”

NEVERTHELESS, MANY ACTIVISTS do not intend to give up, and are looking for their own ways and means. Some of the activism has gone online; fortunately, this format has been well mastered since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, so many forms of work and communication are quite successful on the Internet.

Regional environmental and educational initiatives have been quite successful in this regard. As a rule, they have from 1,500 to 10,000 subscribers and supporters, and carry out activities with their help, for example, monitoring environmental problems (air quality, garbage, recycling). Feminist and LGBT regional initiatives also often exist in closed online groups, uniting for actions and events. Many young people want to volunteer, and if earlier it was mainly the social sphere (helping orphans, the sick, the homeless, animals), now there is an increase in interest in human rights and humanitarian activities.

In this regard, Russian civil society has already passed a certain stage of development and has developed successful strategies and tactics on how to continue its mission, despite the obviously deteriorating conditions. ✖

Inga Koroleva (pseudonym) is a Russian civil right activist that for safety reasons wants to be anonymous.

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Russians living in the Czech Republic protesting against the war in Ukraine. Prague, Old Town Square, March 26, 2022.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

RUSSIAN ANTI-WAR MOVEMENTS. THE HOPE OF EPIPHANY

by **Alexander Generalov**

The war against Ukraine sank the civil society of Russia into despair. The dreams of turning the country with a centuries-long tradition of despotic power and imperialist foreign policy into a peaceful postmodern liberal democracy were brutally crushed. Alongside the tragedy of thousand Ukrainians, this full-scale invasion has meant a defeat of the Russian intellectuals, liberals, and political dissidents who had been trying for many years to persuade themselves and the outside world that the strange reality they inhabited was an inevitable part of being a transitional society. This defeat forced them out of their country. Cursed

by their compatriots as “traitors” and by some public abroad¹ unwilling to stand up to the criminal regime, the new Russian émigré are now trying to construct a new “Civitas Solis” in exile, a different future for themselves and their country which is supposed to rise in place of the apocalyptic darkness of the present.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has caused an unprecedented amount of emigration. Individuals from different social strata have a shared belief that staying in a sanctioned combatant country is not a viable option. It is estimated that since 24 February 2022, around 800,000 Russians have left Russia in reaction to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.² Throughout 2022,

these individuals stormed the border crossings with neighboring visa-free former Soviet countries such as Kazakhstan or Georgia. Historically, these countries have been viewed by any of these escapees as underdeveloped and dysfunctional outposts of the prostrate empire. Now this imperialist perception has played a cruel joke against them: never could they imagine that they would be forced to ask these “little-brother nations”, who had just recently been staying in humiliating queues for job or dwelling in Moscow, for rescue and access to the conveniences which instantly became unavailable in Russia due to the sanctions.³

Many are viewing Europe and North

America as “the lands of Promise”. This was not unexpected, despite travel difficulties⁴ and often an unwelcoming and even hostile attitude from government institutions, some sections of the local population, and even long-term resident immigrants from Russia. The latter accuse their newly arriving former compatriots of a “late reaction”, egoism, imperialism and responsibility for the war.⁵

THIS NEW GREAT exodus is not the first in Russian history; there have been several since 1917. The October Revolution stands out. Between 70,000 and 80,000 “redundant people” (so called by the Bolsheviks) settled in France alone, a country traditionally influential for the Russian Empire’s upper classes both culturally and politically.⁶ In the period 1970–1988 about 290,800 Soviet citizens, mostly of Jewish origin, left the USSR to escape the anti-Semitic discriminatory policies in the country – predominantly for Israel and North America.⁷ The collapse of the Soviet Union has brought economic and social devastation to the former republics, among which Russia was not an exception. In total, about 4.5 million have departed in search of a better life since 1991 using newly opened borders;⁸ the highest rates were in 1992 and 1993 with 700,000 and 500,000 respectively.⁹ Their reasons for leaving were mostly economical, and social, with an increasing number of political refugees since Vladimir Putin came to power and intensified the repressions against his opponents from year to year.

Throughout history, Russian emigrants have clung to their hopes for a better future. The White Émigrés established societies dedicated to discussing post-Bolshevik perspectives, and some even tried to recruit troops for military interventions aimed at overturning the communist government.

Today’s contemporary escapees may seem to be following in the footsteps of their predecessors.¹⁰ However, there is a more promising outlook than ever before. The shared cause of democratic Russians leaving their homeland has led to a global movement known as “Russians Against War.” This movement has not been officially registered as a trademark, but it has become a common identifier for those

with a Russian background who hold pro-democratic views and are protesting against the war in Ukraine or involved in any anti-war movement. The name has become widely popular for organizations established in different countries.

Before the invasion

It would be unfair to suggest that the opposition movement in exile began only after the invasion of Ukraine. Political emigration had started much earlier, as Putin’s regime gradually transformed into what it is today. Several dissidents, such as chess-star Gary Kasparov and Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a banking and later oil tycoon who was imprisoned for ten years for openly opposing Putin, moved abroad even before the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbass region in 2014. Both of them created oppositional political platforms. Khodorkovsky focused on internal Russian oppositional politics through his organization Open Russia, which was declared undesirable and had its Russian representation offices prohibited. It was later forced to operate abroad and after the beginning of the invasion transformed into an initiative that is now known as Kovcheg or The Ark. On the other hand, Kasparov established a think-tank called Free Russia Forum, which gathered leading Russian opposition figures several times a year in Vilnius to discuss the situation in the country.

THE FREE RUSSIA FOUNDATION, headquartered in Washington with European offices in Kyiv, Tbilisi, Berlin, Tallinn, and Vilnius, is another notable organization that aims to help political emigrants from Russia. Vladimir Kara-Murza, who was arrested for his anti-war statements and

promotion of sanctions against Russian statesmen involved in human rights violations, is the most prominent representative of this movement.

While these cross-border organizations are essential in promoting democracy in Russia and unifying political exiles, they are not unique in their efforts. Some organizations were established within specific countries. What is outstanding with them is that they are completely horizontal democratic communities with no clear leadership or role distribution where the participants simply call themselves for “activists”. **Russie-Liberté** in France, which was founded in 2012 as a human rights movement. Its original aim was to raise awareness about the political situation and human rights in Russia. However, after the events of February 24, 2022, the organization shifted its focus to opposing the war.¹¹ Another such example is **Dekabristen** from Berlin, Germany, which was created in 2011 and has been opposed to the war since the Crimea and Eastern Ukraine invasion in 2014. The Russian oppositional exile communities of a similar model started to rise globally in 2022.

After the invasion

Aside from the new communities, the old organizations took on new roles as anti-war movements after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, triggered not merely by the war itself but by the mass emigration of war dissidents and later those fleeing mobilization. It resulted in one more important direction of their activity: providing help to escapees in their relocation from Russia and adaptation in the new countries of their temporary or permanent residence. Free Russia Foundation allocated resident shelters in countries like Georgia and started a project called Reform, arranging discussion and working platforms for the activists. One of them in Tallinn, Estonia, with its own location, is widely used for lectures, seminars, language courses, concerts and other events.

WHEN IT COMES TO political activism, completely new communities have taken on the leading role in various countries throughout Europe and North America.

“THROUGHOUT HISTORY, RUSSIAN EMIGRANTS HAVE CLUNG TO THEIR HOPES FOR A BETTER FUTURE.”



Russian against the war manifestation in Stockholm, Sweden, November 5, 2022.



Anti-war rally in The Hague, Netherlands, February 25, 2023.



SmåRodina protest in Oslo, Norway, June 4, 2023.

While affiliates of Open Russia or Free Russia Foundation have more traditional structures with multinational boards and management, these new organizations are significantly different and have a grassroots nature. They have no principal leadership and consist of volunteer activists making contributions to teamwork. This is due to a new way of thinking among contemporary dissident generations, in contrast to individually ambitious politicians and institutionalized parties that have been extremely divided due to political factions: For example, left-leaning democrats like Yabloko versus right-wing liberals from the Union of Right Forces, later known as Parnas. The new organizations are tolerant of differing views among their members and instead prefer to act on concrete agendas, without compromised leaders, based on horizontal connections and self-organization. This evolution seems to be truly promising. The horizontal structure is proven by the fact that many communities lacked any legal form for a long time and existed informally, on the basis of e-communication where participants have never had and still do not have any concrete capacity and decision-making authorities.¹² What follows is an outline of some of the communities, listed by the countries of the globe where Russians relocated.

Europe

SWITZERLAND. The organization **Verein Russland der Zukunft (Zurich)** existed for a long time as a community without any legal form, coordinated through Telegram-messenger. It was registered as an NGO in December 2022. The focus is on anti-war activism and promoting sanctions against regime-related Russian statesmen and oligarchs and their funds in Switzerland.¹³

NETHERLANDS. **Free Russia NL** is one of the oldest communities of a new type started on January 2021 in support of the Alexey Navalny which got a new life in the beginning of 2022. Free Russia NL clearly expresses its grassroot nature. The community arranges anti-war and pro-democracy protests and actively promotes help to the escapees in their life in the

“WHEN IT COMES TO POLITICAL ACTIVISM, COMPLETELY NEW COMMUNITIES HAVE TAKEN ON THE LEADING ROLE IN VARIOUS COUNTRIES.”

Netherlands. The core values recite everything that a democratic Russian national stands for: democratic values, norms and approach, including free elections; human rights, including freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, freedom of thought and conscience; tolerance and non-discrimination; rule of law and independence of the judiciary¹⁴. The focus on tolerance is not occasional since the Netherlands has been for a long known as open to the Russian LGBT-refugees.¹⁵

GERMANY. **Free Russians (Munich)** started as an informal oppositional pro-Navalny community. Now it is on the way to being officially registered as an NGO. The basic goals are support of democracy in Russia, aid to Ukraine, uniting pro-democratic Russians and of course, resistance to the war. The organization has 47 active members and a powerful social media presence.¹⁶ In general, the country with one of the largest Russian-speaking representations in Europe has many other communities, predominantly seated in Berlin, for example **Solidarus**. Some communities do not have any concrete names and are acting in the name of founding activists.

NORWAY. **SmåRodina (Oslo)** is a leading anti-war organization in that country. Originally a Navalny support group, the



Post from January 31, 2023, shared by the Telegram channel *Polska*.



Post from January 21, 2023, on anti-war manifestation. Shared by *Polska*.

community is one of the most active in Northern Europe. The organization is fast-growing and hosts demonstrations against the war. The community was relatively successful in targeting pressure on Russian diplomacy, which led to the Norwegian government decision to oust three Russian diplomats. *SmåRodina* is strongly oriented to collaboration with the other communities in Europa in order to be part of a wider global community of Free Russians network.¹⁷

SWEDEN. Antikrigskommittén i Sverige “Russians Against War” (Stockholm) unites oppositional Russians residing in Sweden. As well as sharing the same goals as many others, it is known for its hard stance against any Putin regime representation such as pro-Putin Russian diaspora communities, and uses striking visual activism and rallies to call on the Swedish government to break regime-beneficial economic ties with Russia.¹⁸ The community rolls out investigations about the institutions promoting Putin-praising views in Sweden.¹⁹ Russians Against War has recently attracted the attention of the Russian government and gained a truly unique status among all similar organizations in the West as being declared undesirable in Russia.²⁰ Another community is **Jazzik Mira** (from Russian “A little jazz of the peace”)

in Gothenburg which is active in hosting demonstrations, holding cultural events and working not only with a Russian but also a Belarusian agenda.

FINLAND. The Democratic Society of Russian Speakers was built in 2021. It is a community focusing on its activities in support of political prisoners. The members are not only Russian nationals but also from other countries of the former Soviet Union like Kazakhstan, with the agenda extended outside Russian politics. The organization’s good efforts resulted in Finnish President Sauli Niinistö’s appeal to the Russian government to provide Alexey Navalny with an investigation by independent doctors. The organization is eager to claim measures against the property of regime-close oligarchs in Finland.

GREAT BRITAIN. The country with a big number of wealthy residents of Russian

“CZECHIA IS A COUNTRY WHICH IS TRADITIONALLY ACTIVE IN HOSTING RUSSIAN POLITICAL EMIGRANTS.”

origin is also known as a safe harbor for many Putin regime dissidents, who have been targeted for assassinations several times by Russian intelligence.²¹ It also has its own grassroots platform called **Russian Democratic Society**. The community was created in 2021 and is active in demonstrations – independently or in collaboration with Ukrainians.

SPAIN. A known community is **Russia Tomorrow** that has branches in Valencia and Barcelona. The organization deals with countering Russian propaganda in social networks as well as investigations.

ITALY. A community **Comunità dei Russi Liberi** is a main host of antiwar demonstrations on behalf of Italian residents with Russian background. The community is active in Milan and proclaims as its core values opposing the Putin regime and the war as well as standing for release of Russian political prisoners.²²

CZECH REPUBLIC. A country which is traditionally active in hosting Russian political emigrants and forums for Russian anti-war and democratic initiatives, one of which took place in July 3–4, 2022. It is symbolic that the first ever Russian anti-war manifestation was Czech-related: in 1968 seven Soviet dissidents heroically walked into the Red Square in Moscow

“THE COMMUNITY WAS FORCED INTO EXILE AFTER HAVING BEEN DECLARED EXTREMIST IN RUSSIA AND OPERATES ON THE BASIS OF INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN ACTIVISTS SETTLED IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES.”

in their protest against the suppression by the Soviets of the so-called “Prague Spring”.²³ The motto from those events “For Your and Our Freedom” (Russian “За нашу и вашу свободу”) is still widely used in protests against the invasion of Ukraine. The **Prague Russian Anti War Committee** is a community of Russian speakers who condemn Putin’s aggression against Ukraine, aim to help Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic and to manifest their views in public.²⁴ The community was established in early March 2022.

CROSS-BORDER COMMUNITIES. **Vesna** (from Russian “the Spring”) is an outstanding grassroots community which is characterized by three phenomenal features: it was founded in Russia as a youth democratic movement and is currently cross-border. The community was forced into exile after having been declared extremist in Russia and operates on the basis of interconnections between activists settled in different countries (members are active in Netherlands, Czechia, Sweden and Georgia). In this regard, Vesna differs from others having real political experience inside Russia and demonstrating how a community may exist through its activists in different locations simultaneously, with no need of a classical vertical structure and management.

NON-REGISTERED COMMUNITIES. Some communities with the name “Russians Against War” may be traced in other countries, with no signs of legal organization and coordinated through social networks – mostly Telegram or Facebook. **Russians Against War (Polska)** is a Telegram channel informing about the anti-war activities of the Russians residing in **Poland**.²⁵ It is hard to say whether it is a community or simply an informational channel for coordination of protest activities. A Face-

book group called **Russians against war. Vilnius** arranges the anti-war activities in **Lithuania**.²⁶ There is no indication whether it is an organized community. At the same time, it must be recognized that Lithuania has provided a safe harbor for many Russian oppositional organizations – from political movements to media – which is why there may not be a high demand for any united anti-war community.

North America

CANADA. **Russian Canadian Democratic Alliance (RCDA)** is a Canadian organization of “democratic Russians” residing in different cities and provinces of Canada who united in order to oppose all wars waged by Russia, including the military aggression against Ukraine, and the colonialist and imperialist mentality. It believes that Russia, like Canada, must undergo a process of decolonization; stand for equal rights for all regardless of gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, skin color and eye shape, physical or mental abilities; and demand that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights be observed in Russia.²⁷ There is no information on the exact period of initiation of the community. The first post on the RCDA Facebook page dated 21 October 2022 suggests that the community is recent. The openly anticolonial stance on the Russian future is quite unusual for the initiatives of this kind.

THE UNITED STATES. The US Russian-speaking diaspora is one of the largest and oldest in the world. There are anti-war communities both on national and state levels, each active in their own way. **Russian America for Democracy in Russia** is a federal non-governmental organization having local communities in different states around the country. On the webpage anyone may apply to be a volunteer or make a donation and so the organiza-

tion is contributed to and exists.²⁸ The **Chicago antiwar community**, founded by local activists in early 2021 in support of Alexey Navalny, hosts regular anti-war rallies and helps Ukrainians. **New Freedom of Russia** is a human rights open membership organization from Florida. Judging by the name and its human rights focus, the organization was built before the invasion. The indicative fact is that none of the acting public members has any capacity other than simply “activist” – a sign of the lack of hierarchy which is typical for this kind of grassroots community.²⁹ The state communities mentioned here are not the only ones in the country as many never registered in any form and exist as groups in social networks.

Australia

The Australian organization **Svoboda Alliance** covers the two communities in the state of South Australia where it has existed since 2021 and in New South Wales where it was established in spring 2022. Both were founded by groups of pro-democratic Australian residents with a Russian background.³⁰ The Alliance focuses on defending human rights and strongly stands for expelling Russian diplomats from the country.

Middle East

ISRAEL has a large Russian-speaking population, mostly Jewish repatriates from former Soviet republics. Many Russians of complete or partial Jewish ancestry were entitled to Israeli citizenship while staying in Russia until the invasion or mobilization due to different personal reasons. A certain number of them are oppositional activists and dissidents, mostly from cultural or media spheres, facing different kinds of political persecution in Russia. Repatriation for these people was rather the most available “fast-track” alternative of forced emigration than a



April 24, 2023 outside the Russian Embassy in Buenos Aires. Posted by the *Protest Argentina* Telegram channel.

conscious move “back to the roots”. That is why the Russian identity is still dominant among many Israeli repatriates from Russia who feel strong cultural and civic ties to their country of birth. They also try to create their own communities, the largest of which is called **Plakat** (from Russian “the Poster”). As stated in a post from its official Telegram channel, Plakat is a “liberal association” founded in 2022 with more than ambitious goals to stop the war in Ukraine, establish a liberal democracy in Russia and “politicize” Russian society. The community comes out with an open call to join the organizational board.³¹

Outside the “traditional West”

It is worth saying that communities are being built not only in the traditional Western industrial countries with freedom of speech and political expression as a core value, because a poorer minority of Russian escapees succeeded in moving to these alternative countries due to severe entry restrictions in the traditional target countries. Other countries which have

visa free entry for Russian nationals or are located nearby, despite being unstable liberal democracies or not being such at all, are experiencing a greater influx of immigrants from Russia who also try to establish their anti-war or pro-democratic communities as far as it is permissible under local legal or political circumstances.

ARGENTINA. There are Russian anti-war communities even in the region of Latin America. Argentina, despite being the most geographically remote from Russia, has become popular among recent Russian emigrants because of visa free entry and historical generosity to immigration. Some feedback from a Russian newcomer in this country shows that anti-dictatorship sentiments based on the tragic Argentinian Peronist experience awakens a

deep compassion in Argentinians towards democratic Russians.³² The *Protest Argentina* channel in Telegram messenger with more than 100 subscribers³³ announces regular anti-war actions. However, there is no information that any organized Russian community has been established in this state.

GEORGIA. This country with its strong self-identity is admired by many Russians for its traditions of generosity and rich national culture. It is still open to travel for Russians and has no entry restrictions. Having common borders to Russia, Georgia took thousands of Russians fleeing the country, including those affected by the partial mobilization declared in the fall of 2022.³⁴ However, some Russian opposition activists were mysteriously denied entry to the country.³⁵ **Russians in Batumi** is a newly created community which unites the Russians living in the city of Batumi. The scope of activities are demonstrations and help to Ukraine.³⁶ It is very likely that similar communities are present in other places. Yet the anti-war media is dominated by the branches of

“GEORGIA TOOK THOUSANDS OF RUSSIANS FLEEING THE COUNTRY.”

“IT IS CRUCIAL FOR WESTERN STATES TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT RUSSIA IS AN UNSAFE COUNTRY FOR POLITICAL ACTIVISM, AND TO PROVIDE POLITICAL ASYLUM TO THOSE SEEKING IT.”

traditional organizations like the Free Russia Foundation under the leadership of the long-term resident and democratic activist Yegor Kuroptev or Kovcheg.

TURKEY. The most desired beach tourist paradise among the Russians, it was not surprising that Turkey became one of the first countries of mass emigration for them. While the USA and EU suspended direct flight connections with Russia, Turkey opportunistically extended Russia flight programs while ignoring harsh criticism for its persistent neutrality to anti-Russian sanctions, becoming almost the only affordable way for Russians to reach American and European destinations by air. Many on their “way to nowhere”³⁷ preferred staying in Turkey as relatively loyal in providing residence permits and opening bank accounts.³⁸ **Russians Against War Antalya** is an example of a Russian community opposing the war. In addition to traditional anti-war activities (aid to Ukraine, demonstrations, public events etc.) the community provides shelter to Russian escapees.³⁹

Properties of the communities and challenges

As we observe, the geography of Russian anti-war and democratic communities is vast and encompasses the most prominent countries of emigration since the beginning of the invasion. These societies are organized as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or exist without any legal structure, limited to an informal community coordinated through social media. Membership is open, and as a rule, these organizations lack any vertical hierarchy, except for informal activist leaders. Members have no specific capacities or authorities unless stipulated by NGO laws. Each member or supporter can equally contribute through donations or activities. While the least political among these communities proclaim no political goals regarding Russia's political

future, most societies serve as platforms for people with different views united in common goals, such as stopping the Russian aggression in Ukraine, aiding Ukraine (including the Ukrainian army, population, and refugees), supporting Russian political or conscription escapees and political prisoners. Some communities consist of Russian-speaking members rather than being based on Russian nationality or origin. As a result, they include agendas of other post-Soviet states subject to dictatorship and involved in the war in Ukraine on the Russian side, such as Belarus.

IT IS WORTH to say that even those communities tied to “traditional” organizations and oppositional leaders has reshaped their structures and are operated on more horizontal principles. Kovcheg (the Ark) benefits from a huge amount of volunteers in different areas from immigration advisory to psychological aid. Reform platforms are hardly distinguishable from the new-built communities since all participants are equal in making their inputs into different activities – like demonstrations, conferences and evenings of support of political prisoners.

These qualities are significant in projecting the likelihood of these communities' participation in Russian political life, both before the end of the war and the fall of the Putin regime and afterwards.

On the one hand, Russian opposition activists experience new forms of cooperation that deny traditional leadership and problematic political personality cults (“vozhdism,” from Russian “leaderism”), uniting a wide range of political activists with entirely different views on the future of the country. Communities like Plakat in Israel openly declare the politicization of Russian society as their goal, and each member plays an active role, which can be called “proto-politicization.” This expresses the feeling and acknowledgment that only personal engagement in the

Aristotelian “common good” can bring true democracy, be a guarantee against authoritarian consolidation of power, regardless of the future borders and state structure of what is now called Russia and bring persistent peace to the surrounding parts of the Eurasian continent. A qualitative building of “a future Russian home” through such empirical politicization will not leave space for territorial expansion and aggressive foreign policy, as citizens are focused on solving the everyday internal problems of their country such as healthcare, environment, labor rights, and social justice, among others. Any ideological tensions that are, therefore, perceived as a natural condition of collective action will no longer undermine the future democratic system (or systems – if so is the judgment of history).

On the other hand, the challenges faced by these communities are not insignificant. Sanctions, imposed not only on the Russian state and its decision-makers, but also on Russian nationals, have severely restricted the movement of dissidents from Russia and hindered their ability to engage in new political practices. Additionally, the democratic societies at the grassroots level are largely unheard by national political elites, with few exceptions, such as in Finland. Unfortunately, distrust based on “suspicion of all things Russian” pervades public institutions and hampers the organizations' ability to open bank accounts to collect donations.⁴⁰ Their openness also exposes them to the threat of infiltration by Russian intelligence, as the nature of the communities does not provide for clearance control policies, necessitating support and protection from authorities.

IT IS CRUCIAL for Western states to acknowledge that Russia is an unsafe country for political activism, and to provide political asylum to those seeking it. The absence of support or outright hostility from the governments hosting these

democratic and anti-war initiatives can lead to apathy and disillusionment among the Russian political emigrants, who may distance themselves from their home country's fate and give up on transforming it. In some non-Western countries, activists are not even allowed to form communities and are at risk of deportation if requested by Russia, highlighting the need for relocation programs granted by strong liberal democracies.

Conclusion

Ultimately, overcoming these obstacles is essential to the success of the communities' participation in Russian political life. By offering support and protection, Western democracies can facilitate the empowerment of these groups, whose goal is to build a democratic future for Russia through politicization at the grassroots level. This, in turn, would mitigate the risk of territorial expansion and aggressive foreign policy, as citizens focus on solving internal issues such as healthcare, the environment, labor rights, and social justice, paving the way for a democratic system that can withstand ideological tensions and ensure peace in the surrounding regions of the Eurasian continent. ✖

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STREET ART AGAINST WAR

Mural by Banksy
in Borodyanka.

PHOTO: ALINA2206/
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

WITH STENCIL
MARKS AND
PAINT CANS IN
UKRAINE

by **Lisa Källström**

abstract

Street artists have demonstrated their condemnation of Russia's invasion of a neighbor with murals, both in Ukraine and abroad. The most famous of these artists is Banksy. On a wall of what was once a kindergarten, he has sprayed the image of a child in a judo match overcoming a seemingly far more powerful opponent (an adult with some resemblance to the Russian leader). Although such works of street artists in Ukraine sometimes also show Putin, children are a common theme – often a girl with two stiff braids. Some of these works are presented in this essay, considering the role of the child in them, seeking to understand the role of art in protest as an appropriation and reconfiguration of public space.

KEYWORDS: Street art, Banksy, Ukraine, children, civic imagination.

The picture of a mural from Borodyanka near the capital city of Kyiv: A child in judogi (judo costume) appears in black and white sprayed lines on a cracked building facade or wall. The child overpowers a seemingly superior opponent (an adult with a black judo belt). The picture is a reproduction of street art, a piece of mural, a kind of adaptation in a new medium.¹

The photograph seems to demand a response from the viewer. The response may of course vary from person to person. Some may be puzzled. Others might allow information about the picture to guide them to the news coverage of the war in Ukraine. The similarity between the adult and Russian leader Vladimir Putin might even elicit a wry smile. The motif

of the child throwing a much more powerful opponent may also inspire a sense of hope: Like the child, Ukraine will eventually be able to defend itself. The mural epitomizes a David-and-Goliath struggle in which the good wins despite seemingly hopeless odds. The photo may also make the viewer think about the futility of war.

THE MURAL IS JUST ONE of several works now appearing on barricades and house ruins, all executed in the stencil technique so characteristic of Banksy.² Another work by the same artist shows a female gymnast balancing on her hands, upside down. In her balancing act, she has seemingly found a secure hold with her hands on a pile of rubble. A third depicts a woman with curlers in her hair wearing a dressing gown and a gas mask, holding a fire extinguisher. In the middle of what was once a roundabout, two children play on a tank barrier shaped like a teeter-totter. Yet another mural showing a man in his bathtub has been said to show how defenseless people are at the mercy of war, how vulnerable they are even in their own homes.

The photograph of the judo match is just one of several possible adaptations of the same motif. In a video posted on Banksy's Instagram account, we see a mother and child at what was once the child's nursery school.³ All that remains is the wall where the judo match is taking place. The video is accompanied by the song "Chervona Ruta", which refers to the flower of hope. On the occasion of the one-year commemoration of the invasion, the image also appeared on a postage stamp. Upon its release, interested buyers lined up in front of the main post office in Kyiv. "We believe that this stamp, this painting, gives an accurate picture of what we Ukrainians think

about our enemy," said Ihor Smilianskyi, managing director of Ukraine Post, according to German media.⁴

Cities as urban galleries

Banksy is a master at telling stories using the restrained technique of stencils. But other artists have similarly protested the war in Ukraine. Salvatore Benintende alias TVBOY travelled around Ukraine to mark his protest against the war on the walls of Bucha, Irpin and Kyiv.⁵ One of his works shows a nine-year-old girl painting the peace sign in Ukrainian colors. On the wall of the destroyed cultural center in Irpin, we also find a little girl

with a teddy bear reprimanding a heavily armed soldier. Christian Guemy, a French street artist also known as C215, has drawn a portrait of a girl with a traditional flower wreath in her hair near a metro station that was severely damaged by Russian bombing.

EVEN OUTSIDE Ukraine, artists are criticizing the occupation with their street art. They have transformed cities into urban galleries. Justus Becker spent three days drawing a giant peace dove on a five-story

"THE CHILDREN THEN BECOME BOTH A SYMBOL OF THE FUTILITY OF WAR AND AN EXPRESSION OF HOPE THAT IT WILL SOON BE OVER."

building in Frankfurt am Main. The dove holds an olive branch in the colors of the Ukrainian flag in its beak. On a wall in Paris, an image designed by Julien Malland (alias Seth Globepainter) shows a proud girl walking along holding a blue and yellow flag. With confident steps, she tramples on tanks not much bigger than her shoes. A wall in Rome shows two teenage girls sobbing and hugging, united by the word "*mir*" (peace).⁶ Laika painted the girls in the national colors of Ukraine and Russia to celebrate International Women's Day on March 8.

Not surprisingly, Putin appears in several of these murals – as a baby, having his head cut off or behind bars.⁷ But remarkably often, children are the chosen subject. These children may seem sad and even lost, but they can also demonstrate resilience and a sense of humor. The children then become both a symbol of the futility of war and an expression of hope that it will soon be over. Many of these children are not playing but mark their resistance to the war in actions such as painting peace signs and raising their hands as if to say stop. One exception is the playing children Banksy has painted in a roundabout, swinging on an anti-tank obstacle.

IN SEVERAL OF the murals we recognize visual representations of Pippi Longstocking – or Greta Thunberg. These depict lone girls with stiff braids who have taken up the fight, as in Nuart's painting in Stavanger or ChemiS's in Prague. If the subject is a boy, he is often much younger, as in Hijack's mural where a three-year-old boy



Painting by Italian graffiti artist TVBOY in Irpin, outside of Kyiv. PHOTO: FABRIZIO SPUCCHES / CESVI



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Mural by ChemiS in Prague.
PHOTO: JIRIMATEJICEK/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



French street artist Seth Globepainter painted a Ukrainian girl in Paris three days after the war began.

PHOTO: @SETH_GLOBEPAINTER/INSTAGRAM

is tracing his fingers along the marks of a peace sign left by a machine gun. The murals take on different meanings when viewed from the inside – as a victim of the war – and from the outside – as an outsider, but nonetheless affected. For both groups, the child as a motif can show the vulnerability of the exposed and a desire for a better world.

Large format a signum

Viewing this art activism as a complementary narrative or an expressive manifestation of the political sentiments of the time does not do the murals justice. Instead of presenting street art as a carrier of meaning to display dissent, one could also recognize its disruptive and constructive power. Street art is an act of resistance in that it opposes the exhibition space as a legitimizing factor and claims the urban space as a canvas. It resists attempts by art museums and galleries to distinguish what is called fine art from street art.⁸

Anyone can create street art. At the same time, street art risks being labelled as vandalism. The practitioner may be caught and

charged, sometimes taking even greater risks, like the artists who have visited Ukraine or painted anti-war graffiti in Russia.

The risk of being caught in the act becomes greater the larger the work is. The works discussed in this essay have a common feature: their size. The size gives an indication of the artist's level

of recognition. More established artists can set out to paint works that take several days to complete. They are less likely to be penalized because their paintings have been sanctioned and declared to be art. Justus Becker (artist name Cor) needed three days to paint his dove of peace on the wall of a five-story building in Frankfurt. Banksy himself has only painted major works in Ukraine. These works can be compared to his first significantly smaller known work:

The Mild Mild West (1997), depicting a teddy bear throwing a Molotov cocktail in response to overly violent police raids on rave clubs. This mural is a symbol of youth culture in Bristol and as such a protest against government and commercialization.⁹

There are reasons for the large format. Banksy and other

**“ANYONE CAN
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street artists regard photography and the internet as an important means of expression. Large works are more suited to photography because the photographer can capture the painting from a distance and thus include more of the surroundings. Creating large wall paintings also makes it easier to integrate objects into the painting such as an installation like a chair or pile of masonry. Banksy is known for including such items in his work. For example, in the image of the man in the bathtub, Banksy plays with categories such as inside and outside when he draws a snapshot of something so private on a wall in the remains of a bombed-out house. The man's bathtub gives the impression of standing in a room inside the house that is exposed and visible because of the bombed facade.

THE EPHEMERAL NATURE of Banksy's street art is evident in the details around which he composes his works. A chair in front of a house wall serves as a vantage point for the woman with a gas mask and fire extinguisher that Banksy has painted there. A tank barrier in Kyiv becomes a teeter-totter for children to play on. A pile of rubble becomes a gymnastic boom for a female gymnast. The details complete the works and at the same time make them temporary. If these details are removed, the work is no longer complete. However, as social media photographs, Banksy's works (and other street art) overcome this transience. The works live on Instagram – even long after they have disappeared from the streets.

Banksy sells his work online in support of Ukraine. He made 50 prints “for our friends” in Ukraine. They are hand-signed, numbered, and mounted in a wooden float frame. The artist has made scratches on each print with a pizza cutter, so that each work is unique. All copies are sold for £5 000 (approx. €5 800) plus taxes, but each buyer can only buy one image. “We are pleased to be able to offer an art screen print by the famous British graffiti artist Banksy,” can be read on the homepage of the Legacy of War Foundation.¹⁰ The international charity is committed to helping the civilian population in war zones. The organization states that 100 per cent of the proceeds from the sale of Banksy's works will be used to finance relief supplies, and the artist will cover all costs incurred.¹¹

The political dimensions of murals

Scholars have argued that murals can have a mobilizing effect since they invite participation and conversation.¹² Murals are also a provocation because of the space they occupy in the urban environment. Passing pedestrians can take out their mobile phone and take a photo of themselves and the work to post on social media. They can also pick up a pen or a discarded spray can and pick up where the artist has abandoned the work. They can also stop at the artwork and discuss it with their peers. The role of the bystander or Internet user is to view. To see is to seek to engage. What is being shown? What meaning can be attributed to what is shown? Of course, our interpretations depend on expectations and preconceptions.

In another context, I have discussed the difference between seeing Banksy's work in urban space and on the Internet.¹³ In



Mural in Lviv by French street artist C215 near a metro station that was severely damaged by Russian bombing. PHOTO: @CHRISTIANGUEMY/INSTAGRAM




Mural by Banksy in Borodyanka.

PHOTO: ALINA2206/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

that case, however, my analysis concerned the woman balancing on her hands on the shards and bricks of a bombed-out house. Murals can, therefore, be regarded as a call for participation and protest, and as such, as something disturbing. But viewing murals as a complementary narrative or an elusive manifestation of the political sentiments of the time does not do the murals justice. Instead of presenting them as a simple carrier of meaning to be read by dissenters, one could also recognize their disruptive and constructive power at the core of resistance.

To describe the political dimensions of murals, we could draw on Henry Jenkins' concept of civic imagination developed in *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination* (2020).¹⁴ This concept refers to the ability to imagine alternatives to existing cultural, social, political or economic conditions. In his view, nothing can be done about existing conditions without first imagining what a better world might look like. Civic imagination requires and is released through the ability to envision change, to see oneself as a civic actor who can bring about change, to feel solidarity with others whose perspectives and experiences differ from one's own, to join a larger collective with common interests, and to bring imaginative dimensions to real spaces and places in the world. With this in mind, murals not only reflect but also interject. They not only represent but also perform resistance. Instead of taking this performative power as default and focusing on graffiti semiotics only, this article interrogates the ways in which they shape resistance.

AS A REPETITIVE spatial practice, murals emerge as the visual remnants of a spatial performance that address a range of issues, from social resistance to identity formation. In the case of the murals discussed here, not only do they draw attention to the vulnerability of civilians in war – and especially the needs and concerns of children – but also remind us that war is also a war against arts and cultures, not only because war in today's medialized society is about narratives and counter-narratives, but also because solidarity is marked in and through art. Russian attacks not only target the military enemy, but also museums, monuments, churches, and theatres. Recognizing the importance of art for a feeling of belonging, people are trying to protect important monuments with sandbags. These attempts demonstrate the importance of art to a country's self-understanding, while art also plays an important role in resistance by giving voice to people's suffering and calling for action.

Murals may initially be nothing more than a can of spray paint, a wall and an idea, but they can also possibly encourage open and collective resistance – this too is a rhetorical device. 

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Image from Twitter (MilitaryLand.net) May 29, 2022, when a new Azov unit was formed in Kharkiv. The unit Special Purpose Unit Azov-Kharkiv is part of Ukrainian Special Operation Forces (SSO).

The end of Ukrainian radical nationalism is not here – yet

by **Adrien Nonjon**

THE WAR AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR FAR-RIGHT MILITANCY AND VIOLENCE IN UKRAINE

abstract

Is radical Ukrainian nationalism disappearing? However marginal but playing a decisive role in the resistance against Russian aggression, along with the rest of Ukrainian society, this political movement has suffered terrible losses that raise questions about its ability to maintain itself in the post-war political arena. This forward-looking essay examines the multiple challenges posed by this issue, arguing that the Far-right in Ukraine could perhaps find in the war an undeniable opportunity for a renaissance.

KEYWORDS: Radical right, nationalism, Azov, Ukraine.

As a phenomenon intrinsically associated with the last ten years of its history, the question of contemporary Ukrainian nationalism and its radical declinations has not only been raised since its sudden reappearance during the Maidan revolution in 2014, but unfortunately remains open today. Indeed, a brutal and rapid offensive by Russia on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, under the guise of “denazification” of the country, was enough for the question – *in concreto* relegated to the background of Ukrainian political issues – to erupt once again; leading to raw information, passionate and sometimes biased columns, invectives, and hasty, confused or even truncated demonstrations in line with the Russian narrative. These allegations have often led to Ukraine’s significant advances in democracy being downplayed, in more ways than

one. Since the Maidan revolution and the country's gradual exit from the Russian zone of influence, Ukrainian society has more than once shown its resilience in the face of the presumed rise of the extreme right, giving it – let's not forget – too few votes to enable the statement, as Russia wants, that this country has been in the hands of a “fascist regime”, deviously piloted from the West. However, far from falling into a form of “moral procrastination”,¹ it would be wrong to imagine that Ukrainian radical nationalism is totally absent from the current political scene. Indeed, Ukraine has only recently been learning the principles and mechanisms of democracy, all this in parallel with a difficult test imposed by Russia with the occupation, since spring 2014, of part of its territory and the outbreak of a – until February 2022 – covert war. This climate, specific to both post-revolutionary transitology and the implacable logics of the hybrid war, has had the effect of encouraging the extreme right to extricate itself from the marginality to which it was confined until recently. No longer a simple ideological repellent used by the regime of Viktor Yanukovich, the extreme right was able to benefit from the sparks of 2014 to make its grand entrance into public life.² Reconfigured in a hurry to respond to popular demands and the climate of insecurity distilled by the conflict in the east of the country, the Ukrainian political field has become the cradle of new conflicts, coalitions and ideologies that are overflowing and transforming its initial configuration, within which nationalism has been able to draw new contours, even if it has made significant changes in the expression of its most extremist and unavowable aims.

IN VIEW OF THE MULTIPLE issues that have thus arisen in a country in search of a future and answers, the Ukrainian far right has therefore tried to capture several essential issues emanating from the population itself and to influence certain government positions, as was the case in October 2019, at the very moment when Volodymyr Zelensky wanted in vain to undertake a de-escalation in Donbas.³ Similarly, by volunteering to defend the territory during the first separatist and Russian incursions, the far right has in its own way, like the other major political parties, accompanied the revaluation of Ukrainian national feeling, which is now fully accomplished. This reality should not, however, obscure the violent street activism of several militias and groups during this period. Their actions showed that, beyond any parliamentary process,⁴ there were radical militant nuclei that had no trouble exploiting certain weaknesses in the state to act with impunity. If we had come to admit that the Ukrainian far right had ultimately become the radical and vegetative side of a form of patriotism now centered on the defense of the sov-

ereignty of a people, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict once again raises the question of Ukrainian nationalism and its future. Despite repeated failures and continuous strategic flip-flops, Russia intends to continue and complete its purge of radical elements in Ukraine, thus locking itself into an unreasonable and barbaric headlong rush. If this relentlessness has to do with an “imperial mentality” galvanized by the atrophied narrative of the Great Patriotic War⁵, we are nonetheless entitled, in the light of this tragic anniversary, to question the future of Ukrainian radical nationalism. We have so far observed a nation at war, fighting for its survival regardless of political differences. But should we really exclude the far right and radical Ukrainian nationalism from our field of expertise? Forged in the heat of war in 2014, has it or can it regain visibility in the long term?

The general context at the time of writing requires, of course, that we take a strict stance on the issue described above. As we have already said, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is characterized by the massive use of information as a weapon. The Azov regiment, to which we will return, has for example been targeted many times by Russian propaganda, which refers to it as a “neo-Nazi retaliation battalion”. Similarly, it should be remembered that there are no less than around two hundred thousand men and women defending Ukraine with courage and self-sacrifice. Contrary to all the *reductio ad hitlerum* in the Russian media, the vast majority of these fighters do not recognize themselves in any way in the values of radical Ukrainian nationalism and the movements that are at the forefront of it. However, our questions deserve to be raised because of a double observation. Firstly, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the various Western media were quick to question the potential attraction of this conflict for foreign radical right-wing movements. Because of its international dimension, this conflict has seen a massive influx of foreign volunteers since its outbreak.⁶ On numerous occasions, Telegram channels of extremist groups such as the Misanthropic Division have called on their European counterparts to join Ukrainian nationalist fighting forces “for victory and Walhalla”. Although overshadowed today by the urgency of stopping Vladimir Putin at all costs, the idea of Ukraine becoming a giant training ground for the far right on both sides of the front line is more relevant than ever. Finally, it is important to measure the immediate consequences of the conflict on this movement. Regardless of victory or defeat, the gaping stigma of war has always fueled radical discourse and prophecies on the right and left. Questioning the future of Ukrainian radical nationalism in this way by no means entails affirming any partisan position in these columns, but rather laying the groundwork for a reflection that will make

“ALTHOUGH OVERSHADOWED TODAY BY THE URGENCY OF STOPPING VLADIMIR PUTIN AT ALL COSTS, THE IDEA OF UKRAINE BECOMING A GIANT TRAINING GROUND FOR THE FAR RIGHT ON BOTH SIDES OF THE FRONT LINE IS MORE RELEVANT THAN EVER.”



Azov is mobilizing, image before the war 2022.



Azov soldiers patrolling in an improvised armored vehicle, 2014.

PHOTO: CARL RIDDERSTRÅLE/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

it possible to grasp the complexity and depth of a phenomenon that is as marginal as it is unique.

Toward the rise of a new nationalist vanguard?

