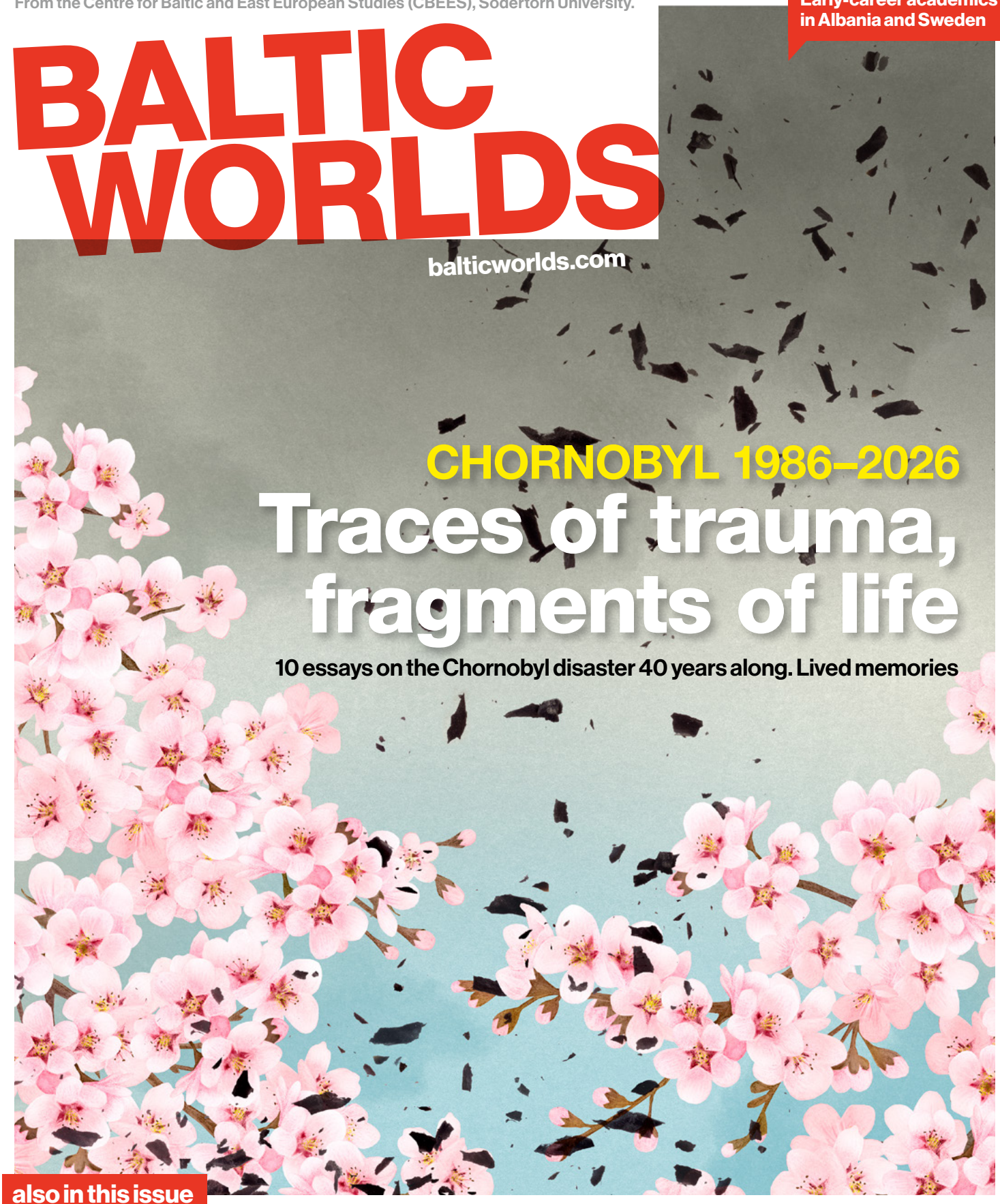
A scholarly journal and news magazine. April 2026. Vol. XVIIII:1.
From the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES), Södertörn University.

Early-career academics in Albania and Sweden

BALTIC WORLDS

balticworlds.com



CHORNOBYL 1986–2026

Traces of trauma, fragments of life

10 essays on the Chornobyl disaster 40 years along. Lived memories

Illustration: Karin Zaric Sunvisson

also in this issue

ELECTIONS IN BULGARIA / LATVIAN FOLKLORE ENSEMBLES / SCHOOLS IN KHARKIV / WOMEN IN DONBAS

SÖDERTÖRN UNIVERSITY
sh.se | STOCKHOLM

BALTIC WORLDS
balticworlds.com

Sponsored by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies
ÖSTERSJÖ-STIFTELSEN
THE FOUNDATION FOR BALTIC AND EAST EUROPEAN STUDIES

editorial

Nuclear spring

The cherry tree is known to be one of the oldest trees in Ukraine. It is said to represent hope, resilience, the memory of home, and the continuation of life amidst adversity. Particularly in Kyiv, these trees have evolved into a symbol of beauty and resistance, thriving even in the face of wartime challenges. On April 26, 1986, the cherry trees in Kyiv were in full blossom, and many people went out to celebrate the arrival of spring. At the same time, 100 kilometers north of the city of Kyiv, a flawed safety test at the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant caused a catastrophic explosion in Reactor 4, releasing massive amounts of radioactive material. The accident resulted in uncontrollable power surge that created a massive steam explosion, followed by a second explosion that blew the 1,000-ton lid off the reactor, exposing the core and spreading a radioactive plume.

SWEDEN HAS BEEN credited with pushing the former Soviet Union to admit that something had gone wrong at the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant. The first alarm came from Forsmark, a nuclear power plant located a couple of hours north of Stockholm. In the early morning of April 28, 1986, after eating breakfast in the coffee room, chemist Clifford Robinson had to pass through a radiation detector, where he set the alarm off. The alarm kept going off for all further employees of the plant coming to work that morning, but nothing indicated any malfunction or problem at Forsmark. It was the surroundings that were heavily contaminated. A first alert was sent to the Swedish Radiation Safety Authority. The investigation concluded that the wind had originated from the area around Chornobyl. Moscow initially denied this, but after a warning from Sweden to file an official alert with the International Atomic Energy Agency the catastrophe was finally admitted.

Northern Sweden absorbed 5% of the radioactive cesium-137 emitted from the reactor which affected especially reindeer husbandry, and tens of thousands of reindeer were slaughtered or deemed unfit for human consumption.

There are no precise figures on exactly how many millisieverts (mSv) of radiation the children in Prypiat received during the 36 hours that elapsed before the evacuation began. However, it is well known that the children in the area were exposed to very high doses of radiation which led to severe health issues. One of the greatest health risks to children was the consumption of milk from cows grazing on contaminated land, which led to large amounts of radioactive iodine being stored in the children's thyroid glands. Between 1991 and 2015, nearly 20,000 cases of thyroid cancer are said to have been diagnosed among those who grew up at the time of the accident.

Chornobyl still casts its shadow. The contamination continues to present a danger in the Exclusion Zone, and the Russian invasion put the integrity of this zone at risk by re-spreading radioactive dust. It is therefore of utmost importance that monitoring work can continue to be carried out at the plant. The war has also disrupted long-term studies on Chornobyl's vulnerable wildlife population and made it more difficult to provide such support as feeding and veterinary care to stray animal populations.

TO MARK the 40th anniversary of the Chornobyl Disaster *Baltic Worlds* is publishing an issue on the theme of the lived memories of the catastrophe, and life in the Exclusion Zone – particularly in light of the ongoing war and its consequences. In ten essays researchers and experts provide an array of perspectives and insights. The guest editors Tatiana Kasperski and Oksana Semenik provide a detailed introduction.

Ninna Mörner

in this issue



Metro-Schools in Kharkiv

"Offline-learning is very necessary because it keeps a child engaged and less distracted.

Page 78



Latvian Folklore Ensembles

"The war has strengthened Latvians' insight into Ukrainian culture and has boosted a sudden popularity of it.

Page 67



ILLUSTRATION: KARIN ZARIC SUNVISSON

peer-reviewed articles

67 Latvian folklore ensembles and their initiatives against Russia's war in Ukraine, *Ilga Vālodze Ābelkina*

94 Echoes of peace, lives of war. Women's narratives of belonging in Donbas, *Eva Ievgeniia Babenko*

essays

78 Resilience of school infrastructure. Children's right to education in wartime Ukraine, *Ilona Kostikova*, *Volodymyr Borysov*, *Tamila Shcheblykina*, *Maryna Vasylieva*, and *Olha Pochuieva*

106 Winter of discontent and elections. Understanding Bulgaria's 2025 protests and issues of Bulgarian politics, *Alexandra Brankova*

114 Worlds apart, struggles alike. Early-career academics in Albania and Sweden, *Gilda Hoxha* and *Joakim Ekman*

report

88 Ukraine update. The attitude climate in 2026, *Simo Mannila*

conference report

119 In search of solidarity between the Global East and the Global South, *Birgit Poopuu* and *Benjamin Klasche*

theme section

The Chornobyl disaster 40 years along. Lived memories

Guest editors: Tatiana Kasperski and Oksana Semenik

4 Introduction. Chornobyl in the fog of war. 40 years after the disaster, *Tatiana Kasperski* and *Oksana Semenik*

essays

8 Chornobyl in the war zone, *Denys Vyshnevskiy*

16 What we wouldn't know without Chornobyl. Science and scientists of Chornobyl, *Olena Pareniuk* and *Kateryna Shavanova*

22 Atoms for peace and atoms for war. In Ukraine's nuclear history, *Mariana Budjeryn*

26 The zone of memory, *Magdalena Banaszkiewicz*

32 Remembering Vilcha. A twice abandoned village, *Viktoria Naumenko*

37 Maria Prymachenko and (not) naive images of Chornobyl: "This is how I dreamed of the fourth reactor", *Oksana Semenik*

43 Writing the disaster from Hiroshima to Chornobyl. Atomic and nuclear testimonies and the afterlife of disasters, *Florence Fröhlig*

49 Peaceful atom, haunted legacy. Echoes of war(s) in Chornobyl documentaries, *Stanislav Menzelevskyi*

57 Chornobyl's children. A generation between two realities, *Olga Bubich*

review

64 The Chernobyl Children: A transnational history of a nuclear disaster, *Robert Jacobs*

colophon

***Baltic Worlds* is published by the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES) at Södertörn University, Sweden.**

Editor-in-chief
Ninna Mörner

Publisher
Joakim Ekman

Scholarly advisory council
Sari Autio-Sarasmo, Aleksanteri Institute, Helsinki University; Sofie Bedford, IRES, Uppsala University; Michael Gentile, Oslo University; Ekaterina Kalinina (Chair), Stockholm University; Thomas Lundén, CBEES, Södertörn University; Kazimierz Musiał, University of Gdańsk; Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, Lund University; Yuliya Yurchuk, Södertörn University

Corresponding members
Aija Lulle, University of Latvia; Michael North, Greifswald University; Andrzei Nowak, Jagiellonian University, Kraków; Andrea Pető, Central European University, Budapest; Jens E. Olesen, Greifswald University; Olga Schihalejev, Tartu University

Language check
Ben Caton

Layout
Sara Bergfors, Lena Fredriksson, Serpentin Media

Illustration
Karin Zaric Sunvisson

Subscription
bw.editor@sh.se

Printed by
Multiply Solutions, Lidköping 2026
Printed: ISSN 2000-2955
Online: ISSN 2001-7308

Contact *Baltic Worlds*
ninna.morner@sh.se

The content expresses the views of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the views of *Baltic Worlds*.

BALTIC WORLDS

Theme: The Chornobyl disaster 40 years along. Lived memories

Guest editors
Tatiana Kasperski
and **Oksana Semenik**

Introduction.

Chornobyl in the fog of war 40 years after the disaster

On December 15, 2020, Ukraine commemorated a landmark in its nuclear history: 20 years had passed since the last operating reactor at the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant was shut down. In connection with this event, and with the Day of Honoring the Participants of the Liquidation of the Consequences of the Chernobyl Disaster, held annually on December 14th, the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine announced its intention to apply for inclusion of the Chornobyl site in the UNESCO World Heritage list. In 2019 more than 124,000 people had visited the site, many of them in the wake of the hugely popular HBO series *Chernobyl*. Tourist interest was steadily growing.

The idea to transform a heavily radioactively-contaminated area into tourist and heritage site surprised many people.[1] Yet in the 2010s and early 2020s tourism had invigorated the economic and cultural development in the zone, and proposals how to expand this potential were plentiful. But the Russian invasion of Ukraine – including the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) – in February 2022 put an abrupt and violent end to these plans.

On a visit to the Chornobyl zone, in winter 2025, that is a few months before the 40th anniversary, these pre-war visions of the future of the CEZ appeared almost surreal. Far from a place of commemoration and heritage, the zone had become a military site and a borderline grey zone, dangerous not so much because of ever-present radioactivity that one learned to measure and manage in order to protect oneself, but because of Russian mines, bombings, and other ongoing military threats and defense-related activities.

"FAR FROM A PLACE OF COMMEMORATION AND HERITAGE, THE ZONE HAD BECOME A MILITARY SITE AND A BORDERLINE GREY ZONE."

THE FOLLOWING essays in this theme-issue aim to capture a snapshot of that 40th anniversary amidst the ongoing war. These essays were written by researchers in life sciences, humanities and social sciences, as well as practitioners of the arts, many of whom have worked on Chornobyl issues in Ukraine, in Eastern and Western Europe and in North America for some time. They engage the effort to understand the impact of the ongoing violence unleashed by Russian troops on the legacy and memory of Chornobyl writ large. These impressions have been laid out in multiple, layered visions and memories of Chornobyl: Chornobyl as a symbol of technological failure, a reminder of local and national tragedy and resilience, and a place for international technoscientific and humanitarian cooperation and collective reflection about nuclear and other technogenic risks.

The authors have experienced the ongoing violence in different ways and through different personal lenses. Those authors who, like Denys Vyshnevskyi, worked in the Chornobyl exclusion zone for extended times expe-



A photo showing the damaged containment vessel at the New Safe Confinement (NSC) in the Chornobyl exclusion zone, following a drone attack on February 14, 2025.

PHOTO: TETIANA DZHAFAROVA/AFP/TT

rienced its destruction and transformation firsthand, and feel how their daily work has been profoundly affected by the war. Several continue to live, work and write in Ukraine, between Kyiv and the CEZ, under incessant aerial attack alerts, explosions, and interruptions in electricity and heat which they have chosen not to highlight in their compelling analyses of the issues and events. Others have endured the war on a daily basis, yet in a mediated way, in physical safety, sometimes virtually, and other times through testimonies of relatives and friends in Ukraine.

The war has affected the way we see Chornobyl and nuclear issues more generally. In spite of the profound differences in our experience of the war, several common themes go through the contributions in this issue. They include the changing spatiality and temporality of the disaster; the difficulty in disconnecting peaceful and military technologies and risks; the physical legacies of geopolitical shocks and constraints; and the role of individual, collective and political memory in the disaster.

THAT RADIATION has no borders was one of the first lessons that international community learned after Chornobyl disaster, indeed in its first days when the Soviet authorities tried to keep secret from Soviet citizens and international community alike the extent of the dangers. The radiation cloud was detected first in Sweden and then other European countries and beyond. However, national and nuclear borders dramatically reappeared in importance when they were violated by Russian troops who invaded Ukrainian territory through Chornobyl exclusion zone in February 2022, stirring up radioactivity and taking station personnel as hostages. More than 400 kilometers of the Ukrainian border with Belarus go through the CEZ as Denys Vyshnevskiy reminds us in his essay. The war made it impossible for zone personnel to commute as normal to and from Slavutych, the residential city built to replace the evacuated atomic city of Prypiat and support CEZ research, monitoring and other activities, to their places of work.

“THE WAR HAS AFFECTED THE WAY WE SEE CHORNOBYL AND NUCLEAR ISSUES MORE GENERALLY.”

The closing of the borders due to the military conflict challenges the many transnational connections that became possible through various forms of cooperation to mitigate the consequences of the Chornobyl accident, from scientific research to humanitarian assistance to children’s aid. Olena Pareniuk and Kateryna Shavanova write how scientific cooperation came and went during the post-Chornobyl decades, but became a source of support to researchers and others after the Russian invasion and war. Olga Bubich followed a generation of young Belarusians who faced severe social and economic crises after the disaster and collapse of the USSR. Yet international programs for “Chornobyl Children” allowed hundreds of thousands of them to experience life abroad and created

life-long ties between the people whose countries used to be on the different side of the Cold War divide. While making physical space of the Chornobyl zone inaccessible, the war made more prominent virtual storytelling about the disaster, writes Magdalena Banaszkiewicz. The CEZ has become a "zone of memory," shaped by digital mediation and virtual immersion.



PHOTO: OLGA BUBICH

International programs for Chornobyl children allowed hundreds of thousands of them to experience life abroad.

THE WAR ALSO transformed dominant temporalities of the disaster. As Pareniuk and Shavanova insist in their essay, the war reveals that the Chornobyl disaster was never a completed event of the past, but an ongoing disaster that will have to be mitigated for decades, and it is finally a source of important new understandings about the nuclear enterprise. Counterintuitively perhaps, they also show that Chornobyl has recently been transformed from a "territory of consequences" into a "territory of solutions", becoming a source of expertise that helps Chornobyl scientists to document and evaluate the damage brought about by the current war on the environment and to anticipate the ways to recovery. For instance, drainage of the cooling pond at the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) generated important data that could be used in environmental remediation after Russian troops blew up the Kakhovka Dam on the Dnipro River in June 2023. Unfortunately, the opportunity to apply knowledge generated in Chornobyl zone elsewhere testifies to the repetition of the patterns of colonial destruction of people and nature.

The recent invasion of the Chornobyl zone reminds of other wars. The "liquidation of the consequences of the Chornobyl disaster", as the Soviet authorities called the post-disaster mitigation effort, relied heavily on military personnel and machinery. For some Soviet citizens witnessing the effort, such as the talented Ukrainian artist Maria Prymachenko, who lived in the village of Bolotnia a few kilometers from the Exclusion Zone, it brought back the memories of the deathly battle against the Nazis during the Second World War. Oksana Semenik shows how the theme of the war, and more specifically of nuclear war, emerges in Prymachenko's paintings. The post-disaster emergency effort was also intentionally portrayed as a life-and-death battle against a dreadful (radioactive) enemy in the Soviet official media, as Stanislav Menzelevskyi analyzes in his essay on the Soviet Chornobyl documentaries. Prymachenko, who died in 1997, could not witness the current war. Yet, symbolically, during the first days of the Russian invasion a shell struck the Ivankiv Local History Museum where 25 of Prymachenko's paintings were on display – 14 of the works could be saved.

The cyclicity of time and violence was felt by the inhabitants of the village of Vilcha, situated in the CEZ, who were forced to abandon their homes twice. First, the entire village was relocated from Polissia, the extensive forested and marshy area that surrounds the power plant, to Kharkiv region, where a new Vilcha was built, and more recently its residents have had to evacuate because of the full-scale Russian invasion of Eastern Ukraine. The cycle of violence confronts communities and societies with the challenges of fragility and resilience. In her essay Viktoria Naumenko shows how, in spite of having lost twice their physical homes, Vilcha residents strive to rebuild their sense of belonging through solidarity, care and shared memories.

THE WAR AND occupation point to another crucial lesson of the Chornobyl disaster that has not been learned: the vulnerability of civilian nuclear infrastructure in times of military conflicts and the need to integrate this infrastructure into international security regimes. More broadly, Russia's ongoing violence against Ukraine highlights the critical entanglements between so-called "peaceful" and military nuclear technologies. The atom was "born violent", as Robert Jacobs, quoted by Stanislav Menzelevskyi, reminds us: indeed, the first nuclear reactors were created to produce plutonium for nuclear bombs. In her contribution Mariana Budjeryn provides the overview of Ukrainian nuclear history that encompasses both military and civilian nuclear technologies. The Chornobyl-type RBMK reactor itself had its origins in the USSR's graphite-moderated military reactors and could, if needed, produce plutonium (Pu). Pu is used mostly for bombs, although the failed promise is that it will be used in so-called breeder reactors – but only Russia has operating commercial scale breeder reactors. The Chornobyl disaster, Budjeryn shows, played a role in the Ukraine's decision to abandon its nuclear weapons arsenal upon the Soviet collapse. This decision ultimately made Ukraine vulnerable to Russia's aggression. Russia has been regularly threatening to use its nuclear weapons both against Ukraine and against Western countries supporting Ukraine in the war. Moreover, Russia's war on Ukraine involved its total disregard for nuclear conventions in its

"RUSSIA'S ONGOING VIOLENCE AGAINST UKRAINE HIGHLIGHTS THE CRITICAL ENTANGLEMENTS BETWEEN SO-CALLED 'PEACEFUL' AND MILITARY NUCLEAR TECHNOLOGIES."

conquest of the Zaporizhzhia NPP, the largest NPP in Europe, and its transformation into a military outpost and a potential dirty bomb.

In their scientific analyses, sociological investigations, and cultural studies, the authors of this *Baltic Worlds* edited volume have emphasized the many, often paradoxical meanings of the Chornobyl zone and of the Chornobyl disaster that are in constant flux. In her discussion of the testimony of Japanese hibakusha and accounts of Chornobyl survivors, Florence Fröhlig points to one of the sources of this diversity: the contrast between two kinds of memory, political and cultural. The former often serves to support state efforts at "closure and national integration," whereas the latter preserves "trauma, ambiguity and [...] loss."

EVEN THE WAYS of spelling Chornobyl point to the ongoing transformations of, and clashes between different meanings, temporality and spatiality of the disaster. The most widely used derivation of Chernobyl is from the Russian language; English language dictionaries still propose it as the only correct one.[2] Yet, if we follow the geographical principle, we should use the spelling derived from Ukrainian, that is "Chornobyl", as the site where the NPP is situated. Adopting the less-used Ukrainian spelling, as we do in this special issue, matters politically, of course, as it signals one's positionality towards, and distancing from, the legacy of the Russian colonial violence. As Banaszkiewicz points out in her essay, this shift gained formal recognition through the United Nations General Assembly resolution endorsing the Ukrainian transliteration "Chornobyl" instead of "Chernobyl" in December 2025. We have used "Chernobyl" when quoted sources and organizations use that spelling, as Robert Jacobs does in his review of Melanie Arndt's book which also employs "Chernobyl". Yet, Chornobyl has become so much more than a concrete geographical or physical place: it has marked imaginaries, environments and bodies beyond Ukraine and Ukrainians, and other affected people might claim the right to their own way of spelling Chornobyl. For instance, Belarusians, whose territory received most of radioactive fallout from the accident, might defend the right to refer to "Charnobyl," coming from Belarusian.

Granted, it is not possible to erase the impact of colonial violence by simply changing spelling. Indeed, "decolonization is not a metaphor," as scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang insist, but should refer to the return of land to indigenous populations.[3] And it is clear, and has become even more painfully obvious during the Russian invasion, that the Ukrainian people are still dispossessed from the land in Chornobyl by radiation and elsewhere by Russian occupiers. Svitlana Matviyenko describes this type of colonial legacy as "vertical occupation."[4] This occupation transpires in the long-term underground contamination, such as radioactive pollution from nuclear sites, including Chornobyl. Similarly, widespread laying of mines and unexploded ordnance will continue to dispossess Ukrainians from their land long after the occupiers have left.

Some people will have the possibility—and choose to—escape to less contaminated and safer places. Others will not be able to escape, like the artist Maria Prymachenko, who chose to stay, being acutely aware, as another elderly woman cited in Oksana Semenik's essay, that it is impossible for them to escape their own poisoned or otherwise occupied land "far or for long." After all, as Melanie Arndt discusses in her book on the Chornobyl children – reviewed here by Robert Jacobs – we all have to learn "the art of living on a damaged planet"[5] wherever we end up.

IT IS IMPORTANT to remember that technogenic, military and other damage will never be inflicted equally everywhere or on everyone at the same time in the same ways, and that deep injustices will persist. This holds for the ongoing war in Ukraine. Our obligation, therefore, should be to recognize and to name this injustice and search ways of remediating it.

The essays here ultimately demonstrate that the peaceful atom is always at risk of being a site of war. They reveal how engineers and scientists struggling to do their work in the face of fluctuating border zones, drones and mines; citizens and their children caught trying to live between war and peace; farmers and Chornobyl re-settlers eking out daily life while soldiers fire rifles in the distance; artists, film makers and others striving to make sense of the invasion; and government officials seeking geopolitical and military advantage have transformed and are transformed by the violence of war. Chornobyl's temporal and spatial; military and economic; and cultural and political impacts will remain in flux far beyond the decay of radiation that first overwhelmed the zone 40 years ago.

Tatiana Kasperski, Associate Professor, is a Project Researcher at the Department for Historical and Contemporary Studies at Södertörn University.

Oksana Semenik is an Art Historian, Curator and Researcher working in Kyiv.

references

1 Yet see the study of this phenomenon by Magdalena Banaszkiewicz in her book *Heritage and Tourism in the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone* (2022), and read her essay in this theme issue, see page 26.

2 For definition of Chornobyl in British English see "Chernobyl", *Collins*: https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/chernobyl and "Meaning of Chernobyl in English", *Cambridge Dictionary*: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/chernobyl

3 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor", *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* vol. 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.

4 Svitlana Matviyenko, "Vertical Occupation," *London Ukrainian Review*, March 4, 2024. Available at: https://www.londonukrainianreview.org/posts/vertical-occupation/

5 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al. (eds.), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), quoted in Melanie Arndt, *Chernobyl Children: A Transnational History of a Nuclear Disaster* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 8, 11 and elsewhere.



PHOTO: DENYS VYSHNEVSKIY

CHORNOBYL IN THE WAR ZONE

by **Denys Vyshnevskiy**

abstract

The first news from Chornobyl was about gunfire near the Buriakivka radioactive waste storage facility. By noon there were images: Russian tanks near the Administrative Building No. 1 of the plant. Denys Vyshnevskyi, the Head of Department at Chornobyl Radiation and Ecological Biosphere Reserve writes here about the occupation and how life changed in the Exclusion Zone. For many research groups, 2022 became the year of accepting a bitter truth – Chornobyl research was being suspended indefinitely.

KEYWORDS: Chornobyl, Exclusion Zone, Russo-Ukrainian war.

Over 25 years of working in the Exclusion Zone, the one lesson I have learned is this: never be surprised by anything. Changes can come unexpectedly – and quite radically. Against the backdrop of stability, slow routines, and the long-standing regularity of Chornobyl's working life, they appear as catastrophes and a reversal of the universe itself. To describe this dynamic, the theory of punctuated equilibrium by Eldredge and Gould or Nassim Taleb's Black Swan theory fits best. Under such conditions, a Chornobyl expert must resist the feeling of sufficient competence and self-confidence – because they amount to the sin of pride.

The full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022 radically changed the design of activities in the Exclusion Zone. Occupation, de-occupation, restoration of operations, strengthening of border defense – these are the terms used to describe the Zone since the beginning of the war. Yet they do not reveal the complexity of the situation, which lies in balancing the changes brought by occupation and martial law with the continued fulfillment of the functions assigned to the Zone and its institutions, as well as the ways human activity adapts to new conditions.

Zero mark, or baseline indicators

The Dytiatky checkpoint is the main gateway to the Zone from Kyiv. The primary flow of people and cargo passes through it. In the 1990s and 2000s, to the left of the radiation control building stood a board listing the main objectives of state policy implemented in the Exclusion Zone. There was no mention of national security, defense, or border protection.

The Zone is located in the very north of Kyiv region, along the border with the Republic of Belarus. Four hundred and eleven kilometers of state border form the Zone's northern boundary. No matter how many times I encountered it, I always felt its ephemeral nature. It existed on the map, but not in the landscape. There were no engineering structures, no watchtowers, no barbed wire, no control strips. Only occasionally did small signposts indicate that the state border of Ukraine passed here. Roads across the border were mostly open. If you didn't look at your GPS, you would only realize you had left the country upon seeing the sign "Gomel Region."



The Exclusion Zone. MAP: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

FROM THE BELARUSIAN side, the attitude toward the border was different. In the 1990s there were cases when Belarusian border guards detained our foresters and confiscated vehicles. It was easy to do – a single road could run partly through Ukrainian and partly through Belarusian territory. The most troublesome section was a wedge of Belarusian land between the Zone and Chernihiv region. Transportation arteries from the Zone to the satellite city of the Chornobyl NPP, Slavutych – the Semikhody-Slavutych railway and the highway – passed through it. On the highway stood a Belarusian customs and border checkpoint serving exclusively vehicles traveling from Ukraine to Ukraine through 30 kilometers of Belarus.

"EUROPEAN BISON WERE RECORDED NEAR THE BORDER, AS WERE THE FIRST OBSERVATIONS OF BROWN BEARS."

From a professional point of view, the border was fascinating. It contained the most valuable areas for biodiversity conservation. A vast, wild floodplain of the Prypiat River with a meandering channel and numerous oxbow lakes. From the Chornobyl NPP to the town of Chornobyl, the Prypiat is merely an artificial canal – diverted during construction of the cooling pond. The true Polesian Amazon could only be seen there and partially between Chornobyl and the Kyiv Reservoir. Along the border lie old deciduous forests and wetlands. On the left bank, sandy dunes remain from the 1992 fires that cleared artificial pine plantations. European bison were recorded near the border, as were the first observations of brown bears.

THE PROCESS OF establishing a true state border was underway, but proceeded slowly. In the 2010s, delimitation began to be discussed. At the end of 2014, a radiological survey of the border was conducted. Staff from the field department of EcoCenter walked the entire Chornobyl border section with dosimeters and sampling equipment. In 2019, geodetic demarcation began. Specialists from both countries determined border points and placed markers in the ground. The Reserve also participated in this work. Our employee, Stas Humenyuk, received a Belarusian border guard patch as a gift. Six years later, Chief Sergeant Humenyuk would be killed by a missile strike on the Kherson front.

Units of the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine were not directly stationed in the Zone, though they were present. The nearest command post was located 7 kilometers beyond the Dytiatky checkpoint. Border guards patrolled the southern perimeter of the Zone from the outside and called it the "rear boundary."

It would be wrong to say everyone was satisfied with this situation, especially after 2014. Once, I attended a discussion among experts who clearly outlined the problem of the border's transparency. The Exclusion Zone contains numerous radiological facilities requiring physical protection: the decommissioned Chornobyl NPP, spent nuclear fuel storage facilities, fuel transportation operations, radioactive waste repositories, and more. None of this was protected from the border side.

Signs of tension

The first time the border became an actual threat was in 2016. That summer, Russian-Belarusian military exercises were underway. At the Paryshiv checkpoint, police officers told us that an unmanned aerial vehicle had been recorded over the village of Teremtsi.

In autumn 2019, we were working on the northern left bank right along the border. The only road toward Belarus was blocked by concrete slabs painted white with the word "Ukraine." Stas Humenyuk suggested we go on a "foreign business trip." Why not? Our drone had detected no activity on the other side. We drove around the blocks and followed a road running above a flooded drainage system. Fifty meters in stood

a sign of the Polesie State Radiation-Ecological Reserve. This was already Belarusian territory. The road looked neat: no fallen trees, good surface condition, generally maintained. Humenyuk didn't like it.

> **Why spend resources maintaining a road with no functional purpose? That's suspicious.**

For him, that line of thinking was normal. He was a veteran of the Anti-Terrorist Operation.

AT THE END OF 2021, Belarus began provocations along the EU border – better known as the migration crisis. To secure the Belarusian border, Ukraine's Ministry of Internal Affairs launched Operation Polissia. National Police, Border Guard Service, and National Guard units reinforced border areas. Judging by press releases, the main threat was seen as provocations and the arrival of illegal migrants.

Russian-Belarusian exercises began again. Few in the country wanted to believe in a possible war and an offensive from the north. Personally, what struck me as suspicious was the presence of Kadyrov's forces. Deploying Rosgvardiia's Chechen units into the Polesian forests seemed excessive for mere exercises. It looked serious.

Then, like in chess, a symmetrical move from our side: exercises in the city of Prypiat – armored personnel carriers, mortar fire, tactical drills. The images were impressive, but these were Interior Ministry forces – essentially light infantry. In February, police units were reinforced by the military regiments in charge. Personnel exchanged shortened AKS-74U rifles for AKM rifles.

On February 16, Russian troops deployed pontoon bridges across the Prypiat River in the Belarusian Zone. On February 17, the Exclusion Zone was closed to tourist visits. Zone employees traveling to Slavutych saw large concentrations of Russian military equipment at the Komarin border checkpoint. Russian troops stood openly, demonstrating strength and superiority.

Everything froze in a dense fog of uncertainty.

"RUSSIAN TROOPS STOOD OPENLY, DEMONSTRATING STRENGTH AND SUPERIORITY. EVERYTHING FROZE IN A DENSE FOG OF UNCERTAINTY."

War

It began like it did for everyone – early Thursday morning. A call from Boryspil at 4 a.m.: missile strikes on the airport. I called Serhii Paskevych, Deputy Director of the Institute for Safety Problems of Nuclear Power Plants in Chornobyl. His response was brief:

> **No time – I'm evacuating Institute staff.**

The first news from Chornobyl was about gunfire near the Buriakivka radioactive waste storage facility. By noon there were images: Russian tanks near the Administrative Building No. 1 of the plant. Between these reports came information about the deployment of a crisis headquarters of the State Agency for Exclusion Zone Management in Ivankiv.

A colleague posted briefly on Facebook: "The CEZ (Chornobyl Exclusion Zone) is over." And that's how it felt.

I called Yevhen Fedorovych, a self-settler living in Chornobyl. He had decided to stay. He said explosions could be heard across the Prypiat River and helicopters were flying. He had already survived one occupation as a child in 1941–1943. Over the next two days we spoke several times. Then communication was lost. The Exclusion Zone turned into a black hole from which no information emerged.

A short news video showed our special forces burning a Russian military column at the Ivankiv roundabout near the "Egg" monument. I had driven through that circle countless times going to and from the Zone. Interrogations of the first prisoners captured near Kyiv revealed a consistent story: they entered through the Zone, first stop – the Chornobyl NPP, then toward Ivankiv, from there to Vyshhorod or Makariv.

ONE INTERROGATION stayed with me – a completely disoriented colonel from the Russian Special Police Force. Watching him, I understood that his unit would have operated after full control of the territory was established: clearing neighborhoods, working through lists of "unreliable" individuals, enforcing occupation order.

The first weeks of the war were entirely remote work. We looked at the Zone only through satellite services. In March we detected a major fire that way.

By late March, once a week I could take the city electric train from Kyiv's left bank to the right bank office. The seizure of the Zaporizhzhia NPP shocked me – especially tank fire directed at station buildings. At that moment came the realization that we might have no understanding at all of how the enemy thinks. That thought unsettled me so deeply that I pulled Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* from my shelf and reread the first chapter, "The Assignment: Japan." It describes how US military leadership tasked anthropologists with studying Japanese mentality for wartime strategy. We needed a similar research program.

During multi-day curfews and transport restrictions, Zoom became the primary means of communication. A crisis radioecological forum took place there – an informal, spontaneous meeting of Chornobyl specialists from Fukushima, Germany, Kyiv, and western Ukraine. We discussed the situation, expectations, and necessary actions. There was no information from Chornobyl itself, so regional meteorological stations outside the occupation and front-line areas were oriented toward detecting potential radiation releases. Primary data were transmitted to computing centers in Kyiv, Japan, and Germany to assess possible sources and magnitude of contamination.



Burned conifer forest.

PHOTO: DENYS VYSHNEVSKIY



Destroyed bridge on the road to Chornobyl.

PHOTO: DENYS VYSHNEVSKIY



Trace of WW2.



February 2022, Kyiv.



North checkpoint Benivka.



Drone.

PHOTO: DENYS VYSHNEVSKIY

Another activity was participation in a working group of the Environmental Inspectorate assessing environmental damage from the war. My deputy worked in the forestry section; I focused on Chornobyl. I immersed myself in various cases of evaluating and compensating for radiological damage: hydrogen bomb testing on Pacific atolls, depleted uranium munitions in the Gulf War, and more.

FROM TIME TO TIME I gave interviews. Once, while arranging a meeting with a journalist via chat, I suddenly saw breaking news that the same journalist had just been killed by a second MLRS strike in the Vinohradar district of Kyiv. I expressed condolences.

That was the rhythm of those weeks. In the background: multi-day curfews, the first reopening of the metro, restoration of railway connections, the rumble of artillery during the destruction of an occupier column near Brovary.

De-occupation

The liberation of Kyiv region unfolded quickly – like spring itself. First came news of destroyed enemy columns, then the freeing of the Kyiv agglomeration. Abandoned equipment and positions, countless trophies; the presence of the Russian army melted like snow in sunlight.

On April 1, according to information from the plant, the last Russian tank left the Zone. Then our airborne troops entered. The Ukrainian flag was raised over the sanitary inspection building of the Chornobyl NPP.

I reached the Zone two weeks later.

On April 14 in the morning, key Zone figures gathered in the parking lot near the Karavan shopping center: heads of different organizations established in the Zone and specialists of the State Agency for Exclusion Zone Management. We warmly greeted each other – we hadn't seen one another since the start of the war. Everyone alive and well – already a blessing. A caravan of journalists joined us. Once assembled, we formed a convoy under police escort. That mattered – there were countless checkpoints along the way, and with escort we passed without stopping.

The first obvious signs of war appeared in Kazarovychi: bullet and shrapnel marks on the dam that had played a decisive role in defending the capital, destroyed houses in a dacha cooperative. All bridges toward Chornobyl had been destroyed; we traveled over temporary crossings. Burned Russian airborne fighting vehicles lay near the Dymer cemetery.

At the Dytiatky checkpoint, the InfoCenter building had been looted. Bullet holes in the glass. Spent shells from an automatic cannon scattered on the ground.

Access was coordinated with the military. Eventually, we entered.

The Zone landscapes outside the window looked unchanged – forests, fallow fields, abandoned villages. War's traces appeared near the Uzh River. The bridge was destroyed; one span

lay in the water. On the bank stood a fortified area: gabions, field fortifications, dugouts carved into the slope. I immediately called it "rat town."

CHORNOBYL TOWN greeted us with the destroyed structure of the Water Protection Complex at the entrance – struck by one of our missiles. Across from the bus station, a civilian car crushed by a tank. In the center of town, several LAZ buses blocked the road – likely an attempt to organize defense.

The remaining population gathered near the church, where humanitarian aid was distributed. We delivered food as well. In the crowd, I saw Yevhen Fedorovych. We greeted each other. Despite his age and circumstances, he remained as confident and energetic as ever.

Return to work

My next visit to Chornobyl was in May. Writer Jonathan Littell contacted me – he was in Ukraine, traveling from Kharkiv to Kyiv, and had already planned to visit the Exclusion Zone. We met in the morning in the lobby of a hotel on Bohdan Khmelnytsky Street. He gave me a signed Ukrainian edition of *The Kindly Ones*.

Under the new conditions, I had nowhere to stay. The dormitory had been given to the military; our belongings were piled up in the commandant's office. I called Serhii Gashchak – a liquidator, a guru of Chornobyl science, deputy director of the Chornobyl Center. They had a field office in Chornobyl, a private house used for living and working in the Zone. I asked to stay overnight – he agreed.

Over those two days, I arranged for sappers to inspect our office and did initial cleaning. The worst part was the story with the mouse carcasses from the Red Forest. They had been stored in a freezer that the occupiers stole. But in some strange act – entertainment or ritual – they had scattered the carcasses throughout the office in various places. I located them by smell.

Another problem was replacing the broken window glass. For a week we prowled through abandoned buildings in Chornobyl like predators, searching for panes of suitable size. Eventually, we found what we needed.

IN JUNE, THE CORE Chornobyl staff of our department resumed work – four people including myself. That was exactly how many the service vehicle could hold, exactly how many could live in the private house Gashchak kindly provided, and exactly how many we could evacuate on our own if necessary.

The first task was to understand where we had ended up – to draw a new map of the territory.

The first category of land: inaccessible areas – the left bank and the northern part of the Zone beyond the railway. The situation in the western direction was unclear. There were reports of numerous mines and unexploded ordnance around the town of Poliske due to fighting. So the western sector of the Reserve was also excluded. These areas became a space of memory and photographs on a hard drive – we did not know when, or if, we would return.

The second category was the "Green Zone" – safe lands between the Prypiat River and the Dytiatky-Chornobyl road. Russians had not entered there, and the Armed Forces had no critical need to use it for maneuvering. Fieldwork was possible.

Between these two lay the "gray zone" – territory with unclear mine safety status, numerous checkpoints, and restrictions.

THE FIRST OPERATIONAL task was to retrieve winter camera traps used for predator monitoring. They were supposed to be collected in March-April, but the war delayed everything. We coordinated with the Armed Forces, who assigned reconnaissance personnel and a sapper. We drove as close as possible to each camera trap location. The military cleared the route to the point; then our specialists approached and retrieved the equipment. In this way, we saved part of it. Other traps remain somewhere near the border.

The second task was to complete our cooperation project with Fukushima University. In 2018, together with Japanese colleagues, we began studying small rodents on the drained sections of the Chornobyl NPP cooling pond. The project had progressed normally – Reserve specialists, the Institute for Nuclear Research of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, and Fukushima University organized a large joint expedition annually.

"FOR MANY RESEARCH GROUPS, 2022 BECAME THE YEAR OF ACCEPTING A BITTER TRUTH — CHORNOBYL RESEARCH WAS BEING SUSPENDED INDEFINITELY."

COVID-19 was the first blow – Japanese colleagues could not come, but we managed. The war should have ended the research – but it did not.

I remember the joy and surprise when, after de-occupation, I found boxes of Sherman traps in storage. The occupiers had not recognized their value. Visits to the near Zone showed that our main field sites – the Red Forest and the cooling pond – were accessible and safe. The first wartime field season began, and results were obtained. In October 2022, at the project's final conference in Warsaw, we presented our findings.

We did it.

For many research groups, 2022 became the year of accepting a bitter truth – Chornobyl research was being suspended indefinitely. We, however, continued routine programs, adding assessment of occupation consequences. We established a test plot on former Russian positions to study vegetation recovery. We examined recent forest fire sites. We attempted to analyze the military impact on ecosystems from an ecological perspective.

Between 2023 and 2025, scientific activity gradually reactivated. National research groups returned; new projects appeared. Together with the Frankfurt Zoological Society, we launched



Wild horse near barbed wire. PHOTO: DENYS VYSHNEVSKIY

a project to restore the drainage system in the Uzh River floodplain. In addition to biodiversity restoration, fire safety, water conservation, and climate adaptation, a new objective was established: improving the tactical defensive properties of the terrain along the border.

AFTER THE DESTRUCTION of the Kakhovka Reservoir dam, questions arose about the development of terrestrial ecosystems on drained areas. Some answers could be found by studying the drained sections of the Chornobyl cooling pond. Specialists from the Institute of Botany of the National Academy of Sciences began this work in 2023. A related study examined abandoned agricultural lands in the Zone to forecast the development of neglected agrolandscapes in combat zones. In 2024, colleagues from the Nuclear Institute joined, and we began involving students.

We seemed to approach normalcy – but the atmosphere had changed.

In the forest, you hear a woodpecker's tapping intertwining with the distant rhythm of machine-gun fire. By sound alone, you can distinguish whether a sniper or a rifle squad is training at the range. Walking along a forest quarter line, you may suddenly see a drone appear overhead and follow you for a time. You see certain austere aesthetic in the work of mobile air-defense fire groups at night. It no longer surprises you when the Zone fills overnight with military equipment and personnel because suspicious activity has been recorded across the border. Finding a UAV in the bushes sparks only technical curiosity.

Interim conclusions

Round anniversaries of the 1986 accident have traditionally served as milestones for describing the state of the Zone and society's attitude toward it. They are points at which one can pause and attempt to reflect on the period that has passed. On the 40th anniversary, the condition of the Zone differs significantly from what it was five or ten years ago. The main reason is the war. Let us try to identify these differences.

CHORNOBYL TOURISM has disappeared. It existed for fifteen years. It became the only activity in the Zone that generated substantial profit and did not carry a corrupt or criminal undertone. Five years ago, it seemed that tourism would become the primary form of presenting the Exclusion Zone to the world – a "tourist magnet," as they wrote. Projects, plans, and development strategies were drafted. All of that is now in the past.

There is a logistical rupture between the city of Slavutych and the Chornobyl NPP. The direct connection that once allowed personnel to reach the plant in less than an hour by rail or road has been destroyed. Staff from Slavutych now travel to the Zone by bus, detouring around the entire Kyiv Reservoir, which takes nearly half a day. The work schedule has shifted from daily commuting to rotational shifts. A separate issue is the fate of Slavutych itself, now cut off from the Zone and increasingly subjected to UAV attacks.

Personnel optimization has taken place. Under new conditions, enterprises have reduced the number of staff working directly inside the Zone, either through layoffs or by relocating divisions outside its boundaries.

The return of spent nuclear fuel from the Chornobyl NPP that had been sent to Russia for storage or reprocessing has been put on hold – possibly forever.

"WALKING ALONG A FOREST QUARTER LINE, A DRONE MAY SUDDENLY APPEAR OVERHEAD AND FOLLOW YOU FOR A TIME."

Militarization. Defense has become a new priority function of the Zone. Border fortification, field defenses, deployment of military equipment and personnel, patrols, and training using the full range of weaponry.

At the same time, some tasks and responsibilities continue to be fulfilled despite martial law:

- Decommissioning of the Chornobyl NPP
- Management of radioactive waste
- Radiation and environmental monitoring
- Maintaining fire safety across the territory
- Development of the Reserve

ALL OF THE ABOVE defines the point at which the Exclusion Zone currently stands. It could be described as stable – but I would hesitate to do so. At any moment, the territory of the Zone could transform into a battle zone, once again overturning the Chornobyl chessboard.

Denys Vyshnevskiy is the Head of Department at Chornobyl Radiation and Ecological Biosphere Reserve.



Roadkill.

PHOTO: DENYS VYSHNEVSKIY



Minefield in the Red Forest.

PHOTO: DENYS VYSHNEVSKIY



Interior view of the control room of Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant unit 3 in December 2010. Over 3,000 people then worked at Chornobyl Nuclear Plant to monitor nuclear fuel and carry out the decommissioning of the facility. PHOTO: DANA SACCHETTI/IAEA

What we wouldn't know without Chornobyl

The important work of scientists in the Exclusion Zone

by **Olena Pareniuk** and **Kateryna Shavanova**

abstract

From the moment of its establishment, the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) became a territory separated from the rest of the country: governed by different rules and a distinct internal logic. The isolation of the CEZ and the urgency of its tasks have shaped – and continue to shape – specific demands on the scientists who work there. Chornobyl science is also influenced by crises that have repeatedly redefined its priorities.

KEYWORDS: The Exclusion Zone, radioactive waste, nuclear power plants, Russo-Ukrainian war.

Science is an integrated field of knowledge. Yet the accumulation of knowledge never proceeds evenly: it accelerates most intensely at moments of "extremes." The Chornobyl disaster of April 26, 1986, at the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant (then located in the Ukrainian SSR within the USSR), was undoubtedly such an extreme. But did it become a driver of scientific progress – and if so, at what cost, and for whom?

From the moment of its establishment, the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) became a territory separated from the rest of the country: governed by different rules and a distinct internal logic. The right to enter requires not only formal authorization but also



PHOTO: USFCRFC

Modern equipment was used for decontamination after the accident. An operator is seen steering a bulldozer by radio.



PHOTO: USFCRFC

A helicopter moves in to help experts check the damage to the Chornobyl reactor in 1986.

knowledge of safety procedures and acceptance of responsibility for one's actions. The Zone compels adaptation from everyone who enters, regardless of status or profession.

In 1986, immediately after the catastrophe, the primary "population" of the CEZ consisted of military units and other emergency response formations, while scientists and plant personnel were a minority. This appeared natural in a mobilization regime responding to what was often described as a "battle against an invisible threat." Nearly forty years later, the circle has closed: today, the principal permanent contingent in the Zone is once again the military.

THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN 1986 and 2025 are immediately apparent: heightened control within the Zone, restrictions for personnel and visitors, and a high cost of error. Yet over these decades, the Zone has undergone profound transformation. Construction of Units 5 and 6 was halted; Units 1–3 were decommissioned; Unit 4 was enclosed within the New Safe Confinement; the cooling pond was drained, and trees now grow where water once stood. The nature of Polissia has been recovering: Przewalski's horses have appeared, and rare bird species have returned. A territory long labeled by the world as a "deadland" has gradually reconstituted itself as a complex ecosystem.

The isolation of the CEZ and the urgency of its tasks have shaped – and continue to shape – specific demands on the scientists who work there. These include readiness for field conditions, practical dosimetry, the ability to adapt instrumental approaches under time and resource constraints, deep knowledge of nuclear and radiation safety, and the capacity to respond to emergencies and manage contaminated territories and high-risk infrastructure. Such infrastructure includes NPP sites, spent fuel storage facilities, radioactive waste repositories, dosimetric checkpoints, access routes, technical work zones, and protocols for handling materials that remain hazardous for decades.

For this reason, when in February 2022 the CEZ once again transformed from a "site of memory" into a territory of potential radiological and very real military danger, the competencies developed by its scientists became even more relevant – both within and beyond the Zone.

History:

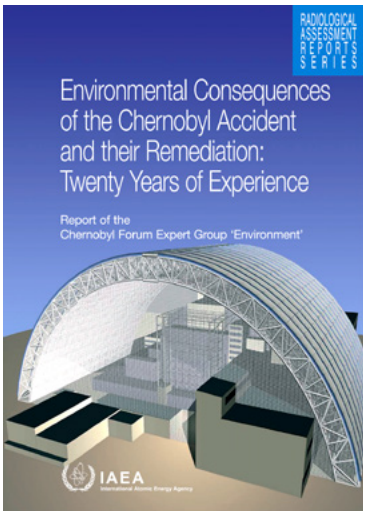
Chornobyl science as a dynamic construction

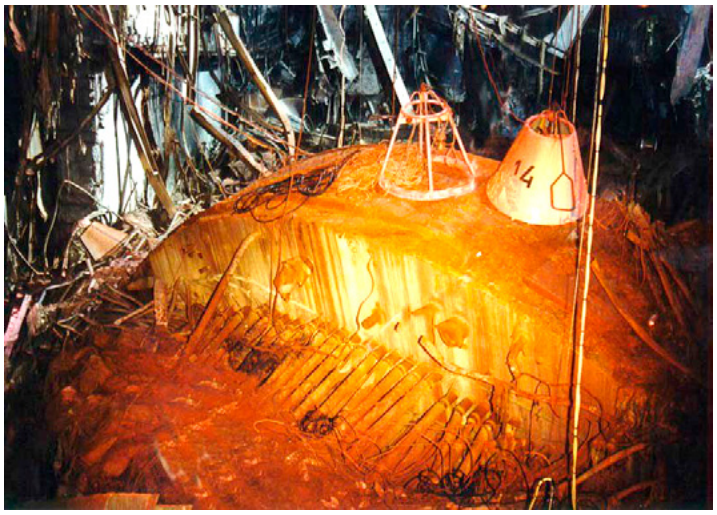
Nuclear and radiation safety is a field that learns best from its mistakes and immediately puts the newly gained knowledge into practice. What, then, did Chornobyl scientists learn – and did those lessons prove useful beyond the Exclusion Zone?

"THERE WAS A PREVAILING HOPE THAT THIS EXPERIENCE WOULD ADVANCE RADIATION SCIENCE — AND NEVER AGAIN BE NEEDED IN PRACTICE."

Science in the CEZ was never a structured monolith created through long-term planning and stable budgeting. Rather, it resembled a dynamic structure constantly rebuilt in response to emerging needs – by people, research groups, topics, and even planning approaches. Yet this fluidity did not imply chaos. On the contrary, science in the Zone was almost always applied in nature: its value was measured not by the number of theories produced but by its ability to answer questions arising "here and now," in a specific territory defined by specific constraints and risks.

In the 1990s, the Chornobyl accident was regarded as an exception. It was difficult to imagine that Chornobyl approaches would later be applied elsewhere (as occurred after the Fukushima Daiichi accident). There was a prevailing hope that this





Left: The 2006 IAEA report represented collaboration among hundreds of scientists worldwide.

Right: A diagnostic buoy, a device used to measure radiation, is seen on top of the reactor lid installed after the explosion in 1986.

PHOTO: US EPA

experience would advance radiation science – and never again be needed in practice.

The First Decade after the accident (1986–1996): Operational science and managing uncertainty

The first decade after the accident was characterized by research aimed at containment and mitigation. This was a period of rapid, highly practical investigation focused on limiting the spread of radionuclide contamination.

The logic of that time is reflected in early decisions that shaped subsequent decades: the rapid construction of the "Shelter" over the destroyed reactor; urgent mapping of radionuclide contamination (including helicopter-based surveys); the establishment of systematic monitoring; and simplification of procedures for people to access the exclusion zone. Data quickly became methodology; methodology became operational practice.

Chornobyl science during this period was relatively closed – not because of secrecy, but because of limited time and resources. International consultation was constrained by limited internet access and language barriers. Nevertheless, it became evident that decades of radiobiological theory could be implemented in practice. The principal limitation often lay not in material resources, but in persuading populations and decision-makers to follow scientific recommendations.

Despite economic crisis in newly independent Ukraine, funding for Chornobyl research remained substantial. Nearly every research institution had thematic projects related to the accident. Scientists worked – and in some cases lived – in Prypiat, and research results were implemented rapidly. Groups with access to both Chornobyl data and international platforms laid a foundation that sustained Chornobyl science until the early 2020s.

In 1992, the IAEA published INSAG-7, providing a detailed technical analysis of the accident and recommendations to prevent similar events.

During this decade, the world came to understand that severe core-damage accidents were not theoretical anomalies, but scenarios requiring containment tools and long-term management strategies. Scientists played central roles in planning mitigation, providing the knowledge necessary to understand processes inside the destroyed reactor. Mass evacuation – affecting hundreds of thousands – left long-term health consequences, lessons later considered during Fukushima (2011). It also underscored the necessity of transparent public communication regarding causes, protective measures, and emergency planning.

Regrettably, the early days of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine demonstrated that society had not fully learned these lessons.

The Second Decade (1997–2006): Systematization, openness, and emerging fatigue

The second decade focused on environmental consequences. Amid speculation about catastrophic impacts, major work culminated in the 2006 IAEA report *Environmental Consequences of the Chernobyl Accident and Their Remediation: Twenty Years of Experience*. This nearly 200-page synthesis represented collaboration among hundreds of scientists worldwide.

Chornobyl science became internationally integrated. Ukrainian scientists joined IAEA advisory bodies, and most major projects received international funding – while domestic science funding declined. Research groups formed in the 1990s struggled to survive, but demand for Chornobyl expertise remained strong.

In 2000, the final operating unit of the Chornobyl NPP was shut down. Ukraine gained real-time experience in decommissioning and transition to long-term conservation – experience later applied to other Ukrainian nuclear facilities.

By the late 2000s, interest began to wane. Funding declined; access remained bureaucratically complex. It appeared that the accident's lessons had been absorbed globally, and Chornobyl



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Przewalski's horses in the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone, 2006.



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The New Safe Confinement in final position over reactor 4 at the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant, 2017.

would remain primarily a guardian of radiation knowledge.

This period reinforced the role of research groups as custodians of thematic continuity. Scientists often carried their research agendas across institutions. At times, institutional restructuring in the CEZ was so fluid that a researcher might change institutions without changing offices.