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine has naturally resulted in a large number of victims among Ukrainian nationalist forces. This is the result of the systematic violence applied to the “denazification” desired by Vladimir Putin’s regime. The martyrdom of the city of Mariupol, considered since its recapture in May 2014 by the Azov regiment as the cradle of a dormant evil, is the most terrible example. It is necessary to mention, however, that the extreme right-wing forces have suffered a great number of casualties because of their ideals. War, however horrific, always sees the most patriotic and radical rush to the front line and unfortunately die in the first few days. Difficult to quantify, these losses are significant to say the least, as they deprive the Ukrainian far right of an old generation of activists. The disappearance of well-known and structuring figures such as Mykola Kravchenko of the National Corps⁷ or Taras “Hammer” Bobanych of the Right Sector are all important losses that the Ukrainian far right will take several years to replace. Is this enough to imagine the eventual dislocation of these groups deprived of key figures or, on the contrary, can we not imagine that a new generation of activists, this time much more radicalized, will take over from the old guard of yesteryear? Despite the setbacks and losses suffered by the movement, nationalist youth is now extremely active, releasing its own energy and obeying its own militant logic. As in the days of the first skirmishes in the Donbas in 2014, it has created new battalions such as “Revenge” from the Orthodox ultranationalist group Order & Tradition, and “Kraken” or the self-defense militias of Ivano Frankivsk.⁸

THE RISE OF THIS YOUNG generation of activists could not be more problematic. Not only could it contribute to the renewal of the far right in terms of numbers, but it could also lead to a return

to violent action and radicalism. It is indeed interesting to note that at the organizational level, this generation has paradoxically been considered by the various nationalist parties as an essential phalanx but also as a very volatile militant base, often incompatible with classic political strategies. Mainly channeled into militias and other vigilante groups that answer to a hierarchy and charismatic leaders such as Andriy Biletsky, the founder of the Azov movement, or Evhen Karas of the C14, their radicalism and desire for action have exceeded the words of command and end up overflowing the structures responsible for containing them. This risk stems from the very structure of these movements. After its foundation in 2016, the Azov movement built a heterogeneous base of activists from different, previously marginalized right-wing organizations and countercultures with divergent political agendas. Contrary to the old guard, the nationalist youth who are often on the front line are in a confrontational relationship with those they consider to be “enemies of the nation”, going so far as to challenge their hierarchy, which is considered to be too political and disinterested in field actions. Because of their cultural influence and the weight of their ideology, these young activists are clearly in a confrontational logic. Antagonism and conflict are the fields par excellence that define them and bring them together. The main actors of the revolution, the youth in Ukraine have been experiencing a crisis of confidence in the country’s future for years. Several developments are causing anxiety. The war is taking a heavy toll on families and close friends, and the economic recession is hitting young people in particular, with 23% unemployment among young people over 25.⁹ Moreover, faced with the Ukrainian government’s lack of initiative to put an end to corruption, young people feel neglected after so much effort to build a better future. Disillusioned by the prevailing climate and the impasse of the solutions proposed by the establishment, a part of the youth has gradually, since 2018, invested in the ultranationalist and militarist ideological field, which it considers to be compensatory themes that can ensure political and patriotic legitimacy. If the Ukrainian far right had



Ukrainian soldiers attack a Russian tank in Mariupol, March 2022.

PHOTO: MINISTRY OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS OF UKRAINE

been able to build a program from the Maidan onwards that was more oriented towards a form of sovereignty or national populism, the war in Ukraine has pushed militant youth to go back on these axioms. From now on, it distills into a discourse that is more and more about identity. Of course, we fight for the nation, but we also fight for European civilization, which must be preserved from the “Asian hordes”.¹⁰ This conception of the fight is based more on experience than on theories. While the old guard of Ukrainian nationalism saw the war in Donbas as the continuation of a struggle that began decades earlier against the Russian occupiers, radical Ukrainian youth sees the Russian-Ukrainian war as its baptismal act. This difference in appreciation of events could have a significant impact on the future of political activism and the use of violence. For, as far as the whole population is concerned, and not only the radicalized nuclei, today’s fear is also that of those generations under 50 who were almost completely unaware of the concrete reality of conflicts. The war, until then a technical matter entrusted to (semi)professionals, the massive mobilization of Ukrainians, but also the multiplication of mass crimes on the scale of all the occupied territories, is a “shock” that confronts younger generations, until then mostly spared violence, with the tragedy of its history. From then on, the latter could be forced to respond with an exalted rather than a measured reaction.

The fortress trap?

Ukrainian right-wing radicals seek to reconcile virulent nationalism and militarism. These theses, which are characterized by an ultranationalist discourse, very directive in the institutional sense, and by an exaltation of the soldier against the elites, place them in the continuity of revolutionary nationalism, that is to say, a fascist path refusing the military and moral defeat of the nation. The origins of this doctrine go back to the interwar period in Germany and the advent of the Conservative Revolution, some incarnations of which, like the Freikorps,¹¹ were at the forefront of this struggle against the supposed decline of the

nation. Contemporary Ukraine has not been spared this phenomenon, even if it is much less strong and spectacular than in Weimar Germany. Indeed, in response to the patriotism of the programs and speeches of the entire Ukrainian political spectrum, the nationalist parties, which had been deprived of their main arguments, built a discourse highlighting the need to promote a fighting ideal through the strengthening of the Ukrainian military apparatus. This discourse is perfectly practiced insofar as it is based on a concrete reality. The proponents of this revolutionary nationalism witnessed the setbacks of the regular army in the first months of the conflict in Donbas in 2014. For many, it was only their intervention that was decisive in turning the tide and avoiding an overall collapse of the front. In doing so, they want to ensure that the Ukrainian nation, whose history is a continuum of struggles for the assertion and defense of sovereignty, has the tools to achieve this ideal. They want a regime that is both much stronger and fully committed to the establishment of a “fortress”.¹² It is therefore a manifestation of a kind of defensive “state chauvinism”. Although marginal in its meanings, this discourse now has a certain resonance in the light of current events as it becomes hybridized with that of the Ukrainian state: Whether it is the first statements of President Volodymyr Zelensky on the need to obtain modern offensive weapons from the West to return to the territorial status of 2014, or even the regrettable but perfectly justifiable contextual outbursts against the Russian people.¹³ These elements clearly demonstrate a potential for hybridization of discourses that could ultimately strengthen the far right in its demands. Given the security stakes, the instinctive reaction of condemning this type of radical discourse would no longer be self-evident for the state and even Ukrainian civil society, which is oriented towards moderation and has an aversion to violence. Not only would the condemnation not be unanimous, but it could be implicitly approved. Caution is still required, however, without overestimating the risks, as there can be no question of underestimating the stabilizing capacities of the state and the resilience of Ukrainian society.

“THEY WANT A REGIME THAT IS BOTH MUCH STRONGER AND FULLY COMMITTED TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A ‘FORTRESS’.”

HOWEVER, LET US put forward a counter argument to this hypothesis. The post-modernity of the present century and its effects are very particular to Ukraine. Indeed, despite the successive political and diplomatic developments since the fall of the USSR, Ukraine has been involved in a bipolar confrontation but also in the heart of transnational demands that go far beyond the revolutionary and chauvinist ambitions of the extreme nationalist right in the broad sense. In view of Ukraine's deep aspirations to turn the page on Russian influence once and for all and to join the European family, nationalist activists are no more a concern than a hope. The patriotic turn undertaken by the main Ukrainian parties – which is ultimately based on the promotion of values previously protected by the nationalist extreme right – has largely contributed to the process of invisibilization of radicalities.¹⁴ The war-induced revaluation of strength by Volodymyr Zelensky locks radicals into a rut: equated with the war patriotism promoted today, as was the case after 2014, by the other parties, they are instantly devalued and perceived as irrelevant. In a system of representations where the defense of the nation has replaced revolution as the horizon, the radical margins have not yet found a way to make their activism understood.

However, are the concerns of their militants so disjointed from those of their compatriots? On the evolution of the economy, on the future of Ukrainian national sovereignty, on regional security, on the place of the global Ukraine, the radicals express, in their own way, problems that are not without importance for many. The marginalization and hypothetical disarmament of radicals are not necessarily definitive facts; their relative revitalization is conceivable if they evolve in a way that allows them to speak to society again or to join a political movement in order to express “a history in conflict”¹⁵ that is being written. Thus, faced with the emergence of new threats, the need for a “new art of war” and to take into account the shift in traditional geopolitical power poles, the Azov movement, unlike Svoboda or Right Sector, had built a whole program around the notion of Inter-marium (Baltic Union-Black Sea),¹⁶ which was intended to both allow Ukraine to find outlets for its defense and give it back its autonomy in the game that the powers in the region were playing.

Azov, a political message behind the glory?

In the line of fire of the Russian denazification, Azov, which is both an elite regiment and a political movement, has managed, despite the tragedy of Mariupol, to regain its former importance and strengthen its legend. Once considered elite fighters, the soldiers of this force are now a symbol of a nation's martyrdom. The respectability of Azov acquired through the war is consistent with its strategy of distancing itself from violent members who could give it a bad image, long before the beginning of the

Russian-Ukrainian conflict. To this end, it submitted to the 2014 Minsk Protocol, which provides for the integration of volunteer battalions into the Ukrainian National Guard. However, this strategy of de-demonization is double-edged: On the one hand, it has allowed the regiment to get rid of a large number of radical elements, but on the other hand, it has allowed them to take over the regiment's brand image and even its elitist rhetoric of nationalist inspiration, which has led to the creation of the political party National Corps.¹⁷ In terms of public order, the integration of Azov into the National Guard was an undeniable added value for the Ukrainian state, as it was now scrupulously controlled and supervised. The verbal provocations of Andriy Biletsky, the founder of the Azov regiment and the National Corps party, were transformed into patriotic appeals, which generally satisfied both the extremist and mainstream patriotic elements, who no longer officially sought to defend alleged Ukrainian racial superiority. However, despite the evidence of a de-radicalization of the Azov military entity, its ideology still stands for radical nationalism and uncompromising political struggle. On the other hand, regardless of the changes observed since 2014, it is still difficult for Azov to completely rid itself of its extremist past and the identity-based struggle it initially embodied.¹⁸ The trivialization of Azov and most of its symbols since the siege of Mariupol raises the question of affinity networks that intend to take over its most bellicose and radical ideological legacies. Studies of extremist movements show us that the contemporary era is above all characterized by an individualization and horizontalization of discourse. This is a global phenomenon that particularly affects the extreme right in both Europe and the United States.¹⁹ In the present context, the trivialization of Azov refers to the question of the self-identification of movements. Hegemonic in representations of heroism and the warrior ethos, the term “Azovian” could on one hand be invested by movements to blur the lines, making it difficult to appreciate their exact intentions in order to remain ideologically and strategically flexible. This is the result of the implosion of the Right Sector after the 2014 presidential elections, which increased the number of formations of the same name despite their contradictory ideological orientations. On the other hand, it should be noted that the internet is part of the phenomenon. Under the guise of supporting the Azov regiment or other structures affiliated with it, sites have appeared which, in addition to their radical political content, sell clothing of radical right-wing brands such as SvaStone, WhiteRex, Belayar or even flocked with the colors of the Azov regiment, and which ultimately participate in its re-ideologization,²⁰ even if the purchase may simply be a matter of virile and martial aesthetics and not a militant act. Nevertheless, an idealization is taking place which is materialized by an increase in activists wanting to renew this original political struggle, paradoxically, through their

inclusion in the electoral game, giving rise to movements which do not refuse this same depoliticization, quite the contrary.

By way of conclusion

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has certainly brought Ukrainian society as a whole together, but it has opened up the common spaces, with the circulation and interaction between moderate and radical spheres that would allow radicals to have access to the system, in a process of general recomposition of the political spectrum. Although today it is confronted with major challenges that threaten its existence, Ukrainian radical nationalism is by no means doomed to disappear. The current context of war and its stakes makes it difficult to assess radicalization and ideological transfers, but this process cannot be ignored. By its mobilization and its essence, it is clear that this once peripheral movement has the potential to re-emerge in an unprecedented organizational and discursive configuration. Until the outbreak of the conflict, Ukrainian nationalism was perfectly integrated into the social fabric and ideological cleavages structuring Ukrainian society. The war disrupted these paradigms and, regardless of victory or defeat, left an undeniable opportunity for a renaissance for a movement that had previously been barely audible. ❌

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Russian school children are parading in fake tanks and aeroplanes in military uniforms.

SOURCE: UKRAINIAN WITNESS/TELEGRAM

The use of children in the Russian aggression against Ukraine

by **Alyona Hurkivska**

February 2023 will be remembered for a lavish propaganda event of the Russian government in Luzhniki stadium in Moscow dedicated to the anniversary of the second Russian invasion of Ukraine. This year it was combined with a celebration of the most significant regular ideological commemoration – a day of “The Defender of *Otechestvo* [the Fatherland].¹ Using the propaganda transfer technique, Russia frames the invasion as a fight against the “Ukrainian Nazis”, providing parallels with winning WWII, thus inheriting Soviet traditions intended to increase feelings of patriotism and national pride.

One of the key narratives promoted by Russian propaganda is the “protection of the people of Donbas”, in particular using propaganda materials with children, especially those deported

from Ukraine. In the recent performance in Luzhniki, children “rescued” by Russians from occupied territories were taken to express their gratitude. An occupier from Chelyabinsk, Yuri Gagarin, was presented as the “savior” of 367 children from Mariupol. One of the children (15-year old Anya) forgot the text and was told by Russian officials to instead hug the soldier who had occupied Mariupol.

Anya’s mother was killed in Mariupol after a Russian attack on the city.

DEPICTING “saved Ukrainian children” became a tool in Russian informational warfare aimed at strengthening internal support of the war. Ukrainian parents are finding their kidnapped kids in Russian news reports: “The column (which was trying to evacu-



Slide from a school lesson presentation for children 10–11 years old, aiming at indoctrinating them about the importance of Russia in the world. Разговоры о важном. Россия в мире. Презентация [Talks about the important. Russia in the world].

SOURCE: [HTTPS://RAZGOVOR-CDN.EDSOO.RU/MEDIA/FILE/RUSSIAINTHEWORLD-1011-PRESENTATION.PDF](https://razgovor-cdn.edsoo.ru/media/file/russiaintheworld-1011-presentation.pdf)

ate from an occupied city) was shot at, the mother was killed, the child was wounded and taken away by the Russians. By chance, the father of the boy, who was in territory controlled by Ukraine, saw a propaganda shot with his son, where the Russians explained how they were saving Ukrainian children.”² There were also plenty of stories and TV shows on Russian channels showing Ukrainian children saying thanks to the Russian, thus promoting the narratives of Russia rescuing Ukrainian children, and thereby encouraging their adoption. The children are of course in reality exploited for ideological purposes.

The international community has concerns regarding the forced transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia itself or Russian occupied territories. Ilze Brands Kehris, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights at the Security Council, emphasized that adoption by the Russian state is a simplified procedure for granting Russian citizenship to children without parental care, thus making them eligible for further adoption.³ However, Russia is not providing information regarding transferred children, and instead changing their names to thwart their reaching out and being taken back home. Changing children’s nationality and names, and hiding children in Russia, are systematic violations of Article 50 of the Fourth Geneva Convention⁴ and Articles 11 and 35 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁵ And it happens systematically although it is hard to get overview of the full extent.

According to fixed data from the National Information Bureau on March 2, 2023, the number of deported children is 16 221;⁶ but on the platform created by the Ministry of Reintegration, infor-

mation posted by open Russian sources gave a total of 738 000. A US Department of State representative claimed in October 2022 that more than 260 000⁷ were deported from Ukraine. The UN Refugee Agency could not count the number of children who received Russian passports or were forced into adoption in Russia, due to the extremely limited access to information.⁸

THE KIDNAPPING policy of the Russian Federation is led by governmental officials at all levels. In May 2022 Russian President signed an Order⁹ providing a simplified procedure for obtaining

“THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY HAS CONCERNS REGARDING THE FORCED TRANSFER OF UKRAINIAN CHILDREN TO RUSSIA ITSELF OR RUSSIAN OCCUPIED TERRITORIES.”

Russian citizenship, based on the appeal by the guardian of a child with Russian/Lugansk or Donetsk People Republics¹⁰ (LNR/DNR) citizenship, by heads of organizations of orphans, or by representatives of an educational, medical, social, or other organization on occupied territory. Putin also signed amendments to simplify the obtaining of Russian citizenship by Ukrainian adults and children.¹¹ On February 18, 2022, heads of the unrecognized republics, so-called “LNR” and “DNR”, signed orders for the “evacuation” of citizens.¹² Subsequently, Russian propaganda reported stories about children who have been “rescued” by Russians. The occupation administration encouraged the special commissions’ work

to open cases on the deprivation of parental rights of people who cannot provide a certain standard of living for a child: more than 38 000 cases were opened.¹³

To leave the battle zone, parents with children were trying to cross the border and needed to pass Russian filtration camps. “At least 18 filtration locations along both sides of the Ukraine-Russia



Slide saying, "Russia is a country that respects the freedom and sovereignty of other countries, protecting traditional human values". From a school lesson presentation aiming at indoctrinating children about the importance of Russia in the world.

SOURCE: [HTTPS://RAZGOVOR-CDN.EDSOO.RU/MEDIA/FILE/RUSSIAINTHEWORLD-1011-PRESENTATION.PDF](https://razgovor-cdn.edsoo.ru/media/file/russiaintheworld-1011-presentation.pdf)

border have been identified thus far,"¹⁴ reported Deputy Chief of OSCE Mission Courtney Austrian in a speech to the Permanent Council. It compared the practice of filtration camps that were used by Russia in the first and second wars with Chechnya.¹⁵ The report of the Eastern Human Rights Group states that during the "filtration" procedure, many citizens were imprisoned and their children were handed over to the deportation procedure by the Russians.¹⁶

IMPLEMENTING GERASIMOV'S doctrine, Russian propaganda serves as an indispensable tool in warfare. In both the occupied territories and Russia, special camps were set up that aim at the ideological "re-education" of Ukrainian children. According to the Yale School of Public Health Report, the Russian federal government operates camps where children from temporarily occupied territories have been placed. The report states that there are 43 of these facilities. Categories of children who were detained in these facilities include some who have parents/guardians, some who were deemed to be orphans by Russia, some who were under the care of Ukrainian state institutions before the February 2022 invasion, and some whose custody is unclear or uncertain due to wartime circumstances caused by the February 2022 full-scale invasion.¹⁷ Children from temporarily occupied territories were deported to Russia under the guise of "evacuation" of orphans and state wards, transferring children to camps, and movement of children to Russia for supposed medical care. The report stated that the primary purpose of such camps is "re-education"; they have a special remit as an "integration program" with the goal of enforcing acceptance of a Russian vision of nation, history, culture, and society.¹⁸ Yale School of Public Health's Humanitarian Research Lab has found that 78% of the camps included an identified component of Russia-aligned re-education, which at times included military training.¹⁹

In the camps, children are restricted from communicating

with their parents; the camp administration refuses to return home children who have expressed a pro-Ukrainian stance, and they are forced to stay in camps for a longer period.²⁰ After camps, orphans are sent for adoption in Russia, and other children are not returned to their parents for various reasons.²¹ The camps' "re-education" includes schooling under the Russian program, "patriotic" lessons from Russian military forces representatives, historians and members of Yunarmia ("Youth army").²² Some children showed problems with mental and physical health after visiting these camps.²³

Russian warfare measures, especially propaganda, works both externally (to affect the enemy) and internally (to gain the needed support and potential survival of ideas). The methods described above of kidnapping Ukrainian children and their "re-education" aims at destroying the Ukrainian nation, while the internal propaganda is aiming to "educate" Russian children to ensure loyalty and potential human resources that would be motivated to continue/or start the next aggression. The Russian government and state-financed institutions have started a comprehensive campaign for the ideological "education" of Russian children who could be used for this purpose.

How does Russian propaganda work with Russian children?

Like the regime of the USSR and other non-democratic authorities, contemporary Russia is taking measures for turning its citizens into expendable material who will die pointlessly in the wars unleashed by Russia as it implements its imperialistic ideology as a main trait of the political culture of its nation. Russian propaganda is designed to unite society against the entire Western world, to ignite a sense of quasi-patriotism and hatred for the declared enemies of Russia, and to increase the Russians' passion to commit genocide, violence, rape, and other war crimes against representatives of other nations while ensuring loyalty

Table 1. What Russian children learn in school about Ukraine

7–8 years of education	9–11 years of education	Putin's speech
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ukraine did not exist before the 20th century. • In 1954 Ukraine obtained Crimea. • Russia always took care of Ukraine because Russians and Ukrainians are one nation. • Ukraine is a non-sovereign country which was led by a pro-American government after the illegal coup in 2014.* • People in Ukraine want to speak their native Russian language and be bearers of the historical memory of Russia. Based on these facts, two independent republics were formed (DNR and LNR). • The war in the east of Ukraine is a confrontation between the Kyiv authorities and people from the east. • Russia did everything to resolve the conflict peacefully, but Kyiv authorities twice carried out military punitive operations in the east, and now Russia is witnessing an aggravation of the situation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ukraine was created by Lenin. • The Ukrainian junta (and Ukrainian international partners) did not implement the Minsk agreements, while civilians were dying. • Foreign partners multiply the power of the Ukrainian army. The Ukrainian regime receives free lethal deadly weapons, and the number of military personnel is rapidly growing. • Russia provides peace enforcement in international practice. Russia recognized the independence of the Donetsk and Lugansk republics and was forced to announce a special military operation. The President (Russian) and the army are destroying the military potential of the fascist state (i.e., Ukraine), created with one goal – to conquer Russia. • If Russia does not act now, in three or four years it will be too late. Then there will be a big war. • Referring to a popular movie in Russia – <i>Brother – 2</i>, “What is the power, brother? – Power in the truth”. • (De)motivation coda: what should a brave and honest person do? Stop the insane person who is killing people instead of standing aside with a sign saying “I am for peace”. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Ukraine, there are terroristic sabotage groups. • All diplomatic measures to deter the US from expanding NATO were exhausted. • Referring to “history”, before the Second World War the USSR was doing everything to keep the peace. He provides parallels that Russia is preventing the war. • There is not a war with Ukraine, but a special peacekeeping operation, the purpose of which is to contain the nationalists who are oppressing the Russian-speaking population. • Its goal is to protect people who have been subjected to bullying and genocide by the Kyiv regime for eight years. • Russia will strive for the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine. • Russian plans do not include the occupation of Ukrainian territories. • There is a threat regarding the development of nuclear weapons by Ukraine.

* The Russian framing of the Revolution of Dignity.

to the authoritarian regime. Especially vulnerable categories for its application are children that would ensure the survival of the imperialistic ideology in the long-time perspective. Thus, the Russian federal government implemented measures to encourage children to prolong the work of Russian occupiers.

In August 2022 the Ministry of Education in Russia issued amendments to the federal state educational standard.²⁴ The document aims at raising students' awareness and ideas regarding Russian civil identity, development of patriotism, civic-mindedness, respect to the memory of the defenders of *Otechestvo* and their feats, acceptance of traditional,²⁵ human, and democratic values, readiness to counteract the ideology of extremism, and nationalism. Russia also uses language and cultural expansion as a weapon in information warfare and a ground for the occupation of sovereign states; the educational standard pays attention to forming the highly valuable perception of Russian

children regarding the Russian language (and Russian literature) as having spiritual and moral merit. The program of school lessons on “history” contains the following: understanding the meaning of Russia in the world and economic processes, understanding reasons for the collapse of the USSR, “Renaissance of Russia as a world state”, “reunion of Crimea with Russia”, and a “special military operation on Ukraine”²⁶. The target set for teachers provides the “ability to protect historical truth”, “do not permit derogation of the feat of the nation while defending *Otechestvo*”, “readiness to confront the falsification of Russian history”, “ability to characterize Russian spiritual and moral values”. An interesting addition to the program is including such topics for discussion as a policy of import substitution²⁷ (the Russian term for replacing products after sanctions). In the field of the “basics of life safety”, people would obtain a picture of the Russian role in the contemporary world, military threats, the

role of the military forces of the Russia Federation in ensuring peace, knowledge on the basis of defense of the state and military service, and the rights and duty of a citizen in the field of military civil defense.

After the approval of amendments to the educational standard above, there are plans to change the working programs and history books²⁸ that would be obligatory for students to read. The plan is also to add questions regarding the so-called “special military operation” to the national testing of graduated students for university entrance.

School teachers are receiving methodological recommendations for talking about the war.²⁹ Some teachers’ interviews state that the usage of manuals is not obligatory but recommended. One of the teachers who was interviewed said that he received the manual in a message from the director, also including a presentation on how NATO is spreading to the East.³⁰ The Russian teacher comments that “educational” lessons of a military “patriotic” character took place even before the war; they mostly concentrated on dates such as the February 23 and May 9, but teachers admitted in an interview that now their number has increased.³¹

Some of narratives to be presented to children are listed in table 1. The table includes a Putin speech with his narratives.³²

THE MEDIA PUBLISHED SLIDES (materials for the lesson) regarding the situation in Ukraine. They contain the messages that Ukraine chose the anti-Russian path by (1) mechanically copying foreign experience,³³ (2) strengthening anti-Russian rhetoric, (3) non-controlled work of foreign non-commercial organizations, (4) “The Russian language in Ukraine was made illegal”³⁴, (5) the Russian nation excluded from the list of indigenous peoples³⁵, (6) rewriting textbooks in which Russia is shown as the enemy, (7) forbidding Russian language channels,³⁶ (8) destroying memorials connected with Russia, banning the Ribbon of Saint George,³⁷ (9) repressions against people who advocated the independence and neutrality of Ukraine, building NATO bases, (10) fighting against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

A campaign extended by Russian government (led by the Ministry of Education) that sets lessons on “patriotic education” named “Discussion about important issues” for all classes of students aims at forming a picture of the world in line with the Russian government’s political and cultural purposes. Analysis of published teachers’ methodological materials, lesson scenarios, posters, videos, and presentations identified the following:

- Materials promote three main statements: “serving for *Otechestvo*”, “patriotism”, and “love of the Motherland”.
- Methodological materials state the target as to “evoke a sense of pride in Russia and its uniqueness” as a civilization. The country is depicted as a state with high culture, modern, world-leading unique technologies (especially in the military



School children in a Karelian village form the Russian symbol Z as part of their patriotic training.

PHOTO: SEVEREAL.ORG

field), and great people who dedicated their life to *serving Russia*. Special attention is dedicated to pathfinders in the expansion of Russian borders.

- Materials highlight a Russian “special mission” as the protection of the world from fascism (referring to the USSR). The role of the narrative regarding winning the WWII has a special sacral value in Russia. In the Soviet Union, the term WWII (September 1, 1939 – 8 May 1945) was replaced by “The Great Patriotic War” (June 22, 1941 – May 9, 1945), referring to the war of the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany. It was framed by Soviet propaganda to emphasize the antagonism between regimes, hide the cooperation of the Soviet Union with Nazi Germany (Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), and monopolize the defeat of Nazism as a victory of the Soviet Union alone. A myth was cultivated in the USSR of the Soviet army (protector of *Otechestvo*) as a liberator in order to justify the presence of the Soviets in Europe (because liberators could not be a threat) and, in particular, the occupation of Baltic countries. The Soviet Union’s legal, ideological approach and the regime’s successor, the Russian Federation, presents the victory in the Great Patriotic War as a Russian mission of fighting Nazis, depicting Russian glory in order to unite society and forming an image of Russian soldiers as liberators. Many lessons inform about the feats of Soviet soldiers. Materials define a lesson target as showing “Russia’s contribution in fighting Nazism and colonialism”. It shows how Russia helped several countries in Africa, which were oppressed by European countries, to obtain independence. Children are intended to discuss other examples of Russian protection of sovereign states.
- The nuclear industry is depicted as a unique development, and a modern step forward in science. The USSR’s strategy for the monopolization of the nuclear industry as a power tool was not included in the materials.
- The program includes the task of teaching children to deny the statement about Russia’s resource economy, promoted by the West as stated in the materials. This is not true from a

Russian perspective, and children are supposed to find causal arguments.

- Russia is presented as a country that “respects the freedom and sovereignty of other countries, protecting traditional human values”.
- Video content regarding the day of Defender of the *Otechestvo* emphasized that soldiers must have no self-interest; thus the issue of salary, conditions, and obstacles should not matter to them. Talking about the so-called “special military operation” in the video, it is argued that God is on the Russian side, as he was in the Great Patriotic War.³⁸ The Russian soldier is depicted as a “soldier warrior-liberator who rescues humanity from the hands of dictators and aggressors who claim world domination” (from Napoleon through fascism and continuing into the present). It is also added that Russian military doctrine has a defensive character, meaning that Russia enters military conflict if the country, its citizens, and Russian allies are in danger.
- Russia is shown as the opposite of the US, as emphasized in materials about genocide committed against Indians in North America, nuclear attacks against Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Vietnam. At the same time, the materials promote the idea that Russia provides peacekeeping operations in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Kazakhstan, and Syria, and protects the people of Donbas (with statements in the video showing Russian soldiers giving food to people).

SOME OF THE RESULTS of the indoctrination of Russian children seep into open sources – media and telegram channels opposed to the war. They post forced “voluntary” political actions at schools where children dressed up in Soviet uniforms are placed into the symbol of the new swastika which became a symbol of Nazism. The symbols of Russian fascism are the letters “Z” and “V”, which stands for “Za pobedu” [for victory] and “Sila v pravde” [power in truth]. Combining with the Russian propaganda narratives listed above, it refers to one of the most popular books in Russia in 2021 and 2022 in which “War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength.”³⁹ ❌

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LVIV — A CITY OF LIONS IN THE YEAR OF WAR

by **Svitlana Odynets**

The journey to Ukraine is no longer measured in kilometers. After Ukraine closed its airspace, the trip demands new spontaneous, situational solutions to get there. Instead, travel can be measured by time — at least fifteen hours from Copenhagen to the western Ukrainian border, but it may be up to thirty hours or more. However, the most accurate measurement of the distance to Ukraine today is the level of closeness to all those people who are staying in Ukraine, in their own homes, and do not even think about surrender. From this point, Lviv is closer than ever.

WHILE MYSELF NOT able to stay in Lviv, where I have lived most of my life, I still do what I can: returning regularly as soon as a new opportunity comes. Because, as Simone Weil wrote, attention (and physical presence, I would add) is the rarest and purest form of love.

Every return brings me new insights. For example, when I was preparing for this text in late 2022, I imagined people would be too tired to talk with me, as one might expect with those who are living under daily alerts and with no electricity at home. But after barely starting some conversations, I was in a situation where I was forced to choose among the stories. Finally, I got it:





Lviv, January 7, 2023.

PHOTO: SVITLANA ODYNETS

the most urgent and important need for Ukrainians today – after shelter, food, and water – is to witness, to be listened to, and to be heard; to have a space to put into words the most critical human experience they get through every day. Therefore, in only one week, I managed to record 15 full-length interviews, each lasting several hours, and twice as many shorter interactions, chats, and observations.

Poland

When one is heading to Ukraine, sooner or later one will notice that every meter of physical space in Poland is filled today with blue and yellow posters, "Jesteśmy z wami" [We are standing with you]. English sounds totally strange here and even aloof. People speak instead some new local tongue – probably renewed from the historical traditions of the Great Duchy of Lithuania. Our new old Central European Esperanto is the Polish-Ukrainian-Belarusian language, with dozens of dialects within it. I even felt surprised when I suddenly heard clear Polish without any other linguistic shadow. Everyone understands each another through conversations started in one language and finished in another, but where words are not enough, people continue to communicate with eye contact and through silence. Polish cities and villages have become a new Babylon, probably already a post-language one.

The space around Warszawa Zachodnia – Warsaw Western bus station – an epicenter of the Ukrainian world today – is filled with announcements about cheaper transport to get to Ukraine, job offers, and housing for Ukrainians. It became even more intensive, compared with time before February 2022, when from one to two million Ukrainians worked in Poland, and regularly commuted between Polish workplaces and their families back in Ukraine.

Hundreds of people are passing by me, many waiting for their busses. However, others seem to be coming here just to spend some time with other Ukrainians, or to find some answers. When I look stealthily at their faces, apart from tremendous tiredness, almost everyone has a voiceless question in their eyes which appears when one goes through an experience that does not fit in the previous life's existential framework: "For what?"

Border

When our Warsaw-Lviv bus, after ten hours, crosses the Ukrainian border at four in the morning, we are immediately immersed in complete darkness. The streetlights are totally dead. Only blue-yellow flags are dimly lit at roadblocks, nearby military hedgehogs and barricades made from stones and sandbags.

However, Lviv, where more than one million people lived before the war, is brighter: the supermarkets are all illuminated – they have been working already for weeks on generators – an external source of electricity that Ukrainians have as the main solution to keep critical infrastructure and business alive, after

Russia started shelling Ukrainian infrastructure on October 10, 2022. Generators for social infrastructure were provided by the Ukrainian government with the support of Western partners, but to be able to get light into restaurants, kindergartens, and private homes people have to cooperate to purchase generators themselves. Villagers and residents of smaller cities, though, have fewer resources for purchasing alternative electricity, and therefore, their lives are much harder.

Trams are running, which means that right now, at this very moment, electricity is available in most parts of the city. I call a taxi from the operator I used when I lived here, and get to wait for 15 minutes, but they cannot find a free car for me. Then I call another operator, wait another thirty minutes, and finally, a taxi from a competing company arrived. They are not competitors anymore, but partners, in order to keep both in the market.

Christmas

I collected the material for this text before and around Christmas week, January 2–10, 2023, close in time to the first war "anniversary".

Usually, the period between New Year's Eve and three weeks

ahead has always been both the most relaxed and the most intense time here. People are busy with the preparation of meals, but this is not only about preserving of traditions. Many are fasting and attuning themselves to the meaning of Christmas, to live it through sacredly.

This year most Ukrainian families, including Ukrainian soldiers at the frontline, will celebrate a "second" Christmas, having the first one at the end of December. The discussion about the change from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar started in Ukraine a long time ago,¹ but the full-scale Russian invasion accelerated the public

consensus. Next year the whole of Ukraine will celebrate Christmas Eve only on December 24, and this year was a transitional one.

Near the Opera House a huge Christmas tree stands, more modestly dressed than usual, with a hedgehog instead of a Christmas star at the top. Lviv's local heritage sculptures of the Roman god Neptune, the Greek goddess Amphitrite, and deities Adonis and Diana, are covered and enclosed in special boxes in case the Russian army bombs the city center. The unique "Sitting Christ" statue has been totally removed from the Armenian Cathedral of Lviv for safekeeping. The last time when that happened was during World War II.

Lviv's Christmas sounds are of generators, war alarms, and medical convoys of ambulances going from the central station to hospitals. Injured soldiers have been daily transported from the frontline to recover in Lviv as well as in other big cities.

SINCE PEOPLE LIVE in planned and unplanned blackouts, sometimes from five to ten hours a day in Lviv (in Kyiv it might last

**"LVIV'S CHRISTMAS
SOUNDS ARE OF
GENERATORS,
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OF AMBULANCES
GOING FROM THE
CENTRAL STATION
TO HOSPITALS."**



In a shelter in Lviv.

PHOTO: ADRIANA DOVHA

for more than thirty hours at a stretch), they have become real experts in getting alternative light into their lives, not least with the help of the Ukrainian diaspora of at least three million (before the war) living abroad. I am surprised how much ordinary people know about alternative solutions for heating, electricity, and, of course, the internet – from flashlights on batteries from Danish Jysk stores and primuses to expensive optic fiber.

Icons on firearms boxes

Being the largest city located farthest from the front, Lviv still seems a typical tourist place, with dozens of crowded restaurants per square kilometer, even if it is partially extinguished and slowed down. But as soon as I dive into my old professional networks, I begin to see its new flickering underground, where an intensive volunteer movement is an iceberg.

Today hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians work round the clock to support front provision. They manage to organize the logistics of transporting body armor, medicine, and drones from Western Europe to the Polish-Ukrainian border, as well as enormous fundraising campaigns. While I am in Lviv, a few such campaigns had started, and one was about to collect 60,000 euros to buy a second-hand armored car in the UK for a division in Bakhmut.

This concrete fundraising takes place on two levels: First, through donations to city concerts organized by singer Sofia Fedyna, who has been working as volunteer since 2014, when Russia attacked Donbas for the first time, and second, via an art

auction where Ukrainian artists present their projects, made either from basic simple materials (such as gauze, bandages, or paper) or materials from the front – ammunition boxes or former cartridges.

The opening of the auction was planned in the Soldier's House, a newly opened social space for war veterans and their families where they can get psychological counselling. In addition, a new service for searching for persons missing in the war started here recently. The institution is located on the former Volodymyr Korolenko street, named after a Russian writer of Ukrainian-Polish origin. Three months ago, this street got a new name: Taras Bobanych, in honor of the 33-year-old hero of Ukraine, a lawyer and active participant in the what Ukrainians call Revolution of Dignity (2013–2014), who died in April 2022 in Kharkiv region at the frontline.

Three minutes before the auction is due to start, an air raid alarm sounds. According to law, all public events have to be paused during alarms, and public organizations and restaurants are closed. But the organizers of the auction are not going to cancel the event. “Wait for a little while, please”, one of the organizers tells me and other journalists assure me: “It will end after about forty minutes.... The [Russian] planes took off in Belarus but most often it is just a warning alert; likely nothing will really happen”.

Like people and even children from other parts of Ukraine who are now able to distinguish different types of missiles and drones by sound alone, Lviv's residents have developed their



Interior in Saints Peter and Paul Garrison Church (Lviv), January 2023. On the photos – children of fallen Ukrainian defenders since 2014.

PHOTO: SVITLANA ODYNETS

own system for assessing types and levels of threat – partly based on the information they receive in special apps, and partly from their own established understanding and experience of everyday life in the war over the last year.

On the forty-fifth minute, the all-clear signal sounds.

The auction starts, and every work presented is about transforming the experience of war and trauma into some form of resilience.

ONE OF THE ARTISTS, Maria Hupalo, who presents a work *The Berehynia² of Christmas Night*, works as a theology teacher at the Ukrainian Catholic University. Her husband worked first as a military medic, but now he is a soldier on an active part of the front. Maria presents a large *vytynanka*,³ a kind of art made from paper, a very common style in Poland and Ukraine. Maria Hupalo is inspired in her works by the visual arts of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. She explains the idea of her art:

“I was always interested in the figure of the martyr. It means

not only suffering but also witnessing. Now Ukraine has become a bystander to previously unpunished evil which Russia perpetrated against many other nations and cultures, including Georgia in 2008”.

The starting price of the work is seven hundred dollars, but the work will later be sold for three times that price.

Another artist, Natalya Prodanchuk, mother of three children, presents a painted shell from a *howitzer*, inspired by the old ethnic traditional Krolevets textiles⁴:

“Even during the war, we must think about how we will transit to a new life after our victory and try to preserve light and joy in our hearts, even today when we have such a difficult time. We can use our old Ukrainian traditional motives to support our soldiers today”.

Artist Valery Gubenin has painted a picture of “Flowers of retribution” on a piece of Howitzer barrel.

The idea of turning materials used at the front into art is not new in Ukraine. Back in 2014, in the Saints Peter and Paul Gar-

“A FEW DAYS AFTER THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA, LVIV BECAME A REFUGE FOR CRIMEAN TATARS, A NATIONAL MINORITY, WHO SUFFERED HEAVILY UNDER THE SOVIETS, BEING MASSIVELY DEPORTED FROM THEIR LANDS IN MAY 1944.”

rison Church in Lviv, the first icons painted on cartridge boxes were collected. The church itself became a live community for soldiers and their families since the Revolution of Dignity⁵ in 2013–2014. Today, there are unique artifacts from the front here, such as a birch cross from Donbas, remnants of shell casings, as well as photographs of all those who died – on Maidan, Donbas, and now, in the newest wave of the Russian invasion.

This volunteer project of fundraising for an armored car ended at the beginning of March. The full amount needed – 60,000 euros – was collected. Now volunteers have embarked on the bureaucratic process of transporting the car from Britain.

“Autumn, winter, and ... spring again”

Another widespread volunteer activity in Lviv today is weaving camouflage netting for the front.

People in Ukraine began to weave it in the spring of 2014, after the beginning of the Russian invasion of Eastern regions of Ukraine. In the spring of 2022, there were more than thirty places where people wove nets in Lviv alone. Over time, the points began to merge, and I got an invitation to come to the biggest one, organized by the “Student Brotherhood” network, physically located in the library of Lviv Polytechnic University.

Solomiya Rybotytska, the leader and a volunteer since 2014, tells me that a new camouflage net starts by pulling a typical fishing net onto large frames, after which one starts to weave strips of fabric in it. The color of the fabric plays a huge role: a net for winter should be white, green for spring, sandy or in juicy green shades for steppes and forests. Initially, people brought their own fabric from home and painted it in the required color, but today all materials are purchased from a national manufacturer in Kharkiv, which is working under shelling.

ON THE FIFTH OF JANUARY, when every Galician house is actively preparing for Christmas, there are up to ten people in the hall, both men and women of different ages. Very different people come to this place, – retirees, students, doctors, teachers, and journalists. Those who are not at the front, not delivering food to people in the areas under shelling, and not performing medical operations in Lviv hospitals, those with health problems, and those having too small a pension to make permanent donations to the army. “At least we can help with something”, they say.

“Thousands of people have an urgent need to do something for the army and for victory”, explains Solomiya.

In the spring of 2022, many students from Mariupol came to the place. They fled to Lviv after they barely saved their lives.

To buy the nets is not a recommended solution: one net, sized six by nine meters costs up to 40 euros. Therefore, people weave nets manually. In addition, the hand-woven net gives much bet-

ter protection. While machine-produced net has a recognizable print and can be “read” by enemy drones from the sky, a net woven manually has many knots and cannot be “read” from the air.

The process of weaving netting continues on a permanent basis, with short pauses. The work was going even on Christmas and New Year’s Eve because the need for new nets is very great at the front.

After the net is made, volunteers send it by post to the most urgent places. “At first, we tried to write something warm on each net, some kind words to support the military, but then the volume of orders became too high. We must work very quickly now”, Solomiya explains. Volunteers have already made about 150 kilometers of nets during the last few months.

AMONG THE VOLUNTEERS, I meet Nadiya, a pensioner who has worked with children all her life. “We come here more often than to church,” Nadiya says. “Especially when air raid alarms sound. Doing something for the front, like this, makes it psychologically easier to go through.”

Nadiya tells me that first, she volunteered at the train station in March when thousands of people were fleeing bombs and trying to cross the border. Then she helped refugees to get new documents to replace lost ones. Her family has relatives that were violently moved and deported by the Soviet authorities to other countries, a history that is very typical for many Ukrainian families. Nadiya herself was born in Russia but came to Lviv at the age of 19. She speaks excellent Ukrainian. She still keeps friendly contact with several people in Russia, and she says that it is important for her to hear that they take personal responsibility and admit their guilt. She tells me that they say that it is not Putin’s fault, but their own fault as a society when they understood all the propaganda but did not react as they should have to.

I ask her how she copes during blackouts.

“I have gas, that’s why I’m warm. There is a power bank for my phone and a tablet. I have a lamp on a magnet. I try to do everything that needs to be done while it’s still daylight. But I feel good with a candle too, I am remembering my life then. All these blackouts are not problems for me, they are just inconveniences.”

Exodus...

Lviv is located seventy kilometers from the border with Poland, which makes it the biggest hub for people’s movements in the war. A few days after the annexation of Crimea, Lviv became a refuge for Crimean Tatars, a national minority, who suffered heavily under the Soviets, being massively deported from their lands in May 1944. After Ukraine became independent, in the early 1990s, they started to come back to their ancestors’ lands.

Twenty years after they got settled, Crimea was annexed by Russians again, in March 2013. Younger people and those with more resources who were not willing to live under the Russian regime immediately started migrating to Kyiv and Lviv. The same happened in Eastern Ukraine. When Russia started the military invasion of Donbas in 2014, many writers and entrepreneurs left their homes for Kyiv, Lviv, and other bigger cities. At that time the country already dealt with almost 1.8 million internally displaced people. In February last year, many “newcomers from 2014” from Crimea and Donbas experienced expulsion from their homes for the second time.

Now Lviv became a real Noah’s ark for hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians, as well as for Belarusian youth who fled repression, and who did not want to leave Ukraine. At first, in March, it was a great exodus. Photos from Lviv railway stations, where thousands of people fled the bombings, went viral around the world.

In order to give them shelter, business centers, sports halls, arenas, kindergartens, and schools (closed for education in situ at that time) were transformed into sleeping places. The infrastructure was provided by Western sponsors, volunteers, as well as Ukrainian businesses, such as that of Yevgen Klopotenko. Yevgen is a Ukrainian chef who opened a restaurant named *Inshi* [Others] in the center of Lviv, and offered 15 new jobs specifically for refugees from Eastern Ukraine. The restaurant also provides social dinners on a daily basis to those who, for one reason or another, are unable to pay for themselves. Every day, the restaurant also delivers warm meals to the modular cities where many refugees still live.

FROM MARCH 2022, more than five million Ukrainians passed through the city, according to the city’s mayor, Andrii Sadovyy. Lviv authorities quote the figure of more than three hundred thousand Ukrainians and representatives of other ethnic groups who were registered as internal refugees and are now staying in Lviv. However, the real numbers are at least twice as high, according to the authorities, because not all newcomers registered and applied for a state allowance. Those who have some savings organize their temporary new life by themselves, waiting eagerly for the time when they can go back home.

Such is the situation for Lina (the name is changed) and her family whom I met by chance on Christmas Day itself. Lina came to Lviv with her family – husband and two children – from Irpin after sitting in a shelter for a few weeks. Both Lina and her husband work in international corporations, and their salaries have not been affected by the war; therefore, they were able to rent an apartment in Lviv. Luckily, their house in Irpin was not destroyed, and they already started arranging some reconstruction to move back in a few months.

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Today, all Lviv schools are equipped with bomb shelters, and teachers combine traditional classes with teaching in shelters when an air raid alarm is heard. Quite a lot of people from modular cities began getting jobs and started renting accommodation themselves. This is typical, especially for teachers and doctors from other regions, who easily find work in Lviv because there was always a shortage of these specialists. However, many of them remain in the modular cities and experience a lack of integration into Lviv social space.

... and homecoming

Approximately 50–100 people come to Lviv every day by evacuation trains, and many of them go on to EU countries directly. However, the main flow of people today is going to Ukraine, and not from.

Why do people return to Ukraine during the ongoing war? I ask Volodymyr Perehinets, my old colleague from the newspaper *Postup*. Today, he works as a Lviv Regional Council adviser. His close friend has just returned from Germany with two children, despite the fact that she had an entire house just for herself, the opportunity to learn the language, and a place in a kindergarten for children. “Because it’s hard for them to be away from home,” Volodymyr tells me. “It is difficult for spouses to be in different countries, to make decisions about children at a distance. It is difficult to just sit there when you have small children and cannot work very much. And it’s generally much easier now in Lviv. Everyone was in shock in the first weeks, but now morale is strong. We defeated them [Russian military], and

they will not pass. Our air defense “has learned” to shoot down everything. (Today, a few months after the interview, Ukrainian military have shot down ballistic missiles too.) For this, we need equipment from the West. People look at Telegram, track where they are flying to, and understand how long it takes to get to the city. And people understand that the probability of getting into an apartment is very low. Many foreigners do not know it, but this is the phenomenon we remember from the Maidan: it is much easier to be inside these events than outside.”

Ukrainian refugees in Sweden, Poland, Italy, Britain, and Germany let me know in my interviews that it works well for them to live in Lviv (or in Ukraine generally). I understand perfectly what they mean. Despite the constant alarms, there have been far fewer bombings in Western Ukraine in recent months. Even if the risk remains, the possibility of living their own life in their own country outweighs the feeling of security. Many of them have a more settled life in Ukraine even during a war than as a refugee in a totally new country.

Svitlana Zhabuyuk, editor-in-chief of internet media *Tvoje misto* [Your city] and mother of three children aged 5, 8, and



Lviv Railway Station, January 2023.

PHOTO: ADRIANA DOVHA

11, recently returned from Germany, where she stayed with the children for several months. She refused to leave Lviv at first, but when the children began to experience health problems due to the stress of constant shelling and alarms, she crossed the border. In Germany, the older children combined two schools – a Ukrainian online school, for which Ukrainian teachers also taught from exile, and a German school in situ. This combination of two schools is almost typical for most Ukrainian families abroad. In July last year, they returned to Ukraine.

“I came back because this is my home: I am a journalist, and it is the worst punishment for a journalist to be outside your country during the war. But also, because, with help from Western countries, we have a better chance of shooting down Russian missiles. This was not the case in March when we left”.

Svitlana believes that we Ukrainians very quickly are adapting to the most difficult scenarios, because we have done our “homework” since 2014.

“Our Maidan of Dignity was our biggest training and preparation for self-organization and how to look for solutions. We learned very quickly to build new options, for example, training in bomb shelters, etc.”

At the moment of our interview, she was preparing to open a new media channel in Kyiv (it opened two months after the interview, in March), and told us about how parent groups in her son’s kindergarten solved the problem with blackouts. “We just

found a generator in Ireland; our German partners paid for it. And then we delivered it across the border in a few days”.

“My biggest fear of this war is that I will have to leave Lviv,” says Adriana Dovha, a photographer and lecturer at Lviv Vocational College of Culture and Arts: “I’m so rooted here, I’m a fourth generation Lviv resident.”

STAYING IN LVIV in the fourth generation, in the territories of “bloodlands”,⁶ is not always about one’s own choice. It’s about a stubborn process of returning home, against all odds. Adriana comes from the family of the famous philologist, ethnographer, and museologist Ilarion Svientsits’kyi, who was deported to Russia in 1915, during the Russian occupation of Lviv, for his active position in preserving Ukrainian museum art. After his return to Ukraine, he fought for the Ukrainian museum heritage until the end of his life. Adriana’s grandfather and grandmother on the maternal side, residents of Lviv, were deported in October 1947 during what is called Operation “West”, when seventy thousand people were violently expelled from their homes in Western Ukraine in one night. Her grandfather died in Siberia, but her grandmother and mother managed to return to Lviv in 1956. “My grandmother came to her yard, where a new Soviet family lived, and was asked by one communist: “Why did you come here? Go back to where you came from”. – “But I came to the place where I came from”, my grandmother answered.



Kiit café, owners Serhiy and Daryna.

PHOTO: SVITLANA ODYNETS



An exhibition of Russian military equipment destroyed by the Armed Forces of Ukraine, 11 August 2022.

PHOTO: SVITLANA ODYNETS

Of course, no one let her into this house. At first, she lived with relatives, and then she got a small one-room apartment for herself.

Stories of deportations are very common in Ukrainian families.

I ask her: What gives you strength in these days? And she answers:

“The opportunity to take pictures of Lviv, especially on a sunny day. I love seeing how light plays with shadows.”

Business against war

Sometimes, talking to people, I caught myself thinking that all these stories of how people are going through the worst surprised even me as a Ukrainian. During my stay in Lviv, I counted up to a dozen new cafés, only opened by newcomers after the full-scale war started. Today, in Lviv, there are coffee shops opened by people from occupied Berdians'k, totally destroyed Mariupol, severely damaged Borodianka and Irpin', and Kharkiv.

The trend of cafés opened by internal refugees began back in 2015, when, for example, a sophisticated project by Crimean Tatars, Bakhchysarai, appeared on one of the oldest streets of Lviv, Drukarska. Or Krymska Perepichka, which initially united other Crimeans, and then became one of the most popular points in the city. Today, Krymska Perepichka donates a significant part of its earnings to support the front. The place was started by Oksana Novikova, who immigrated to Lviv from Simferopol. After the annexation of Crimea, Oksana, not willing to stay under Russian rule, emigrated to Lviv in a matter of days.

“Back in 2014 I already warned everyone that we would have a big war. The longer it took before it started, the scarier it was. I saw them [Russian troops] in Crimea in March 2014, and understood that they will never stop. When they attacked Georgia, in 2008, no one stopped the Russians, and Pandora's box had opened.” Oksana believes that until 2013, the Russians prepared

a “Belarusian scenario” for Ukraine, but the Revolution of Dignity ruined their plans.

Another successful example of the “pies and coffee-to-go” is the already legendary Kiit [Caat] café, which was opened by programmers Serhiy from Irpin, Daryna from Kyiv, and political scientist Ivan from Borodianka. Having escaped from their cities in early spring, they came to Lviv. At first, they volunteered, distributing clothes to people in need. Later they decided to open a café. None of them had any previous experience of this. The place was rented on credit because there was no money for the first month's payment. The owner agreed to lower the price and wait two months for the first payment. The next day, the friends

prepared soup, risotto and baked two different pies in their rented apartment on the outskirts of the city to sell them to people.

“We understood that if everything goes wrong and we do not manage to continue with the project, we will work physically to pay back the loan we took for rent. We are young, healthy, smart, we can do and know a lot,” says Serhiy, one of the project's founders.

Before the war, he programmed and taught mathematics online, and his biggest hobby was his own culinary YouTube-channel *A hungry man*, where

he prepared recipes from Western cuisine, adjusting them to the selection of ingredients one could find in Ukrainian shops.

“I came to Kyiv from the province of Nikopol, where the heaviest shelling is taking place now. I grew up in my mother's kitchen, and after arriving in Kyiv, I quickly became disappointed by the city's restaurants. I started learning to cook myself, and for this, I googled different channels. For example, risotto. Now you won't surprise anyone with this, but that was the first time in my life that I got to hear about this dish.”

When Daryna, Serhiy, and Ivan opened their café, no one paid any attention to them for the first two weeks. People were

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FOTO SVITLANA ODYNETS



Powder Tower in Lviv is a military defense building from the 1550s. It is fortified with sandbags in preparation for a potential Russian attack.

clearly not in the mood for coffee and pies in March 2022. Serhiy, realizing that they would have to close, made a last attempt: He put a sign in the window, where he wrote a text about his “emigration” from the Kyiv region, and about his greatest pain – a cat lost during the evacuation. The next day, a journalist came to them and wrote a short article in the local newspaper. After that, the queue to the café stood in two rows.

TEN MONTHS LATER, they opened a new location in Kyiv. Serhiy, Daryna, and Ivan are now receiving offers to open similar places in other cities, but Serhiy is in no hurry. “I cannot guarantee the quality of the product. For that, I need a very strong team, but real professionals are not so easy to find now.”

Sergey’s team also includes Alina, a writer and professional barista from Berdians’k, which was occupied in the first days of the war. At the time of the war, she was abroad. At first, she stayed in Poland, but in October she returned to Ukraine, to Lviv. “The vibe here is the same as in Berdians’k. I immediately fell in love with this city. But my heart is with Berdians’k. My friends are there, my mother is there under occupation. I talk a lot about the city because many people think that it’s Russian,” she says and gives me a postcard “From Berdians’k with love” featuring the Russian Federation’s burning landing ship Saratov in the port of Berdians’k. “I showed this card to my foreign friends, but few of them understood what the joke was. Well, no matter, the most important thing is that we, in Ukraine, understand it”.

“Berdians’k was occupied by the Russians on the third day of the war, with almost no defense, and to this day no one has answered the question of why the local and central authorities did not organize an appropriate defense. Ksenia Klejnos and Kyrylo Pelivanov, young intellectuals with experience in projects in economics, sociology and urban studies went to a village near Berdians’k on the first day of the war. They believed they would be safe there, although they constantly heard the sounds of air-planes. But in the end, they found themselves almost without communication and the Internet. They considered for a long time how exactly to plan their way out to avoid coming under fire. All the green corridors were then massively shelled by the



A text about fundraising for soldiers in, Saints Peter and Paul Garrison Church.

PHOTO: SVITLANA ODYNETS

Russians, despite all agreements between the Ukrainian and Russian governments. “Luckily, we finally managed to leave in the beginning of April, taking both our mothers, and came immediately to Lviv”, says Ksenia.

Before the war in Berdians’k, they were managers of a social “anti-café”, where various social events were organized. After emigrating to Lviv, they, together with a bigger community of people, organize a social kitchen – an event where both locals and newcomers cook together. The ready-made food they send to the Lviv Vegan Kitchen team, which feed displaced people with vegan food for free six days a week.

“People are happy that they can meet, talk and do something together. It gives energy for the next day,” says Kyrylo.

Belarusians

A part of the social space in Lviv is also created today by members of the Belarusian opposition, who began to actively emigrate to Ukraine after the protests in the summer of 2020, trying to avoid imprisonment and torture. After the start of the war, some of them went to the EU, mostly to Poland, but those who do not want to leave Ukraine remain here.

Alina Rudina, an activist and journalist who remains in Lviv, says that immediately after the protests in the summer of 2020, it became dangerous to spend the night at home, and her friends bought her a ticket to Lviv. She came first to Kyiv, in the end of December 2020, after arrests in Belarus had massively started. Later she moved to Lviv. She left for a few weeks to wait out the potential arrests, but in those two years, she has never returned home to where her parents lived. She is still at a high risk of being arrested. She says that more than a million active Belarusians have left the country today and emigrated to Ukraine, Poland, or other EU countries.

“We should start from what unites us, not what separates us from Ukrainians. And this is language and traditions. I learned Ukrainian carols because for me it’s like therapy”, Alina says.

Together with friends they are preparing exhibitions about Belarusian political prisoners who were arrested in Belarus for their support for Ukraine, and showing them in different Ukrai-



Farewell to the fallen soldiers.

PHOTO: ADRIANA DOVHA

“FROM THE FIRST DAYS OF THE WAR, EVERY DAY, AT 11 O’CLOCK, THE CITY GOES THROUGH THE SAME FAREWELL TO THE FALLEN SOLDIERS.”

nian cities like Lviv, Bucha, and Odesa. “Around 1500 political prisoners who organised protests against Russian invasion in Ukraine, or who had open antiwar position and condemned Russia, received many years of prison for just participating in protests. There were cases when a Belarusian woman was sentenced to 6.5 years in prison for posting an anti-war post. Today we are fighting together with you, Ukrainians”.

Field of Mars

I would be biased if I said that Lviv’s contribution to the ongoing war is only about volunteering and everyday courage. At the core of this struggle, another contribution is being made, less visible for external eyes: Something that transforms the Lviv social space into a communitarian one. This is about mourning, loss, redemption and experiencing grief. From the first days of the war, every day, at 11 o’clock, the city goes through the same farewell to the fallen soldiers. Often there are two or three burials per day, at once.

The city’s farewell ceremony always begins in the same way: at the moment when the soldier’s family and ordinary residents, passers by who often did not have any personal connection with the victim, kneel in front of the coffin, often crying openly, without holding back tears. Then the coffin is brought to the church, where the last service takes place.

After that, the whole procession moves to the old city – Rynok Square, and another minute of silence is held, near the City Council. All its employees stand with their heads bowed, and ordinary residents always stand putting their hands on their hearts.

Next, the procession goes to Lychakivskiy cemetery, to the Field of Mars, not far from our student dormitories, where we walked when we were students. Then it was a green field, although of course we knew that there were old burials there.

The field of Mars was named by the Soviet authorities in honor of Mars, the God of War. After the Soviets destroyed about 4,000 graves in the Austrian military cemetery from the time of

the First World War, they arranged a new cemetery for Soviet soldiers there.

On the edge of the field, another cemetery was destroyed by the Soviets – the graves of the defenders of Lviv, men of the Ukrainian Galician Army from 1918. In the late 1990s, the remains of more than 200 prisoners of the Zamarstiniv prison in Lviv, murdered by the communist regime in 1941, were reburied on the same field.

Two years ago, the Soviet star named “Order of the Great Patriotic War” was taken from the memorial and removed to the “Territory of Terror” museum. On this occasion, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a note of protest to Kyiv, but Lviv poet and public activist Yuriy Ruf achieved the demolition of this star. Now his grave is in the first ranks of fallen defenders of Ukraine.

In April 2022, the first grave from the current new war with Russia appeared here. Week after week, the cemetery grew, and in August I already photographed more than thirty graves. In January, there were several times more.

By now, this new cemetery is a highly intimate place. Men come here with two cigarettes, smoking one, and sticking the other into the grave. Older parents come here every day to read something from their favorite books to their sons. Each grave is framed with private trinkets that were important to that particular soldier. Almost every grave has a flag, blue-yellow or red-black. Children write poems to their dads and leave them under small stones on the grave.

On the opposite side of the Field of Mars is one of the largest maternity hospitals, from where women, holding their newborn babies, watch the burial from the window every day.

Community

How is the Lviv community changing, and those who come to your church these days?, I ask Taras Mykhalchyshyn, the priest of the Saints Peter and Paul Garrison Church.

A family of a defender of Mariupol, who is currently a prisoner of war with the Russians, lives in his house. The defender’s wife gave birth to their first child on the third day after the Russian invasion started. She managed to escape from Mariupol abroad, but returned to Ukraine very quickly, because it was much easier for her to stay in Ukraine when her husband is in captivity. She wanted to baptize the child in the church, and the child’s godfather came directly from the front to Lviv for two days.

“Now we have ten times more weddings than before the war. And we may have a funeral at 11.00, a child baptism two hours later, and then a wedding. Mostly these are people, both men and women, who are fighting at the front, or about to go there”, he explains. And adds: “The most difficult thing is to go through a funeral with children when their father died. It is very difficult to look them in the eyes. We must take responsibility for them, as a whole community, and we are already doing it. And in general, one must remember that when a person returns from the war, he or she should not be asked what was difficult there, one should ask what is difficult for them here, in the peaceful time.”

The priest says that today, two chaplains from the church are at the front. Yesterday the wife of one of the soldiers called and told

them that her husband was having a psychological crisis at the front. “We called our chaplain; he was a hundred kilometers from that place, but he found this soldier, and came to him just to talk.”

What next?

“We are all looking to the future after the war, and we are waiting for it”, says Svitlana Zhabjuk. “All my three children today are members of different school circles where they learn *koliadky*, *shchedrivky* (traditional Christmas songs), or painting Easter eggs which is an old Ukrainian tradition. They have never known so many Ukrainian songs as they do now,” she says. She adds that she observed how many parents massively invest resources in their children’s education, both to involve them in learning Ukrainian culture and foreign languages:

“It seems like if one would draw a picture, it would really be like this: you shoot with one hand and build with the other.”

She also observes that many directors, actors, and poets, both men and women, who seemed incapable of becoming soldiers, went to the front in the first weeks. “They are from different environments, but they complement each other very much. In the same trench, there is someone who has never read books and someone who reads Kant and now they work together. There are also people from business who went to the front. They think differently, and are able to make strategic decisions, for example, where it is optimal to lay trenches, or where to bypass. And this is very valuable for the army. If you can’t win with volumes and numbers, you have to win with your mind.”

Svitlana Zhabjuk is sure that one day we will encounter a new type of leadership built upon the experience of those who could lead such different people in extraordinary situations to victory. ✖

Svitlana Odynets, PhD in Ethnology, Project Researcher at the University of Gothenburg, Journalist and Essayist

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A MEETING POINT FOR OLD AND NEW BERLINERS:

“The need for a welcoming and stable anchor after turbulent times will never change”

by **Annamaria Olsson**

“**R**efugio? Oh, I really liked it there. We’ve gone back several times just to drink coffee and hang out. I met with a lawyer, but I saw there are yoga and music classes also,” Oksana said.

The artsy Ukrainian graphic designer had been in Germany for about six months and she was very clear about what made her appreciate the support she got. “We are refugees, but I don’t feel like one. I sure don’t want to be treated like one.”

Just a stone’s throw away from Hermannplatz, Neukölln’s beating heart and center, lies Refugio, the headquarters of the NGO I founded 10 years ago: An integrated co-housing, project space, and meeting point to break down barriers between old and new Berliners through sharing space, time, skills, and resources. Inclusion as a two-way process on the other side of the spectrum of what I sometimes call “bed and breakfast integration”, managed by bureaucratic institutions. It’s a much slower process that continues way after urgent needs are covered, war fatigue kicked in and the media lost interest in refugees at train stations.

2015, amid the summer of migration, the house was founded by writers Sven and Elke Lager who got access to the building from the City Mission. The wish was to contribute with solutions for the topic on everyone’s lips: refugee integration. By then, Give Something Back To Berlin (GSBTB) had already made us a name in migrant support circles. Since 2013 we had built up a big

grassroots movement of volunteering and skill-sharing all over Berlin. GSBTB was by no means a refugee project, it was a migrant led-community project that simply reacted to the current needs of the city. One of the most pressing was for modern and human-centered activism supporting newcomers.

THE FOUNDERS OF Refugio invited us to build up the house: To bring in life, activities, and the broader community since GSBTB was already working with self-organized refugee groups as well as NGOs all over Berlin. The buildings have six floors, three of which are residential, and house roughly 40 inhabitants of whom half have experienced forced displacement. The rest is project and office spaces, as well as artists and other NGOs. The rooftop has an urban garden and bees and acts as an extended living room for birthdays, BBQs and casual shisha catch ups. Above all, its breathtaking view over the city skyline is a constant reminder that whatever turbulence might be going on, in the outer or inner world, there is always a horizon and the sun will rise also tomorrow.

“One of the strengths of our project is the multi-facilitated provision offered within its frame. We organize up to 20 regular activities per week,” says Mine Nang, GSBTB’s German-Afghan community manager in her office. “Often people might start by joining the language café but end up as participants or vol-



Familiar faces, a hug and a coffee
– Refugio café
is a place for connection.

PHOTO: GSBTB

unteers in our music or cooking project. There people end up practicing what they learned in the language café. Our German one currently has around 100 participants every Tuesday but we also have English, Arabic, and women's only cafés, all community-run. Newcomers also get integration courses from the state but they come with conditions and obligations. It creates a barrier. Of course, you need the language to integrate but the pressure can also become detrimental to learning success. Something that can also feel empowering or at least comforting for the participants with a story of displacement is also that all of our activities are mixed and not only offered to refugees. To see that also more privileged newcomers are struggling in the same way with the language, like it's not only due to my refugee story, it's a human experience of relocating," Mine continues.

"Another big challenge after arriving is getting psycho-social support. Refugees need space to process their experiences but this is not something that is thought about or offered in the very beginning. In some cultures, this type of healing work doesn't have a real space within society. It's not common practice to go

to therapy or self-help groups of different sorts." She saw similar patterns both among the recent Ukrainian new arrivals as well as the Afghan-Iranian community that she knew both through her family history and the activism sphere.

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"Other things simply have priority in the beginning. For themselves and the receiving society. But it's important to not lose sight of the women. A big need is safer spaces specifically for women and children. When the spaces are mixed men tend to dominate or it ends up with a focus on their problems."

A COMMUNITY MEMBER expressed it like this:

"When I was in Syria, I felt like I didn't belong there. It was too strict for me. I thought I would feel at home in Europe. I didn't. There was this huge gap and I felt very lost after arriving as a 16-year-

old. I was super worried about how I would be able to continue studying. How did the system even work? I also felt fed up with learning new languages and refused to learn German at the beginning since I first needed to go to Turkey, learn the language, then Sweden, same procedure, to then arrive in Germany. I was



Award-winning activist Fatuma Musa Afrah.

PHOTO: GSBTB



GSBTB's Open Arts Space in action.

PHOTO: GSBTB

exhausted. Meanwhile, the support given often came with a feeling that you were supposed to change your beliefs, or people showed pity for your situation. Therefore it felt important to find a place where I felt accepted for who I am.”

Downstairs the café is buzzing with activities. In the big meeting hall, once a church room, the house's Iranian handyman, Habib, chef, and always a friendly face, is setting up the room for a conference. All NGOs in the house are partly run as social businesses hosting external bookings from ministries, companies, civic initiatives, and political actors. In the café, the Syrian barista is teaching a volunteer how to make coffee on the fancy Italian machine. Customers of different nationalities and backgrounds are having zoom-calls, chatting over cake, or informing themselves about the weekly schedule. In the afternoon, a GSBTB project focusing on trauma healing for women and children is having its Open Arts Space. Soon the backyard will be full of paint and canvases, paper, crayons, glitter, and glass materials.

Sometimes kids join in but for many activities, childcare is offered so the women can have some space for themselves. The healing work often takes place through art or music or simply being together. Art and culture works as a common language where a shared language or even the right words for oneself don't yet exist. Important (verbal) conversations come with time and trust. Both in internal surveys and in the academic field, studies using GSBTB as an example found that “finding friends” and “the sense of a community” were among the main motivations to join the activities.

A COMMUNITY MEMBER expresses it this way:

“After my partner's sudden and painfully tragic death, needing to attend the bass class was the one certain thing that helped me reconnect with other people and reconnect with myself. So as of now, community for me is a place that helps me heal, while at the same time allowing me to impact others in whatever way I can while being able to do something I love.”

Another community member says:

“WIDENING AND BROADENING NEW ARRIVALS' NETWORKS IS NOT ONLY SUPPORTING HUMAN PSYCHO-SOCIAL NEEDS; IT IS ALSO MAKING THE OPPORTUNITY GAP SMALLER.”

“The Open Kitchen project anchored me to Berlin and served as a place that I can go, that I feel a part of since my arrival to the city. I feel like people were made to live in a community. I think one of the reasons that COVID was so hard for people is that we weren't made to live in isolation.”

Many newcomers participating in GSBTB's programs come from societies that traditionally have very strong extended family and community networks. Losing these bonds due to displacement instantly feels like a loss of stability. Re-creating similar social fibers is one of the most important steps in making the new place a home. But it's not easy. What the Covid pandemic clearly showed us, though, is that being cut off from one's community is somewhere on the scale between distressing and traumatic

for the majority of people. “I prefer a cold bed in a hot city, because paradise without friends is hell”, as the Syrian Palestinian poet Ghayath Almadhoun wrote in one of his poems. Having a network is also something that is often taken for granted by people without migration or refugee experience.

In our interconnected society, this is how jobs, opportunities, flats, and information, also in terms of values and cultural capital, are shared and distributed. Widening and broadening new arrivals' networks is not only supporting human psycho-social needs; it is also making the opportunity gap smaller.

GSBTB and Refugio being based in Neukölln are proof of that. The neighborhood has for decades had a reputation in the whole of Germany of being a so-called *Brennpunktkiez*, a social flash-point, with a migrant-dense population, high levels of poverty, and people living on social benefits as a consequence of segregation, inequality and a stratified educational system.

THE OTHER STORY – it's an area buzzing with life and activity, and in the last ten years became popular with artists and creatives, making it one of the most hip areas in Berlin with rapid gentrification and rising rents. Several generations of migrants and refugees and the so-called ‘guest workers’ dominate businesses



Language learning in big and small groups.

PHOTO: GSBTB



Afghan, Kurdish and Persian Newroz celebration.

PHOTO: GSBTB

in the area: Turkish, Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians. One street down from Refugio lies Sonnenallee with nicknames such as Little Beirut and Arab Street, and with Ramadan evenings and Eid Al Fitr it has more in common with Amman or Ramallah than more well-off areas in the city.

After the Second World War, the devastated German post-war economy began to flourish in the “German economic miracle”. The country was in desperate need of labor and ‘guest workers’ were brought in to work in West German factories. Over fourteen million migrant workers came and worked in Germany between 1955 and 1973. Work visas were issued for a few years, and the whole idea was that they would then return. Few efforts were made to encourage the migrants to feel at home, learn the language, or become a part of the local society. Today, the second and third-generation family members of the three million guest workers who remained still pay the price to this day. It is a story that is shared with many refugees after them and it was not until the year 2000 that Germany officially acknowledged being an *Einwanderungsland*, a country of immigration.

Fatuma Musa Afrah still thinks the country has a long way to go. The Somali activist and speaker used to live in Refugio when she arrived in Germany after spending her childhood as a refugee in Kenya. The outspoken powerhouse constantly needs to interrupt our conversation to say hi to some friend or acquaintance during our talk. For many years she has organized projects supporting isolated communities in Brandenburg, a rural, former East German Bundesland outside Berlin.

“The lack of participation from the locals, especially in the countryside, is a huge problem. We had projects that have been running for eight years and only two Germans attended. The newcomers are super isolated. Some have never met a German person apart from during interactions with the authorities or in supermarkets, even if they have been in the country for ten years. Sending refugees to already socially weak areas with high unemployment and social issues is bad for everyone. By the way, I hate the word integration! Like, only the migrants should mold themselves to the new society, and not the locals open up to them too. It’s a dream of diversity where the newcomers are supposed to add extra spice. For us on the other side, it’s about survival. We need to come into everyday contact with Germans in the same way as we need to drink and eat,” she said while cheek-

kissing a Somali resident of the house and the children that she fought for years to be reunited with after being separated.

“Racism is everywhere but in the countryside, it’s really bad. What do you do when a neighbor throws an egg at you because you look different or wear a headscarf? Some people can identify those who spat in their faces but don’t dare to go to the police because they know nothing will happen.”

THE OFFICIAL DATA speaks for itself. In 2022 there were over 121 assaults, attacks, and damage to property directed toward refugees and migrants. That’s an increase of 73% from the previous year. The number of unreported cases is likely to be much higher and people talk about a situation similar to the beginning of the 1990s when the country was plagued by violent xenophobic attacks.

Lulëzim Ukaj came as a refugee from Kosovo as a child and was a volunteer at the weekly *Sprechstunde* (drop-in consultation) taking place within the frame of the Ukraine-café. He sees both similarities and differences to the 1990s.

“A positive change is that it feels like the state has finally understood that refugee reception can only work if the government supports civic initiatives to do part of the job,” he said over an Italian-Syrian cappuccino.

“One thing that definitely hasn’t changed is the unfriendliness of the authorities that many people experience.”

“The people coming to the *Sprechstunde* often felt overwhelmed, needed a lot of orientation, and were afraid of doing something wrong: Which they also often did and all of a sudden their social benefits were cut. Not even ethnic Germans understand this bureaucratic lingo – how should the new arrivals cope? From the Berlin authorities’ side I think it was a combination of being chronically understaffed, badly organized and a lack of translators. Of course, there were cases of xenophobia but if you compare with other refugees from Muslim countries the Ukrainian were treated rather well,” he said.

“A very big topic was how to find a flat. Many people were soon to be kicked out of their initial emergency housing or reception centers. It was very obvious that a lot of people were taking advantage of the crisis and offered dubious places for astronomic sums just because they knew that the authorities would be willing to pay.”

In comparison with just a couple of years ago and the 2015

refugee generation, Berlin has an exploding housing crisis with a lack of apartments and rent increases. Even non-immigrants have a problem finding apartments. A foreign name makes it much harder. Where the Ukrainian refugees got fast-tracked due to the European temporary protection directive, meaning they were spared the asylum-seeking process, they instead arrived in a very tense housing market in the capital and many places in Germany.

“Another part of our support was keeping people up to date with juridical changes. The laws changed several times which meant new waves of people and questions. The ‘third country citizens’ were in particularly challenging situations as they ended up in a bureaucratic gray zone.”

Students from different African countries became regulars at the Ukraine café while waiting for answers on whether they were allowed to stay and receive the same rights as the Ukrainian citizens. The implementation of the temporary protection directive was a direct consequence of the wars in former Yugoslavia but was used for the first time in European history after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. That being the case was a source of both a certain irritation, anger, and sadness among many people who had arrived in 2015. “How many obstacles could we have been spared?” was the general feeling.

A COUPLE OF DAYS later I meet Hakan Demir, a social-democratic member of the parliament directly elected representing Neukölln. We chat over a Turkish tea close to the city hall, where he knows the café owner by name and several people that walk by will stay for a chat. Despite being involved in high level European conversations about the topic he also starts with the everyday basics.

“We don’t have enough preschool places; even people like you have a problem finding one! Imagine arriving in the country not knowing the language in a small village of 2000 people. You need school, preschool, and social benefits but even if you have the right to them, it’s simply not fixed in two weeks. Last year one million refugees arrived from Ukraine plus 200 000 from other countries. That’s a huge challenge for the local municipalities. Among these around 30 percent will have no right to asylum since they come from countries like Georgia and Moldova. Since there are no real ways for them to relocate for economic reasons they end up in the same system as the refugees. Seeking asylum is the one way they can try to make it here. This adds extra pressure on the asylum system,” he says, sipping his tea.

“Don’t get me wrong here, I’m all for people having an opportunity to seek a better life! These people should have the possibility to come, but our current legal system doesn’t have a framework for that. This needs to change! Last year Germany deported 1000 people from Georgia; meanwhile the country needed at least 400 000 people in the workforce. It’s obvious

that we need to make bilateral agreements with these types of countries. We already did it with the West Balkan countries like Bosnia and Serbia for people to be able to establish themselves in our labor market. As a country we are not “at our limits” but I have the feeling this group of 60 000–80 000 people in the gray zone makes some people think we are.”

HE MOVES ON TO the bigger European picture.

“Our main challenge now is the overall political landscape. We have a post-fascist government in Italy, French right-wing

policies and a country like Sweden which used to be a humanitarian superpower is now gone with the Sweden Democrats and the right-wing government. This is very problematic. Accepting refugees is an act of solidarity but the problem now is that this responsibility is not shared even between different European countries. Today Germany takes by far the most. Refugees choose to a lesser extent to go to France, Austria, or Sweden. Germany is also alone, together with Luxembourg, in pushing for safer migration routes to the European Union.”

He takes a break.

“Currently Germany is the only country in Europe that gives state support to civic sea rescue on the Mediterranean; meanwhile other countries accuse us of contributing with a pull factor. In an ideal world people would of course be able to seek asylum without the dangerous journeys over the sea but the question is who is supposed to take care of these years-long and complicated processes? Frontex? The states on Europe’s borders like Libya and Tunisia?”

WE SAY GOODBYE and I think about how everything and nothing has changed in the last ten years since Give Something Back To Berlin’s founding. I think that regardless of which direction fortress Europe may take and whatever journey people have behind them when they arrive, the need for a welcoming and stable anchor after turbulent times will never change. As a community member described it:

“The organization still keeps going and still makes the space available for people to turn up. My point is just the importance of consistency and availability, no matter what. I think that that is amazing, and it’s something that’s really valuable.” ✖

Annamaria Olsson is Founder of Give Something Back to Berlin, GSBTB, and an Swedish author and essayist.

The quotations from community members are to be found in a recent report about the center. See Christopher Taylor, *Community organization, music and human rights: Community participation as a human right and how music can play a role in the feeling of ‘connectedness’* (The Alice Salomon Hochschule: University of Applied Sciences, May 2022).

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**BÄRBEL HEINRICH,
REFUGEE HELPER:**

She was imprisoned for helping people escape the GDR



PHOTO: PRIVATE/AUTHOR

by **Annamaria Olsson**

Berlin Hohenschönhausen

“I did time in Hohenschönhausen, if that means anything to you. I helped people escape the GDR. We got caught. You and me should talk sometime.”

I had just finished a presentation about my NGO's refugee engagement when a striking lady with strawberry-blonde curls and neat, Marlene Dietrich eyebrows, who had moved restlessly around the room until my right side was clear of small-talkers, put a hand on my arm.

A couple of weeks later Bärbel and Wolfgang Heinrich, both in their 70s and convicted refugee helpers, met up with me at the S-Bahn station Hohenschönhausen in the former East Berlin. Wolfgang came across as warm if slightly introverted, yet comfortable in the role of a loyal ally striding at his wife's side, while Bärbel, the extrovert, chattered away and held forth about this and that.

It was the first of many meetings, forming a relationship that continued over the years. The timing couldn't have been more symbolic as the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall was approaching, and the media was buzzing with accounts of those earth-shattering days in 1989.

The November wind was biting as we approached the notorious Stasi prison Hohenschönhausen where both of them had been detained while awaiting trial. The charges involved of-

fenses against Section 105, subversive human trafficking. Their motives for getting involved lay on different pinpoints of the spectrum between private and political. On 13 June 1961, when news of the Berlin Wall's construction was broadcast, the then fourteen-year-old Bärbel was with her foster family in Sweden together with her sister. Her mother was in a residential health facility in West Germany and her brother was in the East, while her father was at home in West Berlin. The family reassembled at home in West Berlin in the end, but all their other relatives ended up in the GDR. It would be ten years before they saw each other again when they got permission to go to a wedding in Dresden in 1973.

“I'd seen a bit of the East before, when I'd taken the train to Sweden through the transit section,” said Bärbel. “Dresden was something else. Unimaginably depressing and grey. It was called *Tal der Ahnungslosen*, valley of the clueless, as they couldn't get Western TV channels there. My relatives used to come on holiday to East Berlin just to watch TV. They couldn't tear themselves away!”

At the wedding, she got into conversation with a cousin who said she wanted to escape. There was also a man there who discreetly enquired whether Bärbel would consider helping people get out. “I said yes without batting an eyelid or thinking of the potential consequences.”



Bärbel and Wolfgang Heinrich, Christa and Peter Gross Wolf-Feurich at the Fall of the Berlin wall celebration

PHOTO: PRIVATE/AUTHOR

IN THE END it wasn't relatives but complete strangers Bärbel was going to help flee. The same was true of Wolfgang, although his motives were different.

"I was 25 when I was caught, and I'd recently finished military service. The whole logic of the army is based on the idea of an enemy. Which meant Russians and the East. There was ideological brainwashing about everything to do with communism. While I was in the army I got involved in a group that carried out special missions."

"So it was a kind of state-organized operation?" I asked.

"I didn't realize until later what kind of enormous machinery there must have been behind it all. We smuggled out academics, a well-known physicist, for example. I think there must have been agreements. Otherwise some of our actions would have been impossible to carry out."

Bärbel, meanwhile, had met a group of students organized into more grassroots-level assistance shortly after the wedding.

The set-up was always the same. West Berliners with entry permits to the East were given the addresses of GDR citizens who wanted to leave – individuals to whom they either passed on the time and place for transit, or drove out to the transit sections themselves. The transit sections were the corridors of regulated mobility for goods and people to move in and out between East Germany, its neighbors and West Berlin. Foreign and Western vehicles had to pay road tolls, under strict instructions to cross the section more or less in one go, unless they had an urgent need to answer the call of nature, get a snack or petrol. Brief stops during which GDR citizens could, with careful planning, hop into a car boot or hide between goods and packages. Unlike traffic between the border crossings in Berlin, lorries in the transit sections were only sporadically stopped.

"I managed to get ten people out. We failed with the last two, and they ended up in prison like us," Bärbel said.

In 1975, aged 28, she was taken to Hohenschönhausen, little suspecting that she was about to spend the following 28 months



At the meet up in former prison Bautzen.

PHOTO: PRIVATE/AUTHOR

in prison. Wolfgang, then 25 years old, still a stranger to her, had already served some of his 33 months.

"You know, in those days the prison wasn't marked on the map, because officially it didn't exist and only the most loyal Stasi and party people lived in the area."

Hohenschönhausen was a well-kept secret and during its lifetime over 11,000 people who in different ways were considered a threat to the foundations, order and existence of the GDR were imprisoned here. Even though the GDR's constitution of 7 October 1949 stated that every citizen had the right to emigrate, the new state was quick to start persecuting people intending to find a new life or future other than the one offered by the 'workers' and farmers' state'. Before the Berlin Wall was built to stop the 'flight from the Republic' – *Republikflucht* – 2.5 million Germans had managed to escape to the West. In 1979, attempted escape could mean up to two years in prison, and in "serious cases" up to eight. 9,196 people were charged with the offense of flight from the Republic in 1988.

FLOODLIGHT CAST A COLD white light over the yard when we arrived at the metal gate of the prison. Like many other GDR memorial sites, the prison had been allowed to stand more or less untouched once it ceased to be used. A door opened and we found ourselves standing in a room with something that looked like a combination of a windowless lorry and an ambulance.

"The prisoner van. That was what all of us were taken here in. With no windows, so we wouldn't have any idea where we were and people wouldn't see us being taken away. I just vanished off the face of the earth! No one knew where I'd gone, as I hadn't told anyone what I was up to. A well-known rock band was detained at the same time as I was, but as prisoners were brought in and out so discreetly we never saw each other. Total isolation was one of their many torture methods. Often you only met your interrogators. It was like being the only person left alive on earth," she said as we continued through the prison.

Four hundred interrogators, trained in psychology, were tasked with breaking down political prisoners through constant interrogations that sometimes went on for years. From its foundation, the GDR prison system was a brutal one and physical abuse was extremely common. From 1976 onwards there was a gradual move towards what was called ‘operative psychology’. This wasn’t just down to the international criticism of how prisoners were treated, but also because of the discovery that mental abuse was at least as effective as physical abuse without leaving visible, more provable traces. Mental abuse was as comprehensive as it was crushing, involving different types of isolation cells, blackmail and threats, disinformation and prohibitions. Even in the 1980s, when many sentences were relatively short in comparison with the previous decades, over 69 percent of prisoners reported post-traumatic disorders after release – 44 percent of which were long-term. The food – low in nutrients and almost entirely lacking fruit and vegetables – often led to malnutrition and other serious illnesses, as did the lack of sunlight.

“It was all terrible, but in a way it was a good thing that I was a bit older when I ended up here. The younger ones were easier to break down. I knew who I was and my value as a human being. When I was locked up in Bautzen I was put in the same working team as a female murderer. *Bärbel, you’re worse than her. You’ve done worse things than her*, the guards said. I’d helped people find a new life, while she’d taken people’s lives. There’s no point in discussion with anyone who even compares the two.”