The need to popularize radiobiological and radioecological knowledge became apparent. Integration into European research networks was essential – its importance fully realized after 2022, when international colleagues supported Chornobyl scientists. Chronic underfunding forced teams to operate with minimal staff: for example, the Institute of Agricultural Radiology declined from over 3,000 employees in the early 1990s to around one hundred in the 2000s (and later, only dozens).

"CHORNOBYL IS NOT MERELY A POST-DISASTER SITE – IT IS A SITE WHERE THE DISASTER PERSISTS AS A PHYSICAL AND SCIENTIFIC REALITY."

Knowledge was gradually lost. Methods such as the "radioactive buoy" – a device capable of measuring high-dose environments – disappeared. Techniques for constructing robots capable of navigating within the Shelter were lost. Yet, we gained practical experience in managing vast contaminated territories, – something that, unfortunately, will be needed in postwar Ukraine, which will face land rehabilitation challenges along front-line regions.

The Third Decade (2007–2016): Infrastructure, new data, and renewed relevance

At the start of the third decade, it seemed that Chornobyl science would slowly fade. The world had fixed Chornobyl in collective memory as a completed event. The Zone remained an open-air laboratory, but research did not appeared urgent anymore.

The Fukushima accident altered this perception. Chornobyl science became fully internationalized. Ukrainian scientists contributed expertise in Japan, adapting lessons to local conditions. Demand returned for competencies that had become routine in Chornobyl: practical dosimetry, field radioecology, risk communication, and work in territories where standard administrative rules fail. Chornobyl shifted from a "territory of consequences" to a "territory of solutions."

A major milestone was the New Safe Confinement (NSC), completed and operational by 2016–2017. While externally perceived as a final containment solution, for practitioners it established a century-scale engineering framework and intensified questions about long-term risk knowledge. The objective became transforming the NSC-Shelter complex into an environmentally safe system through removal and secure storage of fuel-containing materials (corium).

These materials remain insufficiently understood: their long-term structural evolution and environmental interactions over decades remain uncertain. In this sense, Chornobyl is not merely a post-disaster site – it is a site where the disaster persists as a physical and scientific reality.

On February 14, 2025, a Russian drone struck the NSC, causing a fire between protective shells and compromising structural elements of robotic systems intended for corium dismantlement beginning in 2030. This created new scientific and engineering challenges under wartime conditions.

In 2016, the Chornobyl Radiation and Ecological Biosphere Reserve was established, formalizing governance of a territory that long existed in administrative ambiguity. Chronic underfunding limited its full development. Simultaneously, the immediate 10-kilometer zone surrounding the decommissioned plant remained in economic use, creating a unique configuration of



On February 14, 2025, a drone hit the Chornobyl New Safe Confinement, damaging the sarcophagus. The repair operation required workers to ascend 100 metres in extremely difficult weather conditions.

PHOTO: STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE OF UKRAINE

a waste management infrastructure surrounded by a "buffer" zone of the nature reserve.

The gradual drainage of the cooling pond generated unprecedented empirical data on ecological succession and radionuclide localization – knowledge that gained practical relevance after destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in 2023.

Collectively, these processes reinforced understanding of Chornobyl not as a concluded catastrophe, but as an ongoing physical reality where science functions as a risk-management tool under constrained resources and generational knowledge loss.

The Fourth Decade (2017–2027): **War, disruption, and reconfiguration**

If the third decade suggested gradual stabilization, the fourth shattered that illusion. On February 24, 2022, Russian forces entered the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone from the territory of Belarus. For several weeks, the Zone became an occupied territory, and nuclear infrastructure was effectively held hostage.

This period fundamentally altered the trajectory of Chornobyl science. Research was suspended. Monitoring systems operated under extreme constraints. Personnel was isolated, and rotation was impossible for weeks. The risks were no longer theoretical: heavy military equipment disturbed contaminated soils, fortifications were dug in the Red Forest – one of the most radioactively contaminated areas – and fires became a renewed threat.

The occupation demonstrated that nuclear and radiological risk cannot be separated from geopolitical risk. Decades of work devoted to the containment and stabilization efforts proved vulnerable to conventional military action. It also revealed the fragility of institutional memory: documentation, equipment, and ongoing experiments were placed at risk of destruction or theft.

After de-occupation, scientists returned not only to research but to assessment of military impact: disturbed soils, damaged infrastructure, mine contamination, and new uncertainties in environmental monitoring. The CEZ became both a field laboratory and a case study in the intersection of environmental contamination and armed conflict.

International collaboration, built over decades, became a stabilizing force. European and global partners provided technical support, equipment, and platforms for continuity. At the same time, Ukrainian institutions faced staff shortages, mobiliza-

"CHORNOBYL IS NO LONGER ONLY A SYMBOL OF TECHNOLOGICAL CATASTROPHE. IT IS ALSO A TESTING GROUND FOR RESILIENCE – SCIENTIFIC, INSTITUTIONAL, AND SOCIETAL."

tion, and resource constraints. Some scientists joined the Armed Forces or National Guard; others adapted research agendas to wartime realities.

Thus, the fourth decade reframed Chornobyl once again – not merely as a post-accident landscape, but as a territory where nuclear legacy and active war coexist. This coexistence generates new research questions: How do contaminated ecosystems respond to military disturbance? How should nuclear sites be protected in armed conflict? What monitoring systems are resilient under occupation?

The Future:

Planning under uncertainty

What, then, does Chornobyl teach us about the future?

First, it teaches that knowledge must be institutionalized, not personalized. Generational turnover, chronic underfunding, and administrative instability risk eroding competencies that are difficult – sometimes impossible – to reconstruct. The loss of specialized methods and devices over past decades illustrates this vulnerability.

Second, it demonstrates that nuclear risk management must integrate environmental science, engineering, public communication, and geopolitical awareness. Severe accidents and military aggression alike expose the limits of purely technical solutions.

Third, it underscores the importance of long-term monitoring. Radionuclide behavior in soils, forests, and hydrological systems unfolds over decades. Without continuity of data series, scientific interpretation becomes speculative. Chornobyl's value lies not only in its singularity, but in the accumulation of longitudinal datasets that allow pattern recognition across time.

Fourth, it reveals that contaminated territories are not static wastelands. Ecological succession, species adaptation, and landscape transformation continue under chronic radiation exposure. The Zone provides insight into ecosystem resilience, limits of adaptation, and trade-offs between human absence and radiological presence.

Finally, it compels reconsideration of how societies remember and learn. Memory alone does not guarantee preparedness. The occupation of 2022 demonstrated that lessons from 1986 had not been fully integrated into international security architecture.

Short conclusions

Without Chornobyl, the world would know far less about:

- The long-term environmental behavior of radionuclides in complex ecosystems
- Practical large-scale evacuation and resettlement consequences
- Engineering containment of destroyed nuclear reactors
- Decommissioning strategies under constrained political and economic conditions
- Communication challenges surrounding invisible risk
- The interaction between nuclear infrastructure and military conflict

CHORNOBYL SCIENCE emerged not as an abstract intellectual project, but as a necessity. It developed under pressure, with limited resources, shaped by crises that repeatedly redefined its priorities.

Its trajectory has been discontinuous: periods of urgency followed by fatigue, internationalization followed by isolation, stabilization followed by renewed disruption. Yet across these shifts, one feature has remained constant: adaptability.

Final:

New protocols for a changed world

Chornobyl is no longer only a symbol of technological catastrophe. It is also a testing ground for resilience – scientific, institutional, and societal.

The scientists of Chornobyl have learned to work in uncertainty: with incomplete data, unstable funding, changing regulations, and now under conditions of war. Their experience suggests that nuclear safety cannot be reduced to engineering alone. It requires sustained ecological research, transparent governance, international cooperation, and protection of scientific infrastructure even in armed conflict.

As the fourth decade unfolds, Chornobyl continues to function as a paradoxical space: a territory of loss that generates knowledge; a contaminated landscape that informs environmental restoration; a restricted zone that shapes international collaboration.

If there is a central lesson, it may be this: disasters do not end when headlines fade. They persist physically, institutionally, and intellectually. Whether societies choose to transform that persistence into learning – or allow it to erode into forgetfulness – remains an open question.

Chornobyl has already provided answers to many questions humanity did not know how to ask. The responsibility now lies in preserving that knowledge, integrating it into global practice, and ensuring that future crises – whether technological or military – find us better prepared.

Olena Pareniuk, PhD in Radiobiology, is a Senior Researcher at the Division for Nuclear and Radiation Safety, Institute for Safety Problems of Nuclear Power Plants, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.

Kateryna Shavanova, PhD in Genetics, is a Chemist-Dosimetrist, Khartiia at the National Guard of Ukraine.



ATOMS FOR PEACE AND ATOMS FOR WAR

The alley of lost towns. Chornobyl, October 2025.

PHOTO: MARIANA BUDJERJYN

IN UKRAINE'S NUCLEAR HISTORY

by **Mariana Budjeryn**

abstract

Forty years after the Chornobyl disaster, the essay reflects on the impact of peaceful and weaponized nuclear energy in Ukraine's history. One of the leading nuclear energy operators in the world, Ukraine suffered the worst nuclear accident in history, which had wide-ranging geopolitical consequences. One of them was to influence Ukraine's decision to surrender the nuclear weapons inherited from the USSR, a decision that ultimately exposed Ukraine to Russian predation. After its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moscow proceeded to create and manipulate unprecedented nuclear dangers for Ukraine's civilian nuclear infrastructure, blurring – as it once did in Chornobyl – the distinction between atoms for peace and atoms for war.

KEYWORDS: Chornobyl, nuclear, ZNPP, Ukraine, Russia.

Since the advent of nuclear energy, atoms for war and atoms for peace have been inexorably linked. The horrific debut of nuclear energy on the international stage in August 1945 was in the form of bombs dropped by the United States on Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ostensibly to end a deadly war and usher in peace. The same technologies that forged fuel for the bombs, later produced nuclear material for peaceful uses in medicine, agriculture, and, most prominently, in generating electricity to power economic growth and development. Yet the fission reaction inside the reactor core must be kept under careful control, lest it should run away with disastrous consequences, as it did at the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine 40 years ago.

Since 1945, nine countries managed to develop and keep nuclear weapon arsenals, on which they rely for their national security. Some 32 countries currently operate nuclear power plants, with 440 nuclear reactors producing nearly 400 gigawatts of electricity annually, about a tenth of the world's total electricity.[1] But all nations live in a world shaped by the nuclear predicament, the power constellations underwritten by nuclear weapons, and the promise – and peril – of energy generated by nuclear reactors.

I.

Of all nations of the world, few have been marked by the atom to the same extent as Ukraine. Throughout the 1970s, Ukraine, then a constitutive republic of the Soviet Union, became the site of ambitious nuclear buildup. The first nuclear reactor came online in September 1977 at the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant just 130 km north of capital Kyiv. It would be followed by the construction of another 14 nuclear reactors across five plants, with many more planned. If Soviet plans came to full fruition, Ukraine would have become home to at least 13 nuclear power plants operating a total of 49 nuclear reactors to generate some 50 gigawatts of electricity.

Yet Soviet nuclear ambitions in Ukraine would never be fully realized. On Saturday, April 26, 1986, at 1:23am, during a planned safety system test, the core of an RBMK reactor of Unit 4 at Chornobyl experienced a critical power excursion. Within seconds, nominal energy output of the reactor core surged by a

factor of more than 100, followed by a steam and then hydrogen explosions that tore through the roof of the reactor building. The resulting fires raged for ten days, spewing radioactive plumes from the molten nuclear fuel and the burning graphite moderator rods, high into the atmosphere, spreading over much of the northern Europe.

The human and environmental toll of the Chornobyl accident was unprecedented. Some 100 radioactive isotopes were released into the environment as a result, most damaging of which were iodine-131, strontium-90, ceasium-137, and plutonium-239, -240, and -241. With precipitation, Chornobyl isotopes were deposited as far afield as Austria and Ireland. In Ukraine, Belarus, and parts of Russia, over 125 thousand square kilometers, a third of that – arable lands, were contaminated by radioactive fallout.[2] Some 400,000 people were eventually evacuated and resettled from the worst affected areas.[3] In Ukraine alone, nearly 200 towns and villages disappeared as a result of Chornobyl.

II.

The causes of the accident were attributed to a series of operator errors and a faulty reactor design that lacked a containment structure that would have prevented the release of radioactivity in the atmosphere. But fundamentally, the Chornobyl disaster was a product of a dysfunctional system of industrial management, built on fear and lies, in an ailing Soviet empire.[4] Too big to cover up, the accident exposed the Soviet population not only to ionized radiation but to damning truths about the rot inside the Soviet system that took no account of human life and wellbeing. Throughout the late 1980s, "anti-nuclear" sentiment became synonymous with "anti-Soviet" and was coopted by the pro-independence movements in Lithuania, Ukraine, and Belarus.[5] Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev recognized that the Chornobyl disaster significantly contributed to the Soviet collapse.[6]

The societal and political impact of Chornobyl was evident in Ukraine's decision to declare its intention to become a nuclear-free state in the Declaration of State Sovereignty adopted by the first freely elected Ukrainian parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, on July 16, 1990.[7] Shortly after, the Rada voted for a moratorium on all new nuclear build in Ukraine, essentially mothballing three nuclear reactors under construction one each at Rivne, Khmelnytsky, and Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plants.[8]

Ukraine's unilateral nuclear renunciation anchored nuclear debates when the Soviet Union disintegrated in the fall of 1991. The fate of the enormous nuclear arsenal, the world's third largest, left behind by the Soviet collapse became the dominant foreign policy preoccupation of the newly independent Ukraine. While Ukraine negotiated to obtain financial compensation and security guarantees in exchange for denuclearization, it never wavered from its declared commitment to rid itself of nuclear weapons.[9] In December 1994, Ukraine joined the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) as a non-nuclear-weapon state after signing in Budapest, Hungary, a Memorandum on security assurances to Ukraine in connection with its decision to disarm with the United States, United Kingdom, and Russia, which alone inherited the USSR's nuclear status.[10]

Figure 1. **Nuclear reactors in Ukraine**

	Connected to the grid	Design lifespan, 30y/Life extension/ **Decommissioned**/ **Meltdown**	Reactor type
Chornobyl NPP			
ChNPP-1	1977	2007/**1996**	RBMK
ChNPP-2	1978	2008/**1991**	RBMK
ChNPP-3	1981	2011/**2000**	RBMK
ChNPP-4	1983	2013/**1986**	RBMK
Rivne NPP			
RNPP-1	1980	2010/*2030*	VVER-440
RNPP-2	1981	2011/*2031*	VVER-440
RNPP-3	1986	2016/*2036*	VVER-1000
RNPP-4	2004	2034	VVER-1000
Khmelnytsky NPP			
KhNPP-1	1987	2017/*2028*	VVER-1000
KhNPP-2	2004	2034	VVER-1000
South Ukrainian NPP			
SUNPP-1	1982	2012/*2033*	VVER-1000
SUNPP-2	1985	2015/*2035*	VVER-1000
SUNPP-3	1990	2020/*2030*	VVER-1000
Zaporizhzhia NPP			
ZNPP-1	1984	2014/*2024*	VVER-1000
ZNPP-2	1985	2015/*2025*	VVER-1000
ZNPP-3	1986	2016/*2026*	VVER-1000
ZNPP-4	1987	2017/*2027*	VVER-1000
ZNPP-5	1989	2018/*2028*	VVER-1000
ZNPP-6	1995	2025	VVER-1000

III.

Ukraine's nuclear renunciation was hailed as a contribution to international peace and security. The country moved on to focus on nation- and institution-building and economic development. By 1995, in fulfillment of its obligations under the NPT, Ukraine put all its civilian nuclear facilities under comprehensive safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).[11] The three remaining RBMK-type reactors at Chornobyl, deemed unsafe, were gradually decommissioned, the last one in 2000. In 2016, Chornobyl's damaged reactor 4 and its "sarcophagus," hastily constructed after the 1986 disaster, were covered by a New Safe Confinement, a marvelous feat of engineering and international collaboration, costing nearly $2 billion and built to serve for 100 years and allow the cleanup of some 170 tons of nuclear material still buried under the reactor rubble.

MEANWHILE, IN 1995, the moratorium on reactor construction was lifted, a function of realistic reassessment of Ukraine's energy

needs, and the three mothballed reactors were finished and brought online, one in 1995 and two in 2004. Ukraine came to operate a total 15 VVER-type reactors distributed among four nuclear power plants that generated nearly 14 gigawatts of electricity, half of Ukraine's energy mix, placing Ukraine among the leading nuclear energy producing nations of the world. Ukraine also endeavored to diversify its fuel supply away from Russia, on which TVEL fuel assemblies it hereto relied, and introduced fuel assemblies, developed for the VVER reactors by an American company Westinghouse, first in 2005 at unit 3 of the South Ukrainian nuclear power plant and later at other reactors.

IV.

But Ukraine's geostrategic position between an expanded NATO to the west and an increasingly revisionist Russia to the east, left the country in a security vacuum that invited predation. When Russia, one of the signatories of the Budapest Memorandum, violated its commitments to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity and international borders in 2014 and then again with renewed viciousness in February 2022, Ukraine's decision to disarm came under much public scrutiny. Observers called into question the prudence of the 1994 decision, doubted the competence of Ukraine's then-leaders, and drew attention to the considerable political and economic pressure exerted on Ukraine by its interlocutors, the United States and Russia.[12]

Yet while all these factors undoubtedly played a role in Ukraine's nuclear disarmament, the effect of Chornobyl on Ukraine's nuclear decision-making was as salient then as it is overlooked today. In a bitter historic irony, however, the decision to disarm, along with the feebleness of security commitments pledged in the Budapest Memorandum, left Ukraine vulnerable to aggression by Russia, a nuclear power that relied heavily on nuclear threats in perpetrating its war. While most Russian nuclear rhetoric has been aimed at compelling Ukraine's western partners to temper their support for Ukraine's defense effort, there is an ever-present possibility that Russia might resort to the use of nuclear weapons on the battlefield or to terminate the war on its terms.[13]

AMONG THE MANY nuclear risks created and manipulated by Russia to its advantage in the conduct of its war against Ukraine are the threats to the safety and security of Ukraine's civilian nuclear power plants. The Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant and the 30-kilometer Exclusion Zone around it were among the first places to be occupied by the invading Russian army in the early hours of February 24, 2022.[14] The presence of foreign troops and the proximity to active fighting raised fears of the dispersal, intentional or accidental, of the thousands of tons of spent nuclear fuel and other radioactive materials in storage at the Chornobyl zone.



Budapest Memorandum is bull..it. A book of stamps by Ukrposhta, Ukraine's national postal service, 2025. PHOTO: MARIANA BUDJERJYN

These fears paled, however, to what soon followed at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plan (ZNPP), the largest nuclear power plant in Europe, contributing nearly a quarter of Ukraine's electricity. On the night of March 3–4, 2022, a column of Russian troops and heavy armor stormed the ZNPP, which at the time operated four of its six reactors. Three reactors went into emergency shutdown under the Russian fire, and one remained in operation to support Ukraine's embattled power system. This was the first such armed assault on an operating nuclear power plant in human history.

On September 11, 2022, all six nuclear reactors at the ZNPP were shutdown. But on October 5, 2022, Russian president Vladimir Putin issued a decree claiming Russian ownership of the plant, essentially perpetrating the biggest industrial theft in recorded history.[15] Under its occupation, Russia weaponized the plant, maintaining a permanent military presence of 500 soldiers and storing military equipment and live munition in its turbine halls, using it as a shield to stage artillery barrages on Ukrainian positions, and manipulating nuclear risks through disinformation and false flag operations to sow fear and put pressure on Ukraine and its partners.[16] In the four years and counting of its occupation by Russia, the ZNPP lost off-site power, essential for safe operation of its cooling systems that prevent core meltdown, 12 times. On June 6, 2023, the Russian military blew up the Kakhovka dam downstream on the Dnipro, draining the reservoir on which the ZNPP relied for cooling water supply. Importantly, the Ukrainian operating staff found itself hostage to the Russian occupying authorities, pressured to sign contracts with the Russian nuclear operator Rosatom and take Russian passports. Dozens of operators have been illegally detained and many mistreated and tortured, thousands fled to the Ukraine-controlled territory, enduring a dangerous journey through occupied territories and Russia.[17]

"THE NINE REACTORS THAT REMAIN ON UKRAINE-CONTROLLED TERRITORY ARE IN A CONSTANT PERIL OF LOSING OFF-SITE POWER OR BEING DIRECTLY DAMAGED BY THE STRIKES."

Ukraine's other nuclear power plants have been bearing

the brunt of electricity generation in a situation where other generating facilities, including thermal, hydro, and combined heat power plants, as well as the transmission grid are being systematically degraded by unrelenting Russian missile and drone strikes. The nine reactors that remain on Ukraine-controlled territory are in a constant peril of losing off-site power or being directly damaged by the strikes. Indeed, on February 14, 2025, a Russian drone struck the NSC over Chornobyl's reactor 4 and caused significant damage that undermined hermetic characteristics of the structure that were supposed to last for the next 100 years.

In 1986 Ukraine found itself the site of the world's worst nuclear accident at Chornobyl that resulted from systemic negligence and poor safety culture inherent in the Soviet political system. The accident affected millions of people well beyond Ukraine, shaped the development of nuclear energy globally, and, by contributing to the Soviet collapse and Ukraine's nuclear disarmament, had significant geopolitical repercussions. Today Ukraine once again finds itself at the fulcrum of unprecedented nuclear dangers, perpetrated by a nuclear power with explicit malign intent. Ukraine's story continues to raise the specter of nuclear catastrophe, blurring the distinction between atoms for peace and atoms for war.

Mariana Budjeryn is Senior Researcher at MIT Center for Nuclear Security Policy.

references

1 "Global Nuclear Industry Performance", *World Nuclear Association*, September 1, 2025. Accessed February 3, 2026. Available at: https://world-nuclear.org/our-association/publications/world-nuclear-performance-report/global-nuclear-industry-performance

2 "Chernobyl: Chapter VI. Agricultural and Environmental Impacts," in *Chernobyl: Assessment of Radiological and Health Impacts. 2002 Update of Chernobyl: Ten Years On* (Nuclear Energy Agency, 2002), 99–105. Available at: https://www.oecd-nea.org/jcms/pl_28351/chernobyl-chapter-vi-agricultural-and-environmental-impacts

3 "Background" in *International Chernobyl Disaster Remembrance Day 26 April*, United Nations. Accessed February 3, 2026. Available at: https://www.un.org/en/observances/chernobyl-remembrance-day/background

4 Serhii Plokhy, *Chernobyl: History of a Tragedy* (London, Great Britain: Allen Lane, 2018).

5 Jane Dawson, *Eco-Nationalism: Anti-Nuclear Activism and National Identity in Russia, Lithuania, and Ukraine* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996); Roman Solchanyk, "Introduction," in *Ukraine: From Chernobyl' to Sovereignty*, ed. Roman Solchanyk (London: Macmillan, 1992).

6 Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 189–90.

7 Deklaratsiia pro Derzhavnyi Suverenitet Ukrainy [Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine], 55–XII (July 16, 1990), see http://zakon1.rada.gov.ua/cgi-bin/laws/main.cgi?nreg=55-12.

8 Postanova pro Moratorii na Budivnytstvo Novykh Atomnykh Elektrostantsii na Terytorii Ukrains'koi RSR [Resolution on the Moratorium on the Construction of New Nuclear Power Stations on the Territory of the Ukrainian SSR], Pub. L. Nos. 134–XII (August 2, 1990), see http://zakon2.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/134–12.

9 For more on Ukraine's nuclear debates, see Mariana Budjeryn, *Inheriting the Bomb: The Collapse of the USSR and the Nuclear Disarmament of Ukraine* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2023).

10 "Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine's Accession to the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons," December 5, 1994. Avaialbe at: https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%203007/Part/volume-3007-I-52241.pdf

11 "Agreement between Ukraine and the International Atomic Energy Agency for the Application of Safeguards to All Nuclear Material in All Peaceful Nuclear Activities of Ukraine. INFCIRC/462," February 1995. Available at: https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/infcirc462.pdf

12 A good example of this narrative is a documentary *Budapest. A bomb under Ukraine's independence*, directed by Yuriy Makarov (Suspilne Kultura, 2024), see https://suspilne.media/culture/page/1065-budapestskij-memorandum-film-suspilne/.

13 Mariana Budjeryn, "Why Russia Is More Likely to Go Nuclear in Ukraine If It's Winning," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, October 2, 2024. Available at: https://thebulletin.org/2024/10/why-russia-is-more-likely-to-go-nuclear-in-ukraine-if-its-winning/

14 Serhii Plokhy, *Chernobyl Roulette: War in the Nuclear Disaster Zone* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2024).

15 "Decree of the President of the Russian Federation, no. 711 'On the specifics of legal regulation in the field of nuclear energy use in the Zaporozhye region,'" October 5, 2022, see http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/48370; "Ukraine, Russia and Control of Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant," *World Nuclear News*, October 6, 2022. Available at: https://world-nuclear-news.org/articles/ukraine-russia-and-control-of-zaporizhzhia-nuclear.

16 *A Nuclear Power Plant as Launch Pad* (Berlin/Kyiv: Greenpeace, 2023). Available at: https://www.greenpeace.de/publikationen/McKenzie_Report_Zaporizhzhia.pdf

17 *Seizing Power: Rosatom's Complicity in Occupation, Torture, and Nuclear Safety Breaches at the Zaporizhzhia NPP - Truth Hounds* (Kyiv, Ukraine: Truth Hounds, 2025). Avilable at: https://truth-hounds.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/seizing-power-rosatoms-complicity-in-occupation-torture-and-nuclear-safety-breaches-at-the-zaporizhzhia-npp.pdf; *In A Nuclear Prison: How Rosatom Turned Europe's Largest Nuclear Power Plant Into a Torture Chamber And How Can The World Stop It* (Kyiv, Ukraine: Truth Hounds, 2023). Available at: https://truth-hounds.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/in-a-nuclear-prison-how-rosatom-turned-europes-largest-nuclear-power-plant-into-a-torture-chamber-and-how-can-the-world-stop-it.pdf



Chornobyl Exclusion Zone.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The zone of **memory**

by **Magdalena Banaszkiewicz**

There are places that continue to haunt me. What they share is the impossibility of return, of confronting the spirit of the place after so many years. The loss of physical access to a field site gives rise to place-bound memory-making: a process of sustaining and negotiating memory that remains inseparable from a specific location. Memory does not exist solely as a record in the mind or as a narrative; it is anchored in the physical site – in its materiality, landscape, atmosphere, traces of the past, and in the practices repeatedly enacted within it. Memory that reinforces our relationship with a place sometimes appears unexpectedly, on the bodily level.

In the age of mediated and virtual experience, does each of us become a witness to the past? I ask myself this question in relation to myself and to Chornobyl. I was fortunate to experience the singularity of the Zone's landscape many times and to meet witnesses directly connected to the catastrophe. Does virtual representation merely simulate immersion, or does it produce new forms of memory phantoms?

abstract

This article explores the transformation of the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone into a contemporary "zone of memory" shaped by physical inaccessibility and digital mediation. Drawing on memory studies and cultural heritage research, it analyzes how virtual tourism, social media, and virtual reality (VR) technologies influence the ways in which the catastrophe is remembered and experienced. Special attention is given to the role of immersive media, particularly VR applications, in producing affective and experiential forms of memory that differ from traditional narrative remembrance. The study argues that digital environments reorganize temporal perception and enable users to encounter the past as a sensory and emotional event, generating what may be described as immersive memory.

KEYWORDS: Chornobyl, virtual reality, immersive memory, digital heritage, Chornobyl Exclusion Zone.

Chornobyl as a site of memory

Today, it hardly needs to be argued that Chornobyl is simultaneously a site of memory[1] – understood in the sense proposed by Pierre Nora,[2] as a symbolic anchoring of collective identity in a historical event – and a form of cultural heritage, both symbolic and material (the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone), as a space representing the past. Chornobyl thus functions not only as a historical event, but as a node of memory in which the past becomes entangled with the present. Its looping reveals a cultural process in which a society marked by traumatic catastrophe and subjected to the repression of state secrecy gradually emancipated itself from the regime of a monolithic narrative, deconstructing it as one of the dimensions of the decolonization unfolding in Ukraine in recent years.

Forty years constitute a temporal perspective in which communicative memory (direct, transmitted as testimony) becomes increasingly overlaid with cultural memory.[3] This occurs through the canonization of official discourse produced by state institutions and non-state international actors oriented toward specific memory politics, as well as through informal communication and bottom-up processes, largely driven by circulation within popular culture. The spectacular popularity of the HBO series *Chernobyl* (2019) is undoubtedly the result of an excellent script and outstanding performances, yet this does not preclude recognizing in the story of the catastrophe a contemporary version of ancient tragedy, in which the protagonists appear merely as pawns in a struggle for power among distant gods. In this sense, the series can be read as yet another attempt to expose the tragic consequences of informational terror, which – together with an extensive system of repression – functioned as a mechanism for maintaining totalitarian power.

Place as heterotopia

In recent years, the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone has become a double heterotopia,[4] a place that represents an event frozen in time. It is a contemporary Pompeii: a witness to tragedy, a stage set without actors. From the perspective of four decades after the catastrophe, it was in fact only between 2011 and 2022 that the Zone truly came to life. Of course, I do not mean the continuous work of teams of experts employed in the Zone on a daily basis. What I have in mind is the revival resulting from opening the Zone to tourism on a scale unseen both before and after.

Towards the end of the 2010s the interest of the media, digital creators, artists, researchers and above all tourists in the catastrophe and its consequences became a phenomenon in its own right. Just before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, during the high tourist season between April and October, the Zone witnessed queues of minibuses at the Dytiatky checkpoint, groups of several dozen people treading routes designated by the State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management, and the din of voices of visitors simultaneously having lunch in one of the canteens. Visitor statistics grew year after year, reaching a record level of over 124,000 tourists in 2019. It seemed then that the Zone would share the fate of other places incorporated into the map of global mobility – becoming a tourist product, gradually overgrown with interpretive schemes and narratives shaping the mass experience of visitors from around the world.



Measuring radiation at reactor 4 in Chornobyl. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

This, however, did not happen. The three-year project to develop the Zone as a "revival zone," presented in 2021 by President Zelensky at the All-Ukrainian Forum "Ukraine 30. Ecology", remained at the level of a proposal because of the full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation on February 24, 2022. The Chornobyl Exclusion Zone once again appeared on the front pages of newspapers and news portals, not because of another record number of visitors, but due to the incursion of Russian troops into it and the fear of another nuclear disaster. Russian soldiers, the "rashists" (a Ukrainian neologism combining "Russian" with "fascists") fell into the trap of heterotopia. Demolishing buildings and digging trenches in the heavily radioactive Red Forest, they resembled an army of post-apocalyptic zombies condemned to senseless aggression, as if in a video game. After their withdrawal, the Zone was once again depopulated – lying on the border between Ukraine and Belarus, exposed to drone attacks and mined by Russian troops, it froze as a space of emptiness and fear. Yet, in a classical butterfly-effect logic, the freezing of physical access to the Zone translated into an intensification of storytelling about the catastrophe and its consequences in virtual space, especially on social media. Their dynamics, although stimulated by hashtag-driven trends, resist being fully controlled by any authority.

Social media and the aesthetics of stalking

Virtual tourism, largely defined as tourist-like experiences without spatial displacement, took on various forms in relation to the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone, developing in parallel with the growth of physical tourism. It began with Google Street View, which appeared in the Zone in October 2015, on the occasion of the approaching thirtieth anniversary of the catastrophe. Other forms of exploration included (and continue to include) vlogs and reportages, primarily published on YouTube, as well as accounts shared on other social media platforms, such as Instagram. The virtual and the real worlds strongly interpenetrated,

mutually stimulating one another. The Spanish-language two-part film by Luisito Comunica, *EXPLORANDO CHERNOBYL: Zona de Exclusión*, published in 2019, amassed 46 million views on YouTube within six years (the "wow" effect is further amplified by 1.4 million reactions and over 57,000 comments). This result surpasses even the official trailer of the HBO series *Chernobyl* (41 million views). For those who have ever visited the Zone, the film offers little that is surprising. There are hundreds of similar materials – personal reports from the Zone, narratives of the explorer's experience, in which movement through space becomes a journey through time.

Many of the films available online, especially those produced before the Russian invasion, were created within what might be described as a stalker aesthetic – an aesthetic of uncovering secrets and overcoming obstacles to reach places that are particularly intriguing, though also dangerous. The figure draws symbolically on Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* and has evolved into a cultural practice of post-Chornobyl appropriation, in which explorers who call themselves "stalkers" illegally trespass into the Zone. They reinterpret the past transgressive, experiential engagement with the disaster landscape.[5] In many films posted on social media, the dramatization of exploration was closely linked to the hazard of radiation. The narration was typically dynamic, often whispered due to haste and the difficult acoustic conditions inside abandoned buildings. The imagery was raw, with handheld cameras intensifying the impression of participating in a risky undertaking. The soundtrack played a crucial role in stimulating anxiety and a sense of escalating threat. A key aesthetic element was often the piercing beep of dosimeters signaling radiation levels exceeding safety norms.

The conspiratorial landscape

A particular strand of Zone-related media production emerged in the form of materials created by the stalkers themselves. These productions did not merely document exploration; they actively performed the Zone as a space of secrecy, danger, and forbidden access. Vika and Stas Polessky (back in the time: a married couple of stalker-influencers) reconstructed a room in a private apartment for the 35th anniversary of the disaster in 2021 so that its décor corresponded to the design of 1986. Their YouTube channel documented the renovation process, prepared together with friends over the course of a year. An earlier project involved painting and reconstructing a room in a kindergarten in Prypiat in order to reenact its pre-disaster state.

The virtual presence and activity of individuals associated with the Zone became particularly significant during the pandemic period, when these materials were published. Forced immobility, combined with the vulnerability of material heritage to destruction, gave new causality to the dissemination of previously collected content by admirers of the Zone. Vika's concluding speech, delivered in costumes stylized after the 1980s, resonated with particular force:

> **I want to greet all the residents of Prypiat and say that I feel great sympathy with you, as you have lost your family homes. Please accept our small contribution to memory – your memory of your life here.**[6]

After 2022, however, even stalker expeditions into the Zone were radically curtailed. In one of her later posts from 2024, Vika describes areas near the border of the Zone, maintaining the tone of stalker exploration while simultaneously noting between the lines, that the territory of the Zone has become doubly dangerous. Not only because of areas of elevated radiation, which stalkers had learned how to avoid, but also because of landmines buried by Russian forces.

"VIRTUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE CHORNOBYL LANDSCAPE ACCUMULATE IMAGE AND SOUND IN AN AHISTORICAL MANNER."

Today, Chornobyl functions as a conspiratorial landscape in which historical knowledge, speculation, and post-apocalyptic aesthetics intertwine within virtual experience. Once again rendered inaccessible, the Zone becomes subject to arbitrary transformation. The Zone has broken free from the Zone, acquiring an autonomous virtual existence.

Virtual and authentic encounters

The landscape of the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone presented through virtual exploration and the authentic landscape differ fundamentally in their persuasive function. The virtual world operates according to the logic of postmodern bricolage, in which aesthetics are mobilized to generate emotion. The Chornobyl landscape itself is ordinary and uneventful: abandoned buildings slowly collapsing into ruin, forest, field. It resists spectacle.

Virtual representations of the Chornobyl landscape accumulate image and sound in an ahistorical manner. Recordings are edited together with historical photographs, graphic simulations, or infographics explaining technical aspects, such as the spread of the radioactive cloud. The final chord is done with soundtracks added in post-production. In most cases, the viewer is unable to distinguish what is authentic from what is imagined. Only the author of the film, often positioned as a guide-narrator, holds the power of authentication, yet who is able to verify whether the creator is telling the truth?

The more physically inaccessible the Zone becomes, the more powerfully its virtual representations act upon the imagination, modifying memory of the catastrophe. This occurs because the representation of cultural heritage in virtual reality transcends both space and time. On the one hand, users can visit places that are inaccessible or too distant; on the other, they can encounter places as they existed at different historical moments through digital preservation of past settings.

In this sense, VR produces not memory of an event, but memory of immersion. The past is no longer approached through

narrative sequencing or temporal distance, but through bodily co-presence with its traces. The experience of time is reorganized: what once functioned as "then" is activated as "now," not as reconstruction, but as situated experience. This raises the question of whether one should accept the creative otherness of virtual heritage. Its aim is not authenticity or the faithful reproduction of presence, but a carefully constructed interpretation. One that enables the user not so much to feel as if they were there, but to engage with the past in a qualitatively different way.

The Chernobyl VR Project

One of the forms of exploration that currently allows to a limited extent engagement with the Zone is the *Chernobyl VR* application, released in 2016 by The Farm 51, a company known for producing the popular survival horror RPG *Chernobylite*. Through the use of photogrammetry, the reality of the Zone was reconstructed with considerable care in order to achieve an impression as close as possible to individual exploration of the space. Wojciech Pazdur, creative director and co-founder of The Farm 51, described the project as a "virtual museum of Chernobyl" arguing, that "this place is amazing because of its history, especially the stories of the people".[7]

Chernobyl VR has been designed as a prototype of virtual reality. Although the terms virtual world and virtual reality share a common component, their semantic scope is not the same. A virtual world is a computer-simulated environment, whereas virtual reality can be defined as a simulated experience. It is a technology that enables users to experience a computer-generated world in an immersive way – that is, in a manner that produces a sense of "being immersed" in another environment: a three-dimensional digital setting that either reproduces the real world or presents a fictional one.

THE MOST IMPORTANT feature of VR is the sense of presence in the virtual world, although the degree of immersion may vary and depends on the tools employed. Fully immersive VR is generally understood as virtual reality experienced through a head-mounted display (HMD). This configuration gives users the impression that they are inside the virtual world rather than merely observing it. Through the use of headsets, motion controllers, or haptic gloves, the experienced three-dimensional image responds to head movement; the user hears sound, moves within virtual space, and interacts with objects – touching, lifting, or activating them.

The project employs a first-person perspective, allowing users to "land" in specific locations and move freely through them. Exploration is further enriched by access to archival materials, for example through testimonies of individuals directly connected to the tragedy, as well as of such famous witnesses as the former mayor of Kyiv, Vitali Klitschko, whose father was a liquidator, or the Nobel Prize-winning writer Svetlana Alexievich, author of the book *Chernobyl Prayer*.

Full immersion differs from approaches based on non-immersive VR, which operate on a computer screen (such as 3D games), as well as from semi-immersive VR, typically realized









Screenshots from the *Chernobyl VR Project*.

through large-scale projection systems such as CAVE (Cave Automatic Virtual Environment), for example in so-called immersive exhibitions. Virtual museums and art galleries constitute one of the most common applications of VR within the field of cultural heritage. They allow users to appreciate objects at their actual scale within realistic environments, aiming to reproduce the museum experience. However, when speaking of VR experiences more broadly, this places experience at an entirely different level. At present, embodiment, which is a key component of physically visiting a place remains difficult to access in VR due to the lack of tools capable of extending the full range of sensory experience. Temperature and smell, for instance, continue to represent some of the most significant technological limitations of virtual reality. That is why the *Chernobyl VR Project* experience is conducted using special goggles, which make immersion provide completely different physical sensations than watching an image on a computer screen.

THE QUESTION OF what kind of representation technology produces concerns not only space, but also time. Virtual reality does not simply extend existing modes of representation; it reorganizes temporal experience itself. Rather than situating the past at a distance, VR allows users to encounter it in the mode of the present.

User reviews published on the Steam platform (68 reviews posted between September 2016 and July 2025, written in multiple languages – 34 of them in English) present the project as generating ambivalent responses. Reviewers emphasize the educational value of the experience, praising the realistic photogrammetric scans and the unique opportunity to visit a closed zone without leaving home. Analyses of *The Chernobyl VR Project* reviews indicate that VR experience produces strong yet ambivalent affective reactions, arising from the tension between the emotional weight of the place and the limitations of immersive technology.

Users describe the VR experience primarily in emotional terms. Dominant descriptors include "sad," "moving," and "overwhelming," suggesting that affect precedes historical interpretation. VR does not so much transmit knowledge about the catastrophe as it initiates an emotional encounter with its traces. A key element of this affective experience is the uneven quality of sensory input. Users complain about low resolution and a "blurry" image in 360-degree videos, which undermines realism. By contrast, photogrammetric scenes (3D scans) are evaluated as highly realistic and visually impressive. The narrator's voice is generally assessed positively as clear and comprehensible, although some users mention background noise during the listening experience and a stylization marked by a "russian-vodka-balalaika" accent. The sound of the Geiger counter functions as a warning signal and contributes to atmosphere, responding dynamically to rising radiation levels in the virtual environment.

An important aspect of the reviews concerns descriptions of bodily reactions, revealing the limitations of VR. Poorly optimized camera work and movement mechanics cause some users to experience dizziness and nausea typical of motion sickness. Errors in object scaling sometimes make users feel like "giants or ants," disrupting natural spatial perception. The user's body becomes a site of negotiation between affect and physiology. Instead of a coherent sense of "being in the world," the experience oscillates between presence and technological frustration. This dissonance leads to a rupture of immersion and, consequently, to a weakening of the affective continuity of the experience. However, as Pazdur points out, VR, as a relatively new technology, "has not really reached the stage yet where one could say that it is good, or that VR experiences are good".[8]

"USERS DESCRIBE THE VR EXPERIENCE PRIMARILY IN EMOTIONAL TERMS. DOMINANT DESCRIPTORS INCLUDE 'SAD,' 'MOVING,' AND 'OVERWHELMING,' SUGGESTING THAT AFFECT PRECEDES HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION."

Immersive memory

Immersion in VR operates not through representing the past, but through the synchronization of perception, movement, and affect, which produces a sense of presence and leads to the formation of experiential memory. VR is not a medium for displaying the past, but an environment in which the past becomes a "sensory event." The immersive experience – the subjective sensation of "being there" – facilitates the production of affective memory, intense emotional responses, and individual interpretations. In a situation where direct experience of the Zone is impossible, the question arises as to whether the emotions experiences by tourists or stalkers can be recreated. Put differently, what conditions or elements would need to be put in place to approximate such an experience as closely as possible? What allows the user not so much to feel as if they were there, but to experience a new mode of engagement with the past.

An analysis of virtual worlds, including virtual reality, demonstrates that categories developed within memory studies – communicative memory, cultural memory, and postmemory – now require substantial revision. Virtual reality, in particular, does not merely constitute a new medium of memory transmission, but introduces a radically different regime of temporality. This regime shifts the analytical focus from the question of what is remembered to the question of how past time is experienced. VR enables users to encounter the past in the mode of the present Although the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone is often described as "frozen in time," this notion should be understood as a metaphor reflecting the semiotics of ruins as carriers of their past forms. Visiting an abandoned swimming pool or theatre allowed tourists to draw on their imagination and reconstruct a vision of these spaces when they were still full of life. In virtual reality, however, it may

become possible not merely to observe the ruins of the pool but to enter the pool itself: immersing in the water as it might have been experienced when the facility was still fully operational.

VR DOES NOT RELY on temporal distance or narrative sequencing. Instead, it enables the synchronous coexistence of multiple temporal orders: the present of the user's body, the historical "once," and the time of archival media. The result is an atemporal experience whose outcome is not the memory of an event, but the memory of one's own immersion within a complex temporality. Immersive memory, therefore, is neither a record of the past nor its representation, but a situated experience of time in which the past is lived as present through affective engagement. This has far-reaching implications for understanding virtual reality as another medium of public history. The television series *Chernobyl* enabled many viewers to "see" the disaster for the first time and to grasp the dramatic consequences of radiation exposure. At the same time, the creators moved beyond individual stories, embedding personal fates within a broader narrative about the disintegration of a totalitarian system and the mechanisms of violence, dependence, and responsibility that emerge in situations of extreme crisis. Similarly, virtual environments– constructed through narrative design and shaped by the agency of those immersed in them – may serve important educational and cognitive functions.

The future of Chornobyl memory

While personal and cultural memory have become a hybrid assemblage of digital practices,[9] the digital realm has increasingly reshaped contemporary mnemonic culture. An article by Andrew Hoskins advances the argument that the development of generative and agentic artificial intelligence leads to the end of "collective memory" as previously understood, irreversibly transforming our relationship with the past. According to Hoskins, the proliferation of autonomous AI agents and chatbots, that labels as "agentic turn," makes the formation of shared group memory increasingly impossible. Collective memory, once grounded in shared generational or media-based experiences (the era of broadcast transmission), is fragmented into individualized and synthetic versions of the past. People lose control over how the past is shaped, as it becomes difficult to determine what constitutes an authentic memory and what is the result of algorithmic remixing. Technology already enables the creation of so-called deadbots – memory robots of the deceased – as well as digital twins (AI twins) that emulate the behaviors and voices of both living and dead individuals. On the basis of archival materials, it would therefore be possible to recreate deadbots of witnesses to the disaster and walk with them through Prypiat, perhaps even through the city as it existed before the catastrophe. Although this remains a largely futuristic vision, contemporary technological developments are opening an entirely new future for engaging with the past.

The desire to revive the dead is among the oldest and most unsettling human longings. Forty years after the Chornobyl catastrophe, the question of memory strategies and tools – in the plural – stimulated by the development of new technologies of virtualization and artificial intelligence and activated in response to a geopolitical order straining at the seams, appears more urgent than ever.

Today, the Zone functioning primarily as a digitally imagined landscape, has not lost its role as a zone of memory. On the contrary, being a zone of memory, it continues to actualize our anxieties about the future.

Magdalena Banaszkiewicz is an Associate Professor in Cultural Anthropology at the Department of Intercultural Mobility Studies, the Jagiellonian University in Krakow.

references

1 I deliberately use the spelling Chornobyl rather than Chernobyl, following the Ukrainian linguistic and cultural context of the disaster – an approach I elaborate on in my book *Heritage and Tourism in the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone* (2022). This choice reflects a conscious distancing from Russian-derived nomenclature that has long framed the catastrophe through a Soviet lens, despite its location in Ukraine. The shift gained formal recognition in December 2025, when the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution endorsing the Ukrainian transliteration Chornobyl instead of Chernobyl, a change increasingly adopted by international media and organizations in acknowledgment of linguistic accuracy and solidarity with Ukraine.

2 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 7–24. https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520

3 Aleida Assmann, "Transformations between History and Memory," *Social Research* vol. 75, no. 1 (2008): 49–72

4 Philip Stone, "Dark Tourism, Heterotopias and Post-Apocalyptic Places: The Case of Chernobyl" in eds., Leanne White and Elspeth Frew, *Dark Tourism and Place Identity: Managing and Interpreting Dark Places* (London: Routledge, 2013), 167–182.

5 Magdalena Banaszkiewicz, "The Transgressive Approach to the Dark Tourism Experience: Stalkerism in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone", *Polish Sociological Review*, vol. 219 no. 3 (2022). https://doi.org/10.26412/psr219.05

6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZb4tWgyxPw.

7 Tomasz Róg, Anna Duda in the interview with Wojciech Pazdur, "'Chernobyl VR Project' nie jest projektem zamkniętym" [The Chernobyl VR Project is not a closed project], Licznik Geigera blog. Available at: https://licznikgeigera.pl/wojciech-pazdur-chernobyl-vr-project-nie-jest-projektem-zamknietym-caly-czas-go-rozwijamy/. Accessed: March 20, 2026.

8 Tomasz Róg, Anna Duda, interview with Wojciech Pazdur.

9 Samuel Merrill and Simon Lindgren, "Memes, brands and the politics of post-terror togetherness: following the Manchester bee after the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing, *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 24 no. 16 (2021): 2403–2421. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1942957



Old Vilcha, in Polissia region.

PHOTO: VIKTORIA NAUMENKO

Remembering **Vilcha**

A twice abandoned village

by **Viktoria Naumenko**

Tetiana S.: My mum is 88 years old, and I still haven't told her that there's nothing left there [at the cemetery]. […] She keeps saying, 'Bury me there.'
Viktoria N. (interviewer): In Polissia?
Tetiana S.: No, here – in Vilcha of the Kharkiv region (crying).[1]

This clarifying question frequently arises in conversations with residents of Vilcha. The reason is that there are two settlements with the same name in Ukraine. The first Vilcha is located in the Polissia region of Kyiv Oblast, on the border with Belarus. The second is in the Sloboda region of Kharkiv Oblast, on the border with Russia. What do these two settlements have in common?

Their shared history is one of forced rupture and continuation. The history of the first Vilcha, located approximately 40 kilometers from the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant, effectively ended ten years after the 1986 accident, when its entire population was resettled. At the same time, the history of the second Vilcha began precisely because of these resettlers – a new village was built for them in the Kharkiv region.[2] The first Vilcha was abandoned due to radioactive contamination. The second Vilcha

abstract

This essay examines the fate of Vilcha, a village that was forcibly abandoned twice within a single generation. Originally located in Polissia, the village was evacuated after the Chornobyl disaster. Its inhabitants were resettled to a newly built village in the Kharkiv region. This second village of Vilcha was occupied and subsequently destroyed during the Russian-Ukrainian war. Based on three waves of oral interviews conducted between 2016 and 2025, this essay explores the experiences of forced displacement, memory, and loss. Vilcha emerges as a poignant example of repeated forced migration caused by both technological disaster and war.

KEYWORDS: Vilcha, forced displacement, repeated resettlement, Chornobyl disaster, Russian-Ukrainian War, oral history, memory.



New Vilcha, in Kharkiv region.

PHOTO: COURTESEY OF MYKOLA LIRSKII, COUNCIL OF VILCHA



The location of the two Vilcha villages in Ukraine.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

was almost completely destroyed as a result of the war. In both settlements, cemeteries were severely damaged during the hostilities of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. Today, life in both villages has ceased – they have both turned into ghost towns.

Yet there are still people whose life stories are inseparably connected to both Vilchas. This essay is about these people and their experience of double forced resettlement over the course of thirty years.[3] This is a generation that has been forced to leave their homes twice in their lifetime. They spent their childhood and youth in the first village, where they started families and had children. They spent the second half of their lives in the second village: their children grew up there, their grandchildren were born there, and they retired there. Their story is one of loss and discovery, pain and solidarity, despair and hope.

Vilcha was founded in Polissia at the beginning of the 20th century from two forest farmsteads. For decades, it remained a small but stable settlement with its own infrastructure and industry. The construction of the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant and the city of Prypiat turned Vilcha into an important transport hub in the region and gave its residents a sense of a predictable future. The disaster of 1986 radically altered the trajectory of the village's development and the fate of its inhabitants. Classified as a zone of mandatory resettlement,[4] Polissia's Vilcha lost its last resident in 1996. Since then, the only possibility of a symbolic return has been the annual memorial trips to the abandoned settlement.

Polissia Vilcha as a space of memory

As if I had flown here on wings[...].[5]

My acquaintance with the people of Vilcha began with a journey to the cemeteries of Polissia Vilcha. In Ukrainian tradition, there is a custom of commemorating deceased relatives in the period after Easter – the so-called *Hrobky* or *Provody*. During these days, people visit burial sites, tidy up graves and the surrounding area after winter, and honor the dead at a shared table.

In May 2016, I joined one such trip to an abandoned settlement in the Kyiv region.[6] The purpose of my accompaniment was to conduct semi-structured interviews about the participants' expectations for the journey and the impact of the disaster on

their lives. Despite my research interest, I felt anxious. My interlocutors had lost their homes more than twenty years earlier and were now returning to the restricted zone to see the ruins of their former lives and to visit the graves of relatives and friends.

As soon as the bus entered the territory of the former Polissia district, memories began to come alive. Fifty people, all from Vilcha, first fell silent and pressed their faces to the windows, trying to make out familiar landscapes and recognize what was "their own". Gradually, the silence gave way to excitement: voices grew louder, and memories became more emotional. They recalled their lives before the disaster and their youth in Polissia Vilcha: school pranks, skating on homemade ice rinks in winter, and trips to the forest to gather blueberries and mushrooms. The space of the former settlement gradually turned into a space of memory – and, significantly, one filled mostly with bright and life-affirming recollections.

UPON ARRIVING in the village, the visitors first walked through the streets of Vilcha, which had been almost completely reclaimed by the forest. They were drawn to the places where their family homes had once stood, places saturated with so many memories. Here and there, the remains of buildings were still visible. On some of them, the name of the street – Oleksiivska – could still be read. Most of the houses, however, had been entirely destroyed; only wild fruit trees testified that people had once lived there.

The next important moment of the trip was the tidying up and care of family graves in two local cemeteries. The cemetery resembled an anthill, filled with people absorbed in their work. Some cleared graves overgrown with weeds, others painted memorial crosses and repaired fences, and some even installed new monuments. Afterwards, a communal meal began – everyone set the tables near the graves. People moved from one table to another, talking, reminiscing about the past, and laughing together.

The importance of this trip for the people of Vilcha in 2016 cannot be overestimated. For many of them, it would be their last visit to their Polissia home. On the way back – already returning to their settled lives in the Kharkiv region – they felt relief and elation. The passengers were radiant, smiling, and animatedly discussing what they had seen and whom they had met from other villages. If tears appeared in the eyes of the Vilcha's residents on the way there, they returned filled with joy. My anxious expectations did not come true. Yes, there was a lot of sadness when the residents of Vilcha could not even find traces of their former homes. Yet the overall mood remained bright and uplifted. "I feel recharged for the whole year now."[7]

Creating a New Vilcha

It's Not Ours.[8]

The 2016 journey to Vilcha in the Chornobyl zone both began and ended in another Vilcha – in the Kharkiv region. This village, built on the site of a former collective farm field near the town of Vovchansk, was intended to become a new home for displaced persons and, above all, to protect them from the harmful effects of radiation.



Old Vilcha. PHOTO: VIKTORIA NAUMENKO

The residents of Polissia Vilcha were not evacuated immediately after the disaster in 1986. On the contrary, they were actively involved in the "liquidation" (as Soviet authorities called it) of the consequences of the catastrophe: a temporary hospital for irradiated soldiers was set up in the school, contaminated equipment was washed and unloaded at the railway station, and bread was baked for those mobilized to work in the affected area. Vilcha became one of the reception points for the first evacuees from the ten-kilometre zone around the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant.

IN THE FOLLOWING years, the need to resettle the population of Vilcha became increasingly clear, as it was evident that the land would remain unsafe for a long time. Gradually, the familiar sense of security eroded, and everyday life became defined by prohibitions: it was forbidden to keep livestock, eat homegrown fruits and vegetables, or gather mushrooms and berries in the surrounding forests. These restrictions undoubtedly caused anxiety, yet stable employment and centralized food supplies kept people from deciding to move. Only when children began to fall ill and previously healthy young people started to die suddenly did the "invisible" radiation become a tangible and very real threat. At that moment, the danger took on concrete form, and the decision to resettle became inevitable.

"EVEN IN THIS NEW SPACE, THERE WAS SOMETHING THAT OFFERED A SENSE OF HOME — THEIR OWN PEOPLE."

Most people perceived the forced move to a new village in another, eastern part of the country as one of the greatest tragedies in their lives. For a long time, the pain of losing their homes and the realization that they could never return hindered their ability to settle in the new place. The situation was further complicated by a nationwide socio-economic crisis: there was a lack of work, the hastily built houses needed repairs, and the economy had to be rebuilt from scratch in unfamiliar climatic conditions. Tensions were also heightened by the wary attitude of local residents, who were envious of the new houses and compensation payments.

Even in this new space, there was something that offered a



PHOTO: VIKTORIA NAUMENKO



New Vilcha.

PHOTO ANASTASIIA HRIAZNOVA



PHOTO: COURTESY OF MYKOLA LIRSKII, COUNCIL OF VILCHA

sense of home – their own people. Because the resettlement was carried out compactly, the community remained together: entire streets and extended families moved as a group. During this difficult period, it was precisely this unity and mutual support that became the main resource for the survival and moral resilience of the people of Vilcha.

OVER TIME, the second Vilcha became a true home for the displaced community. Children grew up here, grandchildren were born, gardens and vegetable plots appeared, and new social ties were formed. Carrying memories of their lost homeland and hopes for a safer future, Vilcha inhabitants gradually took root in their new surroundings, preserving symbolic continuity through the name Vilcha. As one of the residents put it:

> **Vilcha is our history. I still see the old village in my dreams. With my eyes closed, I can describe every path, every house, every broken branch. But fate has turned this settlement into our home. We truly want to see it thrive, and we believe in a happy future here, in the new Vilcha.**[9]

Vilcha before the full-scale invasion: Life between two catastrophes

As a researcher, I visited Vilcha in the Kharkiv region several times, most recently in the spring of 2018. Unlike my 2016 journey to the abandoned village in Polissia, this encounter was no longer a journey into the realm of memory. It was an encounter with the life that continued.

Blooming gardens and open courtyards with low fences, through which flower beds were visible, created a sense not of isolation, but of trust in the world. Yet what struck me most was not the outward orderliness, but the human hospitality – the readiness to share one's space, one's time, and one's experience of losing and finding a home.

By that time, Vilcha had already become a refuge for new forced migrants from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, who had fled the war after 2014.[10] The residents of Vilcha supported them not only with food and basic necessities, but also with their own stories of disaster and displacement. They tried to pass on what had once sustained them: faith in the possibility of putting down roots again, rebuilding everyday lives, and learning to call a new place home.

The residents of Vilcha willingly showed their homes, gardens, and flower beds, as if to prove that home is not merely a geographical location, but a state of being that can be cultivated even on unfamiliar soil. Their words still echoed with pain for Polissia, yet at the same time it was clear that the new village was where they had taken root. At that moment, it seemed that this Vilcha was final – that despite the war, the fate of forced resettlement would not be repeated here.

Occupation and the loss of home once again

This settlement was also devastated by a new catastrophe – Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. Located just eleven kilometers from the Russian border, Vilcha was occupied in the first hours of the invasion in February 2022. The following six months became a period of severe ordeal marked by fear, uncertainty, and moral exhaustion.

The residents of the village vividly remember the beginning of the shelling, the arrival of the occupying forces, searches, brutal beatings, detentions, and disappearances. The village lay on the route of Russian missiles and fighter jets heading toward Kharkiv where many inhabitants had relatives. Numerous families found themselves divided between the occupied and free territories. The absence of communication, shortages of water and electricity, and the lack of food and medicine became part of everyday life.

DESPITE THIS, the community once again rallied together. People supported one another with food, medicine, and information, and helped displaced persons from neighboring villages. Maia Yr. recalled:

> **We had no mobile connection at all, and it was in my garden, near that table, where people could catch an internet signal. [...] So there were always people in my garden – always. Even when I wasn't there, when I was at work. [...] We always had tea and our homemade treats, made from our own homemade flour.**[11]

Some residents were forced to leave the village to escape persecution by the occupying authorities. Others, mainly elderly people, chose to stay "until the very end", fearing that they would lose their homes for a second time.

The liberation of Vilcha in September 2022 was one of the happiest days in the lives of many residents.[12] After months of occupation, the return of Ukrainian authority was met with hope that normal life could be restored. Over the next two years, people worked tirelessly to rebuild their everyday existence. They planted gardens, reconstructed heating systems, and sought alternative energy sources, preparing for winter under the constant threat of renewed attacks. The determination not to lose their living space a second time was overwhelming.

Yet in the spring of 2024, a new Russian offensive brought this fragile recovery to an abrupt halt. Vilcha once again found itself on the front line, and its residents were forced to leave their homes. Even when the war ends, the prospects of return remain deeply uncertain. The scale of destruction is compounded by the geographical proximity to the Russian border and the likelihood of this territory being turned into a "buffer zone". For many families, this does not mean temporary evacuation, but a second and final loss of homes. Vilcha has once again been turned into a wasteland – a kind of "ghost town" that tragically repeats the fate of its Polissia predecessor.

When there is nowhere to return to

> **I am already making plans for what I will do there: I need to mow the grass and clean up.**[13]

When I met with the residents of Vilcha in 2025, I listened to their stories of losing their homes for the second time. The most difficult question concerned the future. For many, it is now connected not to a place, but to people – their children and grandchildren. At the same time, a paradox repeatedly arose in our conversations: they recognize that the return is impossible, but at the same time they continue to talk about it. Between the recognition of final loss and the hope of return, a tense space of memory takes shape.

THE PEOPLE OF VILCHA now gather in Kharkiv and the Kyiv region. They remain in contact through chat groups, exchange photographs of their destroyed houses, and share news about the front line approaching their village. In this way, Vilcha continues to exist – not as a physical settlement, but as a community of people bound by the shared experience of two catastrophes.

Within a single generation, Vilcha has been forcibly abandoned twice. Its residents have been displaced twice – first by a man-made disaster, and then by war. Their story is not only a chronicle of loss, but also a testament to their capacity to recreate a sense of home even when it no longer has a geographical address.

Vilcha's fate has mirrored the major Ukrainian traumas of recent decades – from the technological catastrophe of the late USSR to Russia's war of aggression. Yet one constant remains in this tragic cycle – people who choose life together again and again. The residents of Vilcha have lost two physical addresses, but they have not lost their community or sense of belonging. Their experience shows that home is not a fixed point on a map, but a process of mutual care and solidarity that endures even when only ruins remain where familiar streets once stood.

Viktoria Naumenko is PhD in History, Researcher and project staff member at the Public History Department, FernUniversität in Hagen.

references

1 Interview with Tetiana S., February 7, 2025. The age mentioned in the quote has been altered to ensure the anonymity of the interviewee. Collection "Double Displacement: Vilcha, Ukraine", Author's private archive.

2 Vilcha (Polissia District, Kyiv Region) was officially removed from the register of settlements in August 1999; Vilcha (Vovchansky District, Kharkiv Region) was founded in June 1993.

3 The empirical basis of the essay includes three sets of oral history interviews with residents of Vilcha: 17 short structured interviews conducted during a research trip to the abandoned village in the Chornobyl exclusion zone (2016); 30 interviews from the project "Vilcha – a Resettled Village" (2017); and 26 interviews from the collection "Double Displacement: Vilcha, Ukraine" (2025), conducted within the framework of the "Documenting Ukraine" grant (Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen, Vienna).

4 Following the Chornobyl accident, four zones were established according to levels of radioactive contamination: the exclusion zone, the zone of mandatory resettlement, the zone of guaranteed voluntary resettlement, and the zone of enhanced radioecological control. In 1986, only the thirty-kilometer exclusion zone was subject to mandatory evacuation. As information about the scale of the disaster became public, further resettlement followed.

5 Interview with Anzhela M., May 6, 2016. Author's private archive.

6 The trip was organized by the Chornobyl History Workshop (Kharkiv) with financial support from the International Education Center Dortmund (IBB Dortmund) and the Renovabis Charitable Foundation.

7 Interview with Raisa P., May 6, 2016. Author's private archive.

8 Interview with Anatolij G., Mai 6, 2016. Author's private archive.

9 Ivan Kel, quoted in: Mariia Sokolchuk and Ivar Matern, "Ivan Kel's Story," in *Vilcha – pereselene selo* [*Vilcha – a Resettled Village*], ed. Gelinada Grinchenko, Viktoriia Naumenko, and Svitlana Telukha (Kharkiv: Madrid, 2018), 124.

10 For accounts of the assistance provided to IDPs from Donetsk and Luhansk, see: *Vilcha – pereselene selo* [*Vilcha – a Resettled Village*], ed. Gelinada Grinchenko, Viktoriia Naumenko, and Svitlana Telukha (Kharkiv: Madrid, 2018).

11 Interview with M.Yr., January 26, 2025. Collection "Double Displacement: Vilcha, Ukraine." Author's private archive; to be deposited at Deutsches Gedächtnis Archive (FernUniversität in Hagen).

12 The liberation of Vilcha in September 2022 formed part of the Armed Forces of Ukraine's counteroffensive in the Kharkiv region. On September 13, official sources confirmed the restoration of control over border communities. See: "Vilcha. Stantsiia Derzhprom no.6" [radio report], Radio Nakypilo, October 27, 2022. Accessed May 31, 2024. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCmb_sG2ED4

13 Interview with Maia Yr., January 26, 2025. Collection "Double Displacement: Vilcha, Ukraine." Author's private archive; to be deposited at Deutsches Gedächtnis Archive (FernUniversität in Hagen).



As our people extinguished the fourth reactor, as sacks fell onto the raging fire, and the heroes performed their military duty and left us, may their memory be eternal. And to those who are alive, Ukraine bows to the very ground.
Maria Prymachenko, 1995.

"This is how I dreamed of the fourth reactor"

Maria Prymachenko and (not) naive images of Chornobyl

by **Oksana Semenik**

abstract

Art in the Soviet Union was the mirror of the official communist party policy. However, Maria Prymachenko was successfully hiding the critique of the system behind "naive" pictures. She was one of the few artists who truly depicted the consequences of the Chornobyl catastrophe: from environmental issues to commemorating the dead, from illnesses to corruption surrounding liquidator certificates.

KEYWORDS: Maria Prymachenko, Chornobyl disaster, Ukrainian art, Russo-Ukrainian war, naive art.

No art exists outside of politics, even if you paint colorful animals, birds, and flowers in a quiet village far from the big cities. Politics can affect you in different ways: the government might decide to take all your food. Occupiers may come to your home and garden. Politics may force your teenage son to work on a collective farm instead of you, since you cannot work there due to a disability. And one day, a large nuclear power plant will be built near your idyllic village. And in ten years, the invisible result of hundreds of political decisions – uncontrolled radioactive contamination – will reach your land. The art of Ukrainian artist Maria Prymachenko (1908–1997) is often considered "naive" and "apolitical." Yet it is perhaps the best testimony to the Chornobyl disaster: from environmental issues to commemorating the dead, from illnesses to corruption surrounding liquidator certificates.

Prymachenko existed outside of systems and art schools and lived a few kilometers from the Exclusion Zone, in the village of Bolotnia in the Ivankiv district. She grew up, like all villagers, surrounded by folk art – *pysanky* (traditional decorated Easter eggs), embroidery, wooden sculptures, folk music, and folk beliefs. Her first artistic impressions came from traditional Ukrainian art and her own imagination. Later, she studied at the Lavra Workshops in Kyiv. In the mid-1930s, following the Holodomor, the Soviet authorities began "searching for talent in the villages." One of those searching for distinctive artists was embroiderer Tetiana Floru. She traveled to Ivankiv and immediately noticed an unusual embroidery. There, she was told about Prymachenko and directed to the village where the artist lived. According to various accounts, at Maria's home, Floru saw her drawings and decided to invite the artist to the newly-established workshops for folk artists from the village. In these workshops, located on the grounds of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, folk and academic artists were to work and study side-by-side. In the 1940s, Maria Prymachenko returned to live in her native village, where she completely withdrew from the art world and lived as a single mother through World War II. In the 1960s, the generation of the young Ukrainian intellectuals called "The Sixtiers" (*Shistdesiatnyky*) revived interest in folk art and culture. While traveling through the Chornobyl region, Viktor Zaretskyi and Alla Horska (who was killed by the KGB in 1970 for her pro-Ukrainian stance) met Maria Prymachenko and helped her return to the art milieu. The Soviet authorities saw no threat in the "naive," "decorative" art of a "rural grandmother." "The Sixtiers" found not only inspiration in her magical-realist art but also safety in her home, where they could gather without KGB surveillance. All the well-known Ukrainian artists, poets, writers, museum curators, and even director Sergei Parajanov began to visit Bolotnia. Her colorful, almost conceptual art successfully conceals social and political issues behind naive images.

A BRIEF NEWS REPORT about the Chornobyl accident first appeared on Soviet television on April 28, 1986. It was not until May 14 that General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev delivered a speech that focused on accusations of an "anti-Soviet campaign" by the capitalist media, rather than on discussing the consequences of the accident or cleanup plans.[1] All these topics were classified. Other topics that could not be discussed included: the true causes of the accident at the fourth reactor, information on radiation levels, results of soil and water measurements, information on the number and condition of the population affected by radiation, and so on.[2]

For a long time, the heroism of the liquidators remained the official and permitted topic in both the media and official Soviet art. Artists were even specifically sent on assignments to the Exclusion Zone by order of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine to create portraits and "to boost morale." About a dozen artists worked in various parts of the Exclusion Zone: Prypiat, Chornobyl, the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant, and the villages of Kopachi, Stari and Novi Shepelychi, and Tovsty Lis. Some of the paintings created remained in the Zone forever – they were too contaminated by radiation.[3] Most of those who participated in the disaster consequences "liquidation" as artists have already passed away.

"I GIVE FLOWERS TO THOSE WHO WORK SHIFTS AT THE NUCLEAR PLANT. GRANT THEM, LORD, STRENGTH AND HEALTH, A LONG LIFE, AND THE ABILITY TO RAISE THEIR CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN."

Oleg Veklenko, a renowned Ukrainian graphic artist and founder of the international environmental poster triennial "The 4th Block," was mobilized almost immediately – by May 3, he was already in the Exclusion Zone and remained there for two months. His duties included showing films from a special booth, painting ideological posters (as he himself recalled, for this he had to barter for or steal paint and boards on his own), and, of course, engaging in various tasks related to the cleanup of the accident. At the same time, Veklenko took documentary



The eagle flew in, landed on the fourth block, and grew sad: there's nowhere to feed, poplars are growing on the fourth block. Maria Prymachenko, 1995.



This bird flies everywhere, searching for her husband. But he is nowhere to be found; his body has scattered across all of Ukraine. Flowers will grow, children will pick them, and carry them to the graves. But my grave has flown into the sky. Maria Prymachenko, 1993.

photographs of his daily life and sketched portraits of the liquidators. The first exhibition of these portraits took place right in Chornobyl – at the entrance to the camp where the liquidators lived. At first, it was simply called "The Wall of Honor," but later the political department approved the title "Time Gives Birth to Heroes." Then, as Veklenko recalls in *Chornobyl: Sketches from life*, the command issued an order to display this "exhibition" in various locations throughout the zone.[4]

UNOFFICIAL ART had more freedom in expressing the consequences and imagery of the Chornobyl disaster. The theme of the liquidators' heroism, on the one hand, was fueled by the Soviet authorities. On the other hand, the desire to somehow support those affected by the accident and help mitigate the consequences was also sincere. Citizens raised funds for the victims, offered to host them in their homes, built new houses for the displaced free of charge, and volunteered to go work in the Exclusion Zone. There was a need for people in various professions: from builders to cooks, from nurses to laundry workers. For those artists who worked at the site of the accident, the heroes most often had names. For most artists outside of the disaster "liquidation" efforts, it was a tribute to abstract heroism.

Maria Prymachenko signed each of her works with almost poetic narratives, using her native Chornobyl dialect. Sometimes these signatures bear witness to historical events, and at other times they convey the philosophy and worldview of the artist and the people of Polissia. Prymachenko's floral compositions are always about dedication, wishes, or tribute. In particular, she dedicates a floral composition to the workers of the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant: *I give flowers to those who work shifts at the nuclear plant. Grant them, Lord, strength and health, a long life, and the ability to raise their children and grandchildren. Thank you, our dear workers*. Another work is dedicated to the liquidators – *As our people extinguished the fourth reactor, as sacks fell onto the raging fire, and the heroes performed their military duty and left us, may their memory be eternal. And to those who are alive, Ukraine bows to the very ground.*

It depicts a yellow helicopter in which a person, seemingly in a spacesuit, drops three sacks. We see fire rising from the reactor unit where a snake sits. The nuclear reactor appears as absolute evil, the devil, or even the Antichrist. For most artists who were not direct participants in the cleanup or did not live in areas close to the Exclusion Zone, the Chornobyl disaster took on mythological and even apocalyptic imagery. Hanna Chuchvaha, in her article *Memory, Trauma, the Maternal*, notes that:

> **[...] for many Belarusians and Ukrainians, Chornobyl is synonymous with an immeasurable trauma that goes beyond a simple association with the disaster zone and enters the existential realms of human birth and death.**[5]

According to Griselda Pollock, traumatic experience is primarily associated with the female gender, where the maternal-feminine is linked not only to life but also to death.[6] It was precisely the images of "Chornobyl Madonnas" that dominated Ukrainian art after the disaster. For example, the "Chornobyl Madonnas" by Ivan Marchuk, Vudon Baklyts'ki, and Ivan Zhupan. In Ukrainian literature, the seminal work that resonated even during the Soviet era was "The Chornobyl Madonna" by Ivan Drach, the poet from the generation of "The Sixtiers". The poem provides poetic images of contemporary Ukrainian (Chornobyl) women. For example, an elderly woman returning to her native village after

evacuation. In the section of the poem titled *Variation on a trite plot, or the old woman in cellophane – our mother*, he describes a fictional (but not entirely) story. Soldiers in a helicopter notice something strange: "two aliens from outer space" are walking around in cellophane suits. It turns out they aren't aliens at all, but an old woman and a cow, both wrapped in cellophane, who didn't leave during the evacuation.

> **'Why on earth did you wrap the cow in plastic, granny?'**
> **'What, haven't you heard about the radiation?'**[7]

Drach mocks the absurd and ineffective recommendations from the Soviet authorities. In 1986, Maria Prymachenko also depicted a cow in plastic wrap alongside an old man. As a conceptual artist, she creates allegorical images featuring animals, flowers, or people that, at first glance, appear merely decorative, and explains her idea on the back of the sheet. For example, a bird that at first glance appears ordinary, standing next to a frog, is actually discussing water contaminated with radionuclides ("The partridge speaks to the frog. The frog says: 'We are in trouble, nowhere to swim: the water is contaminated. Woe to us!"). And a large blue catfish, due to the danger of contaminated water, has crawled onto land in search for a clean body of water where it can live ("A Polissia catfish crawled out of the pond into the forest, looking for clean water. And we don't have any!"). She captions the cow in cellophane as follows: *Just as there was trouble with Reactor 4 in Chornobyl, an old man is herding a cow there. To protect it from radiation, he wrapped its legs, horns, and even its tail, but the cow is munching on grass – it won't listen to anyone. That's the kind of old man he is.*

The cow's tail, horns, and hooves are wrapped in cellophane, and its udder is protected by lead. Did Prymachenko realize that she was not merely criticizing the Soviet system – which failed to protect its citizens and covered up the disaster – but also illustrating the effects of external and internal radiation exposure? Even if the cow and the old man had been completely shielded by lead, the cow still ate contaminated grass and would produce contaminated milk. It is not known for certain whether Prymachenko read Drach, or whether, perhaps, Drach saw Prymachenko's work. But local residents of the Ivankiv district, which borders the Exclusion Zone, recall that shepherds were issued chemical protection suits.

AND ALTHOUGH Maria Prymachenko did not create her own "Chornobyl Madonna," she immortalized another, real mother – Hanna Khodemchuk: *The mother sits by the house, the mother sits by the garden, looking at her son's footprints, she weeps and says: "My son, my falcon, when will you fly to me, when I see you, I will only cry."* The day before the disaster, Valery Khodemchuk was at his mother's house in the village, working in the garden, pruning the trees. The ground was still damp, and his footprints remained. For a long time, his mother wouldn't let anyone into the garden, so as not to trample the footprints of her son, whose body had vanished and was buried forever in the ruins of the fourth reactor. Valery Khodemchuk became the first victim of the Chornobyl disaster. During the reactor explosion, he was in the pump room, almost at the epicenter. Beneath the new safe confinement now lie not only the ruins of the nuclear reactor, but also Valery Khodemchuk's grave. His death struck Maria Prymachenko not only because of the extraordinary story of a simple worker from a Polissia village whose name became known to the whole world – he was her nephew. The artist dedicated several works to "Valerik," as she called him. In 1989, she depicted a bird flying amidst nature: *This bird flies everywhere, searching for her husband. But he is nowhere to be found; his body has scattered across all of Ukraine. Flowers will grow, children will pick them, and carry them to the graves. But my grave has flown into the sky.* Prymachenko metaphysically senses Khodemchuk's demise: the atoms of his body scattered along with the radiation across all of Ukraine. And he is not buried beneath the rubble of the power plant, but in the sky. This bird is yet another depiction of the Chornobyl female figure: a bird symbolizing Valery's wife, Natalia Khodemchuk. In November 2025, Natalia also flew away into eternity. A Russian drone struck the woman's apartment. She died in the hospital from her injuries and burns.[8]

"PRYMACHENKO NOT ONLY ENVISIONS THE REBIRTH OF THE CHORNOBYL LAND BUT ALSO ALMOST PRECISELY DEPICTS THE NEW SAFE CONTAINMENT STRUCTURE – ONLY IN THE PAINTING IT IS BLACK, WHILE IN REALITY IT IS LIGHT."

The memory of the disaster was central to Maria Prymachenko's art. Her large-scale memorial work *This is how I dreamed of the fourth reactor* serves as a unique monument to the accident liquidators who lost their lives. The painting depicts a power unit adorned with flowers, with birds flying above it – the souls of the deceased; future generations come to it to honor the memory of the heroes. The flowers symbolize the artist's belief that the land of Chornobyl will be reborn. *This is how I dreamed of the fourth reactor. Flowers will grow on it. And children will carry flowers. It will stand as a monument forever beside it. Our heroes, the doves, will fly in; they saved us, they left us*, Maria Prymachenko captioned the painting, created in 1988. Prymachenko not only envisions the rebirth of the Chornobyl land but also almost precisely depicts the new safe containment structure – only in the painting it is black, while in reality it is light. The artist depicts a similar structure in yet another memorial work and further emphasizes the rebirth of nature: *The eagle flew in, landed on the fourth block, and grew sad: there's nowhere to feed, poplars are growing on the fourth block*. It is also striking that Prymachenko somehow knew that the abandoned city of Prypiat would be



Just as there was trouble with Reactor 4 in Chornobyl, an old man is herding a cow there. To protect it from radiation, he wrapped its legs, horns, and even its tail, but the cow is munching on grass – it won't listen to anyone. That's the kind of old man he is. Maria Prymachenko, 1989.

overgrown with poplars, many of which were planted during the construction of Atomgrad. In one of her interviews, Maria Prymachenko shares her vision of the future:

> **I had a dream that I am walking through a beautiful green field. The sun is shining, the birds are singing. It's as beautiful as paradise. Everything will be fine with us – and the radiation won't harm us. Ukraine will bloom again.**

Prymachenko felt a deep sorrow for the nature of her native, idyllic Polissia, which was facing a nuclear disaster. The artist's works addressing the environmental and socio-political themes of Chornobyl were censored. They were either excluded from exhibitions altogether or had their original titles replaced with neutral ones. For example, in the album *Maria Prymachenko*, published in 1989, the works from the Chornobyl series are ignored. Her works continue to be called "folk paintings," with the focus solely on fantastical beasts "that do not exist in nature," and she is described as "a peasant woman from a quiet Polissia village." And there is no mention that, after the Chornobyl disaster, Bolotnia is no longer an idyllic, quiet place. And the only work they did accept is a painting of a red beast opening its toothy mouth: *Mr. Reagan, look at this painting and think about how heavy, burdensome, and senseless this atomic thing is. Look at it and make peace with us, so there may be peace on Earth. The atom is beautiful, [but] you can play with it and say goodbye to your loved ones*. In it, Prymachenko addresses US' President Ronald Reagan, back in the year of the 1986 disaster, hinting at the end of the Cold War and nuclear arms. However, Soviet censors renamed it in the album to the more neutral *The threat of war*.

THE CHORNOBYL paintings were not purchased for Ukrainian museum collections under state commission. Almost all of them are in private collections, except for about ten "neutral" ones that did not criticize the Soviet authorities, did not address environmental issues, or were visually more typical of the artist's style. For example, another work depicting a bull and a frog from the Chernihiv Art Museum appears in catalogs with the abbreviated and neutral caption *The bull went to the Meadow*. In the artist's

original concept, the frog warns the bull not to eat the grass, as it is contaminated with radionuclides. The bull replies that he was born in Ukraine and lives in Polissia, and therefore he is not afraid of radiation. This reads as fatalism, an acceptance of one's fate – a life near the fourth reactor. After all, Maria Prymachenko herself, upon learning of the Chornobyl reactor explosion, as the matriarch of her family, decided not to leave her land and ordered her son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren to continue working in the garden and vegetable patch. She wasn't afraid of radiation; she was only worried that her paintings would get dirty and she wouldn't be able to show them to people. Ukrainian poet Iryna Zhylenko of "The Sixtiers" generation, who lived in Kyiv in 1986, kept a diary of her daily life during the Chornobyl disaster.

> **In Kyiv, children are being sent to pioneer camps starting on the 15th [of May][…] Yesterday I saw how Vira's elderly mother was calmly picking onions and radishes from the garden. I told her she shouldn't do that. And she (a completely illiterate peasant woman, half-deaf) gave me a lesson in wisdom – not so much wisdom as a clear-eyed understanding of our situation. She said: 'The land is poisoned for a long time, not just for a year or two. We won't be able to escape it far or for long. No one needs us anywhere. And we ourselves won't be able to leave our land forever. We'll still have to eat the fruits of our land, because if we don't eat, we'll die.' That is what the old woman told me, and I understood that this was not pessimism, but the realization of an inescapable truth, and therefore (since there is no escape) –reconciliation with it and acceptance […].**[9]

***

War came to the town of Ivankiv in northern Kyiv Oblast on February 25, 2022. The night before, Russian troops had invaded Ukraine through the Exclusion Zone. They seized the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant and its personnel, then advanced further from the Belarusian border – toward Bucha, Borodianka, Kyiv, and Ivankiv. On February 25, fighting broke out in the town. That same day, a shell struck the Ivankiv Local History Museum, where works by Prymachenko were housed. The fire engulfed the museum. The museum guard was the first to spot the fire. As the roof caught fire, the man pulled everything he could out of the flames. Fourteen of the artist's 25 paintings on display at the museum were saved. Local residents hid these works until the end of the Russian occupation. The fact that residents risked their lives to save the artist's works is the best testament to the pricelessness of Maria Pryimachenko's art.

Oksana Semenik is an Art Historian, Curator and Researcher working in Kyiv.

Note: All images are from the collection of Eduard Dymshyts, published with the courtesey of Prymachenko's family.

references

1 "Horbachov: avariia na CHAES, zvernennia" [Gorbachev: Accident at the Chornobyl NPP, Address], *Suspilne Mediateka*, May 14, 1986. Available at: https://mediateka.suspilne.media/media/6199

2 "Perechen' svedenii, podlezhashchikh zasekrechivaniiu po voprosam, sviazannym s avariei na bloke № 4 Chernobyl'skoi AES" [List of information subject to classification regarding issues related to the accident at Unit No. 4 of the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant], SBU Archives, f. 11, case 992, vol. 33.

3 Sergui Krasilnikov, *Chornobyl'ska tragediia: i mertvym, i zhyvym, i nenarodzhenym* [The Chornobyl Tragedy: For the Dead, the Living, and the Unborn], (Kyiv: ARTIS, 2012).

4 Oleg Veklenko, *Chornobyl': etiudy z natury* [Chornobyl: Sketches from Life], (Kharkiv: Tochka, 2017).

5 Hanna Chuchvaha, "Memory, Trauma, and the Maternal: Post-Apocalyptic View of the Chernobyl/Chornobyl/Charnobyl Nuclear Disaster," *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, vol. 7 no. 2 (2020) : 3–32.

6 Griselda Pollock, "Mother trouble: the maternal-feminine in phallic and feminist theory in relation to Bracha Ettinger's elaboration of matrixial ethics/aesthetics," *Studies in the Maternal,* vol. 1, no. 1 (2009) : 1–31.

7 Ivan Drach, "Chornobyl'ska Madonna" [The Chornobyl Madonna], Ivan Drach, *Vyishov z radio chornyi lev* [A Black Lion Came Out of the Radio], (Kyiv: ABABAGALAMAGA, 2023), 162–206.

8 Luke Harding, "'She went through hell': widow of Chornobyl engineer is killed in Russian drone strike on Kyiv," *The Guardian*, November 16, 2025. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/nov/16/nataliia-khodemchuk-widow-of-chornobyl-engineer-killed-russian-drone-strike-kyiv

9 Iryna Zhylenko, *Homo feriens: Spogady* [Homo feriens: Memoirs] (Kyiv: Smoloskyp, 2011).

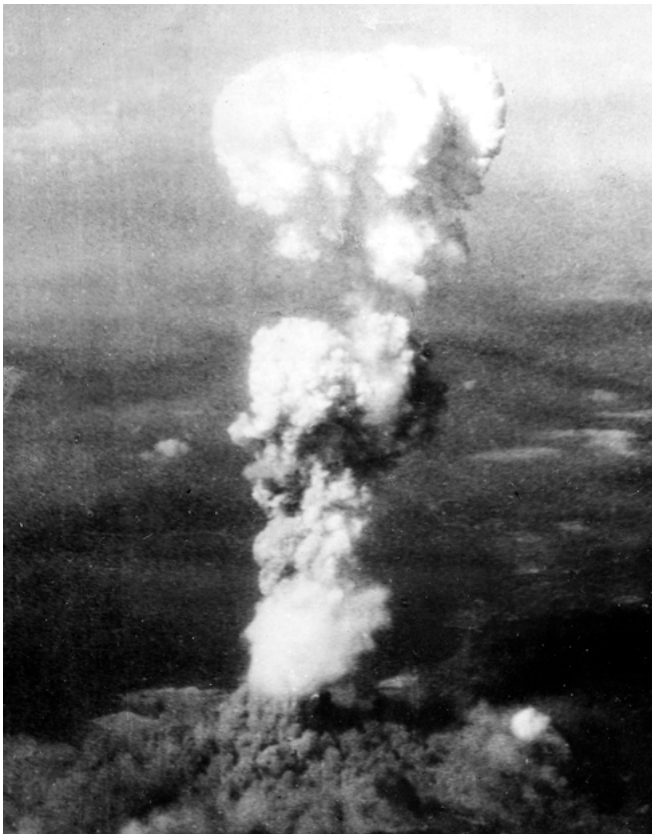


PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Hiroshima , August 6, 1945.

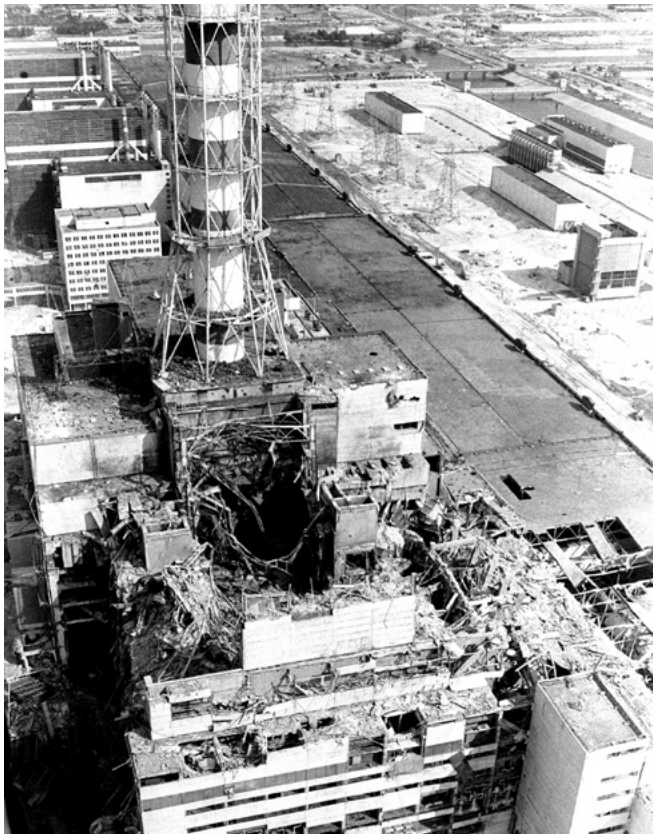


PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Chornobyl, April 26, 1986.

Writing the **disaster** from **Hiroshima** to **Chornobyl**

ATOMIC AND NUCLEAR TESTIMONIES AND THE AFTERLIFE OF DISASTERS

by **Florence Fröhlig**

abstract

This essay examines the memorialization of two pivotal nuclear catastrophes – the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945 and the Chornobyl nuclear disaster in 1986 – through the lens of testimonial writings and Maurice Blanchot's concept of "the disaster." Drawing on Japanese hibakusha testimonies and Chornobyl survivors' accounts, the essay contrasts political memory, which seeks closure and national integration, with cultural memory, which preserves trauma, ambiguity, and unresolved loss. Testimonial writings, rather than commemorating a concluded past, emerge from within the disaster itself, articulating a reality that defies assimilation into redemptive historical narratives.

KEYWORDS: Nuclear disaster, Maurice Blanchot, A-bomb literature, Chornobyl literature.

40 years ago, on April 26, 1986, at 1:23:58 at night a series of explosions destroyed reactor number 4 of the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant. 2026 also marks the 35-year anniversary of the collapse of the USSR. The two events are associated, and the accident at Chornobyl is often cited as the event that brought about the final collapse of the communist regime.[1]

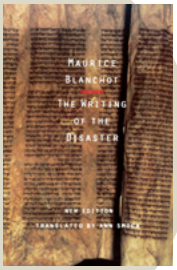
Another tragic nuclear catastrophe that has come to symbolize the end of an era is the dropping of the first atomic bomb over Hiroshima, a city of 350,000 inhabitants, at 8:15 in the morning on August 6, 1945, 80 years ago last year. President Truman's official release following the bombing proclaimed:

> **It is an atomic bomb. [...] The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East.[2]**

The use of the atomic bomb has long been represented – particularly within the dominant American war narrative – as a necessary measure that hastened the end of the Second World War in Asia and thereby saved countless (American soldiers') lives.

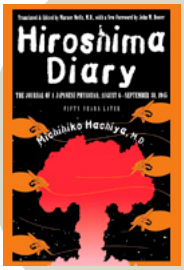
It is striking that both the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the Chornobyl nuclear disaster have been interpreted in similar terms, as events that accelerated the collapse of existing political regimes, namely the militarist regime in Japan and authoritarian Soviet rule in Eastern Europe. In each case, the collapse has been framed as a historical turning point and celebrated as a return to (Western) civilization and values.

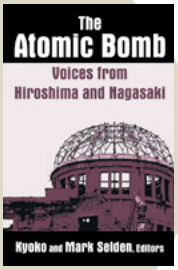




Maurice Blanchot.

Both disasters became powerful cultural symbols. However, whereas the Hiroshima bombing has been iconized through photographs of the atomic mushroom cloud – demonstrating the military use of the atom and American supremacy – the Chornobyl nuclear accident has been iconized through images of the ubiquitous rusted Ferris wheel at Prypiat, symbolizing the dangers of civilian nuclear energy production and Soviet technological and political failure. Yet both these tragic events transcend national and cultural boundaries and have become embedded in the political memories of humankind.





IN THIS ESSAY, I share reflections on the memorialization of these two nuclear disasters and discuss the discrepancy between cultural and political memory. Cultural memory is understood here as the memory shared within a social group and mediated through texts, rites, monuments, and commemorative practices, whereas political memory refers to the memory conveyed and sustained by institutions, nations, and states.[3] Both political and cultural memory, however, aim at a permanence of memory and are "founded on durable carriers of symbols and material representations".[4] Yet where political memory tends to stabilize meaning and integrate events into national narratives, cultural memory – particularly when shaped by testimonial voices – often preserves ambiguity, trauma, and unresolved loss. The tension between the two concerns not so much what is remembered but how the past is narratively organized: as closure or as an open wound.

This essay approaches Hiroshima and Chornobyl not primarily as historical events, but as instances of what Maurice Blanchot calls "the disaster": an occurrence that exceeds the logic of eventfulness and unsettles the very continuity of time. Although both catastrophes have been politically framed as turning points that precipitated regime change and reopened the path toward a renewed historical order, such narratives risk assimilating destruction into a progressive teleology. Within a narrative of historical progress, destruction is cast as the precondition for renewal, and the disaster is retrospectively justified by the regime change it is said to have enabled.

BY READING Japanese *hibakusha* writings and Chornobyl testimonies alongside Maurice Blanchot's reflections in *The Writing of the Disaster*,[5] I argue that these texts articulate a different temporality – not catastrophe as an event that passes, but catastrophe as an enduring condition.[6] My argument is that testimonial writings resist precisely this logic of redemptive history. Testimony thus emerges not as commemoration of a concluded past, but as writing from within a disaster that does not end.[7] In so doing, these texts shift attention from geopolitical transformation to existential rupture, thereby unsettling the political appropriation of catastrophe.

To contrast political memory with cultural memory in relation to both disasters, I examine four different testimonial writings. First, I draw on Hachiya Michihiko's *Hiroshima Diary*,[8] a personal account of the bombing by a Japanese survivor, a physician working at the Hiroshima Communications Hospital. The diary was not intended for publication but was eventually translated into English in 1955. The second text is an anthology, *The Atomic Bomb: Voices from Hiroshima and Nagasaki*,[9] which documents the experiences of victims from diverse social backgrounds through memoirs, poems, novellas, drawings, and photographs.

FOR CHORNOBYL, I am relying on the poems written by Lyubov Sirota, a civilian victim and poet who lived near the Chornobyl power plant and witnessed the accident, and especially her poem "To Pripyat", included in *The Chernobyl Poems* (1995).[10] The second source is the well-known book *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* (2005), in which the Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich has gathered testimonies from survivors.[11]

"WITHIN A NARRATIVE OF HISTORICAL PROGRESS, DESTRUCTION IS CAST AS THE PRECONDITION FOR RENEWAL, AND THE DISASTER IS RETROSPECTIVELY JUSTIFIED BY THE REGIME CHANGE IT IS SAID TO HAVE ENABLED."


PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

In the immediate aftermath of both disasters, the survivors' voices were silenced, either overtly through censorship or indirectly through intimidation and implied threats. Moreover, most information was blacked out by the authorities, and reporters were barred from the disaster sites. American authorities in Japan and Soviet authorities in the Soviet republics of Ukraine and Belarus censored information and blocked publication not only of scientific papers, articles, and books, but also of reportage, short stories, or even poetry describing nuclear disasters and their effects.[12] All information about each accident was classified as secret, including not only data on the extent of radioactive contamination, but also the results of medical analyses. This initial silencing is crucial: political memory begins not as commemoration but as suppression. Only later, once the event can be narratively controlled, does it reappear as a symbol. Testimony therefore emerges not merely as recollection, but as counter-memory – as an intervention into the state's management of visibility and invisibility.[13]

ALTHOUGH WRITERS continued to bear witness to the bombings in Japan, their works were not publicly disseminated. This did not, however, prevent the emergence of a clandestine body of literature written by bomb survivors, the *hibakusha*. This so-called A-bomb literature (*Genbaku Bungaku*) was banned from public circulation – people read it by wrapping the books in a newspaper – and remains largely unknown in the West.


Lyubov Sirota.

A similar pattern of suppression occurred after the accident at Chornobyl NPP, when the Soviet Union tried to conceal the accident and marginalize survivors' testimonies. In response, a distinct genre known as "Chornobyl literature" emerged. In her poem "To Vasily Deomidovich Dubodel" (a Chornobyl victim), Lyubov Sirota (1995) reflects explicitly on censorship and the silencing of the catastrophe:

> **But thousands of 'competent' functionaries**
> **Count our 'souls in percentages, [...']**
> **They keep trying to write off.**
> **Our ailing truths**
> **With their sanctimonious lies.**
> **But nothing will silence us!**
> **Even after death,**
> **From our graves**
> **We will appeal to your Conscience**
> **Not to transform the Earth into a Sarcophagus![14]**

The testimonies were acts of resistance, not only against past governmental censorship but also against official narratives and the politicization of memory. They conveyed very private and intimate accounts of the catastrophe, offering an alternative to official memory.

Testimonial writings, usually composed in the first-person, arise from the eyewitnesses' urgent need to testify. They also reveal the difficulties the authors faced in finding adequate words/language to convey their experiences, and in identifying meaningful comparisons with which to describe the disasters. One of the survivors interviewed in Alexievich's book observes:

> **What I'm telling you, it's not coming out right ... The words are all wrong ... I'm living in a real and unreal world at the same time.[15]**

Following Blanchot, the disaster destroys the very subject who might testify.[16] Yet testimonies nonetheless persist; writing thus emerges from a place where language has already failed. In *hibakusha* or Chornobyl testimonies, survivors often say that what they experienced "cannot be described". Language falters before radiation, burned bodies, invisible contamination. This difficulty resonates strongly with Blanchot's idea that the disaster is precisely that which escapes experience even as it is being lived.[17]

The often-experienced lack of adequate words is further intensified by the affective nature of trauma, which "closely ties nuclear catastrophes' literature to the philosophical potential of poetic language".[18] Testimonial accounts of the Chornobyl disaster bear witness to the efforts of eyewitnesses to address the uncanniness of radioactivity, thereby exposing the limits of cognition, as the two excerpts below show:

> **What had happened was something we didn't know about. A different kind of fear. This was something you couldn't hear or see. It had no smell, no color, and it changed us physically and mentally.[19]**

> **We were preparing for war, nuclear war, building nuclear shelters. We wanted to hide from the fallout as if it were**

> **shrapnel from a shell. But it was everywhere, in the bread, the salt … We breathe radiation, we eat radiation.**[20]

Even if all eyewitnesses were confronted with the limits of representation, the atomic and nuclear disasters did not affect them in the same way. When reading the testimonies, I was struck by the disparity in how the atomic bomb and the nuclear explosion hit the populations.

THE HIROSHIMA testimonies are marked by excessive visibility: light, heat, mutilated bodies, and the overwhelming presence of death. The disaster appears as an instantaneous apocalypse, condensed into a single blinding flash. The atomic bomb killed people in three different ways: by heat rays, explosion blast, and radiation rays. The casualties were immediate and dramatic, and survivors' accounts attest to the same haunting images of nuclear destruction: first a stunning flash, followed by a colossal blast that tore away the clothing and peeled the skin of many victims, leaving them naked or semi-naked. The accounts convey a picture of apocalypse or hell: corpses "frozen by death while in the full action of flight! A dead man on a bicycle," youngsters huddled together awaiting death, mothers with dead children, infants with dying mothers, corpses without faces, and the abject smell of burnt bodies: "Burned people smell like drying squid or look like boiled octopuses," as one witness mentioned.[21] And everywhere flies and maggots:

> **Maggots … were lapping up blood and eating Yoko […] What a clever fly! Wasting no time, it had procreated in the waste left by the destruction. The maggots swarming in Yoko's open wounds soon become flies, and it would be their turn to create new lives.**[22]

In Chornobyl, as all eyewitnesses stressed in their testimonies, the accident was initially invisible to most of the affected victims and their families. The event and the scale of the hazard it presented were initially hidden from the public. And therefore, in contrast to the bombing of Hiroshima, the consequences of the explosion of the nuclear reactor at the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant appeared less immediate and spectacular:

> **It happened late Friday night. That morning, no one suspected anything. I sent my son to school; my husband went to the barber's. […] I can still see the bright crimson glow; it was like the reactor was glowing. This wasn't any ordinary fire; it was some kind of emanation. It was pretty. I'd never seen anything like it in the movies. That evening everyone spilled out onto their balconies, and those who didn't have them went to friends' houses. We were on the ninth floor; we had a great view. People brought their kids out […] People came from all around on their cars and their bikes to have a look.**[23]

When reading the accounts of the Chornobyl disaster, we initially sense calm, contrasting with the noisiness and spectacularism of the burning bodies after the bombing of Hiroshima.

> **In the morning, I went out into the garden, and something was missing; the usual sounds were gone. Couldn't hear a single bee – not one! Eh? What was that about? And they wouldn't fly out on the second day. Nor the third. Later, they told us there was an accident at the power plant, which wasn't far off. But for good while [sic] we didn't know. The bee knew, but we didn't.**[24]

The noise and panic came several days later, when the army was sent to put out the fire and evacuate the neighboring population.

> **The planes are flying and flying. Every day. They fly real, real low right over our heads. They're flying to the reactor, to the station. One after the other. While here we have the evacuation. They're moving us out. Storming the houses […] The livestock is moaning, the kids are crying. It's war!**[25]

While the consequences of the disaster at Hiroshima were directly related to wartime violence and had immediately visible casualties, it took some days for the residents of Prypiat to grasp the consequences of the catastrophe. Yet references to wartime life are common in Chornobyl testimonial accounts. Witnesses describe experiences of "evacuation, grief and loss, collective brotherhood, opportunities for heroic action, and even a sense of becoming war veterans", as Johanna Lindbladh notes.[26] The persistent recourse to war metaphors can be understood as a way of anchoring them in something to which witnesses can relate. However, this reveals a paradox: in order to render the unprecedented thinkable, witnesses resort to the familiar vocabulary of armed conflict. At the same time, these metaphors simultaneously fail, because radiation does not behave like an enemy that can be confronted or defeated. Unlike war, which presupposes antagonists, radioactive contamination is impersonal and omnidirectional. Thus, the metaphor both enables and limits comprehension. And the repeating pattern of trauma in the Chornobyl accounts emerges precisely from the shock the eyewitnesses describe upon realizing the consequences of radiation for their own bodies.

"THE RELATIONSHIP TO ANIMALS, FOOD, SOIL, AND THE MOST ORDINARY GESTURE OF SURVIVAL BECOMES CHARGED WITH ANXIETY AND MORAL HESITATION."

Besides physical harm, testimonial accounts address the emotional impacts of disasters on survivors' lives. The most poignant testimonies are those in which survivors describe witnessing the suffering and deaths of loved ones. In accounts of Hiroshima, the emotional trauma further encompasses the incapacity of rescuing a family member lying beneath the rubble of a house when the fire spreads, or the shock of seeing corpses eaten by maggots. The testimonies documented affective disorders and shifts in attitude toward life, with many witnesses from both disasters stating that they could no longer bring harm to animals.

> **Slugs were breeding there in swarms. My mother and Teiko diligently dropped them in a can of salt water. I looked in the can. They were half-melted, but not completely melted. [...] After once eyeing this sight, I had begun to suffer from an association. It was about human beings heaped up in a mound of death, half burnt but not completely melted, with no energy to show any sign of resistance.**[27]

Such moments indicate that nuclear catastrophe alters not only political belonging but also ontological orientation. The relationship to animals, food, soil, and the most ordinary gesture of survival becomes charged with anxiety and moral hesitation. The everyday world is no longer self-evident.



Svetlana Alexievich.

IN ALEXIEVICH'S WRITINGS, the most dramatic accounts are those of the liquidators' wives and of the liquidators who survived but witnessed the lingering deaths from severe radiation among their colleagues. Toward the end of his monologue, one soldier explains how his friends died: one got fat "like a barrel", another one skinny and black "like coal"; he then remarks that "I was in Afghanistan, too. It was easier there. They just shot you"[28]. The comparison with Afghanistan is telling – conventional warfare, however brutal, offers a recognizable structure of violence: one is shot, one dies. Radiation, by contrast, produces a slow and disfiguring death that erodes the boundaries between the living and the dying. Testimony repeatedly returns to this prolonged temporality of suffering.

Even though the atomic and nuclear disasters did not affect the population in identical ways, these events clearly constitute a turning point in the lives of the eyewitnesses, who were pitched into a new reality that changed their perceptions and disrupted their sense of reality.

> **[...] in the space of one night, we shifted to another place in history. We took a leap into a new reality, and that reality proved beyond not only our knowledge but also our imagination.**[29]

Atomic as well as nuclear catastrophes represent an existential shock for the victims, and their consequences are "inherently irreversible".[30] Testimonial accounts consistently emphasize the disruptive character of such disasters on the lives of the narrators, bearing witness to lingering deaths, lifelong bereavement, physical harm from radiation, keloid scars, malformed children, and ceaseless psychological trauma among those who escaped immediate death. These testimonials further show how the disasters permeated their intimate lives, destabilizing their routines, relationships, and basic sense of orientation in the world.

Read alongside Maurice Blanchot's reflections in *The Writing of the Disaster*, nuclear catastrophe appears not merely as a historical event but as what Blanchot calls the disaster: that which exceeds the logic of occurrence and unsettles the very possibility of experience. The disaster, he suggests, "does not come" – it has always already taken place, undoing temporal continuity and leaving the subject exposed to an aftermath without conclusion.[31] The testimonies from the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Chornobyl nuclear disaster repeatedly articulate this temporal dislocation: survivors speak from a present that is no longer fully present, from a world that continues and yet has irrevocably ended. In this sense, nuclear catastrophe constitutes an apocalypse without eschatology – an ending without revelation or redemption.

Moreover, radiation itself seems to embody what Blanchot elsewhere describes as the neuter: an impersonal force that erodes distinctions between subject and object, life and death, war and peace. Invisible, odorless, and omnipresent, it escapes sensory cognition while penetrating bodies and landscapes alike.[32] The disaster thus no longer belongs solely to the realm of the spectacular – the flash over Hiroshima – but persists as contamination, latency, and deferred illness. The witnesses struggle to articulate not only the horror of destruction, but also the experience of being dispossessed of mastery over perception and language. Their insistence that "the words are all wrong" enacts what Blanchot understands as writing from the disaster: a mode of testimony that arises where language falters and the speaking "I" is itself destabilized. Testimonial writing, then, does not restore coherence to the past; instead, it preserves the trace of an encounter with the impersonal, with a reality that resists assimilation into political narratives of progress or of the end of the disaster.

SEEN IN THIS LIGHT, the tension between political and cultural memory becomes even more pronounced. Political memory seeks to stabilize the disaster as a completed historical episode – a turning point that clears the way for a linear historical narrative. In contrast, the testimonial voices, writing from within what Blanchot calls the disaster, resist such narrative foreclosure. Their accounts do not commemorate an event safely consigned to the past; they articulate a persistence, an ongoing ex-

posure that continues to unsettle the present. Cultural memory, shaped by these testimonies, thus preserves the experience of living on in the disaster's interminable aftermath.

> **We drank juice from birch and maple trees. We steamed beans on the stove. We made sugared cranberries. And during the war, we gathered stinging-nettle and goose-foot. We got fat from hunger but didn't die. There were berries in the forest, and mushrooms. But now that's all gone. They don't let you eat the mushrooms or the berries. I always thought that what was boiling in your pot would never change, but it's not like that.** [33]

If testimonial accounts make visible the physical, emotional, and existential impacts of atomic and nuclear catastrophes, they also blur the boundary between the private and the public. The polyphony of voices conveys a shared memory and shapes the cultural memory of the events without creating any official history. In this way, the discrepancy between cultural and political memories becomes starker. Whereas political framings of such disasters foreground the collapse of allegedly undesirable and backward political regimes and promise a resumption of a "normal" (Western and modern) course of history, the testimonial writings evidence instead the collapse of the victims' lives, which are irreversibly marked by the events and will never return to normal. In line with Blanchot, disaster in the testimonial writing is not the end of the world, but life continuing after the end. The world goes on, but not as before: there is no return, nothing can be erased. In this sense, cultural memory, as articulated through testimony, rejects the logic of "after" on which political narratives depend. This contrasts with theological apocalypse. Nuclear disaster does not culminate in transcendence; it leaves behind a "ruined time". For witnesses, there is no clean temporal break between past and present, no stable post-catastrophic order. The disaster persists not as a monument, but as a lived interruption. As Lyubov Sirota wrote:

> **Nothing can be erased, nothing subtracted, nothing cancelled, nothing corrected!**[34]

Florence Fröhlig is an Associated Professor in Ethnology, and the Director of Studies of BEEGS (Baltic and East European Graduate School) at CBEES, Södertörn University.

references

1 See for instance Johanna Lindbladh, "Chernobyl as the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union," *Baltic Worlds* vol. 7 no. 1 (2014): 4–12; Zhores Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Vladimir Gubarev, *Sarcophagus: A Tragedy* (New York: Vintage, 1987); David R. Marples, *The Social Impact of the Chernobyl Disaster* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).

2 Kyoko and Mark Selden, eds., *The Atomic Bomb: Voices from Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (London: Routledge, 1989): xvii.

3 On the political memory of Chornobyl, see Tatiana Kasperski, *Les Politiques de la radioactivité. Tchernobyl et la mémoire nationale en Biélorussie contemporaine* (Paris: Éditions Petra, 2020).

4 Aleida Assman, "Re-framing memory. Between individual and collective forms of constructing the past," in *Performing the Past: Memory, History and Identity in Modern Europe*, eds. Karin Tilmans, Frank Van Vree, and Jay Winter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010): 43.

5 Maurice Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1980).

6 Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre*, 7–8.

7 Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre*.

8 Hachiya Michihiko, *Hiroshima Diary: The Journal of a Japanese Physician, August 6–September 30, 1945*, trans. Warner Wells, MD (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

9 Kyoko and Selden, eds., *The Atomic Bomb: Voices from Hiroshima and Nagasaki*.

10 Lyubov Sirota, "To Pripyat," in *The Chernobyl Poems* (1995), https://brians.wsu.edu/2016/12/05/chernobyl-poems/.

11 Svetlana Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* (New-York: Picador Edition).

12 Gabrielle Decamous, *Invisible Colors: The Arts of the Atomic Age* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2018).

13 See also Jacob Darwin Hamblin and Linda Marie Richards, eds., *Making the Unseen Visible: Science and the Contested Histories of Radiation Exposure* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2023).

14 Sirota, "To Vasily Deomidovich Dubodel," in *The Chernobyl Poems*.

15 Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 73.

16 Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre*, 79–82

17 Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre*, 17.

18 Anna Barcz, *Environmental Cultures in Soviet East Europe: Literature, History and Memory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

19 Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 239.

20 Selden, *The Atomic Bomb*.

21 Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 133

22 Selden, *The Atomic Bomb*, 47.

23 Nadezhda Vygovskaya, evacuee from the town of Prypiat, in Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 151–52.

24 Alexievich *Chernobyl Prayer*, 31.

25 Zinaida Kovalenko, in Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 27.

26 Johanna Lindblad, *Baltic Worlds*, 10.

27 Ota Yoko, in Selden, *The Atomic Bomb,* 57.

28 "Chorus of soldiers", in Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 49.

29 Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 32.

30 Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'Équivalences des catastrophes: (Après Fukushima)* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2012), 11.

31 Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre*, 7–8.

32 Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969), 450.

33 Anna Badeva, in Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 54.

34 Sirota, "Burden," in *The Chernobyl Poems*.

Peaceful atom, haunted legacy.

ECHOES OF WAR(S) IN CHORNOBYL DOCUMENTARIES

by **Stanislav Menzelevskyi**

abstract

From a cinematic perspective, the Chornobyl accident became one of the most generative episodes in Ukrainian film history. The explosion of Reactor No. 4 triggered an unprecedented surge in film production: between 1986 and 1998, around forty documentaries were produced, alongside only one feature film. This essay examines one of the earliest attempts to represent the disaster, Volodymyr Shevchenko's *Chornobyl. Chronicle of the Hard Weeks* (1987), now regarded as a key Chornobyl film. Focusing on its pervasive militarized rhetoric, the essay investigates how wartime language and memory structure the film's interpretation of what was fundamentally a civilian, technological catastrophe.

KEYWORDS: Chornobyl accident, Ukraine, cinema, war, chronicle, Shevchenko.