WE WENT DOWN STEPS leading to underground corridors of cells. I sat down on the bed while Bärbel, as she did in every other room, stood as if to attention, as if perpetually ready to flee. Wolfgang chimed in, whispering as if to not wake up ghosts.

“One punishment was to sit bolt upright at a table without moving your hands. For hours, for days on end. Nothing to read, nothing to do. Nothing to look at but the walls. It was psychological terror. People went crazy in the cells. You could hear them screaming from the corridors. Some of them hanged themselves. You couldn’t go outside for more than one hour a day, usually just twenty minutes, half an hour. There was a guard with an AK47 watching you all the time.

After ten months in detention, the time came for Bärbel’s trial.

“They offered me a lawyer from the East with no interest in defending my interests. It was a show trial. I got five years for offenses against Section 15, *staatsfeindliche Menschenhandel*, subversive human trafficking. I spent about a year in Hohenschönhausen, one year and six months in Bautzen and then in Lindenstrasse in Potsdam. When I got out I weighed forty-five kilos and had to slowly eat my way back to a normal weight.

In 1977 she and Wolfgang were bought back by the West German government. Price: 95,000 Deutschmarks per person, around 140,000 Euros today, to be released. Taking political

prisoners wasn’t something the GDR did just to punish and make people submit to its system. It was also business.

“The politicians in the East claimed that West German smuggling organizations were conducting human trafficking when they helped people escape, whereas it was actually the GDR carrying out human trafficking.”

BY THE TIME THE WALL came down, the cynical trade in prisoners, the financial game that the Heinrichs would become part of, had brought in more than 3.4 billion Deutschmarks for 33,755 prisoners. That is around 5 billion Euros at today’s value. The poorer the GDR became, the higher the price. Between 1964 and 1970, the average price was 48,000 Deutschmarks, but between 1977 and 1989, the typical price had increased to 95,842 Deutschmarks.

“They kept people they needed. A senior doctor at the Charité hospital: no, he’s staying. A builder: no, you can have him! 30,000? No, let’s say 35,000 and he can go! It was harder to get

out if you had an academic education. It was a kind of reverse class privilege. And a game. If the West was interested in buying you, the GDR could practically delete you from the list just for the sake of it.”

The increasingly hard-up state even had a department called ‘Koko’, *Kommerzielle Koordinierung*. The task of its 3,000 employees was to bring valuable Western currency into the GDR by almost any means, by trading via two hundred and twenty mailbox firms and

thousands of bank accounts around the world. This included trade with toxic waste from the West; it was not unusual for this to be dumped without adequate safeguards, contributing to massive environmental damage in the GDR. Other sources of income included illegal trading in art, where private collectors in the East often had their collections confiscated and then sold to the West. Although the state claimed to be pacifist, it secretly traded in weapons, and during the Iran-Iraq war it sold weapons to both sides.

I asked what the first thing they had done was when they were released.

“We went to Schlachtensee Lake,” she said, putting her hand affectionately on Wolfgang’s.

“We? The two of you?”

“Yes. We met at the lawyer’s office when we were awaiting release. We were freed on the same day. July the thirteenth, 1977. Our double anniversary. We got together at the lawyer’s and spent the following three days and nights just walking around in the surroundings of the lake.”

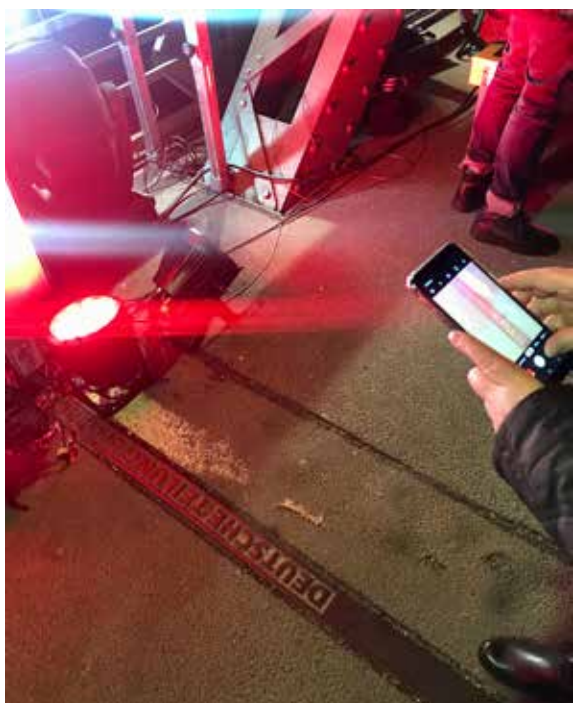
It took almost twenty years before they could bring themselves to visit Bautzen prison again, but since their first visit with a kind of self-help group for former political prisoners they’d returned regularly. But even within that group there were different opinions and experiences and sometimes they ended up at loggerheads.

“TAKING POLITICAL PRISONERS WASN’T SOMETHING THE GDR DID JUST TO PUNISH AND MAKE PEOPLE SUBMIT TO ITS SYSTEM. IT WAS ALSO BUSINESS.”



Freigang in Bautzen prison.

PHOTO: PRIVATE/AUTHOR



A bordercrossing in Potsdam.

PHOTO: PRIVATE/AUTHOR

“People were treated in different ways in prison. Us ‘Wessies’ were often treated better than the ‘Ossies’ but that doesn’t make our experiences less important or traumatic. And then you mustn’t forget that they actually grew up in a police state where people denounced one another. Those behaviors can stick with some people, even if they hated the state and were crushed by it. It’s complicated. Others are frustrated because they never caught up economically after the Wall fell and now they take it out on any ‘Wessie’ they can, even though we were all in the same boat in prison.”

Bautzen prison

It could have been a school reunion when the group of former prisoners stood arranged for the yearly official photo in the Bautzen courtyard, a pensioners’ outing to the Bayreuth Festival or a leaving do for the year’s trade union representatives, with their files tucked ready under their arms. Eight of the thirty-two people in the official photograph were women, and Bärbel soon vanished with three of them into an office, where they exchanged experiences specifically as female prisoners. Meanwhile I talked with Wolfgang, who showed me around the workrooms and cells.

“Eight hours a day, six days a week. All prisoners, working in teams of twenty. We made current switches for vessels and lifts. The least signs of rebellious inclinations were punished harshly. When I was released, I started my own business, selling cleaning products, cosmetics and jewelry at different markets. I don’t think I could have had a normal job after prison. Someone else decided what I was going to do, when, where, and how.”

He pointed at the toilet, shared with his cellmate with no privacy. The cupboard for the few personal belongings.

“We got two books to read a week. You could only hope you got the thickest book possible, so you could drag it out. Often it was wretched propaganda books. Bärbel was always raving about some book about Vladivostok she’d got that made her really want to go there after reading it. Apart from that there was nothing to do.”

He tapped his head with his finger.

“All your time was spent in here.”

AFTER A POTATO-HEAVY LUNCH, we met up with the group Bärbel had been talking with in the women’s block. They looked like the political rehabilitation version of a retired Spice Girls: each with her own unique personality, aura and style, enchanting in her own unassailable vitality.

Sigrid, a little over 80, had a blonde Prince Valiant-bob and near-translucent blue eyes. On release she’d weighed 31 kilos and she didn’t appear to have gained all that many more since, and she spoke with an intensity worthy of a small wind power station. Brigitte’s hair was cut short. Anja laughed easily, and it sounded like Alpine bells ringing as she guided us to the isolation cell that her rebellious youthfulness had led to her spending quite some time in.

“Yeah, you didn’t want to go in there,” chuckled Bärbel.

“Thank goodness I never had to either.”

“Well, I was only nineteen when I was arrested,” said Anja. “For refugee help?”

“Yes. It’s hard to put a nineteen-year-old down.”

Just as ‘Ossies’ and ‘Wessies’ were put in different prisons, women and men were in different buildings. They could see each other from the cell windows though, and an alphabet of taps was developed to communicate and socialize.

“It was strictly forbidden. But also an incredibly fiddly way to communicate. Twenty-six letters, each with a unique combination. It took ages to send a message – but then again, there wasn’t much else to do,” Anja said.

NEARLY ALL OF Anja’s periods in the isolation cell were for tapping messages.

“The longest I got was fifteen days in a row. A girl from a cell nearby threw a packet of cigarettes in front of the little vent, so I could smoke, thank goodness.”

She didn’t stop knocking, despite constantly ending up in isolation.

“With Ove, I agreed that if I was released before him, I’d go and call on his aunt so that we wouldn’t lose touch. Two years later my doorbell rang and it was him. He’d been released and now we’re married.”

“You’re joking!” I said.

“No” she replied, with a laugh and a little toss of the head.

“You know, one time when I was inside I got a visit from my then-boyfriend,” Bärbel said. “We smeared shoe polish onto our eyelashes to look nice but good lord it stung. We curled our hair with toilet paper rolls. One of the two Iranians always had immaculately pressed trousers. He always placed them under the mattress before he went to bed and always woke up to a perfect crease. All to create some kind of normality.”

While the two Western birds’ laughter chirped across the room, Brigitte told her story rather more quietly. Unlike the other three, she’d grown up in the East.

“I’d submitted several applications for a travel permit to be reunited with my relatives in Hamburg,” she said, her hands clasped together on her knee.

“Time after time they were turned down, and in the end I began to believe I’d never get out. So one winter, our family went on a skiing trip to Czechoslovakia. The country was open to tourists from the GDR and in Prague I met an Austrian man at a restaurant. Come and visit me in Vienna, he said. I laughed and said it was impossible. Why? he asked, not understanding. Because we aren’t allowed to travel anywhere. He had no idea! We can get married so you can get out, he suggested. He was a widower and must have thought he’d never find anyone else again.”

“But were you romantically involved?”

“God no. He just wanted to help. Marrying a foreigner was one of the few ways you could leave. A lot of people entered into fake marriages like that. We didn’t have any other options. We got

married but had to wait two years for it to be approved. I mean, I’d asked for an exit permit a few times already, so they must have suspected something was up. On the way to Dresden for the ceremony they chucked him off the train and sent him back over the border. Finally we managed it though, and I left for Austria. When I got to his flat in Vienna, I saw all the liquor bottles. He was an alcoholic. I stuck it out for a year and then asked for a divorce. I lost my Austrian passport when we divorced, but I was allowed to stay in West Germany. There I soon got involved in one of all the networks helping people escape. I began working as a courier; I wanted to help people the same way I’d been helped.”

“How many people did you help leave?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I was just a courier but I was sentenced to nine years in prison. I was bought out after two and a half years. But when I heard nine years – I simply wanted to die. Just think, some people were inside for fifteen! You can’t believe it, right?”

“Yes, unfortunately,” I said and told her about my Syrian colleague Sara Mardini, currently awaiting her trial in which she and several activists risked twenty-five years in prison for having helped recently arrived refugees on the beaches of Lesbos. Sara’s case was one of the most publicized, but many like her sat awaiting similar trials on the periphery of Europe.

Border crossing at Bornholmer Straße

On the 30-year anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall I met with Bärbel and Wolfgang at Platz des Neunten November, at the border crossing of Bornholmerstrasse. The place didn’t look like much today: just a metal bridge over a busy S-Bahn station and a piece of graffiti-tied wall. In another life, it was a border crossing between the district of Wedding in the West and Pankow in the East. One of many despised places now compressed into a mundanity that made it virtually invisible unless you took the trouble to look more closely or were a visiting tourist, or it was an anniversary day like today.

Bärbel and Wolfgang led the way through the buzzing crowd. In one of the countless texts she’d sent me in recent

days, she told me about her friends Peter and Christa Gross Wolf-Feurich who I absolutely had to meet. The couple were well-known ‘fall of the Wall’ personalities – in 1985 a film had been made about their fate.

In spite of his slightly unruly hair in a white side parting, Peter had a youthful look and an energetic voice with a Swiss accent. Christa had a soft face and friendly blue eyes, and was wearing a red quilted coat. “Officially and unofficially she is judged to be a very intelligent, mentally alert, sharp-witted, coldly calculating and refined personality” said Christa’s Stasi file, while Peter’s file depicted him as “an adventurous man whose interests were travel, photography, sailing and women.”

BÄRBEL AND WOLFGANG had met the couple through the Bautzen prisoners’ association, and their story had both similarities and

“WE GOT TWO BOOKS TO READ A WEEK. YOU COULD ONLY HOPE YOU GOT THE THICKEST BOOK POSSIBLE, SO YOU COULD DRAG IT OUT.”

dissimilarities. Peter grew up in Switzerland, where information about life behind the Iron Curtain seemed almost non-existent. In 1968, hearing of the revolt in Prague and curious, he booked a multi-stop train ticket through the East.

On a train between Prague and East Berlin he met a woman who after just a couple of minutes of conversation asked if he could find a fake passport or get in touch with some refugee helpers. Peter, equally politically naïve as he was stubborn, said he'd see what he could do. After corresponding for a few months, contact ceased abruptly, until a postcard came nearly two years later telling Peter he could never travel to the GDR again as he risked being arrested by the police. She had been arrested by the Stasi because of their letter and phone contact but been released in an amnesty and got an exit permit to the West. During the two years in which there'd been no contact, however, Peter had visited East Germany several times without anything happening, so he came to the conclusion that he was safe. In 1973 he began work as the private chef of the Swiss Embassy in the GDR. As a local hire, he didn't have full diplomatic immunity, but his car could move freely between the strictly regulated border crossings.

GENUINELY INTERESTED in life in the GDR, he travelled around a lot, but also indulged his rebellious streak by revving up his Mini Cooper in the petrol-stinking queues of Trabant and Ladas on the Autobahn. He also regularly frequented bars and clubs, wearing Western clothes and an air of freedom. With an exchange rate of 5 Deutschmarks to 20 Ostmarks he was always the king of the bar. At the dancefloor of Tanz Bar Café Nord he met Christa who worked as a pharmaceutical engineer at a blood donation center in a hospital. She couldn't understand for the life of her how someone could come to the GDR voluntarily. They exchanged numbers and a few days later Christa rang him from work, as she didn't have a phone at home. Their feelings for each other grew and soon Peter visited Christa at home. Seeing her flat for the first time came as a shock: a run-down hovel with no bath and a toilet one floor down, a kitchen in a small pantry with a bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling.

"Conditions not even the poorest guest worker in Switzerland would live in," he said.

Peter's contract at the embassy was coming to an end, which threatened their relationship, as Christa couldn't follow him back to Switzerland. They began to toy with the idea of escaping, and took an ambitious decision to visit the glitzy Western shopping street Ku'damm for a day, to see how it felt. Leaving their whole lives and families behind them without knowing if they would ever see them again wasn't a decision to be made in a hurry.

They would manage a second visit, but there was no third time. Someone from the West like Peter was of great interest to

the Stasi and his movements did not go unobserved and unmonitored. The East German state had over 89,000 official employees and between 110,000 and 189,000 unofficial informers within a highly developed system of denunciation. Like many others, Christa and Peter would later discover from their Stasi files that people they had thought were friends worked for the Stasi and had been informing on them for a long time.

"The man who opened the wall was the same one who sent Christa and Peter to Bautzen," Bärbel said, cheeks flushed

slightly with mulled wine. They were arrested at this border crossing.

Harald Jäger, the same Lieutenant-Colonel and responsible Stasi commander at Bornholmerstrasse, who on this date in 1989 had opened the first border crossing that marked the end of the Cold War, was the same person who gave the order to examine Peter's Mini Cooper when information arrived that a woman was highly likely to be hiding in the boot. An order resulting in three years in Bautzen. As if that wasn't already ironic enough, Jäger himself was born in the town of Bautzen. A man who had voluntarily signed up to

the GDR's border police in 1961 and started working for the Stasi in 1964 had gone down in the history books as 'The Man who Opened the Berlin Wall'.

"Jäger's no hero to me," Bärbel snorted. "Just a few years before that, you can 100% guarantee he would have fired into the crowd with heavy ammunition. If it had just been a few hundred people at the border, he might have fired, but then it was more than ten thousand. It just wasn't feasible; he had no choice."

BOTH COUPLES sipped on their mulled wine in front of the hated wall. I took a picture. Dressed up warm in front of the border that had brought them together, kept them apart, reunited them and created a shared experience that had forged their strong marital bonds, this glimpse of a moment gave me the feeling that love always won in the end. ❌

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Translation from Swedish: Darcy Hurford

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"THE EAST GERMAN STATE HAD OVER 89,000 OFFICIAL EMPLOYEES AND BETWEEN 110,000 AND 189,000 UNOFFICIAL INFORMERS WITHIN A HIGHLY DEVELOPED SYSTEM OF DENUNCIATION."

MEMORY WARS IN BELARUS 1937–2020

by **Olga Bubich**

In a place that had never allowed you to write your own history, even remembrance can be a radical act.

from *The Impossible City*
by Hong Kong writer
Karen Cheung

Common memory awakening is the only real way to acquire a common language

writer, translator
Nikolai Eppler

One out of four, and 1941 are two numbers everyone who went through the Soviet and post-Soviet schools in Belarus is familiar with. The former stands for the statistics of the Belarusians who died in the Great Patriotic War, the latter marks the year this war began. However, when I first came to Europe as a teenager, I was amazed to discover that no one actually knew either of my people's heroism or our great victory. The war, as I found out then, did not even start in 1941 – nor was it defined as “patriotic”. Rather it was everyone's – “world war” – with patriotism not attributed to nationalities.

As historian Galina Ivanova, whose quote Nikolai Eppler cites in his book *Inconvenient Past*, states, the war in the USSR had actually begun long before WWII. Moreover, the point is not even

about crossing other independent states' borders:

In fact, a protracted, undeclared war of the party and state against its own civilian population became a civil one,” she writes, noting that this artificially imposed battle was based on the search for external and internal enemies. Criminals were perceived as allies with the Soviet government, actually “legitimizing persecution for dissent.”

NOW, DECADES LATER, one comes to realize that in the first half of the 20th century, Belarusians were often murdered not by terrible Germans as depicted in propaganda posters, but by their own fellow citizens – on the denunciations of neighbors and in the name of the liquidation plan received from above. If every fourth person died

**“IF EVERY FOURTH
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IN THE 1930S?”**

defending the USSR, then how many disappeared on a seemingly peaceful night in the 1930s? And was it necessary to be a Belarusian to have your death counted in this terrible formula?

One of the victims of the Great Terror was my great-grandfather Ivan Frantsevich, thrown into a *Cherny voronok* [Black Raven: meaning police car]² by plain-clothes police in 1937 – until recently, the fact of his sudden disappearance had been the only thing my family knew about his fate. While studying memory-related topics a few months ago, I came across his card in the Memorial archive:³ Ivan Frantsevich was shot under Articles 72 and 74 of the BSSR Criminal Code: “Propaganda or agitation containing a call for overthrow.” I learnt that local villagers had nicknamed him, a 54-year-old miller, “an American”. He had just returned from the USA, where he went to work. “An American” – during the Great Terror it was enough for a bullet in the back of his head and silence that the regime made to last for almost a century.

IN ACCORDANCE WITH NKVD order No. 00447 (On repressive operations against ex-kulaks, criminals and other counter-revolutionary elements) in July 30, 1937, repressions were carried out on the basis of approximate figures and, contrary to popular belief, affected not only the nomenklatura, but ordinary people – such as my great-grandfather.⁴ Any well-off



Screenshot of the people's memorial in Kurapaty. Retrieved in Google. Date of the shot made on the memorial site: April 2019.



Screenshot of the area around Kurapaty, the site of collective executions during the Great Terror. The restaurant "Let's Go – Let's Eat" is captioned as "No going, no eating". Retrieved on Google on January 20, 2023.

citizen, a former member of the White Guard Party or a surviving tsarist official could match the definition of "an anti-Soviet element". The other target group to be eliminated were non-ethnic Russians: Soviet Poles, Germans, Romanians, Latvians, Estonians, Greeks, Chinese and others. An additional reason leading to the death sentence could have been the fact that my great-grandfather spoke Polish and had a Polish surname.

In the late 1930s, about 1.6 million people were arrested in 16 months, and 682,000 shot.⁵ A broader historical frame seems hard to visualize, yet in 1930–1958: 20,000,000 prisoners passed through the Gulag – 2,000,000 of them died.⁶

Nowadays, memorial sites on European territory are full of detailed information about the prisoners and perpetrators and contain calls to remember and never repeat the horrors of dehumanization, harassment, torture, and execution methods – invented and functioning on the sites surrounded by towers and encircled by barbed wire with barracks and experimental medical blocks. But who in today's Belarus remembers hundreds of thousands of people killed by their own fellow citizens?

FOREXAMPLE, at the site of mass executions committed by the NKVD on Stalin's orders in 1937–1941 in Kurapaty, near Minsk, there is still no memorial – however, according to experts, up to 250,000 people could have been buried in its mass

graves.⁷ The struggle for the right to commemorate the victims has been going on for decades: The authorities continue demolishing the people's memorials and arresting grassroots activists who try to put up crosses and honor the deceased. Since 2017, Dmitry Dashkevich, one of the memorial's most persistent defenders, has been regularly subjected to repressions.⁸ Amnesty International has twice recognized him as a prisoner of conscience.

The state reacts to the activists' demands with cynicism and ignorance. In the early 1960s, the Soviet authorities deliberately built a highway that ran through Kurapaty, splitting the burial ground into two parts. In the second half of the 2000s, "Bulbash Hall" entertainment complex (later renamed "Let's Go – Let's eat") was built there – as a mockery at the place of mourning.⁹ Denis Ivashin, an investigative journalist working on the identification of the circle of people involved in this financially beneficial decision, was imprisoned in 2022 and sentenced to 13 years in a penal colony. One of the articles of the ac-

"BUT WHO IN TODAY'S BELARUS REMEMBERS HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE KILLED BY THEIR OWN FELLOW CITIZENS?"

cusations was Article 356 of the Criminal Code: "Treason against the state".¹⁰

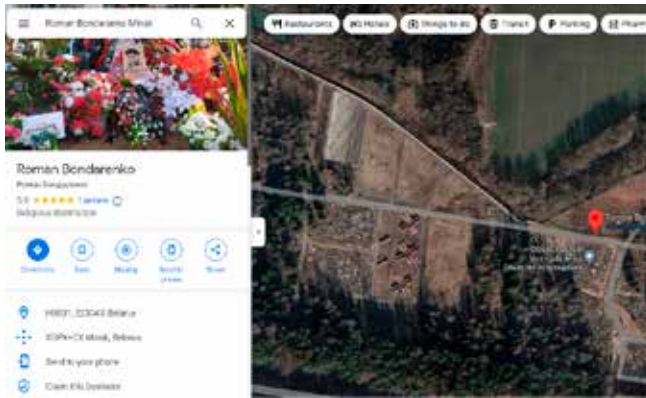
On April 20, 2019, Lukashenko introduced a total ban on any further research on Kurapaty:

Maybe some other president will come one day and start looking for consensus and dig these graves up. As long as I am president, this will not happen[...] And I do not support an idea of swarming and rummaging – all these excavations and archives.¹¹

The state's understanding of memorial culture is also expressed in another statement of the country's self-proclaimed leader:

We will hang flowers on the fence, as on the Winners Avenue's dividing line. We will make a gate so that people can use it for going in and out.¹²

VLADIMIR MATSKEVICH is another iconic political prisoner in Belarus who persistently voiced his concerns about the necessity to respect the memory of the Stalin's victims in an appropriate way. He is a philosopher, methodologist, and the founder of the "Flying University". Matskevich has recently been imprisoned for 5 years in a reinforced regime penal colony for "heading an extremist formation". In an interview in 2019 he said:



Screenshot of the area around Roman Bondarenko's grave – on Google it is marked as “religious destination”. Retrieved on January 20, 2023.



Screenshot from the site dedicated to the “Square of Changes” timeline. The image was made by Pasha Krichko and shows a track transporting the candles, lamps, and flowers of the dismantled people's memorial to Roman Bondarenko. Retrieved on January 20, 2023.

The people's memorial hurts someone's eyes so much. President [A.G. Lukashenko] said that he was annoyed by the crosses he sees from the highway. How much hatred for the manifestation of free will and independence the current government demonstrates by such actions.

In the same interview, Matskevich also calls the situation around Kurapaty “a desecration of graves and looting”.¹³

THE CONFRONTATION around the memorialization of victims in Kurapaty is perhaps the loudest and longest battle in the memory wars on the territory of modern Belarus, but this episode is far from being the only one. Other mass graves of Stalinist repressions' victims were discovered in Orsha and near Vitebsk: In both cases, attempts to document and honor the victims' memory have been made exclusively by grassroots initiatives. What about the state's position? Not only does it fail to contribute to the culture of memory strengthening – people are regularly punished for fighting for the right to remember. Yan Derzhavtsev, an activist and initiator of the Vitebsk national memorial “Khaysy”, was faced with administrative charges for “an unauthorized reburial of the remains, installation of 34 crosses and a few dozen memorial plaques”.¹⁴

For almost 30 years, Lukashenko's regime has been highlighting only indi-

vidual episodes from the country's history – those believed to be convenient for a more persuasive interpretation of Belarus' past as closely connected with that of the “brother” Russia. And this “convenience” lies in the fact that Belarusians should remember as little as possible.

The well-known comedian Yefim Shifrin also speaks with regret and pain about the silence of the official memorial culture. In Yuri Dud's documentary *Kolytka – Birthplace of Our Fear*, dedicated to Stalin's victims in the Gulag, he shares the story of his repressed father, a resident of the Belarusian town of Orsha in the Soviet years. In the prison where “anti-Soviet” elements were once tortured and killed, there is now a Jesuit college. The building has been renovated and given a fresh touch of bright paint – with no memorial plaque installed, Shifrin states.

Loud May Day parades on Victory Day, central avenues decorated with red flags,

“THE POLITICAL ELITE'S REQUEST TO ‘TURN THE PAGE’ BECOMES A MANTRA THAT SOUNDS EVERY TIME THE REGIME REALIZES THAT IT HAS GONE TOO FAR.”

streets named after both Soviet heroes and Soviet executioners, the stereotyped rhetoric of the great historical countdown marked by the “great victory” – all these actions are declarative in nature and do little to help people move out of the scenery of their hard past into the world of the present. There is no search for a language of “gathering around the present, not around the past”.¹⁵ It is easier to remember heroes than victims, and talking about the masses is not so hard as speaking out individual names. The political elite's request to “turn the page” becomes a mantra that sounds every time the regime realizes that it has gone too far. And unspoken, unprocessed, silenced history repeats itself, preserving in today's social fabric the gap, or the division into “us” and “them” imposed by the authorities – for the sake of convenience, of control.

JAN ASSMANN, the German Egyptologist and historian of religion and culture, writes that:

Throughout human history, it was the memory of the dead that served as the main basis for constructing communities' identity. The memory of the dead is a paradigmatic case of memory able to ‘create a community’. By addressing the dead in their memories, the community maintains its identity. Recognizing one's debt to certain names always underlies

the recognition of one's sociopolitical identity.¹⁶

Recurrence, the need to openly address the subject of the silenced victims of state terror, is manifested not only in the desire of grassroots initiatives to retrieve and remember the names of the innocent ancestors, but also in the tragedies of today. In the chronology of the 2020 protests, I constantly recall an episode that seems to bear a great importance for understanding the role of Belarusians' memorial culture in the current development of the nation. It was a reaction to the death of Roman Bondarenko, a young activist kidnapped and killed by plainclothes police in his own backyard in 2020 – a spontaneous people's memorial, which was formed near the transformer booth as a sign of support. Photographs taken by another resident of “the Square of Changes”, Yauhen Attsetski, and a detailed documented timeline of the story of the locals' resistance and mutual support can now be found on a website specially dedicated to the memorial of Bondarenko.¹⁷ The materials collected in this online archive still amaze with the mass participation of caring Belarusians: on November 12, 2020, a booth with the image of “DJs of Change” (another important symbol of confrontation) was surrounded by a field of flowers and lamps brought by the townspeople. The death of Roman Bondarenko, who was abducted near his home, shocked Belarusians, comments the team behind the site. Wishing to pay tribute to the memory of the deceased, thousands of people from all over the city began to bring lamps, flowers, and photographs to the “Square of Change”. Passing cars honked, people chanted “We won't forget, we won't forgive!”, “Tribunal!” and “Fascists!”. Traffic jams formed at the entrance to the backyard, now turned into the memorial.

THUS, THE VOW to “never forget – never forgive” becomes more than an anti-fascist WWII slogan. On November 15, 2020, at the memorial service, and later at Roman Bondarenko's funeral, these words postulated memory as a duty, and

the demand for justice as a moral imperative of the nation.

Despite the fact that the memorial was destroyed on the orders of the authorities a few days later, Attsetski's archive articulates and (in the context of the story of the “Square of Changes”) also solves a task important for the formation of national identity. In the 21st century, documentation can take a form of not only physical objects – crosses, monuments, or memorial objects installed at the places of executions or burials. A freer and more flexible digital space (therefore less exposed to censorship) can also help to remember. Memory wars in Belarus are therefore continuing in different spaces and forms – appealing to empathy and universal values, and uniting around common suffering and grief can become one of the ways to overcome division and move towards the restoration of justice and democracy. And in my turn, I would like people who choose to support the regime today to check the lists of victims of Stalinist terror on “Memorial” website.¹⁸ Knowing that the fate of Roman Bondarenko was shared in the 1930s, perhaps by their blood relative – a great-grandfather, a grandfather or a great-grandmother – how can one refuse to remember, refuse to long for a life other than one built on fear, violence and silence?

VIOLENT DEATH is something that cannot be attributed to “those of my kin” or “those of the alien ones”. The right to life and the right to remember are inalienable human rights that belong to a person of

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any nationality, religion, and historical period. Why, then, does the promise “never again”, immortalized in the memorial complex on the site of the first concentration camp in Dachau, remain unfulfilled, forcing the Belarusians again and again, almost a century later, to face nightly abductions, searches, lawlessness, hastily passed sentences and the hunt for dissidents? Maybe one of the answers to this question is connected with the imposed indifferent attitude to the sacred places of memory and mourning as formal “gates one can go in and out”? Lamps and flowers, of course, can be thrown into the back of a truck as trash, people's memorials can be easily dismantled, but no regime is able to erase the memory.

The French philosopher, philologist and historian of religion Ernest Renan writes:

Suffering in common unites more than joy does. Where national memories are concerned, grief is of more value than triumphs, for it imposes duties, it requires a common effort. A nation is therefore a vast solidarity, constituted by the sentiment of the sacrifices one has made and of those one is yet prepared to make. It presupposes a past; it is, however, summarized in the present by a tangible fact: consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life.¹⁹

National politics, Eppler concludes, can be rethought not on the basis of common victories and common pride, but on common defeats and common pain: “The main value the new order of things rests on is human life – not the greatness of the state, and human rights should serve as a new universal language.”²⁰ x

Olga Bubich is a Belarusian freelance journalist, photographer and memory researcher temporary based in Berlin as an ICORN Fellow. She is the author of the photobook *The Art of (Not) Forgetting* (2022) dedicated to the elusive nature of memory and ways to resist it.

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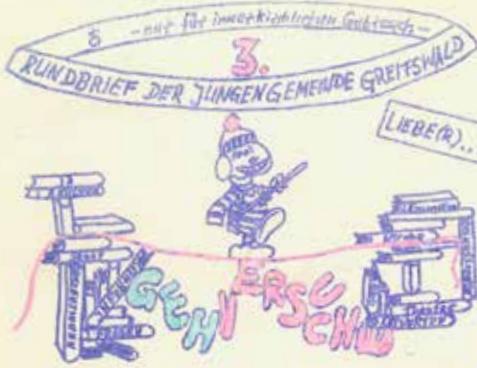
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STREIFLICHES

essay
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KONTEXT
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FRIEDENS
READER 4

Herausgegeben von
Ulrich, Stadtjugendpfarrer
4100 RUHRSTADT, Schulplatz 11
- Nur zur innerkirchlichen Gebrauch -

AKTIONEN REPORT-AKTIONS-REPORT
Zum Arbeitswochenende in den ...
NSG
Das Zentrum behält ...

Bello, liebe Freunde, da sind wir
also wieder mit vielen neuen, in-
teressanten und lehrreichen Infor-
mationen!
wünschen euch viel Spaß beim
lesen und hoffen, daß ihr so Ge-
danken untereinander angeregt
wird. Wenn ihr Gedächtnisbeobach-
tungen oder Fragen an uns
schicken würdet, könnten diese dem
nächsten Rundbrief weitergeleitet
werden. Ich würde mich freuen, wenn
ich eure Beiträge in der nächsten
Ausgabe sehen könnte.
Alles wie die Testtube (Kontakt U)
am Mittwoch ein Treffpunkt für
alle Leute aus allen JGs und Ar-
beitsgruppen ist, kann der Rundbrief
in der nächsten Ausgabe sein.
Ich freue mich die verschiedenen
Themen besprechen zu können.
Ich habe zu den vorigen Ausgaben
recht positiv - herlichen Dank!
Ihr seid wichtig und wir werden
uns auf dem selben Weg wie
vorher bewegen. Bitte, an die an-
gebundenen Adressen. Persönliche Briefe
sind für die nächsten Ausgaben!
pfeiler und andere technische
Mittel bitte wir zu entschuldi-
gen.
der Redaktionskreis.

"I have a dream"
Vor 20 Jahren, am 4. April 1968
starb Dr. King an dem Geschick eines
Schmerzhafteiten...
Inmitten von "Mein
King" von Corretta,
"Dr. King war kein
einer Traum hat
Führung schickte
von Amerika geist
Purheit und Apathie
erhöhte den Kinder
der nichts habe, zu
sterben leben, nicht
zu kommen nicht das
was Liebe, sondern
Dr. schrieb seinen
um sich in den ein
nen liebreichen daraus
daß ich versuchte,
schauen. Sagt immer
die Menschen zu Kl
daß ich versuchte,
Zwei seiner Grund
Tug über die Lehr
Jens nachdenken
wichtigkeit der
und des Lebens
oben dies hat er
Lebt das Buch mal

friedrichsfelder
zu Afghanistan
Nur zur innerkirchlichen
Information
extrablatt
März 88



GA/ ETV 47110
Infoblatt der Offenen Arbeit, Teil der Kirche von Union
Redaktions: nicht haftfähig!
Redaktionschluß: nie!

OSTKREUZ
POLITIK · GESCHICHTE · KULTUR
JANUAR 1989



ehr Sport!
beiterratschaft wegen in der Zeit vor und nach dem
rieg in Arbeiterportraits "Krieg" organisiert,
sich sehr bemühte, den gesamten Rat der offenen
lungen. Der nachfolgende Text stammt aus einem
ab des "FICHTS" - Vereins von 1984.
Die liebe Polizei
wie steh'n um Mitternachts
leht die Polizei den Himmel ein und oben und reicht
leht!
Ist zu arretieren
kann zu Aufbruch führen
auf hat sie ja zu sehen
soll sich auch morgen drehen
hoch die Polizei! die liebe, die liebe Polizei
aner an zu stehen
wie die Daren schnell
ter hinter diesen den schändlichsten Hottel
er zum zweiten Male
es Kampfbegriffe!
Polizei packt ihren Mann
er weiter nießen kann
hoch die Polizei! die ...

UmweltBl
INFO-Blatt des Friedens- und Umweltkreises
Umweltbibliothek
Griebenowstraße 16

CARL v. OSSIEZKY
das Risiko
eine eigene
meinung
zu haben
KU/UB
12/88
Dezember 88

The fear of the word

by Ines Soldwisch

Samizdat and political language in the real socialist dictatorship

abstract

The article deals with samizdat writing in the GDR, which could not be published legally. Thus, authors published their critical texts on handbills and smaller booklets. The article shows forms of distribution and focuses the analysis on individual examples and actors.

KEYWORDS: Samizdat, GDR, authority.

What actually is authority or rulership?¹ Philosophers, historians, political scientists, sociologists and researchers from other academic disciplines have been grappling with this question for a very long time under different headings in order to sharpen the terms of authority, to explore the character of authority, but also to find out about the possibilities and limitations of authority. Why?

Terms serve us to make historical reality describable. But this already poses a first problem. Either they overshoot this reality, or they fall short of it. Since we cannot solve this dilemma

without using language, we nevertheless try to find terms that can never depict historical reality 100%. But they can be “carriers of a dimension of meaning interwoven into this reality”,² as Christian Geulen described in 2010. And that is precisely why there is conceptual history, which has been prominently pursued since the 1970s by Reinhard Koselleck, among others. With the term “authority”, many phenomena can be better described and explained: Community, statehood, social constitution, paths of dependency and much more.

The sociologist Max Weber laid the foundations for the modern understanding of authority with his formulation of the three types of legitimate rule. These merge into one another and cannot be clearly demarcated from one another:

rulership, according to Weber, can be exerted in a rational manner, in a traditional manner and in a charismatic manner.³

Fundamental to our reflections on the concept of domination are Max Weber’s remarks in his writings on economy and society, formulated here:

[...] rulership is the chance that specific (or all) commands will be met with obedience on the part of a specifiable group of persons. It is not therefore each and every kind of chance of exercising ‘power’ and ‘influence’ over other people. In this sense, in the individual instance rulership (‘authority’) can also rely on the most varied motives for conformity: from dull habituation to purely purposively rational considerations. Present in every genuine relationship of rule is a specific minimum of willingness to obey, hence an (outward or inner) interest in obedience.⁴

In this context, Weber goes on to say about the will to obey:

‘Obedience’ shall mean: that obedient people mostly conduct themselves as if they, purely for their own sake, have made the substance of the command their own behavioural maxim, and this only because of the formal relationship of obedience, without regard to their own view regarding the command’s value, or lack of it.⁵

It is exciting to ask what happens to domination when this obedience, as formulated by Weber, is only enacted for its own sake, or even further, when this obedience is only accepted by a few, or even when there is opposition to domination – even if it is only from a small number of people.

The following article deals with these considerations. It will examine how and in what framework and context of action opacity and/or opposition could become public in a system of totalitarian rule such as the GDR, how it found written expression in a system of rule that also controlled writing and placed it under “obedience” in the form of censorship and did not imply the active participation of those subjected to the rule, as Weber did.



Samizdat is the written language of the “people”. It takes politically prescribed words seriously and directs them in a readable way against that power which, by means of an occupation of language, asserts its claim to interpretive sovereignty and legitimate rule. Samizdat, which means uncovering “true word meanings”, is language politics, a struggle for the appropriate description of reality in the medium of writing. Samizdat also stands for disputes among one another, for a diversity of topics, a plurality of forms of expression, as well as for the contradiction of opinions among one another. This is precisely what makes samizdat an alternative model to the wooden language of the regime.

Ehrhart Neubert has asked the wise question: “Can a society be patronised and claimed for purposes of domination by a centre of power that claims to represent it, or can society acquire power over itself?”⁶ Political samizdat was just that, an attempt to let society come into its own again, and without questioning the structure of the state. Because the government equated its actions with the reason of state and the state itself, the attempt to return to speaking for oneself inevitably appeared to the rulers as a threat to the system. Political samizdat became a social movement when local media fell back into the hands of society, when technical development and support from East and West made central control of the social media system less and less possible. In the process, the fact that the “dictatorship of the proletariat” simultaneously asserted the rule of the people took its revenge. The people who spoke wanted the system to be reformed. But because the system interpreted every expression of free speech against the rulers as opposition to the system, the only way out was revolution. With the success of that revolution, samizdat lost its basis for existence.

The rule over the public sphere of writing in the GDR

Until the end of the 1980s, the question of written publications in the German Democratic Republic is quickly answered from a legal point of view. Public statements were only permissible to the extent that they did not call real socialism into question. The secretary of the Central Committee for Agitation and Propaganda, Joachim Hermann, who had been in charge since 1978, was responsible for control.

A free, a “functioning public”⁷ did not exist until the end of the GDR. The mechanisms to prevent it were manifold.

The media monopoly of the socialist state was also protected by criminal law. Section 106 of the GDR’s penal code states under “anti-state agitation”:

(1) Whoever, with the aim of damaging or inciting opposition to the socialist state or social order of the German Democratic Republic, 1. introduces, produces, distributes or displays writings, objects or symbols

**“THE POLITICAL
ACTIVISTS WERE
NOT CONCERNED
WITH QUESTIONING
THE SOCIALIST
STATE, BUT WITH
POINTING OUT
WAYS OF SOLVING
PROBLEMS.”**

discriminating against the state, political, economic or other social conditions of the German Democratic Republic; 2. Threatens crimes against the state or incites resistance to the socialist state or social order of the German Democratic Republic; 3. Discriminates against representatives or other citizens of the German Democratic Republic or the activities of state or social organs and institutions; 4. Glorifies fascism or militarism, shall be punished by imprisonment from one year to five years. (2) Whoever, in order to carry out the crime, uses

organs of publication or institutions which wage a struggle against the German Democratic Republic or carries out the crime on behalf of such institutions or in a planned manner, shall be punished by imprisonment from two to ten years.⁸

Section 220 of the GDR Penal Code also criminalized defamation of the state.⁹ Both provisions were flanked by the “Order on the Approval Procedure for the Production of Printed and Reproduced Products” of July 20, 1959¹⁰ and the “Order on the Publication and Production of

All Periodical Press Products”.¹¹ Thus the state secured complete control over the media and, in our case, power over writing in the public sphere.

Attempts to defy the “dominated script”

But what was left for people who wanted to express their thoughts, goals and perceptions apart from this “dominated public” (Jürgen Kocka)?

Despite internal ideological and military armament, a new type of political opposition developed in the GDR. It took a legalistic approach and did not radically question the political system of the SED. The ‘open church youth work’, the independent peace and ecology movement, and the activities of groups and networks formed to defend human rights issued samizdat products and showed themselves in public actions. This behaviour did not represent a mere reaction to the deficits in the GDR, but was aimed at independence and publicity in the determination of goals and the choice of means.¹²

The aforementioned groups created spaces for action in initiatives, in peace and environmental circles, in discussion circles, but also in semi-public samizdat writings. Spaces for action were “only given in the closed society [...] when they were created by themselves and there was at least a rudimentary formation of civil society”.¹³

As a result, the state turned them into opponents of the state, while they themselves were striving for something completely



PHOTO: ROBERT HAVEMANN SOCIETY/SIEGBERT SCHEFKE

Tom Sello in September 1989 on the grounds of the Berlin Zionsgemeinde with various samizdat publications. He sells, for example, *Umweltblätter* and the single-issue debt crisis. The issues can be purchased for small amounts of money. At the same time Tom Sello collects signatures for appeals and petitions.