Nuclear power was indeed "born violent," as Robert Jacobs puts it, highlighting the scientific and technological continuity between military and civilian applications of the fission reaction.[1] Global narratives of a clear separation between military and civilian uses were largely rhetorical. Nuclear Power Plants (NPPs) and their reactors didn't appear as autonomous, "peaceful" technologies, but rather as byproducts of the larger technological system, the global nuclear arms race, and the post-WWII military-industrial complex that facilitated it. It is symptomatic that explicitly military-affiliated publishers issued some of the earliest popular Soviet books on atomic energy: the Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Navy, and the Military Publishing House of the Ministry of Defense.[2]

WHILE SOVIET LEADERSHIP proclaimed the peaceful use of atomic energy a top priority in the mid-1950s, envisioning the USSR's global ideological leadership in developing civilian nuclear applications, they assigned all military ambitions to the "American war machine"[3] and "cruel and inhuman politicians"[4] of the West. The Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, cast as quintessential acts of imperialist violence, quickly became staple tropes across Soviet media.[5] The official bureaucratic formula for this peaceful technological transition to "atomic-powered communism"[6] was encapsulated in the slogan "may the atom be a worker, not a soldier," which circulated broadly across cultural and media landscapes.[7] Soon, these words would adorn a nine-story building in the center of Prypiat, and the atom was tamed to "work for communism," at least until 1986, when the atom for several years became a soldier once again, an enemy soldier.

This is precisely the soldier-worker/war-peace oscillation I would like to highlight in several Ukrainian documentaries about Chornobyl, which unexpectedly manifested the same umbilical connection between atomic technological ambition and militaristic discourse, drawing on the language and memory of wartime experience.

***

Chornobyl. Chronicle of the Hard Weeks, filmed by Ukrkinokhronika (Ukrainian Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio) in 1986, became not the first but subsequently canonical Chornobyl film, defining the representational strategies of the first post-accident years.[8] The filming of the accident appeared challenging for







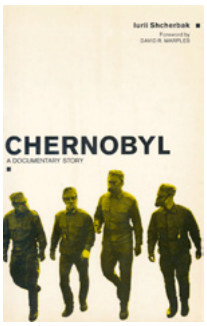


Film stills from the documentary *Chornobyl: Chronicle of the Hard Weeks* (1986). Bottom left, the director Volodymyr Shevchenko.

several reasons. To start with, there was no iconic atomic mushroom cloud, no visual documentation of the explosion, only its aftermath – the ruins of reactor number 4. The subject matter seemed to be even more elusive: how to represent radiation that is "invisible" to the human eye, that has no color, odor, or any other perceptible form? On top of that, film directors faced not only party censorship, but also fundamental artistic and ethical dilemmas: how, if it were even possible, to represent the tragedy and narrate the trauma of such magnitude. "It's impossible to describe! It's impossible to write down,"[9] summarized the issue one of the disaster's witnesses. A similar imperative is given by journalist Anatolii Shymanskyi while recalling his immediate experience after Chornobyl: "Instead of writing, you should record. Document".[10] Eventually, Chornobyl raised a crucial question for the environmental humanities:

> **How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political interventions?**[11]

THE DOCUMENTATION SHAPED the post-1986 discourse, turning into a broader cultural phenomenon of the era; a mission and an obsession of Ukrainian intellectuals, a compulsive civilian and humanistic duty, performed in numerous iconic Chornobyl texts. For example, Iurii Shcherbak, one of the leaders of the Ukrainian environmental movement, confesses in his foundational book *Chornobyl: A Documentary Story* (1989) that after the accident, he was thinking of giving up writing because all "traditional literary forms, all the subtleties of style", all that seemed "artificial and useless" back then.[12] Instead, using a cinematic metaphor, he proposes to his readers an "assemblage" ("montage") of the documents and facts.[13]



Chornobyl: A Documentary Story by Iurii Shcherbak.

The Chornobyl experience seemed to slip away from symbolization. Yet the camera could still roll. Ultimately,

Chronicle… proposed a universal solution, the pathos of which is encapsulated in both the title of the film and the studio name – chronicle – implying the renunciation of artistic reflection in favor of straightforward documentation.[14] Catastrophic events indeed required urgent filmmaking. *Chronicle…*, contrary to the established logic of the cinematic production process, was greenlit by the studio without a script.[15] It sought to capture what was still too raw to narrate, documenting the events and lessons of the tragedy for future generations. Ultimately, chronicle documentaries became a dominating genre of the Chornobyl cinema in the few years after the accident. It was only in 1990 that the Dovzhenko Film Studio in Kyiv produced the first Soviet fiction film about Chornobyl – *Rozpad* (directed by Mykhailo Belikov).[16]

***

The film crew began shooting *Chronicle…* on May 14, 1986, 18 days after the accident, missing the first stages of the containment efforts, when Mikhail Gorbachev broke the silence and mentioned the explosion for the first time during the TV address. By August 1986, the *Chronicle…* crew filmed around 20,000 meters (12 hours) of footage. Not until later did Shevchenko get to working on the script and voice-over narration with his regular collaborator, Ihor Malyshevskyi. Reflecting on their shared focus, the latter once confessed:

> **For some reason, I can so easily picture Volodia on a battlefield. Perhaps it's because most of what we created together was about the war.**[17]

Chronicle… was finished by October 3, 1986, and initially greenlit by the Soviet Goskino. Then the film was reviewed by USSR Gosatomenergonadzor (USSR State Committee on Supervision of Safe Conduct of Work in Atomic Energy). 152 remarks and four rounds of editing later, the film was shortened to less than an hour. The first public screening of the film took place at the Kyiv House of Cinema only five months later, on February 14, 1987, an event for which Shevchenko was released from the hospital, where he was receiving treatment for what was diagnosed as "bronchitis" caused by excessive radiation exposure.[18] The general public was able to view the film with an even more significant delay. Initially, there were only four distribution copies for the entire republic, reflecting state reluctance and the political tensions surrounding its subject matter.[19] The director Volodymyr Shevchenko died on March 29, 1987. According to the urban legend, his film camera has been buried as well, due to the inability to decontaminate the film equipment. Subsequently, *Chronicle…* was even – somewhat metaphorically – dubbed "the most dangerous film in the world".[20]

Ultimately, *Chronicle…* became *the* Chornobyl film, gaining significant festival circulation, critical recognition, and broad international television distribution.[21] In the years that followed, several industry awards were named after Shevchenko. Ranked 49th–50th in the top 100 Ukrainian films, the film solidified its lasting artistic and historical importance, as well as its influence on generations of Ukrainian and international filmmakers".[22]

***

And here is the main question: how was *Chronicle…* organized and rhetorically designed to position its audience in ways that secured such acclaim? Compositionally, it is heavily voice-overed footage of the first months of the liquidation efforts (cleaning the area of radioactive debris, sealing problematic areas with concrete, etc.), interviews with experts, doctors, local residents, and politicians.[23] The film also covers the evacuation of the Exclusion Zone, the resettlement of the people, and panoramas of the newly constructed sarcophagus over the destroyed reactor. The *Chronicle…* closure is a didactic warning to the world community and future generations:

> **Let us remember, in sorrow and joy, that the atom has two faces. […] its other face, similar to the one whose sinister mushroom has for decades been hanging over the consciousness of the present-day mankind, over its perception of the world.**

"THE FIRST PUBLIC SCREENING OF THE FILM TOOK PLACE AT THE KYIV HOUSE OF CINEMA ONLY FIVE MONTHS LATER, ON FEBRUARY 14, 1987."

REVIEWS OF THE FILM, while highlighting the heroism and dedication of the production team, consistently return to one of its central leitmotifs, cementing the *Chronicle's* reception in antiwar and non-proliferation terms. In this fog of peace, critics positioned the film as both a historical lesson about the technological disaster and a global call for disarmament:

> **This is a cautionary film, a warning bell—no one and nothing will survive a global nuclear catastrophe, which we can and must prevent today.**[24]

When *Chronicle…* was screened in Moscow in October 1987 as part of a Ukrainian film festival during the Days of Ukraine at VDNKh (Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy), it was indeed promoted as "a film about the struggle for peace, a work addressing internationalism and the friendship of peoples".[25] Still, the film's most striking antiwar framing was again evident in the Russian capital, at the XV Moscow International Film Festival in July 1987. Opened by Gorbachev himself, the event was designed to showcase the successes of democratic reforms in both the country and its film industry. It was also one of the first occasions where *Chronicle…* was presented to the international film community as a truly global phenomenon, a movie about the universal tragedy of a planetary scale. What is remarkable is that this universal agenda, inspired by the film, was shared by the film's authors, Soviet industry bureaucrats, and foreign guests alike. If *Chronicle…* cinematographer Volodymyr Taranchenko claims the topic covered in the film is relevant

worldwide and "very important for the future existence of humanity", then the new Head of the USSR State Film Agency Aleksandr Kamshalov sharpens the message into geopolitical terms, stating that:

> **[…] the harsh lessons of Chornobyl advocated for a nuclear-free world […] for the humanism of cinema, for peace and friendship between peoples!** [26]

But it is the acclaimed American film director Stanley Kramer who took the film to the highest level of universalist peace pedagogy. Inspired by *Chronicle…*, he decided to make his next film about Chornobyl and wanted this production:



Rozpad (1990), directed by Mykhailo Belikov, was the first Soviet fiction film about Chornobyl.

> **[…] to be not Soviet, not American, not Soviet-American, but global. I want every viewer to understand that the tragedy of Chornobyl can happen anywhere, to anyone, and at any time".** [27]

IT IS WORTH NOTING, however, that the film's reception was marked from the outset by a certain ambivalence, one that partly mirrored the dramaturgical structure and rhetorical modality of the film itself. This paradoxical convergence may be summarized by the canonical Soviet Cold War formula of the "struggle for peace," in which a pacifist teleology is articulated in explicitly militaristic terms. If we look beyond the neutral documentation mission, Shevchenko's movie is a classic example of what Bill Nichols calls the expository mode of documentary filmmaking.[28] The expository mode of non-fiction representation is the most conservative and authoritarian way of organizing a film argument, which employs didactic narration, direct address, voice-over, and non-synchronized sound. It aims to present an epistemic truth, to persuade the viewer rather than challenge the status quo. The expository mode aims to present a clear and ideologically coherent narrative to the viewer, with the filmmaker serving as a neutral mediator. From this perspective, *Chronicle…* can be read as a conventional Soviet propaganda film that normalizes catastrophe through an emphasis on administrative competence and heroic sacrifice in the struggle against radiation. What made the film globally resonant, however, was its appeal to the universal grammar of war and the affective structures of empathy it mobilizes.

***

In the first three years after the accident, the optimistic official narrative was structured around "liquidation": the normalization of the Chornobyl accident and the success of cleanup activities.[29] What scholars would later identify as the state media strategy (focus on the heroic deeds of the emergency workers, the familial solidarity of the Soviet people, and the efficiency of the central and local authorities)[30] was early and clearly manifested in *Chronicle…*:

> **[…] the Chornobyl accident highlighted the wonderful qualities of Soviet people: responsibility, decency, courage, selflessness, nobility, generosity.**[31]

WHILE NOT DENYING the selflessness of many cleanup workers, related sometimes to lack of knowledge as well as to the notion of public duty, it is worth noting a curious semantic slip. The official use of the term "liquidation" (*likvidatsiia*) encoded Soviet post-accident governance within a militarized semantic field, aligning the Chornobyl disaster with the warfare rhetoric. In the absence of an officially designated perpetrator – and under conditions in which blaming the Party was impermissible–the catastrophe was narrativized as a people's war against an unprecedented enemy: radiation itself.[32] The rhetoric proved so tenacious that it outlived the Soviet Union itself, continuing to reverberate decades later in the imaginaries of European intellectuals for whom liquidators are "soldiers of celestial fire".[33]

Historical irony once again twisted the wish of the pioneer of the Soviet atomic bomb project, Igor Kurchatov, who is believed to have coined the formula of the peaceful atom being a worker, not a soldier. Hence, *Chronicle…* is saturated with warfare references throughout: "a deadly enemy[…] invisible, carried out its dark deed in the body of man. Radiation, it has no odor, no color, only a voice".[34] In Shevchenko's film, the "deadly enemy" gained

a voice of the Geiger Counter, which afterward became the main feature of post-accident film soundscapes.

A simple question remains, however, why does the film envision Chornobyl as a war zone, a battlefield. Such reasoning might be expected from a documentary like *The Chornobyl Operational Zone* (1987), commissioned by the USSR Ministry of Defense – but not from a newsreel and documentary film studio production. *Chronicle…* aesthetic choices are hardly self-evident and, in fact, were largely essentialized *a posteriori*, given that warfare rhetoric gradually vanishes from Chornobyl cinema after 1988. Already in *Rozpad* (1990), this military-patriotic pathos is openly mocked, particularly as manifested in one of the canonical episodes of Chornobyl iconography – the hoisting of the red flag over the fourth reactor, an image that inadvertently resembles the raising of the Soviet banner over the Reichstag. This episode is absent from Shevchenko's film but appears in *Chornobyl: Two Colors of Time* (1986–1988).

"At the alarm, our army took its stand on the defensive line of misfortune. They went as if beyond the front line – but without ammunition, carrying only dry rations," the narrator of *Chronicle…* comments over a montage of military vehicles and people boarding APCs. It is true that more than half of the cleanup workers were military personnel.[35] It is also true that the extensive use of military equipment (as well as its abundance in the film) offered protection against alpha and beta radiation, radioactive dust and contamination, but not against gamma radiation. Yet the expansion of war references went beyond this immediate logic. Numerous witnesses compared Chornobyl to World War II because the memory of the war remained vivid, especially in the devastated regions of Ukraine and Belarus, and was continually reinforced through established practices of commemoration.[36] The 1985 40th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War was a particularly largescale example: it featured a major parade on Red Square in Moscow – the first such parade since 1965 and the last of comparable scale in Soviet history – alongside films such as *Battle of Moscow* (1985, dir. Yuri Ozerov) and *Come and See* (1985, dir. Elem Klimov), as well as exhibitions, television programs, and commemorative medals. Operating within the established framework of war-oriented commemorative practices and cinematic tradition, the *Chronicle…* team undoubtedly drew on their extensive experience in the war-film genre to shape the narrative and iconography of their production.

AT THE SAME TIME, comparing Chornobyl to a war not only highlighted Soviet "cult of war",[37] but constituted the accident as a universal traumatic experience, manifesting the historical rupture of "before" and "after." As one of the witnesses in Shcherbak's documentary novel describes it: "It was reminiscent of the war. Every one of us in the Town Committee has kept until now this sense of a boundary: before the war and after the war. We simply say: that was before the war."[38]

It is no surprise that the heroism of liquidators, as well as filmmakers, became a modernized version of the feats of the Soviet army during the Great Patriotic War, while the experience of horizontal mobilization and solidarity was appropriated by the official Soviet heroic narrative. A 1987 article in Ukrainian press emphasized this solidarity in the following terms: "In those fraught days, the artists – chroniclers, historians, fighters all at once – set aside every other task and bent themselves to a single aim: to give their compatriots the unvarnished word of truth."[39] Eventually, *Chronicle…* was described as the most tragic postwar cinematic chronicle, and its creators were proclaimed "worthy heirs to their predecessors, the frontline cameramen who filmed in the fire of the Great Patriotic War".[40] After the preview of *Chronicle…* filmmaker, film actress, and social activist Dzhemma Firsova raised a question of whether the documentary *Defeat of the Nazi Army Near Moscow* (1942) would have been as effective if it were shown six months after the events depicted.[41] The film's aesthetic and moral urgency clearly derived from wartime experiences and iconographies. Not coincidentally, *Chronicle* was awarded the Oleksandr Dovzhenko Golden Medal, an All-Union Goskino prize for the best military-patriotic film (1987).[42]

"THE HEROISM OF LIQUIDATORS, AS WELL AS FILMMAKERS, BECAME A MODERNIZED VERSION OF THE FEATS OF THE SOVIET ARMY DURING THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR."

***

And yet, contrary to the sense of traumatic rupture often identified as the main trigger for the unprecedented militarization of Chornobyl's representation in *Chronicle…* and in the immediate post-1986 culture more broadly, such rhetorical framing had a longer genealogy and must be considered within an earlier cinematic tradition. A significant corpus of Ukrainian films produced between 1974 and 1986, depicting the construction of the Chornobyl NPP and the city of Prypiat, pioneered the iconography of nuclear modernity before the disaster – one that was later overshadowed by the technological skepticism and dystopian consensus of the post-1986 era.[43] Although these pre-accident Ukrainian films were made in a utopian mode of technopolitical optimism and progress, avoiding the explicit military imagery characteristic of *Chronicle…*, they nevertheless still echoed the experience and memory of war.

One of the first Chornobyl films, *Chornobyl NPP*–produced twelve years before *Chronicle…* but written by the same Ihor Malyshevskyi – already establishes a pattern of avoiding any association between nuclear technology and its military applications, containing only one explicit reference to the atom in a wartime context, voiced by a schoolchild: "In the past, Russian spies and partisans used the atom to blow up trains," which the



Film stills from *Chornobyl: Chronicle of the Hard Weeks*, Volodymyr Shevchenko, 1986.

film frames ironically as a naïve, historically displaced remark. In pre-1986 movies the memory of the war is typically invoked in two, non-technological, ways: first, through direct references to the wartime history of the region, and second, through the biographies and army-related experiences of the construction workers building the ChNPP and the town of Prypiat. In this context, the "peaceful atom" is imagined rather as a therapeutic force, intended to bring generations together, heal wartime traumas, and repair infrastructures damaged by the war.

THIS NARRATIVE STRATEGY is fully articulated in *Morning of Atomohrad*.[44] Produced in the same year as *Chornobyl NPP*, but by a different studio – *Ukrtelefilm* (the Ukrainian Studio of Television Films), which enjoyed a far wider reach due to its television distribution – *Morning of Atomohrad* largely defined the pre-accident iconography of Chornobyl in Ukrainian cinema. The film was originally envisioned to open, somewhat surprisingly, with wartime newsreel footage of the Prypiat River being crossed by soldiers of the 1st Partisan Army of General Kovpak, situating the regional history within a larger historical narrative: "[…] while on the banks of the quiet Prypiat River […] the Soviet Army was advancing, liberating Ukraine." This scene was ultimately left out, but it was replaced with an equally evocative moment. Near a World War II monument, Komsomol members – who are also construction workers of the Chornobyl NPP and the town Prypiat – take an oath, in the name of the sun and the Motherland, to always remember the military valor of their fathers and the names of all those to whom they owe their lives and happiness. Veterans attend the ceremony, casually asking about the ongoing construction of the nuclear plant. Through this random and informal exchange, the generational gap is bridged, linking the partisans of the Great Patriotic War with the Komsomol builders who are going to shape the Soviet nuclear future.

From there, the film unfolds as an almanac of worker biographies, many of whom served in the army or were affected by the war. Among the former are two brothers, Ivan and Mykhailo, former tank drivers, who connect soldierly skills to those needed for construction:

> **Now, all these qualities are helping us in our work on constructing the nuclear power plant.**

Among the latter is Maria Serdiuk, a house painter. Orphaned in childhood, she was raised in Makarenko's labor colony, took part in the collectivization campaign, and survived Auschwitz. Maria not only appears in the film; she is also the subject of the poem "Maria from Ukraine – No. 62276: From Auschwitz to the Chornobyl Nuclear Plant",[45] part of the cycle "Breath of the Atom" (which also includes a poem about Ivan and Mykhailo, *The Welders Are Kings)*, by the renowned Ukrainian poet Ivan Drach. In *Morning of Atomohrad*, Maria is featured in a deliberately staged scene as a survivor, her presence is a symbol of endurance. Her voice addresses the young female workers, casting the horrors of war in the light of the peaceful atom:

> **And what we are building here, the first stream of our atom, let it serve peaceful purposes, bringing us happiness and beauty, so that we never again know about such horrible things as war, explosions, and worries.**

SADLY, THAT HOPE never materialized. In 2022, the Russian army launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and Prypiat area once again became a site of military offence. Entering from Belarus, Russian forces seized the Chornobyl NPP (later also capturing the Zaporizhzhia NPP, which they still control). Nuclear energy returned to its military origins: for the first time in history, a nuclear power plant was occupied by an invading army and essentially weaponized. The Russian invasion, unlike the explosion of the fourth reactor in 1986, was recorded by an anonymous Ukrainian resident and by the station's surveillance cameras. Using

smartphone footage, panoramic views of the plant, testimonies from Ukrainian personnel who survived the occupation, and the station's own surveillance recordings, Oleksiy Radynskyi created *Chornobyl 22* (2023) and *Special Operation* (2025), contributing to a broader Chornobyl filmography and documenting the most recent iteration of the linkage between the nuclear power plant and military action – between atom and soldier. "We called the accident a war," recalls one of the Ukrainian survivors of the occupation, "before the war, that meant before the accident." Therefore, preventing any recurrence of the 1986 catastrophe became one of the principal objectives of the Ukrainian personnel during Chornobyl site occupation. Using all their technical and professional expertise, they resisted, manipulated, and pressured the Russian soldiers. A tactical victory was achieved, as Russian army withdrew from the exclusion zone in the end of March of 2022. But the war continues.

Stanislav Menzelevskyi is a PhD candidate in Film Studies at the Media School at Indiana University, Bloomington, US.

references

1 Robert Jacobs, "Born Violent: The Origins of Nuclear Power", *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* vol. 7, no. 1 (2019): 9–29.

2 I. A. Naumenko, *Atomnaia energia i ee ispol'zovanie* [Atomic energy and its use] (Moscow: DOSAAF, 1955); V.A. Mezetcev, *Atom i atomnaia energia* [The atom and atomic energy] (Moscow: Voennoe izdatel'stvo Ministerstva Oborony, 1957).

3 K. A. Gladkov, *Energiia atoma* [Energy of the atom] (Moscow: Detskaia Literatura, 1968), 167.

4 Yu. I. Koryakin, *Biography of the Atom: Stories on the Discovery and Use of Atomic Energy* (Moscow: Gosatomizdat, 1961), 3.

5 Eventually, marking the twentieth anniversary of the Soviet peaceful atom, Mosfilm released two ideologically charged films: *Take Aim* [Vybor tseli, 1974/76] and *Moscow, My Love* [Moskva, liubov moia, 1974]. In both films, Hiroshima functions as a traumatic core and a kind of MacGuffin, but they develop the theme in different genre directions. While *Take Aim* remains a historical epic focused on the Soviet nuclear project, Moscow, *My Love* ventures to fuse this traumatic memory with the celebration of Russian high culture, ballet in particular.

6 Paul R. Josephson, "Atomic-Powered Communism: Nuclear Culture in the Postwar USSR", *Slavic Review* vol. 55, no. 2 (1996): 297–324.

7 See: A.Rubina, "May the Atom Be a Worker, Not a Soldier!" *Ogonyok* vol. 41 (October 9, 1960): 28–29; A. Chernyshev, "The Atom's Workplace." *Izvestia*, no. 69 (22 March 1963): 4; *Atom at a New Workplace* (1965; Mosnauchfilm, dir. Boris Epstein).

8 Practically in parallel, Ukrainian studios commissioned *Chornobyl: Two Colors of Time* (1986–1988, dir. Ihor Kobryn), *Pain and Courage of Chornobyl* (1986, dir. Israel Goldstein), and *Chornobyl: Breaking Bread* (1986, dir. Oleksandr Kosinov), while the central Russian studios produced *The Bell of Chernobyl* (1986, dir. Rollan Serhiienko) and *Warning* (1987, dir. Vladimir Osminin and Elena Pozdnyak).

9 Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* (Normal, Ill.: Dalkey Archive, 2005), 12, 19.

10 Alexievich, *Voices From Chernobyl*, 124.

11 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 3. One can also find a quite opposite approach, which treats Chornobyl as a household name for spectacular disaster, overshadowing other cases of nuclear slow violence, such as Hanford and Maiak; see Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

12 Iurii Shcherbak, *Chernobyl: A Documentary Story* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 6.

13 Shcherbak, *Chernobyl: A Documentary Story*, 3.

14 The initial title options were *The Address of Our Misfortune* and *Chornobyl: Twenty Difficult Weeks*. The first was rejected for its perceived overemphasis on victimhood, evident in successive script versions in which references to assistance and suffering were systematically removed. The second became progressively less relevant as delays in securing approval postponed the film's release.

15 Ihor Malyshevskyi, *Volodymyr Shevchenko. From Kulunda to Chornobyl* (Kyiv, Mystetstvo, 1988), 12.

16 The title was deliberately left untranslated for international distribution, preserving a sense of unfamiliarity. It also appears in transliteration from Russian as Raspad. The word carries multiple layers of meaning that are lost in translation: radioactive decay, the breakdown of the social fabric, and the disintegration of the USSR.

17 Among the latest films of the creative duo were the wartime trilogy *Soviet Ukraine. Years of Struggle and Victory* (1974–1977); the wartime documentary *Battle for Kyiv* (1973); and the WWII feature film *Counterstrike* (1985). Moreover, both Volodymyr Taranchenko and Viktor Kripchenko, cameramen on *Chronicle...*, brought experience from WWII-related projects: Taranchenko as an assistant to the war cameraman Valentyn Orliankin, and Kripchenko through his work on the abovementioned *Soviet Ukraine: Years of Struggle and Victory* (1974–1977). In Malyshevskyi's memoirs of Shevchenko, one recurring theme is not only Volodymyr's childhood experience of war and occupation, but also his extraordinary knowledge of the historical and technical details of WWII. Malyshevskyi, *Volodymyr Shevchenko*, 13.

18 Although Shevchenko's external radiation dose exceeded the permissible limit, reaching 126.3% of the level established by the temporary sanitary safety regulations for Chornobyl-related work, the press reported cautiously, avoiding mention of his diagnosis and instead focusing on his personal courage and the fulfillment of his civic and professional duties, as well as his obligations as a Communist and an artist. Bronchitis appears in Shevchenko's own diary, though Malyshevskyi interprets it merely as a "reassuring" diagnosis. In subsequent literature, however, the canonical diagnosis becomes lung cancer. See: Anatolii Karas, "Diktatura (khuodno-dokumentalna povist')", *Viche*, no. 10 (2006).

19 Malyshevskyi, Volodymyr Shevchenko, 139–14.

20 Susan Schuppli, *Media, Forensics, Evidence* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020), 62.

21 See: Malyshevskyi, *Volodymyr Shevchenko*, 145–155; Olha Tarasova-Khodzhashvili, "The Soul Longs for Good, Yet It Is Poisoned with a Toxic Brew", *Pravda Ukrainy*, no. 88 (September 8, 1999): 4.

22 *Chernobyl* HBO miniseries of 2019 is the most recent and vivid example of this "inspiration." See: Sharf, Zack. "20 Chernobyl Books and Movies to Check Out If You're Obsessed with HBO's Miniseries", *InideWire*, June 4, 2019. Accessed February 2, 2026.

23 *Chronicle...* was narrated by the film actor Nikolay Olyalin, renowned for his role in Yuri Ozerov's WWII epic *Liberation* (1971–1972).

24 *Chornobyl: Khronika tiazhkykh tyzhniv* [*Chronicle of the Hard Weeks*]. *Vechernii Kyiv*, no. 92, April 20, 1987.

25 "From October We Come." *Pravda Ukrainy*, no. 247 (October 25, 1987): 3.

26 V. Borshchov and I. Dumkin, "Chornobyl: Khronika tiazhkykh tyzhniv", *Na ekranakh Ukrainy*, no. 28, July 11, 1987.

27 Ibid.

28 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 33–38; Bill Nichols, Introduction to Documentary (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 84–86.

29 Kyiv Studio of Popular Science Films, among others, produced four "optimistic" pictures aimed to restore devalued legitimacy of the Soviet scientific project, to normalize the accident and define it as a series of acceptable errors: *Radiational Shield of Kyiv* (1986, dir. Yurii Tyshchenko); *Nuclear Station Engineer* (1987, dir. Mykhailo Tkachuk); *Special Processing Site* (1987, dir. V. Kravchuk); *Radiation. The Defensive Line* (1987, dir. Ihor Ponomairov).

30 Tatiana Kasperski, "Chernobyl's Aftermath in Political Symbolism, Monuments and Rituals: Remembering the Disaster in Belarus", *Anthropology of East Europe Review* vol. 30, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 83–84.

31 *Chronicle of the Hard Weeks*.

32 The verdict in the Chornobyl trial was announced on July 29, 1987.

33 "Radioactive Fire: Why the Chernobyl Experience Calls Our Worldview into Question", *Lettre International*, vol. 60 no. 1, (2003): 11–15.

34 *Chronicle of the Hard Weeks*.

35 See: Svetlana Bodrunova, "Chernobyl in the Eyes: Mythology as a Basis of Individual Memories and Social Imaginaries of a 'Chernobyl Child'", *Anthropology of East Europe Review* vol. 30, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 22; *Chornobyl: Breaking Bread* (1986, Ukrkinokhronika, dir. Oleksandr Kosinov).

36 Andreas Zink, "Approaching the Void – Chernobyl in Text and Image." *Anthropology of East Europe Review* vol. 30, no. 1 (2012): 100–112. The war devastated Ukraine, destroying 15% of its territory and claiming the lives of an equivalent share of its population. Approximately 700 cities and towns lie in ruins, and more than 80% of its industrial and agricultural capacity has been wiped out. See Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2021), 291–292.

37 Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War* (1994).

38 In Shcherbak, *Chernobyl: A Documentary Story*, 1. Yaroshynska even sees the Chornobyl accident as a fundamental divide in global human history: "And it, life on Earth, will henceforth be divided not only into eras, eras, cultures, religions, socio-political formations, it will be divided into life before and after Chornobyl. The Earth will never again be what it was before April 26, 1986, 1 hour and 24 minutes […]". Alla Yaroshynska, "Chernobyl sovershenno sekretno" [Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter], *Media-Inform* (1992): 8.

39 E. Pozdnyakova, "Postupok" [A Courageous Act], *Pravda Ukrainy*, no. 77 (1987): 3.

40 I. Pazhitnova, "Pry vykonanni profesiinoho oboviazku…"[In the performance of professional duty…], *Na ekranakh Ukrainy* [On the screens of Ukraine], no. 21 (1987).

41 E. Pozdnyakova, "Postupok", 3. Dzhemma Firsova was a filmmaker, film actress, and social activist. After the Chornobyl accident, she participated in the creation of the Chornobyl Union organization as well as was appointed a head of an independent expert group on the immediate causes of the Chornobyl accident.

42 In 1972, the Main Political Directorate of the Soviet Army and Navy, Goskino USSR, and the Union of Cinematographers of the USSR instituted the Oleksandr Dovzhenko Golden Medal, accompanied by three silver medals, to recognize exceptional filmmakers in the field of military-patriotic cinema. The awards are presented annually on the Day of the Soviet Army and Navy, with the laureates receiving them on Victory Day. Yuliya Solntseva became the first recipient. See: "Medali imeni A. P. Dovzhenko" [Medals named after A. P. Dovzhenko], *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 5 (1972): 55.

43 The most representative films are: *Chornobyl NPP* (dir. Leonid Avtonomov, Ukrkinokhronika, 1974); *Morning of Atomohrad* (dir. Volodymyr Heorhiienko, Ukrtelefilm, 1974); *Light Up Your Sun* (dir. Volodymyr Heorhiienko, Ukrtelefilm, 1976); *Chain Reaction* (dir. Volodymyr Heorhiienko, Ukrtelefilm, 1978); and *Belonging* (dir. Borys Kvashniov, Ukrtelefilm, 1982).

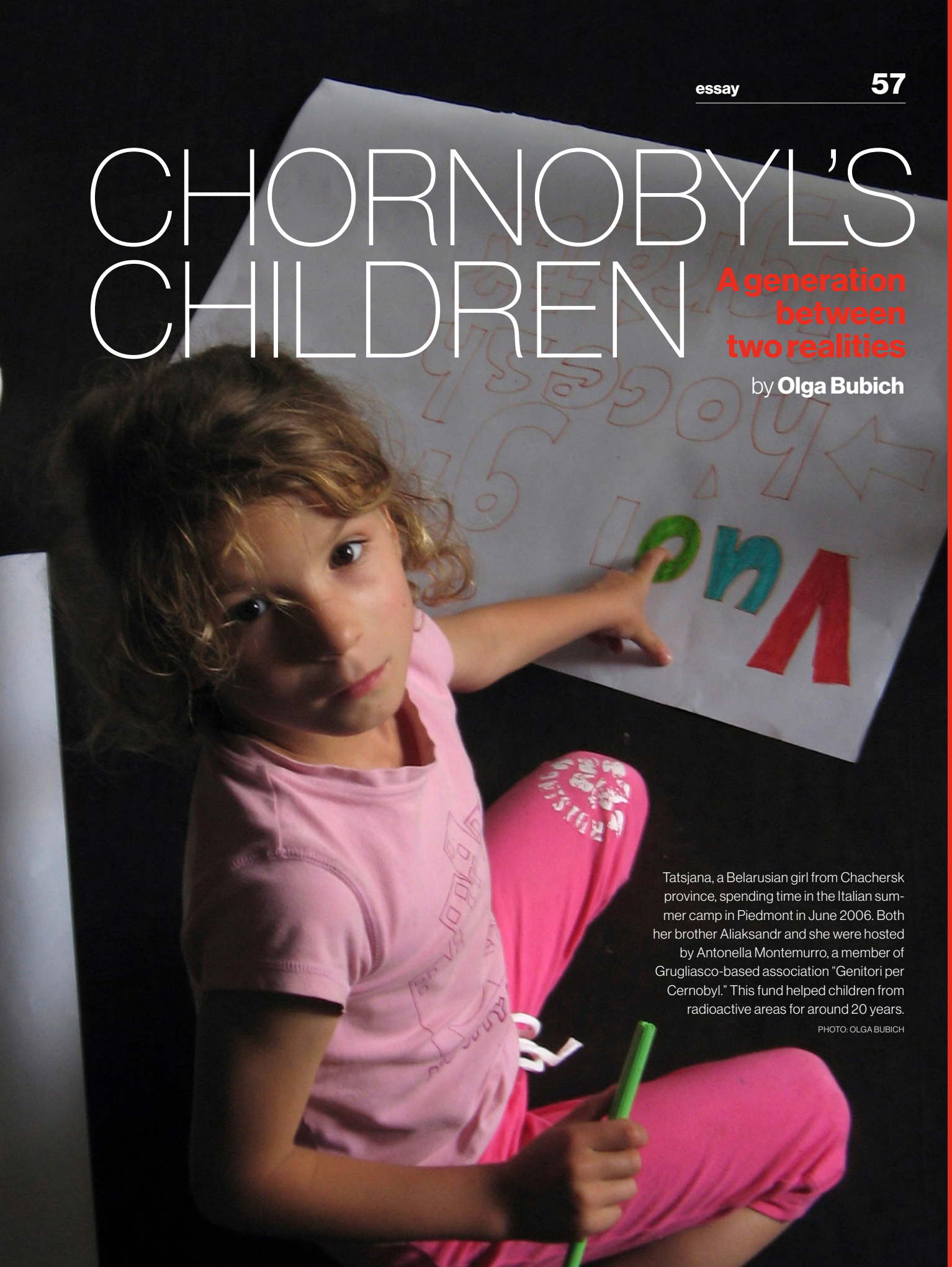
44 Atomohrad – a Soviet neologism combining "atom" and the Old Slavic hrad, a solemn term for "town" – "Atomic Town".

45 Ivan Drach, *Korin' i krona* [Root and Crown], (Kyiv: Radyans'kyi pysmennyk, 1974), 28–33.

CHORNOBYL'S CHILDREN

A generation between two realities

by **Olga Bubich**



Tatsjana, a Belarusian girl from Chachersk province, spending time in the Italian summer camp in Piedmont in June 2006. Both her brother Aliaksandr and she were hosted by Antonella Montemurro, a member of Grugliasco-based association "Genitori per Cernobyl." This fund helped children from radioactive areas for around 20 years.

PHOTO: OLGA BUBICH



Children from Buda-Kashaliova province taking part in a Dutch humanitarian program, ready to board the plane for the first time in their lives. Spring, 2013 .

PHOTO: OLGA BUBICH

abstract

After the collapse of the USSR, rural Belarus faced severe economic and social crises and psychological issues. International humanitarian Chornobyl Children respite programs enabled hundreds of thousands of children to spend time abroad in Europe and North America. Although designed to improve health after the 1986 disaster, these initiatives gave encounters with other ways of living and thinking. Personal testimonies and long-term observations suggest that the experience significantly influenced the youth's aspirations, self-perception, and life trajectories. These projects became a transformative encounter with a bigger world.

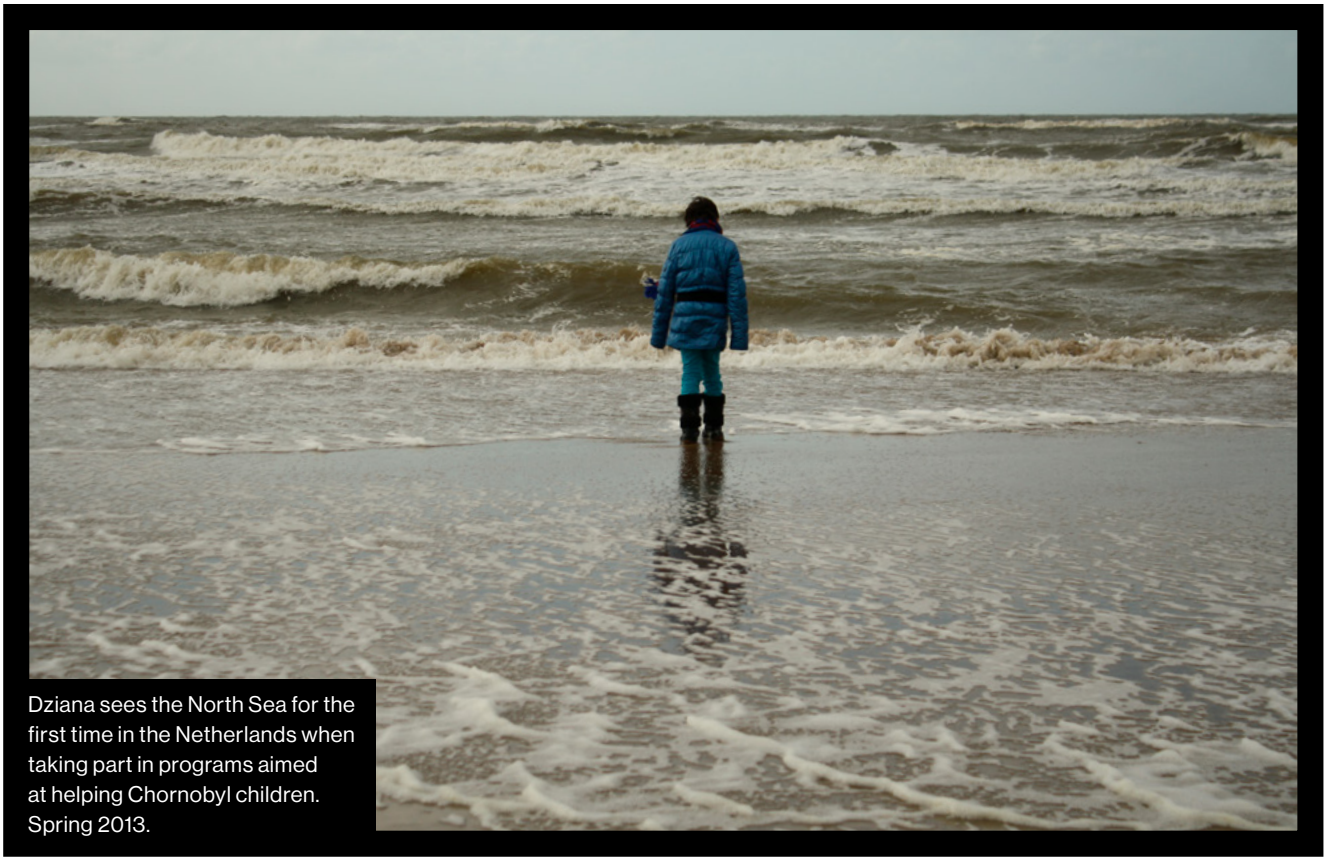
KEYWORDS: Belarus; "Chornobyl Children" programs; post-Soviet social transformations; Chornobyl aftermath.

Large families, joblessness, underpaid manual labor at factories; *kolkhozes*, or dairy farms; poverty, limited access to education and healthcare; alcohol abuse and domestic violence – these are the stereotypes often associated with former post-Soviet states during the first decade after the collapse of the USSR. Unfortunately, they were close to reality. Visiting the rural areas of Belarus, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, the country's only president since 1994, mostly did so in a "Potemkin village" format, ignoring the actual economic and social collapse. From 1993 to 2002, average yearly inflation reached 247.2%, while salaries and pensions stayed below 100 USD.[1] The suicide rate between 1990 and 1995 was 32.28 per 100,000 – the sixth highest in the WHO European Region – with cases among males (mostly related to binge drinking) being five times higher than among females.[2]

However, a parallel reality began to emerge at approximately the same time, thanks to humanitarian respite programs launched in more than a dozen countries for the so-called "Chornobyl Children." These programs operated across various periods and countries in Italy, Ireland, Germany, Switzerland, Canada, the USA, and other European and North American states.[3] Overall, around 1 million children are estimated to have participated, traveling abroad for a temporary stay to improve their health. For many, given the world they were accustomed to, participation in these initiatives meant much more than a strengthened immune system or the intake of radiation-free food and air.

Half a million Belarusian children

The first and largest Belarusian initiative of this kind was the "For the Children of Chernobyl" charitable fund, which operated from 1989 to 2012. It was headed by Gennady Grushevoy – a



Dziana sees the North Sea for the first time in the Netherlands when taking part in programs aimed at helping Chornobyl children. Spring 2013.

PHOTO: OLGA BUBICH

Belarusian academic, politician, and human rights defender also involved in the Belarusian Popular Front movement. Its network was impressive: by the mid-1990s, the fund's teams were active in over 20 cities and towns in Belarus, managing more than 40 long-term programs for charitable, medical, and humanitarian outreach.

Children from areas contaminated by the 1986 catastrophe were offered respite from lingering radiation. Some stayed with host families, developing lifelong personal bonds, while others lived in groups with chaperons in communal accommodations. Medical checkups were regularly arranged, often alongside essential dental care.

FOR SOME INTERNATIONAL associations, aid went beyond the initial scope of respit from radiation. It evolved into targeted support, from assistance for low-income families to long-term partnerships with local schools, hospitals, and crisis centers. Support often came through the purchase of equipment, furniture, or medication which were a tangible investment in the long-term functioning of local infrastructure. Although the exact number of participants is difficult to determine, researchers estimate the figure at half a million – roughly 7% of the country's population.[4] While Grushevoy closed his fund in 2012, stating it had "fulfilled its social mission" and that grownups must now be "in charge of their own destinies",[5] many other NGOs continued their work until 2020, when they faced a prolonged hold caused first by the pandemic and later by a crackdown on civil society.

"I have no idea where I would be now"

It was in June 2000, when carrying a bulging folder with all sorts of documents required to navigate notorious Belarusian red tape and coordinate the humanitarian trip, I met the first group of mine at the airport. Watching them clutching chocolate boxes and poorly hidden, jingling vodka bottles that their parents had handed them as souvenirs for Italian host, I could hardly imagine the amount of work I was to face. Forty-nine minors, two group

"CHILDREN FROM AREAS CONTAMINATED BY THE 1986 CATASTROPHE WERE OFFERED RESPITE FROM LINGERING RADIATION."



Planning to establish new contacts and create projects of targeted help, some associations visited schools in rural areas.

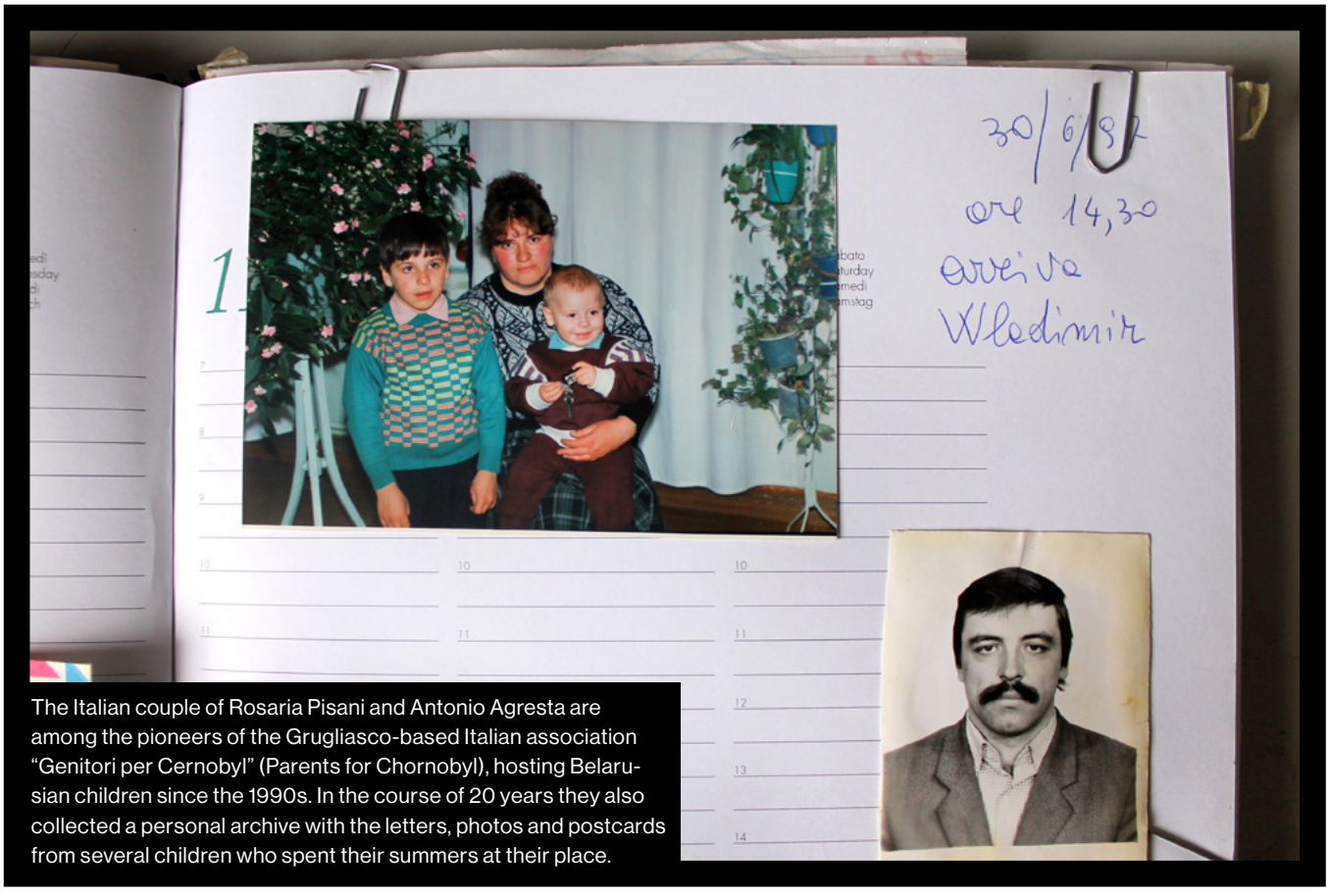
PHOTO: OLGA BUBICH



PHOTO: OLGA BUBICH



PHOTO: OLGA BUBICH



The Italian couple of Rosaria Pisani and Antonio Agresta are among the pioneers of the Grugliasco-based Italian association “Genitori per Cernobyl” (Parents for Chornobyl), hosting Belarusian children since the 1990s. In the course of 20 years they also collected a personal archive with the letters, photos and postcards from several children who spent their summers at their place.

PHOTO: OLGA BUBICH

leaders, and 40 days in a small Italian town – this is the scenario I would then repeat each year for around two decades. However, during these years what I witnessed was not only health-related, but social and psychological changes in the growing children – the mindsets of the entire generation of Belarusians underwent transformations due to the unique intensive exposure to what one of the former participants of such a project defined as "the world that was bigger than I."

When looking at Belarusian youth today, one might conclude that the technological revolution and internet access have bridged the gap between them and their global peers. However, in the late 1990s, the divide was stark, especially in the case of the children from rural areas. Many families I worked with lacked basic sanitary facilities, let alone rotary telephones and landlines – to say nothing of a mobile connection. Even ten years later, while accompanying Dutch host families to the southern district of Buda-Kashaliova, I still saw homes using traditional Russian stoves and horse-drawn transport for daily needs. For children in these areas, going to school often meant a daily, several-kilometer journey on foot through forests or along desolate highways.

ULADZIMIR, a former participant in an Italian program, recalls that due to his village's remoteness, he and his sister Alena were sent to a *internat* – a boarding institution for orphans and "social orphans" (children from disadvantaged families whose parents, however, despite of their negligence, were not deprived of parental rights – mainly to allow the state to show good statistics). For these children it was their only way to receive basic education.

He remarked:

> **We lived in a small remote village with no job opportunities for my parents or school for my brothers or sister. The only company I had was that of Alena and one more girl next door. I didn't have a clear idea of what the world beyond looked like. In 2000, I was lucky to be added to the list of kids who went to Italy, back then I was only eight years old and everything happening to me seemed like a dream or a fairy-tale.**

Uladzimir's stays in Tuscany dramatically changed his trajectory. He eventually managed to relocate to Minsk where he graduated from a polytechnical university. Many orphaned children from his internat moved to Italy upon reaching adulthood. Since international adoption has been virtually banned in Belarus since the early 2000s,[6] these programs were the only way to reunite with host families who cared for them. Some even chose to Italianize their names, eager to turn the page on their previous traumatic lives.

Darya, now a translator for an international firm, reflects on an "alternative" scenario:

> **I often think about the 'whats' and 'whys' of my life. If I had stayed and never seen the world outside? School, university, two years of obligatory state service, a salary hardly enough to buy food and, if lucky, a pair of tights. A husband (probably drunk), kids, a rented apartment. A typical life many my age have – some better, some worse. Many are already divorced, and if single, stigmatized as spinsters.**

Freedom and the invisible infrastructure of change

The memories shared by Chernobyl Children programs participants are strikingly similar: the fear of the unfamiliar, strange new food, the shock of well-stocked shops, the first time swimming in the sea, and the discovery of new languages. Now, as adults, they ask: *Why were our lives so different? Why were we so "unfree"?*

Katya, now an office worker in Hrodna, recalls:

> **Antonio and Rosaria, my hosts, didn't let their age stop them from being 'crazy.' We pushed each other in shopping carts around the mall, went to late-night discos, and danced in giant bunny costumes. In Belarus, people of that age just stay home and watch TV or go to doctors. Living with this family showed me that Italians are much more relaxed than we are; they don't worry about what others would say about them. In Italy, I felt so free.**

"THE POVERTY AND STAGNATION OF THE HOMETOWNS OF CHORNOBYL CHILDREN WERE NOT INEVITABLE 'NATURAL LAWS,' BUT RATHER PRODUCTS OF A SPECIFIC SOCIO-POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT."

These and other stories I witnessed and collected while volunteering for NGOs show that, even without it being a conscious goal, Chornobyl Children programs turned into something more than a temporary escape from post-Soviet economic and emotional austerity. They became a form of informal diplomacy – a window of opportunity to learn both about "a bigger" world and about themselves. It would not be an exaggeration to say that many children found role models in the people who hosted them. Through the comparative lens present in the accounts similar to those of Darya's and Katya's, critical evaluation of one's own realities was stimulated.

"**IF YOU HAVE** a goal and can pull yourself together, everything is possible," summarizes Aliaksandr. Now 40 years old, I first knew him as a boy from a traumatic home defined by violence and heavy alcohol abuse. Surrounded by the trust of his host family, he grew into a self-sufficient man who now drives to Minsk



One of the teenage girls from Belarus during her summer visit to Italy as a part of the humanitarian programs, 2010s.

PHOTO: OLGA BUBICH

in a white suit for business. Stories like his show that the legacy of learnt helplessness and perception of life as "survival mode existence" which is often inherited together with other attitudes from previous Soviet generations, can be questioned and altered. The poverty and stagnation of the hometowns of the children were not inevitable "natural laws," but rather products of a specific socio-political environment. The cycle of rural poverty could be broken as a result of conscious efforts invested into education, individual agency, and community support.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the international Chornobyl Children programs represent one of the largest unplanned social experiments in modern history. They proved that while a state can control its borders and its narrative, it cannot easily erase the memory of a "bigger world" once a child has experienced it. For 7% of the population who crossed physical borders and questioned internal frontiers, mental, emotional, and psychological were also crossed.

Even as these programs remain on hold, the transformed mindsets of a half-million Belarusian adults form a resilient counter-narrative based on inner freedom, empathy, and solidarity they encountered in strangers as children. These foreigners gradually became family. Ultimately, my hope for this new generation is that, in order to cherish such values, they won't have to go through another radioactive catastrophe.

Olga Bubich is a Belarusian Freelance Journalist, Photographer and Memory Researcher, temporary based in Berlin.

references

1 Yaroslav Romanchyk, "Konets eksperimenta: chto stalo s ekonomikoi pri Lukashenko" [The End of the Experiment: What Happened with Belarusian Economics during Lukashenko], *Forbes.ru*, (2020). Accessed February 7, 2026. Available at: https://www.forbes.ru/biznes/407643-konec-eksperimenta-chto-stalo-s-belorusskoy-ekonomikoy-pri-lukashenko

2 Yuri Razodovsky, "Suicide in Belarus" in *Crisis: the Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention*, vol. 19 no. 4, November 2012. Accessed February 4, 2026. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233406929_Suicide_in_Belarus

3 *For the Children of Chernobyl*. Archived from the original http://www.friends-partners.org/ccsi/nisorgs/belarus/chornbel.htm on December 22, 2008. Accessed Febryary 4, 2026. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20081222082028/http://www.friends-partners.org/CCSI/nisorgs/belarus/chornbel.htm

4 Artur Smirnov, "Pochemu o Chernobyle v Belarusi Detiam bolshe ne rasskazyvaiut" [Why Belarusian Children Are No Longer Told About Chernobyl?], *Deutsche Welle*, (2017). Accessed February 4, 2026. Available at: https://www.dw.com/почему-о-чернобыле-в-беларуси-детям-больше-не-рассказывают/a-36354991

5 Gennady Grushevoy, "Grushevoi prekrashchaet deiatelnost fonda 'Detiam Chernobylia' i nachinaet pomogat' zakliuchennym" [Ceases the Activities of the Children of Chernobyl Foundation and Starts Helping Prisoners], *Nasha Niva*, (2012). Accessed February 4, 2026. Available at: https://nashaniva.com/ru/102249

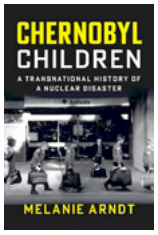
6 "Novoe postanovlenie po voprosam usynovleniia ogranichivaet belorusskim sirotam vozmozhnost' na obretenie sem'i" [A New Adoption Regulation Limits Belarusian Orphans' Chances to Find Family], *Spring96* (2007). Accessed February 7, 2026. Available at: https://spring96.org/ru/news/10711

review

The Chernobyl Children.
A generation growing up with radiological contaminations

Chernobyl Children: A Transnational History of a Nuclear Disaster

Melanie Arndt, transl. Alastair Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 368 pages.



On April 26, 1986, children across the Western Soviet Union woke up to a normal late winter Wednesday. As they headed to school, or helped their parents, or tended to animals, radioactive particles were falling out of the sky and settling onto the trees and shrubs, and into the soil. Following the early morning explosions in reactor number four at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant on the border of the Ukrainian and Belarusian Soviet Republics, a fire burned for several weeks, streaming a river of particles into the sky to spread downwind and contaminate children and families and pastures. At first no one knew a thing. The events of that morning, and the journey that those radioactive particles began during the disaster would shape the lives of those children in profound and complex ways.

For historian Melanie Arndt the children of Chernobyl, defined in multiple ways, serve as guides to the unsteady history that has unfolded since that day: from embodying the ideology and then collapse of the former Soviet Union, the emergence of a post-bipolar transnational order, and ultimately the solitude with which each of us has entered the Anthropocene.

ARNDT'S DEEPLY RESEARCHED and profoundly compassionate 2020 study of the "Chernobyl children" has been translated from its original German into English by Alastair Matthews. The book is an essential guide to how nuclear crises cannot be contained by the timeframe of their initial disasters, but slowly morph into international, transnational, and deep-time ecological continua of ongoing disaster. While such a study could become bogged down by this overarching narrative, Arndt's work achieves a powerful humanity by remaining close to the people who lived this history as she slowly expands her scope.

From the start there were shifting definitions foisted on the children by various state and institutional interlocutors. Arndt describes the "uncertainties surrounding what is meant by the terms 'Chernobyl child' and 'affected'" (14) and thus the uncertainties about who was included, and what being affected might mean for subsequent health outcomes. Against this managerial framework she engages us with many of the harms experienced by the children, what their resilience shows us, and their ultimate journey from signifiers of pure Soviet children to children of a wounded planet.

The "First Chernobyl Children" were the roughly 17,000 child residents of Prypiat, the energy worker town adjacent to the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, who were evacuated two days after the explosions. Of Prypiat, Arndt writes, the:

> **[…] inhabitants had an average age of twenty-six, and there were numerous facilities for children and young people, including thirty-five playgrounds, fifteen kindergartens, five middle schools, one vocational school and one art school. (89)**

It was a young city, but it was mere kilometers away from the fatally wounded reactor that was belching fallout over the city and region even as children were allowed to play outside for several days.

In the following weeks and months, hundreds of villages would be evacuated, and it would become clear that tens of thousands of children, at a minimum, had been exposed to worrying levels or radiation, and that these levels extended far outside of the immediate zone of the disaster. Large populations of children were now being restricted from playing outside or in the woods. During the early months of the disaster, when the scale of the contamination was unclear, supporting the children became a means of enacting and performing state care by Soviet officials.

As decisions were slowly taken at the republic or oblast levels to evacuate children, toddlers and babies, tens of thousands were evacuated in the late spring and summer of 1986 from both the Belarus and Ukrainian Republics, many placed in holiday facilities or pioneer camps. Arndt tells us:

> **These stays were primarily paid for by enterprises and trade union organizations, which also operated many of the facilities. In addition, a number of ministries, including the Ministry of Health and Education, as well as the Komsomol and various agencies, not only allowed Chernobyl children to stay at facilities they ran but also footed the bill. (99)**

However, she notes, not all intended to join the programs were able to find slots, allowing for the corruptions of the old system to steer and taint many efforts.

As the Soviet Union declined in the years immediately after Chernobyl, funding and infrastructure to continue the programs, even at the republic and oblast levels faltered. Some of the groups supporting various cohorts of the children began to reach out to supportive socialist and communist countries to help fund or receive and host various groups of the children. Cuba, with its strong national emphasis on healthcare, began bringing Chernobyl children to the island nation for medical care in 1990, continuing until 2011:



Children gather for a parade celebrating the success of the Chernobyl power plant in April 1986, a few weeks before the accident. Plant director Viktor Brukhanov (in hat and tie) and the plant's Party secretary Sergey Parashin (in glasses) are visible on the far right. At the time, children made up more than a third of Prypiat's population.

PHOTO: PETR VYHOVSKY/PRIPYAT-CITY.RU

> **[…] the legacy of the Cuban efforts to support the Chernobyl children can still be felt in Ukraine – and not only there – today. (140)**

At about this time, philanthropic groups in the United States and Europe began to fund numerous Chernobyl children's charities, and to welcome children for visits and medical treatments in Western countries. Arndt calls this period one in which the "children" went from being "Soviet Chernobyl Children" to "Children of the Whole Planet," seeing the participants becoming poster children for various causes or issues each charitable group was advancing. In this role, the children were repositioned as innocent victims of the brutalities of modern politics and technology. They were wounded innocents standing as sentinels, warning the people of the world about the risks and dangers of the late Cold War, and post-Cold War worlds. Many of the support groups sought increased awareness of the plight of the Chernobyl children in the press, and public awareness of the Chernobyl children as a group of innocents rose worldwide.

PART OF WHAT was being advanced was notions of the trans-nationality with which the children could be cast, not solely as victims of inferior Soviet technology, but human recklessness and lack of care for the most vulnerable among us. Rather than individuals, they were placeholders for emerging Western concerns about collapsing ecological wellness, or extensions of religious service work. Witnessing the health impact of the radiation on the children, and the bright resilience with which they entered the future from their dystopian origin story was imagined as compelling concerned citizens to think beyond the bipolar death struggle of the Cold War. The children stood as refugees of that bipolar struggle, and as harbingers of the world emerging in its wake.

Arndt presents a solid institutional history of these various groups, many of which suffered through funding, embezzlement, and mismanagement scandals, detailing how the concerns of the "children" were often left behind as organizations slowly disbanded.

> **The opening and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union also released an unprecedented wave of humanitarian activism in civil society in the West. The Chernobyl children presented countless individuals and initiatives in the West with new ways to get involved, both at home and in the uncharted territory of their former enemies. (221)**

She describes the support movements in multiple host countries, for example that of Ireland, and of charitable efforts such as that of the YMCA in Michigan. Links between various of the participants, and residents of host countries, or of activists focused on nuclear industry sites, for example Nadja Neal Hinson who's activism around the contaminations of the Hanford plutonium production site in Washington State led her to work on behalf of specific groups of the children and to speak out about how their plight is linked to the harms experienced by the Hanford downwinders (184–192), dot this section.

WE SEE THE INITIAL period of high hopes and cooperation across various boundaries give way to the politics unfolding in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and specifically about how the autocratic and insular turn of Belarusian leader Lukashenka cut off Belarusian children from international cooperation. While detailing the complex web of national, international, religious, and philanthropic attempts at intervention, Arndt demonstrates that children were the vector that made this event transnational, but that in the end, while many did receive care and aid, they were also placeholders for players with larger concerns.

Chernobyl children is a solid history of the organizations that played key roles in these efforts as they unfolded, and of the specific people who participated as children and what their experiences were like, but the real power of the book comes as Arndt contemplates the larger implications of these histories. Ultimately, we are confronted with the unwillingness of governments to address the long-term consequences of radiological contaminations, and

Continued.
The Chernobyl Children

the inadequacy of these aid or philanthropic organizations to grapple with the legacies of nuclear disasters.

Arndt demonstrates how the universal innocence of children undergirded the defining and success of children as communicators of harm and as coal mine canaries of nuclear risk. Regardless of what you think about politics, about the bipolar landscape of the Cold War world, children occupied a space above these concerns. Unable to have made choices that led to the consequences of their illnesses, foregrounding children was an effective strategy by many to universalize various issues.

RECENT CHERNOBYL histories, often seeking to achieve a cinematic quality in the telling, obsess like nativity stories around the moment of creation (disaster) rooting the books to the years of the physically destructive events, giving barely a nod towards the Red Forest and the deep consequences unfolding less visually. Chernobyl children give us characters who inhabit this part of the story: bit players in the initial events, victims of a specific moment in time and technology, perhaps among the first people living in a world slowly coming into view: "They embody what it means to be at home on a damaged planet," reveals Arndt (285).

Nuclearity, according to Gabrielle Hecht, in part raises mundane things out of time, and so the Chernobyl children occupied a liminal place in history and technology once they were tainted by the radiation spewing from reactor no. 4.[1] No longer optimistic Soviet children creating a socialist future, no longer transnational recipients of a sort of postwar charity, now they inhabited a world, and even bodies, marked by uncertainty.

Today the "children" are adults, but most of the fallout particles distributed in 1986, are now deeply embedded into the ecosystems of Central Europe and just starting their lifecycles. It is the very nature of radionuclides, which embed into the ecosystem once deposited, and then transport as does any chemical within that ecosystem: transporting spatially, via water, biota and wind, and transporting deeply into time. Many will remain active, radiating energy as the particle decays, for hundreds, thousands, or even billions of years, meaning that most of those who might experience harm



Evacuation of children from Prypiat city in May, 1986.

SOURCE: CHERNOBYL.COM.UA

from the Chernobyl distribution may not yet be born. This is the deep-time nature of the threat, putting the Chernobyl children at the front of what may be a long line of those who experience radiogenic illness in its deep wake.

Still, Arndt reminds us that:

> **Those who have to live with Chernobyl on a daily basis for the rest of their lives, with the vague sense of uncertainty and the existential fear of illness and pain that this brings, have often been rendered invisible, left behind after the initial headlines fade. Only recognizing the importance of the long view – the seemingly unspectacular personal trajectories and intimate relationships between the body, health and the environment – can we start to understand what living on a damaged planet entails. (11)**

In writing about *Slow violence* (2013), Rob Nixon warns us that environmental violence often occurs over years and decades and is difficult to understand as violence.[2] Arndt invites us to envision big history, to slow down and see the forest; to imagine a timeframe that leaves nation states, and certainly political or economic systems of social organization, receding far away on the horizon of the past, as we join the Chernobyl children in facing and determining our future.

Robert Jacobs

Historian of Nuclear Technologies, is a Professor Emeritus at the Hiroshima Peace Institute Hiroshima City University and a Visiting Professorial Fellow 2025–2028 at the School of Humanities and Languages, University of New South Wales.

references

1 Gabrielle Hecht, *Being nuclear: Africans and the global uranium trade* (The MIT Press, 2012), 14.

2 Rob Nixon, *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 2–3.



Figure 1. Members of Riga folk dance community making masking nets in Riga, Latvia, February 12, 2023.

PHOTO: ARTŪRS BERGS

Latvian folklore ensembles and their initiatives against Russia's war in Ukraine

by **Ilga Vālodze Ābelkina**

abstract

This article delves into the folk music community of Latvia and its reaction to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Rooted in the 20th-century folklore revival movement, during which Latvians revitalized their cultural heritage as a form of opposition to Soviet ideology, the community of Latvian folklore ensembles, musicians and enthusiasts has joined the broader civic initiative of giving aid to Ukraine and expressing solidarity with the Ukrainian people. Since February 2022, at least 80 initiatives linked to folklore (concerts, dance events, protests etc.) have been carried out that are directly connected to gathering support for or expressing solidarity with Ukraine. The analysis of these events reveals how the folklore community engages with political issues, using folklore as a medium to express its views in the contemporary political context.

KEYWORDS: Folklore revival, protest, recontextualization, solidarity, traditional music.

During occupation by the Soviet Union, the Baltic states were subject to its communist ideology in all areas of life. Naturally, this included culture, where propaganda and censorship were implemented to a certain degree in areas such as education, performing arts, and publishing. This article focuses on Latvia, where, in response to attempts by the ruling powers to devalue traditional local culture and enforce ongoing Russification, a folklore revival movement (Latvian *folkloras kustība*) emerged in the late 1970s, culminating in the Awakening and subsequent restoration of an independent republic in the early 1990s. It was a revitalization movement[1] partly driven by political resistance, and which constantly balanced between those cultural activities that were accepted by the regime and the dissemination of anti-Soviet ideas. The movement involved musicians and enthusiasts, who engaged with traditional culture by singing folk songs, reviving and playing

traditional music instruments, exploring traditional customs, celebrating seasonal rites, and so on. Many also joined folklore ensembles, the number of which grew rapidly, reaching a total of more than 200 in the 1990s. However, during the 1990s, the movement's activities and those of folk ensembles mostly blended in with the institutional apparatus of the national cultural sector of the recently restored Republic of Latvia, providing municipally funded opportunities for those interested in folklore. With this, the motivations and experiences of the revivalists slowly changed; while the emphasis on national self-determination as one of its goals remained, the functions of folklore as a social and artistic experience also came to the fore. Today, more than 50 years since the movement began in Latvia, there are over 250 active folklore ensembles in the country, practicing traditional music, dance, and numerous crafts. Many of these ensembles involve the descendants of leaders or active participants in the movement, who either continue their parents' musical traditions or create new expressions of their cultural heritage, which was revived from the 1970s onwards and passed down to them. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, countless activities expressing solidarity with and support for Ukraine took place across the world, including in Latvia. Being part of the folklore society in Latvia and a musician myself, with time, I started to notice that among music concerts, fundraising campaigns and other support actions being carried out countrywide, there was a range of initiatives connected to traditional culture. Folklore ensembles have on their own initiative collected donations, gathered to make trench candles and weave camouflage nets, and learned Ukrainian traditional music, performing it as a way of expressing their support for the sovereignty of Ukraine. Some of these activities have also been developed in contexts other than the folklore community, involving the general public in support actions.

"IN THE CAPITAL OF RIGA, EXPRESSIONS OF CIVIL SOLIDARITY HAVE VISUALLY TRANSFORMED THE CITY, WITH BLUE AND YELLOW COLORS INCREASINGLY BECOMING PART OF THE URBAN LANDSCAPE SINCE 2022."

THIS ARTICLE explores the current activities of the folklore revivalist community of Latvia, which partly overlap with the characteristics of the 20th-century folklore movement, examining how Latvian folklore ensembles have addressed the war in their creative work following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The methodology of this article is built on autoethnography that is blended with fieldwork. Information regarding all the activities analyzed in this paper has been gathered from posts on the social media platforms *Facebook* and *Instagram*, as well as from *WhatsApp* chats. One valuable source of information has been the *Facebook* group "Ukraine's support activities within the framework of cultural events. Archive", which was created immediately after the full-scale invasion on the initiative of Latvia-based Ukrainian ethnomusicologist Viktorija Prituļaka. By February 16, 2026, more than 700 people had joined the group, and from posts published there and on other social media channels, most of them *Facebook* pages, I have gathered information on around 80 initiatives by Latvian folklore ensembles and folklore musicians, all aimed at supporting Ukraine through traditional culture. They are diverse, mostly voluntarily organized events that have taken place in various regions of Latvia.

The Russo-Ukrainian war and its impact on Latvia

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has subsequently had a profound and irreversible impact on the lives of the Ukrainian population. It has also caused significant turbulence in the security landscape of the entire region and led to a re-evaluation of Russia's long-standing cultural influence in Eastern Europe and the Baltic States. Certain changes have taken place since the start of the conflict and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, when the European Union imposed sanctions on Russia. While Latvia, as an EU member state, supported these measures, since spring 2022 it has clearly stated its position that Russia is an aggressor state while gradually severing economic ties with its neighbor, with which it shares a 284 km-long border. The war has initiated a new wave of de-Sovietization in Latvia. Relics from the Soviet era that had become ingrained and invisible have been recognized again – such as when city councils renamed streets[2] and removed Soviet monuments.[3] The Latvian education system has restructured schools offering education in Russian, and a three-year transition period was implemented in 2022 so that, by 2025, instruction at preschool and elementary school levels throughout the country would be conducted exclusively in Latvian.[4] The war has had a significant impact on Latvia's security. Before the full-scale war, the Latvian government was largely focused on domestic issues. In 2021, when the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic were at their greatest, the largest proportion of the state budget was allocated to social protection, with less than 2% of the country's GDP being spent on defense. This meant that Latvia was paying under the minimum contribution specified in the 2014 NATO Wales Summit Declaration.[5] Latvia was dependent on Russia for its energy supplies, with strong business ties and regular travel between the two countries. However, since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Latvians have once again begun to feel threatened by their eastern neighbor, gradually cutting ties with Russia and investing in security measures. Today, 4.9% of Latvia's GDP is allocated to security in the budget of 2026.[6] These developments are highlighted to illustrate how the war has affected Latvia and demonstrate that its support for Ukraine is linked to concerns around its own security.

Russia's aggression in Ukraine has mobilized the people of

Latvia in support of Ukrainians on a civic level as well. Since 2022, countless initiatives have been launched, many of which are continuing today. Businesses and individuals alike participate in fundraising and in campaigns to supply military and civilian resources.[7] In the capital of Riga, expressions of civil solidarity have visually transformed the city, with blue and yellow colors increasingly becoming part of the urban landscape since 2022.[8] Alongside military resistance and physical armament, Ukraine and the surrounding region are also defying Russian imperialism on a cultural level. This will be examined in more detail after the next section, but first, an overview will be provided of how participants in the Latvian folklore movement in the 20th century used cultural heritage to express resistance to the ruling power.

Latvian folklore revival and political resistance

Latvians, as well as Lithuanians and Estonians, early on developed an ability to use cultural heritage as a form of resistance. The rebirth of folk songs in the Song Celebration tradition in the 19th century is an example of how events can bring people together, especially when they are used as a tool for self-determination, as in the establishment of independence.[9] In Latvia, more than 40,000 people now take part in this celebration, which has become a cultural phenomenon whose importance in maintaining Latvian identity is undeniable.[10] Another significant development was the 20th-century folklore revival movement, which played a part in liberating the Baltic states from Soviet occupation.[11] The folklore revival first emerged in Estonia and Lithuania in the 1960s, reaching Latvia at the end of the 1970s. It was a wave of invested focus on researching cultural heritage, driven by an urge to bring this heritage back to life. In theory, cultural revivals are connected to a dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs and an urge for change that leads to activism.[12] Ethnomusicologists Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill have distinguished four types of revival efforts, one of which is political and involves acts of protest.[13] Under communist rule, the local culture in all the republics of the Soviet Union was transformed and tailored to achieve the ideological goals of the leadership in Moscow. The cultural life of Soviet citizens was to be in line with communist ideals, and this included the glorification of Stalin. After acquiring the territories during World War II and establishing institutional governance in Latvia in 1945, the USSR took power over all cultural sectors, including folklore. During the Stalinism period (until 1953), interwar folklore research was criticized and subjected to regime guidelines, including self-criticism of scientific work.[14] During this period some forms of art were degraded and included in the Soviet framework of amateur art, known as *samodejatel'nost'* (which can be translated into English as "self-activity"), within the context of which various forms of Soviet folklore were developed.[15] In Latvia, the Song and Dance festival was ideologized, Soviet folk music ensembles were formed, and other means of bringing art to people[16] were established, thereby enabling the regime to reach sections of society that could not be targeted by propaganda in other ways.[17] Under these circumstances, from the end of the 1970s onward,[18] Latvian folklore revivalists – people from various professions who, driven by different motivations, had been inspired to rediscover their culture – strived to reduce the influence of the Soviets on local cultural heritage. Alongside the work of folklore researchers, which continued during the Soviet era but was heavily influenced by the regime, revivalists engaged in heritage research. Both enthusiasts and academically trained musicians studied unarranged folk music, paid attention to dialectal peculiarities, carried out private expeditions to record folklore, revitalized seasonal celebrations, restored traditional musical instruments and made folk costumes, and practiced other crafts. These activities took place in cities (Riga, the capital, soon became the center of the movement), regional centers, and rural areas. All of this was done according to certain aesthetic principles, as Latvian ethnomusicologist Mārtiņš (Martin) Boiko notes: "'authenticity' and 'back to the roots' were the catchwords of the new movement."[19] By striving for authenticity in their cultural practice, Latvian folklore revivalists clearly rejected the concept of Soviet folklorism.



Figure 2. Saucējas ensemble and friends singing in front of the Ukrainian Embassy in Riga, Latvia, March 3, 2022.

PHOTO: LAIMA BAUERE'S PERSONAL ARCHIVE

While opposing the ethnic culture to the ruling power, folklore revivalists took definitive steps in political activism, joining demonstrations held to commemorate the conclusion of the



Figure 3. Members of Riga folk dance community making trench candles in Riga, Latvia, February 12, 2023. PHOTO: ARTŪRS BERGS

Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocol, as well as against the construction of a hydroelectric power station on the Daugava River and other such projects.[20] The most outstanding expression of political resistance to Soviet rule among Latvian folklore revivalists during the occupation was the rebirth of the national flags of the Baltic republics. It occurred during and after the opening concert of the international folklore festival Baltica' 88 on July 13, 1988.[21] It was one of the acts that merged with other events of the Singing Revolution, with the Baltic states soon regaining their independence. Although political resistance was not the only driving force for the revivalists, it was a unifying factor, and the folklore movement in the Baltics culminated with the restoration of independence during the Third Awakening.

Singing was the most significant form of expression within the Latvian folklore movement.[22] During the Soviet era, Latvian folk songs were heavily stylized to adapt them to the aesthetics of choral music,[23] while the originals, as recorded by folklore collectors, were forgotten. In an attempt to restore older singing practices, folklore revivalists devoted their attention to outdoor singing and its characteristic multipart structure. Some of the revival's most popular songs imply a subtext about foreign domination and the desire to break free from it. One example is the song *Spīguļo, saulīt!* (Shine, Sun!), which was often performed at various events, including as the opening number at the Baltica opening concert in 1988, where it was the first song listed in the festival's song booklet.[24] In the lyrics, the narrator invites the Sun deity to shed the "black layer" and put on "the white one", a call that can easily be interpreted as a metaphor for political change. By 1991, more than 200 folklore ensembles had been founded across Latvia, practicing the aforementioned activities.

ONCE THE GOALS of the revitalization movement have been achieved, traditions can take on an independent existence unrelated to the previous goals.[25] After the independence of Latvia was re-established, the folklore movement transformed and reached a "new steady state" – this is a concept offered by American anthropologist Anthony Wallace, used to describe cases in which the revival no longer exhibits the previous forms of activism but a stable situation has taken hold.[26] As there was no longer the need to position cultural legacy as opposed to the occupying regime, the folklore movement shifted. Nevertheless, folklore practices have kept growing in popularity. Today, there are more than 250 active folklore ensembles in Latvia, which are exploring and taking care of local cultural heritage, mainly operating within the structures of municipal cultural institutions.[27] Unlike the amateur artistic framework during the Soviet period, today the cultural centers with which these ensembles are affiliated are only partly involved in the activities of the ensembles. In 2020, a survey[28] was conducted on the activities of traditional cultural ensembles (filled out by more than 100 group leaders), and the respondents' answers reveal a wide range of themes, even extending beyond the boundaries of traditional culture – for example, by incorporating musical instruments such as the guitar and ukulele into the ensemble's repertoire. Coming from a family connected to the Latvian folklore revival since the 1980s and having been actively involved in the community of Latvian folklore ensembles for the past 10 years while studying folkloristics in an academic setting, I as an author have developed observations about the revitalizers of Latvian folklore, as a community that has the ability to mobilize for political resistance, including in the contemporary context. This statement partly comes from personal experience within the community of Latvian folk musicians and is grounded in the view, associated with the method of autoethnography, that a researcher can take advantage of their involvement in the group studied and subject their own experience to analytical analysis.[29] Since 2022, I have been using folklore as a platform to express solidarity and support for Ukraine, but the inspiration to research this aspect of civic activity within a part of the Latvian folklore community came after becoming involved in major protests related to Latvian domestic politics in 2025, which will be mentioned again at the end of this publication. By participating in protests and charity and solidarity events while researching the folklore revival in the 1970s and the 1980s for my doctoral thesis, I started to see parallels with

the folklore movement in the political resistance context. While today the people of Latvia do not need to stand up for their own sovereignty as they did in the Soviet era, ever since the first weeks of the full-scale war, the confidence and determination to help Ukraine, expressed through traditional culture, has been noteworthy among folklore enthusiasts, musicians, and participants in folklore ensembles in Latvia.

This article aims to address the research question: How does the Latvian folklore community, rooted in the revival movement of the 20th century, activate and become engaged in political questions in the contemporary context, by reapplying strategies from the 1970–1990s to current events? As research methods, I am using autoethnography to collect and analyze data, while the study is based on the literature on music revival movements, and applying the theory that cultural revivals are fluid and can adapt in response to political and social changes.

Recontextualization of cultural heritage in acts of protest and expressions of solidarity

The war has undoubtedly had the strongest influence on local customs in Ukraine. Examples of ritual revitalization include *provody v armiyu* (проводи в армію), a series of rituals for escorting someone to the army that is still a preserved tradition in rural areas. The initiation ritual is performed by Ukrainian traditional musicians in cities and shared on social media.[30] It is being researched by folklore scholars such as Anna Nikolaeva,[31] a Ukrainian ethnologist and host of the *Porobleno* (Поробљено) podcast, which discusses the initiation ritual in its series along with other topics relating to military rituals.[32] Particular funeral traditions from various regions that have been brought back to life and recontextualized to fit the current circumstances have been researched by Ukrainian scholar Inna Shvorak.[33] In the *Baltic Worlds* special issue on music and war,[34] Shvorak described how the current revitalization of historical Cossack folk songs, a traditional musical instrument (*trembita*), and lullabies have all become part of modern-day funeral rituals.[35] However, the military conflict has also impacted cultural events outside Ukraine. Although Latvia does not share a common border with Ukraine, the war has been perceived as something very close. Along with the security challenges posed by this war, which have been outlined in one of the previous sections of this article, this can be explained by the fact that both of the countries have shared experience of Soviet occupation and Russian imperialistic ambitions within this structure.

“SOME OF THE REVIVAL’S MOST POPULAR SONGS IMPLY A SUBTEXT ABOUT FOREIGN DOMINATION AND THE DESIRE TO BREAK FREE FROM IT.”

COUNTLESS ACTIVITIES expressing solidarity and support for Ukraine, including events in Latvia, have either taken place online or are mirrored on the Web, as it is one of the characteristics of this era. The information relating to the activities analyzed in this paper has been gathered from posts on social network platforms *Facebook* and *Instagram*, as well as from *WhatsApp* chats. However, the activities themselves were mostly on-site events. Most of the information was found in the *Facebook* group “Ukraine’s support activities within the framework of cultural events. Archive”,[36] but since 2022, activity in it has significantly decreased and information not directly related to cultural support activities has been published more frequently, making data processing more complicated. The advantage of being part of the Latvian folk music enthusiast community myself was useful for me, as an author for collecting data and information. I have participated and initiated or co-organized some of these activities, describing the experience in a researcher’s diary.[37] This reflective personal narrative has helped to formulate how the war has impacted developments within the Latvian folk music community and shifted its participants’ perception of its repertoire, for example with regard to Latvian war songs. Some initiatives, such as self-organized protest demonstrations held in front of the Russian embassy or learning Ukrainian folk songs in folklore ensembles or groups of particular revivalists, were neither announced as public events nor mirrored on social media. One can therefore merely presume that the total number of events and their impact is higher than what’s summarized here. It should be borne in mind that expressions of solidarity cannot be measured and included in simple statistics. The summary included here was compiled by attempting to group publicly announced events or statements, but gestures of support such as the inclusion of the colors of the Ukrainian flag in ensemble communications (which, incidentally, is still a widespread phenomenon in the folklore community) were left out of the research data this time.

There are **five main types of activities** that I was able to summarize from the *Facebook* archive group, and from other social media profiles and the webpages of folk ensembles. They are 1) protests; 2) fundraising for Ukraine; 3) initiatives connected to Ukrainian music; 4) other Ukrainian traditions; and 5) support events such as concerts and others (see Chart 1). In this breakdown, the term “protests” refers to initiatives in which folklore ensembles and other musicians have gathered at demonstrations to express their condemnation of the war. Under the group of “others” are initiatives such as an invitation for Ukrainian citizens to join Latvian traditional culture learning events;[38] a public invitation for Ukrainians to join a Latvian folklore ensemble;[39] an announcement that another ensemble is learning Ukrainian language and traditional music;[40] and other such initiatives. Some of the examples cited fall into more than one category, and in the list of the activities they have been assigned to the category whose characteristics are primarily related to an initiative. Most such cases are fundraising efforts integrated within broader support initiatives, predominantly folk

music concerts. Also, Ukrainian music appears in other categories, being involved in support concerts and song repertoires used in protests. Most of the initiatives mirrored in the *Facebook* group "Ukraine's support activities within the framework of cultural events. Archive" took place in 2022, but there are some folklore ensembles and other entities that have kept supporting Ukrainians and Ukraine's defenders with their concerts and by collecting donations. By compiling the activities archived both within the group and elsewhere, a total number of 80 initiatives were identified. Of these, 71% or 57 different activities were created by folklore ensembles, with the others carried out by private persons or families of folklore revivalists, as well as by popular music groups, musicians, and cultural organizations. However, it has to be noted that, since social networks were the main source of information for this study, there might be some activities, especially those taking place in the regions, that have not been included.

THE MOST COMMON form of folklore in these initiatives is song. It was also the most popular form of folklore revived from the 1970s and 1980s. Songs hold a special place in Latvia's intangible cultural heritage, as one million folk song lyrics and 300,000 melodies have been preserved and are stored in the Archives of Latvian Folklore to this day.[41] War is one of the themes widely explored in Latvian folklore, and has remained present in the repertoire of Latvian folklore ensembles, every year gaining special attention in November, the month in which Latvia's Independence Day is celebrated. The ongoing war in Ukraine has created a new context for the ancient narratives found in those materials about war, the lives of soldiers, and those left behind. The repertoire is diverse and has been recontextualized and performed in settings differing from their original context – war songs are sung in protests in front of the Russian Federation embassy in Riga, in solidarity demonstrations, and on Ukrainian national holidays and days of remembrance. As the Russian embassy became a place for broader society to express their opposition to the war in 2022, Latvian folklore musicians and whole ensembles also went there, protesting through singing. The chosen songs were about war and soldiers parting from their loved ones, which is a popular subject in Latvian folklore records. But in some songs, the message of resistance can be found through metaphorical symbols. For example, the song *Tumsa, tumsa, kas par tumsu* [Darkness, darkness, what about the darkness], sung in one of the first protests in 2022,[42] is about how a dark evening is not an obstacle in bringing home a brother's bride. In the protest context, "darkness" refers to evil power and tragic times for Ukraine. Another song, which is also reflected in the context of protest on the internet, is a Latvian springtime multipart song in the Latgalian dialect, *Nakyukoji, dzaguzeite* [Cuckoo, don't sing] – again, a song that is not thematically related to war but involves a message of parting and change. Additionally, the character and symbolism of the cuckoo bird is recognizable in both Latvian and Ukrainian culture, and in many other cultures of the region. *Nakyukoji, dzaguzeite* was sung to express support by a group of protesters – singers from various folklore contexts – in front of the Ukrainian embassy in Riga on March 2, 2022.[43] In this study, documentations of five singing protests staged in February and March of 2022 were analyzed. They were organized by or featured at least four folklore ensembles and other folklore singers and were carried out in front of the embassies of Russia and Ukraine in Riga, after being covered in social media.[44]

The war has strengthened Latvians' insight into Ukrainian culture and created a sudden boost in popularity for it in Latvia. This cultural development has been referenced in a public survey conducted as part of Rita Grīnvalde's study of Ukrainian support activities in visual symbols in Riga – the respondents confirmed that during the war they had become more familiar with Ukrainian music, history, and cuisine, with examples of folk music appearing multiple times in their responses.[45] Posts about Ukrainian culture published in the *Facebook* archival group of Ukrainian support activities mostly involve traditional music, with other cases featuring Ukrainian dances[46] and Easter egg painting *pisanka* (писанка).[47] Looking back to the Latvian folklore movement in the past century, parallels can be drawn with efforts to explore cultural heritage as a means of non-violent resistance to oppressive regimes.[48] Among folklore ensembles, there are groups that have learned Ukrainian traditional songs. Some of them have recorded and released Ukrainian songs in studio albums alongside Latvian music.[49] In 2024, a Ukrainian song (*Maričkа*) performed by folklore ensemble Upīte (based in the village of Upīte, located in the borderland a few kilometers from Russia) was released with a music video dedicated to the nation of Ukrainians.[50] The song repertoire acquired by folklore ensembles is diverse – ranging from war songs to songs of the Ukrainian Midsummer *Ivana Kupala* festival (Івана Купала). But the most popular song for Latvians (not only the folklore musicians) to learn has been the Ukrainian national anthem (both the official and the folk version from Kuban village), and especially in 2022 it has been sung in various situations – at protests, folklore concerts,[51] and other non-formal settings.[52] In June 2022, three folklore ensembles based in Riga carried out a singing workshop, teaching participants both Latvian and Ukrainian Midsummer songs.[53] There has also been a case of Latvian singers learning songs directly from Ukrainians. In August 24, 2022 a group of like-minded singers that had been learning songs from Ukrainian singer Vira Ibryamova-Sivoraksha online congratulated Ukraine on its Independence Day by singing a congratulatory song.[54] Although Ukrainian folklore gained wider popularity in

"THE WAR HAS STRENGTHENED LATVIANS' INSIGHT INTO UKRAINIAN CULTURE AND CREATED A SUDDEN BOOST IN POPULARITY FOR IT IN LATVIA."



Figure 4. Rēvele ensemble and other participants of Baltica 2022 singing Ukrainian folksong in Pope, Latvia, July 9, 2022.

PHOTO: SCREENSHOT OF A VIDEO POSTED ON LAURA ŠMIDEBERGA'S FACEBOOK PAGE

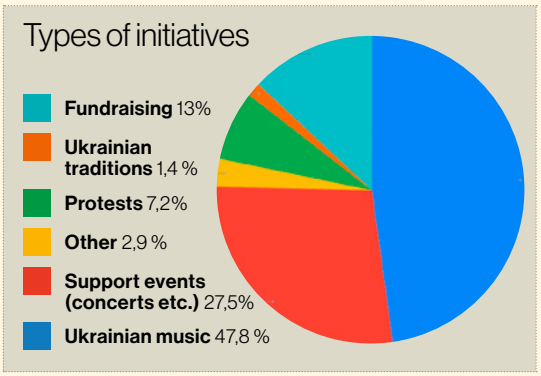


Chart 1. Types of Ukrainian support initiatives carried out by Latvian folklore revivalists and folklore ensembles.

Latvia after the full-scale invasion, some of the Latvian folklore practitioners involved in these activities already had musical connections to Ukraine before the full-scale invasion and have been revisiting the repertoire they learned from Ukrainians in the time since. One example that stands out is that of Janta and Ilmārs Mežs – participants of the Latvian folklore movement since the 1980s. In the early 2000s, the Mežs couple lived in Kyiv, where they met the Ukrainian music ensemble Bozhychi (Божичі). After returning to Latvia, they kept singing and teaching some of the songs they learned to their folklore friends. One of these songs has embarked on a special journey in the community of Latvian folklore musicians. It is *Ja ptychka-nevelychka* (Йа птичка-невеличка) [*I am a little bird*], from Pusta Hreblya village. Janta taught the song to some friends, including members of the ensemble Saucējas, a well-established and internationally recognized traditional singing group in which she herself sings. There have also been occasions when this song has reached a wider audience. In 2015, the folk music community in Latvia heard it directly from Bozhychi, who performed it in a regional concert of *Baltica*.[55] Right after the full scale invasion, on March 5, Saucējas opened the Latgalian Culture Award Boņuks 2021 ceremony, and the event was broadcast on national television just as the aforementioned *Baltica* concert was in 2015.[56] The title of the song translates to English as "I am a little bird" and the lyrics do not convey a specific message about war, but by simply being in Ukrainian, it has embodied an association to the war. Since early spring of 2022 it has been performed by various Latvian folk singers in many protests and other public and non-formal cultural gatherings, not necessarily connected to the war. On February 24, 2025, Daina Zalāne, an active supporter of Ukraine and producer at the Culture Management Centre Lauska, made a *Facebook* post showing three members of the Latvian folklore community singing *Ja ptychka-nevelychka* after *Path of Light for Ukraine*, a commemorative and support event held at the Freedom Monument. In her post, she wrote:

> **Can't believe we have to sing in this context already for three years [...]**[57]

The song's undeniable popularity among Latvian folk musicians was proven at the *Baltica* festival in 2022. During a regional concert in western Latvia, Rēvele, a Latvian diaspora folklore ensemble from Tallinn, Estonia, invited the audience to join them on the stage and sing *Ja ptychka-nevelychka* together, thereby expressing their support for Ukrainians. In total, 14 folklore ensembles participated in the concert, and following an invitation by Rēvele ensemble leader Laura Šmideberga, singers from various Latvian folklore ensembles did not hesitate in taking to the stage, uniting in a solidarity choir of approximately 40 singers (Figure 4).[58]

FOLLOWING INITIATIVES including traditional Ukrainian music, the next most popular type of initiative is that of events involving support for Ukraine. Alongside song-related activities, traditional dance events have been a relatively common platform to achieve this goal. As the dance community in Latvia, especially in Riga, is quite strong, I was able to gather information about 14 different initiatives involving or based on folk dances. Most of them were dance evenings dedicated specifically to supporting Ukraine. Riga Folk Dance Club (*Rīgas danču klubs*) has been one of the ensembles that, together with its partners, has also continued supporting Ukraine after 2022. The dance club, together with the youth folklore ensemble Kokle, cooperated for a series of events and from December 2022 to March 2023 carried out four events[59] in which participants were invited to join workshops for making trench candles and masking nets that were later sent to Ukraine (Figures 1 and 3). The workshops were followed by dancing. These and many other events' admission has been by donation. By changing the approach to charging admission fees to donations, several thousand euros have been collected during the annual International Ģikši Dance Night (*Ģikšu danču nakts*) event over the last three years (2024–2026) and were later transferred for the purchase of drones. Every year the event brings together various folklore ensembles from Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and other countries. The organizers are KasTe, an active NGO that consists of folklore musicians and craftspeople. In 2025 and 2026, the NGO also held Ukrainian

dance masterclasses led by Ukrainian music ensembles that later played at the dance night.[60] In music concerts, the format of charging an entrance fee as a donation to Ukraine has also become a way of giving support.[61] The ancient battle ensemble Vilkači has become one of the most active Latvian folklore ensembles supporting Ukraine. The ensemble gathers civically active men, who mainly research and perform the music of Latvian ancient warriors, and some of their events have been dedicated to supporting Ukraine, asking for donations instead of an admission fee. Since 2022, for four years already now, Vilkači have integrated a message of support into their annual Independence Day concerts, and every year they collect a couple of thousands of euros in donations that are later sent to defenders of Ukraine in the form of Christmas gifts and supplies.[62]

Undoubtedly, the initiatives examined in this publication, among other global efforts dedicated to supporting Ukraine, spiked right after the full-scale invasion in 2022, remaining regular and popular during the first year. Based on data from social media and on initiatives I have personally learned about from other sources, since 2023 there have been less than 10 activities taking place in Latvia every year that are directly connected to supporting Ukrainians. If we try to link these occurrences with the processes of Latvian folklore revitalization in the 20th century, it should be noted that a large proportion of the initiatives listed were initiated and implemented by younger generations of Latvian folklore musicians. But revitalizers, who since the turn of the 1970s/1980s have fought for the preservation of their ethnic culture and tried to free their heritage from the influence of the occupying power, have also been involved in protests, fundraising, learning about Ukrainian culture, and expressing solidarity in other ways. One such example is the post-folk band Iļģi – a group whose members Ilga Reizniece and Māris Muktupāvels were among the most influential figures in the folklore movement. Iļģi began as a folklore ensemble striving for authenticity but later chose a different creative direction, starting to create their own folk music arrangements. Reizniece was also the first to define and adopt the post-folklore genre, using it to describe the practice of Iļģi.[63] On March 9, 2022, the band published a video of a Latvian lullaby wishing the Ukrainian children sweet dreams and a bright future.[64]

ALTHOUGH THE MOTIVATION behind all the activities discussed here has come from the urge to support Ukraine during the ongoing war, these acts of solidarity are also linked to Latvians' own grim experience of Russian imperialism, and through them an unambiguous desire to continue living in a democracy has been expressed. Protest actions such as demonstrations on February 24 and gatherings condemning Russian aggression in front of the Russian embassy are accompanied by Latvian flags, and in general a new wave of patriotism has swept through Latvian society following the outbreak of the war. New domestic political circumstances have recently emerged in Latvia, causing significant resistance within society. In the fall of 2025, the Saeima, the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia, began a populistic process – presumably in preparation for the next parliamentary elections in the fall of 2026 – of denouncing the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (widely known as the Istanbul Convention), voting to exit it on October 30.[65] This process sparked protests. On November 3, the decision was suspended by the President of the Republic of Latvia Edgars Rinkēvičs, who asked the Parliament to reconsider the law and defer it to the next Saeima.[66] Despite this decision, the public still mobilized, and on November 6, in the capital of Riga, various regional Latvian towns, and diaspora communities such as London, Paris, Brussels, Toronto, Washington and others,[67] a large protest was carried out under the slogan "Nosargāsim Māti Latviju" [Let's Protect Mother Latvia]. According to official records, the protest in Riga gathered at least 10,000 people, making it the biggest public demonstration in Latvia since 2007.[68] Among the messages conveyed in various formats, stating that the Saeima vote would not be forgotten before the next parliamentary elections in the fall of 2026, people also included elements of folklore in their protest posters and integrated traditional symbols into their clothing, with some arriving in full traditional costumes.[69] By focusing on the aspect of singing, the protest on November 6 was also an event that united the protesters in song. The central repertoire, compiled by the protest organizers, included both original songs promoting the idea of national independence and several Latvian folk songs.[70] Musicians and whole Latvian folklore ensembles also took part in these protests; songs that carried a message of resistance in the 1980s were adapted to the context of the current political tensions, with those involved compiling and applying satirical lyrics about specific political forces in the form of folk songs and even uniting in submitting an official letter to the president asking him not to support the parliament's decision.[71]

"MUSICIANS AND WHOLE LATVIAN FOLKLORE ENSEMBLES ALSO TOOK PART IN THESE PROTESTS; SONGS THAT CARRIED A MESSAGE OF RESISTANCE IN THE 1980S WERE ADAPTED TO THE CONTEXT OF THE CURRENT POLITICAL TENSIONS."

Conclusions

Rooted in the experience of the 20th century revitalization movement, the community of folklore musicians and enthusiasts in Latvia today is a dynamic group that becomes civically active in situations where culture is threatened, and which expresses its condemnation of aggression. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has subsequently sparked strong sympathy and unity within the community, which seeks to provide both

solidarity and practical support. If these developments are compared to the 20th-century folklore movement, today's events can thus be said to have taken on a broader character linked to international politics. The previous experience with the Soviet occupation, which degraded local heritage, is a unifying aspect for Latvian and Ukrainian people. Since the outbreak of the war, Latvian folklore musicians have become increasingly interested in learning about Ukrainian culture, especially studying traditional songs, thus creating a link to the revitalization of unarranged traditional music within the folklore movement in Latvia from the 1970s to the 1990s. Recontextualizing Ukrainian folk songs as symbols of support and performing them in concerts has turned into one of the most popular forms of expressing solidarity among Latvian folklore revivalists and enthusiasts. They have united in various other support activities, whose intensity has declined but which nevertheless remain regular. These activities involve not only revitalizers, who have been involved in folklore since the 1970s, but also the younger generation. But since the fall of 2025, the role of folklore in unity and civic engagement has become particularly relevant in the context of domestic policy, due to local challenges in the political arena. Part of the community of Latvian folklore musicians and enthusiasts has come together, expressing its opposition to domestic populists in the Latvian Parliament both in a formal way as well as through its cultural heritage – adapting the folk music repertoire to the current context of political resistance.

Ilga Vālodze Ābelkina is a Research Assistant at the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia.

Acknowledgement: This research is financed by the Recovery and Resilience Facility project Internal and External Consolidation of the University of Latvia (No. 5.2.1.1.i.0/2/24/I/CFLA/007).

references

1 The concept of revitalization was first proposed by the American anthropologist Anthony Wallace in his 1956 article "Revitalization Movements" (*American Anthropologist*, vol. 58, no. 2 (1956), 264–281.) explaining it as a "deliberate, organized, con-scious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture.", 265.

2 Madara Bērtiņa, "Soviet-glorifying street names still plentiful in Latvia", *Latvian Public Media*, July 8, 2024. Accessed March 30, 2026. Available at: https://eng.lsm.lv/article/culture/history/08.07.2024-soviet-glorifying-street-names-still-plentiful-in-latvia.a560624/

3 "Largest Soviet monument in Baltics dismantled in Riga", *The Baltic Times*, August 26, 2022. Accessed February 18, 2026. Available at: https://www.baltictimes.com/largest_soviet_monument_in_baltics_dismantled_in_riga/

4 "Saeima supports transition to Latvian as the only language of instruction", *Latvian Republic Saeima*, September 29, 2022. Accessed March 24, 2026. Available at: https://www.saeima.lv/en/news/saeima-news/31457-saeima-supports-transition-to-latvian-as-the-only-language-of-instruction

5 "Wales Summit Declaration", *NATO*, September 5, 2014. Accessed February 17, 2026. Available at: https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2014/09/05/wales-summit-declaration

6 "Government approves #Budget2026 – A budget for a more secure future", Ministry of Finance Latvia, October, 14, 2025. Accessed December 30, 2025. Available at: https://www.fm.gov.lv/en/article/government-approves-budget2026-budget-more-secure-future

7 Among the most visible initiatives are volunteer car donation and delivery action "Twitter Convoy", a fundraising initiative that provides necessary supplies for the Armed Forces of Ukraine "Stopify", both moderated through the online platform www.ziedot.lv and a fundraising campaign organized by entrepreneurs "Uzņēmēji mieram" (www.uznemejimieram.lv).

8 Rita Grīnvalde, "Zili dzeltenā Rīga", *Letonica*, no. 54 (2024): 30-54.

9 Valdis Muktupāvels, "Vispārējo latviešu dziesmu (un deju) svētku tradīcijas vēsture" [The History of the General Latvian Song (and Dance) Festival Tradition] in *Dziesmu un deju svētki. Tradīcijas anatomija*]Song and Dance Festival. Anatomy of a Tradition] (Rīga: Jāņa Rozes apgāds, 2018), 66.

10 In Latvia as a country of population under two million, the XXVI Latvian Song and XVI Dance Celebration in 2018 brought together 43 219 participants, which until today is the largest number in the history of the event. Hermane, *Dziesmu un deju svētku process skaitļos*, 305.

11 Guntis Šmidchens, *Dziesmu vara* [The power of songs] (Rīga: Mansards, 2017), 398.

12 Anthony Wallace "Revitalization Movements", *American Anthropologist*, vol. 58, no. 2, 265; Juniper Hill, Caroline Bithell, "An Introduction to Music Revival as Concept, Cultural Process, and Medium of Change", *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

13 Juniper Hill, Caroline Bithell, "An Introduction to Music Revival as Concept, Cultural Process, and Medium of Change", *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 11–12.

14 Ķencis, *Vācot padomju folklore* [Collecting Soviet folklore], 21–25.

15 Martin Boiko, "The Latvian Folk Music Movement in the 1980s and 1990s: From 'Authenticity' to 'Postfolklore' and Onwards", *The World of Music*, vol. 43, no. 2/3 (2001): 113–114.

16 One of the guiding principles of Soviet cultural policy was that "art belongs to the people", and it became a popular slogan in the USSR (Egge Kulbok-Lattik "Art belongs to people!" The Soviet cultural policy and Estonian community houses", *Culture Crossroads*, vol. 9 (2016): 107.

17 Arnolds Klotiņš, "The Latvian Neo-Folklore Movement and the Political Changes of the Late 20th Century.", *The World of Music*, vol. 44 no. 3, (2002): 111.

18 In some cases, attempts had already been made to focus on a more ancient layer of folklore – see Vilis Bendorfs, *Es nedevu nevienam savu dziesmu sarežģīt* [I didn't let anyone complicate my song], (Rīga: Zinātne, 2021), 219–220 – but most of researchers of the Latvian folklore revitalization have identified as certain starting point for the folklore movement – a concert at the Dailes Theatre in Riga on October 14, 1978 organized by The Folklore Sector of the Institute of Language and Literature at the Latvian SSR Academy of Science to reflect on the 30th folklore expedition. More on this: Grīnvalde, "Latvian Folklorists in Late Socialism: Within the Workplace", *Letonica*, no. 42 (2021): 48–49.

19 Boiko, "The Latvian Folk Music Movement in the 1980s and 1990s: From 'Authenticity' to 'Postfolklore' and Onwards", 114.

20 Digne Ūdre-Lielbārde, "Visualizing cultural opposition: Folklore movement in late Soviet Latvia", *Letonica*, vol. 57 (2025): 84.

21 For more on this see Ābelkina, "International Folklore Festival Baltica '88: the Return of Latvian Folk Music from Exile", *Letonica*, no. 57 (2025): 315–317.

22 Ieva Weaver et al, "The Power of Authorities, Interpretations, and Songs: The Discourse of Authenticity in the Latvian Folklore Revival", *Traditiones*, vol. 52 no. 2 (2023): 48.

23 Boiko, "The Latvian Folk Music Movement in the 1980s and 1990s: From 'Authenticity' to 'Postfolklore' and Onwards", 114.

24 Helmī Stalte, *Sadziedāsim! Latviešu tautas dziesmas un rotaļas* [Let's sing! Latvian folk songs and games], (Rīga: E. Melngaiļa Republic Folk Art and Cultural Education Scientific Methodological Center), 3.

25 Bithell Hill, "An introduction to music revival as concept, cultural process, and medium of change", 28.

26 Anthony F.C., Wallace, "Revitalization Movements", *American Anthropologist*, vol. 58, no. 2 (1956): 275.

27 The precise number can not be determined because not all of the folk ensembles operate within the structure of supervised cultural institutions. However, in 2021 Latvian National Centre for Culture was monitoring 281 ensembles. These statistics include six ensembles in Latvian diaspora as well as folklore ensembles of ethnic minorities. Accessed February 10, 2026. Available at: https://www.lnkc.gov.lv/lv/folklora

28 Agnese Treimane, *Grupu darbība tradicionālās kultūras jomā* [Group activities in the field of traditional culture], 9.

29 David Hayano, "Auto-Ethnography: Paradigms, Problems, and Prospects", *Human Organization*, vol. 38 no. 1 (1979): 99–101.

30 Tetiana Novytska, "Як проводжали до війська рекрутів в Україні. Розповідає етномузикологиня Анна Коломицева" [How recruits were escorted to the army in Ukraine. Ethnomusicologist Anna Kolomytseva tells the story], *The Claquers*, October 29, 2025. Accessed February 17, 2026. Available at: https://theclaquers.com/posts/15837

31 https://www.instagram.com/reels/C7U3ddbouVP/ Accessed April 2, 2026.

32 "Сакральне в житті українського війська: ритуали, нова міфологія, переосмислення традицій" [The sacred in the life of the Ukrainian army: rituals, new mythology, rethinking of traditions], *Youtube*, February 26, 2026. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tzu9edau4ao Accessed March 31, 2026.

33 Inna Shvorak, "*Folk* music (post)revival in (re)invented Ukrainian military funerals", *Baltic Worlds*, vol. 18 no. 3. (2025): 73–81. Available at: https://balticworlds.com/folk-music-postrevival-in-reinvented-ukrainian-military-funeral-a-research-note-on-wartime-ritual-practice/

34 Anna Schwenck, Aleksej Tikhonov & David-Emil Wickström, guest eds., "Sounds in times of war. Popular music, (contentious) politics and social change since Russia's war on Ukraine", *Baltic Worlds*, Special Issue vol. 18 no.3 (2025). Available at: https://balticworlds.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/BW_3_2025_OCT_FINAL.pdf

35 Inna Shvorak (2025), 77–79.

36 *Facebook* group *Ukrainas atbalsta aktivitātes kultūras pasākumu ietvaros. Arhīvs* [Ukraine's support activities within the framework of cultural events. Archive], https://www.facebook.com/groups/ukrainasatbalstakaktivitasukratuve.

37 Researcher's diary is a form of autoethnographic writing suggested by the method developers such as Carolyn Ellis and Tony E. Bochner, "Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: researcher as subject", *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2011), 733–768.

38 In September 2022, society "Tavi draugi" organizes masterclasses in Latvian seasonal rites and traditional dances carried out by folklore revivalists, https://www.facebook.com/groups/ukrainasatbalstakaktivitasukratuve/permalink/428764902656770/ Accessed April 2, 2026.

39 Folklore ensemble *Upīte* invites Ukrainian folklore musicians, singers and dancers to join their collective, https://www.facebook.com/groups/ukrainasatbalstakaktivitasukratuve/posts/309423181257610/ Accessed March 31, 2026.

40 Folklore ensemble *Senleja* is learning Ukrainian Ukrainian folk songs, https://www.facebook.com/groups/ukrainasatbalstakaktivitasukratuve/posts/309333074599954/ Accessed March 31, 2026.

41 "Latviešu tautasdziesmas", https://enciklopedija.lv/skirklis/52758-latvie%C5%A1u-tautasdziesmas Accessed April 2, 2026.

42 On 1st of March folk ensemble "Banga" announced a singing protest, publishing a song lyrics document, in which *Tumsa, tumsa* was one of the first songs in the sequence. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1OVMIMHeF-EZ8sbK44TkJU8TEiObZMtmeU-IUSXnGvI0/edit?tab=t.0 Accessed February 17, 2026.

43 https://www.facebook.com/604937840/videos/pcb.10159991023287841/4646567458785574 Accessed February 17, 2026.

44 https://www.facebook.com/Vilkaci/posts/pfbid02M9ndDPn9LrAPABmPpEcx8fKzhckpNHiP2cdvgcM4qzk6WtZxLqHNkzgxEDvCDk7Rl; https://www.facebook.com/bangafolk/posts/pfbid02Uimaabr5Rs3zBjo2PR3VjFS8VLjgDcvfkSdGeaQ1qNTQdN4BWN1G7DtPbA9SZ1ALl; https://www.facebook.com/daina.zalane/posts/pfbid0BUSy4uLixPUfP71KJmA4ZjsDLkHHsynYKBDgXemEhHpj2yACNgnepc3k4MP2w6cul; https://www.facebook.com/iveta.tale/posts/pfbid0xpqhnqvKhtR5NHJJVxXDvqY9NqotaaMwEhChuVsjuCCqHQDKriinXDn6gSG7xiipl; https://www.facebook.com/groups/ukrainasatbalstakaktivitasukratuve/posts/310096947856900/ Accessed April 2, 2026.

45 Grīnvalde, "Zili dzeltenā Rīga", 50.

46 In 2022, Latvian dance ensemble "Dandari" posted a video of themselves dancing a Ukrainian dance (https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3095436404029135 Accessed April 2, 2026 and in 2026, the program of Ķikši dance night 2026 involved Ukrainian dance workshops (https://www.facebook.com/RozuKasTe/posts/pfbid04J595BDwmsCqpj6kkMev6ZnZVhiiUw8cC9c5GYgQyF2bNXVctzLtP2P3fDpEkyAl Accessed April 2, 2026)

47 https://www.facebook.com/groups/ukrainasatbalstakaktivitasukratuve/permalink/331274432405818/ Accessed April 2, 2026.

48 American Latvian folklorist Guntis Šmidchens has delivered a significant research on this topic in his monograph, *Dziesmu vara* (2017).

49 Such examples are Family folklore studio "Garataka", who released a Ukrainian song "Koļa" in their album "Izmeklētas meldijas un tādā garā" (Lauska, 2023) and Folklore and ancient battle ensemble "Vilkači" with a song "Kopav, kopav krynyche`ku" (Копав, копав криничень`ку) included in album "Ķezbierēs" (Lauska, 2024).

50 #FKUpīte - Marička, https://www.upite.lv/jaunumi/params/post/4452731/fkupite---maricka Accessed February 17, 2026.