PHOTO: ROBERT HAVEMANN SOCIETY/SIEGBERT SCHEFKE

Printing press of the Berlin Environmental Library. The *Umweltblätter* and other writings are printed on this wax matrix machine.

different. The term “opposition” therefore falls short. It only does limited justice to the aspirations and goals of the actors. Sebastian Richter referred to the concept of political obstinacy. This actually seems much more appropriate in the discussion of samizdat writing. The political activists were not concerned with questioning the socialist state, but with pointing out ways of solving problems. Some of the actors themselves spoke out against the term “state opposition”. Two examples can be cited: Friedrich Schorlemmer, conscientious objector, recalcitrant theologian and main author of the “20 Wittenberg Theses”, explained in retrospect how much he had been fixated on his own environment and how close the bond with the state was – admittedly not with the government: “[...] I stabilised the GDR, [...] because I served it as an enemy, hoped for its change and understood leaving as fleeing from responsibility”.¹⁴

Markus Meckel, “GDR activist”, pastor and later co-founder of the SDP (Eastern German version of the SPD) already resisted the term “opposition” in the early 1980s:

From the state side in the GDR, one often hears the accusation that oppositional elements were gathering in the peace groups. This use of language means more than the term ‘opposition’ implies. Opposition here means: Enemy of the state. It is possible that this is also based on the association with ‘bourgeois’ language, according to which the opposition is striving to take power. However, it is absurd to assume that this is the case for peace activists. What they are concerned with is a reaction to concrete political conditions that is different from state reaction and the search for political alternatives for the good of the state and the people who live in it.¹⁵

Even 30 years later, his memoirs state:

One was not simply a ‘member of the opposition’, as is often read. There was no membership and to speak of organisation is often misleading. [...] For us, it was simply a matter of being a responsible person and becoming aware of our responsibility. We were aware that you can’t go along with everything and accept everything in silence. At least opening our mouths seemed to us to be an imperative.¹⁶

This speaking out that Meckel refers to led to the emergence of a kind of counter-public in the mid-1980s, which sought to increase its possibilities for action and dissemination by writing things down. These texts were secretly written, copied and distributed. Since Soviet times, the term samizdat has been used for such self-published writings. In the GDR, however, the term was taboo. It neither appeared as a lemma in reference works nor was it part of the spoken language. The term simply did not seem to exist, so great was the fear of it. Even at the highest political level, it was strictly avoided.

In connection with the rigged GDR local elections of 1988, Karl Wilhelm Fricke quotes from a “Confidential Classified Document” of the Berlin District State Security Administration. It mentions “written material” and “associations of people from the political underground to denigrate the people’s elections”¹⁷. What was meant were writings of samizdat, but not even the Stasi dared to use the term, so dangerous did it seem.

The fear of the language of others

Where did the fear of samizdat come from? At first glance, it seems surprising that such an elaborate system of domination, power,

control, surveillance, and repression – including of language – felt threatened by a small body of writing that operated only secretly underground. It seems even more surprising that it was possible to disseminate samizdat literature at all, regardless of its form.

Language makes it possible to gain influence, is able to designate reality and thus deprives rule of its legitimacy. What remains is the state's pure will to power and pure arbitrariness. This is precisely why the GDR leadership relied on the control of language. Where there was no separation between state, constitution and government, any reflection on reform meant opposition to the state. Because language aims at action, non-conformist speech unsettles pure power. Before the revolution of 1989, therefore, we observe a revolution of speech. And consequently, it was the civil rights groups and the churches that gave language back to the people. At the beginning of "We are the people" was samizdat, a new language that was both the basis for the new language action of the actors and demonstrated its power. It commented on the official language of the state and reduced it to its true ideological core, as will be shown below.

The term samizdat

What does samizdat mean? Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk names the Russian writer Nikolai Glaskow as the originator of this term.¹⁸ Glaskow, who had his unpublished poems loosely stapled together in 1952, called them "Sam-sebja-isdat", in German translation "Verlag für sich selbst". Later, he renamed the privately distributed writing, which was not politicised or oppositional in any way at the time, as samizdat; in English translation "self-publishing".¹⁹ The term only became politically charged in the Soviet Union in the 1960s, when banned authors distributed their writings via samizdat. Probably the best-known work distributed in samizdat is Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*.²⁰

Forms of samizdat in the GDR

While Glaskow's self-publishing was still aimed at distributing his own writings, self-initiative soon proved to be a political alternative to state journalism. In the 1960s, it was not only a matter of independently producing and distributing writings, but also of countering the state-dominated public sphere with a deliberative public sphere. In the last years of the GDR, different directions of samizdat can be identified accordingly.

- (1) General samizdat, which dealt with the grievances of everyday life, with injustice, discrimination, etc.
- (2) Literary and artistic samizdat, whose writings could not otherwise appear because of the prevailing cultural policy. It served as a model for political samizdat because it showed that it was possible to publish "without license".
- (3) The ecclesiastical semi-samizdat and the directly political samizdat. They increasingly challenged the state's monopoly on opinion.

It should be emphasized at this point that the identified forms of samizdat literature cannot be considered clearly separate from each other, as they merged into each other in terms of content, and that samizdat as a whole was diverse in content. Many samizdat publications dealt with contemporary historical, philosophical, and political topics, but also contained literary texts and artistic graphics and drawings.

The samizdat writings, with their contemporary historical documentation, their exposure of grievances in everyday life, including the documentation of environmental pollution, represented a counterpoint to the centrally provided news of the state apparatus controlled by the SED. The samizdat journals had imaginative names: *Dokumenta Zion*, *Fußnote 3* [Footnote 3], *Die Mücke* [The Mosquito] and *Wahlfall 89* [Election Case 89], to name but a few. They provided information about the thinking and activities of the language activists. Stephan Bickhardt,

an Evangelical Lutheran pastor, published *Spuren* [Traces] in the form of so-called *radix-blätter* [radix-leaflets] in 1988. They offered the first authentic description of the history of the oppositional peace movement in the GDR. *Arche Nova*, *Wendezeit* [The Time of the Turnaround], *Kontext*, and others were devoted to the history of the Soviet Union and Gorbachev's perestroika policy, which did not officially appear in the GDR.²¹

The importance of samizdat increased by leaps and bounds from 1986 onwards and continued to grow until 1989, not only because of the ever-increasing breadth of content. Neubert states that based on the titles published and the reproduction technology used, it can be assumed for 1988 that several tens of thousands of copies of magazines, books and multi-page information sheets were published in samizdat.²² Many of these publications were passed on after being read, passed from hand to hand, at demonstrations, at meetings, and among friends, so that the distribution itself can be estimated to be much higher.

Actors and forms of distribution of political samizdat in the GDR

The history of political samizdat did not begin in the 1980s. Politically unwelcome leaflets, appeals, manuscripts or flyers accompanied the entire history of the GDR.

Until the Wall was built in 1961, they were mostly produced in the West.²³ In the 1980s, the entire Eastern bloc experienced a blossoming of samizdat literature. Most of the writings were now published, printed, and distributed in the East of Germany itself. Political samizdat relied on quite simple means such as typewriters, carbon paper or stamp boxes, which only allowed for very small print runs. But it was precisely this that made it difficult for the Stasi to control, since the typewriter was part of the equipment of modern industrial production, paper and carbon copies were needed in many places, and stamp boxes could be privately produced.

**"PROBABLY THE
BEST-KNOWN
WORK DISTRIBUTED
IN SAMIZDAT
IS ALEXANDER
SOLZHENYTSIN'S
THE GULAG
ARCHIPELAGO."**

The literature of the Protestant church, insofar as it dealt with political topics, must also be counted as political samizdat. The early papers were still restrained, formulated cautiously and deliberately. They contained announcements of dates, self-portrayals of individual Christian groups and contributions on social issues with a religious connection.

IN THE SECOND HALF of the 1980s, all this changed. Political samizdat, including church samizdat, now became bolder and more critical. Political issues moved to the centre of the publications. And the problems were now called by their names. *Grenzfall* [Border Case] and the *Umweltblätter* [Environment Paper] became the best-known and most important samizdat publications in the GDR. *Grenzfall* began appearing in 1986, and shortly afterwards the first issue of the *Umweltbibliothek* [Environmental Library] also circulated in Berlin's Zionsgemeinde.²⁴

The number of known samizdat writings increased from 20 in 1987 to over 30 in 1988, reaching 39 titles in 1989. The much larger number of journals obviously also led to a greater variety of topics and a significant broadening of political perspectives. The *Umweltblätter*, which I have mentioned briefly, were published by the secret Berlin Environmental Library, with a total of 32 issues appearing up to 1989. In 1989 they were renamed *telegraph*.

Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk attributes a decidedly grassroots, radical ecological and anarchic orientation to the *Umweltblätter*.²⁵ The *Grenzfall* had its origins in the "Initiative Frieden und Menschenrechte" [Initiative for Peace and Human Rights] and from here represented radical democratic positions and insisted on a universally valid concept of human rights.

Hubertus Knabe has pointed out in his studies that "the publications showed growing differences in editorial concepts" – oscillating "between practically oriented and theoretically oriented booklets, between locally anchored, supra-regional or GDR-wide periodicals, between publications of scientific analyses, artistic essays, documentations without commentary or shorter information"²⁶. In short, samizdat literature proved to be a forum for ever larger sections of public deliberation.

Most of the samizdat writings were produced on church reproduction machines in the 1980s. Issues that had to get by without church support had a much harder time. The Leipzig papers *Anschlag* [Keystroke] and *Glasnost* were produced with the help of typewriters and carbon paper, later also reproduced with computers, and therefore only a few copies appeared. The *Grenzfall* was initially produced on A6 format photographic paper with 50 copies. It was only when Robert Jahn was able to procure a wax matrix machine from the West that the production of the magazine became easier and was expanded to 1000 copies. Nevertheless, the procurement of materials posed particular difficulties. Dies, paper and ink were difficult to obtain in the GDR for understandable reasons, and if they were available, the Stasi kept a close eye on their use. Under these circumstances, the only option was to import from the West. Friends, acquaintances and correspondents who were accredited in the East helped as much as they could.²⁷

Thomas Pilz, who lived in Upper Lusatia at the time, reported



PHOTO: HARALD HAUSWALD/OSTKREUZ

Printing leaflets on an Ormig copying machine in the Environmental Library, Till Boettcher. Zion Church Berlin, GDR, 1988.

on the coincidence of the development of the dissemination of samizdat sheets, in his case the *Lausitzbotin* [Lusatian Messenger], in an interview with a contemporary witness,

[...] we suddenly discovered a printing device on the floor of the Großschöna vicarage (belonging to Pastor Alfred Hempel, who later also co-founded the New Forum in Berlin), which was not registered. Pastor Hempel informed us, made it available to us, and then we decided that we would produce samizdat ourselves in order to broaden the network more, with information that we ourselves had collected about our region, but of course also information that came from Berlin, from Leipzig, from Dresden.²⁸

Financing the print runs was another problem. Almost all the papers called on their readers to donate money or materials. Some publications were sold at prices of 5 or 10 marks.²⁹

Samizdat texts were distributed in small circles, from hand to hand. But they were also read out in churches. Neubert describes a church service in Suhl in October 1989: "In the following information section, the various political appeals and statements of the churches and the new oppositional groups, which had not yet been published in the media, were read out."³⁰ So oral publicity was added to the written publicity, thus lowering the costs of dissemination.

And yet:

The main difficulty was to obtain cheap, printable paper. It had to be bought in small packs all over the country. Sometimes the authorities ordered such paper to disappear from the shops altogether. Where available, the plain church reproduction technique was generally used. Some samizdat editorial offices were able to supply themselves with such technology. Numerous regulations had to be observed. Western support groups, mostly former GDR opposition members, helped with

the procurement of duplicators, spare parts or printing ink. Mostly wax matrices were used, which allowed almost a thousand prints with Western material and about half that with Eastern material. With the Ormik spirit process, which was also common, only about 150 copies could be produced, and reprints were common.³¹

Combating samizdat

From the regime's point of view, there was a clear demarcation between literary samizdat and the much more dangerous political samizdat, which had emerged around civil rights groups and was aimed at a wider audience. In general, action against samizdat could be taken on several levels. Service directive no. 2/85 allowed for early intervention to "prevent, uncover and combat underground political activity".³²

Since Gorbachev's accession to power in 1986, and the concomitant opening up of political discussion in the USSR, political samizdat received special attention and vigilance. In November 1987, the Berlin journal *Grenzfall* was condemned. All copies were confiscated. An internal circular by Erich Mielke discussed civil and criminal measures against the editors.³³

During a demonstration on January 15, 1988, individual members of the civil rights group around *Grenzfall* were spectacularly arrested. But in the final phase of the GDR regime without protection from the USSR, the weapon of Stasi violence remained blunt. Shortly after the arrest, the magazine *Kontext* was founded as a direct reaction under the umbrella of the Protestant Church. Civil and criminal measures were thus given a clear legal framework that was difficult to overcome. Nevertheless, the Stasi tried to prevent the distribution of *Kontext* in unofficial ways, for example by intercepting couriers, checking mail, using more IMs (unofficial employee) and exerting influence via the church leadership.³⁴ Up to ten percent of samizdat circulation was lost due to MfS confiscations,³⁵ not really much, but more than enough for historical research. So the Stasi was forced to take other measures:

In the MfS's struggle to contain the independent public, plagiarism was also used for disinformation. The Friedrichfelder Feuermelder announced in its April 1987 issue: "On 30.3. a forged edition of the Friedrichfelder Feuermelder appeared in Berlin. The pamphlet, originating from pro-authority circles, was distributed by mail."³⁶

Influence and effects of samizdat writing on the "public"

With the use of new technology, the circulation of samizdat publications increased. While in the early 1980s the publications still went from hand to hand and reached few people due to their small number, a broader counter-public was now reached through new printing and distribution mechanisms. The publications were distributed at selected events, e.g., during demonstrations; they were found on book tables in churches or in the secret Berlin Environmental Library.

The reform forces gained more and more influence at the end of the 1980s, which was also a reason for more and more numerous editions of the samizdat publications. Thus, samizdat became a "mirror image" of increasingly self-confident sections of society and reflected their desire for renewal. Samizdat covered a wide range of topics: Inner and outer peace, the environment, ecological management, the SED state and the church, human rights, democratization, social reforms, glasnost and perestroika, East-Central and Eastern Europe, solidarity with the Third World, questions of historical culture and remembering political prisoners.

SAMIZDAT IN THE GDR reached its peak in autumn 1989, spurred on by the fact that the regime was proving less and less capable of adequately reflecting reality. The speechlessness of the SED and the state was countered by samizdat publications. It provided the Western media and the GDR population directly with all the current information that the GDR leadership withheld or could no longer process at all.

Samizdat replaced the state-dominated language with the living language of free deliberation. That is why there were many opinions and many positions in samizdat. The illusion of a revolution that conformed to the system was broken by the regime's speechlessness and had to end with the revolution of 1989/90. There was no alternative to the open society that could have conformed to the system. Samizdat became purely self-publishing again, and because there were so many other publishers, it was forced into a niche. The samizdat authors themselves now worked as editors, publishers, or subscribers to respected new or old papers.

The activists and their samizdat publications prepared the ground for the revolution they had never aspired to. They had wanted to be citizens, appropriating the right to be a citizen and thus depriving the real socialist dictatorship, which pretended to be perfect democracy, a citizen's paradise and a haven of prosperity at the same time, of its basis. In the words of Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk:

Samizdat does not need [...] to be idealised. Not everything that appeared as samizdat was a guarantee of quality, innovation or political wisdom. The existence of samizdat, however, formed a force." [...] "Samizdat was about action, it was about regaining sovereignty over language, over one's own life, over society."³⁷

Samizdat allowed precisely this. ✖

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“Better stories” in higher education

**Cunning strategies for gender studies:
What can you do when nothing can be done?
Can the hangman be an ally of gender studies?**

by **Andrea Pető**

The contemporary moment in which we find ourselves is shaped by environmental destruction, political polarization, structural and other forms of violence, and the transformation of liberal democracy into autocracies of different forms. This explains the predominance of apocalyptic visions and doomsday scenarios in contemporary political discourse and media. We are all tired, exhausted, hopeless, and depressed. In discussions in university cafeterias faculty is complaining about lack of funding, the uncooperative and demanding administration, and uncooperative students. The stories of success and joy that we feel after an enlightening discussion with colleagues and students are rarely happening. Moreover, the lack of new analytical tools to understand the new development also contributes to confusion. The hijacking of feminist discourse, vocabulary, and institutions by forces who empty and instrumentalize the hard-won achievements of equality politics is painful and confusing.

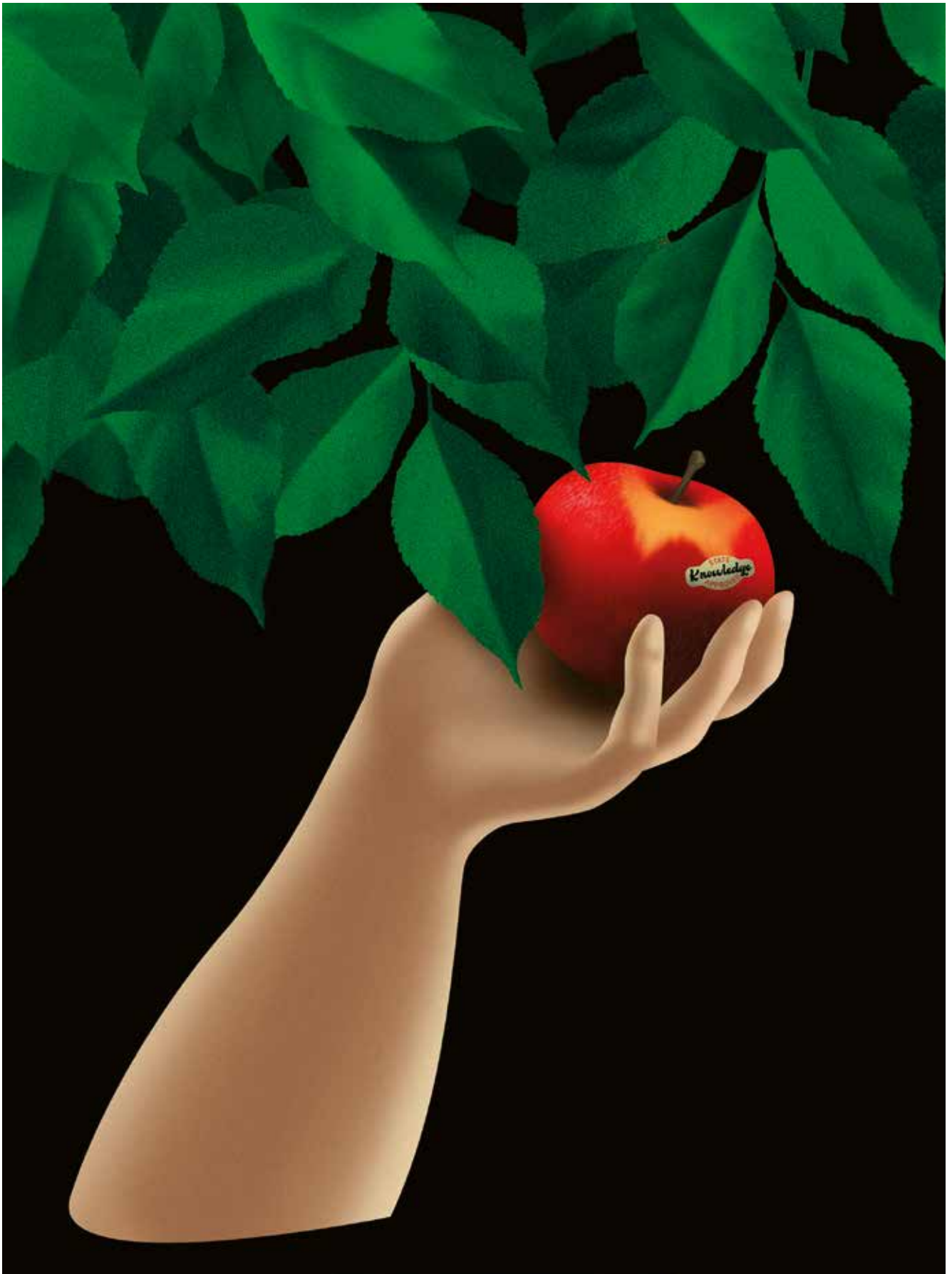
Unfortunately, this kind of “grim storytelling” is typically also utilized in exclusionary, racist, (hetero)sexist ways to instigate fear and insecurity and to propagate increasingly repressive nationalist politics. At the same time, “grim storytelling” plays a major role in the social sciences where the response to the contemporary state of the world has often been to focus on decline, suffering, collapse, and conflict.

CAN WE MOVE beyond pessimistic frameworks while at the same time developing new tools to understand and transform the social, political, and environmental challenges that we face in Europe and beyond? What are the consequences of “grim storytelling” dominating these realms and, increasingly, the aesthetic realm as well? What possibilities could be opened up by “better stories” of political, academic, and aesthetic interventions that offer affective, embodied, and transformative alternatives? By

asking such questions, this paper seeks to explore, understand, and make visible the livable – that is, real and acceptable – alternatives to the “grim stories” of the present.

MY ATTEMPT TO move away from “grim stories” is even more important as I am three times loser as a gender studies professor at CEU.¹ My academic field, gender studies, was deleted from the accredited study list without consultation.² CEU was forced to move from one EU member country to another to preserve its academic freedom. And thirdly, I had to resign from the Hungarian Accreditation Committee as the President of the Committee demanded that I should withdraw my peer-reviewed academic article from the otherwise less publicly known German academic journal *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte*.³ By now this article about illiberal academic authorization has become the most-read article in the journal. This unwanted recognition or as Eric Fassin calls it, “paradoxical recognition” created a political opportunity to share my ideas with the widest possible audience.

This paper is based on two arguments: First, “grim storytelling” only gives access to part of the story and therefore needs to be supplemented with “better stories” – stories that generate an understanding of human potentiality, creativity, resilience, interconnectedness and shared “vulnerability”.⁴ Second, the tendency towards “grim storytelling” in critical social sciences constitutes a major limitation for the possibilities of imagining and enacting the very transformations that Europe most urgently needs in order to enhance the European project. In her critique of “dark anthropology”, Sherry Ortner succinctly asks: “What is the point of opposing neo-liberalism if we cannot imagine better ways of living and better futures?”⁵ That is why it is important that the alternative tools of knowledge production and practices of political engagement, which are already being put into effect in various activist communities throughout Eu-



rope and beyond, become more visible. It is equally important to translate these alternative tools of knowledge production and political engagement into a methodology with which they can be made more intelligible in terms of their possibilities for transformative politics on a larger scale. To this end, a reconsideration of the potential of critical social science praxis is urgently required. The precondition of critical social science praxis is academic freedom.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM IS KEY for formulating and telling these “better stories”, as “the better story, as the principle of creation and surviving difficult experience, is also the principle of how people collectively share a story to survive better”.⁶ Education is a space where this “collective sharing” of “better stories” is happening. This story can be a literature piece or history or a family story or your own story. This sharing of collective stories is a powerful tool to fight against grim storytelling.⁷ This article shares my personal experiences and theoretical and strategic insights about how gender studies can survive and flourish during illiberal attacks.

Defining the new threat to gender studies and academic freedom

In order to resist, we first need to know what danger we are facing when gender studies experience threats, delegitimization, anti-intellectualism, and hijacking of its language. With Weronika Grzebalska, we call these newly built states *illiberal polypore* states, based on their common modus operandi.⁸ The polypore is a parasitic pore fungus that lives on wood and produces nothing but more polypores. Unlike political scientists who admire the effectiveness of these illiberal states destroying democratic institutions,⁹ we argue that polypore states do not have original ideas; rather, they take the ideas of others and use them for their own purpose: self-maintenance of their own separate world. Past authoritarian regimes took over existing scientific institutions and transformed them into explicitly ideological institutions such as research institutes of Communist Party history or race hygiene. By contrast, polypore institutions mask themselves as “real” academic institutions, i.e. as “one of them”.¹⁰ The polypore not only creates parallel institutions but also weakens already existing infrastructure and discredits its activities. The illiberal state also systematically destroys any other existing mechanisms of scientific evaluation, turning emptied institutions into performative formalities, rendering them mere simulacra of the original institutions. Polypore and state institutions with the same profile differ, in that the available state funding for the polypore institutions seems limitless, now that funds from other state institutions are being pumped into the state-financed polypore institutions, leading to those state-funded institutions’ further impoverishment.

My personal story also illustrates that attacks on academic freedom are not happening in “faraway countries we know so little” (to paraphrase Chamberlain when he signed the deal with Hitler hoping to save the peace) but already inside European Union. Recent developments inside the EU and in countries like

Denmark and Sweden, which previously pioneered academic freedom and institutionalization of gender studies, also prove that academic freedom is not a given but a space of negotiation.

How come the different professional organizations, institutions, and the EU itself were so unprepared for this paradigm change in knowledge production and dissemination? Because that is what I am arguing the attack on academic freedom is. This sleepwalking is the concept we are using in our podcast series hosted by the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre.

Four historians of the Holocaust, including myself, are discussing what can we learn from the past to recognize similarities and differences as far as attacks on liberal values are concerned.¹¹ Illiberalism is not a new phenomenon: European modernity has always operated with exclusion, colonialism, and othering. This dark legacy has never disappeared, but progressive actors misread its non-visibility as its absence. The sleepwalking is brutally ended by the poly-crisis when all the mistakes and consequences of neoliberalization, including transforming universities to conveyor belt-like knowledge transfer businesses, came to light. As one of the responses to this poly-crisis some groups were capturing the state and using the resources collected from the citizens of the state for their own purpose.

THIS IS A CRUCIAL PART of this paradigm change: the new relationship with the state. The belief in the state and its institutions is unquestionable but countries that went through neoliberalization, which fundamentally weakened state institutions with the slogan of excellence and economic efficiency, created a state which is strong for the strong and weak for the weak, which means that the state decides who are the worthy citizens, whom they serve. And higher education has also transformed in this process: the percentage of public higher educational institutions decreased. The whole of Hungarian higher education was privatized in two weeks (!) which means losing autonomy and freedom to decide what to teach and how. The story of the CEU, a private university in Hungary now forced to move to Vienna, Austria from one EU member country to another, actually helps us to rethink whether only public universities could serve the public good. If the state is captured by mafia, and operates as a mafia group, a private university can serve as a beacon of academic freedom. That was the reason why CEU had to leave Hungary. Of course, this process is not only Orbanization; it is easy to pin structural changes, a paradigm change, onto one person, as it helps to normalize this disturbing paradigm change. This is

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even dangerous as this illiberal state capture uses the hijacked neoliberal language of excellence, competitiveness, impact, social outreach, and indices – as do proxy female leaders talking about women's rights. This leads to another feature that led to sleepwalking: the concept of “illiberal pragmatism”, which means anything goes. If one argument does not work that is no problem, as they apply another which might be just the opposite of the first one. The content does not really matter. Intellectuals, scientists, and progressive politicians spend considerable time and energy on analyzing and understanding a phenomenon that is impossible to analyze and understand. That impossible task also contributes to exhaustion and depression among progressive forces.

What can we do when nothing can be done, or should we ally with the hangman?

In this section, I discuss what can be done when seemingly nothing can be done. Brecht wrote in his 1935 piece, *Writing the Truth. Five Difficulties as follows*: “It takes courage to say that the good were defeated not because they were good, but because they were weak”.

In my academic work, I explore and analyze the question: Why are we so weak today even though we know that we are the good ones and have a vision of a better society and are able to tell “better stories”?¹² We are losing the hegemonic fight, which is not an unfortunate accident. The recent rise of illiberalism and neo-fascism is not a natural catastrophe, it has its reasons and causes. And even earthquakes can be forecast if one is attentive enough. During earthquakes, some well-built houses withstand the tremor, while others collapse. What has happened and what will happen with different gender studies programs globally is clear. The illiberal tactics are to restrict (through “bending” and “de-specification”), delegitimize (through “forging”), or, indeed, eliminate (through “breaking,” and possibly “de-specification”) gender studies programs.¹³

IN MY WORK, I am interested in the reason for our sleepwalking, for our ignorance of the causes and reasons that lead to our becoming weak. And I also want to understand how to put a stop to that: how to build edifices, in this case spaces of critical knowledge production, that resist earthquakes. We can only stop sleepwalking with a culture that comes from education as a site of sharing “better stories”. Education matters because if we fail, we sleepwalk into a situation as we have in the case of Russia. In the past decades, several warning signs were raised about Russian higher education which were ignored even though they served as blueprints for transforming research and education globally. The moment arrived in 2022 when education will not be enough anymore, and only real weapons and sacrificing human lives can stop evil. Education can only create the culture

necessary for ending sleepwalking if academics and researchers are able to speak the truth, to quote Brecht again, in a way that can be heard. The present academic evaluation system with nontransparent impact factors and managerial teaching deliverables does not encourage us to tell the truth. And especially not for a wider audience. That many progressive and critical thinkers failed to speak the truth in a way that can be listened to and understood by many led to the current series of overlapping crises. One such crisis resides in the fact that academia and higher education became a warzone, of which gender studies is the first battlefield.¹⁴ Whatever happens with gender studies, it will influence the future of higher education, and the ways in which knowledge is produced, shared, and evaluated. I disagree with the claim that changing this self-centeredness of academia would be hopeless, but it is more challenging now in a hostile environment. Let me quote Brecht again: “Even the hangmen can be addressed when the payment for hanging stops, or when the work becomes too dangerous”. Even the hangman can be recruited at the right historical moment but only if we are cunning enough to recognize the historical moment and proceed in a way that can be attractive – even for the hangman. It is not enough to simply do our job anymore, we need to be “cunning”, again using Brecht's adjective, because the institutional framework we blindly trusted to safeguard the values we hold dear is no longer protecting us but is captured by illiberal forces. The new means of communication which were meant to disseminate ideas of freedom and be available for everybody are constructing vulnerable, exploited, and hateful individuals, the unashamed citizens

who were behind different horrific events in human history. The discussion about academic freedom often falls into the dark hole of what others and other institutions should be doing instead of asking the question of what we can do as academics in higher education.

The first strategy is from the folk tale entitled “Smart girl”, when the King orders the girl to visit him, bringing a present and not bringing a present, clothed and not clothed, otherwise he

will execute her. To translate this to an academic context: to participate and not participate, resist but not resist, driven by the imperative to survive. The ambiguity of responses offers space for survival and helps to avoid the confrontation she knows she will lose to the much more powerful enemy. And when you are losing even survival is an achievement.

The second is the normalization of what is actually not normal: Saying it is ok, look on the bright side, do not politicize, just avoid the confrontation. Normalization is an interiorized strategy of the illiberal state which secures the passivity of the individuals.

The third strategy is hiding in an academic ivory tower (objective science) and using technocratic academic language to avoid anything which may be called political. As progressive forces lost the hegemonic fight over defining the meaning of what

“EDUCATION MATTERS BECAUSE IF WE FAIL, WE SLEEPWALK INTO A SITUATION AS WE HAVE IN THE CASE OF RUSSIA.”

politics is, the discussion of academia being at all political is a non-winnable discussion for progressive and critical studies. As a response, claiming that returning to objective science can save critical social sciences and humanities is a mistake.

The fourth option is creating alternative institutions, exercising the politics of separation which worked very well during communism in Eastern Europe. Havel's concept of "anti-politics" suggested non-participation in politics, in a sphere where both now and back then an overpowering state is controlling the resources. As an alternative, building up alternative, nonformal organizations and movements was suggested, as informality makes policing difficult.

How can academic gender studies resist in an illiberal polypore state?

When the state is captured and the illiberal discourse becomes hegemonic, best practices from the past can come in handy. I am inspired by the work of David J. McQuoid-Mason in apartheid South-Africa.¹⁵ He invented the concept of "street law" instead of human rights and built up an educational network that contributed to the fall of the apartheid regime and also became the foundation of the new South Africa.

In comparison to South Africa during apartheid, this new illiberal polypore state has three functional characteristics: the establishment of parallel institutions, and familial and security discourse, all of them gendered. Policy-related questions are presented as security questions. According to its rhetoric, a vigilant government will defeat the threats posed by the EU, the UN, migrants, gender studies professionals, George Soros, etc. The security discourse also affects narratives concerning science policies. It has become routine to call scientists and academics "enemies of the nation" and to personally intimidate scientists who disagree with government policies.¹⁶

IN THIS CONTEXT – when women are not considered citizens in their own right, but only in the familialist discourse – there are still places to resist. Visible and not visible faculty and staff are doing the right things at the right moment: "cunningly" building networks and building resilience. As the illiberal forces capture institutions, our strength is in these invisible networks, thanks to which resistance can come from unexpected places.

Here are some suggestions:

- Strengthening your guild: join a professional organization and strengthen your professional network. The professional network is not your family, you do not need to love and agree with all members, but you should share the basic principles of professional ethics. That firm value is already a blow to "illiberal pragmatism".
- Use your academic authorization to impress and achieve your aims. The new illiberal polypore institutions hack academic authorization systems to undermine professional values and at the same time they build up their parallel system of authorization in order to use it in the hegemonic fight. Do not shy away from using your titles and credentials when participating in public debates and publishing open ads.

- Think carefully about when and how to engage in public discussion as these debates are not about solving issues but rather the debate as a genre is used to disseminate and normalize very problematic ideas. Engage in debates about gender studies but NOT in a framework of "for and against", but rather about issues to be solved with the research coming from gender studies.
- Avoid technical language and terms in English. Illiberal science wins because it uses populist methods: addressing a wider, nonprofessional audience in a popular, understandable language. Try to do the same to speak about very complex issues in understandable language.
- The illiberal takeover is a legal counterrevolution that uses legal methods in order to create an alternative legal framework. The best allies are lawyers as they know that professional credibility is at stake, not only the concrete issue.
- Line up with a few influencers to support you and support you on social media.
- Your classroom and your lecture hall are your space. Using it strategically is shaping the research agenda.
- Use existing organizations and their resources in higher education and academia for your purpose.
- Use existing laws and discourses of "country X is pioneering in human rights" for your purpose and as a threat of PR disasters.
- Illiberal regimes work with conflicts partly because academics are not very combatant and partly because debates are ways of putting forward and normalizing their ideas. Conflict is good (debate, reporting, denunciations, etc.) if you know how to use this political opportunity.
- Accept that some of your colleagues are not your allies. They may have other agendas, being short-sighted or just tired at the moment. Do not offend them but keep the door always open by keeping them in the loop.
- Be ready to be listed as a traitor to the nation and use social media for your purpose and tweet #theOtherHungary showing an example and an alternative.
- Be present on social media and make sure you stay safe. If you receive threats, react already to the first threat, immediately contacting the police and demanding that they do their job. If they do not, post about it.
- Pick a fight you can win on your own terms; do not waste energy on reacting because that is how polypore states with seemingly inexhaustible resources operate. Silence and nonaction can be as powerful as going to the streets!

Conclusion

I argue in this paper that fighting against academic freedom and gender studies, and controlling what is taught and how, is an essential and constitutive part of the illiberal turn. This is not a temporary backlash but a fundamentally new development in the science policy of illiberal regimes. It cannot be fought with the vague promise of success by normalization or calling it a temporary backlash. More importantly, there are no "good old times" of science policy to return to because the neo-liberal-

ization of the academic landscape has already fundamentally changed scientific knowledge production and communication. Over-bureaucratized neoliberal universities and their impact factor-driven, conveyor belt-style mass teaching are products of a bygone area. They are no longer able to create spaces for responsible, critical thinkers and their modus operandi makes the whole critical knowledge production vulnerable.¹⁷ Illiberal science policy has a long-term impact on academic authority: if the state supports the “troll science” with taxpayers’ money and all its quality assurance institutions are based on institutions and systems of academic authority, “troll science” becomes “real science”. Indeed, that is at stake in building up an alternative, parallel science system. Still, the impact factors and international journals, as sites of professional solidarity, are the only tools available to discredit, marginalize and defeat illiberal forces. First, the problems and then threats need to be identified in order to find strategies and tactics to resist and to build a new higher education that matches the requirements of the poly-crisis.

IN THE NEAR FUTURE, what can be expected (if this has not happened yet) is that syllabi are controlled, free applications are advertised on campus to report teachers on your cell phone, and video surveillance systems are being installed in classrooms. An interesting example of an adaptation strategy, the so-called “Smart Girl”-strategy, can be observed among gender studies scholars who are now continuing their same research under the umbrella of “family studies” instead of gender studies. New disciplines like family studies are replacing gender studies first in Russia, then in Hungary and Poland, thus demonstrating the impact of polypore science policy on science.

As we pointed out in our global survey with Ergas et al., “though repressions initiated by the state authorities may lead to the suspension of the programs, it does not mean a complete end of gender studies – it may prompt a further interest among prospective applicants and lead to the decentralization of the neoliberal university and make it more accessible to the public through alternative hubs of knowledge offered through resistance movements. As existing gender studies centers have been weakened or altogether eliminated, for example by policies of *breaking*, *bending* and *de-specification*, scholars have continued to focus on gender in other sites, including universities in exile and informal academies, and to disseminate and debate their work through networks of scholarly exchange.” This will be a long fight, not a sprint but a marathon and to close with Dina Georgis: “[...] if there is no final story, if the story never ends, there is always a better story than the better story”.¹⁸ ❌

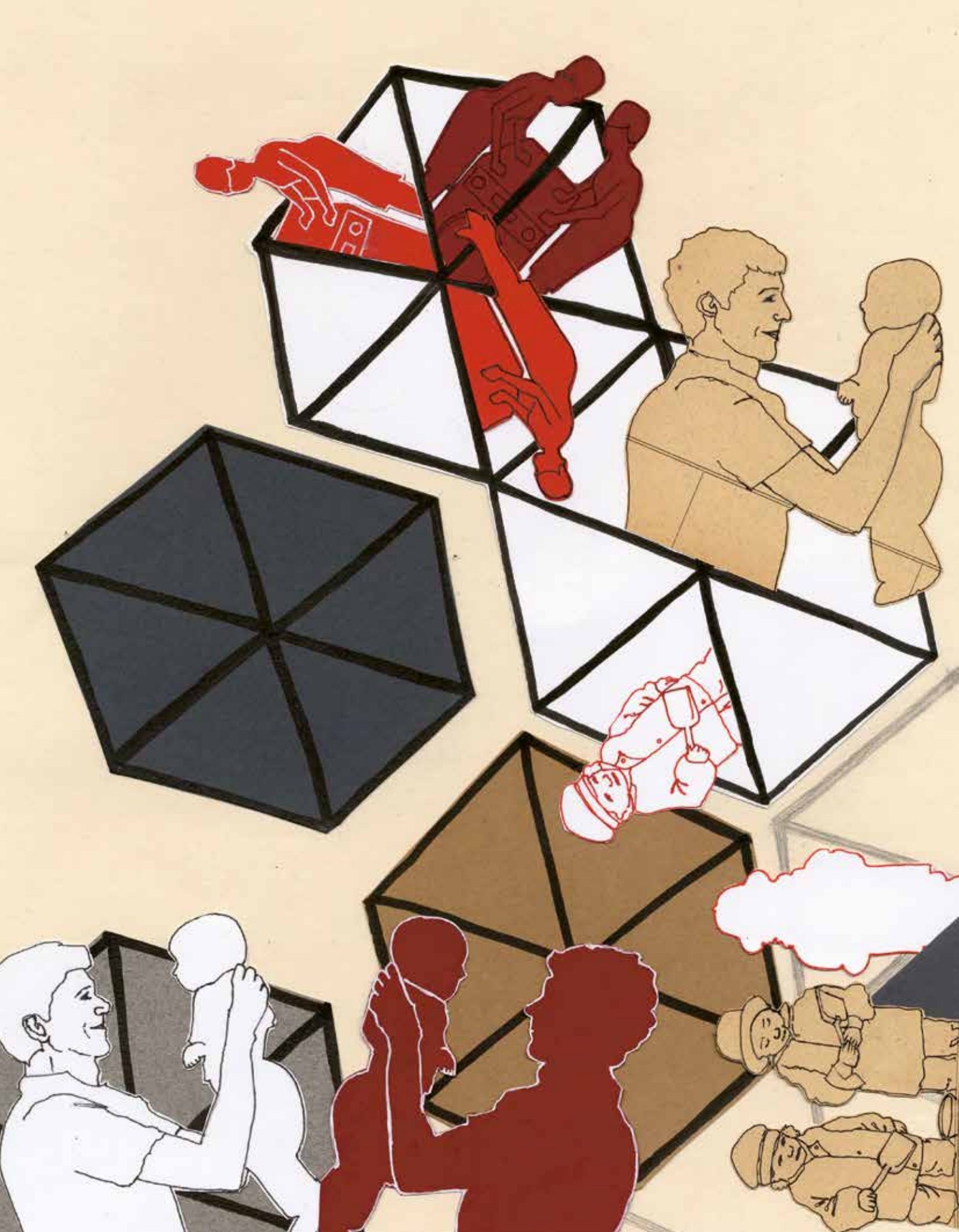
Andrea Pető

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Note: Andrea Pető was awarded an honorary doctorate by Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden. This text is a reworked and elaborated version based on the talk “Why Do Universities and Academic Freedom Matter?”, that she held when the award was presented on September 15, 2022.

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DISCOURSES ABOUT CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION AND CHILD PERSPECTIVE

A comparative study of policy documents that guide social work in Sweden and Germany

by **Sylvia Koziel** and **Ylva Spånberger Weitz**

abstract

This article compares Swedish and German social work, including policy documents, and discusses the policies of these two countries regarding the implementation of children's rights in social work practice. The analysis focuses on two main concepts that are used in social work practice: the concept of a child perspective in Sweden and the concept of participation in Germany. This study aims to investigate the ideas, values and guidelines mediated by political institutions to social workers in the field. The results showed that both the Swedish and German policy documents gave the distinct impression that the concepts had been properly implemented and formed part of child welfare practice. In the Swedish context, the idea of both making children visible and the formal aspects were highlighted, whereas in Germany, participation was related to an educational discourse. However, it is argued here that the discourses suggest that there is unequal relationship between children and adults, and we conclude that social workers must contribute to the child's status as an active subject.