51 https://www.facebook.com/groups/ukrainasatbalstakaktivitasukratuve/permalink/331028862430375/; https://www.facebook.com/janis.jasjukevics/videos/1126190528230231/; https://www.facebook.com/groups/ukrainasatbalstakaktivitasukratuve/permalink/427843319415595/; https://www.facebook.com/groups/ukrainasatbalstakaktivitasukratuve/permalink/454578073408786/ Accessed April 2, 2026.

52 https://www.facebook.com/groups/ukrainasatbalstakaktivitasukratuve/permalink/309338884599373/; https://www.facebook.com/100006261520041/videos/1757336084608896/ Accessed April 2, 2026.

53 "Ielīgošanas un Jāņu pasākumi Rīgā 2022", https://kultura.riga.lv/lv/kultura?target=news_item&news_item=ieligosanas-un-janu-pasakumi-riga-2022-9415 Acessed February 17, 2026.

54 https://www.facebook.com/100012704223603/videos/1872773903075533/ Accessed February 17, 2026.

55 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHeZBsR-j_0 Accessed February 18, 2026.

56 Boņuks 2021. Latgaliešu kultūras gada balvas pasniegšanas ceremonija, https://replay.lsm.lv/lv/skaties/ieraksts/ltv/254895/bonuks-2021-latgaliesu-kulturas-gada-balvas-pasniegsanas-ceremonija Accessed February 18, 2026.

57 https://www.facebook.com/daina.zalane/posts/pfbid05e5BdXCrudbQvdxisfBBWwMwFaJiuLsvyNESGxCe1B7cQBBHwQ11KuZpXVUpiy3vl Accessed April 2, 2026.

58 A video from the solidarity act has been published on Facebook and until March 2026 has been viewed 8,9 thousand times. https://www.facebook.com/reel/564208035182491 Accessed March 24, 2026.

59 https://www.facebook.com/groups/ukrainasatbalstakaktivitasukratuve/permalink/309381547928440/; https://www.facebook.com/dina.liepa.7/posts/pfbid02gyswXgtk14bTreouXCeaAkmmPYfeAreWYKc8S1m7LirxTP5XFitLMDWGjp2EtzB9l; https://www.facebook.com/events/575701530779608/; https://www.facebook.com/events/947193696693860/ Accessed April 2, 2026.

60 Ģikšu danču nakts, https://www.facebook.com/GiksiDanceNight/ Accessed February 17, 2026.

61 Some of such examples, which were reposted in the Facebook group of Ukraine's support activities' archive, include folklore ensembles "Banga" (https://www.facebook.com/groups/ukrainasatbalstakaktivitasukratuve/permalink/344383187761609/ Accessed April 2, 2026) and "Saucējas" (https://www.facebook.com/groups/ukrainasatbalstakaktivitasukratuve/posts/481228714077055/ Accessed April 2, 2026).

62 https://www.facebook.com/reel/1231402925525441/ Accessed February 17, 2026.

63 Mārtiņš Boiko, "No autentiskuma uz postfolkloru un tālāk. Folkloras kustība 80.-90. gados" [From authenticity to post-folklore and beyond. The folklore movement in the 1980s-1990s], *Mūzikas Saule*, no. 5 (2001), 23.

64 https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=697314678172461 Accessed February 17, 2026.

65 "Draft law on Latvia's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention returned to the Foreign Affairs Committee for reconsideration", the official webpage of the Saeima, accessed February 16, 2026, https://www.saeima.lv/aktualitates/saeimas-zinas/35190-draft-law-on-latvia-s-withdrawal-from-the-istanbul-convention-returned-to-the-foreign-affairs-committee-for-reconsideration.

66 "The President requests the Saeima to reconsider the Law "On withdrawal from the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence", the official website of the President of the Republic of Latvia, November 3, 2025. Accessed February 16, 2026. Available at: https://www.president.lv/en/article/president-requests-saeima-reconsider-law-withdrawal-council-europe-convention-preventing-and-combating-violence-against-women-and-domestic-violence.

67 "Diaspora also rallied Thursday against Latvia exiting Istanbul Convention", Official news portal of Latvian Radio and Latvian Television, November 7, 2025. Accessed February 16, 2026. Available at: https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/latvians-abroad/07.11.2025-diaspora-also-rallied-thursday-against-latvia-exiting-istanbul-convention.a621525/.

68 "Caurie lietussargi", August 17, 2010. Accessed February 18, 2026. Available at: https://providus.lv/raksti/caurie-lietussargi/

69 "VIDEO: Vismaz 10 000 cilvēku Doma laukumā protestē pret Latvijas izstāšanos no Stambulas konvencijas" [VIDEO: At least 10,000 people protest in Dome Square against Latvia's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention], *Latvijas Sabiedriskais Medijs*, November 6, 2025. Accessed April 2, 2026. Available at: https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/06.11.2025-video-vismaz-10-000-cilveku-doma-laukuma-protestepret-latvijas-izstasanos-no-stambulas-konvencijas.a621286/

70 Information about the protest and song repertoire, https://www.facebook.com/CentrsMARTA/posts/pfbid0icrHxx5rzwCUYN7BFw87CZPnBwinFddi9eye485s6UxTLi1mg4mPkj14B8k66hhBl Accessed April 2, 2026.

71 ""Tradīcijas nav aizsegs vardarbībai": Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga un vairāk nekā 400 folkloristi un tradīciju kopēji aicina prezidentu aizstāvēt Stambulas konvenciju" ["Tradition is not a cover for violence": Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga and more than 400 folklorists and tradition lovers call on the president to defend the Istanbul Convention"], *Sejas*, November 3, 2025. Accessed February 18, 2026. Available at: https://sejas.tvnet.lv/8354891/tradicijas-nav-aizsegs-vardarbibai-vaira-vike-freiberga-un-vairak-neka-400-folkloristi-un-tradiciju-kopeji-aicina-prezidentu-aizstavet-stambulas-konvenciju



New classrooms were inaugurated in the Railway Lyceum's bomb shelter in Kharkiv city in February 2025. PHOTO: TETIANA KURAS/ UNHCR

Resilience of school infrastructure

Children's right to education in wartime Ukraine

by **Ilona Kostikova**, **Volodymyr Borysov**, **Tamila Shcheblykina**, **Maryna Vasylieva**, and **Olha Pochuieva**

abstract

This essay examines innovative educational adaptations implemented in Kharkiv to ensure children's right to education, considered as a manifestation of resilience in wartime. The research methodology employed a descriptive case study approach utilizing multiple data sources to ensure triangulation, including official reports from educational authorities; press releases; Ukrainian and foreign mass media platforms; documented observations of facilities and stakeholder testimonials; and personal notes, videos, and photos. The results indicate the interventions successfully provided safe learning environments for approximately 15,000 schoolchildren (30% of school-aged learners) by December 2025 The experience in Kharkiv offers transferable insights for educational continuity planning in conflict zones worldwide.
KEYWORDS: Armed conflict adaptation, educational resilience, children's right to education, underground schools.

Children's right to education has faced unprecedented challenges during the Russian-Ukrainian War as the conflict has led to a humanitarian crisis with severe implications for civilian infrastructure, particularly in urban centers proximate to combat zones. Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, located merely 30 kilometers from the Russian border, has experienced particularly devastating effects on its educational infrastructure. 316 schools in the Kharkiv region are damaged and 60 completely destroyed, according to the data for January 2026.[1] According to earlier data (May 9, 2025), almost 60% of the schools in Kharkiv city were either damaged or completely destroyed. As a consequence, according to the data for May 2025, only 8,800 schoolchildren studied offline; that represents slightly over 16% of all schoolchildren living in the Kharkiv region, while all the rest studied online.[2] By December 2025, 15,000 schoolchildren (30% of school-aged learners) in Kharkiv



The aftermath of a Russian bombing of a school in Kharkiv, Ukraine in February 2022. An estimated 1 700 schools have been damaged or destroyed in Ukraine since the war started, leaving one in every third child unable to attend schol at a full time basis. PHOTO: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

learned offline. The widespread destruction of schools has left thousands of school-aged children without access to traditional learning environments.

Educational challenges in Kharkiv must be contextualized within a prolonged period of disruption. Prior to the current conflict, schoolchildren had already experienced two years of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by an additional three years of online education necessitated by the war. However, continued online education is not merely a response to physical infrastructure damage but represents a critical safety measure given the persistent threat of missile attacks. With Russian missiles capable of reaching Kharkiv within approximately 30 seconds, conventional above-ground educational facilities present unacceptable security risks for schoolchildren and educational personnel.

EFFORTS BY EDUCATORS to fulfil children's right to education during the war in Kharkiv represent a powerful example of humanity in the post-digital era of education – a context where technological solutions for remote learning exist, even if they cannot fully replace the essential human elements of education. This tension between digital capability and human necessity forms a critical backdrop for understanding the significance of underground educational infrastructure development. While digital platforms provided immediate continuity during the initial stages of the conflict, the community's determination to establish face-to-face learning environments despite extraordinary challenges demonstrates a profound recognition of education's social and developmental dimensions.

The post-digital educational context in Ukraine is particularly complex, as it follows directly from pandemic-related disruptions that had already stretched the limits of digital learning modalities. Research prior to the conflict had already identified concerns about the psychosocial impacts of extended online learning, including decreased learner engagement, limited peer interaction, and challenges in maintaining educational quality. These existing concerns were magnified by the conflict's onset, creating an urgent need for solutions that could address both safety requirements and holistic educational needs.

"EDUCATIONAL RESILIENCE ENCOMPASSES BOTH INSTITUTIONAL ADAPTABILITY AND COMMUNITY DETERMINATION TO MAINTAIN EDUCATIONAL CONTINUITY."

EDUCATIONAL RESILIENCE provides a valuable theoretical framework for examining Kharkiv's response to the disruptions to education caused by the conflict. Educational resilience encompasses both institutional adaptability and community determination to maintain educational continuity. This framework helps contextualize Kharkiv's underground educational initiatives not merely as tactical responses to immediate safety concerns but as strategic manifestations of systemic resilience.

Several dimensions of educational resilience can be identified that are particularly relevant to the situation in Kharkiv:

- Adaptive capacity: the ability to modify structures and processes in response to changing circumstances

- Resource mobilization: effective utilization of available resources and infrastructure
- Community participation: engagement of multiple stakeholders in developing and implementing solutions
- Cultural relevance: ensuring adaptations respect and reinforce cultural identity and values
- These dimensions provide the analytical lenses for examining Kharkiv's educational adaptations, particularly the repurposing of underground infrastructure for educational use.

Literature review

The researchers Bezkrovniy[3] and Derkachova[4] have conducted in-depth analyses of the legal regulation of the right to education in Ukraine, with particular attention to its preservation and enforcement amid wartime conditions. Their work offers critical insights into the legislative framework governing education and its practical implementation during periods of armed conflict. Complementing these contributions, Romanova[5] examined the theoretical and juridical foundations of the right to education in times of war, focusing on key challenges affecting its realization under the constraints imposed by military aggression. Expanding upon this foundation, Tereshchenko[6] explored the exercise of educational rights under martial law in Ukraine, emphasizing the urgency of protecting access to education for all social groups and delineating the complex obstacles faced by the Ukrainian academic community in ensuring educational continuity.

Beyond the Ukrainian national legal context, scholarly inquiry has increasingly turned to the role of international actors in mitigating educational disruptions during crises. Iliichuk et al.[7] presented a detailed examination of policy frameworks and strategic recommendations issued by international organizations committed to safeguarding educational access, quality, and equity in emergency settings. Similarly, Zayachuk[8] analyzed the broader implications of international assistance in addressing Ukraine's educational challenges, situating this support within the paradigm of the Sustainable Development Goals.

FURTHERMORE, Nestulya et al.[9] highlighted international cooperation as an essential instrument for alleviating financial volatility in the educational sector, fostering scientific progress, stabilizing higher education institutions, and promoting the dissemination of best practices in university governance. Their research also underscored the significance of youth engagement through career-oriented programs and student-led initiatives, as a strategy for enhancing institutional resilience and adaptability.

In parallel, the systemic effects of the war on Ukraine's educational infrastructure have been rigorously assessed by Sibruk et al.,[10] who emphasized the pivotal role of educators in cultivating students' academic competencies amid crises. In particular, educators have emerged as both facilitators of learning and providers of psychological support, enabling students to maintain the development of essential skills despite the challenges posed by ongoing hostilities.

During the war in Ukraine, the right to education continues to be realized primarily through the expansion and adaptation of online learning.[11] Building upon the experience gained during the COVID-19 pandemic, Ukrainian universities have maintained access to education by integrating digital platforms such as *Moodle*, *Zoom*, *Microsoft Teams*, and institutional systems like the Educational Electronic Information Complex.[12] These tools enable skill development and provide flexibility in learning, particularly benefiting students with high motivation. Online education has proven effective in preserving instructional continuity, although researchers emphasize the importance of balancing online and offline elements to foster meaningful communication and engagement.[13]

PAPERS WRITTEN by researchers outside Ukraine[14] offer a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of the legal, institutional, and international dimensions of the right to education during wartime elsewhere in the world. All studies collectively highlight the imperative for robust legal safeguards, sustained international cooperation, and adaptive educational strategies to uphold the right to education under conditions of armed conflict.

"DURING THE WAR IN UKRAINE, THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION CONTINUES TO BE REALIZED PRIMARILY THROUGH THE EXPANSION AND ADAPTATION OF ONLINE LEARNING."

Nonetheless, a critical gap remains in the existing literature concerning the emergence of underground educational institutions, particularly in Kharkiv, as an innovative response to wartime constraints. The research presented in this paper seeks to address this lacuna by examining the phenomenon of underground education as a novel mechanism for ensuring educational continuity in times of war.

This research aims to document and analyze the innovative educational infrastructure adaptations implemented in Kharkiv, Ukraine, during the Russian-Ukrainian War, with particular attention to their humanitarian dimensions. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. document the establishment, operational framework, and physical organization of the Metroschool initiative and educational facilities of underground schools;
2. analyze the logistical, security, and pedagogical considerations that shaped these educational adaptations;
3. evaluate the effectiveness and limitations of these initiatives in providing educational continuity during armed conflict;
4. examine how these adaptations reflect broader humanistic values and commitments in post-digital education;
5. consider the broader implications of Kharkiv's experience for educational resilience planning in conflict-affected regions globally.

THIS RESEARCH CARRIES significance for multiple domains. For educational policy and practice in conflict zones, it offers documented evidence of innovative approaches to maintaining educational continuity under extreme or wartime conditions. For humanitarian response frameworks, it provides insights into how educational needs can be addressed alongside other emergency or war provisions. From a theoretical perspective, it contributes to scholarship on educational resilience by examining existing manifestations of adaptive capacity in a complex crisis or war context.

Methods and materials

This research employs a descriptive case study methodology to comprehensively examine Kharkiv's educational adaptations during wartime conditions. The case study approach is particularly appropriate when examining contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts. The unique nature of Kharkiv's underground educational adaptations, deeply embedded within specific geopolitical and cultural contexts, makes case study methodology an appropriate choice.

The research utilizes a single-case embedded design, with the Kharkiv educational system constituting the primary case and underground educational initiatives such as the *Metroschool* and purpose-built underground schools representing embedded units of analysis. This approach facilitates detailed examination of specific adaptations while maintaining attention to the broader systemic context.

The descriptive analysis method was also used. The study provides detailed descriptions of the challenges, solutions, and outcomes of educational adaptations during wartime. In addition, the qualitative research method was also used. The authors share their insights in the capacity of being researchers, university professors, and Kharkiv residents, incorporating their observations in doing firsthand interpretations.

DATA COLLECTION involved multiple sources to ensure methodological triangulation, such as: official reports and statistical data from Kharkiv City Council's Department of Education (2023–25); press releases and public statements from the municipal city authorities (2023–25); documented observations of Metroschool and underground school facilities (2023–25); mass media from Ukrainian platforms *UkrInform*, *Suspilne*, *DumkaMedia*, *Ukrainska Pravda*, *KharkivOsvita*, and *CurrentTime* and foreign platforms such as *Euronews*, *Deutsche Welle*, *CNN*, etc.; and testimonials from educational stakeholders (teachers, administrators, parents, students), collected through public statements and from personal recordings and videos.

The collected data underwent thematic analysis to identify key patterns related to infrastructure development, operational frameworks, security protocols, and pedagogical adaptations. This approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of both the technical implementation of underground educational facilities and their socio-emotional impact on educational communities.

Analysis proceeded through several stages. A categorization



PHOTO: IHOR TEREKHOV/MAYOR OF KHARKIV

Metroschool classroom.



PHOTO: OLEG SINEGUBOV/KHARKIV OVA



PHOTO: IHOR TEREKHOV/MAYOR OF KHARKIV

The first totally underground school in Kharkiv.

of themes was carried out according to technical, operational, pedagogical, and humanitarian dimensions, after which a comprehensive framework was developed for understanding the multiple dimensions of underground educational initiatives.

A limitation of this methodology is its focus on descriptive documentation rather than longitudinal assessment of educational outcomes. Ethical considerations included ensuring appropriate attribution of the sources while maintaining confidentiality for individual stakeholders where appropriate. The researchers' position as both academic investigators and community members required ongoing reflexivity to balance insider knowledge with analytical objectivity.

Findings

After the war began, understanding that schoolchildren need socializing, parents, teachers, and city authorities came up with the unique idea of opening classes in the city's underground subway. In September 2023, the so-called *Metroschool* solution was launched as the response to the destruction of educational infrastructure. This program repurposed sections of the city's subway system to create safe learning environments while maintaining essential transportation functions. Key features of the Metroschool initiative include:

- 20 purpose-designed classrooms distributed across six metro stations
- classrooms averaging 40 square meters with capacity for 20 learners each
- strategic positioning in underground passages between stations
- implementation of ventilation systems, noise insulation, and educational technology including interactive whiteboards and projection equipment
- transformation of utilitarian spaces into child-friendly environments through decorative elements including educational materials, colorful multiplication tables, cartoon characters, and a prominent "Indestructible Kharkiv" banner
- dedicated play areas with Legos and toys for younger learners
- two-shift scheduling system operating from 09:00–12:00 and 13:00–16:00
- dedicated transportation network routes utilizing school buses
- varying attendance frequencies based on grade level (with primary school learners attending 2–3 days weekly)
- modified instructional periods (30 minutes for grades 1 and 2, 40 minutes for grade 3, 45 minutes for grades 5 and above)
- focused curriculum emphasizing core subjects (Mathematics, Ukrainian Language/Literature, History)
- on-site support personnel including medical staff, psychologists, and security officers
- daily commencement with the national anthem to maintain cultural continuity and national identity

The initiative demonstrated rapid growth, expanding from approximately 800 young learners in September 2023 to 2,200 learners by December 2025. Testimonial data from parents and teachers indicates a generally positive reception of the Metroschool initiative, despite its limitations. Parents particularly valued the safety provisions and socialization opportunities for younger students. The parents noted that there are colorful carpets and toys, and that children even have a place to go and just jump around, stating that offline learning is very necessary because it keeps a child engaged and less distracted.

Educational professionals observed improved engagement compared to online learning modalities. Teachers noted that learners are not distracted, and that a teacher can immediately see what learners do and do not understand when teaching in person. Some teachers also reported that the technological resources in the Metroschool classrooms often exceeded those available in pre-war conventional schools.

THE METROSCHOOL is a place where university students are involved in teaching practice. Pre-service teachers train to deliver lessons, while professors observe them and offer students their comments and advice. The students' teaching practice at the Metroschool was designed to provide pre-service teachers with practical classroom experience in secondary schools. The primary aim of this teaching practice is to bridge theoretical knowledge with practical teaching skills, allowing students working as pre-service teachers to observe experienced educators, analyze various teaching methodologies, and begin developing their own instructional approaches to delivering lessons.

"TESTIMONIAL DATA FROM PARENTS AND TEACHERS INDICATES A GENERALLY POSITIVE RECEPTION OF THE METROSCHOOL INITIATIVE, DESPITE ITS LIMITATIONS."

The students' teaching practice began with a location conference where pre-service teachers were provided with information regarding their placements, content expectations, and specific tasks to be completed during the practice period. Throughout the process, pre-service teachers participated in regular video conferences via the ZOOM platform, led by a head professor who reviewed daily tasks and addressed questions.

The practice took a multifaceted approach to professional development, including elements such as: classroom observations across different grade levels of young learners (particularly grades 1–2 and 3–4); analysis of experienced teachers' instructional methods; the development of lesson plans and teaching fragments; the implementation of teaching opportunities; the completion of supplementary professional development through an online course titled "School for All"; an exploration of inclusive education practices; and the preparation of a comprehensive practice report at the end of the practice.

PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS in 2025 were strategically placed in different classrooms, which provided opportunities to observe

diverse teaching approaches in the Metroschool. One notable experience involved observing a classroom operating as part of the exclusive "Intellect of Ukraine" project, offering insight into this specialized educational model. The varied placements allowed practice participants to compare and contrast different instructional methods and classroom management techniques employed by experienced educators.

Many students highlighted the value of witnessing how experienced teachers at the Metroschool balanced traditional pedagogical approaches with modern educational technologies. They observed creative tasks and game-based learning activities that effectively engaged young learners and facilitated better comprehension of academic material. An important component of the practice was the opportunity for students to deliver their own lessons, particularly in Mathematics, the Ukrainian language, and the English language. This hands-on teaching experience proved invaluable for applying previously acquired theoretical knowledge in an authentic classroom environment.

The supplementary online course "School for All" enhanced the practice experience by providing additional theoretical frameworks and practical ideas that complemented the in-classroom observations. This course appeared to focus on inclusive education practices, with participants noting that they had gained knowledge about inclusion approaches from various international contexts.

The practice generated significant professional development outcomes for the participants. Students reported:

- enhanced understanding of lesson structure and instructional design,
- practical application of theoretical knowledge previously acquired at the university,
- development of a methodological resource base through observation and analysis of different lessons,
- greater comprehension of diverse teaching techniques and approaches,
- experience in implementing various instructional methods
- improved ability to analyze Mathematics, Language, and Literature lessons,
- acquisition of a professional teaching certificate following completion of the "School for All" online course during their practice.

STUDENTS CONSISTENTLY noted the high academic achievement demonstrated by young learners at the Metroschool, suggesting that the observed teaching methods were effective in promoting learning. Beyond the professional development aspects, many students reported forming meaningful connections with the Metroschool learners. Despite the relatively short duration of the practice (several weeks), participants reported becoming "sincerely attached" to the learners and finding joy in observing their academic progress. The energy, curiosity, and enthusiasm of the young learners served as inspiration for the pre-service teachers.

Practice participants characterized the Metroschool as having a "special atmosphere" where students, teachers, and







PHOTO: MINISTRY OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS UKRAINE

School lesson in Kharkiv Metro during Russian invasion of Ukraine. 61 children of different ages study in five metro stations in Kharkiv.

young learners functioned as "one big family", characterized by mutual support. This positive school climate appears to have significantly enhanced the practice experience and provided a model for the type of learning environment a "student-teacher-learner" might aspire to create in their future classrooms. The Metroschool practice experience was consistently described as valuable, interesting, and beneficial for professional development. Pre-service teachers emphasized that the experience went beyond mere academic observation to become a real journey into the world of young learners full of indomitability and a thirst for knowledge.

The practice successfully achieved its aims by providing students with:

- exposure to diverse teaching methodologies
- opportunities for professional reflection and analysis
- practical teaching experience
- enhanced understanding of effective instructional design
- connections between educational theory and classroom practice

MANY PARTICIPANTS expressed an anticipation that future practice experiences would build upon this foundation and offer even more intensive opportunities for professional growth and discovery. The practice appears to have reinforced participants' commitment to the teaching profession while providing actual skills and experiences that will inform their future pedagogical practice.

Overall, the Metroschool practice represented a significant milestone in these pre-service teachers' professional development journey, combining structured learning experiences with authentic classroom engagement to prepare them for careers in education. Recognizing the capacity limitations of the Metroschool program, municipal authorities initiated a comprehensive underground school construction program. This unprecedented infrastructure development project included the establishment of the first dedicated underground schools in Pivnichna Saltivka and the Industrial District, areas experiencing severe shelling. Comprehensive safety provisions including reinforced construction were required in order to be able to meet the wartime protection parameters. The facilities' combined floorspace exceeds 1,000 square meters, including classrooms, dining facilities, and conference spaces, with a total capacity of approximately 900 schoolchildren, operating in two shifts. The first totally underground school in Kharkiv was opened in May 2024.

THE SECOND totally underground school in Kharkiv was built and opened in January 2025, with an initial enrollment of 750 schoolchildren. It features an enhanced design incorporating wider corridors, more spacious classrooms, and specialized inclusive education facilities, with a projected capacity of 1,000 schoolchildren upon completion of second-stage construction.

The necessity of underground schools is emphasized in many interviews. For example, nine-year-old S. says he feels safe from the bombs he's heard while studying at home:

> **[...] when it was very loud, I would either run into the corridor or hide underneath the table. Near the wall, away from the window.**

His father says:

> **The war greatly affected the development of children. The war had a great impact on education. There must be a society for children. And the children have dreamed of meeting their classmates.**

The teacher N. comments:

> **The anxiety is constant. It's always there. And as you see –constant air signals. We are constantly under stress, but we try to hold on. Of course, this is our choice. We are staying in Kharkiv, we have not gone abroad. This is our native home, our native school.**

Kharkiv Regional Prosecutor's Office S. B. states that:

> **More than one million civilians live in Kharkiv and they suffer from attacks every day. No one is safe from such strikes, as you can see that the time from the launch of the bombs to their arrival is very short and people do not have time to go to the shelter during the alarm.**[15]

Further underground schools are under construction in all city districts, with projected completion by December 2026. By October 2025, combined enrollment across all underground educational facilities including the Metroschool and five underground schools reached approximately 15,000 schoolchildren, representing approximately 30% of the estimated 50,000 school-aged children residing in Kharkiv. A consistent pattern emerged across all underground educational initiatives: the prioritization of young learners, particularly those in early primary grades. This priority allocation of limited resources reflects both pedagogical considerations regarding young learners' developmental needs and a pragmatic recognition of their greater vulnerability to educational disruption.

These opportunities for in-person education for young learners are important and valuable, as they offer them opportunities for socialization, communication, and team and pair work. Both parents and educators emphasize the particular importance of in-person learning for young learners' social and academic development. Underground educational facilities incorporate comprehensive security protocols beyond mere physical protection from missile strikes. These include the regular presence of National Police and emergency service personnel, controlled entry/exit procedures, and on-site medical and psychological support services.

The development of these protocols required collaboration between educational authorities, emergency services, and security personnel –representing a significant achievement in cross-sector coordination during crisis and war conditions.

Discussion

Kharkiv's development of underground educational infrastructure represents an unprecedented adaptation to ensure educational continuity during prolonged armed conflict. The rapid conceptualization and implementation of these facilities demonstrates remarkable organizational resilience within Kharkiv's educational system. By repurposing existing underground infrastructure while simultaneously developing purpose-built facilities, authorities have created a sustainable approach to educational continuity despite ongoing security threats.[16] This multi-tiered approach allowed for an immediate intervention with the Metroschool while also developing longer-term solutions with the dedicated underground schools. Such strategic planning reflects the key elements of systemic resilience: adaptation, transformation, and persistence in the face of war. The Kharkiv case exemplifies how educational systems can maintain their core functions while fundamentally transforming delivery mechanisms in response to external threats.

The underground educational initiatives in Kharkiv represent a profound statement about educational values in the post-digital era. Despite the available technological infrastructure for online learning –a modality necessitated during both the COVID-19 pandemic and the initial stages of the war – the community's determination to establish in-person learning environments reflects a recognition of education's irreducibly human dimensions. Several aspects of this humanistic orientation are particularly noteworthy. The consistent emphasis on socialization opportunities, particularly for young learners, demonstrates a recognition that education encompasses more than just the delivery of academic content.

WITHOUT DOUBT, offline learning keeps learners engaged and less distracted. This prioritization of interpersonal interaction represents a corrective to purely instrumental conceptions of education that can predominate during times of crisis or war. Symbolic elements incorporated into underground educational environments –including prominent "Indestructible Kharkiv" banners and the daily playing of the national anthem –reflect a commitment to maintaining cultural identity and national solidarity during the war. These elements transform underground spaces from mere safety shelters into sites of cultural preservation and transmission. The differentiated allocation of resources based on developmental needs –particularly the prioritization of young learners –reflects a humanistic attention to children's varied requirements, rather than a uniform application of technological solutions. This nuanced approach recognizes the particular vulnerability of young learners to educational disruption and prioritizes their needs accordingly.

The psychological impact of underground educational environments merits particular consideration. While primarily developed as physical safety measures, these spaces appear to provide significant psychological benefits for schoolchildren. Children describe the underground school as being better than home, indicating that these environments may offer psychological security amid ongoing conflict-related stress. Several psychological elements also appear significant. The establishment of regular schedules, consistent instructional patterns, and familiar educational rituals provide crucial elements of normalcy amid broader disruption. This routinization likely contributes to psychological stabilization for both schoolchildren and educators.

UNDERGROUND EDUCATIONAL environments provide respite from the hypervigilance required in above-ground settings, where air raid alerts and potential missile strikes create ongoing stress. By temporarily removing this stressor, underground facilities may enable more focused learning and reduced anxiety. The shared experience of underground education appears to foster community solidarity among participants. By transforming what could be experienced as degraded educational conditions into a symbol of collective resilience, the psychological framing of these facilities contributes to their effectiveness. Despite impressive adaptation efforts, significant limitations remain. Additional challenges include instructional constraints, with instructional time typically limited to 2–3 hours daily on alternating days, and a reduced curriculum scope focusing primarily on core subjects. Long-term uncertainties are the unknown psychological impacts of spending extended periods in underground educational environments and sustainability concerns regarding resource allocation for specialized infrastructure.

"CHILDREN DESCRIBE THE UNDERGROUND SCHOOL AS BEING BETTER THAN HOME, INDICATING THAT THESE ENVIRONMENTS MAY OFFER PSYCHOLOGICAL SECURITY AMID ONGOING CONFLICT-RELATED STRESS."

Kharkiv's experience offers valuable insights for educational resilience planning in other war-affected regions. Most significantly, it demonstrates how existing underground infrastructure can be rapidly repurposed for educational use –potentially a transferable approach for other urban centers with subway systems. Additionally, the phased approach to infrastructure development provides a model for progressive expansion of educational capacity despite ongoing security threats.

SEVERAL TRANSFERABLE principles emerge. The creative repurposing of existing infrastructure in the metro demonstrates how educational continuity can be maintained without requiring entirely new construction. This approach allows for rapid response while more permanent solutions are developed. The clear prioritization of young learners provides a model for allocating limited resources during war conditions, recognizing varying developmental vulnerability while maintaining some educational access across age groups.

The integration of educational, transportation, security, and health services demonstrates the importance of coordinated planning across multiple sectors when developing educational strategies for responding to war. The transformation of safety measures into symbols of resilience and cultural continuity illustrates how physical adaptations can serve psychological and social functions beyond immediate security. As researchers, university professors, and Kharkiv residents, it can be stated that the Metroschool and underground school initiative represents more than just an educational solution; it exemplifies the Ukrainian spirit of resilience and determination.

Variants of Kharkiv's Metroschool and underground schools have been established in different border cities, towns, and villages in the Zaporizhia, Dnipro, Kryvyi Rih, and Sumy regions in Ukraine. Despite the ongoing war, the community's commitment remains firm in maintaining educational standards and ensuring schoolchildren's socialization and development. This innovative approach has garnered international attention and could serve as a model for other war-affected regions. While the current situation presents significant challenges, Kharkiv's response demonstrates a clear priority: maintaining educational continuity and socialization, even in the face of fear and uncertainty.

THE CHALLENGES and potential negative consequences of underground schooling are varied. The limited capacity for accommodating schoolchildren who study face-to-face leads to reduced instructional time, typically just 2–3 hours daily on alternating days, and to a narrowed curriculum focused on core subjects. Furthermore, there are long-term uncertainties regarding the psychological impacts of prolonged periods spent in these underground environments; while they offer physical safety, the absence of natural light, fresh air, and outdoor play could affect schoolchildren's mental and physical well-being over time. The sustainability of such resource-intensive initiatives also remains a concern, particularly in the case of a prolonged conflict. These factors highlight that underground schooling, while an impressive demonstration of resilience, is only a temporary, partial solution.

A limitation of the study is its focus on descriptive documentation rather than longitudinal assessment of educational outcomes. Ethical considerations included ensuring appropriate attribution of the sources while maintaining confidentiality for individual stakeholders where appropriate. The researchers' position as both academic investigators and community members required ongoing reflexivity to balance insider knowledge with analytical objectivity. The limitations of relying on media reports, which can sometimes have positivity biases and especially during times of war, are also considered. Media may sometimes focus on the heroic aspects of resilience while downplaying the significant hardships and challenges faced by those involved.

Conclusions

Kharkiv's innovative adaptation of underground spaces for educational purposes in order to uphold the right to education represents a remarkable example of community resilience in the face of extraordinary war challenges. While these measures cannot fully replicate conventional educational experiences, they provide critical opportunities for in-person learning and socialization during the prolonged conflict.

Several key conclusions emerge from this case study. The rapid development and implementation of underground educational facilities demonstrates remarkable strategic innovation in responding to the war. By combining immediate repurposing of existing infrastructure with longer-term development of specialized underground facilities, Kharkiv's educational authorities have created a sustainable approach to maintaining educational continuity despite ongoing security threats. The prioritization of in-person teaching and learning, despite the availability of digital alternatives, reflects a deeply humanistic orientation in the approach to education. This approach recognizes that education encompasses more than just content delivery –it includes socialization, communication, teamwork, cultural transmission, and psychological support, which are difficult to replicate in purely digital environments.

"THE RAPID DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF UNDERGROUND EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES DEMONSTRATES REMARKABLE STRATEGIC INNOVATION IN RESPONDING TO THE WAR."

The successful implementation of underground educational initiatives required substantial community mobilization, including coordination between municipal authorities, educational professionals, security personnel, transportation providers, and families. This collective effort demonstrates how the war can catalyze unprecedented levels of cross-sector collaboration. While current underground educational capacity remains limited relative to total need, ongoing development plans suggest continued expansion of these facilities. The planned completion of other underground schools by December 2026 will substantially increase capacity, though full accommodation of all Kharkiv's schoolchildren remains a distant goal.

THE EXPERIENCES documented in this case study offer valuable insights for educational continuity planning aimed at upholding the right to education in war zones worldwide, demonstrating how educational systems can adapt to ensure learning continues even under the most challenging circumstances. Particularly transferable elements include approaches to infrastructure repurposing, priority allocation frameworks, and methods for transforming safety measures into psychologically

supportive environments. The case of Kharkiv's educational adaptation during wartime stands as a testament to human ingenuity and determination. As the city continues to build and expand its underground schools, it sends a powerful message to the world: Education continues despite the war. The resilience and bravery of Kharkiv's people, exemplified through initiatives like the Metroschool and underground schools, contributes to the broader narrative of Ukrainian strength and determination in the face of war.

Ilona Kostikova is a Doctor of Science in Education, holds a PhD in Philology and a PhD in Education, and is a Full Professor and Head of the Mykhailo Hetmanets Department of Theory and Practice of the English Language and Foreign Literature, H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Kharkiv, Ukraine.

Volodymyr Borysov holds a PhD in Philology and is an Associate Professor and Vice-Rector at the Department of General Linguistics and Romano-Germanic Philology, H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Kharkiv, Ukraine.

Tamila Shcheblykina is a Doctor of Science in Education and a Professor at the Department of English Philology, H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Kharkiv, Ukraine.

Maryna Vasylieva holds a PhD in Pedagogy and is an Associate Professor at the Department of English Philology, H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Kharkiv, Ukraine.

Olha Pochuieva holds a PhD in Education and is an Associate Professor at the Department of Pedagogy, Foreign Philology and Translation, Simon Kuznets Kharkiv National University of Economics, Kharkiv, Ukraine.

Acknowledgment: The research was conducted with funding within the framework of the Fellowship from the Shevchenko Scientific Society in the US, NTSh-A, 2025.

references

1 *Save Schools*, website, accessed January 19, 2026, https://saveschools.in.ua/en/.

2 O. Nagorna and O. Gorun, "Almost 60% of Kharkiv schools are damaged, how many teachers remain in the city," *Objectiv.tv*, May 9, 2025, https://www.objectiv.tv/uk/objectively/2025/05/09/majzhe-60-shkil-harkova-poshkodzheni-skilki-vchiteliv-zalishayetsya-v-misti/.

3 Y. A. Bezkrovniy, "Ensuring the Right to Education under Martial Law as the Basis of Educational Activity," *Scientific Bulletin of Uzhhorod National University. Series: Legal Sciences* vol. 82, no. 2 (2024): 103–07, https://doi.org/10.24144/2307-3322.2024.82.2.15.

4 N. Derkachova, "Legal Regulation of Education during Martial Law," *Public Law* vol. 46, no. 2 (2022): 19–25, https://doi.org/10.32782/2306-9082/2022-46-2.

5 Alona Romanova, "Education Right: Features of Realization during the War in Ukraine," *Visnik Nacional'nogo Universitetu «Lvivska Politehnika». Seria: Uridicni Nauki* vol. 10, no. 37 (2023): 113–17, https://doi.org/10.23939/law2023.37.113.

6 I. O. Tereshchenko, "The Right to Education in the Conditions of the Legal Regime of Martial State," *Analytical and Comparative Law* vol. 5 (2024): 130–34, https://doi.org/10.24144/2788-6018.2024.05.20.

7 Liubomyra Iliichuk, Oksana Tsiuniak, and Oleskii Vorobets, "Ensuring the Quality and Accessibility of Education in Times of War: Guidelines and Initiatives of the International Community," *Journal of Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University* vol. 11, no. 1 (2024): 39–49, https://doi.org/10.15330/jpnu.11.1.39-49.

8 Yuliya Zayachuk, "Ensuring Quality Higher Education in Ukraine in Times of War," *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education* vol. 31, no. 1 (2025): 135–59, https://doi.org/10.1177/14779714241270254.

9 Oleksiy Nestulya, Nataliya Pedchenko, Nataliya Karpenko, Svitlana Nestulya, and Maryna Ivannikova, "Policy of Managing the Educational Activities of the University in the Context of the Russian-Ukrainian War," *Problems and Perspectives in Management* vol. 21, no. 2 (2023): 61–66, https://doi.org/10.21511/ppm.21(2-si).2023.08.

10 Anastasiia V. Sibruk, Svitlana V. Lytvynska, Uliana P. Koshetar, et al., "Ukrainian Education System: War Challenges," *Multidisciplinary Science Journal* vol. 5 (October 2023): 2023ss0502, https://doi.org/10.31893/multiscience.2023ss0502.

11 Liudmyla Holubnycha, Tetiana Besarab, Yana Pavlishcheva, et al., "The Effectiveness of Mobile Learning Technology at the Tertiary Level During Conflicts," *International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies (iJIM)* vol. 16, no. 23 (2022): 148–60, https://doi.org/10.3991/ijim.v16i23.33793.

12 Ilona Kostikova, Liudmyla Holubnycha, Oleksandra Marmaza, Viktoriia Budianska, Olha Pochuieva, and Halyna Marykivska, "Real Country Experiences: On-Line Teaching in Wartime after Pandemic in Ukraine," *International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies (iJIM)* vol. 17, no. 3 (2023): 123–34, https://doi.org/10.3991/ijim.v17i03.36419.

13 Ilona Kostikova, Liudmyla Holubnycha, Yuliia Sytnykova, Tetiana Shchokina, Natalia Soroka, and Svitlana Tarasova, "University Teachers' Psychological State During the Stress of Online Education after Pandemic in Wartime in Ukraine," *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning (iJET)* vol. 18, no. 13 (2023): 152–62, https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v18i13.39825.

14 Sarah A. van der Horn, Thijs van Kolfschoten, Johannes van der Plicht, and Wim Z. Hoek, "The Effects of the 8.2 Ka Event on the Natural Environment of Tell Sabi Abyad, Syria: Implications for Ecosystem Resilience Studies," *Quaternary International* vol. 378 (2015): 111–18. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.quaint.2015.04.005; Sansom Milton, "Syrian Higher Education during Conflict: Survival, Protection, and Regime Security," *International Journal of Educational Development* vol. 64 (2019): 38–47, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2018.11.003; Arie Perlinger, "Most Israelis Dislike Netanyahu, but Support the War in Gaza –an Israeli Scholar Explains What's Driving Public Opinion," *The Conversation* (via *Yahoo News*), May 23, 2024, https://www.yahoo.com/news/most-israelis-dislike-netanyahu-support-123031322.html; Sara Zamir and Lea Baratz, "The Home-Leaving Experience of Gaza Envelope Residents Following the May 2021 Gaza War," *Israel Affairs* vol. 29, no. 5 (2023): 914–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2023.2247651.

15 Max Zander, "Kharkiv Opens Underground School to Escape Russian Bombs," *Deutsche Welle*, May 21, 2024. Available at: https://www.dw.com/en/kharkiv-opens-underground-school-to-escape-russian-bombs/video-69138257.

16 Sibruk et al., "Ukrainian Education System"; Tereshchenko, "The Right to Education in the Conditions of the Legal Regime of Martial State"; Zayachuk, "Ensuring Quality Higher Education in Ukraine in Times of War."

UKRAINE UPDATE; THE ATTITUDE CLIMATE IN 2026

by **Simo Mannila**

In 2018 and 2021, I wrote two articles for *Baltic Worlds* on Ukraine and the Ukrainian attitude climate in the context of the ongoing Russian attack on Ukraine, launched in 2014.[1] The empirical data used in the articles was largely taken from the website of the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), whose press releases and reports are accessible in Ukrainian, Russian, and English.[2] The KIIS surveys covered the territory governed by the Government of Ukraine before February 2022. One of the key purposes of the articles was to give the Ukrainian population a more international voice, taking into account the pro-Russian bias of the international research community as pointed out e.g. in the Kuzio-Sakwa debate.[3] Now, it may be interesting to take a new look at the attitude climate in Ukraine and how it has changed; the war has continued since 2014 and escalated in 2022, and while the international community keeps speaking about peace and security guarantees, there is no real perspective of the war ending.

ONE VERY SIGNIFICANT result of the war so far is that Ukraine has become more monolingual than it was earlier. After first annexing Crimea, which has a Russian-speaking majority (68% before the annexation), Russia also formally annexed e.g. the occupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, both of which also had Russian-speaking majorities before the war (75% and 69%, respectively).[4] As a result, Ukraine seems to have lost – this is my estimate – over 6 million Russian-speaking citizens, plus some additional number from other oblasts under Russian occupation. It deserves mentioning that the Russian attack is mainly on those people Russia claimed to be protecting, who live in Eastern Ukraine. For instance, approximately half of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ukraine come from the majority Russian-speaking regions of Kharkiv and Donetsk.[5] Most of these people define themselves as Ukrainians, since language does not define ethnicity or state loyalty in Ukraine.[6]

Ukrainians' positive attitude toward Russia started to diminish as of 2014 as a result of the war, but the share of those with a positive attitude toward the country was still a surprising 42% in 2020, equal to that of those with a negative attitude. Russians' attitude toward Ukraine underwent a very similar development, with positive attitudes slightly dominating over negative ones. This result may be explained by the fact that, when responding to the question, the people surveyed had many different things in mind: people, history, government. When asked, in 2020, about people specifically, attitudes in Ukraine toward Russians, as well as those of Russians toward Ukrainians, were largely positive, at 77% in Ukraine and 82% in Russia. Up until the full-scale attack in 2022, negative attitudes in both countries were reserved for the other country's political leadership.[7]

In the course of the war, from 2014 onward Ukraine quickly changed from a country where the population was balancing between East and West to one with a clear Western orientation, leaning toward NATO and the European Union.[8] A similar repercussion of Russia's escalation of the war in 2022 was later seen in the Nordics, where Finland and Sweden, both once staunchly neutral, joined NATO in 2023 with high levels of public support.

"ONE VERY SIGNIFICANT RESULT OF THE WAR SO FAR IS THAT UKRAINE HAS BECOME MORE MONOLINGUAL THAN IT WAS EARLIER."

Ukrainian attitudes in 2024–2025

When describing the attitude climate in today's Ukraine, I again draw on the KIIS's most recent data, supplemented with a few other sources. As before, the KIIS surveys cover the territory controlled by the Government of Ukraine, i.e. a somewhat smaller part of the country than in the earlier articles (2017, 2021).

The impact of the war is now being felt directly by a significant share of the Ukrainian population. Almost 40% experienced bombing or shelling in 2024, while 30% experienced separation from loved ones at some point during 2024–2025. The levels of stress faced by the population have increased since 2023, with only 10% reporting they experienced no stressful situations.[9] Nevertheless, most of the population are ready to endure the war as long as needed, and this share increased from 2024 to 2025. A clear majority (77%) sees Ukraine as being able to continue its resistance against Russia, and most Ukrainians do not believe that the present negotiations will bring peace.[10] When asked in 2025 whether the Russian or European-Ukrainian peace plans would be acceptable to them, 75% of respondents rejected the Russian plan, but 74% found the European-Ukrainian plan acceptable, including freezing the conflict along the present front line without legal recognition of the occupied territory for gaining international security guarantees. However, most respondents expected Russia to attack again. These results show that public readiness to accept Ukraine giving up some of its territory increased between May 2022 and October 2025 from 10% to



The impact of the war is now being felt directly by a significant share of the Ukrainian population. Almost 40% experienced bombing or shelling in 2024, while 30% experienced separation from loved ones at some point during 2024–2025.

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

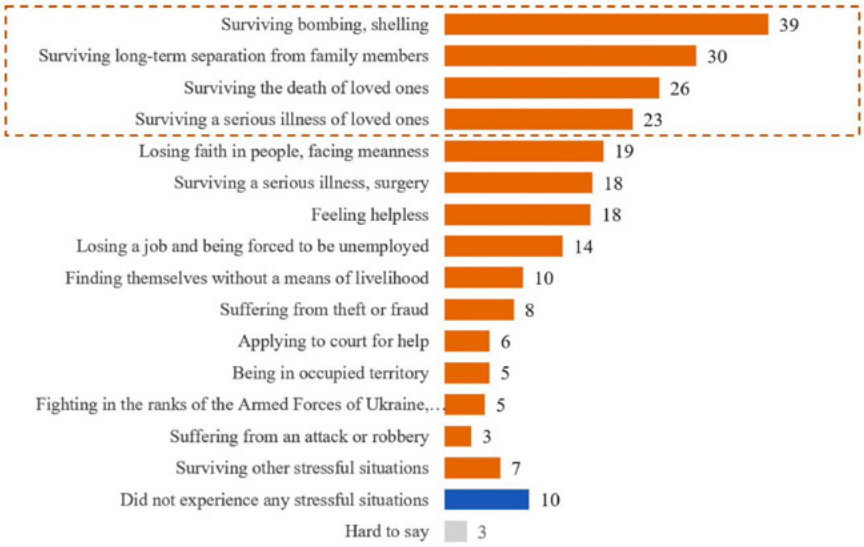
38%, although a majority (54%) is still against this.[11]

SOMEWHAT surprisingly, in 2024 a majority of Ukrainians (58%) considered themselves happy, although this share was down from 69% in 2023. Only 16% of the people surveyed considered themselves unhappy. Besides those directly related to the war, other factors also exert a significant influence on happiness. Good health and well-being (calculated in monetary terms) as well as optimism about the future of the country happiness, while old age decreases it.[12] Most Ukrainians have a positive view regarding the future of Ukraine. At the end of 2025, a total of 64% thought that Ukraine will be a prosperous country in the EU in 10 years' time, while a significant minority of 21% predicted it will have a ruined economy and a high level of emigration.[13]

In 2024, there was a very high level of trust in both the defense forces (92%) and volunteers (81%), indicating the importance of civil society in Ukraine. The traditionally strong degree of trust in the Church has decreased and lay at 40%, which may be explained by complex relations between the various churches in Ukraine. There is no unanimous support for the present government or for legal institutions in Ukraine, with the highest levels of trust expressed for the President of Ukraine (40%). In February 2025, only 38% of the population saw political affairs in the country as going in the right direction, while 46% saw them as going in the wrong direction. This critical view of government politics is not new in Ukraine: the share of those satisfied with the recent development of the country has as a rule been low, although during the first year of the full-scale war it was – following a success on the battlefield – at 50–70%. There are some regional differences, but no significant ones, with the share of critical respondents at 41–48% across the country.[14]

PEOPLE SURVEYED in 2025 mostly expressed somewhat contradictory feelings concerning the development of the country, typically disappointment (32%) and hope (28%). Anton Hrushetskyi from

Graph 1. **Stressful situations faced by Ukrainians in 2024**



Source: *Stressful situations in the lives of Ukrainians, 2024*, (Press releases and reports, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, January 30, 2025). Available at: https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1472&page=1.

KIIS interprets this as meaning there was a wish for something new in the air.[15] Besides war, the key worry of the population is corruption. Sadly, an overwhelming majority (71%) sees this as having increased during the full-scale war, with minor regional differences,[16] although most feel that there is now a genuine fight against corruption.[17]

Since the large-scale attack on Ukraine, new groups have emerged within its population, such as refugees who have moved out of the country, internally displaced persons, and Ukrainians who found themselves in occupied territory since February 2022. The general attitude toward these groups is somewhat reserved, but negative views are represented by a minority of 10–20%. There is a considerable difference here in comparison to the attitude toward Russians from the Russian Federation, whom 80% of the population would not let into Ukraine. Volodymyr Paniotto (KIIS) comments[18] that there is a risk that negative feelings toward the enemy may partially be transferred onto the Russian minority in Ukraine – a further result of the Russian aggression.

"NATIONAL HOLIDAYS HAVE INCREASED IN IMPORTANCE SINCE 2013, WHILE SOVIET HOLIDAYS ARE BEING PHASED OUT."

WHEN ASSESSING Ukrainians' attitudes to various holidays, we see that national holidays have increased in importance since 2013, while Soviet holidays are being phased out. For instance, 54% of those surveyed in Ukraine in 2025 named Independence Day as an important or favorite day, while the corresponding share in 2013 was only 12%. Victory Day (May 9), a key holiday in the Soviet Union as well as in today's Russia, was an important or favorite day for just 11% of Ukrainians in 2025, while the corresponding pre-war share in 2013 was 40%.[19] A similar growth in commitment to Ukraine, as well as a certain optimism regarding its future, is confirmed by other sources.[20]

Since 2021, support for the EU and NATO has grown further in Ukraine. In

"THE NEGATIVE ATTITUDE THAT WAS ONCE RESERVED FOR THE RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT NOW ALSO APPLIES TO RUSSIAN PEOPLE IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, INCLUDING TO SOME EXTENT UKRAINIANS WHO LIVE IN RUSSIA."

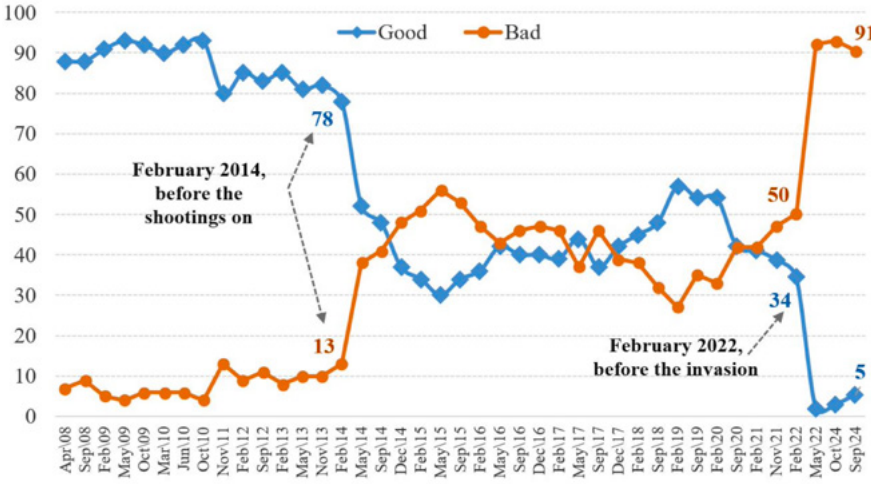
2024, 90% of the population wanted to see Ukraine in the EU, and 84% in NATO. There is some regional variation, but even in Eastern Ukraine NATO is supported by 71% of respondents. Interestingly, people usually support membership of both organizations, but when asked for their priority, support for NATO is stronger than that for the EU (46% vs. 22%). This response is understandable due to the war. Equally understandably, there is no high degree of trust in the USA; the option "hard to say" usually dominates in these responses, and President Trump's peace proposals are considered unfair and unsustainable.[21]

Ukrainians vs. Russians, Ukrainian vs. Russian

The KIIS research shows a new language climate as compared to what we found in 2017 and in 2021. 63% of the population now speaks Ukrainian at home, with 13% speaking Russian and 19% both languages. In 2020, the share of Ukrainian-speakers was 52% and that of Russian-speakers 25%. Regional differences have diminished; the share of Ukrainian-speakers in Southern Ukraine increased from 22% to 39%, for instance, and the share of Russian speakers reduced in Eastern Ukraine – where the war is on the doorstep – from 53% to 32%. In 1998, almost half of the population (46%) found that Russian should be given the same attention as Ukrainian within Ukrainian-language schools, while in 2025 a majority (58%) felt that Russian should not be studied at all and 29% felt it should be studied as much as or less than other foreign languages.[22]

In Southern and Eastern Ukraine, a dramatic change occurred following the full-scale attack in 2022. For instance, in 2019 a total of 66% of respondents in East Ukraine felt that Russian should get the same attention as Ukrainian in Ukrainian-language schools, while in 2025 the share was 8%, with 36% finding that it should not be studied at all. Those Ukrainian families who speak Russian at home also felt quite often (27%) that it should not be studied at all, while only 11% wanted it to be given equal attention to the Ukrainian language. These results are partly explained by the Russian land grab in the Donbas, where the survey could not be carried out. When asked why Russian should be studied at school, people usually said that knowing foreign languages is useful, that there is Russian-speaking minority in Ukraine, and that there are historical reasons for learning the language.[23]

Graph 2. **Dynamics of attitudes towards Russia, 2008–2024**



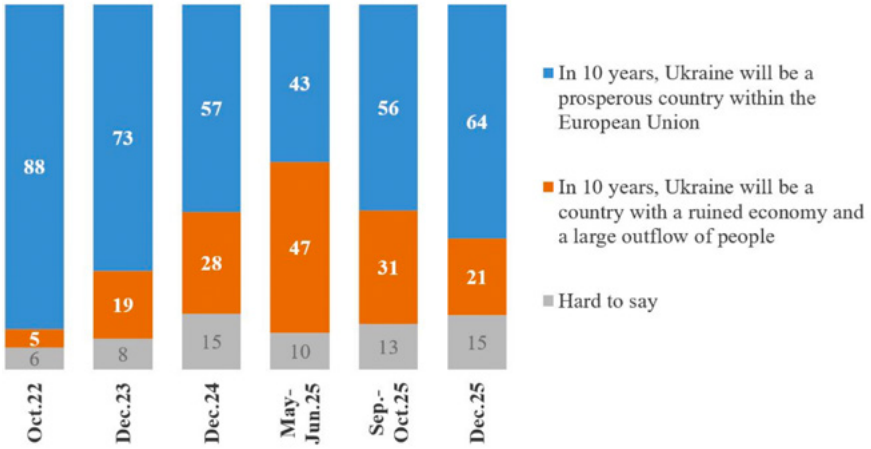
Source: *We can see even without light that you are..." The attitude of Ukrainians towards Russia and Russians* (Press releases and reports, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, October 24, 2025). Available at: https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1564&page=1.