KEYWORDS: Child perspective, children's participation, German social work, Swedish social work, discourse analysis

Introduction

To what extent are children's voices heard in social work practice? Since the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989, there has been an ongoing public debate concerning children's rights and children's participation in social work practice. There has also been a growing demand for children's views to be acknowledged and for a child perspective to be adopted in social work.¹ Both the German Children and Youth Welfare Act and the Swedish Social Services Act give children the right to be heard, and state that the best interests of the child must be considered in decisions that concern them. Both of the studied countries are striving to achieve a better realization of children's rights, with a specific focus on strengthening the opportunities for children to participate. There has been an ongoing discussion in Germany for many years on how to anchor children's rights in the German constitution² and in Sweden, following a similar discussion, the CRC was incorporated into national law on January 1 2020.³ Nevertheless, in Sweden, more than 30 years after ratification of the CRC, and the various political efforts, critical voices have stated that the position of children in social work practice is marginalized and their opportunities for influence and participation on issues concerning them are inadequate.⁴ Likewise, international research about children's participation in child welfare has shown that, despite a broad agreement on the importance of

children's participation in social work practice, the interpretation of what children's participation actually entails varies⁵ and there is a lack of clear guidance regarding how children's participation can be achieved.⁶

PREVIOUS RESEARCH has highlighted several challenges regarding the implementation of children's participation in social work practice. One such challenge is the view of children as vulnerable and in need of protection, meaning they cannot deal with the burden of responsibility that comes with decision-making, and the belief that adults know better, resulting in children's views being questioned when they are not consistent with the views of social workers or when social workers perceive a child as untrustworthy.⁷ Other challenges regarding the implementation of children's participation concern organizational barriers, for example, that child protection services primarily focus on systemic requirements, for example, completing investigations on time instead of ensuring that trustful relationships are established between a child and caseworker or that a high workload and a high level of staff turnover do not allow for the frequency and continuity that is necessary to establish such relationships.⁸ Hence, both organizational conditions related to social policy and societal views about children's needs and skills seem to influence the ways and the extent to which the implementation of children's participation is made possible in practice. Research on children's rights in policy documents aimed at social work practice shows that children are often constructed as part of a family rather than individuals in their own right, and that a strong emphasis on children's participation in policy is not sufficiently followed up in practice.⁹ However, few studies have compared the construction of children and the representation of children's rights between different national contexts.

In this article, the discrepancy between children's legal right to participate and the actual limitations of children's participation in social work practice will be explored through a comparative analysis of national discourses on children's participation in policy documents from two European countries in the Baltic Sea region: Sweden and Germany. The construction of children in policy discourses influences how children's rights and participation are implemented in everyday practice, while social workers also contribute to the construction of children through their daily practices.¹⁰ This article explores and discusses how national discourses about children and children's participation in different socio-political contexts may determine the possibilities and limitations of children's participation in practice. In order to cover a broad range of the national discourses on children and children's participation in the field of social work with children, no specific sub-area in this field has been selected for

analysis. Instead, the focus is on policy documents aimed at any organization that carries out social work with children in the two countries.

Sweden and Germany constitute interesting cases for comparison, given that both countries have a clear political ambition to strengthen children's participation. Yet, there are substantial differences regarding the organization of welfare in the two countries, as well as a divergent ideological foundation. In Sweden, the global influence of the CRC, involving children's right to participate, has led to the development of a national policy that includes the principle of a child perspective (*barnperspektiv*).¹¹ By contrast, this concept is not common in German social work, where the main discussion primarily concerns the issue of children's participation (*Partizipation/Beteiligung*), and where participation is described as a fundamental postulate and key topic of social work practice.¹² Thus, we will focus on these two concepts: child perspective and children's participation.

Aim and research questions

The article aims to explore the various meanings and interpretations of a child perspective and children's participation in different national contexts and to better understand the consequences of the enactment of these concepts in social work

practice with children and families. More specifically, the article will compare and discuss the discourses of a child perspective and of children's participation in Sweden and Germany as they are presented in national policy documents that provide recommendations and guidelines for social work practice with children in a broad range of fields of child welfare. The article provides knowledge on how and why children's participation and child perspective are interpreted and shaped in specific ways due to the impact of national contexts and

national discourses about children and childhood. The following research questions are in focus: How are the concepts of a "child perspective" and "children's participation" constructed? Which ideas, values and guidelines concerning children's participation are mediated by political institutions to professional social workers in these policy documents? How can national differences in discourses be understood and what are the implications of specific discourses for the conception and realization of a child perspective and of children's participation in social work with children and families?

Sweden and Germany as comparative cases

A comparison between Sweden and Germany aims to deepen the knowledge of the potential meanings and practical implementation of the concepts of a child perspective and children's participation. The two countries show similarities that allow for

"SWEDEN AND GERMANY CONSTITUTE INTERESTING CASES FOR COMPARISON, GIVEN THAT BOTH COUNTRIES HAVE A CLEAR POLITICAL AMBITION TO STRENGTHEN CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION."

a suitable point of departure in this study of a shared phenomenon. Both countries have child welfare systems that are primarily based on family support.¹³ At the same time, the countries are part of different types of welfare regimes,¹⁴ which may affect the interpretation of children's right to participate in social work practice. German family policies are more conservative and oriented toward marriage, while Swedish policies are characterized by a more individualistic perspective. In Sweden, social work is primarily organized by the state, at a municipal level. The child welfare system is closely associated with the state. Most professionals who interact with children are obliged by law¹⁵ to report any concerns they may have that a child might be at risk to the social services, even if such concerns are based on unverified information. The social services is legally obliged to initiate an investigation if it receives information that indicates that a child might be at risk.¹⁶ In Germany, on the other hand, social work largely takes place in NGOs.¹⁷ The so-called principle of subsidiarity gives priority to voluntary non-profit organizations and means that "public authorities will only be involved in the production of services when the abilities and resources of the family, the community and organizations to serve their members have been fully exhausted."¹⁸ Furthermore, the different social work traditions of the two countries (educational in Germany and social administrative in Sweden) might affect social workers' interpretation and implementation of children's rights to participate.¹⁹ Such variations create an opportunity to study how discussions on and the implementation of a child perspective and children's participation are described by them from both their partially different background conditions and foundational values.

Children's participation and child perspective in policy and social work practice

Globally, there is a strong emphasis on children's participation in both social work policy and practice.²⁰ In Sweden, both children's participation and the terms *child perspective* and *child rights perspective* are commonly used and promoted.²¹ It is argued that the concept of a child perspective is imprecise²² and is criticized for being used as an ideological concept.²³ There is also a lack of clarity regarding the extent to which children's participation is incorporated in the concept, while in the literature, a distinction is made between child perspective (the adult's view of children) and the child's perspective (the child's own perception of their situation).²⁴ The concept of participation is also seen as ambiguous²⁵ and in social work practice the interpretations of what children's participation entails are diverse.²⁶ For example, children and social workers often have different interpretations of this concept, where children tend to emphasize the importance of being taken seriously and having a proper say in decisions that are important to them, whereas social workers tend to focus on children's participation in terms of gathering and providing information in order to find solutions to problems defined by social workers.²⁷

Although the importance of children's participation and the need for a child perspective in social work are emphasized, research shows that it is difficult to translate these concepts

into practice.²⁸ There is also a lack of clear guidance in policy as to how children's participation or a child perspective is to be achieved.²⁹ The difficulties relate, for example, to a lack of consensus on what children's participation and a child perspective entail.³⁰ Furthermore, among professionals, there may be uncertainty regarding the appropriateness of children's participation in certain situations, something that van Bijleveld³¹ has linked to a view of children as vulnerable objects in need of adult protection. Other studies have shown that children are only allowed to participate if their participation do not affect the interests of adults,³² or that the views of children are given more weight if they are in line with the views of social workers.³³

SEVERAL DILEMMAS have been identified in social work practice regarding children's rights to participation, for instance, the difficulty of combining a *human rights perspective*, which emphasizes children's agency and their active subject position, with a *care perspective*, which emphasizes children's need for protection.³⁴ Related to this dilemma is the tension between constructing children as *active subjects* in their own right or children being *passive objects* in need of adult care and supervision, something that is commonly discussed in the theoretical framework of the sociology of childhood.³⁵ These tensions also manifest in policy documents that aim to guide social work practice,³⁶ where children's participation is strongly promoted, while at the same time children are constructed as part of their family rather than as individuals with their own rights. In line with this, Rasmusson et al.³⁷ show that policies aimed at promoting child-centered social work tend to balance between emphasizing children's rights vs. children's needs, while Sanders and Mace³⁸ argue that the difficulties of translating ideals on children's participation from policy into practice may be understood as a consequence of conflicting imperatives to both protect children and give them a voice.

Most research on children's participation in social work specifically concerns children's participation in child protection investigations³⁹ or during out-of-home care.⁴⁰ Many studies show that children are often not sufficiently involved in decision-making processes during child protection investigations, where social workers typically rely on an adult's description of the child's situation instead of listening to the child's views.⁴¹ Research on children's participation in decisions concerning out-of-home care show similar results.⁴² However, one study⁴³ stated that children reported having better opportunities to participate when they were in foster care compared to the earlier stages of their contact with the child welfare services.



Method

The results presented in this article are based on a discourse analysis that aims to shed light on national discourses about children's rights in Swedish and German social work practice and compare them. More specifically, the analysis focuses on common social work concepts that relate to the opportunity of children to be heard. In Sweden, commonly used concepts to describe this phenomenon are a "child perspective" and "children's participation", whereas in Germany the commonly used concept is "participation". The analysis explores how these concepts are presented in national guidelines and policy documents. In Sweden, this means examining documentation issued by the National Board of Health and Welfare, NBHW (*Socialstyrelsen*), which is the social and healthcare sector authority, and which guides and supports social services in Sweden. In Germany, these policy documents emanate from the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, BMFSFJ (*Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend*), which is a cabinet-level ministry responsible for family politics and which is the highest authority for social welfare, including child welfare. The authorities of both countries publish reports as well as guidelines and recommendations for practitioners in the field of social work and address the development of quality in social services. These two authorities are not identical, because a ministry is the highest national authority, whereas the NBHW in Sweden is an authority under the Ministry of Social Affairs. Nevertheless, the publications of these two national authorities are comparable to each other. Germany also has an authority under the BMFSFJ: the Federal Office for Family and Civil Society Tasks (*Bundesamt für Familie und zivilgesellschaftliche Aufgaben*). This Federal Office prepares publications for the BMFSFJ but does not publish them. For this reason, a comparison between the documents of the Swedish National Board and the German Federal office was not possible. A comparison of the publications on a ministerial level was not appropriate because the purpose of this study is to examine guidelines and recommendations directly aimed at social work practice. In Sweden, such documents are not published on a ministerial level but directly by the NBHW.

The sample

The selected documents (see appendix) were published between 2010 and 2015, a period during which there were intensive public debates about children's rights. This correlates to findings in the National Archives of Sweden: a search in the database of daily newspaper shows that the term "child perspective" was most frequently used during the period 2010–2015, peaking in 2014 with 719 search results, and then steadily declining. In

Germany, a similar picture emerges when searching the digital archives of one of the biggest daily newspapers, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*⁴⁴ for the term *children's participation*. The years 2010–2015 can be seen as a period where ideas about children's rights were intensively discussed and shaped our understanding of these ideas and of their related concepts. Over 20 years has now elapsed since the ratification of the CRC and a new phase had begun in which both countries discussed and planned the incorporation of the CRC in national laws in 2018. While in Sweden the CRC was incorporated in Swedish law in 2020, in Germany the proposal to incorporate the CRC was rejected in 2021 because there was no majority in the parliament.

THE SELECTED DOCUMENTS can be regarded as examples of professional communication⁴⁵ in which political institutions communicated their values and ideas concerning a child perspective and children's participation to social workers and other target groups. Such policy documents can also be seen as representing official understanding, problematization and problem solutions.⁴⁶

The documents were found via the databases of the NBHW and the BMFSFJ by using the search terms *child perspective* and *children's participation*, as well as other related terms such as *children's rights*, *children's voices* and the *child's best interest* in order to ensure that the relevant documents were not excluded. The search generated findings on different welfare and healthcare topics, many of which are not relevant for this study (e.g., dental care). Documents that mainly focused on social work with adults were also excluded. The focus of this study is on social work with children, in other words, child welfare. We selected documents that address either child welfare in general or a specific

domain of child welfare, for example, residential care. Some documents deal with child welfare in general, but in a broader context, for example, Swedish reports directed at both the social services and health care. After applying these criteria, five German and ten Swedish documents were included in the sample (see appendix).

The sample includes reports, guidelines, handbooks, comprehensive brochures, magazines, and other documents. The types and designation of the documents vary but are all described and presented as a source of knowledge for practitioners and include recommendations and guidelines for practice. Some of the Swedish documents were described as a basis for decision-making, not only for social workers but also for politicians and officials. The German brochures and magazines are types of documents that are not common in the Swedish context. The reports from both countries and the Swedish handbook were the most comprehensive documents (200–500 pages), although

“THE YEARS 2010–2015 CAN BE SEEN AS A PERIOD WHERE IDEAS ABOUT CHILDREN’S RIGHTS WERE INTENSIVELY DISCUSSED AND SHAPED OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THESE IDEAS AND OF THEIR RELATED CONCEPTS.”

only certain parts of these documents were relevant for the analysis (for example, just one chapter comprising 30 pages on child welfare). The Swedish guidelines comprised around 40–160 pages, the various Swedish and German documents and brochures comprised around 50–60 pages and the German publications and magazines comprised around 20–50 pages.

Critical discourse analysis

The analysis was inspired by Fairclough's critical discourse analysis,⁴⁷ which focuses on how language functions in maintaining and changing power relations in society, and how language analysis may reveal these processes. Critical discourse analysis comprises three interconnected components: The first component – the normative critique of discourse – which can be described as an examination of power *in* discourse, includes manipulation. In this study, it was important to identify contradictions in social reality as well as gaps between what is said and what is done in practice. The second component, the explanatory critique, meaning the examination of the power *behind* the discourse, includes ideology. Ideologies can be understood as assumptions that are taken for granted as common sense.⁴⁸ Common sense is basically contradictory in nature, as Fairclough highlighted, and helps to maintain an unequal power relationship. The third component is transformative action/praxis, which aims to change existing social reality for the better. There is no direct connection between critical discourse analysis and transformative action, yet the analysis could be seen as a form of practical argumentation that advocates a form of action.⁴⁹

IN OUR ANALYSIS we are interested in exploring how the concepts of a child perspective and participation are described in policy documents and the ideas, values and guidelines that are mediated to professionals through such documents. The analysis was conducted based on the original language of the documents. However, for this article, it was deemed necessary to translate some of the quotes into English. As a first step in the analysis, all documents (both Swedish and German) were searched for the terms “child perspective” and “participation”. The term *child perspective* only appeared, as expected, in the Swedish documents. The term *participation* appeared in both the Swedish and German documents, but more frequently in the German documents. The search yielded relevant sections of text, i.e., descriptions of these two terms were provided and related to the field of child welfare. In many of the documents, particularly the Swedish documents, neither of the terms were frequently used (i.e., 3–10 times), meaning the analysis was easily manageable and, in this context, the use of a term was examined in relation to the specific section or chapter in which it was mentioned. In some of the German documents, the term *participation* frequently appeared (450 times), making it impractical to focus on each specific section in which the term was mentioned; instead,

Table 1: A comparison of discourses in Germany and Sweden

	Sweden	Germany
Main concept	Child perspective	Participation
Type of discourse regarding participation	Formal: legal aspects, degree of participation, documentation, ethical aspects	Pedagogical/educational
View of the child	The (in-) visible child	The educational child
Discourse hybrids	Evidence-based practice	Quality discourse
Discourse regarding methods	Standardization	Diversity of methods

the entire text was examined from beginning to end. This was particularly the case for shorter documents.

In the ongoing analysis, we focused on language, particularly vocabulary, rhetorical figures and argumentation, resulting in the analytical themes *The Concept of a child perspective: making children visible* (Swedish context) and *Participation in Educational Discourse* (German context). These analytical themes gave us an insight into how the concepts are discussed in national contexts and the ideas and ideologies with which they are associated. In Sweden a formal discourse and in Germany a pedagogical discourse were identified. Fairclough also points out that the choice of wording depends on, and helps create, social relationships.⁵⁰ The concept of subject position that Fairclough uses emphasizes that the subject is positioned in a specific way in a discourse, but that people are not conscious of being positioned.⁵¹ In our analysis, it was important to examine the relationship between children/youth and adults (social workers, parents). Within the formal discourse we could identify the view of the child as (in-) visible, while the pedagogical discourse refers to the educational child.

THE TERMS *child perspective* and *participation* appeared in the texts together with the description of methods and, because of our interest in the guidelines that are mediated to social workers, the second analytical theme focuses on *Children's participation and methods*, which says something about how professionals are expected to work with their clients. Fairclough stated that a word cannot be understood as isolated, but that its meaning depends on the relationship of that word to other words. He discusses *a cluster of words*, which are associated with different systems of meaning.⁵² Interdiscursivity should also be mentioned here, which includes hybrid combinations and cases in which elements of different discourses are merged into a single discourse. In our analysis, the cluster of words showed that the formal discourse interplayed with the discussion on evidence-based practice and the standardization of methods, whereas the pedagogical discourse interplayed with the quality discourse that emphasizes a diversity of methods. Table 1 provides an overview and comparison of all concepts developed in the analysis.

Findings

Sweden The concept of a child perspective: making children visible

In the Swedish documents,⁵³ the concept of a child perspective (*barnperspektiv*) was presented as something established and given in social work practice. The documents described the successful implementation and expansion of the concept in recent years and argued that the more a child perspective was adopted, the more it resulted in improved participation and consideration of children's rights. Formulations such as the following quotes are common: "These days, a child perspective is used more than it was previously,"⁵⁴ or social work is "based on a child perspective to a wider extent."⁵⁵

The concept of a child perspective was not explicitly defined in the documents but was instead presented as already being well defined and clear, even if previous research has pointed out the inherent complexity and ambiguity of this concept and describes child perspective as an ideological term that is open to different kinds of interpretation.⁵⁶ In the next quote the term *child perspective* is explained using another complex term: the "best interests of the child". The depiction of a well-defined and clear concept is made through the suggested parity of "best interests of the child" and "child perspective" and through the term "so-called":

Consideration of the best interests of the child, the so-called *child perspective*, also means that we must be more aware of the child's situation when parents contact social services [...].⁵⁷

Not only in this quote, but also in other quotes, the concept of a child perspective appeared in constellations with other terms, for example, in the quote above with the term the *best interests of the child*, in other quotes with the terms *children's rights* or *participation*. In these quotes, the concept of a child perspective was sometimes explained using other complex terms and was not further elucidated.

When the concept of a child perspective was described and explained in the documents, a specific view of children emerged, as well as an idea of the desired relationship between children and adults: that adults should make children more visible.

The different documents contained descriptions about the seeing and the perception of children, as in the fol-

lowing quotes: "The child perspective means that adults *see* the child and keep them *in mind*."⁵⁸ or: [...] "keep the *focus* on the child".⁵⁹ Further:

The child needs to be made *visible* during an investigation. This can mean that you [the social worker] need to look at the child's housing situation, whether the child attends preschool or school, the child's relationships [...].⁶⁰

To make children more visible means, as the quotes illustrate, that social workers keep the child in mind and collect data about the child during an investigation, although keeping

somebody in mind or remembering somebody refers to a process of thinking and perception, instead of concrete interaction with a child (e.g., talking to children). When a child perspective is described more in terms of action, such as in collecting information about a child, the text is unclear about whether interaction with the child in the form of meetings or conversation forms part of this activity.

Moreover, the analysis showed that a child perspective was sometimes presented as a disguised adult perspective. The documents contained different

variations of this phenomenon. Sometimes the differences between a child perspective and an adult perspective were seemingly erased. Sometimes, as in the following quote, the child perspective and the adult perspective were described as being inseparable, which seemingly makes the power imbalance between adults and children invisible.

The child perspective is sometimes in conflict with the adult perspective. Indeed, we cannot see children as isolated from their parents, and parents cannot be seen as isolated from their children. That *adults receive the best possible support* from the social services is also in the best interests of the child.⁶¹

It is remarkable that this quote, which describes child perspective, emphasizes that the adults (in this case, the parents of the child) should receive the best possible support, instead of emphasizing that their child should receive the best possible support (as may be expected to be the focus of a child perspective). To clarify, what seems remarkable is not the assumption that support for parents may also, in turn, achieve the best interests of the child, but that a child perspective here is described as being essentially interconnected with the adult perspective. In this quote, child perspective in the context of parent-child relationships is depicted as a shared perspective for children and adults, and children and parents are therefore depicted as an inseparable unit.



Children's participation and methods

In the Swedish documents, children's participation was primarily described in quite formal terms. This means, inter alia, that the extent of participation was an issue, and both the positive and negative aspects of the implementation of children's participation were addressed. Broadly speaking, the extent of participation is described as varying depending on the field of child welfare: for example, while the opportunities for youth to participate in the planning and implementation of services and activities are described as good in general, out-of-home placements for unaccompanied refugee children and care for criminal youth are described as having a lack of participation. The issues raised in the documents are about the lack of respectful treatment of children, as well as difficulties establishing a trustful relationship between a child and their social worker.

Participation, as described in the documents, means taking the children's views into account and documenting them. Participation is also described in technical terms and as an administrative process, as a procedure on how participation should be carried out. For example, the following was determined:

Finally, the child's opinions about the investigation, the planned interventions and the proposal for a decision shall be stated in the documentation, as well as how the case worker has taken such opinions into account. The opinion of the young person or child shall be documented, as well as their participation.⁶²

The realization of children's participation has been highlighted as an ongoing challenge in the documents, and is presented as something that social services need to become better at reflecting on and constantly aiming to improve. The documents contain a lot of rhetoric on efforts to improve children's participation, yet there is very little discussion about what such participation should entail or how to improve the opportunities for children to participate. At the same time, participation is sometimes described as something risky that could harm a child if it is given too much responsibility, as the following quote illustrates:

When it comes to children there is need to find a balance, so that they are able to participate without being given too much responsibility for their life situation.⁶³

Regarding the methods that were mentioned in the documents, it was primarily standardized methods and evidence-based practice that were discussed in order to improve children's participation, which is not surprising since evidence-based practice is a part of a broader policy strategy in Sweden, which was also stated in the documents.

In 2013, the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and County Councils (SKL) and municipalities began their initiative to support an evidence-based practice, which includes, for example, allocating state funds for

regional and local development work. [...] The work focuses on three areas: 1. Strengthening the participation of children and young people with disabilities [...]⁶⁴

In the documents, standardized assessment instruments in general and the Integrated Children's System (called BBIC in Sweden), a manual-based model which includes numerous standard forms, were described as important instruments for the participation of children (and parents):

Participation, clarity and transparency are keywords in BBIC. The participation of the child and their legal guardian is important when planning future collaboration with authorities and others.⁶⁵

In the Swedish documents, children's participation is associated with the use of standardized methods and working procedures. The quote above is also an illustration of the formal approach toward children's participation, in which participation is mentioned together with terms such as *clarity* and *transparency*, which in this context refers to correct procedures and documentation in child welfare work.

Germany Participation in educational discourse

In the German documents, we noted extensive use of the term *participation*, both as a loan word (*Partizipation*) and as word used in everyday speech (*Beteiligung*). Overall, there is a range of expressions that include the term *participation*, for instance: *the process of participation*, *the culture of participation*, *participation skill*, *the landscape of participation*, *the pedagogy of participation*, *participation capability*, *e-participation* (meaning online participation), etc.

In some German documents, the concept of participation is strongly associated with the concept of education (*Bildung*) and the educational approach in social work. These documents state that social work practice should promote the educational processes of children, and participation and education are described as being interdependent:

Education needs participation and participation promotes education. Without participation, the educational processes of children and youth are restrained.⁶⁶

Furthermore, participation is identified as:

the key to successful educational processes,⁶⁷

and is sometimes even described as being coequal:

Participation is also always an educational process.⁶⁸

In the German documents the interdependency of participation and education is presented as something that is obvious and, in this sense, participation is also understood as a process, a recur-

rent term in the above quotes and in other documents. Here, it is important to mention that education (*Bildung*) should not be misunderstood as school education. The socio-pedagogical conception of *Bildung* refers to critical educational theories that describe *Bildung* as a critical and self-reflexive process of own experiences, needs, interests, social norms, etc.⁶⁹ Public care is discussed in the documents as a secure place in which participation can and should be tried and acted upon. To exemplify more specifically what educational processes could be referring to, in the documents we found descriptions of public care for children that was described as a place for education in which social skills could be developed:

Adults, children and youth possess new skills in the process of participation. Children and youth will learn to formulate their interests and to stand up for them. When children and youth participate, adults will experience new processes of negotiation.⁷⁰

In this quote we find the idea that participation not only refers to children's participation but a process that covers both adults and children, in which adults and children will learn something and in which the relationship between adults and children will be changed. The comment that "adults will experience new processes of negotiation" can be interpreted as an expectation of a decline of power for adults, because of the need to negotiate with children.

When explaining participation, the power relationship between children and adults is a recurrent topic in the documents. The aim of participation was described as being to enhance young people's participation in decision-making, which was also deemed to require adults to share some of their power with them. However, there are other examples in which it becomes apparent that adults are expected to regulate the degree of participation of children. For example, one document stated that adults should tell children how much influence they will be given, and the role they will play in the process: whether they are allowed to be involved in decision-making, or whether they will merely be given the opportunity to formulate their own ideas. The following quote states:

Children and youth should clearly understand the possibilities and boundaries of their participation.⁷¹

The documents also pointed out that participation is only possible if social workers really want it, and that every institution needs to clarify how they understand participation. Indeed, this shows the boundaries of participation, the dependence on adults and the risk of arbitrariness when it comes to implementing the concept. In the German documents too, we found references to the difficulties experienced in different fields of child welfare. There is a high demand to implement children's participation in out-of-home care (e.g., residential care) compared to other fields of child welfare. In services for children in out-of-home care, fear of the negative consequences of children's participation was also described.

Children's participation and methods

Overall, the idea of a diversity of methods was dominant in the German documents. In one document,⁷² methods such as child conferences, future workshops and children's councils are described as being suitable for the realization of children's participation in different fields of social work. No specific methods were mentioned in relation to social services. Instead, it was stated that:

A wide range of different forms of participation enables broad participation.⁷³

Also, emphasis was placed on the need to develop new methods:

New methods need to be tried out and new knowledge needs to be generated.⁷⁴

The German documents suggested that there is not one single method of participation, but that such methods need to be continuously developed in practical work. In the documents we also found descriptions of various target groups and the goals of different methods. For example, it was suggested that methods of participation should be chosen in accordance with the target group and in relation to the child's stage of development and education. In the following quote, some goals have been formulated:

The methods should be chosen in such a way that makes them accessible and they should not be unilateral (e.g. focusing on language and writing) because this could contribute to the exclusion of children and youth. The methods adopted should be diverse and should address the different senses and encourage and enable action.⁷⁵

According to this quote, the general goals for methods of participation seem to be inclusion, both inclusion that "makes them accessible" to different services and the inclusion of all children regardless of their age or ability. Another goal is to "enable ac-



tion”, which can be interpreted as meaning that participation is seen as an activity, not just passive involvement. The documents also discuss the need for gender-specific methods.⁷⁶

IN THE GERMAN DOCUMENTS the description of methods of participation includes the terms *quality* and *quality standards*, which are also part of a broader national policy. German quality standards for participation in child welfare (and other fields) were developed in the context of the National Action Plan (NAP) from 2005 to 2010, as well as later.⁷⁷ The NAP was developed by the *Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth* as well as the federal government, the state governments, and municipalities. Also, the Children’s Commission of the German Bundestag, NGOs, the science society and children were involved in the development of the NAP. The following quote describes the national policy:

In order to promote the quality of children and youth participation throughout society, an NAP working group developed both general and specific quality standards and recommendations for practice [including child welfare] [...] The next step will be the distribution of these quality standards in political and professional committees, in professional practices and in education and further education.⁷⁸

The next quote describes the relationship between participation and quality:

In Germany, children and youth participation is an inherent part of quality development and is therefore an essential mark of quality for all fields of child welfare.⁷⁹

This quote illustrates that the realization of children’s participation is deeply intertwined with the idea of quality development in different fields (of social work) and that participation is a crucial element of quality development: an “essential mark”.

In concrete terms, the ambition to ensure children’s right to participate has been consistent throughout the formulation of the quality standards, and one document discussed this more specifically.⁸⁰ In this document, we found 14 quality standards, which can mainly be understood as general aims, attitudes and ambitions for practitioners. For example, the document stated that efforts should be made to enable participation for all children, that decisions should be transparent and that methods should be attractive to all the various target groups, etc. Some quality standards included concrete guidelines and strategies such as the need for evaluation and documentation, but also qualification through the development of skills, certificates of

good practice, development of networks, etc. A few quality standards specifically referred to children, for example, that children who meet professionals should be able to choose topics that are relevant to them and, secondly, that professionals should ensure that children’s participation leads to personal benefits for the child.

Discussion

Concerning the normative critique of discourses, which aims to identify gaps and contradictions between what is said and what is done in practice, in both the Swedish and German documents, child perspective and children’s participation are described as

common sense and something that should be taken for granted in child welfare practice. In contrast, research shows that children rarely have the opportunity to participate in social work practice.⁸¹

According to Fairclough, the explanatory critique of discourses entails the investigation of the power behind the discourse, including ideology. The Swedish concept of a child perspective was described as common sense in the policy documents and the emphasis on a child perspective was described as self-evident. This also means that descriptions of the complexity and in-

herent dilemmas of the concept were not addressed as an issue of importance, nor was it acknowledged that child perspective in relation to professional action may be a complex issue that requires reflexivity.

As Fairclough has noted, common sense functions as everyday knowledge while also being essentially contradictory. In the Swedish documents, this contradiction is evident in the description of what a child perspective means in practice and of the methods needed to implement a child perspective. While the child perspective in practice is described as a process of thinking and perception (“see the child” and “keep in mind”) – a process that per definition is not standardized – nevertheless, standardized methods were presented as being adequate to achieve a child perspective. These methods were presented as being beneficial for participation, but the relationship between standardization and participation remained unexplained.

THE GERMAN DOCUMENTS showed contradictions within the educational discourse, which stated that there was a connection between participation and education (*Bildung*). The educational discourse signaled an openness to various educational processes, learning experiences, etc. and presented a variety of methods for achieving participation in practice. Within the educational discourse, children should be encouraged toward action. As far as the power relationship between children and adults is concerned, the image of a more balanced and equal relationship emerged; within the educational discourse, adults were also pre-

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sented as being in need of development, for example, learning participatory attitudes, and participation was described as a process of mutual learning. At the same time, the descriptions of the relationship between children and practitioners also revealed that participation is perceived as being regulated by adults and that the subject position of the “educational child” can barely be understood as an active subject position in line with the framework of childhood sociology.⁸²

These contradictions can be understood through the term *interdiscursivity*, in which elements of different discourses are merged into an interdiscursive hybrid combination.⁸³ This phenomenon appeared in the policy documents of both countries. In the Swedish documents, the discourse on child perspective was merged with the discourse on evidence-based practice (EBP), which promotes the use of standardized methods. Speaking of how to achieve and fully realize a child perspective in social work practice, it could be argued whether the discourse on evidence-based practice has merely colonized the discourse on child perspective. The reason why standardized methods are being presented as successful can be interpreted in light of the fact that the NBHW has been a driving force in the implementation of EBP in Sweden and can be understood as a way of strengthening the NBHW’s position in the struggle over the interpretation of a child perspective and how it should be put into practice. As Eliasson-Lappalainen⁸⁴ has noted, researchers have been in a kind of “defensive battle” due to their lack of consensus regarding the dominant position of this positivistic approach to methodology advocated by the NBHW. Regarding the German context, the educational discourse has merged with the confines of the quality discourse. The quality management discussion in Germany focuses on efficiency and effectiveness and has economic connotations.⁸⁵

BOTH THE QUALITY management in Germany and the EBP discussions in Sweden can be seen in light of a weakened professionalization and a loss of professional autonomy.⁸⁶ Otto & Schnurr⁸⁷ state that the introduction of quality management could lead to a weakened professionalization, in which the ideal of autonomous social workers is replaced by the ideal of social workers oriented by quality guidelines. Nevertheless, each country seems to place an emphasis on different aspects; while Sweden focuses on standardization and evidence-based methods, Germany focuses on a diversity of methods. It is possible that the definition of the field of child welfare has had an impact here; German child welfare definition includes more (preventive) fields and is more diverse in principle.

The discourse analysis has shown how language contributed to the maintenance of unequal power relationships between

children and adults. In reference to the sociology of childhood,⁸⁸ which describes different views about children in terms of active-passive and subject-object, the Swedish documents contained another two terms: *visible* and *invisible*. The application of a child perspective was described as a process of making children visible. Indeed, making children visible does not necessarily mean that children will talk or interact with a social worker, as the analysis has shown. The concept of the “visible child” does not automatically include a view of children as active subjects. The idea of a child perspective, as well as the interconnected subject position of a “visible child”, has a low ambition when it comes to the involvement and participation of children. Thus, this subject position may be described as marginalized. To “see” and to “think about” the child does not take into account the first step in Hart’s⁸⁹ ladder of participation, which is manipulation, and which should imply that the child is present.

Reflection on the method – comparing apples to apples?

International comparisons must address the issue that it is difficult to determine whether what we study is comparable.⁹⁰ This study has compared two different concepts (the child perspective in Sweden and children’s participation in Germany) on the

basis that these are the dominant concepts following the ratification of the CRC in each national context.⁹¹ Nevertheless, this comparison is not unproblematic. The term *child perspective* is not common in Germany, whereas in Sweden the term *child participation* is commonly used and has thus been analyzed in relation to the term *child perspective*. An alternative would have been to focus solely on the concept of participation in both Sweden and Germany, which we considered a lesser alternative because of the common use of the concept of a child perspective in Swedish social work. However, considering a range of different concepts related to children’s rights, instead of just two

specific concepts, would probably have contributed to further insights into how the CRC is interpreted in different national contexts and in social work practice.

Furthermore, we compared different types of documents that also need to be problematized. Some documents are similar, for example, official reports, while other documents are difficult to compare, for example, the German brochures and magazines which have no Swedish equivalent. These brochures and magazines can be seen as more commonplace and less scientific and did not provide as many rich descriptions of the concepts as the other documents. Still, the *Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth* publishes these kinds of documents in order to disseminate knowledge about participation,

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which is why these documents were included in the study.

2010 to 2015 was a period in which ideas about children's rights were intensively discussed. However, focusing on this period only could also be regarded as a limitation. However, it may be assumed that the various ideas explored in this study may still have an impact on child welfare practice since child welfare systems and the traditions associated with social work practice do not change quickly. It is hard to say what kind of impact the documents have on social work practice. However, Bergmark and Lundström⁹² argue that the Swedish NBHW has a strong position in Sweden and significantly impacts the development of social work, while similar guidelines from authorities in countries with strong NGOs (which is true in the case of Germany, even though Bergmark & Lundström discussed the example of the USA), do not have such a strong impact on social work practice. In Germany, NGOs are strongly involved in the debate about children's rights in social work⁹³ and the "National Coalition Deutschland" (www.dkhw.de), for example, is a network comprising more than 120 NGOs that work toward the implementation of children's rights in Germany. It is possible that the strong position of NGOs in Germany weakens the position of guidelines from the authorities. Furthermore, the documents we analyzed include guidelines that are not mandatory for social workers to use and we therefore do not know much about the extent to which they actually influence practice.

Conclusions and implications

This article provides insight into how ideas about the implementation of children's rights in social work practice is interpreted in different national contexts. It builds on an analysis of policy documents regarding child welfare and specifically the presentation of the two main concepts used in social work practice in each country: child perspective in Sweden and children's participation in Germany. The study indicates that national discourses have consequences for shaping ideas about how a child perspective in Sweden and children's participation in Germany is to be understood in relation to social work practice, the methods that are promoted, and how children are positioned in relation to these concepts.

The interpretation of the concepts needs to be understood in relation to the organization of the child welfare system, as well as the definition and tradition of social work in each country. The Swedish documents mainly deal with child welfare investigations and the BBIC method, and the focus is on the exercise of authority through the social services, which goes hand in hand with the administrative tradition of social work and the organization of municipal social services. The more formal nature of the discourse on participation in Sweden can be understood against this background. The German documents refer to a greater variety of fields of child welfare and the diverse work of different NGOs, in which the exercise of authority is not an issue (e.g., preventive youth social work, preschool, etc.). Against this background, the comprehensive interpretation of participation and the variety of methods are understandable. It is also worth mentioning the different definitions of children in national law;

whereas the Swedish Social Welfare Act defines everyone under the age of 18 as a child, the German Child Welfare Act differentiates between children (up to the age of 14), youth (up to the age of 18) and young adults (up to the age of 27). This means that participation in a German child welfare context involves a larger group of people that includes young adults, which can explain the broader approach to participation. Furthermore, we can assume that the German concept of participation is based on both the educational tradition and on the preventive approach of social work.

THE DISCOURSE ANALYSIS has shown that children, in both the Swedish and German documents, were relegated to weak subject positions that maintained existing power relationships between children and adults. The invisibility of children, and the fact that children and parents are mentioned together, is also described in other studies of policy documents.⁹⁴ For social workers, this means that they need to be aware of their own views on their clients and consciously contribute to the child's status as an active subject. Furthermore, a reflection on standardized methods is necessary and a range of methods based on professional judgment about the opportunities for children to become active subjects ought to be promoted.

This analysis of policy document has provided insight into the ways in which the CRC and global concepts such as children's participation can be understood. This paves the way for reflection on and improvement of social work practice. An awareness of the different interpretations of the concepts shows the complexity of these issues but can also be used for transformative action to change the existing reality for the better. ✖

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appendix

Documents from Socialstyrelsen [the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare]

Title: Swedish/English (authors' translation)	Type of document, number of pages	Topic/area	Target group
S1: <i>Lägesrapport 2011, Hälso- och sjukvård och socialtjänst</i> (2011) [Progress report 2011, Health care and social services]	Report, 200 pages	Health care and social services	Mainly government and parliament, but also decision-makers on a national level, as well as other target groups
S2: <i>Tillsynsrapport 2012, Hälso- och sjukvård och socialtjänst</i> (2012) [Supervision report 2012, Health care and social services]	Report, 67 pages	Healthcare and social services	Mainly government and Parliament, but also decision-makers and accountable managers on a national and local level
S3: <i>Dokumentation av barnets bästa inom socialtjänsten</i> (2012) [Documentation of the child's best interests in social services]	Guide, 40 pages	Social services, specifically child welfare and family law	Case workers and managers
S4: <i>Program för trygg och säker vård i familjehem och hem för vård eller boende. Redovisning av regeringsupdrag</i> (2012) *[Programs for safe and secure care in out-of-home care and residential care. Reporting of government assignments]	Materials for improvement including a guide, legal regulations, general advice and educational materials, 55 pages	Residential care, out-of-home care	Regional development managers, social services, educators
S5: <i>Samverka för barns bästa — en vägledning om barns behov av insatser från flera aktörer</i> (2013) [Collaboration for the best interests of the child — a guide to children's need for services from several actors]	Guide, 104 pages	Healthcare, social services, schools	Accountable healthcare managers, social services and schools
S6: <i>Barns och ungas hälsa, vård och omsorg 2013</i> (2013) [Children and young people's health, nursing and care 2013]	Report, 306 pages	Public health, social conditions, environmental health, healthcare and social services	Mainly government and parliament, but also officials and practitioners in municipalities, county councils, researchers, public authorities and organizations
S7: <i>Placerade barns skolgång och hälsa — ett gemensamt ansvar</i> (2013) [Placed children's schooling and health — a shared responsibility]	Guide, 164 pages	Children in residential care and out-of-home care	Concerned parties in social services, schools and health care
S8: <i>Tillståndet och utvecklingen inom hälso- och sjukvård och socialtjänst</i> (2014) [The condition and development in health care and social services]	Report, 223 pages	Healthcare, social services	Decision-makers on a national level, as well as other target groups
S9: <i>Från enskilt ärende till nationell statistik. Barns behov i centrum (BBIC)</i> (2015) [From individual case to national statistics. Integrated Children System (BBIC)]	Report, 126 pages	Integrated Children System	Social workers in child welfare
S10: <i>Utreda barn och unga. Handbok för socialtjänstens arbete enligt socialtjänstlagen</i> (2015) [Investigate children and young people. Handbook for the work of the social services according to the Social Services Act]	Handbook, 214 pages	Child welfare investigations	Social workers, managers, politicians on the social welfare board

**Documents from Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend
[the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth]**

Title German/English (authors' translation)	Type of Document, number of pages	Topic/area	Target group
G1: <i>Perspektiven für ein kindergerechtes Deutschland. Abschlussbericht des Nationalen Aktionsplans „Für ein kindergerechtes Deutschland 2005–2010“</i> (2010) [Perspectives for a child-friendly Germany. Final report of the national action plan “For a child-friendly Germany 2005–2010”]	Report, 128 pages	Child-friendly Germany, strategies on national and local level, for example, in social services, NGOs, schools, preschools, urban planning	No target group specified
G2: <i>immer dabei – Das Magazin für kindergerechte Kommunen</i> (2010) [always there – the magazine for child-friendly municipalities]	Magazine, 36 pages	Child-friendly municipalities, (e.g., social services, NGOs, schools, pre-schools, urban planning)	No target group specified
G3: <i>beteiligen – Themenheft 1 für kindergerechte Kommunen</i> (2010) [participate – Issue 1 for child-friendly municipalities]	Publications for the practice, 20 pages	Child-friendly municipalities, (e.g., social services, NGOs, schools, pre-schools, urban planning)	No target group specified
G4: <i>14. Kinder- und Jugendbericht. Bericht über die Lebenssituation junger Menschen und die Leistungen der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe in Deutschland</i> (2013) [14. Children and Youth Report. Report on the life situation of young people and the services of child and youth welfare in Germany]	Report, 519 pages	Child welfare, children's living conditions	Actors on a national level, in federal states and on a local level (national institutions, agencies, professionals, service providers and science institutions)
G5: <i>Qualitätsstandards für Beteiligung von Kindern und Jugendlichen. Allgemeine Qualitätsstandards und Empfehlungen für die Praxisfelder Kindertageseinrichtungen, Schule, Kommune, Kinder- und Jugendarbeit und Erzieherische Hilfen</i> (2015) [Quality standards for the participation of children and young people. General quality standards and recommendations for preschools, schools, municipalities and child and youth welfare]	Brochure, 56 pages	Preschools, schools, municipalities, child and youth welfare services	All actors who want to develop children's rights in their working field

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ENHANCING DEMOCRACY?

European presidents and national referendums from 2000 to 2020

by **Paul Tap**

abstract

Referendums have been extensively analyzed from multiple perspectives and different studies have discussed their various features and types and how different actors use them. However, little attention has been paid to investigating the reasons why political elites (i.e., European presidents) initiate referendums. Thus, this article explores the intentions and aims by analyzing 18 referendums called by European presidents from 2000 to 2020. Secondary sources, such as media reporting, official documents, and scientific works, have been analyzed using a comparative case study approach. The results indicate that presidents usually have strategic objectives when they call referendums, and that the initiation of a referendum is influenced by the anticipated short- or long-term effects that could result from the referendum.