THE ATTITUDE toward Russia has completely changed due to the Russian attacks. Until February 2014, only 13% of the population had a negative attitude toward Russia, while for 78% had a positive one; it is now positive for just 5% of the population, while 91% have a negative attitude. In those parts of Eastern Ukraine that are controlled by the Government of Ukraine, 80% of respondents also feel negatively about Russia, as so do Russian-speaking Ukrainians in general (76%). The negative attitude that was once reserved for the Russian government now also applies to Russian people in the Russian federation, including to some extent Ukrainians who live in Russia. The finding is interpreted by KIIS as evidence that attitudes have become increasingly political; they are not directly ethnic, since both Ukraine and Russia are ethnically mixed.[24]

For comparison, the Levada Center surveys find that attention toward the war in Ukraine is decreasing in Russia, with approximately half of the population actively following its events and a similar share following them "without much attention" or not at all.[25] This is in stark contrast to how the war is being experienced in Ukraine. When asked to recall the events of the previous four weeks, Russian people most often mentioned personal events or nothing at all, with the

war – or "special military operation", as it is called – mentioned by only 7% of the respondents. However, 73% of the population accepted the actions of the Russian armed forces, with only 15% stating that they do not support them. Responses concerning attitudes toward war veterans are also overwhelmingly positive. Altogether, 40% of respondents felt that the war has done Russia more harm than good, while a third of the population saw it is as having had more of a benefit. According to the Levada Center findings, the key perceived benefit is the expansion or return of historically Russian territories (30%), while the key harm is the resulting loss of life or the high number of casualties (73%). Altogether, 61% of the respondents support peace talks, while 30% feel that the hostilities should be continued.[26]

Graph 3. **How do you see the future of Ukraine in 10 years?**



Source: *How the Ukrainians see the future of Ukraine* (Press releases and reports, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, January 9, 2026). Available at: https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1577&page=1.

RUSSIAN PUBLIC opinion concerning Ukrainians has changed over the course of time. During 2004–2016, the share of those who consider Russians and Ukrainians to be one people went down from 79% to 49%, while the share of those considering them to be two different peoples went up from 18% to 43%. Thus, while just ten years ago Russians and Ukrainians were still typically considered to be one people, there is an increasing perception that this is not the case, even if this idea still persists to a lesser extent. The pseudonym "special military operation" enjoys widespread support, which some interpret as being due less to anti-Ukrainian feelings than to propaganda and general right-wing authoritarianism, including support for Vladimir Putin.[27]

In conclusion

The share of Russian-speakers has decreased in Ukraine due to the war, but attitudes toward the Russian-speaking minority in Ukraine remain mainly tolerant even following the full-scale attack. This is understandable in the light of the country's history, bilingualism, and many interethnic ties. Nevertheless, research into discrimination, hate speech, and hate crimes in Ukraine shows that, for instance, 33% of respondents recognize discrimination against Russian speakers and 26% discrimination against Ukrainian speakers.[28] These are problems to be addressed during the forthcoming EU accession.

The Russian attack on Ukraine has strengthened the nationhood of Ukraine, "the unexpected nation."[29] While the war is having a negative impact on practically the whole of society, there is nevertheless a strong will to defend the country and a high degree of optimism concerning its future. This situation is in stark contrast to that in the Russian Federation, where the population hardly seems to feel the impact of the war. The European-Ukrainian peace proposal is widely accepted in Ukraine, although not without some reservations. Besides the war, corruption is the key malaise of Ukrainian society. Trust in government and its legislation is traditionally low in Ukraine, while the President of Ukraine enjoys a higher rate of trust as compared to the key institutions. The armed forces as well as volunteers are well trusted, reflecting the importance of civil society – as we know, back in in 2014, Ukrainian civil society even played a major role in setting up and supporting a functioning national defense force.

THE RESULTS show that Ukraine has distanced itself from Russia due to the latter's war against it. Beyond the Russian government, this attitude now also applies to Russian citizens, including Ukrainians in Russia. Within Ukraine, the Russian language has turned from a prestigious language of high culture into a widely stigmatized language of the enemy. We may say that Ukraine is still largely bilingual, but that Ukrainian dominates over Russian more clearly than it used to.[30] As with Ukrainian attitudes toward NATO, this result is quite the opposite of the goal Russia has proclaimed in repeatedly attacking Ukraine since 2014.

Simo Mannila is an Adjunct Professor in Sociology at the University of Helsinki.

references

1 Simo Mannila and Natalia Kharchenko, "War and other worries of the people. Views on Ukraine from Ukraine," *Baltic Worlds* no. 4 (2017): 10–19. Available at: http://balticworlds.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/BW-4.2017-MANNILA_KHARCHENKO_pp10_19.pdf; Simo Mannila, "Crisis in Russian studies? Ukrainian-Russian relations and what to think about them," *Balticworlds.com*, June 20, 2021. Available at: http://balticworlds.com/crisis-in-russian-studies-ukrainian-russian-relations-and-what-to-think-about-them/.

2 Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, see: https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=en.

3 Taras Kuzio, *Crisis in Russian studies? Nationalism (Imperialism), Racism and War* (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2020); Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (London: B. Tauris, 2015).

4 For an overview of the situation regarding the Russian language in Ukraine, see Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_language_in_Ukraine#:~:text=Polls%20*%20Autonomous%20Republic%20of%20Crimea%20%E2%80%94,%E2%80%94%2044.3%25%20*%20Mykolaiv%20Oblast%20%E2%80%94%2029.3%25.

5 Zuzanna Tabakiernik, "The Russian-speaking minority in Ukraine: The reason for the Ukrainian war or its greater victim?," *The Perspective*, April 8 2025. Available at: https://www.theperspective.se/2025/04/08/article/the-russian-speaking-minority-in-ukraine-the-reason-for-the-ukrainian-war-or-its-greater-victim/.

6 Mannila and Kharchenko, "War and other worries of the people."

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Volodymyr Paniotto, *Stressful situations in the lives of Ukrainians, 2024*, (Press releases and reports, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, January 30, 2025). Available at: https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1472&page=1.

10 Anton Hrushetskyi, *Results of the all-Ukrainian survey on war and peace issues* (Press releases and reports, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, September 16, 2025). Available at: https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1551&page=1; Anton Hrushetskyi, *War and peace – opinions and views of the Ukrainians (results of a survey conducted on January 9–14, 2026)* (Press releases and reports, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, January 16, 2026). Available at: https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1579&page=1.

11 Hrushetskyi (September 16, 2025); Hrushetskyi (January 16, 2026).

12 Volodymyr Paniotto, *Dynamics of self-assessment of happiness in the population of Ukraine from 2001 to 2024* (Press releases and reports, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, March 20, 2024). Available at: https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1508&page=1.

13 Anton Hrushetskyi, *How the Ukrainians see the future of Ukraine* (Press releases and reports, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, January 9, 2026). Available at: https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1577&page=1.

14 Anton Hrushetskyi, *Dynamics of trust in social institutions* (Press releases and reports, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, January 9, 2025). Available at: https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1467&page=1.

15 Anton Hrushetskyi, *What do Ukrainians feel about the current government in Ukraine* (Press releases and reports, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, March 18, 2025). Available at: https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1507&page=3.

16 Anton Hrushetskyi, *Perception of changes in the level of corruption in Ukraine during the full-scale invasion* (Press releases and reports, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, October 3, 2025). Available at: https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1556&page=1.

17 Anton Hrushetskyi, *Perception of the fight against corruption in Ukraine and the attitude of Ukrainians towards criticism of the authorities' actions during the period of full-scale invasion* (Press releases and reports, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, October 17, 2025). Available at: https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1562&page=1.

18 Anton Hrushetskyi and Volodymyr Paniotto, *Attitudes towards refugees, internally displaced persons, Russian-speaking citizens and some other categories of the population of Ukraine* (Press releases and reports, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, January 21, 2025). Available at: https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1469&page=2.

19 Volodymyr Paniotto, *Attitude of Ukrainians to May 9 (Victory Day) from 2013 to 2025* (Press releases and reports, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, May 7, 2025). Available at: https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1516&page=1.

20 *Independence Day: How the Ukrainians see the end of the war and the future or their country* (Ilko Kucheriv Fond Democratic Initiatives Foundation and Razumkov Centre, August 27, 2025). Available at: https://dif.org.ua/en/article/independence-day-how-ukrainians-see-the-end-of-the-war-and-the-future-of-their-country.

21 Anton Hrushetskyi, *Dimensions of attitudes towards the EU and NATO and attitudes towards the USA* (Press releases and reports, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, January 14, 2025). Available at: https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1468.

22 Anton Hrushetskyi, *Attitude towards teaching Russian in Ukrainian-language schools* (Press releases and reports, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, April 29, 2025). Available at: https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1513&page=1.

23 Hrushetskyi, April 29, 2025.

24 Anton Hrushetskyi, *"We can see even without light that you are…" The attitude of Ukrainians towards Russia and Russians* (Press releases and reports, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, October 24, 2025). Available at: https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1564&page=1.

25 Levada Center, *The conflict with Ukraine in April 2025: Attention, support, attitude towards negotiations, attitude towards the participants in the Special Military Operation* (Press releases, Levade Center, May 19, 2025). Available at: https://www.levada.ru/en/2025/05/19/the-conflict-with-ukraine-in-april-2025-attention-support-attitude-towards-negotiations-attitude-towards-the-participants-in-the-special-military-operation/.

26 Ibid.

27 Alexey Levinson, "Through the Russian gaze: Perceptions of Ukraine and Ukrainians," in *Russia against Ukraine: Russian Political Mythology and the War on Ukrainian Identity*, ed. Anton Shekhovtsov (Vienna: Center for Democratic Integrity, 2025), 47–59. Available at: https://democratic-integrity.eu/russia-against-ukraine/; Robin Wollast, Joseph B. Phillips, Illia Yahiiaiev, Karine Malysheva, Olivier Klein, and Nikhil K. Sengupta, "Russian attitudes towards the war in Ukraine," *European Journal of Social Psychology* no. 55 (2025): 119–35, https://doi.or/10.1002/ejsp.3118.

28 Inna Volosevych, Olga Prochukhanova, and Tetiana Kostiuchenko, *Research on discrimination, hate speech and hate crimes in Ukraine* (Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2024). Available at: https://rm.coe.int/research-on-discrimination-hate-speech-and-hate-crimes-in-ukraine-en/1680b063ba.

29 Andrew Wilson, *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

30 Volodymyr Kulyk, "Language shift in time of war: The abandonment of Russian in Ukraine," *Post-Soviet Affairs* vol. 40, no. 3 (2024): 159–74. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2024.2318141; Ilko Kucheriv, *Rezul'taty opytuvannya: Ukraina yedina: nacional'na nalezhnist', identychnist', mova ta derzhavni atrybuty* [Results of the experiment: Ukraine is one: national belonging, identity, language and state attributes] (Democratic Initiatives Foundation and Razumkov Centre, January 21, 2025). Available at: https://dif.org.ua/en/article/ukraina-edina-natsionalna-nalezhnist-identichnist-mova-ta-derzhavni-atributi-vseukrainske-opituvannya?fbclid=IwY2xjawH9kP1leHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHWB9yudvLLGUmOdREgEuFKtytI64VmRin2f_o-3STLJbSj7tIcDynjJdNA_aem_Hq3rk46kSQTTldpHfyDzJw.





Summertime in Kalinovka. Donetsk Oblast, Ukraine, Summer 2012.



The oldest spoil pit of Horlivka in bloom. Horlivka, Donetsk Oblast, Ukraine, Summer 2012.



In a bus – "Marshrutka" from Horlivka to Donetsk, Autumn 2012.

PHOTO: EVA IEVGENIIA BABENKO

Echoes of **peace**, *lives of* **war**

WOMEN'S NARRATIVES OF BELONGING IN DONBAS

by **Eva Ievgeniia Babenko**

abstract

Drawing on five narrative interviews with women from Ukraine's Donbas, this article explores how belonging and national identification shift across three temporalities: everyday life before 2014, the outbreak of war in 2014, and the full-scale invasion in 2022. Using grounded theory coding, it traces how conflicting Ukrainian and Russian nation-making projects are experienced through domestic routines, media consumption, and encounters with state institutions. Before 2014, regional pride and Russophone familiarity distanced Ukrainian narratives, until war shattered this normality and forced difficult, morally charged choices. After 2022, respondents describe intensified fear, betrayal, and a reconfiguration of home and belonging, while distinguishing survival from political loyalty under occupation. The article argues that identity in Donbas is neither binary nor linear, but a gendered, emotional, and relational process shaped through everyday practices and retrospective moral evaluation. By centring women's voices, the study complicates top-down accounts of nationhood and shows why reconciliation must address mistrust, recognition, and personal repair and dignity.

KEYWORDS: Donbas, Russo-Ukrainian war, women, everyday nationalism, nation-making, reconciliation.

For decades, the Donbas region has stood at the intersection of confronting Ukrainian and Russian nation-building projects, contested political loyalties shaped by propaganda and disinformation, and layered forms of belonging. Situated within the Ukrainian and Russian state project, Donbas nonetheless maintains a deeply ingrained regional identity.[1] Since the outbreak of war in 2014, and especially after the full-scale Russian invasion of 2022, questions of who belongs to the Ukrainian nation, who is of the Kremlin-promoted concept of the "Russian world",[2] and how the people of Donbas position themselves have become central to political and scholarly debate. Yet these struggles over nationhood unfold not only in official discourse or geopolitical analysis, but also in everyday life – in family conversations, media habits, moral judgments, and strategies of survival. This article focuses on how women from Donbas narrate these transformations in identity and belonging through the years of war in the East of Ukraine.

This article centres women's narratives to examine how belonging in Donbas is reshaped across three key temporal moments: *Life before 2014, the rupture of war in 2014, and the full-scale invasion of 2022.*

RECENT STUDIES on Ukrainian nation-making and war memory have examined state discourse, media narratives, and geopolitical strategy,[3] yet comparatively fewer analyses focus on gendered experiences of belonging in occupied Donbas.[4] While the war has generated extensive corpus of scientific research, much of it focuses on elites, state projections, and military developments, whereas this study foregrounds lived experience of the ordinary women.

Feminist scholarship has long shown that nations are structured through gendered relations, reproduced in everyday life through care practices, emotional labour, and routine social interactions.[5] In wartime, gendered expectations surrounding safety, responsibility, and family intensify these dynamics. Women often mediate between state authority and household survival, making them key interpreters of political violence. Focusing on women's narratives, therefore, allows us to trace how national belonging is negotiated through relational responsibilities and moral positioning under conditions of uncertainty.

Drawing on five in-depth narrative interviews conducted in 2024 with women who remained in occupied territories, relocated within Ukraine, or moved abroad, the article explores how identity unfolds as a temporal and relational process. The aim of this study is not statistical representativeness but analytical depth, achieved through maximum variation sampling.[6] Using grounded theory techniques,[7] the analysis identifies recurring patterns in how respondents interpret key events, evaluate their experiences, and make sense of shifting wartime contexts.

I argue that identity in Donbas cannot be understood as a fixed or binary position, like "pro-Ukrainian" versus "pro-Russian," "victim" versus "collaborator", but as a gendered and emotionally charged process that constantly evolves in unfolding circumstances. Women's recollections of pre-war "normality", their interpretations of 2014, and their reassessments after 2022 reveal how belonging is continually re-evaluated in light of fear, responsibility, loss, and retrospective moral judgment.

By foregrounding women's lived experiences, the article contributes to debates on nation-making in Ukraine by demonstrating how identity formation unfolds through everyday practice rather than solely through state projects. It also speaks to broader discussions of reconciliation by showing that fractured belonging is not only a political question but a deeply personal one.

Theoretical framework

Scholarship on gender and nation-making has long demonstrated that nations are not neutral political communities, but gendered constructions embedded in everyday practices, symbolic boundaries, and expectations. As Yuval-Davis[8] argues, women serve simultaneously as biological reproducers of the nation, cultural carriers of its traditions, and markers of its moral boundaries. Feminist scholarship further shows that national projects rely on gendered divisions of labour, emotional responsibilities, and norms of respectability that shape who is recognised as a legitimate member of the national community.[9] These processes become especially visible in wartime, when narratives of protection, sacrifice, and vulnerability place differentiated expectations on men and women, shaping what counts as appropriate loyalty and belonging.

"WOMEN OFTEN MEDIATE BETWEEN STATE AUTHORITY AND HOUSEHOLD SURVIVAL, MAKING THEM KEY INTERPRETERS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE."

While classic theories of nationalism emphasise political institutions, collective memory, and elite mobilisation,[10] feminist approaches highlight how nationhood is reproduced not only through official discourse but also through everyday routines, caregiving practices, and emotional labour that sustain family and community life. This perspective aligns with everyday nationalism,[11] which examines how national identities emerge through habitual practices and "micro-boundaries" structuring daily experience. A feminist lens extends this by showing how such practices are themselves gendered and shape opportunities for agency and mobility, particularly under conditions of insecurity.

WAR INTENSIFIES these dynamics. Feminist peace and conflict studies demonstrate that war reorganises social relations, redistributes responsibilities, and reshapes emotional bonds, producing both new attachments and forms of distancing.[12] Women's experiences of fear, displacement, and moral responsibility become central to how political violence is interpreted and experienced, particularly by those who remain in the war zone, and how national belonging is renegotiated. In such contexts,

identity is best understood not as a fixed position but as an ongoing, gendered negotiation shaped by uncertainty and shifting authority relations.

This article adopts a feminist everyday perspective to examine how women from Donbas interpret key events from 2014 to 2022. Their narratives illustrate how gendered expectations structure moral judgments, kinship obligations, and perceptions of the state, as well as everyday practices of maintaining or challenging national boundaries. While this study does not assume that male narratives would necessarily differ in substance, it demonstrates that women's wartime positioning is consistently mediated through socially structured expectations of care, responsibility, and moral accountability. By conceptualising nation-making as a dynamic and gendered process shaped by narrative interpretation, the article provides an analytical framework for interpreting the shifting identities emerging from the interviews.

To guide the analysis, the article draws on three interconnected analytical lenses that structure the interpretation of the interview material. First, gendered nation-making[13] directs attention to how symbolic, reproductive, and moral expectations shape women's positions within competing national projects. Second, everyday nationalism[14] shows how daily routines and domestic interactions make belonging visible in practice. Third, narrative and emotional meaning-making[15] highlights how women organise past experiences and present dilemmas into morally coherent stories.

These lenses function as sensitising concepts rather than predefined categories, enabling a grounded interpretation of how women from Donbas navigate rival Ukrainian and Russian nation-making projects across more than a decade of war.

Research design and sampling

This article is based on five in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews conducted between February and April 2024 with women originating from the Donbas region. The purpose of the study is not to produce statistically representative findings but to develop an analytically rich understanding of how women narrate transformations in belonging, identity, and meaning between 2014 and 2022. The sample was therefore constructed through a combination of maximum variation[16] and theoretical sampling.[17] The participants were selected to represent diverse wartime trajectories, including remaining in occupied territories, relocating to Ukraine-controlled areas, and migrating abroad. This variation makes it possible to trace how different positionalities and experiences of war shape processes of narrative meaning-making.

Narrative interviewing

Narrative interviewing was chosen because it foregrounds participants' own interpretive frameworks and allows them to organise their experiences temporally, emotionally, and morally.[18] Interviews began with a single open prompt (*"Tell me about your life in Donbas and how it has changed over time?"*) and developed through follow-up questions aimed to stimulate elaboration, clarification, and reflection. Rather than seeking factual verification, the interviews focused on how respondents themselves constructed events, relationships, and the turning point of 2014. Each interview lasted between 90 and 120 minutes, was conducted in Ukrainian or Russian, according to participants' preference and was audio-recorded with informed consent.

Analytic strategy

The analysis combined narrative sensibilities with grounded-theory techniques,[19] used to identify recurring patterns of meaning rather than to generate a formal theory. Through cycles of open and focused coding, I wrote analytic memos that traced how participants interpreted key events, justified moral positions, and made sense of shifting identities. Particular attention was paid to the temporal organisation of narratives, how respondents contrasted "before 2014", "after 2014", and "after 2022", as well as to the emotional tones of fear, attachment, anger, and loss that were embedded in their accounts. Codes and memos were revised multiple times to ensure that the analysis remained close to participants' language and avoided the imposition of predefined categories.

"MEMORIES OF LIFE IN DONBAS BEFORE 2014 EMERGED AS A CRUCIAL REFERENCE POINT FOR THE WOMEN'S LATER INTERPRETATIONS OF THE WAR."

Participants

A total of five interviewees participated in the study. The interviewees differed in age, education, family situation, and wartime trajectories, including displacement and continued residence in occupied territories. All names are pseudonyms.

Ella (55) holds an MA in Languages and is married, has an adult daughter. In 2014, she initially sought refuge in Ukrainian government-controlled areas of Donbas but later relocated to Russia due to increasing hostility toward people from occupied territories. After 2022, she and her husband obtained temporary protection in Finland, where they currently reside. Her relatives and close friends remain in occupied Donbas.

Lisa (33) holds an MA in Media Communications and is engaged. In 2014, she left Donbas due to safety concerns linked to her reporting and documentation of Russian military presence in her hometown. Her family remained in occupied territory until 2022. She obtained Internally Displaced Person (IDP) status in Ukraine and later relocated to Germany under temporary protection.

Maria (34) holds an MA in Business Management and is married. Shortly before the outbreak of the war in 2014, she moved to Finland for studies, where she encountered Russian narratives about the war in Donbas. She holds IDP status in Ukraine;



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The very first battle forces ATO on Savur-Mohyla, June 2014.



PHOTO: OSCE SPECIAL MONITORING MISSION TO UKRAINE

Ukrainian troops in the Donbas, March 2015.

part of her family continues to live under occupation. She resides in Finland as an independent artist.

Nelli (51) has professional training in psychology and is divorced, has a teenage son. In 2014, she fled her hometown during the initial takeover but later returned from Ukraine-controlled territory due to financial and family responsibilities. She holds IDP status in Ukraine and currently lives and works in the self-proclaimed "DPR".

Adele (34) holds an MA in English and Ukrainian language and literature. In spring 2014, she worked as a journalist covering the "Russian Spring" in her hometown and neighboring cities. She was forced to leave after receiving threats linked to her pro-Ukrainian position. She obtained IDP status and lives and works in Kyiv, while her family remains in the occupied territory.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were central due to the sensitivity of discussing life under occupation, displacement, and political persecution. Participants were recruited through personal networks in Ukraine and within the Donbas diaspora following careful assessment of potential safety risks. Interviews with residents of occupied territories were conducted via secure communication channels, and the research design was reviewed to be compliant with trauma-informed interviewing to ensure that questioning minimised distress. Additional procedural information concerning digital security and transcription is provided in the accompanying methodological note.[20]

Before 2014

Memories and everyday identity in Donbas

Memories of life in Donbas before 2014 emerged as a crucial reference point for the women's later interpretations of the war. These recollections were not only atmospheric descriptions of the past; they functioned as an emotional and symbolic baseline against which subsequent experiences of war, occupation, and displacement were evaluated. It turns out that returning to this period meant revisiting a world remembered as stable, predictable, and structured by familiar routines – even when marked by political indifference, limited mobility, or economic uncertainty. This "normality" was repeatedly invoked to underscore the contrast with the chaos, moral ambiguity and fragmentation that followed the outbreak of war in 2014.

Normality here refers not simply to the absence of war, but to a routinised stability in which national belonging remained largely implicit. Everyday life revolved around work, family obligations, and local networks, leaving political identification mostly unarticulated. In this sense, belonging operated as a background assumption embedded in habitual practice, an example of what everyday nationalism describes as the reproduction of nationhood through routine, "unmarked" interactions. The rupture of 2014 did not create identity from nothing but rendered previously taken-for-granted frameworks visible and contested.

A DOMINANT THEME across the interviews was the pervasive presence of Russian cultural and media influence in everyday life. Ella noted that:

> **Russian TV and culture were a big thing. If the TV was on, it was always on a Russian channel, always Russian news, and a Russian view of the situation."**

Maria similarly reflected that Russian television had shaped her perception of public life long before the war:

> **I didn't watch much Ukrainian television because Russian TV was very engaging and relaxing. Now I understand its real purpose: they just wanted to make you indifferent to any difficult topics.**

These accounts resonate with existing scholarship on the cultural russification of Donbas[21] but the interviews also reveal a distinctly gendered dimension of this media environment. Women frequently described themselves as curators of the household's informational space, deciding which channels played in the



A view of a train station as people who want to go to Kyiv from Kramatorsk in the Donbas region continue to wait, following Russianfull-scale invasion in Ukraine, on February 25, 2022 in Kramatorsk, Ukraine.

PHOTO: AYTAC UNAL/GETTY IMAGES

background and what media children were exposed to. In this sense, everyday media consumption became intertwined with gendered responsibilities for care, routine, and the reproduction of a taken-for-granted social order.

At the same time, Ukrainian cultural and political narratives held a secondary or peripheral place in many respondents' pre-2014 lives. The Ukrainian language, in particular, was often experienced as formal, bureaucratic, or externally imposed, rather than as a meaningful component of everyday belonging. As Nelli recalled:

> **When Donbas was part of Ukraine, all the documents were in Ukrainian. I saw it rather as a burden. Nobody understood why we needed it. I speak and write Russian now. It's more 'natural' to me.**

Likewise, Adele described how her decision to study Ukrainian language and literature required repeated justification within her social environment:

> **I chose to study the Ukrainian language and literature, and it was very much disliked. I had to explain my decision to many of my relatives and friends. They couldn't simply believe that I just liked it.**

These accounts suggest that engagement with Ukrainian language and culture was not simply uncommon, but often perceived as socially marked, politically charged and requiring explanation, positioning Ukrainianness as marginal within the everyday cultural landscape of pre-2014 Donbas.

SUCH RECOLLECTIONS underline that for many residents; Ukrainian identity was less a felt cultural affiliation than an administrative reality. In the absence of frequent travel across Ukraine, exposure to other regional cultures or engagement with Ukrainian politics, these women's everyday worlds remained deeply local. Nelli highlighted this sense of isolation explicitly:

> **I haven't been much in Ukraine and other regions; I just didn't need to. I was in Kyiv a couple of times, but it was a long time ago. On the other hand, people from the West of Ukraine also didn't visit us much.**

The women also spoke of a strong regional pride associated with Donbas's industrial identity.[22] Rooted in mining, metallurgy, and working-class solidarity, this pride formed an important axis of belonging that often-overshadowed national categories. Maria described this sentiment as characteristic of her childhood environment:

> **People around me lived their lives like there was nothing around. They didn't travel much; they just worked and did what they had to. All this 'political stuff' going around was unclear and had limited importance – they were above it.**

Reflecting retrospectively, Maria contrasted this perceived stability with what she described as the uncertainties of post-Soviet Ukrainian politics, noting that:

> **It was much easier for people from my town to lean towards the 'stability' of Russian colonialism than the 'chaotic' democracy of Ukraine.**

Women frequently invoked the industrial ethos not simply as background context, but as a formative element of local identity,

shaping expectations about social order, hierarchy, and the role of the state.

The interview data also revealed internal stereotyping within Ukraine, which further contributed to a sense of alienation from Ukrainian national projects. Adele captured this dynamic vividly when recalling stereotypes she encountered outside the region:

> **People told me I don't look like someone from Donbas. I asked them, 'What should I do? Squat on a bench and call you names every other word?'**

Ella remembered similar experiences:

> **Oh, you're from Donbas?! Sorry, we don't have jobs for separatists.**

Such encounters reinforced the perception among Donbas residents that they were viewed as culturally other, producing emotional distance from broader Ukrainian identity even before the outbreak of war.

BEFORE 2014, political neutrality was prevalent among the respondents. Several women described themselves as politically neutral in the early months of the war, not because of sympathy for any side, but because work obligations, caregiving responsibilities, and economic survival left little time or emotional capacity to follow unfolding events. For many respondents, neutrality emerged less as an ideological position than as a condition structured by gendered labour-balancing paid employment, family care, and household stability in a rapidly deteriorating environment. In this sense, political detachment reflected not indifference but the constraints of everyday responsibility, as the neutrality described by Ella and Nelli was shaped by a practical orientation toward everyday survival rather than an explicit political stance.

Ella summarised this indifference directly:

> **I was neutral. I didn't care.**

Nelli echoed this, linking her lack of political awareness to the pressures of everyday life:

> **I didn't have time to follow the news, I just worked a lot, so I had no clue why the Yanukovych regime was bad.**

Such accounts suggest that neutrality was a condition shaped by gendered responsibilities and socioeconomic realities. This condition was further reinforced by a media and informational environment in which political developments were fragmented, contradictory, or presented as distant from everyday concerns.

Taken together, these narratives suggest that pre-2014 Donbas identity was grounded not in nationalist commitments but in a combination of heavily russified culture, industrial pride, limited exposure to the rest of Ukraine, and gendered practices and routine. These overlapping layers of belonging formed a dense emotional and symbolic landscape that later shaped how the women interpreted the outbreak of war in 2014, how they assessed the legitimacy of Ukrainian and Russian nation-making projects, and how they negotiated their own loyalties and identities within the shifting context of conflict.

2014 as the Point of no return

Shifting identities, emotional shock, and early confrontations with nation-making

While memories of Donbas before 2014 were grounded in routine and familiarity, all five respondents described the first months of the conflict as a total disaster – an unexpected collapse of the normal world they had taken for granted. The emotional tone of their narratives shifted sharply from calm recollection to shock, confusion, disbelief, and, in some cases, fear or moral outrage. This moment stands out not simply as the beginning of war, but as the point at which previously stable understandings of self, community, and state authority were suddenly destabilised.

"THE EMOTIONAL TONE OF THEIR NARRATIVES SHIFTED SHARPLY FROM CALM RECOLLECTION TO SHOCK, CONFUSION, DISBELIEF, AND, IN SOME CASES, FEAR OR MORAL OUTRAGE."

For several respondents, the earliest weeks of the conflict were experienced as surreal. A recurring theme was disbelief that violence could take root in their hometowns. Maria recalled how the first news of separatist activity seemed fundamentally incompatible with her mental picture of Donbas people "lived their lives like there was nothing around. They didn't travel much; they just worked and did what they had to.", which made open conflict seem implausible and likely short-lived.

Similarly, Adele, who was reporting on events at the time, remembered that she "believed that we would be liberated soon, as it happened in Slovyansk." An expectation grounded in the assumption that whatever was unfolding would be brief and reversible. Lisa expressed a comparable sentiment when reflecting on the period:

> **I swear I was sure that it would all be over in two months.**

These recollections illustrate how everyday routines produced a sense of stability in which political developments appeared insignificant and unlikely to disrupt ordinary life.

Disbelief, however, coexisted with rapidly diverging interpretations of what was happening. The women's narratives show how personal disposition, prior political awareness, and sources of information shaped early reactions to the unfolding events.

Two participants – Lisa and Adele already had relatively clear political commitments and were therefore more attuned to signs of Russian involvement.

Lisa described how her own observations contradicted local narratives of spontaneous uprising:

> **I knew that in my small town, nothing was happening because of the people's will, so I ran to find who those 'protestors' were.**

This early awareness placed her in physical danger and contributed to her decision to leave Donbas in 2014. Adele similarly recalled that her pro-Ukrainian stance quickly made her a target:

> **I was forced to leave because my life was threatened due to my pro-Ukrainian position and my family was subjected to blackmail.**

For other respondents, confusion, emotional numbness, and the pressures of everyday life initially limited the capacity to interpret unfolding events politically, making early developments appear temporary or reversible rather than transformative. Several women described themselves as politically neutral in the early months of the conflict, not because of sympathy for any side, but because the demands of work, exhaustion, and everyday responsibilities left little time or energy to follow unfolding events closely. In this sense, neutrality emerged less as an ideological stance than as a condition shaped by gendered labour and care responsibilities within the household.

"ALL RESPONDENTS RECALLED THE FIRST MONTHS OF THE OCCUPATION AS EMOTIONALLY CHARGED AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY DISORIENTING."

For many respondents, this practical neutrality was closely tied to gendered responsibilities within the household, where maintaining stability for children, partners, or elderly relatives often took precedence over explicit political engagement.

Both Ella and Nelli characterised this period not as a moment of political awakening, but as one in which the routines of survival left little space for reflection. In retrospect, this early neutrality was often revisited with feelings of guilt or self-reproach, not because it had been experienced as wrong at the time, but because later events retroactively altered how earlier decisions were emotionally evaluated.

These retrospective reassessments reveal how women's moral positioning was closely tied to gendered expectations of responsibility not only toward the nation, but toward family and community. Political passivity was later reinterpreted as personal failure, even when it had originally functioned as a strategy of stability and protection.

> **I had to do more to protect my homeland/ I didn't do enough / I wasn't a conscious citizen; it's a shame that I was so indifferent./Ella**

These retrospective reflections show how the experience of war reshaped earlier memories of neutrality, transforming what once appeared as ordinary disengagement into a source of moral self-evaluation.

> **I was working, and working, working a lot, it was my way to say that I will live my life despite everything. /Nelli**

Her account illustrates how everyday labour functioned as a strategy of survival, allowing individuals to maintain a sense of normality while suspending explicit political alignment.

Lisa described a similar sense of dissonance when witnessing Russian soldiers occupy her hometown while local residents repeated official Russian narratives:

> **Russian soldiers occupied my city[...] but I was just a bystander.**

For her, this moment produced feelings of guilt and fear, along with a sudden sense of political responsibility she had not previously articulated.

THESE CONTRASTS reveal a clear pattern: the onset of war in 2014 did not create identity positions from scratch, but rather amplified pre-existing dispositions – whether political engagement, indifference, or passive acceptance of local narratives. Yet even among those who initially felt disengaged, the rapid escalation of violence forced an earlier and more direct confrontation with political reality than many had anticipated.

The occupation also triggered a heightened awareness of regional stereotypes and inter-Ukrainian mistrust. Respondents described how certain narratives- encountered both in everyday interactions and through media reinforced the sense that residents of Donbas were perceived as culturally backward, politically unreliable, or insufficiently Ukrainian.

ADELE RECALLED that the stereotypes she had encountered outside the region even before the conflict took on a heavier meaning after 2014, as suspicions of separatism or complicity became increasingly common:

> **I was furious to hear that people I knew and respected could say, right in front of me, that these Donbas atrocities were running around the country like rats. Am I a rat as well?**

For some, the emotional weight of 2014 was sharpened by moments of intimate betrayal and moral shock. Maria's experience captures this sense of disbelief. While studying abroad, she en-



Early autumn evening in the neighborhood (of the auhor/photographer). Autumn 2012. PHOTO: EVA IEVGENIIA BABENKO

countered Russian propaganda not as distant rhetoric but voiced directly by someone in authority. She recalled:

> **I was studying at a Finnish university, and my Finnish dean seriously told me that Russia would take my homeland, where we belong, back to Mother Russia. Like [...] really?**

All respondents recalled the first months of the occupation as emotionally charged and psychologically disorienting. Certain dichotomies, traced more explicitly in the sections that follow, were already present at this stage: "War was impossible / war was unavoidable," "Maidan saved us/Maidan was the point of no return," and "Ukraine abandoned us/Ukraine will liberate us". These polarities did not simply reflect broader political discourses, but rather, they captured the internal fragmentation unfolding within individuals as they confronted a conflict that demanded new moral and political alignments.

> **Ordinary Donbas people tried to ignore Maidan for as long as possible, even though there were politically active people on both sides. Then everything escalated, and unfortunately, most people were completely unprepared for what was happening. That's why, I think, Russia was able to succeed. People were so afraid of the transformations our country was undergoing./Ella**

THE ONSET OF WAR in 2014 also marked the beginning of divergent identity trajectories. Lisa, Adele, and Maria aligned themselves firmly with Ukraine early on, interpreting the conflict as a struggle over sovereignty and truth.

> **I was ready for what's coming. I knew Russians won't leave us alone, because they are not an empire, not a country without Ukraine. I saw from a distance how my home country is evolving into something modern and even pioneering, so I sent money to my mom and told her to be ready by February 2022./Maria**

Ella and Nelli remained within the occupied territories for a longer period, developing narratives shaped by their immediate environment, limited mobility, and interactions with state institutions – first Ukrainian and later "republican."

> **We need to understand what they went through-it's pure hell. People forgot how to live normal lives. They're filled with rage and fear because their hopes were never realised. They wanted prosperity but ended up in poverty. They wanted more but had less. They wanted the best for their children, but those children grew up in unrecognised republics. Everyone knows now that counting on Russia and abandoning Ukraine was a huge mistake. Eventually, some people started saying that it was better when they were part of Ukraine, but for them, it's hard to admit that. It's easier to listen to the propaganda and blame everything on Ukraine. They wonder, why hasn't Ukraine liberated us? Maybe it is true that they always hated us?/Ella**

This narrative reflects the tension between lived hardship under occupation and the persistence of competing political explanations for that hardship.

What united these otherwise different narratives was the

sense that 2014 suddenly demanded moral, political, and emotional choices for which many women felt unprepared, not because of indifference, but because everyday routines, gendered responsibilities, and a fragmented informational environment had previously allowed identity to remain unexamined. The war cut through families, workplaces, and communities, forcing individuals to choose a side and position themselves long before they had developed the conceptual or emotional tools to do so. This moment is thus essential not only as a historical marker, but as the point at which identity ceased to function as an unconscious background assumption and instead became a deeply felt, often painful, personal question.

After 2022:
Shock, awakening, and the reconfiguration of belonging

For all five respondents, the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022 represented not only a new stage in the war, but a profound emotional and cognitive shock – one that forced a re-evaluation of earlier beliefs, positions, and the meaning of home. If 2014 destabilised identity, 2022 shattered what remained of the earlier interpretive frameworks, leaving the women confronting a reality that exceeded previous narratives of neutrality, routine, or regional specificity.

Across the interviews, the emotional tone intensified significantly. The women described fear, disbelief, a shift in moral pattern, and again a deep feeling of guilt linked to the impossibility of foreseeing the scale and direction of violence within the informational and emotional constraints of the time.

Ella recalled how her assumptions about the war collapsed almost instantly:

> **I didn't expect it to come to this point. I didn't believe it was possible. I lived in Russia back then, and I trusted the Russo-Ukrainian brotherhood. Again and again, I feel guilty now about it.**

Her earlier misconceptions (as she calls them) became a source of emotional burden once the brutality of the invasion reshaped how earlier positions were retrospectively understood. For her, 2022 constituted an existential awakening – a moment when neutrality, once experienced as a survival strategy, could no longer be sustained emotionally.

Nelli experienced a similar shock, intensified by her proximity to occupation authorities and the sensory reality of war. She recalled living through shelling, fear and moments that demanded immediate choices:

> **I lived through shelling, through fear, through situations where I had to make choices. I understood that nobody is protecting us.**

This sense of abandonment – combined with an emerging awareness of how Russian narratives had shaped her environment for years – triggered a painful reassessment of the past:

> **It hurts to admit how much we believed in Russian TV. It hurts even more to see what it led to.**

For Lisa and Adele, who had recognized the risks earlier and left Donbas in 2014, the full-scale invasion brought a different form of experience, an overwhelming confirmation of fears they had previously warned others about. Yet even this confirmation did not lessen the shock. Adele described the moment bluntly:

> **I thought I had seen enough in 2014. I thought I understood what Russia is capable of. I didn't. Nobody did.**

Her narrative illustrates how previous political clarity did not shield her from the magnitude of the invasion, which for her marked the definitive collapse of any remaining ambiguity surrounding national belonging.

Maria, who had been living abroad since before the war, described 2022 as the moment when physical distance and emotional proximity collided:

> **From abroad, you see everything clearly and painfully at the same time. The whole identity debate suddenly becomes your personal story again.**

Her position in the diaspora introduced new layers of guilt and responsibility, intensifying her sense of identification with Ukraine despite years of physical absence from the region.

IN INTERVIEWS, the theme of betrayal surfaced repeatedly – betrayal by Russia, by certain neighbours or relatives, by local authorities, and sometimes by one's own earlier assumptions. Where 2014 produced confusion, 2022 produced a form of moral and emotional clarity that many respondents described as harsh and irreversible. The respondents described how the full-scale invasion dissolved any lingering belief that the conflict could be understood through local grievances, Soviet nostalgia, or regional identity alone.

Ella expressed this shift vividly:

> **I realised that I was wrong. Completely wrong. This is not a misunderstanding. This is aggression, invasion, destruction. I'm Ukrainian, and Russia is bombing my homeland.**

For her, the invasion reshaped how earlier neutrality was understood, opening space for a new form of identification with Ukraine – not ideological, but deeply emotional.

Meanwhile, Nelli's re-evaluation was shaped by her continued life under occupation, where administrative systems, social benefits, and information channels had long been reorganised according to Russian rules. She explained how the distribution of Russian passports was experienced locally:

> **When the 'DPR' started giving out Russian passports, many took them because they needed pensions, treat-**

> **ment, and food. It was not loyalty. It was survival. Now, Russia is mobilising our men because we have their passports. Why?**

This distinction between survival and loyalty became central to how she interpreted the choices of people around her – and to how she understood her own complicated relationship with the state structures imposed by occupation. Her decision illustrates how everyday survival strategies often blur the boundary between pragmatic adaptation and perceived political loyalty.

The shock of 2022 also exposed generational divides. Adele noted:

> **The older generation believed in stability. They didn't believe Russia could go this far. The younger ones, especially those who moved away, saw it differently.**

These generational differences reflect broader patterns in Donbas, where Soviet socialisation, media consumption, and lived experience have shaped divergent responses to the war. Importantly, the full-scale invasion also triggered a profound reconfiguration of national belonging. For some respondents, the full-scale invasion of 2022 revived Ukrainian identity, making it emotionally charged and personally meaningful. For others, identity remained entangled in complex obligations, family ties, and survival strategies. Yet none of the women remained unchanged after 2022.

"FOR SOME RESPONDENTS, THE FULL-SCALE INVASION OF 2022 REVIVED UKRAINIAN IDENTITY, MAKING IT EMOTIONALLY CHARGED AND PERSONALLY MEANINGFUL."

A PARTICULARLY STRIKING dimension of the post-2022 break was the way the invasion reshaped the women's sense of home. Maria explained:

> **The town where I grew up is gone. Not yet physically, maybe, but emotionally. What is there to return to? Everything feels empty.**

Her reflection captures how the destruction of belonging did not necessarily require physical annihilation, despite some of the towns being destroyed, but unfolded through the erosion of emotional attachment and the loss of a meaningful future orientation toward place.

This sentiment, home as a place transformed beyond recognition, appeared across the interviews, reflecting a shared experience of loss that transcended political alignment.

Finally, the narratives reveal how 2022 forced a transformation in how the women understood themselves not only politically, but also morally and personally. Some confronted their earlier neutrality; others reinterpreted decisions made under stress, others found their identities reshaped through activism, professional engagement, or transnational life. Importantly, none of these shifts was linear or simple. Identity after 2022 emerged as a complex, emotionally saturated process shaped by fear, guilt, hope, responsibility, and an acute awareness of the stakes of nation-making.

The women's accounts show that the full-scale invasion did not simply deepen the conflict; it reshaped the emotional, moral, and symbolic terrain upon which identity was built. In this sense, 2022 was not a continuation of 2014; it marked a fundamentally new beginning, one that compelled the women to re-examine their past, re-evaluate their present, and reimagine their future belonging.

Identity, stereotypes, and nation-making during the Russo-Ukrainian war

The three empirical sections demonstrate that identity in Donbas evolved through distinct temporal phases, each shaped by gendered everyday experience. Before 2014, national belonging functioned largely as an unexamined background to daily life, embedded in routines of work and local social relations, and rarely articulated as a political position. The outbreak of war in 2014 disrupted this taken-for-granted normality, forcing women to confront political categories and moral expectations for which many felt unprepared, often resulting in confusion and misrecognition, though the immediacy of loss and displacement was uneven and did not affect all lives in the same way. Following the full-scale invasion in 2022, identity was reassessed more explicitly and emotionally, which shaped how women interpreted events and negotiated their sense of belonging over time.

BEFORE 2014, the respondents' accounts highlight how regional identity, cultural Russophonia, and limited mobility formed an environment in which Ukrainian national narratives were present but emotionally distant. Women's pre-war everyday responsibilities, domestic routines and work obligations reinforced this distance. Neutrality thus emerged as a practical position, rather than an explicitly political one. These insights align with scholarship that conceptualises identity as situated and relational, rather than fixed or ideological.

The onset of war in 2014 brought this "normality" into crisis. Some respondents immediately interpreted the unrest as externally driven, while others struggled to make sense of rapidly changing events. Crucially, this moment exposed pre-existing tensions within Ukraine, including stereotypes that painted Donbas as culturally backward or politically unreliable. Several women described experiences of being labelled or mischaracterised outside the region well before the war. During the war, these earlier experiences acquired renewed emotional salience, influencing how respondents understood their place within the Ukrainian nation.

The onset of war – confusing for some, clarifying for others – thus marked the first point at which identity became an active and often painful question.

The full-scale invasion in 2022 intensified these processes. Whatever emotional or interpretive distance existed in 2014 largely collapsed after February 2022. The scale of violence forced all respondents, regardless of previous position, to reassess earlier assumptions. For some, this meant confronting previous neutrality or disbelief. For others, it reactivated tensions between personal loyalty, regional belonging, and national identification. The shift from "routine life" to existential threat generated new emotional frameworks within which identity was reconsidered – fear, guilt, grief, and moral clarity became central to political positioning.

A strong theme across all narratives is the distinction between survival and loyalty. Decisions concerning documents, employment, or mobility under occupation were rarely expressions of political identification; rather, they reflected attempts to navigate constrained local realities shaped by fear, dependency, and responsibility for others. For women in particular, these decisions were often tied to caregiving obligations, like securing pensions for elderly parents, accessing healthcare for children, or maintaining household stability. The distinction between survival and loyalty thus unfolded through gendered forms of accountability, where compliance with occupation authorities could coexist with emotional attachment to Ukraine. These findings also complicate top-down explanations of nation-making by demonstrating how state narratives from Ukraine and Russia intersect with lived experience. The respondents were clearly aware of state messaging, yet their acceptance, rejection, or reinterpretation of it depended heavily on personal trajectories, generational experience, and emotional responses to violence. Identity formation thus unfolded as a negotiation between structural pressures and personal meanings, an interaction between what is imposed from above and experienced from below.

"WHATEVER EMOTIONAL OR INTERPRETIVE DISTANCE EXISTED IN 2014 LARGELY COLLAPSED AFTER FEBRUARY 2022."

TAKEN TOGETHER, the women's stories suggest that the temporal reconfiguration of identity in Donbas has produced not clarity, but moral burden. As earlier assumptions were unsettled, women were compelled to re-evaluate their own positions and past actions in light of violence, loss, and prolonged uncertainty. Decisions made under conditions of fear, limited information, and responsibility for others – whether to stay or leave, to remain silent or speak out, to accept documents or refuse them – were often revisited retrospectively through feelings of guilt, doubt, or self-reproach. At the same time, these narratives resist simple moral judgment: actions that might appear politically meaningful from the outside were frequently understood by respondents as acts of survival rather than expressions of loyalty. In this sense, identity after rupture emerges as emotionally charged and morally ambivalent, shaped by the tension between responsibility for oneself and others and the impossibility of clear moral positioning under conditions of war.

By bringing women's narratives to the centre, this article demonstrates how gendered everyday experience contributes to the understanding of contested nationhood in Donbas. The accounts illuminate how individuals interpret the pressures of war, navigate competing political narratives, and reconstruct identities across multiple ruptures. They also underscore that the future of Donbas, whether within Ukraine or under a different political configuration, depends not only on state agendas but on the slow, often painful work through which individuals and communities reassess who they are and where they belong. These voices, rarely heard in political debates, are indispensable for imagining a future that acknowledges both the complex realities of the region's past and the lived consequences of its present.

Conclusion: Reconciliation as a personal struggle

The narratives examined in this article suggest that reconciliation in Donbas cannot be understood solely as a political or territorial question. For the women interviewed, it emerges primarily as a personal and moral process shaped by how identity has been lived, negotiated, and re-evaluated throughout years of war. The possibility of a shared future depends not only on formal settlements but also on whether individuals can live with their past choices and with the uncertainty surrounding how those choices may be judged by others and by themselves. In this sense, reconciliation appears less as a discrete future event than as an ongoing struggle to reconcile personal memories, losses, and moral evaluations.

The analysis also demonstrates that identities in Donbas have evolved unevenly across the ruptures of 2014 and 2022. Some respondents describe a clear alignment with Ukraine and express optimism about eventual reintegration, believing that support for occupation authorities remains limited. Others view the future with greater anxiety, particularly regarding how their everyday survival under occupation may be interpreted after the war. As Nelli reflects:

> **If Ukraine returns and I stay, I am afraid that they will punish me because I have been living in Donbas all this time.**

In such narratives, the simple fact of remaining becomes morally charged and open to retrospective reinterpretation.

Long-standing stereotypes and experiences of misrecognition further shape these concerns. Respondents described how encounters with institutions and public discourse sometimes reinforced perceptions that residents of Donbas were viewed with suspicion or distrust. Such experiences demonstrate that

belonging is shaped not only through political alignment but also through everyday encounters that signal recognition, dignity, or exclusion. Decisions to stay, leave, comply, or withdraw are therefore often driven less by ideological commitment than by immediate practical and emotional considerations.

TAKEN TOGETHER, the findings demonstrate that national belonging in wartime Donbas emerges as a fluid and negotiated process rather than a simple binary between Ukrainian and Russian identities. War did not simply create new identities but forced individuals to reinterpret earlier routines, relationships, and assumptions about the state.

From this perspective, the aftermath of war is unlikely to represent a clear moment of resolution. Rather, it will involve a prolonged process in which individuals renegotiate their relationships to the state, to their communities, and to their own past decisions. Reconciliation, therefore, extends beyond political agreements or territorial arrangements. It unfolds through the quieter and often invisible work of rebuilding trust, managing memories of loss, and learning to inhabit identities reshaped by years of conflict. Women's narratives indicate that the legacies of war will remain deeply personal and long-lasting, shaping how belonging, trust, and coexistence are imagined in Donbas for years to come.

Eva Ievgeniia Babenko is a PhD Researcher at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, Åbo Akademi University.

references

1 Kerstin Zimmer, "Trapped in Past Glory: Self-Identification and Self-Symbolisation in the Donbas", in eds., Ashgate Swain, *Re-constructing the Post-Soviet Industrial Region: The Donbas in Transition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 97–121; Eva, Ievgeniia Babenko, "Through the Dark Matter: Exploring Donbas Identity in Times of Peace and War" *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 53 no. 6 (2025): 1246–1263, 2025.

2 The term "Russian world" (Russkii mir) refers to a concept promoted in Russian political discourse that frames Ukraine and other post-Soviet territories as part of a shared civilisational space centred on Russian language, culture, and historical identity. The concept has been widely analysed in scholarship as an ideological instrument used to legitimise Russian influence and territorial claims and is therefore treated here as a political discourse rather than a neutral category of identification.

3 Sergii Pakhomenko, Kateryna Tryma, and J'moul A. Francis, "The Russian-Ukrainian War in Donbas: Historical Memory as an Instrument of Information Warfare," in *The Use of Force against Ukraine and International Law*, (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2018), 297–312; Nataliia Stepaniuk, *Lives Punctuated by War: Civilian Volunteers and Identity Formation amidst the Donbas War in Ukraine,* (PhD diss., University of Ottawa, 2018); Mykyta Petrakov, "Historical Policy and Memory Policy in Ukraine: The Evolution of Discourse through the Narratives of Decolonisation and Mnemonic Sovereignty" *Politicus*. vol. 6 (2025). Available at: https://politicus.od.ua/6_2025/11.pdf

4 Tamara Martsenyuk, Ganna Grytsenko, Anna Kvit, "The 'Invisible Battalion': Women in ATO Military Operations in Ukraine," *Kyiv-Mohyla Law and Politics Journal*, vol. 2, (2016): 171–187; Olesya Khromeychuk, "From the Maidan to the Donbas: The Limitations on Choice for Women in Ukraine", in *Gender and Choice after Socialism* (Palgrave Macmillan. 2018), 47–78.

5 Nira YuvalDavis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997); Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, (2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

6 Maximum variation is a technique used in qualitative research to select a small, diverse sample that maximizes variation on key dimensions of interest.

7 Kathy Charmaz and Linda L. Belgrave, "Grounded Theory", in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2015); Michael Q. Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (4th ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2015).

8 Yuval-Davis, 1997

9 V. Spike Peterson, "Political Identities/Nationalism as Heterosexism," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* vol. 1 no.1 (1999): 34–65; Tamar Mayer, ed., *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation* (London: Routledge, 2000); Enloe 2014).

10 Eric P. Kaufmann, "Complexity and Nationalism", *Nationalities Papers*, (2017), 7.

11 Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity'", *Theory and Society* vol. 29 no.1 (2000): 1–47, 2000; Jon E. Fox and Cynthia MillerIdriss, "Everyday Nationhood", *European Journal of Sociology* vol. 49 no. 2 2008): 271–307.

12 Fionnuala D. Ní Aoláin, Dina Francesca Haynes and Naomi R. Cahn, *On the Frontlines: Gender, War and the Post-Conflict Process* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 29; Élise Féron and Tarja Väyrynen, eds., *Affective Politics in Conflict and War* (London: Routledge, 2024), 3–5.

13 Yuval-Davis, 1997.

14 Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008; Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).

15 Ní Aoláin, Haynes and Cahn, 2011.

16 Patton, 2015.

17 Charmaz and Belgrave, 2015.

18 Riessman, 2008.

19 Ibid.

20 Interviews were conducted either in person or via encrypted communication platforms, depending on participant location and risk assessment. Audio files were stored on encrypted devices, and transcripts were anonymized immediately after transcription. Translations from Russian or Ukrainian into English were performed by the author and checked for accuracy by a native speaker. Following Riessman transcripts were edited lightly for clarity while retaining syntactic features relevant to participants' interpretation of the events. See Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2008).

21 Zimmer 2007; Hiroaki. Kuromiya, *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas: A Ukrainian-Russian Borderland, 1870s-1990s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

22 Kuromiya, 1998.



Protesters march during an anti-government rally in Sofia, Bulgaria, December 15, 2025. PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

WINTER OF DISCONTENT AND ELECTIONS

Understanding Bulgaria's 2025 protests and issues of Bulgarian politics

by **Alexandra Brankova**

abstract

Widespread anti-government and anti-austerity protests erupted in Bulgaria in December 2025, reflecting intense public opposition to the state's fiscal policies, governance models, and lack of transparency in political and judicial processes, which eventually led to the resignation of the Zhelyazkov Government. The eighth round of parliamentary elections in just five years took place on April 19, 2026 and resulted in victory for Progressive Bulgaria, the new party of the former president Rumen Radev. The country faces ongoing political instability. The current essay sheds light on the central misrepresentations in the portrayal of the protests and underlying structural issues in Bulgarian politics based on the analysis of state documents, media coverage, corruption investigation cases, and digital observations.

KEYWORDS: Bulgaria, protests, elections, media, clientelism.