KEYWORDS: Democracy, EU, presidents, referendums, strategic motivations.

Introduction

Referendums are used as instruments of political decision-making and entail the action of casting a Yes or No vote on a specific issue. They allow citizens' votes to be transformed into legitimate political outcomes characterized by either the adoption or the rejection of a specific policy.¹ Referendums are usually called when a particular decision about a constitutional provision needs to be taken. Referendums could be described as top-down processes when they are called by official actors (political parties or presidents) and bottom-up processes when they are initiated by citizens.² Referendums have been extensively studied from multiple perspectives. Some studies focus on the categories, forms, and legislative provisions of referendums while others underline how referendums should be employed in contemporary representative democracies.³ In spite of this interest for studying referendums there is still little knowledge about why political elites (i.e., European presidents) initiate them.

This article attempts to fill this gap in the literature by answering the following question: why do European presidents call referendums? This is an appropriate basis for conducting this

research because referendums have been extensively initiated in Europe over the last 20 years (for details, see the research design). Also, there is a general understanding of these processes in Europe and, for this reason, variations in political culture are avoided. It is also important to study these processes in order to understand more clearly whether the reasons why presidents call referendums are in line with democratic principles or whether they are only used as a means of achieving narrow political objectives.

THIS ARTICLE ANALYZES all national referendums called by European presidents over the last 20 years (i.e., from 2000 to 2020). The referendums were analyzed using qualitative methods, i.e., a comparative case study approach, which is a suitable approach because it allows researchers to conduct a comparative analysis of different cases. The analysis is based on secondary literature (i.e., official documents/reports, the media, and scientific works) and the data have been analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

The article's relevance is enhanced by its empirical and theoretical contributions. At the empirical level, the article provides a better understanding of why European presidents call referendums. This work is the first attempt to answer this question by focusing on all referendums called by European presidents over the last 20 years. At the theoretical level, the article proposes an analytical framework that could be used in other studies that conduct similar analyses. Accordingly, the paper contributes to the literature in terms of the material (i.e., data about the referendums) used for analysis, as well as perspectives on how it has been analyzed (i.e., the analytical framework and research design).

The article is structured as follows: The coming first section reviews the literature on the reasons why referendums are called and presents the analytical framework; the second section focuses on the research design and the third section focuses on the analysis. The conclusions section discusses the major findings of the article, underline its limitations, and proposes further research avenues.

Different reasons for calling referendums

Referendums may be called by political actors when they need to address controversial issues that could cause conflicts. In such cases, referendums are used as instruments of mediation and they allow the population to make a sensitive political decision.⁴ The 1971 referendum in Denmark or the referendums held in Taiwan in 2008 are good examples.⁵ Also, the 2016 Brexit referendum could be placed in this category because it was used as an instrument of mediation intended to avoid potential divisions

in the Conservative Party generated by the UK's departure from the European Union (EU).⁶ Similarly, political actors could use a referendum as an instrument for outmaneuvering their political opponents or destabilizing political opposition. Evidence from Bulgaria and Slovakia shows how political parties used referendums as a means of gaining an electoral advantage to overcome their political opponents.⁷ Also, evidence from Poland emphasizes the way in which President Bronisław Komorowski tried to outmaneuver his rivals and win a second term in office by calling a referendum that he believed would improve the likelihood of receiving support from the electorate.⁸

Referendums could be used for the purpose of consultation or negotiation. The 2003 Swedish referendum concerning adoption of the euro aimed to consult the population regarding this issue and show them that their voice mattered. Even though the referendum was consultative, the political actors took into account the outcome of the referendum and the euro was not adopted.⁹ The referendums held in 1992 in South Africa and in 1998 in Northern Ireland are other examples of referendums that were used to consult the population regarding the solutions to be taken for specific political and social issues.¹⁰ Also, ex-Catalonian president Carles Puigdemont called the 2017 independence referendum because he wanted to use the referendum as a means of negotiating with the central authorities.¹¹ Referendums are also used to gain legitimacy or as a means of further empowering political actors.

Findings from Romania, Poland and Hungary explain how political parties turned the outcomes of referendums into means of increasing their power(s) and for legitimizing specific courses of action which required formal approval of the citizens.¹²

ANOTHER REASON WHY referendums are called is their ability to control/set political agendas. Political actors may initiate referendums when they want to introduce/reject a specific policy that requires approval by the population before it can be enacted. Referendums may also be called when political actors want to bypass normal parliamentary processes and overcome their political opponents who hold a majority of seats in a political setting.¹³ Findings from Latin America show that presidents often call referendums for agenda-setting reasons that usually revolve around institutional and political changes.¹⁴ In such cases, citizens could also become actors who use referendums as a means of promoting innovative political proposals or for controlling and monitoring the accountability and trustworthiness of political actors.¹⁵ For instance, in Switzerland, citizens have the right to amend the entire Federal Constitution via a referendum if they consider that legislators are not effectively representing their interests.¹⁶

“IN SWITZERLAND, CITIZENS HAVE THE RIGHT TO AMEND THE ENTIRE FEDERAL CONSTITUTION VIA A REFERENDUM IF THEY CONSIDER THAT LEGISLATORS ARE NOT EFFECTIVELY REPRESENTING THEIR INTERESTS.”

Referendums can be used as a means of political mobilization/ participation by political actors and citizens. On the one hand, political actors could initiate referendums to stimulate the idea of engagement in political processes.¹⁷ Findings from the US shows that the frequent initiation of referendums can positively impact the long-term engagement of citizens in political processes and has the potential to cure political alienation.¹⁸ On the other hand, citizen-initiated referendums could trigger the participation of dissatisfied citizens since these processes could be deprived of any political control and influence.¹⁹

An analytical framework

Presidents are among some of the most influential political actors. Although their political influence differs according to the type of regime, due to their visibility and the fact that they have been granted right to call referendums, their political voice is considered important. It could therefore be assumed that they are less likely to call referendums in order to merely increase their voice in politics or to empower citizens and increase their level of awareness of political and social realities.²⁰ Following these arguments, and in line with what the literature says about the most common reasons for calling a referendum, this article suggests that presidents call referendums in order to achieve specific strategic goals, such as: 1) overcoming political deadlocks, 2) outmaneuvering the competition, 3) setting the agenda, 4) increasing their legitimacy or 5) reinforcing their power(s).

Regarding the first goal, political deadlocks emerge when a controversial issue appears on the political agenda and legislators cannot identify a suitable solution to resolve the issue.²¹ In order to avoid internal or external conflicts, presidents may act as a mediator between the political actors and call a referendum in order to let the citizens decide on how the issue in question could be resolved. Presidents who use referendums in this way transform them into problem-solving instruments/instruments of mediation.²² Outmaneuvering the competition and achieving electoral success are two key objectives for presidents. They may call referendums when the electorate has shown an interest in specific policies or social change that were not properly addressed by political rivals.²³ By employing this strategy, presidents are able to increase their visibility and electoral support and could become more appealing in the eyes of the electorate.

SETTING A POLITICAL AGENDA may be another strategic reason why presidents initiate referendums. This could be because a president wants to block, enact or remove a specific policy from the political agenda. Similarly, presidents may use a referendum in this way when they want to circumvent the normal parliamentary processes that could hinder their ability to achieve their

goals.²⁴ Legitimacy is synonymous with the right to rule and when legitimacy is achieved, citizens start believing that the political actors are righteous, trustworthy and should be obeyed.²⁵ For this reason, presidents may use referendums as a means of increasing their legitimacy based on a trustworthy relationship between themselves and the citizens. By calling a referendum, presidents indirectly support the notion that they care about the citizens and are seeking their approval of various potential courses of action.²⁶ Similarly, presidents could use referendums as a means of reinforcing their political position. Even though the reinforcement of power is seen as a plebiscitary use of referendums, presidents that use referendums in this way tend to expand the power of the executive by promoting specific policies through them.²⁷

Research design

This article seeks to explain why European presidents initiated referendums from 2000 to 2020. There are three reasons why this research was conducted: First, recent research has shown that between 1793 and 2019, 630 national referendums were held in Europe. Also, over the last 20 years, referendums started being used more frequently compared to the period before 2000.²⁸

For this reason, the European continent represents a good case for studying the use of referendums because of the many referendums held in recent centuries in general, and over the last 20 years, in particular. The latter argument directly enhances the relevance of the period of analysis (2000 to 2020) since a higher number of referendums have been called over the last 20 years.

Second, European states share a universal political culture. Although there are a variety of regimes with different democratic qualities, the

understanding of a referendum is the same: casting a Yes or No vote on a specific issue. For this reason, we can look at the whole of Europe in order to conduct our research because it is very unlikely that there will be different understandings of such a political process. Third, to the best of my knowledge, no studies have analyzed the reasons why European presidents called referendums from 2000 to 2020 and this article represents a first attempt to address this issue.

The cases selected for analysis concern all referendums called by European presidents from 2000 to 2020 (i.e., 18 referendums). In order to identify the various referendums, I checked all referendums held in Europe and only selected those referendums that were initiated by presidents. Only two countries were not included in the analysis: Lichtenstein and Switzerland. These countries have particular forms of governance and a very specific history regarding the use of referendums. For these reasons, their particular settings could not be generalized to other

“BY CALLING A REFERENDUM, PRESIDENTS INDIRECTLY SUPPORT THE NOTION THAT THEY CARE ABOUT THE CITIZENS AND ARE SEEKING THEIR APPROVAL OF VARIOUS POTENTIAL COURSES OF ACTION.”

Table 1: Referendums called by European presidents from 2000 to 2020

Country	Date	Summary	Binding/ Non-binding	Outcome	Yes (%)	No (%)	Turnout (%)
Belarus	17.10.2004	Unlimited presidential terms	Binding	Adopted	88.91	11.09	90.28
Bulgaria	25.10.2015	Introduction of electronic voting	Non-binding	Adopted	69.52	25.99	39.34
France	24.09.2000	Reduction of presidential term	Binding	Adopted	73.21	26.79	30.19
France	29.05.2005	Ratification of the European Treaty	Binding	Failed	45.32	54.68	69.36
Georgia	05.01.2008	Changing the date of the 2008 parliamentary elections	Non-binding	Adopted	79.74	20.26	56.19
Georgia	05.01.2008	Georgia's accession to NATO	Non-binding	Adopted	77	23	56.19
Iceland	06.03.2010	Refusal to counter-sign the Icesave bill.	Binding	Failed	1.9	98.1	62.73
Iceland	09.04.2011	Refusal to counter-sign the Icesave bill.	Binding	Failed	40.23	59.77	75.34
Poland	06.09.2015	Introduction of single-member constituencies for the Sejm elections	Non-binding	Adopted	78.75	21.25	7.8
Poland	06.09.2015	Maintenance of state funding of political parties	Non-binding	Failed	17.37	82.63	7.8
Poland	06.09.2015	New interpretation of tax legislation	Non-binding	Adopted	94.51	5.49	7.8
Romania	25.11.2007	Changes to the voting system	Non-binding	Failed	83.41	16.59	26.51
Romania	22.11.2009	Changing parliament from a bi-cameral parliament to a unicameral parliament	Non-binding	Adopted	77.78	22.22	50.95
Romania	22.11.2009	Reducing the number of parliamentarians to 300	Non-binding	Adopted	88.84	11.16	50.95
Romania	26.05.2019	Prohibition of amnesties and pardons for criminal offenses.	Non-binding	Adopted	85.91	14.09	43.35
Romania	26.05.2019	Prohibition of the adoption of emergency ordinances in the field of justice	Non-binding	Adopted	86.18	13.82	43.35
Russian Federation	25.06.2020 01.07.2020	A constitutional referendum	Non-binding	Adopted	78.56	21.44	67.88
Turkey	21.10.2007	A constitutional referendum	Binding	Adopted	68.95	31.05	67.51

Note: The table is based on the author's personal data collection.

cases.²⁹ The referendums were selected based on four criteria: They must have been: 1) held in Europe, 2) called by a president, 3) national and 4) initiated from 2000 to 2020. Data about the referendums were collected from three main websites that index information related to referendums or other electoral or political processes: The Center for Research on Direct Democracy (C2D)³⁰, the European Election Database (EED)³¹ and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)³².

The selection and categorization of the 18 referendums (see Table 1) were conducted using a comparative case study approach and involved six steps: 1) identification of a suitable research question, 2) formulation of the theoretical expectations, 3) presentation of the selected cases and their relevance, 4) an explanation of how the data were collected, coded and analyzed, 5) an analysis implying alternative explanations in a comparative manner (see the analysis) and 6) reporting the findings.

Table 2: Complete list of coding of the reasons for which presidents call referendums

Country	Overcoming political deadlock	Overcoming political opposition	Placing a policy on the official agenda	Gaining the right to govern	Expanding presidential power
Belarus	No	No	No	Partially	Yes
Bulgaria	No	No	Yes	Partially	No
France	No	No	Yes	Partially	No
France	No	Yes	No	Partially	No
Georgia	No	Partially	No	Yes	No
Georgia	No	Partially	No	Yes	No
Iceland	Partially	No	No	Partially	No
Iceland	Partially	No	No	Partially	No
Poland	No	Yes	Partially	Partially	No
Poland	No	Yes	Partially	Partially	No
Poland	No	Yes	Partially	Partially	No
Romania	Yes	No	No	Partially	No
Romania	No	Partially	No	Yes	No
Romania	No	Partially	No	Yes	No
Romania	Partially	No	No	Yes	No
Romania	Partially	No	No	Yes	No
Russian Federation	No	No	Partially	Partially	Yes
Turkey	Yes	No	No	No	No

Coding and data

By referring to the most frequent reasons in the literature as to why referendums are called, I found that presidents use referendums as: 1) problem-solving instruments/instruments of mediation, 2) a means of outmaneuvering the political opposition, 3) a means of setting the political agenda, 4) a means of gaining legitimacy and 5) a means of reinforcing power. In the theoretical framework, I understood that referendums are used as problem-solving instruments/instruments of mediation when political actors are unable to reach consensus regarding a specific issue. This could lead to specific internal/external conflicts or political deadlock. In this sense, a president could act as a force of mediation with a view to resolving a dispute by calling a referendum. For this reason, I decided to link this with the idea of overcoming political deadlock (see Table 2 how the five reasons were coded).

The second reason could be interpreted as any measures implemented by presidents when they wanted to defeat their opponents. In such cases, presidents might call a referendum in order to increase their visibility or to cast their political opponents in a bad light. Thus, the second reason is associated

with the idea of overcoming political opposition. The third reason encapsulates all those measures a president might use to ensure that a policy was included on the official agenda, and which otherwise would not have been taken into account by the legislature. In this sense, I believe that the third reason could be associated with the idea of ensuring that a policy was included on the official agenda.

The fourth reason describes the efforts made by presidents to enhance their legitimacy in the eyes of both citizens and fellow politicians. All presidents require this type of approach because it could be used interchangeably with the idea of gaining the right to govern. The main difference between this reason and the second reason relates to the actual moment when the referendum was called. In such cases, referendums that were called to overcome political opposition strictly refer to the notion of defeating an opponent regardless of the context of the referendum's initiation. However, referendums used as a means of gaining the right to govern were often held close to the time of presidential elections in order to support a president's desire to win another term. The fifth reason is linked to the idea of calling

a referendum with the intention of advancing a policy aimed at expanding presidential power(s).

IN APPENDIX 2 the five reasons for presidents to calling referendum have been coded as follows: 1) Overcoming political deadlock, 2) Overcoming political opposition, 3) Placing a policy on the official agenda, 4) Gaining the right to govern and 5) Expanding presidential power. For each country three indicators have been used, namely “No”, “Partially” and “Yes”. The “Yes” and “No” indicators show if a given referendum was primarily called to fulfil one out of the five reasons. The “Partially” indicator applies when a specific reason was present but was of secondary importance. This reasoning is supported by the idea that referendums are usually not called just to achieve a singular objective but to achieve multiple strategic objectives. I therefore decided to allocate the “Yes” indicator to those referendums in which one of the five reasons were more obvious than the others. This idea was supported by the context of the referendum and the major debates that justified the need for it to be called. For example, although the 2015 triple referendum initiated by former Polish president Komorowski could also be assigned other indicators (e.g., placing a policy on the official agenda) the context of its initiation (i.e., before the next presidential election) and the major arguments that justified it, pointed to the idea that Komorowski was looking to win another presidential term. We can therefore refer to this referendum as being used as a means of overcoming political opposition. The same reasoning applies to the other cases.

The analysis is primarily based on secondary literature (i.e., official documents reports, the media and scientific works). The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. This method of analysis is suitable for the aim of this article since it was used deductively to analyze different types of content (e.g., journalistic, political, scientific) in order to demonstrate whether the preconceived categories of determinants listed in the analytical framework could actually explain why presidents initiate referendums.

The five reasons why presidents may call referendums

The analysis is conducted as follows: For every reason presented in Table 2, two different referendums were comparatively analyzed, i.e., one referendum in which the selected reason influenced a president's decision to call a referendum and another referendum in which the same reason was not of primary importance. The comparative analysis only focuses on how referendums were used to achieve a specific goal and the comparison with another referendum initiated to achieve a different goal is only intended to emphasize this contrast (to see how one goal is

different in practice to another). In such cases, different types of regimes do not matter because the comparative analysis is only looking at reasons for initiating a referendum, nothing more.

To demonstrate this, the analysis primarily looks at two factors that enabled the initiation of a referendum: 1) the context of the referendum and 2) its subject. According to the evaluation of the above-mentioned factors, the analysis shows that there are specific reasons why referendums are called by presidents.

Overcoming political deadlock

This reason was encountered in six out of 18 cases (see Table 1). To show how presidents use referendums to overcome political deadlock, this sub-section focuses on the 2007 referendum held in Romania about changing the voting system and the 2008 referendum held in Georgia about the country's accession to NATO (i.e., the second question in the double referendum).

The issue of changing the Romanian voting system has been a heavily debated subject since 2002 and many political parties (i.e., PNL, PSD, PC) proposed bills or programs aimed at changing the voting system. In 2007, President Traian Băsescu called a referendum aimed at transforming the Romanian electoral system into a single-member majoritarian voting system in two rounds.³³

He stated that this change was the only way to reform an entire political class and that it had the potential to obliterate the clientelistic relationships of the parties.³⁴ He used this referendum as a means of overcoming political deadlock in the Romanian Parliament because after more than one year of unsuccessful political debates, the two chambers of the Parliament (i.e., the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate) were unable to reach consensus regarding electoral reform. Băsescu therefore decided to let the electorate decide and although 81% of the population expressed their approval of the proposed voting system, the turnout was very low (i.e., roughly 27% of the total population) to make the outcome of the referendum binding.³⁵

GEORGIA GAINED ITS independence in 1991 and since this time its citizens have continuously sought to increase the democratic quality of the country. One of their main objectives was to implement Western values in Georgian society and that the country would join both the EU and NATO. After protests directed at the government, which culminated in the 2003 Rose Revolution, new parliamentary and presidential elections were held and the Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze was replaced by Mikhail Saakashvili, who was regarded as pro-democracy.³⁶ Even though Saakashvili was considered to be an ally of the US and a politician who promoted Georgia's integration with NATO, the period before the 2008 referendum was characterized by political and social turmoil that was mainly limited to opposition

“PRESIDENT TRAIAN BĂSESCU CALLED A REFERENDUM AIMED AT TRANSFORMING THE ROMANIAN ELECTORAL SYSTEM INTO A SINGLE-MEMBER MAJORITARIAN VOTING SYSTEM IN TWO ROUNDS.”



81st session of the Polish Senate. Voting on the motion of the President of the Republic of Poland to order a nationwide referendum on October 25, 2015.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS/SENATE OF THE REPUBLIC OF POLAND

parties who attempted to undermine the president's image.³⁷ In a context characterized by popular protests that were stifled by government forces, which used violent measures, the president resigned in protest at the political situation in Georgia.³⁸ However, Saakashvili turned the social unrest to his advantage in order to increase his chances of succeeding in the upcoming presidential elections in 2008. He called a referendum on Georgia's accession to NATO in order to increase his legitimacy and demonstrate that he was taking the will of the people into account.³⁹ The referendum revealed that 77% of Georgian citizens wanted the country to join NATO and the organization of the referendum represented an effective electoral strategy that helped Saakashvili win a second term in office after the presidential elections that were held on January 5, 2008.

THUS, IF WE COMPARE the two referendums, it is clear why they were used in specific contexts in order to achieve strategic goals. While Saakashvili tried to increase his legitimacy in order to win another term in office, president Băsescu called the referendum in order to overcome political deadlock in parliament. This demonstrates that presidents tend to use referendums as a means of overcoming political deadlock when political actors cannot reach consensus regarding a specific issue and not when they want to enhance their legitimacy before an upcoming election.

Overcoming political opposition

This reason was encountered in seven out of 18 cases. They were primarily used in the period before upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections. In order to adequately demonstrate how this reason was used, this sub-section focuses on the triple referendum (i.e., the first question of the triple referendum) held in Poland in 2015 and the referendum that was called in France in 2000 which was motivated by other strategic reasons.

The 2015 referendum held in Poland on the theme of changing the electoral system into single member constituencies for *Sejm* (the lower chamber of the Polish Parliament) represented a major electoral strategy used by the president in order to attract support during the presidential elections.⁴⁰ The main reason for holding the referendum was because President Komorowski (who ran for a second presidential term) performed poorly during the first round of voting. He was outmaneuvered by one of his main competitors (Andrzej Duda) who received a 34.76% share of the vote, whereas Komorowski received 33.77%.⁴¹ In order to increase his chances of winning, Komorowski took the idea advanced by another candidate (Paweł Kukiz who won 20.8% of the vote and was in third place) of calling a referendum about changing Poland's electoral system. The referendum was not supported by the opposition parties⁴² and the low turnout (roughly 7.8%) indicated that citizens were aware of the electoral

motivation behind the referendum.⁴³ Komorowski's last strategy to overcome political opposition via a referendum and to prove to the citizens that he was responsive to their demands backfired and the only winner was Duda, who did not engage in the 'referendum war' in order to achieve electoral success.⁴⁴

THE 2000 REFERENDUM organized in France was motivated by a desire to reduce the presidential term of office from seven to five years. This topic had been on the official agenda since 1973 and, according to the president at the time, had been supported for decades by various political factions.⁴⁵ The referendum was called by President Jacques Chirac and its initiation was primarily justified by the president's desire to eliminate the risk of cohabitation, i.e., to avoid a situation in which a president and PM were from rival parties because parliamentary elections had been held two years before a seven-year presidential term had concluded.⁴⁶ However, the real reason why the referendum was called may have been because Chirac was looking to win another presidential term in office during the next elections to be held in 2002. Due to his advanced age⁴⁷, he considered that a five-year term in office was a more suitable option because the population may have been skeptical about electing an elderly president for a seven-year term in office.⁴⁸ The referendum was approved by 73.2% of the electorate. However, the percentage of the population that participated in the referendum (i.e., roughly 30%) demonstrated the population's overall lack of interest in only being involved in consultative processes when they were asked to legitimize a political agenda.⁴⁹

In both cases, the presidents wanted to use referendums to achieve strategic goals. Komorowski wanted to overcome his political opponents and Chirac tried to set the political agenda in such a way that he could increase his chances of winning another presidential term. However, it could be assumed that presidents may use referendums in order to overcome political opposition when we talk about the short-term effects (i.e., upcoming elections). Although Chirac pursued another presidential mandate, he was not influenced by this reality and used the referendum as an agenda-setting device by initiating it two years before the 2002 presidential elections.

Placing a policy on the official agenda

This reason was encountered in six out of 18 cases. In order to demonstrate how presidents may call a referendum in order to achieve this goal, this sub-section analyzes the 2015 Bulgarian referendum and also the referendum held in 2008 in Georgia (i.e., the first question of the double referendum).

The 2015 referendum was Bulgaria's first referendum initiated by a president. It was initially discussed in 2014 by President

Rosen Plevneliev when he proposed three measures to be considered by the National Assembly: 1) changing the electoral system, 2) the introduction of compulsory voting and 3) the introduction of electronic voting.⁵⁰ The president was not supported by the National Assembly, which rejected Plevneliev's proposal to hold a referendum. In spite of this rejection, the president continued to promote the referendum and supported signature collection campaigns in order to force the decision-makers into holding the referendum. He appointed a committee of professors from the University of Sofia led by Professor Bliznashki and by February 15, 2021 the committee delivered 500,000 signatures

to the National Assembly – of which 100,000 were invalidated.⁵¹ Even though the number of signatures were not sufficient to make the referendum mandatory, due to the increasing dissatisfaction about the government's performance, the Oresharski Government resigned in August 2014 and the president appointed a caretaker government, led by Professor Bliznashki.

Following this, the president was able to hold a referendum and the National Assembly decided to accept the referendum based on the 400,000 signatures.⁵² The referendum

only focused on one of the measures from the initial three measures that had originally been proposed (i.e., the introduction of electronic voting) and it was held on October 25, 2021 alongside local elections. Although the turnout was lower than the necessary threshold to make the outcome of the referendum binding (i.e., roughly 40% of the population voted), the results showed that 70% of participants were in favor of electronic voting and this was subsequently implemented by the legislators.⁵³

SINCE THE POLITICAL and social context of the 2008 Georgian double referendum has already been presented above, I am only using this example (i.e., the first question of the double referendum) to show how referendums could be better employed to achieve various strategic goals. Therefore, the first question asked the Georgian electorate to express their opinions regarding the possibility to change the date of the parliamentary elections from the autumn of 2008 to the spring of 2008. This question was also motivated by strategic goals because one of the main reasons why citizens protested in the wake of the 2008 presidential elections was to give them the opportunity to vote at an earlier stage to in the parliamentary elections.⁵⁴ The president effectively maneuvered this topic, transformed it into a referendum and managed to win a second term in office during the 2008 elections.

While the 2008 Georgian double referendum aimed to increase the president's legitimacy for the upcoming elections, the 2015 Bulgarian referendum was not motivated by such a reason – or at least, it was not of primary importance. Unlike Saakash-

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April 11, 1995, in the Supreme Court building, Belarus. 19 deputies from the opposition, on hunger strike as a sign of disagreement with the referendum initiated by President Alexander Lukashenko.

PHOTO: CREATIVE COMMONS

vili, who had been influenced by the presidential elections, Plevneliev called a referendum primarily because he wanted to place a policy on the official agenda (even though he sought to increase his long-term legitimacy through this referendum). It could therefore be assumed that presidents use referendums as a means of placing a policy on the political agenda when they are not constrained by elections or other political or social factors that require a more rapid response in order to address them.

Gaining the right to govern

This reason was encountered in 17 out of 18 referendums and it could be considered as one of the main reasons to justify a presidents' decision to hold a referendum. To better understand how presidents employ referendums in order to achieve this strategic goal, this section focuses on the double referendum held in Romania in 2019 (I have used both of the referendum's questions since they refer to the same issue) and the referendum held in Turkey in 2007.

In 2019, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis called a double referendum on the theme of justice. The referendum was initiated due to a tense political and social situation primarily created by the governing PSD party and its leader, Liviu Dragnea. Starting in 2016, the leftist government tried to adopt several political reforms in the field of justice. These reforms were intended to decrease the level of punishment associated with acts of corruption.⁵⁵ One of the most controversial reforms was the desire to enact the amnesty and pardon laws, the endorsement of Emer-

gency Ordinance 13⁵⁶ or the desire of former PM Sorin Grindeanu in 2017 to release 2,500 prisoners because of prison overcrowding – and this included individuals who had been convicted of acts of corruption.⁵⁷ These measures were specifically aimed at favoring PSD politicians who, at the time, were being investigated for corruption, Liviu Dragnea being one of them. Even though the PSD did not support Iohannis' initiative to hold a referendum, the president nevertheless called it alongside the European Parliamentary elections (i.e., on May 26, 2019).⁵⁸ Iohannis extensively promoted the referendum and urged Romanians to participate. By adopting such a stance towards the issues at hand, Iohannis became a symbol of anti-corruption by increasing his legitimacy and trustworthiness, which resulted in enhanced electoral support during the next presidential elections.⁵⁹

IN CONTRAST TO the 2019 double referendum held in Romania, the constitutional referendum held in Turkey in 2007 was motivated by totally different reasons. The referendum was called by Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer (president of Turkey from 2000 to 2007) because he wanted to block the constitutional reforms promoted by PM Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Tensions between the two officials arose when Erdoğan proposed that Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Gül should be the next president of Turkey because Sezer's term in office was due to expire in May 2007.⁶⁰ Sezer opposed this proposal because he considered Gül as being controversial.⁶¹ Erdoğan's opponents engaged in popular protests resulting from his proposal and the first bal-

lot for the presidential election was declared invalid because the required two-thirds of representatives was not reached in order to validate the vote. Following these events, Erdoğan proposed several constitutional reforms that were subsequently adopted by the Turkish Parliament. The most important aspects of these reforms related to the status of the president and the Turkish Parliament, as well as the possibility for the president to be directly elected by the citizens.⁶² Sezer opposed these reforms and called a referendum in an attempt to impede their endorsement. However, his efforts were in vain because in August 2007, the National Assembly declared Gül president.⁶³

Thus, there are striking differences between the two referendums. Unlike Iohannis, who initiated the referendum to enhance his legitimacy in order to gain the right to govern, Sezer had no prospects of winning another presidential term. Sezer only called the referendum to block the endorsement of several provisions with which he disagreed.

Expanding presidential power

This reason was encountered in two out of 18 referendums and was identified in those countries that had questionable governing regimes, i.e., forms of authoritarianism such as those in Belarus or the Russian Federation. To portray how presidents use referendums to achieve this end, this section analyzes the 2004 referendum in Belarus and the 2019 double referendum in Romania presented in the previous section.

Belarus gained its independence after the breakdown of the USSR in 1991. However, the country is far from being considered a full-fledged democracy but rather a state ruled by an authoritarian regime. The poor democratic quality in Belarus and the authoritarian features that govern the state are all due to the actions of President Alexander Lukashenko.⁶⁴ Since 1994 when he became president, he has called several referendums in order to employ political reforms intended to extend his presidential powers. The strategic use of referendums endorsed by Lukashenko could be perceived as a tactic for conducting preemptive attacks on any opposition party that opposed his authoritarian policies.⁶⁵ Using the same logic, in 2004 Lukashenko announced that he intended to hold a referendum that would grant him the right to take part in an unlimited number of presidential races without being constrained by constitutional provisions. This referendum was necessary because, until this time, the Belarusian Constitution limited candidates to a maximum of two presidential terms and Lukashenko's second term was scheduled to end in 2006.⁶⁶ Thus, once again he used a referendum as a means of gaining the formal legitimacy required to endorse his return to power. During the referendum held on October 17, 2004, roughly 88% of citizens who participated in the referendum voted in favor of this initiative.⁶⁷ Consequently, Lukashenko achieved his objective and received the right to run for unlimited presidential terms.

By looking at the features of the two referendums, it is clear that the two presidents had similar goals (i.e., both of them sought re-election and wanted to gain legitimacy from the citizens). However, Iohannis promoted a referendum that was intended to resolve the corruption crisis in Romania, Lukash-

enko cleverly transformed the referendum into a means of serving his objectives. We can therefore mention that the main difference between the reasons why the two presidents initiated referendums is in the type of policies they wanted to endorse. Lukashenko was only seeking formal approval for his actions and Iohannis used referendums for strategic reasons but had no control over their outcome.

Conclusions

This article attempted to explain why European presidents call referendums. To answer this question, the article focused on all 18 national referendums initiated by European presidents from 2000 to 2020 and analyzed them using a comparative case study approach. The article demonstrated that the reasons why referendums are used by presidents are far from purely democratic. In this sense, we may assume that presidents use referendums as a means of achieving strategic goals (i.e., individual or multiple) that otherwise would be difficult to achieve.

The article showed that apart from the political and social realities that shape the evolution within a given context, decisions by presidents to call referendums are influenced by their short- and long-term ambitions. Referendums motivated by the desire to achieve the right to govern were encountered in 17 out of 18 cases and it could be assumed that gaining legitimacy represents a ubiquitous goal that presidents seek to achieve, regardless of the short- or long-term effects. However, overcoming political deadlock or political opposition are more likely to justify a president's decision to call a referendum when they are addressing a specific issue for which a solution is required in order to provide a short-term effect (e.g., mediating a sensitive political issue or defeating political opposition). Conversely, setting a political agenda and reinforcing presidential power(s) could justify the initiation of a referendum when a president is seeking to achieve long-term benefits (i.e., the employment of a specific policy or the expansion of presidential influence).

THIS ARTICLE HAS contributed both theoretically and empirically. At the empirical level, it offers evidence that could improve knowledge about the use of referendums by explaining the reasons behind a president's desire to initiate such processes. Its empirical relevance is enhanced by the fact that, to the best of my knowledge, no studies have attempted to address such an approach. Also, taking into account that the reasons selected for analysis are not country-specific, the results of the article could be generalized to other countries in which presidents are granted the right to call referendums. At the theoretical level, the article proposes an analytical framework that could be partially or, in some cases, fully tested (e.g., continents, countries). The article's relevance is enhanced by the fact that the analysis confirms all the theoretical expectations and the methodological steps have been clearly presented in the research design. This means that other researchers could use this article as a source of inspiration to conduct similar studies, not least because there have not been many studies that have employed a case study approach for a similar number of cases (18). The results of the ar-

ticle could be of interest to researchers in the field of democracy, in general, and referendums, in particular, but also for individuals who would like to better understand how referendums are used by European presidents.

The article has a number of limitations. The first limitation is the reliability of the data used for analysis. Bearing in mind that there are no databases that conduct a centralized form of indexing, regarding the information on specific referendums, some important information may have been omitted due to limitations concerning data collection. This may have affected the trustworthiness of the analysis to some extent. Another limitation is that the analytical framework did not include other reasons why referendums might be called by presidents (e.g., consulting the population, creating an instrument of negotiation). Also, the analysis was primarily based on explaining the main reasons why a president would call a referendum but without extensively analyzing the reasons of secondary importance.

Based on these limitations, further studies could analyze other reasons that were not included in the analysis in this study or could replicate the analytical framework for other continents (e.g., Asia, South America). Also, other qualitative studies could be conducted based on interviews with politicians or presidents in which they could express their opinions about referendums and how they justify their grounds for calling them. Moreover, quantitative studies could be conducted that use national surveys that aim to evaluate the general attitude of citizens towards referendums, regardless of whether they have been called by European presidents, political parties, or fellow citizens. In addition, it could be interesting to study how referendums are called by the presidents of countries with different types of regimes, since the European continent comprises multiple states with varying degrees of democratization. Further comparative analyses could be used to approach this matter or could look at countries in which presidents have different powers according to constitutional provisions. ✖

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by Ella Petrini

Combining fossil-fuel phaseout and just transition

The international conference "From the grassroots to policy and back: Putting just transition to practice" on October 28–29, 2022 took place at the University of Silesia.

The idea of a *just transition* originates from the American labor movement in the 1990s. The leader of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers International Union, Tony Mazzocchi, argued that workers in polluting and hazardous industries should not have to pay with their livelihoods for environmental protection and toxic industry clean ups. In recent years, such ideas have gained traction among policy makers, in light of the urgency of fossil fuel phaseouts in response to the accelerating climate crisis. The establishment of the European Union's Just Transition Platform in 2020, aiming to support fossil fuel dependent regions and workers in the industries concerned, is one such attempt at targeting the social aspects of the transition.

The conference *From the grassroots to policy and back: Putting just transition to practice* gathered social scientists who in different ways struggled with the tensions implied in the concept of "just transition". The conference took place in Katowice, Poland, in many ways at the epicenter of the transition. Katowice is located in Silesia, the "Coal heart of Europe", the main coal-producing region in Poland and in Europe. Considering this, coal phaseouts were the focus of the conference. While most contributors came from Eastern Europe, interesting comparisons were made between the earlier mine shutdowns in the UK, Germany and Spain.

In her presentation, Nicole Horáková put forward a micro-perspective of coal transitions, describing the individual life strategies of coal miners after the shutdowns of the Ostrava-Karvina mines in the Czech Republic during the 1990s. The research team discovered that after pit closures, coal miners in this Czech region migrated to do seasonal labor in coal mines in Northern Spain, rather than finding work in other sectors. In the following discussion, a participant from Spain said that these life trajectories were interesting, given that the Spanish coal industry was then already in decline. Nevertheless, for the coal miners of Ostrava-Karvina, this was a pragmatic option to deal with job loss and social change. The discussion also underlined the importance of researchers recognizing individualized coping strategies, especially in post-socialist state contexts when labor agency and welfare states are usually quite weak.

SEVERAL CONTRIBUTIONS also highlighted the social groups at risk of being sidelined in the current transition processes. Notably, Jan Frankowski's presentation showed the mining-dependent jobs in Upper Silesia, Poland, where the unionization level is lower and working conditions more precarious, as compared with coal mining itself. For these workers, indirect job loss is a pervasive threat, but they have not always been included in the implementation of just transition projects.

Béla Galgóczi from the European

"KATOWICE IS LOCATED IN SILESIA, THE 'COAL HEART OF EUROPE', THE MAIN COAL-PRODUCING REGION."

Trade Union Institute spoke about the automobile industry, which, unlike the energy sector, is not usually the focus of just transition policies, despite the fact that employment in this sector is likely to undergo large changes as cars become electrified. Galgóczi focused on the case of Poland – one of the European countries with the highest number of cars per resident. The transport system is highly individualized, with a chronic lack of state investment in collective transport. This shapes the preconditions for the transformation of the automobile sector – in the spheres of both production and consumption.

SEVERAL INTERESTING contributions came from the research project Tippings+. The researchers involved discussed how in contrast to earlier coal phaseouts, systemic shifts now need to take place promptly and will have to be policy driven rather than triggered by an economic crisis. As part of the project, researchers have begun to search for *positive tipping points*, whereby events trigger positive feedback loops that set regional socio-ecological systems onto more sustainable and just trajectories. Still in its early phases, the project aims to identify what initial policy steps could be conducive to creating these positive feedback loops, for example by achieving more trust in the transition process.

A startling observation made in the Tippings+ project emerged in the analysis of pension age data in the Ruhr region. The research team were surprised that despite the new state-financed early retirement schemes, the average age of retirement in the region had not changed much. What they found out was that a pension scheme had existed previously, only then it was paid for by the compa-



Old coal mine in Katowice, Poland. The photo was taken in 2006.

PHOTO: LESTAT/JAN MEHLICH/ WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

nies themselves. This case reveals of contingent risk of just transition packages, namely that the state will subsidize fossil fuel companies in unforeseen ways.

Dunja Krause, from the Just Transition Research Collaborative, elaborated on how different welfare regimes shape the starting points for Just Transitions, that is, low-carbon transitions that promote social values like equality, inclusivity, and justice. The presentation highlighted the challenges of achieving a just transition in an era of neoliberal welfare state retrenchment. In this political and economic context, the climate transition can become a divisive process, whereby some social groups end up on the winning and some on the losing side. If transition processes are driven by corporate interests and only offer targeted social policies and compensation packages, they are likely to reinforce social inequalities. In contrast, the social democratic welfare regimes are especially well positioned to implement just transitions, as universal social policy and redistributive mechanisms are already in place.

COUNTERING THE SUPPOSED “jobs vs. environment dilemma”, the rather controversial phrase “unemployment is not the problem” came up several times. Presenters like Luke Haywood underlined that few former coal miners remained in long-

term unemployment after losing their jobs due to mine shutdowns, drawing on the case of Germany. Instead, they often had to find employment in other sectors, often with lower wages, worse conditions, and lower unionization rates. This reflects the macro-trend of employment de-industrialization, whereby a larger share of the workforce is employed in the service sector. While mining provided “jobs for life”, the imperative of labor market flexibility has become more salient, especially for young workers. Among possible labor market effects of fossil fuel phaseout, Heywood argued that the main concern of policy makers should not be rising unemployment. In his view, the focus should be on creating good quality jobs for the next generation of workers.

THIS REPORT HAS only captured a fraction of the themes brought up during the conference with its over 30 presentations. For me, one lasting take away was the revelation of the contradictory role of the state in the transition away from fossil fuels. In the “Just transition” framework, the state should redistribute wealth and enhance social justice, to ensure legitimacy and political participation in the process of phasing out fossil fuels. There is, however, a risk that states continue to subsidize fossil fuel capital, albeit under the banner of *just transition*.

Although many presenters underlined the need for transformative system change, it was usually delimited to *energy systems* and their social aspects rather than questioning the political economy of fossil fuel extraction. A welcome intervention came from Pedro Alarcón, who gave a post-colonial critique of extractivism.

In the opening address of the conference, former Polish prime minister Jerzy Buzek emphasized that “change must be evolutionary, not revolutionary”, especially in the Eastern European context, where the memories and painful experiences of the post-Soviet transition linger. Other contributors spoke of a conscious and policy driven transition. Presenter Franziska Mey gave a pragmatic assessment of the “incremental changes toward fossil fuel-phaseout” that have slowly begun. At the same time, one might ask whether it is possible to achieve a socially *transformative* transition, if relying on incrementalism. If so, serious consideration of the power configurations of stakeholders – especially fossil fuel corporations – is necessary. ✖

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Everyday life in rural Belarus. In the shadow of the last kolkhozes

**A Taste for
Oppression
— A Political
Ethnography
of Everyday
Life in
Belarus**

Ronan
Hervouet:
(New York,
Oxford:
Berghahn,
2021)
254 pages.
(Original: Ronan
Hervouet:
*Le Goût Des
Tyrans. Une
Ethnographie
Politique Di
Quotidien En
Biélorussie*
(Lormont: Le
Bord de l'eau,
2020) 281
pages.

How can a system that imposes several broad constraints produce acceptable or even desirable ways of life, and loyalty to the authoritarian regime? Ronan Hervouet is trying to find an answer to this conundrum in his book on everyday life in Belarus and he seems to succeed. He studies the countryside governed by collective farms, the *kolkhozes*. Earlier, between 1999 and 2013, he collected data that he published in his earlier book, *Dacha Blues*, on summer cottages – life in Belarusian countryside. Ten years later, he returns to the theme, taking a wider perspective on everyday life and livelihoods in Belarusian villages. The motto for this new publication comes from Alexis de Tocqueville's book *Democracy in America* (1835–40): "The love of order is cofounded with a taste for oppression". Hervouet came to think about this maxim when listening to a Catholic priest in the village of Mosar in 2005: "Many people talk about democracy and other similar things. Yes, democracy is good, I do not dispute that, but who said that democracy should mean a lack of discipline?" (p. 211)

In his research, the farming system and agricultural policy are seen "from below". The author wants to show that the authoritarian regime relies not only on police violence and redistribution politics. There are also other forces to preserve the political and social order. Hervouet suggests that even if the system requires citizens to be loyal to those in power, it also offers them a way of life that they can accept. First and foremost, it promises them certain liberties, which are controlled not by the elite but by local moral codes.

The researcher distances himself from the totalitarianism paradigm, preferring to watch history from the level of everyday life. He accepts Alf Lüdtke's² point of view on communist societies that stability in such a society is maintained "by violence, by 'guns and tanks' or by successful indoctrination." (p. 4) He also rejects the alternative explanation of a social contract between rulers and those ruled. According to this explanation, the leaders of a country obtain social order by giving material benefits to the citizens, who accept not participating in politics. This is too simple, thinks Hervouet, and turns the focus onto feelings of solidarity and communality.

Hervouet lived in Belarus for five years, enabling him to build relationships with locals and to interview people more than once. He made qualitative interviews in different parts of Belarus; the visits to these localities were not long, because of restrictions set by the authorities. He succeeded in collecting a fine set of qualitative interviews with brief stories, describing the features and dilemmas of everyday life in rural Belarus, and informing among other things about how law and order are entwined with local manners and norms.

THE BOOK BEGINS WITH a short but interesting introduction to the economic system of Belarus (pp. 11–12). President Alexander Lukashenko calls it "market socialism". Polish economist Oskar Lange already developed the idea of such a system in the 1930s.³ He tried to link Marxist economic analysis to the neoclassical economy and combine socialism with market mechanisms. Similar thinking has inspired reforms in various communist countries, such as China in 1970s, Vietnam in 1980s, and more recently Cuba. According to Roj Medvedev,⁴ Lukashenko has drawn his inspiration from the Chinese model. The dilemma of post-socialist economic policy is to ensure that opening markets guarantees both the effectivization of economy and the just distribution of the prosperity produced. Perhaps it is strange to think that a dictator like Lukashenko would care about justice. However, justice is needed to legitimize the system. What is more, a strong state is also needed to be able to guarantee that the system functions. Lukashenko's ideal is a strong, authoritative state with a hierarchic system of power. The president himself, at the top of the system, is personally the final guarantor of the system. The countryside and its kolkhozes is a key part of the system, being in fact the president's favorite area. Just before taking up the presidency in 1994, he was the director of a state farm in Gorodets for seven years.

Belarus preserved collective agriculture at a time when its northern neighbors, Latvia and Lithuania, dissolved and privatized their collective farms. In 1990, one fifth of the working population was still employed in agriculture. The crash of agriculture in early 1990s was similar in Belarus to that in other post-Soviet countries: Production fell by 23% in four years. Belarus succeeded, however, in recovering faster than other post-Soviet countries. It exported increasing amounts of butter, cheese, milk, and flax, above all to Russia. Livelihoods in the countryside started to improve, even if problems were still great enough: in spite of heavy investment, the level of salaries in agriculture was low; production costs stayed high in comparison to Western Europe; machines broke down; work discipline was weak; and finding new markets in countries other than in Russia did not succeed. Russian markets have been the lifebelt for Belarus, even if they are a shackle as well. While Russia has succeeded in intensifying its agriculture in recent decades, export prospects have turned doubtful for Belarus. This was one of the reasons



BELARUS IN IMAGES

The photojournalist Dean C.K. Cox has worked for several years on a long-term project documenting the daily life in Belarus: here a selection of photos from the project, exhibited in Sweden, the UK and Hong Kong.

Dean C.K. Cox has been working in more than 50 countries for more than 25 years, primarily covering the former Soviet Union, Europe and East Asia.

Note: The photos are not from the reviewed book.

PHOTO (ALL IMAGES): DEAN C.K. COX

Continued. Everyday life in rural Belarus

why Belarus has become more and more dependent on Russian political decisions – the process that has been tragically proved by the collaboration of Belarus with Russia in its war against Ukraine.

IN BELARUS, THE AVERAGE farm size has been increased by fusions and modern life has been advanced in rural areas by building “agri-towns”, concentrating flats and services in the central villages of the kolkhozes. Many such reforms are simply a continuation of Soviet politics; for example, agri-towns were already a part of Nikita Khrushchev’s reforms in the 1960s. Also, the tradition of Soviet *subbotniks* (a day of voluntary work) and rural folk festivals were revived in Belarus.

Hervouet is told that many people in the villages support Lukashenko and the system he represents. He works with the enigma: What makes people and workers with hard work and small incomes support the president? Part of the explanation lies in their background: their experiences of very poor lives, often coming from places that suffered from war. Simply having food and basic safety fulfills their core wishes. Furthermore, the system today allows them opportunities to earn some extra money. They have the right to own a farming plot, which makes them partly self-sufficient and gives them the opportunity to sell products. Occasional incomes are received by working for pensioners and others who need help to plow land and to cut firewood. In addition, distilling and selling alcohol, even if formally illegal, provides an additional income for many. Also, the collective property supplies an employee with material benefits and services. An employee may rent agricultural land or a tractor, or buy seed grain, at advantageous rates. Furthermore, it is often acceptable to steal something from public property. Hervouet got evidence on this from a local carpenter: “On the kolkhoz everyone steals. Anyone can also control anyone else. People steal fuel, but they also steal seeds.” (p. 72)

This interview supports Alina Ledenova’s⁵ theory on *blat* in Soviet economy, the use of personal networks and informal contacts to obtain goods and services in short supply and to find a way around formal procedures. A theft may be based on a wordless contract, a common understanding between workers and employers. Using a tractor on a private plot can take place before the formal working hours if the employer turns his head away. During harvest time, workers may take (without permission) one sack of potatoes for their household. This is forbidden by law but can be accepted according to local morality. I met a similar case in Russian Karelia in 2004, where a (privatized) sovkhos leader told us that a tractor driver “naturally” takes fuel for his own use, because his salary is so low.⁶ Fifteen years after the system change, this Karelian farm still continued to work like a Soviet collective farm. And in Belarus the practice still continues ten more years later!

The book gives a many-sided picture of everyday life: it analy-

ses the resources in a kolkhoz; it describes impacts of alcohol consumption and the presence of prostitution in village communities; it gives examples of people on the margins of society; and it discusses interrelationships and values in the village community. It also discusses the question of how the Stalin era affects life today. All this is useful for any reader who wants to get a fresh picture of a rural community in Belarus. The picture is deepened by introducing types of people who do not adjust to the lifestyle of a collective farm, and do not want to contribute their own effort to support the model. The author names three such types: profiteers, idlers, and moralists (pp. 179–192).

ACCORDING TO THIS scheme, a profiteer is a person who uses his or her position to get rich. For clarity: you are not a profiteer if you steal a little from kolkhoz property, as long as other people do not suffer for it. But you are a profiteer if you steal without thinking about the common interest and if your theft threatens the solidarity in a community. Even some of the kolkhoz directors are thieves. The leader of country has been ready to set limits to the corruption of these leaders. Some of them have been prosecuted and condemned.

An idler is described as person that lacks the willingness to work. Some idlers are beneficiaries of charitable practices. Alcoholics are the largest and most problematic group of idlers. They fail to work satisfactorily in a kolkhoz; they are perhaps dismissed but rehired a few weeks later due to the shortage of labor in the countryside. A dismissed worker can always find a job when his head is clear again. He can move to another kolkhoz or help a pensioner to chop firewood. But normally he returns to his old work because no alternative workers exist in the neighborhood. This is one reason for using violence as a punishment. Simply, violence may seem to be the only effective punishment, it is argued.

Profiteers and idlers are seen as lacking morals, but there are also moralists whose morality differs from the local one. Hervouet presents two sorts of moralists. The materialist morality of urban people characterizes *dacha* owners. Another type of morality is adopted by representatives of the political opposition and

human rights activists. According to a local point of view, both of those types are dangerous because they are questioning the foundation of livelihoods in the villages.

These three types embody the challenges that kolkhoz workers face in Belarus. By taking a position on such persons, local inhabitants construct their own judgement on what is acceptable and what is not, what is a good life and what kind of morality it requires. Hervouet (p. 201) ends by considering Edward P. Thompson and James C. Scott's⁷ theory of moral economy. Moral economy is above all interested in two things: in the principles of a good life, and in the relationship between leaders and led. The principles of a good life are first and foremost justice, dignity, and respect. In one way or another the countryfolk are able to follow these principles in spite of the poverty of their lives. These moral codes, however, are endangered both from inside and outside, and they need support to defend their righteous world – they expect the authorities to convert, or possibly punish, the figures who jeopardize this social order.


THIS IS AN INTERESTING passage. The above-mentioned opportunities for additional incomes are important not only for livelihood but also for dignity. To steal from the property of the common farm leads from time to time to overreactions and endangers moderate equality. Leaders have to accept it, in order to allow the led to keep their dignity. On the other hand, local morality is jeopardized by people who do not care about local norms and violate them. The resulting disorder needs corrective measures and punishments from both the local leaders and the leaders' leaders.

Hervouet interprets the prevailing patience in the Belarusian countryside as a choice for which there are sensible reasons. It is not the "atavistic conservatism of countryfolk, nor the mechanical efficiency of the regime's ideological discourse". The best choice for rural people is often to maintain the world unchanged, if they are only able to do so. At least it guarantees basic safety, and some freedoms, and in addition a form of justice that the local morality has adopted. This patience is also observed in the Russian context, analyzed by Coenen-Huther.⁸ Hervouet concludes his thoughts about moral economy with a quotation from Didier Fassin: "Moral economy provides an understanding of how a system of exploitation can survive even when local principles of justice prevail."⁹

Let us return to the village of Mosar, where a Catholic priest spent his later years. He worked against alcoholism, to improve the environment and to revive religious life. He did a lot and encouraged the villagers to do voluntary work to renovate and build new things in the village: a graveyard, paths, and sport fields, among other things. In a neighboring village called Paris – thus named by French soldiers in Napoleon's army escaping from Russia – he organized the building of a 30 meter-high "Eiffel Tower" with a cross on top. In addition, he established an ethnographic

museum to give information about peasant life. In a word, the priest contributed greatly to life in the village and to its touristic value in Belarus as well. He became known as a benefactor all over the country. Studying this priest is a key to understanding how a certain order in everyday life is reached, and how it is linked to the representation of the past (p. 219). Authoritarian power cannot only be supported with material benefits supplied to citizens. The system also needs a moral justification, which the priest helped to generate.

AS A WHOLE, Hervouet's work gives valuable information on life in kolkhozes, on the attitudes of villagers and their possibilities for action. It informs the reader not only about Belarus in present times but opens a way to understand better how collective farming could work in Soviet times in Belarus and also in other places. The data was collected some years before the huge demonstrations in Belarus following the presidential election in 2020. We do not know how the situation changed during those processes. In any case, the analysis in the book helps to understand why the demonstrations did not spread much into the countryside. Hervouet is continuing his work, and we can hope to hear more about his results later. While we are waiting for the time when anybody can travel freely to Belarus, it is worth reading Hervouet's work. If you are not interested in theoretical issues, you will certainly find interesting sections containing interviews that give an insight into local thinking. For scientists, the book offers an interesting contribution to research on the post-socialist transition, also bringing the theory of moral economy to a post-Soviet context.

Ronan Hervouet works at the University of Bordeaux as a member of the Centre Émile Durkheim. Durkheim worked there in the faculty of social philosophy for 15 years, at a time when sociology was not yet an independent science in France. Durkheim's heritage can be seen in Ronan Hervouet's research. 

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Continued. Everyday life in rural Belarus.

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A neighborhood view of Kaliningrad. Investigating close cross-border relations

The Kaliningrad Region. A Specific Enclave in Contemporary Europe

Eds., Arkadiusz
Żukowski and
Wojciech
T. Modzelewski
(Paderborn:
Brill Schöningh,
2021)
336 pages

Visiting the Kaliningrad area, I entered a village with small monument dedicated “to the liberation in 1945”. Liberation from what and to what, one might ask. Among the many strange outcomes of the end of World War II, Kaliningrad is probably one of the weirdest. Originally it was just a spoil of war, a Soviet territorial advance, and an end to a problematic exclave situation of the German Nazi Reich, resulting eventually in a new enigmatic situation of exclave location.

This new book is a collection of articles primarily by researchers at the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, Poland, located only some 40 kilometers from the Kaliningrad border. Olsztyn, called Allenstein while under German control, became known as one of the areas of plebiscite in 1920, and was allotted to Germany as part of the Ostpreussen exclave. After the Nazi German defeat in 1945 the exclave was “provisionally” divided between Poland and the USSR, the Soviet part becoming a domestic exclave of the Russian SFSR. In both areas the resident population was expelled. But while the Polish part was relatively smoothly integrated into its mainland by ethnic Poles, Ukrainians and Belarusians from areas lost to the USSR, the Soviet Union saw its new territory as a military outpost, and an “ethnic Soviet”, i.e. Russified, island different from the Lithuanian, Polish and Belarusian ethnicities in the neighborhood.

THE BOOK IS DIVIDED into four parts covering regional identities, (inter)regional policies, geopolitical perspectives, and research perspectives. Regional identity is a controversial topic, and in an area covering the territory of former German East Prussia, divided between two “Socialist states” of extremely different geopolitical and “geocultural” attitudes, memory was dealt with in very different ways before the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. During the years of a chaotic democracy in Russia and a hesitant rapprochement between Poland and a united Germany, attempts were made to discuss history books, even to produce common statements on events affecting all three countries, but as Krzysztof Gładkowski shows in his paper, some interpretations were simply unacceptable to the Russian side. History, remembrance, and



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The harbor in Kaliningrad, 2009, when local border traffic occurred.

politics are closely connected. East Prussia is a strong example. After a short but fair summary of its history, Gładkowski analyzes the relation between memory and history, especially that of “trans-border historical policy”. Krzysztof Żęgota mentions the differential handling of physical remains, buildings, and place names, while Arkadiusz Żukowski makes a survey of identity studies, finishing with the hope that the currently suspended local border traffic will again create a regional awareness, while pointing at Russian attempts to create a “homo Russicus” identifying with the regime. A short paper on the Tatar and Muslim community highlights the ethnic links with similar groups in neighboring countries.

The section on (inter)regional policies contains eight papers on political and administrative aspects in Kaliningrad, covering structures in both Russia and Polish political actions towards the exclave. Waldemar Tomaczewski analyzes the specificity of the Kaliningrad region within the Russian Federation, followed by Karolina Tybuchowska-Hartlińska’s study of political participation in Kaliningrad. Of particular interest is Tomasz Bojarowicz’s survey of how Polish political parties have reacted towards events and structures in Kaliningrad since 1989,

mirroring extremist irredentist views, risks of military escalation due to Poland’s accession to NATO and even fear of a German re-take of East Prussia. In recent years, the leftist government spoke of regaining better relations with Russia and Kaliningrad, also supported by local borderland politicians, while the rightist Law-and-Order Party took a harsher attitude, in step with increasing Russian isolationism.

LOCAL MEDIA COVERAGE of neighboring Kaliningrad is mostly related to border passage problems. A local radio program that included a few minutes on life in the exclave was ended in 2014, when the general attitude in Poland against Russia deteriorated sharply because of the assault on Ukraine, as shown by Katarzyna Maciejewska-Mieszkowska. Local border traffic between Poland and Russia underwent several regulatory changes due to e.g. Poland’s accession to the EU, leading to visa requirements, but the traffic was greatly enhanced by an agreement in 2011 allowing visa-free border crossings to residents of Kaliningrad oblast and adjacent areas of Poland. The agreement was abandoned by Poland in 2014. Wojciech Kotowicz concludes it is hard to envisage the possibility of a return to an agreement for local border traffic. While the visa-free agreement was handled by the EU and each state, contacts were made between the local governments of the adjacent regions. His question: “Will LBC [local border cooperation] come back?”, now seems tragically outdated, and in a rather similar paper Teresa Astranomicz-Leyk shows that the local cross-border cooperation is, or rather was, driven by common interest.

Continued. A neighborhood view of Kaliningrad

The geopolitical section is given a realist historical interpretation by Jacek Więclawski, starting with the original controversy between the pagan Prussians and the Teutonic Order, transformed into an intricate relationship involving territorial, religious and political changes in what was eventually to become Poland and Prussia. While this political geography covered a vast area from Russia to the Netherlands and Denmark, with military influences from Sweden and Russia, the bone of contention was often in the area of Königsberg and the mouth of the Vistula. Benon Gaziński continues this history with a vivid description of the latest developments up to 2021 and the problems a multi-political “West” (EU, NATO, Poland) face in dealing with an increasingly totalitarian Russia. With the local border traffic these contacts were strengthened, and with its discontinuation in 2016, traffic and contacts slumped. Starting with the details behind this break, Łukasz Bielewski evaluates what was accomplished and what the (then) remaining agreement on Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) will accomplish. Foreign activity by local governments, called “paradiplomacy”, presented by Wojciech T. Modzelewski, were already initiated soon after the demise of the USSR, based on agreement between the states. From around 2001 cooperation was intensified, including information exchange, promotion of entrepreneurship from the other side, and mutual participation in fairs, sports etc. Under these agreements, cross-border relations between counties and municipalities in the borderland were established until its discontinuation in 2016.

AN OUTSIDER VIEW is given by Ingmar Oldberg in his analysis of Kaliningrad’s internal and external problems, including a valuable description of the military re-armament of the area and a useful list of references. Marcin Chelminiak focusses on a Baltic perspective on Russia’s role, starting with hopeful cooperation but becoming increasingly spatially and politically contained.

The last section is a presentation of research activities on Kaliningrad performed by Olsztyn University, in some cases in cooperation with Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, which

also presents its own international activities in a short chapter. The authors Anna Barsukova and Igor Zhukovskiy, both from Kaliningrad University, very positively show the importance of international cooperation among universities. One might wonder if this view is still allowed in Kaliningrad today.

There is a plethora of literature on the enclave/exclave of Kaliningrad, but this book represents “a neighborhood view” with an understanding of close cross-border relations. It contains a valuable survey of scholarship in Polish and Russian. Being an anthology, every chapter can be read and understood separately but this also leads to a great deal of overlapping. In some contributions the English translation is a bit “choppy”.

AT THE TIME OF writing this review, Russia is carrying out an unprovoked war against its neighbor while at the same time strengthening domestic unity, with Kaliningrad seemingly returning into its Soviet military confinement. This book is a time document showing the status of Kaliningrad during an openness that was already threatened .

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The Baltic Way human chain in 1989.

PHOTO: KUSURIJA/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

How and why did Estonia succeed? Exploring the long-lasting grip of the Soviet period

**Bakom och
bortom
järnridån. De
sovjetiska
åren och
frigörelsen i
Baltikum och
Ukraina**

[Behind the
Iron Curtain
and Beyond.
The Soviet
Years and the
Emancipation in
the Baltics and
Ukraine].
Li Bennich
Björkman.
Stockholm:
Appell förlag.
465 pages.

Li Bennich Björkman, Professor Skytteana of Eloquence and Government at Uppsala University, is the appropriate scholar to write the contemporary history of the three Baltic States. Bennich Björkman's chair was founded by the Swedish state counsellor Johan Skytte in Uppsala four hundred years ago. At the time Estonia had already become, and Livonia was in the process of becoming, a Swedish province. In 1632 Johan Skytte became the first chancellor of Tartu University in Estonia, which was founded on his initiative. The students came from Estonia and Livonia. Estonia and Livonia belong in the foundation process of early modern Sweden, the age of state chancellor Axel Oxenstierna.¹

Johan Skytte is the symbol of the kinship of Sweden, Estonia and Livonia. In 2007 a monument to him was erected in Tartu. Besides being the current scholarly heir of Johan Skytte, Professor Bennich-Björkman has a personal link to Estonia. Her mother was born in prewar Estonia. *Behind the Iron Curtain and Beyond. The Soviet Years and the Emancipation in the Baltics and Ukraine* is a comparative analysis of the transition of the three Baltic States and Ukraine from dictatorship to democracy. It is also a hermeneutical investigation of the states of mind of the different people who accomplished the transition. Simply put, the book is a comprehensive history of the contemporary political

history of the Baltic States and Ukraine. It is a blend of strict political science and good story telling. The analytical tools are neatly interwoven in the narration.

This lengthy introduction to a review may seem excessive. However, after having closely followed Bennich Björkman's presentation of the contemporary histories of the four states, I cannot help concluding that Estonia stands out as the third contemporary edition of the Swedish state that was formed in the seventeenth century, the second edition obviously being Finland. The siblings are different in many respects, but their shared ancestry is living history with agency.

According to Bennich-Björkman's criteria for the establishment of a democratic multiparty system and of a non-corrupt market economy, Latvia has been less successful than Estonia. The jury is still out concerning Lithuania. It is not evident whether it will join Estonia as a future-oriented society or remain hampered by the Soviet heritage of mess. In the first post-

Continued. How and why did Estonia succeed?

Soviet decades Ukraine showed similarities with Latvia. It was perhaps entering a more promising “Lithuanian” way before the Russian war of conquest. The author goes beyond these coarse generalizations. They are not value judgments but simply statements of the fact that the magnitude of the Soviet assault on civil society was great. Bennich-Björkman delivers a multifaceted picture of political struggles and the development of market economy in all the four states.

The crucial research question is expressed explicitly at the beginning of the book: how and why could Estonia succeed? The answer is reached through a systematic comparison between Estonia and the three less successful examples. They have not managed to follow the same track:

[...] Estonia swiftly developed that specific mixture of cooperation and conflict which is the trade mark of democratic policies at their best. Competition and struggle for power in conjunction with respect for rivals and cooperation according to the legal rules of the game. No noticeable political corruption, economic managers not attempting to capture the state, or to become the state. (pp. 10 f., my translation).

In order to explain why and how Estonia’ transition has been successful, Bennich-Björkman starts her comparative analysis with an overview of the Soviet period. It is an outright condemnation of the Soviet experience. It is characterized as “Out of many, one: seventy years of Soviet headache.” The author makes clear that the Soviet Union was a very peculiar entity. It was a territory with fixed external boundaries but it was neither a polity nor an economy. It was a society without politics, a dictatorship based upon forced labor and arbitrary distribution of goods to the population. Basically it was a continuation of pre-Petrine Russia, a society which most Russians accepted as natural. However, and this is what Bennich-Björkman’s history is all about, this society was experienced as alien by the non-Russian inhabitants of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, western Ukraine and Kyiv.



Night singing parties at Lauluväljaku 1988, Estonia.

PHOTO: JAAN KÜNNAP/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

An obvious premise for Bennich-Björkman is that the native population of the three Baltic States and western Ukraine experienced the Soviet period as a Russian occupation of the homeland. It was self-evident that there must be resistance. The author makes clear that the resistance wasn’t primarily anti-Russian, but anti-Soviet, against the real-life consequences of the communist ambition to create Homo Sovieticus, the reduction of human beings to mere productive forces. The successful resistance was epitomized by the activities of the Estonian intelligentsia. In art, music, literature, poetry, drama, history, religion and through self-studies, all Soviet dimensions were externalized from ordinary life.

Natural scientists and engineers as well as economists helped create an ambience that was oriented not towards the past but the future. Estonians were prepared to meet the challenge of Gorbachev’s perestroika. In Estonia, the representatives of the ruling party were pragmatic. They mastered the art of double think. They might seem to have been opportunistic, even hypocritical, but they were realists. They functioned as a shield against the oppressors, i.e., the Russians and the true Soviet believers among their own kin. Much like their 13th century Japanese predecessors, the Estonians trod on the tiger’s tail and managed to avoid detection.² In due time they became recognized. In the perestroika period, Alexander Yakovlev as well as three Soviet philosophers pointed to the Estonians as the (only) people that were capable of implementing glasnost and perestroika: They should “pull the other territories out of their backwardness and stagnation”. The reason was that they were Protestants.³

Thanks to Bennich-Björkman’s approach of designing her study as an investigation of state building, it becomes obvious

that the Soviet Union's main characteristic was that it was a pre-modern state. Her book is a splendid and highly readable anthropological study of state building in primitive societies. She has met and discussed history, politics and economy with some fifty people, representatives of the party state, and intellectuals, i.e., agents of the status quo and agents of change. Above all in Estonia but to a certain degree also in Lithuania the boundaries were blurred between the two categories.

The first part of the analysis has the title "Behind the Iron curtain". People in the three Baltic Soviet republics proved capable of preserving informal institutions from the period when their countries had been real existing states in 1920–40. Western Ukraine also had an experience of having belonged to regular states in the same period (Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania). Estonia is characterized by the author as "a pragmatic survivor", Latvia as mutilated by "decades of frost" and Lithuania as "with the Vatican as lodestar". Ukraine is defined as "at the margin of Europe". This is a conscious pun, because the literal meaning of the word is "on the border" or "the end". Bennich-Björkman's manner of defining Ukraine implies that Russia is outside Europe, not in a banal way, geographically, but as a civilization.⁴

Bennich-Björkman's book is the result of twenty years research and extensive field work in the three Baltic States and Ukraine. She gives detailed descriptions of the environments of the meetings with her informants, of the local architecture in the capitals with their distinctive European medieval, Renaissance, Baroque and Art Nouveau buildings. In classical cafés she could meet with her interlocutors over coffee (and not over vodka, the usual Russian drink).

The book is an intellectual traveler's guide to the Baltic States and Ukraine. As has been hinted at above, Li Bennich-Björkman calls attention to the role of tradition when she notes the prominent role of certain cities as strongholds of existential resistance to the Soviet steamroller. The university town Tartu in Estonia, Kaunas with its Catholic seminar in Lithuania, and the university town Lviv in Ukraine were intellectual counterweights to the political capitals. This does not mean that intellectuals in Tallinn, Vilnius and Kyiv were idle, but the provincial cities went under the radar. Latvia was different. Riga was not only the capital; it was also the site of the university. Latvia stands out as least resistant against the Soviet repressive conformity. There was no important counterforce in the country.

Before 1939 Lviv had been a vibrant intellectual center of Austrian-German, Polish and Jewish culture. After 1945, the Austrian Germans had left, the Jews had been exterminated and the Poles had been deported (many to turn up in Wrocław, from where the Germans had been deported). The new inhabitants were Ukrainian workers and peasants. However, the new inhabitants managed to re-animate the spirit of this arch central European city. It became a dynamo in Ukraine's striving to emerge as a European

country. The history of the place and not of the people became decisive.

The necessary condition for the epochal change in Estonia was the changes brought about by Mikhail Gorbachev and Alexander Yakovlev in Moscow, i.e., glasnost, perestroika and *novoye myshlenie* [new thinking]. However, as Li Bennich-Björkman can demonstrate through her comparative analysis, only Estonia possessed a domestic political culture of pragmatic cunning that made the country capable of rising from Soviet apathy. This is the whole gist of her analysis. Estonia's existential resistance was a continuous process. Once the Soviet Union began to falter, the Estonians were prepared to resume that history which had been brought to an abrupt end in 1940.

The sad and horrible fact is that the Russian president Vladimir Putin is against everything Western. Li Bennich Björkman rightly concludes that if all Russian speaking inhabitants had become citizens of Estonia and Latvia when these states resumed their sovereignty in 1991, "NATO membership would not have been accomplished when the Russian bear woke up again". ❌

Kristian Gerner

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references

- 1 Gunnar Wetterberg, Axel Oxenstierna: makten och klokskapen [*Axel Oxenstierna: Power and Wisdom*] (Atlantis, 2010).
- 2 Cf. the movie by Akira Kurosawa from 1945.
- 3 Kristian Gerner, Stefan Hedlund, *The Baltic States and the End of the Soviet Empire* (Routledge 1993, 1997), 101.
- 4 The present review is written under the impact of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. For the present reviewer it is odd to be forced to realize that Russia isn't a part of European civilization in a positive sense. In 2011 I published a book called *Ryssland. En europeiskt civilisationshistoria*. In 2022, the revised version was called simply *Rysslands historia*. It has an epilogue: "Rysslands avsked till den europeiska civilisationen" [Russia's goodbye to European civilization].

Cultural heritage under scrutiny. As a concept, a political tool and a contemporary discourse

**Kulturarv: en
begrepps-
politik**

[Cultural
Heritage: the
politics of the
concept],
Johan Hegardt
and Marcia Sá
Cavalcante
Schuback,
(Södertörn
philosophical
studies, 2022),
124 pages.

That is why in the place of “cultural heritage”, we should probably put “history”, but not occupied, essentialized and therefore manipulated history, not the history of historians, the history of bureaucrats or pedagogical history, but “sublime” and “hybrid” history, the history that we jointly carry and which may lie in the ground of the survival of criticism or, why not? – survival through criticism – what does it mean to inherit life and death? (page 24, translation – AK)

The effort to formulate the ideas contained in *Kulturarv: en begreppspolitik*, the title of which can be translated as *Cultural Heritage: the politics of the concept*, started before and ends after the research project that the book became a part of. This project, titled “Transnational Art and Heritage Transfer and the Formation of Value: Objects, Agents, and Institutions”, was led by Prof. Irina Sandomirskaya and was dedicated to a variety of paradoxes of the cultural heritage concept and practice. Hegardt and Schuback came into the project with their own set of paradoxes relating to the cultural heritage concept, which they set out to analyze in the book.

Quite short, but intense in its quality of analysis, this book can lead discussions in different directions. Hegardt and Schuback make a sketch out of themes that have been left unnoticed in cultural heritage discourse and discourse analysis. They also put the concept of cultural heritage in its historical perspective with a rather pessimistic conclusion about the concept’s role in contemporary Western society. Their book gives Sweden the role of representing the Western discourse, as both authors live and work in this country and chose to analyze first of all Swedish official documents and policy papers as a case study for their research.

Hegardt and Schuback observe that the official cultural heritage discourse is one of the oldest in Sweden. The country got its cultural heritage law as early as 1666 “Placat och Påbudh, Om Gamble Monumenter och Antiquiteter”. Initially, cultural heritage was about protecting valuable objects which no longer belonged to anyone and thus had no legitimate protectors. These were the objects whose cultural context had disappeared for good. What was left was

material evidence of the disappeared world, which subsequent generations felt obliged to preserve in the remaining objects, more as a hint, the last survivor, material evidence of the bygone past. Schuback used a Latin legal term for this: *bona vacantia* (ownerless property), underlining that cultural heritage is something that no one inherited. It became cultural heritage just when the lawful owner could no longer be identified (at some points of history, not freely, as was the case with post-revolutionary expropriations of private property in the USSR). This heritage without heirs leads to different political powers trying to use cultural heritage for their own needs. It becomes the origin of different twists, which Hegardt and Schuback describe in their book.

They claim that the time has come to question the value of the notion of *cultural heritage*, as the quotation at the beginning of this review defines it – through “sublime” history and criticism. The book reminds us that the development of the cultural heritage discourse intensified during the period of industrialization and globalization, when the attachment to the place one originated from and its history weakened. Thus cultural heritage started to be connected with the feeling of nostalgia and of missing something one has not even owned oneself but belonged to: the search for the assurance of the meaning of one’s own existence via the collective memory and heritage. This is when cultural heritage becomes more than just a valuable *antiquity*, the collector’s pleasure, and becomes a social mechanism less dependent on the material object and more on the feelings of attachment and alienation.

ACCORDING TO THE BOOK, the use of the cultural heritage concept peaked in the 2000s and is now dwindling. In the chapter “Arvets förvaltning” (The management of heritage) and “Arvets politisering” (The politicization of heritage) the authors analyze the history of the concept of cultural heritage in Swedish official papers, for example how it was used in different SOUs (official government investigations), bills and reports, which the Swedish government used as an inspiration and preparatory work for possible changes to Swedish law.

Through critical theory and analysis of the official cultural heritage discourse, the book raises the more and more topical question on the status of immigrants’ belonging to the society they live in and their connection to the officially defined cultural heritage. The authors demonstrate the inbuilt inequality and exclusion in the very concept of cultural heritage. As the book defines: “The exile’s longing turns existence into what it always already is, a vulnerability before all other existences [...] it’s not just about not being allowed to live at home in the familiar, but also about becoming a stranger both at home and in the foreign” (page 38). The policy of cultural heritage prescribes the kind of heritage to which one has to experience a personal feeling of belonging. For example, it is said that an immigrant to Sweden cannot own the feeling of belonging to the Swedish heritage. It is prescribed that she should miss only her culture from her homeland, even



All of the state's official inquiries (SOU) between 1922 and 1999 are digitalized and to be found at the National Library of Sweden.

if she escaped it and has no plans to return. At the same time she will always be an “immigrant”, “fremmande”, “stranger”, and to quote the book: “As a stranger for others, one becomes a stranger for oneself” (page 43). Someone else on the level of cultural policy defines what kind of nostalgia we are to have and for what kind of culture. It always has to be a national culture of a certain kind, and cannot be transnational or global culture. The book claims that cultural heritage preservation policy has changed and, unnoticed, is gradually becoming an identity policy, or even “identifikationspolitik” (the politics of identification) (page 44). According to Hegardt and Schuback, in this framework everyone has to become their own *image*-producer: they have to clone, imitate, play their heritage identity. We see the confirmation of this claim in all types of different media – from official to amateur. The imaginary becomes a property, a source of conflict, and leads to the struggle for appropriation. Cultural heritage practice nowadays is less the attempt to know more about the forgotten past and to strive for the preservation of heritage objects, and more a field of positioning in the media world. The book follows in detail the transformation of the concept in official Swedish discourse, tracing this transformation using the Swedish example. The finding of this analysis is that the official discourse, which from the 1970s tried to emphasize the importance of minorities’ cultural heritage, gave a tool to neonationalists to highlight the Swedish cultural heritage as valuable

on the same grounds as other heritages (page 81). The discourse on cultural heritage during recent decades, although formulated with good intentions, led to the focus on the purification of a description of separate cultures, instead of demonstrating their mutual influences, which gave neonationalists an argument to state the importance of preserving pure Swedish culture.

THE BOOK MAKES a strong claim that cultural heritage policy, which became identity policy, paved the ground for neonationalism, ethnocentrism and racism. These policies in different countries searched for and found a powerful suggestive imaginary of the past, which helped people with their self-definition and provided the comforting feeling of certainty in themselves. As a result, this imaginary can become a replacement for thorough historical study. One can conclude after reading the book that a parasite ideology, which addresses us with the comfortable language of cultural heritage identity, replaces cultural heritage preservation discourse as it was formulated in the second

Continued. Cultural heritage under scrutiny

part of the 19th – early 20th century; and as the authors claim, Swedish authorities have gradually lost control over the message they themselves prioritized and developed.

Hegardt and Schuback reveal the tendency in contemporary society towards the need to identify oneself with some kind of a stable image: a nationality, or a powerful group. Even more – the need to highlight one's own cultural heritage at the expense of others; that is, the concept of cultural heritage is exclusionary. In this claim they refer to *The Heritage Crusade* by David Lowenthal, which as they point out was ignored among cultural heritage researchers, probably because it questions the status of the concept of cultural heritage. All who remain undefined face the challenge to be questioned, not only on the theoretical level, but also on the level of their existence. In this the authors of the book see the similarities of our time with the world as it was in the 1930s. They claim that globalism that prizes flexibility and mobility leads to people losing their historical identities. What replaces those identities are new constructed identities based on the appropriation of images and narratives, coined among other things by the discourses of cultural heritage. Without identity one feels oneself to be an outsider, but the identities offered for one to choose from are myths. The difference to the 1930s, according to Hegardt and Schuback, is that between First and Second World Wars one was to identify oneself with the party, country or a ruler. Nowadays one chooses to identify with an image of

oneself. What one does is constantly to form oneself according to the picture that one consumes in media.

It is interesting that the book turns the pleasure of self-identification into a trap. The question is: where we can go to resist the need to constantly create our identity? Even if one succeeds in resisting, how will one tell others about it, without creating a new image and a new suggestive identity? Are we forever destined to go around in the traps of multiple attractive but dangerous images of ourselves?

The book gives a little glimpse of the way out of this situation. It comes to the conclusion, or one can say sees hope in finding a new form of coexistence which can survive without the need of identification, an "open identity" which develops in the process of searching, not finding. It prizes the feeling of *missing* as a continuity that does not seek to be filled or satisfied. To agree or not with this is a task for a reader of the book. The question is formulated, and now it is the readers' duty to think it further.

THE DISCUSSION of the traps of identity policies and practices is becoming more and more topical and the book is a substantial contribution in this subject. The question that remains is whether the concept of *cultural policy* will survive and gain a new meaning or is destined to lose its importance and become marginalized or even disappear. If so, we, as humanities scholars, might not need to be sad about it. As Lowenthal, and following him Hegardt and Schuback, emphasize, cultural heritage should not be mixed with history. It is not really a study of the past but the prizing of the past, coined to suit contemporary needs. ✖

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Regional report reveals how transitions have set ecological concerns aside

Ninna Mörner (ed.), *CBEES State of the Region Report 2022/23: Ecological Concerns in Transition: A Comparative Study on Responses to Waste and Environmental Destruction in the Region* (Södertörn University, Centre for Baltic and East European Studies, CBEES: Huddinge), 222 pages. Editorial members: Florence Fröhlig, Tora Lane and Eglė Rindzevičiūtė

As the previous CBEES State of the Region Reports were dedicated to the management of memory and the current political situation in the region, we decided this year to devote the CBEES State of the Region Report to Ecological Concerns in Transition.

Non-humans, such as mountains, forests and trees, meadows and ravines, rivers, lakes, and animals, bear the scars of human beings' past actions and political choices. These non-human beings: for instance, the soil, particular landscapes, polluted environments, and even hazardous radiation emitted by nuclear waste, testify to an exploitative approach to nature.

BUT NATURE KNOWS no borders and environmental issues are on the agenda globally. In our region, the environmental situation has however to be set in the post-communist context. From the beginning, communism meant an alternative process of modernization, with state-governed industries and extensive extraction of natural resources. When the Eastern Bloc set on a transition path from a state-owned planned economy to privatization and a market economy, the spheres of industry and natural resources were of course extremely attractive for private foreign and national interests, but also highly problematic since some were

conditioned by a state infrastructure that was in a state of collapse. Today, we see abandoned heavy industries, mines, and nuclear plants which no one seems to take responsibility for and that to this day continue to contaminate ground, water, forest, and air in areas throughout the whole region. It appears that the speedy transition meant giving little time or effort to restoring the damage to nature, dismantling unprofitable industry and taking care of its waste, or making sure that future investments were based on sustainability and recycling.

THE PROBLEMS of transition have currently led to environmental challenges in many parts of the region. The state response to these challenges and the ability to address them in official media or by the communities vary considerably. Because of the very palpable threat to people on a local level, it appears that environmental issues can unite people at grassroots level, despite strong political repression and human rights violations.

The onset of the current war in Ukraine added another dimension to ecological concerns and brought new levels of destruction to the region. Nuclear catastrophe has become an impending threat. Moreover, beyond the loss of human life and the shattering of cities and livelihoods, war means long-lasting destruction of the environment: Removing dangerous military waste, clearing land, water, air, and natural habitats from the remnants of war, and stabilizing ecosystems will be a heavy burden on generations to come.

Nuclear threat and destruction in the region have become a global concern. Nuclear waste risks creating a world that can no longer sustain life. In the face of such devastation, how might we begin mobilizing and taking responsibility?



In this year's report, we asked different scholars to shed light on some of the environmental concerns in the region and to map contemporary awareness and responses, forms of resistance, and engagement with these environmental issues wherever this is possible. Thirty-two scholars contributed to this report, mainly scholars within environmental sciences, and from cultural history from different countries in the region. As usual we combined essays dealing with overall themes and additional perspectives with several country reports in the region: 15 countries from the Baltic Sea Region, Eastern and Central Europe, and the countries in the post-Soviet area and former Yugoslavia. The responses varied as concerned theme and scope, but together they constitute a map of diverse environmental concerns in the region and the relation to the historical legacy as well as contemporary awareness and responses, forms of resistance, and engagement with environmental issues through politics, activism, and art. ✕

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The full text of the report can be found at:
<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-51241>

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Promoting multidisciplinary and international cooperation

On March 27–30, the Baltic University Programme (BUP) organized the BUP Master Thesis Training 2023. 22 master students from the BUP participating universities attended the event, which took place at the Geocentrum at Uppsala University. The idea was to give the students the opportunity to meet and discuss scientific problems related to their ongoing master theses, focusing on sustainability in an interdisciplinary, international, multicultural, and regional context.

The Director of the Baltic University Programme, Madeleine Granvik (Uppsala University) explains: “We started the master thesis training in 2022, as an extension of similar arrangements that BUP has organized for years for PhD students. The students come from BUP member universities in the Baltic Sea region, and from different disciplines.” Students from Ukraine were also invited to participate in the event online.

EACH STUDENT was given individual feedback on their master thesis from a supervisor from a participating university. A total of 8 supervisors were invited. In addition to the individual counseling, the event included student-to-student discussions. The theses covered a wide range of topics, including climate change, energy issues, sustainable societies, urban-rural



Some of the participants at the Master Thesis Training 2022 gathered outside Linneanum, an orangery from 1787, in the botanical gardens in Uppsala.

development and sustainable food systems.

Another idea behind the event was to provide the students with the opportunity to become acquainted with universities in other countries and their scientific traditions. As in all BUP activities, the training program was based on an interdisciplinary approach. Evan Goss at the BUP Coordinating Secretariat, responsible for organizing the event, says: “This is a worthwhile opportunity for students from all over the region to meet, learn from each other, build connections with other students, and become better acquainted with other academic perspectives, all in a friendly environment.”

THE PROGRAM also included social events, to facilitate network building among the participants.

Madeleine Granvik says: “This illustrates what the BUP can do: promoting academic cooperation in the Baltic Sea region by enriching the students’ perspectives on sustainability with experiences and perspectives from other disciplines and other countries. The training will thus serve as a platform for a common understanding of regional challenges and possibilities and open avenues for future cooperation on these issues.”

This is indeed needed in the region today. ❌

Joakim Ekman

THE BALTIC UNIVERSITY PROGRAM

The Baltic University Programme (BUP) is one of the largest university cooperations in the world, with about 92 participating universities in the Baltic Sea region (including the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia,

Sweden and Ukraine). The Baltic University Programme strives to find novel ways of interaction among universities and between universities and society. The main aim is to enhance strong regional educational and research communities, but also to foster a

greater awareness on the network’s focus areas: sustainable development, environmental protection, and democracy in the Baltic Sea region. The BUP is coordinated from Uppsala University.

More info: www.balticuniv.uu.se/about-us/.