Bulgaria appeared on various international news segments at the end of 2025 due to its mass protests and its entry into the eurozone. The protests were largely depicted as an anti-budget movement[1] or "Gen Z" uprising.[2] While governmental spending and the suggested 2026 budget were key pillars of discontent, the reasons for the demonstrations remain more multi-layered and complex. Opposition to systemic corruption, state capture, clientelist relations, a malfunctioning judicial system, and a lack of transparency are some of the underlying and foundational issues of relevance to the public. The article is based on the analysis of state documents and decisions, Bulgarian media coverage, corruption investigations, and digital observations. The current essay attempts to shed light on some of the misconceptions about how Bulgaria's 2025 protests have been depicted and to reflect on the deeper issues in Bulgarian politics.

Misconception 1: **This is just a protest against the budget? – Not really**

The Zhelyazkov Government (GERB-UDF) suggested the 2026 budget, supported by their coalition partners ITN (There is Such a People, *Ima Takuv Narod*) and BSP-UL (Bulgarian Socialist Party – United Left). The oligarch Delyan Peevski, sanctioned under the Magnitsky Act, backed it with his party Movements for Rights and Freedom – New Beginning (DPS-NN). The budget was designed to meet the 3% government deficit requirement under the Maastricht criteria for eurozone entry.[3] It included refinancing the former debts, increasing borrowing through the financial instrument Security Action for Europe (SAFE), and raising the debt ceiling.[4] Why did the budget encounter such strong opposition, and what does this reveal about contemporary Bulgarian politics and society?

The proposed fiscal plan faced criticism from business owners and the private sector. Some of the key changes envisaged by the suggested 2026 framework included a rise in dividend tax from 5% to 10% and increased government spending on public-sector personnel.[5] Bulgarian businesses would also be financially affected by the mandatory requirement to connect to the National Revenue Agency's software for management of sales (*SUPTO*), inflicting additional costs.[6] The employer and industrialist representatives, Dobri Mitrev and Kiril Domuschiev, met with the former finance minister Temenuzhka Petkova (GERB-UDF) to mitigate the proposed increases in the social security contributions and dividend tax.[7] Concerns exist that the tax hikes on private businesses to fund state-sector wages can be considered a governmental mechanism to limit the private sector and increase grip over state institutions and funding streams.[8] Citizens also remained cautious about the increased borrowing and the long-term effects of the budgetary framework.

THE PROTESTORS demanded the resignation of the Zhelyazkov Government seen as a façade for the rule of Boyko Borisov and alignment with Delyan Peevski.[9] Interviewed participants shared that they are opposing the political model based on clientelist relations between state institutions and affiliated personal networks. Holding banners of Borisov, Peevski or Petkova, they expressed a desire to remain in Bulgaria, while also conveying concerns about the high proportion of young Bulgarians emigrating due to rising inequalities, limited economic opportunities, and deficiencies in fairness and institutional justice.[10] Fears of public funds being diverted into corruption schemes were salient. Strategic appointments to key ministries and agencies – such as the Ministry of Energy (e.g. Chiren gas storage and the case of The European Public Prosecutor's Office against *Bulgartransgaz*), the Ministry of Regional Development, and the Bulgarian Road Infrastructure Agency – illustrate how political influence is consolidated across critical sectors of governance limiting competition.[11] The protests in Bulgaria are driven not merely by fiscal grievances but by widespread frustration with systemic clientelism as well as the lack of transparency and effective judicial accountability.



Boyko Borisov (GERB), Delyan Peevski (DPS-NN), and Temenuzhka Petkova (GERB). PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

"THE PROTESTS IN BULGARIA ARE DRIVEN NOT MERELY BY FISCAL GRIEVANCES BUT BY WIDESPREAD FRUSTRATION WITH SYSTEMIC CLIENTELISM AS WELL AS THE LACK OF TRANSPARENCY AND EFFECTIVE JUDICIAL ACCOUNTABILITY."

The judicial system also experiences similar mechanisms with the appointment of the only candidate for Prosecutor General, Borislav Sarafov. The independent investigative outlet BIRD discussed that with the arrival of Sarafov in 2024, various key cases (such as Turkish Stream pipeline case, the Plovdiv Fair case, Barcelona Gate, Skullgate, among others) were either terminated or discontinued.[12] Borislav Sarafov's tenure as acting Prosecutor General of Bulgaria has become a focal point of constitutional and political dispute, with the Supreme Court of Cassation ruling his mandate expired in July 2025, while the Supreme Judicial Council maintains he remains in office, generating institutional gridlock.[13] New protests against Sarafov took place in January 2026. Oppositional parties demand his removal, and questions are raised about the impartiality of the judicial system.

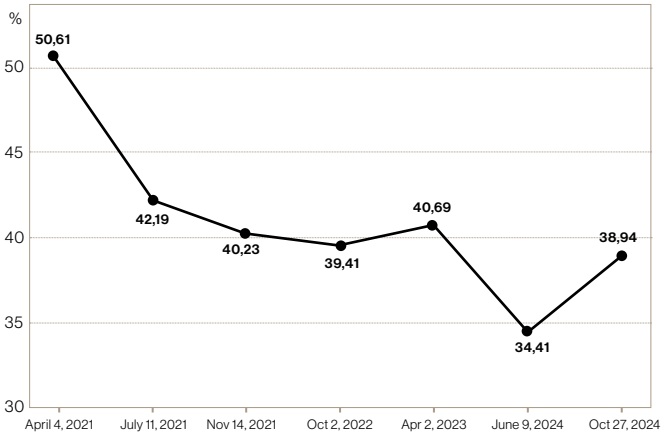
VARIOUS ACADEMIC STUDIES discuss the role of clientelism in contemporary Bulgarian politics,[14] understood as the distribution of benefits to individuals or groups in exchange for various kinds of political support[15]. Some of these examples include economic clientelism through public tenders or electoral clientelism. A policy paper from the World Bank Group indicates a high risk of corruption in Bulgaria when it comes to public procurement tenders between connected buyers and suppliers, as the risk is highest on local government level.[16] The report outlines formal or informal

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK



The Continuing Change party placed a pink piggy bank in central Sofia. The pig became a symbol of corruption during the protests.

Figure 1.
Voter turnout: Bulgarian parlamentary elections (2021–2024)



SOURCE: DATA FROM THE BULGARIAN CENTRAL ELECTION COMMISSION. GRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

mechanisms affecting public procurement deals, such as tenders with one bidder and no actual competition, short submission periods providing an advantage to bidders with internal information, personal ties between buyers and suppliers, as well as limited public information.[17] Such case was the public tenders of the Bulgarian Road Infrastructure Agency (API) for horizontal road marking in several Bulgarian regions. Miroslav Manolov, formerly associated with "Trace Group Hold" AD offered Anton Taskov, owner of "Bitulight" Ltd. to secure a regional contract in exchange for a 7% commission – 5% allegedly for senior API officials and 2% for himself.[18] Bulgaria has the second-highest road fatality rate in the EU[19], and corruption in the road infrastructure sector can be linked to compromised safety standards.

Electoral clientelism is also ubiquitous in times of political instability and multiple national parliamentary elections in Bulgaria. Gherghina, Saikkonen, and Bankov theorize three types of electoral clientelism and explore them among Bulgarian constituencies.[20] Electoral clientelist exchanges can be positive, negative (coercive), or programmatic.[21] Voters are "offered money, goods, or preferential access to jobs or welfare services" in positive clientelistic relations, while negative ones are characterized by "punishment for voting the wrong way".[22] Programmatic approaches include the mobilization of social and electoral support in favor of proposed policies based on goals. The practice of vote-buying[23] affects the outcome of the elections, especially with generally low levels of electoral turnout (Figure 1, above). The multiple rounds of elections demonstrate lowering voter turnout with a slight increase in October 2024.

"THE TEMPORAL CONTINUITY OF PROTESTS AGAINST PEEVSKI AND BORISOV FOR MORE THAN A DECADE WAS REPRESENTED IN MEMES, SONGS, POSTERS, AND POPULAR CULTURE."

In the context of low voter participation, electoral fraud – specifically vote-buying – can skew parliamentary representation by allowing a small number of paid votes to determine a party's success. The provisional government of Andrey Gurov, alongside the deputy Minister of Interior Ivan Anchev, took tougher actions against electoral manipulations through vote buying by carrying out over 226 police operations, detaining over 288 individuals, and issuing over 4000 warning protocols.[24] These recent developments demonstrate the scale of the practice. After the elections, the interior minister, Emil Dechev, announced the names of the parties with most allegations of electoral fraud: 631 alerts for DPS-NN and 318 alerts for GERB.[25] Vote-buying takes place on regional or local levels, which increases the importance of local elections and the forming of mayoral networks. This can further explain the pressure on oppositional mayors in Sofia and the recent imprisonment and release of the mayor of Varna, characterized by clashes between GERB-UDF and Continuing Change (*Produljavame Promyanata*, PP) representatives.

INTERESTINGLY, Gherghina, Saikkonen, and Bankov found that voters who are dissatisfied with the state of democracy or democratic institutions, as well as voters with little political knowledge, are more likely to accept positive clientelist relations.[26] These observations are relevant for understanding the mass protests of 2025 and 2026 as a larger dissatisfaction with institutions and the judicial system brought politically engaged Bulgarians to the streets of major cities such as Sofia, Plovdiv, and Varna.[27] However, the situation in rural areas or smaller towns is less

clear. The electoral turnout in April 2026 was higher than previous elections campaigns (see Figure 1) getting closer to the rates from April 2021.[28] This demonstrates increased willingness to participate but still remains quite low as about half of the eligible voters abstained. The tougher measures against votes purchasing practices and increased turnout may also help explain shifts among the leading parties in 2026. Increasing voters' turnout, political engagement outside big cities, and active civil society can ensure fairer elections.

Misconception 2:
This is a Gen Z protest? – Yes and no

Young Bulgarians were active during the 2025–2026 protests. Some defined the opposition to the budget as "Gen Z"-led initiative and as generational mobilization against repression, corruption, and social injustice through social media networks.[29] While it is true that many young Bulgarians were present in the protests and actively used Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook to raise awareness, to call people to come to the Square, it is important to note that they were not the only generation represented. Classifying the protest as "Gen Z" belittles their scale. Millennials, Generation Y, and X were all present as they were reminiscing about the lack of progress since the 2013–2014 mass protests against the Oresharski Cabinet, when Delyan Peevski was proposed for the head of the State Agency for National Security (DANS). The temporal continuity of protests against Peevski and Borisov for more than a decade was represented in memes, songs, posters, and popular culture.[30] Continuing Change installed a large pink pig statue (picture on the previous page) on the square in front of the Council of Ministers in Sofia, which created viral buzz and became a semiotic representation of corrupted politicians. PP and DB used the pink pig afterwards for their respective campaigns for the recruitment of volunteers called "Protect the Elections" and "You, Count!".[31] These initiatives promote bottom-up participation from citizens when counting the votes or observing the elections.

ANOTHER ASPECT worth mentioning for the 2025–2026 protests is that they united both liberal and conservative or far-right political opposition parties despite the differences in their geopolitical affiliations and ideological stands. This aspect remains neglected in various commentaries and coverage of the events. "Revival" and "MECh" announced through social media channels that they are joining the protests organized by PP-DB.[32] Radostin Vasilev, the leader of "MECh", called to join the protest on a Facebook vertical video, concluding:

> **This is a nonpartisan issue; here we are talking about our country. We are not talking about left or right, about Russophiles or Americophiles – we are talking about Bulgaria!** [33]

This temporary alignment, despite geopolitical and ideological differences, helps to explain both the scale of the protests and the participation of various voter groups.





The two screenshots are from the channels Evrokom (available at https://www.youtube.com/live/dAPR6xf-IgU?si=NEiZX-lLvoB8F1HH) and BNT1 (available at: https://youtu.be/ZiFeZ-53HAA?si=Pk1kLaBQ1-wZQTNO). Both programmes aired on November 26, 2025. The faces of protestors are blurred for safety reasons.

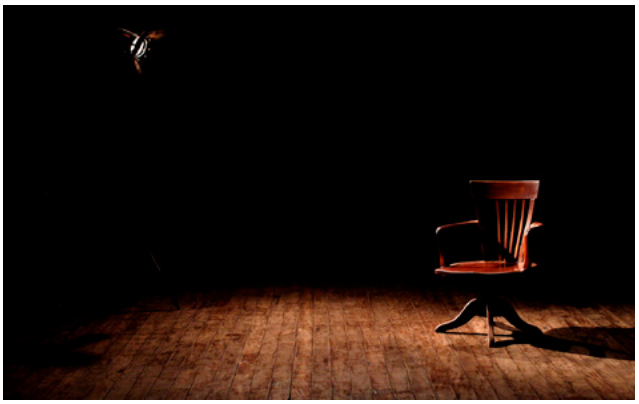
Misconception 3:
Freedom of the Bulgarian media and framing the protest? – Questionable

During the first days of the protests, a comparison of the television coverage by the Bulgarian National Television (*BNT*) and a smaller channel, *Evrokom*, went viral on Facebook. BNT depicted scarcely spread protestors and a lack of activity, while Evrokom, broadcasting at the same time, showed a different story. The streets were full of people holding national flags and placards on the "*Delnitsi*" show with Nikolai Kolev (see the two screenshots above). Two very different perspectives and depictions. This example raises questions about the accurate representation of events and the agency of media outlets and journalists in political processes. Slavtcheva-Petkova, Pogson, and Karadjov suggest that the long rule of Boyko Borisov and gradual media capture changed the role of outlets as they trade influence and manipulate information.[34] Their study discusses that corruption practices have been observed by journalists as they have increasingly precarious roles caught between political and business interests.[35] The framework of media capture is discussed by investigative journalists, who have been removed from large television networks and are currently working on private projects or have YouTube channels (such as Mirolyuba Benatova and Genka Shikerova). The "empty chair" in a television studio became a symbol of media censorship and removal of journalists asking difficult questions.

The "empty chair" metaphor appeared in Bulgarian public

SOURCE: FACEBOOK





Left: The bTV host Maria Tsantsarova with the cup that her employer claimed had a political message.

The "empty chair" metaphor was first used in 2017, and resurfaced in December 2025 with the removal of Maria Tsantsarova.

space in 2017 with the removal of Anna Tsolova from the morning blog of NOVA TV as her partner Viktor Nikolaev was leading the program alone for a limited time. Nikolaev was asking various questions about the purchase of fighter aircraft to the members of parliament Anton Todorov (GERB) and the deputy prime minister at the time Valeri Simeonov (NFSB, Patriotic Front). They threatened that he would lose his job if he continued to ask questions about the purchase of fighter aircraft for the Bulgarian Air Force.[36] This discussion concerned the debate between Rumen Radev and GERB-Patriotic Front about the purchase of the Swedish (Gripen) or American (F-16) fighter jets.[37] Anton Todorov said to Viktor Nikolaev:

> **You use very strong words, they will eat your bread [...] They have already eaten your colleague's bread (referring to Anna Tsolova). She [...] and she had kind of gone in some direction, but I see that her chair is missing.**[38]

"THE 'EMPTY CHAIR' PHENOMENON RESURFACED IN DECEMBER 2025 WITH THE REMOVAL OF MARIA TSANTSAROVA, THE HOST OF BTV'S MORNING SHOW."

The "empty chair" phenomenon resurfaced in December 2025 with the removal of Maria Tsantsarova, the host of bTV's morning show.

The removal of Maria Tsantsarova caused an uproar in Bulgarian journalistic circles as many gathered in front of the headquarters of the media outlet. While bTV initially kept quiet, a statement was published later. bTV claimed that Tsantsarova:

> **[...]allowed herself to express her political preferences on air [...] One example of this was her appearance on air with a branded cup with a message that is clearly associated with a currently ongoing political campaign alongside criticism towards her supervisor influencing the editorial content.**[39]

The branded cup had the print of "Time to make real change" as she published a photo of it on her Facebook page during the protests. While her confrontational interview techniques and perceived political biases surfaced in live broadcasts or debates with guests, Tsantsarova asked challenging questions and carried out investigative work. bTV Media Group's journalistic impartiality faced scrutiny previously after Anton Hekimyan, their former Director of News, Current Affairs and Sports, stepped down just two days before being announced as the GERB party's nominee for the 2023 Sofia mayoral elections.[40]

After Tsantsarova's removal from the morning blog, she crowdfunded and organised a parliamentary debate through the new media platform "IZVUN EFIR" (meaning OFF AIR). It was broadcast online through social media and partnering organisations such as Dnevnik[41], circumventing larger television groups. Progressive Bulgaria, GERB, BSP, and PP-DB participated, while Revival and DPS-NN refused to show up or did not respond to the invitation. Tsansarova entered the hall after a close-up shot of the notable mug.

CHANGES IN Bulgarian media landscape and its media capture were discussed with another former Director of News and Current Affairs at bTV, Venelin Petkov. His interview with Darik Radio summarized well current developments. Petkov stated about bTV:

> **I will not discuss the entertainment shows or the choice of primetime content, but from the journalistic practice point of view[...] it disappeared. It was replaced by information, infotainment, and publicist broadcasts where political propaganda is practically pouring in from one, another, and a third direction [...] What is left then? News without context.**

Bulgarian media system is characterized by high levels of political parallelism as media ownership is concentrated and influenced by business interests leading to a lack of critical reporting especially concerning sensitive issues or corruption.[42] Low levels of media freedom are also observed and a small number of media companies dominate the market.[43] The organization of the Bulgarian media system further deters journalistic investigations of corruption, transparency of decision-making, and availability of impartial

information to Bulgarian audiences. YouTube and various podcasts still provide platform for more investigative journalism as Bulgarian audiences search for alternative channels of information and discussions. Bulgarian audiences, their media repertoires, and lowering media trust remain some areas neglected by researchers.

April 2026: Campaigning

A recent report showed that the majority of large political parties invested substantial resources in collecting donations and media campaigning. Rumen Radev resigned from his presidential role in January 2026, joining the elections with "Progressive Bulgaria". He was earlier estimated to lead among preliminary polls.[44] His party is reported to have received the largest amount of donations both in terms of sum and number of donations – 779 834 euros, followed by DPS-NN with 300 350 euros and PP-DB with 44 671 euros.[45]

Similar trends are reflected in the spending on media. "Progressive Bulgaria" was a forerunner in advertising expenditure, spending over 196 000 euros followed by PP-DB with over 172 000 euros and Revival with 163 000 euros. However, the parties differed in their selection of outlets and approaches. "Progressive Bulgaria" and "Revival" focused on major television channels such as BNT, Nova, bTV, and Evrokom. PP-DB had a more mixed approach by choosing similar television channels, but also radio (BNR and Darik Radio), and news outlets. Delyan Peevski's DPS-NN and GERB did not follow the same pattern but prioritized digital web/news portals or aggregators such as Vesti.bg, Dir.bg, 24 hours, Epicenter or Aktualno with lower general expenditure.[46] Social media campaigning through Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram was also visible as political leaders often presented themselves visiting constituencies or campaigning.

Conclusion: What is next?

The political mobilization of Bulgarian citizens, unity across oppositional parties, and the sheer scale of the protests resulted in the successful withdrawal of the budget. That being said, a new budget has not yet been approved, as Bulgaria has entered the Eurozone without a budgetary framework. Some media outlets claimed that the budget would not be approved until the summer, thereby continuing the previous year's financial framework.[47] This gives the impression of a country running on autopilot without long-term policy planning. The new party of the former Bulgarian president Rumen Radev will play a key role in deciding the 2026 budgetary framework. Bulgarian political landscape will be restructured after Rumen Radev's electoral victory in April 2026. His party "Progressive Bulgaria" has been the first one to gain full majority since 1997 when the UDF won 137 seats.[48] Five parties are expected to enter the Bulgarian parliament.

Rumen Radev's party "Progressive Bulgaria" is the winner in April 2026 with 44.59% of the votes in the 52nd National Assembly.[49] The difference between Progressive Bulgaria and GERB-UDF (13.39%) or PP-DB (12.62%) is substantial, demonstrating Bulgarians wish for change or a new alternative. Other parties entering the parliament are DPS (7.12%) and Revival (4.26%). Progressive Bulgaria and PP-DB were the most popular among gen Z and millennial voters. According to Trend research, Progressive Bulgaria captured 18.5% of former PP-DB voters and 15.7% of those previously aligned with GERB, demonstrating that constituencies with Euro-Atlantic leanings also chose Radev.[50] Rumen Radev's position favouring a more "pragmatic" approach to relations with the Russian Federation has also attracted former voters of Revival (10.7%).[51] BSP remains outside the parliament for the first time after the transition period in the 1990s. Both ITN and BSP-UL failed to cross the electoral threshold, similar to the electoral fate previously experienced by GERB's former coalition partners, such as the Patriotic Front and the former Reformist Bloc. A similar governing arrangement (sglobka) eroded PP-DB's support in previous elections. Radev addressed the nation after the election day stating in front of Associated Press:

> **Bulgaria will make every effort to continue on its European path. But believe me, a strong Bulgaria and a strong Europe need critical thinking and pragmatism. Europe has fallen victim to its own ambition to be a moral leader in a world without rules.**[52]

This statement summarises aspects of the party's ideology, foreign policy orientation, and national priorities.

Winning the elections is not a guarantee for stability in Bulgarian politics. Smaller parties were ousted from Bulgarian politics in April 2026 while Radev's majority can put an end to an endless cycle of elections. However, little is known about the new party, its policy goals, its commitment to profound reforms, or its geopolitical stands within the European Union. More substantial reforms require political partnerships with other parties. For example, Progressive Bulgaria and PP-DB can work together towards the replacement of the Supreme Judicial Council, but their geopolitical differences remain alongside GERB and DPS presence in the Parliament. The Bulgarian voters have opened the political arena to a new actor in times of instability and rising costs of living, but the present consolidation of public trust remains uncertain. Political parties will have the significant task of negotiating and reaching agreement on key domestic policies and reforms, as a lack of alignment on foreign policy or public expenditure can be major obstacles. In Bulgaria, protest is not merely a reaction – it is a form of democratic participation, as the results from this round of elections demonstrated a willingness for change despite the unknown. Each wave of mobilization reflects a society unwilling to relinquish its commitment to accountability, transparency, and reform as Bulgarians want to live in a fairer and more equal state.

Alexandra Brankova is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of Political Science, Swedish Defence University and an Affiliated Researcher at the Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University.

Note: Borislav Sarafov submitted a resignation request to the prosecutors' office April 22, 2026.

references

1 Kate Hairsine, “Bulgaria sees massive protests against budget, corruption”, *DW*, December 12, 2025. Available at: https://www.dw.com/en/bulgaria-sees-biggest-protest-in-years/a-74975871

2 This formulation appeared in various media outlets. Some of the examples included: Lara Jakes, “Did We Do That? Gen Z Protesters Help Tip Balance Against Bulgaria’s Leaders”, *New York Times*, December 12, 2025. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/12/world/europe/bulgaria-young-protesters-gen-z.html ; “Bulgaria protests: Gen Z forces government to scrap tax plan”, *The Times*, December 16, 2026. Available at: https://www.thetimes.com/world/europe/article/bulgaria-protests-news-2rnbs0h3p?gaa_at=eafs&gaa_n=AWEtsqdWQdx3br_rnNtwX6fOMX-wXOE_s2Y3CN_cNx-IHyF9GkOgDyRAolHLPZfS24s%3D&gaa_ts=6969e795&gaa_sig=WsByRMouWWM5SMGzu0q1qCSGfn5BLKJUbS8b6pJ4Xa8Sp_mQOT8tyMKfmvP0AFF-5dLK1FIJR_VGYQe_xvLqDw%3D%3D

3 “How to join the euro area”, Council of the European Union, 2025. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/join-the-euro-area/

4 These details are available in the suggested budget, pages 121–123: https://www.minfin.bg/bg/legislation7/572 This was also discussed on Bulgarian media outlets. Cvetelina Sokolova. “Бюджет 2026: Дефицит под 4 млрд евро, нов дълг – над 10 млрд евро [Budget 2026: Deficit under €4 Billion, New Debt over €10 Billion].” *Mediapool.bg*, November 3, 2025. Available at: https://www.mediapool.bg/byudzhet-2026-defitsit-pod-4-mlrd-evro-nov-dalg-nad-10-mlrd-evro-news376867.html

5 Details about the suggested 2026 budget can be found on the page of Bulgarian Ministry of Finance for the period November and December 2025. Available at: https://www.minfin.bg/bg/legislation7/572

6 The budget and the software of the National Revenue agency (SUPTO) was discussed widely on Bulgarian media. Some sources include: *Darik Radio*, “Бюджет 2026: Какво се крие зад цифрите” [“Budget 2026: What is hidden behind the numbers”], November 6, 2025. Available at: https://dariknews.bg/novini/bylgariia/biudzhet-2026-kakvo-se-krie-zad-cifrite-2435972 ; Vasil Minkov and Vera Denizova, “Бюджет 2026: ГЕРБ е склонна да отстъпи от данък “дивидент” и СУПТО (обновена)” [“Budget 2026: GERB is willing to give up on the “dividend” tax and SUPTO (updated)”], *Capital*, November 28, 2025. Available at: https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/ikonomika/2025/11/28/4857918_pregovorite_po_bjudjet_2026_gerb_e_sklonna_da_otstupi/

7 Bulgarian National Television, “Bulgaria’s Draft Budget 2026 to Be Amended Following Talks with Employers and Trade Unions,” *BNT News*, November 28, 2025. Available at: https://bntnews.bg/news/bulgaria%E2%80%99s-draft-budget-2026-to-be-amended-following-talks-with-employers-and-trade-unions-1367233news.html

8 Svetoslav Todorov, “Bulgaria Govt Mulls Scrapping Budget Plan as Protests Rock Sofia”, *Balkan Insight*, November 27, 2025. https://balkaninsight.com/2025/11/27/bulgaria-govt-mulls-scrapping-budget-plan-as-protests-rock-sofia/

9 “Thousands Rally Again in Bulgaria to Demand Government’s Resignation”, *Reuters*, December 11, 2025. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/world/thousands-rally-again-bulgaria-demand-governments-resignation-2025-12-10/

10 Ibid. The author also observed interviews with protestors on various web sources and Bulgarian media outlets.

11 “EU Top Prosecutor Suspends Bulgarian Prosecutor Colleague Amid Probe”, *Politico EU*, March 28, 2025. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-top-prosecutor-suspends-bulgarian-prosecutor-colleague-amid-probe/

12 Gesho Ivanov, “Sarafov’s Big Prosecutorial Laundering Continues in 2024”, *BIRD – Investigations and Data Journalism Project*, January 10, 2025. Available at: https://bird.bg/en/acting-sarafov-in-action-2024/

13 These developments were covered extensively by Bulgarian news outlets. Some examples include: https://www.novinite.com/articles/234697/Bulgaria%E2%80%99s+Supreme+Court+Declares+Sarafov+No+Longer+Acting+Prosecutor+General ; https://www.bgonair.bg/a/2-bulgaria/396589-konstitutsionna-kriza-i-sporove-okolo-mandata-na-borislav-sarafov; https://www.bta.bg/en/news/1048464-protesters-in-sofia-varna-and-plovdiv-demand-acting-prosecutor-general-sarafov

14 Some of these studies are: Milena Benovska-Sabkova, “Small Places, Large Networks: Transformation of Clientelism in Bulgaria”, In *Klientelismus in Südosteuropa: 54. Internationale Hochschulwoche der Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft in Tutzing*, 5–9 Oktober 2015, (Südosteuropa-Jahrbuch, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang), 43, 31–48; Jonathan Hopkin,“Clientelism and Party Politics.” In *Handbook of Party Politics*, eds., Richard S. Katz and William J. Crotty (London: Sage Publications, 2006) 406–412; Henrik Örnebring, “Clientelism, Elites, and the Media in Central and Eastern Europe”, *The International Journal of Press/Politics* vol. 17, no. 4 (October 2012): 497–515; Sergiu Gherghina, Inga Saikkonen, and Petar Bankov, “Dissatisfied, Uninformed or Both? Democratic Satisfaction, Political Knowledge and the Acceptance of Clientelism in a New Democracy”, *Democratization* vol. 29 no. 2 (2022): 211–31; Radosveta Vassileva, “Is It Possible to Fight Corruption in a Post-Communist Captured State? The Case of Bulgaria.” In *Contemporary Economic Crime: Issues and Challenges*, eds., Michala Meiselles, Nicholas Ryder, and Penelope Giosa (1st ed. London: Routledge, 2025) 85–94.

15 Jonathan Hopkin, 2006.

16 Mihaly Fazekas, Viktoriia Poltoratskaia, and Bence Tóth, *Corruption Risks and State Capture in Bulgarian Public Procurement* (Policy Research Working Paper 10444. Washington, D.C.: World Bank, May 2023). Available at: https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/39828

17 Ibid.

18 “Разследване на АКФ разкрива корупционна схема за милиони в Агенция „Пътна инфраструктура“ |Investigation of AKF reveals multi-million corruption scheme at Road Infrastructure Agency], *Anti-Corruption Fund*, May 25, 2025. Available at: https://acf.bg/bg/razsledvane-na-akf-razkriva-koruptsio/

19 “Road Death Statistics in the EU (Infographic)”, *European Parliament* (2024). Last updated October 20, 2025. Accessed February 13, 2026. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20190410STO36615/road-death-statistics-in-the-eu-infographic

20 Sergiu Gherghina, Inga Saikkonen, and Petar Bankov, 2022, 211–31.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 213

23 Isabela Mares, Alina Muntean, and Tsveta Petrova, “Pressure, Favours, and Vote-buying: Experimental Evidence from Romania and Bulgaria”, *Europe-Asia Studies* vol. 69, no. 6 (2017): 940–960.

24 “Премиерът Гюров: Високата избирателна активност е по-силна от всички криминални схеми” [“Prime Minister Gyurov: High voter turnout is stronger than all criminal schemes”], Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria, April 15, 2026. Available at: https://www.gov.bg/bg/prestsentar/novini/premierat-gyurov-visokata-izbiratelna-aktivnost-e-po-silna-ot-vsichki-kriminalni-shemi

25 “МВР с данни кои партии са купували гласове” [”Ministry of Interior with data on which parties bought votes”], Bulgarian National Television News, April 19, 2026. Available at: https://bntnews.bg/news/mvr-s-danni-koi-partii-sa-kupuvali-glasove-1389256news.html

26 Sergiu Gherghina, Inga Saikkonen, and Petar Bankov, 2022.

27 “Protests in Sofia, Varna and Plovdiv Demand Resignation of Acting Prosecutor General Sarafov”, *Novinite.com* (Sofia News Agency), January 22, 2026. Available at: https://www.novinite.com/articles/236587/Protests+in+Sofia%2C+Varna+and+Plovdiv+Demand+Resignation+of+Acting+Pros

ecutor+General+Sarafov; “Thousands go out on protest in Sofia and major cities across Bulgaria”, *Radio Bulgaria* (BNR News), December 1, 2025. Available at: https://bnrnews.bg/en/post/394549/thousands-go-out-on-protest-in-sofia-and-major-cities-across-bulgaria

28 At the time of the submission of this article the measured electoral turn out on April 19, 2026 at 16:00 was 34.63%, this was 4 hours before the closure of the voting stations. Some research agencies such as Alfa Research and Market Links https://results.cik.bg/pe202604/aktivnost/index.html

29 Ivaylo Dinev, “Why Bulgaria Became a Success Story for the Gen Z Protests”, *ZOiS Spotlight* no. 2 (2026), Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS), January 28, 2026. Available at: https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/why-bulgaria-became-a-success-story-for-the-gen-z-protests

30 Nikolay Lavchiev, “Как протестът срещу Пеевски и Борисов влезе в поп културата [How the Protest Against Peevski and Borisov Entered Pop Culture]”, *Svobodna Evropa*, December 3, 2025. Available at: https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/protest-meme-borisov-peevski-budzhet-pesni-bezobrazie-kultura/33611231.html

31 “Прасето от протестите тръгва на турне из страната [The Pig from the Protests Goes on Tour Across the Country], Continuing Change *Promeni.bg*, January 16, 2026. https://promeni.bg/praseto-ot-protestite-tragva-na-turne-iz-stranata/

32 Lăchezar Lisitsov, “Цялата опозиция в НС се включва в протеста на ПП ДБ срещу бюджета [The Entire Opposition in the National Assembly Joins the PP DB Protest Against the Budget]”, *Club Z*, November 26, 2025; last edited December 2, 2025. Available at: https://clubz.bg/168313

33 This quote is taken from the Facebook video published on November 25, 2025 from the profile of Radostin Vasilev. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1MUzggsBX3/

34 Vera Slavtcheva-Petkova, Mark Pogson, and Christopher Karadjov., “Media Capture, Survival of the Corruptest and Journalistic Agency: The Case of Bulgaria.” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* (2025).

35 Ibid.

36 European Federation of Journalists, “Bulgaria: Deputy PM Threatened TV Journalist Viktor Nikolaev”, October 10, 2017. Available at: https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2017/10/10/bulgaria-deputy-pm-threatened-tv-journalist-viktor-nikolaev/

37 Martin Dimitrov, “US Coaxes Bulgaria to Buy F-16 Fighter Jets”, *Balkan Insight*, December 20, 2018. Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2018/12/20/usa-sweden-raise-the-stakes-in-the-battle-to-deliver-bulgaria-s-new-jet-fighters-12-20-2018/

38 This quote is taken from the interview on NovaTV and materials published on the website of bTV. bTV Новините. “Заплахи към водещия Виктор Николаев: Внимавайте, вашата колежка вече я няма” [Threats toward host Viktor Nikolaev: Be careful, your colleague is already gone], October 6, 2017. Available at: https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/zaplahi-kam-vodeshtija-viktor-nikolaev-vnimavajte-vashata-kolezhka-veche-ja-njama.html

39 “bTV и Мария Цънцарова се разделят: Медията няма да се поддаде на външен натиск и стартира процес по прекратяване на взаимоотношенията с нея“ [bTV and Maria Tsantsarova Part Ways: The Media Will Not Yield to External Pressure and Starts a Process of Terminating Relationships with Her], *bTV*, December 22, 2025. Available at: https://www.btv.bg/za-btv/spetsialno/btv-i-marija-cancarova-se-razdeljat.html

40 “Bulgaria’s GERB nominates journalist Anton Hekimyan as Sofia mayor candidate”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Bulgarian Service*, September 25, 2023. Available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-gerb-sofia-mayor-hekimyan/32608280.html

41 Mariana Aleksandrova, “Големият предизборен дебат на "Извън ефир"" [“The Big Pre-election Debate of “IZVUN EFIR”], Dnevnik, April 14, 2026. Available at: https://www.dnevnik.bg/izbori-2026/2026/04/14/4902521_video_na_jivo_golemiiat_predizboren_debat_na_izvun_efir/

42 Dessislava Boshnakova and Desislava Dankova, “The Media in Eastern Europe,” in *The Media Systems in Europe*, ed. Stylianos Papathanassopoulos and Andrea Miconi (Cham: Springer, 2023), 163–90.

43 Ibid.

44 Ivana Sekularac, Edward Mcallister, and Stoyan Nenov, “Bulgarian President Radev Resigns amid Speculation He Will Form His Own Party,” Reuters, January 19, 2026, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/bulgarias-president-radev-resigns-2026-01-19/ “‘Маркет Линкс’: Румен Радев – с най-високо доверие от 51%, при избори сега – влиза в парламента с 25.6%’ [Market Links”: Rumen Radev Has the Highest Trust Rating at 51%; If Elections Were Held Now, He Would Enter Parliament with 25.6%], bTV Novinite, February 16, 2026. https://btvnovinite.bg/predavania/tazi-sutrin/market-links-rumen-radev-se-polzva-s-naj-visoko-doverie-51-ako-sega-bjaha-izborite.htm

45 Institute for Public Environment Development, “Над 1 млн. евро са даренията към третата седмица на кампанията” [“Donations exceed 1 million euros by the third week of the campaign”], April 11, 2026. Available at: https://openparliament.net/2026/04/11/над-1-млн-евро-са-даренията-към-третата-с/ l

46 Institute for Public Environment Development, “Партиите похарчиха близо милион евро за медийна реклама в кампанията” [“The parties spent nearly a million euros on media advertising in the campaign”], April 17, 2026. Available at: https://openparliament.net/2026/04/17/партиите-похарчиха-близо-милион-евро/

47 Dobromir Nikolov, “Цялостен бюджет за 2026 година няма как да има поне до лятото” [There will be no comprehensive budget for 2026 until at least the summer], BTV News, February 5, 2026. Available at: https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/cjalosten-bjudzhet-za-2026-godina-njama-kak-daima-pone-do-ljatoto.html?campaignsrc=clipboard

48 Velina Gospodinova, “За първи път от почти 30 години: Радев ще има пълно мнозинство” [“For the first time in almost 30 years: Radev will have a full majority”], Capital, April 20, 2026.

49 This information is from 20th April (afternoon), with 100% of analysed votes when this article was submitted for printing. The percentages are taken from the website of the Central Election Commission: https://results.cik.bg/pe202604/rezultati/index.html

50 “От кои партии е дръпнал гласове Румен Радев, най-много от ПП-ДБ“ [“From which parties did Rumen Radev get votes, most from PP-DB?”], 24 Chasa, April 19, 2026. Available at: https://www.24chasa.bg/bulgaria/article/22695502

51 Ibid.

52 This quote is taken from Associated Press News website. “Tired of political turmoil, Bulgarians give ex-president a convincing mandate for change”, Associated Press News, April 20, 2026. Available at: https://apnews.com/article/bulgaria-election-radev-borissov-corruption-russia-oligarchs-2f821c5a659a8ca4ab9dfe28b9138236 . The full video address and statement can be watched here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSVAzxdcjZ4 (DRM News, April 19, 2026).

WORLDS APART, STRUGGLES ALIKE

Early-career academics in Albania and Sweden

by **Gilda Hoxha** and **Joakim Ekman**

abstract

Early-career academics (ECAs) generally experience insecure employment conditions, intense competition for research funding, and limited access to effective mentorship. Postdoctoral career pathways are marked by uncertainty and precarity, with short-term contracts and high expectations for research output, teaching, and administrative work. Drawing on interviews with ECAs in Sweden and Albania, this essay identifies a striking convergence in their experiences despite substantial differences in national academic systems. The findings suggest that these difficulties are not merely country-specific but reflect broader structural characteristics of contemporary European academia. The persistence of such conditions highlights a systemic disconnect between doctoral training and sustainable academic careers, pointing to the need for reforms that promote long-term career stability and healthier research environments. The essay also reveals differences between Albanian and Swedish ECAs' career aspirations and experiences of gender equality.

KEYWORDS: Early-career academics, academic precarity, comparative higher education, Albania, Sweden.

Life for most individuals who remain in academia after completing their PhD is far from being all sunshine and rainbows. On the contrary, the reality can be quite challenging, according to the literature on early-career academics (ECAs). Many ECAs find themselves working on short-term contracts, which creates persistent uncertainty about their professional future. Securing grants and funding, which are essential for career advancement, is highly competitive and often difficult to achieve without an already established track record. In addition to these fundamental uncertainties, ECAs must balance demanding responsibilities: producing high-quality research, delivering effective teaching, and sometimes managing administrative duties.[1] This juggling act can be overwhelming, with the heavy workload frequently leading to stress and even burnout. Above all, there is intense pressure to publish regularly in international academic journals, which is crucial for establishing academic credibility and securing promotions.[2] The demands of the job often extend beyond normal working hours, encroaching on personal life and overall wellbeing.

These challenges represent some of the more general struggles faced by junior academics. Yet beyond these, other difficulties are also common. For instance, many ECAs experience a sense of isolation after their PhD, as they often no longer have a formal supervisor to provide guidance and support. Finding mentors or advisors becomes a personal responsibility, which can be a daunting task.[3]

Furthermore, female junior academics, and ECAs who belong to minority groups, face additional obstacles. These can include implicit biases, unequal access to networking opportunities, and challenges related to work-life balance (particularly for those juggling family responsibilities). Additionally, the lack of role mod-



University of Tirana, Albania. PHOTO: UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA



Lund University, Sweden. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

els and mentors can exacerbate feelings of exclusion and limit opportunities for career progression.[4]

GIVEN THESE SIGNIFICANT challenges, it is not surprising that many ECAs question the attractiveness of a long-term academic career. In this text, we compare the perspectives and experiences of three ECAs in Albania with those of their counterparts in Sweden. The accounts from Albania were gathered in spring 2025, while the Swedish perspectives were collected a year earlier, in spring 2024.[5] We posed a similar set of questions to both groups, starting with their overall impressions of life as (post-doctoral) researchers in academia, followed by their access to senior mentors or role models, their experiences with gender inequality, and finally, their outlook on the future: do they see themselves still working in academia ten years from now?

The comparison between these two markedly different European cases (Albania and Sweden) is inspired by a research design known to political scientists as the "most different systems design". This approach involves selecting cases that differ widely across various background factors (such as culture, economy, and political structures) but share a similar outcome. The goal is to identify the common factor(s) that might explain this shared result.[6] In this instance, both Albania and Sweden have higher education systems formally aligned international standards; however, they differ significantly in institutional capacity, research infrastructure, and developmental maturity. While Sweden's research and research training systems meet EU standards, Albania continues to face major challenges in modernization, gender equality, and the development of research infrastructure, even if we have witnessed notable improvements in recent years.[7]

The next section provides a snapshot overview of the general higher education contexts in Albania and Sweden in order to situate the analysis, before turning to the actual interviews.

Higher education institutions background: Albania and Sweden

Higher education institutions in Albania operate as both public and private entities under the national regulatory framework. The Albanian higher education system has undergone significant transformation over the past decades, marked by substantial reforms and persistent challenges. These changes have been largely driven by the country's transition from a centralized, state-controlled model to a more autonomous and competitive academic environment. Key reforms have focused on enhancing quality assurance mechanisms, strengthening institutional governance, and aligning curricula and degree structures with European standards through participation in the Bologna Process.[8]

Despite these efforts, the sector continues to face challenges such as limited research funding, ongoing brain drain, and insufficient linkages between universities, the labour market, and international academic networks. These dynamics highlight the ongoing struggle to balance system expansion with quality and societal relevance within Albanian higher education. In particular, a remaining significant challenge is the absence of a clearly defined and sustainable career path for early-stage researchers, which limits professional development opportunities and long-term academic advancement. Combined with constrained research funding and structural barriers, these shortcomings

"THE SECTOR CONTINUES TO FACE CHALLENGES SUCH AS LIMITED RESEARCH FUNDING, ONGOING BRAIN DRAIN, AND INSUFFICIENT LINKAGES BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES, THE LABOUR MARKET, AND INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC NETWORKS."

continue to hinder the growth and retention of young researchers within Albanian higher education.[9]

In Sweden, higher education institutions consist of universities and university colleges, all operating under the same national legislation. The Swedish higher education system is fully aligned with the Bologna Process, and universities and university colleges enjoy a high degree of institutional autonomy in areas such as internal governance, curriculum design, staffing, and research priorities. Quality assurance and compliance with national legislation are overseen by the Swedish Higher Education Authority.[10]

ALL THE SAME, ECAs are not seldom described as a particularly vulnerable group in Swedish academia as well. They occupy an uncertain position between having attained formal recognition as independent scholars (i.e., the completion of a PhD), yet lacking the security of a long-term employment. This liminal status creates professional and existential ambiguity. More specifically, Swedish junior researchers face a range of interconnected challenges, including decisions about where and what to publish, whom to seek for mentorship and guidance, and how to balance institutional expectations and performance metrics with personal values, research interests, and long-term career aspirations.[11]

Thus, despite the differences outlined above, early-career academics (ECAs) in both Albania and Sweden face broadly similar challenges in academic career progression. These challenges, however, differ in their intensity and institutional context. Sweden benefits from more established career frameworks, stronger institutional support, and more robust research funding, whereas ECAs in Albania confront more severe constraints stemming from limited resources and less developed career structures. Turning now to the interview data, the analysis seeks to further illuminate both the shared experiences and the key divergences shaping the career trajectories of early-career academics in Sweden and Albania.

"EARLY-CAREER ACADEMICS (ECAS) IN BOTH ALBANIA AND SWEDEN FACE BROADLY SIMILAR CHALLENGES IN ACADEMIC CAREER PROGRESSION."

Academic life: A balance of freedom and precarity

Most of the ECAs we interviewed, in both countries, acknowledged the appeal of academic life. After years spent grappling with their doctoral theses, entering the postdoctoral stage brought a sense of accomplishment and intellectual freedom, not seldom accompanied by a degree of collegial recognition. However, the informants could easily to point out the less ideal aspects of this path. Chief among them was insecurity. One participant aptly described the experience as "a mix of intellectual fulfilment and systemic frustration". The frustration referred to precarious employment contracts, the constant pressure to secure external funding through grant applications, and the highly competitive nature of the work, where even temporary positions are limited. Added to this are the numerous demands related to publishing, teaching, and navigating inflexible bureaucratic systems. Here, the Swedish informants did not differ significantly from the Albanian. Both groups told the same story, very familiar from the literature on ECAs. At the same time, one of the Albanian ECAs noted though that he (temporarily working outside of Albania) faced one additional challenge: being a non-EU citizen. This made the already precarious work situation more complicated, due to visa requirements and residence permit bureaucracy.

Door-openers or gatekeepers?

When discussing mentors and role models, a noticeable difference emerged between the Swedish and Albanian informants. The Swedish ECAs identified a range of individuals who could offer support or guidance: former supervisors, senior scholars, but also (more experienced) peers who could be considered "junior-senior" mentors. These mentors provided various forms of help, from opening career-related doors and facilitating publication opportunities, to offering practical advice and social support. In contrast, the Albanian informants more readily identified mentors as older colleagues or professors who had the power to offer access to networks, international conferences, and publication opportunities. However, they also noted that such benefits could be withheld if relationships with these mentors were not cultivated properly. Despite these differences, all ECAs recognized the importance of having a more experienced person to turn to for advice and support.

One informant emphasized the need for "a structured mentoring culture": a system in which access to established scholars is institutionalized rather than left to chance or individual initiative. She connected this to a perceived gender imbalance, suggesting that men are generally less at risk of missing out on mentorship opportunities. This brings us to the third discussion point, gender inequality.

Experiences of gender inequality

As previously mentioned, existing research has highlighted the barriers faced by early-career women in academia. In the interviews conducted for this confined study, gender differences and inequality emerged as recurring themes across various contexts. However, the experiences reported differed notably between the Swedish and the Albanian ECAs.

While the Swedish informants were clearly aware of gender inequality as a broader issue, none reported experiencing unequal treatment personally. For them, concerns such as securing long-term contracts and managing external demands often took precedence over gender-related issues, which were sometimes perceived as secondary.

In contrast, the Albanian participants shared direct and personal accounts of gender inequality. One informant noted

that male colleagues were more frequently invited to co-author papers or join research projects through informal academic networks; opportunities she found less accessible. She also recalled hearing remarks suggesting that women in academia would "slow down" after starting families, whereas men were viewed as stable, long-term assets. Such perceptions, she believed, influenced decisions about hiring, promotion, and leadership opportunities. Another Albanian informant commented that female researchers were expected to work harder than their male counterparts to prove themselves.

Here, the informants confirm a situation that is well-known. Gender equality has been a topic of institutional discussion in Albania for many years, yet it continues to face significant obstacles in terms of implementation and broader cultural acceptance. Albania remains a predominantly patriarchal society, a characteristic that is also reflected within its universities, where informal norms, organisational cultures, and inherited hierarchies often reproduce gendered expectations. In the last few years, higher education institutions have started to introduce Gender Equality Plans, initiatives encouraged largely by the EU integration process and external project requirements rather than emerging from an internally driven strategic commitment.

TO BE NOTED, although most higher education institutions formally adhere to gender equality frameworks, in practice, their implementation remains limited. For many universities in Albania, the gender equality plan exists primary on paper and is not consistently integrated into recruitment, promotion, or decision-making process. Institutional inertia, lack of accountability mechanisms, and insufficient resources often prevent these plans from translating into tangible outcomes. As a result, gender disparities persist across academic ranks, particularly in leadership positions and research funding distribution.

Although the small sample size here prevents definitive conclusions about national academic cultures, it is reasonable to suggest that research environments with limited funding and fewer institutionalized practices may be more susceptible to informality and nepotism. In contrast, more professionalized and transparent systems may offer greater safeguards against such biases.[12]

Prospects for the future

What about the future? Can our informants, the ECAs in Sweden and Albania, imagine themselves remaining in academia ten years from now?

The Swedish respondents generally answered yes to this question. While they acknowledged the uncertainties inherent in academic careers (see above), they still saw staying in academia as both desirable and realistically achievable. Among the Albanian researchers, the picture was slightly more complex. All expressed a desire to remain in academia, but one highlighted the need for significant structural reforms. If the system continues to function as it currently does, she explained, alternative career paths, such as roles in think tanks, international organizations, or NGOs, could become more appealing. Leaving academia, in her view, would not signify failure but rather an adaptation to systemic limitations. Another Albanian informant put it more bluntly: "The moment I see it does not work for me, I'm out with no regrets".

Concluding remarks

As noted in the introduction, our tentative comparison between Albania and Sweden was guided (or perhaps rather, inspired) by a most different systems design. Despite substantial national differences, a striking convergence emerges: ECAs in both countries report remarkably similar challenges. Precarious employment conditions, intense competition for external funding, and a pronounced need for mentorship recur across both cases. This suggests that such challenges are not merely context-specific, but rather pervasive features of contemporary academic life. More broadly, there appears to be a structural gap in career opportunities and trajectories between PhD candidates and established researchers across European universities.

Naturally, differences exist between the two countries examined here, particularly regarding experiences of unequal treatment and expectations for the future. Nevertheless, the overarching pattern is consistent: the academic systems in both Sweden and Albania present substantial barriers to early-career researchers, irrespective of national context. This leads to a sobering conclusion. If two markedly different systems generate such similar accounts of struggle, the problem is unlikely to be purely local; instead, it points to a structural and widespread issue. Meaningful reform is therefore required; not only to provide early-career researchers with viable academic career paths, but also to strengthen the functionality of research environments in Sweden, Albania, and beyond.

Gilda Hoxha is a Lecturer at Universiteti Mesdhetar i Shqiperise, Albania.

Joakim Ekman is Professor in Political Science and the Director of CBEES at Södertörn University.

references

1 Cathy A. Trower, Ann E. Austin and Mary Deane Sorcinelli, "Paradise Lost: How the Academy Converts Enthusiastic Recruits into Early-Career Doubters", *American Association for Higher Education Bulletin*, vol. 53, no. 9, 2001, 3–6; Shuhua Chen, Lynn McAlphine and Cheryl Amundsen, "Postdoctoral Positions as Preparation for Desired Careers: A Narrative Approach to Understanding Postdoctoral Experience", *Higher Education Research and Development*, vol. 34, no. 6, 2015, 1083–1096; Cathelijn J. F. Waaijer et al., "Temporary Contracts: Effect on Job Satisfaction and Personal Lives of Recent PhD Graduates", *Higher Education*, vol. 74, no. 2, 2017, 321–339; Channah Herschberg, Yvonne Benschop and van Marieke van den Brink, "Precarious Postdocs: A Comparative Study on Recruitment and Selection of Early-Career Researchers", *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2018, 303–310; Carine Signoret et al., "Well-Being of Early-Career Researchers: Insights from a Swedish Survey, *Higher Education Policy*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2019, 273–296; Kate I. McCormick and Libba Willcox, "Mind the Gap: Transitions from Doctoral Graduates to Early Career Faculty", *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, vol. 14, 2020, 543–566; Fulvio Castellacci and Clara Viñas-Bardolet, "Permanent Contracts and Job Satisfaction in Academia: Evidence from European countries", *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 46, no. 9, 2021, 1866–1880.

2 Mark De Rond and Allan Miller, "Publish or Perish: Bane or Boon of Academic Life?", *Journal of Management Inquiry*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2005, 321–329; Seema Rawat and Sanjay Meena, "Publish or Perish: Where are We Heading?", *Journal of Research in Medical Sciences*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2014, 87–89.

3 Barbara Bagilhole and Jackie Goode, "The Contradiction of the Myth of Individual Merit, and the Reality of a Patriarchal Support System in Academic Careers: A Feminist Investigation", *European Journal of Women's Studies* 8, no. 2, 2001, 161–180; Agnes Bäker, Julia Muschallik and Kerstin Pull, "Successful Mentors in Academia: Are they Teachers, Sponsors and/or Collaborators?", *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2020, 723–735.

4 Peter van der Besselaar and Ulf Sandström, "Vicious Circles of Gender Bias, Lower Positions, and Lower Performance: Gender Differences in Scholarly Productivity and Impact", *Plos One*, 2017; Stina Powell, "Gender Equality in Academia: Intentions and Consequences", *International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities and Nations* 2018/1; Åsa Berggren, Cecilia Almlöv, Alexandra D'Urso and Ann Grubbström, "'Screwed from the Start': How Women Perceive Opportunities and Barriers for Building a Succesful Research Career", *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 7, 2022; Jacob D. Davidson et al., "Postdoctoral Researchers' Perspectives on Working Conditions and Equal Opportunities in German Academia", *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2023; Daniel Pizzolato et al., "Bridging the Gap – How to Walk the Talk on Supporting Early Career Researchers", *Open Research Europe*, 2023, https://open-research-europe.ec.europa.eu/articles/3-75; cf. Sarah Winslow and Shannon N. Davis, "Gender Inequality Across the Academic Life Course", *Sociology Compass*, vol. 10, no. 5, 2016, 404–416; Fredrik Bondestam and Maja Lundquist, "Sexual Harassment in Higher Education – A Systematic Review", *European Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 10, 2020, 397–419; Douina Bourbain, "Everyday Sexism and Racism in the Ivory Tower: The Experiences of Early Career Researchers on the Intersection of Gender and Ethnicity in the Academic Workplace", *Gender, Work and Organization*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2021, 248–267.

5 The junior researchers in Albania comprised three individuals, two women and one man. The Swedish junior researchers are described in Joakim Ekman, "Navigators in the Baltic Sea Region: Professional Strategies and Identity Constructions Among Early-Career Academics", *Baltic Worlds*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2024, 121–130.

6 Carsten Ackar, "On the Applicability of the Most Similar Systems Design in Comparative Research", International Journal of Social Research Methodology", vol. 11, no. 5, 2008, 389–401.

7 Ministry of Education and Sports, Albania, "Dokumenti i politikave të arsimit të lartë 2030: Për arsimin e lartë në harmoni me standardet ndërkombëtare, mbështetës i procesit të integrimit dhe zhvillimit të vendit [Higher education policy document 2030] (Government of Albania, 2025). https://arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Dokumenti-i-Politikave-te-Arsimit-te-Larte-18022025.pdf

8 European Commission, *European Higher Education Area: Bologna Process Implementation* (Brussels: European Commission, 2020); *Qendra e Botimeve Zyrtare* (QBZ), July 22, 2015. https://qbz.gov.al/eli/ligj/2015/07/22/80; Elona Saraci, *Albanian Higher Education in Perpetual Reform* (Tirana: Albanian Erasmus+ Office, 2017). https://erasmusplus.oead.at/fileadmin/Dokumente/.../Albania_presentation_in_Vienna__Austria.pdf

9 Erisa Kryeziu, *The Uncertain Journey of Albanian Students Towards a Good Job*. *Citizens*. (October 1, 2024). https://citizens.al/en/2024/10/01/rrugetimi-i-pasigurt-i-studenteve-shqiptare-drejt-nje-pune-te-mire/; cf. WBC-RRI-NET, "Enpowering Albanian Young Academics for Research and Innovation", 2022; Eriona Deda, "Scientific Research, Development and Innovation: a Priority for Socio-Economic Growth of a Contry", *Scientific Journal of Professional Studies*, vol. 6, 2025.

10 Swedish Council for Higher Education, "The Swedish Higher Education System" (Swedish Council for Higher Education website, 2024). https://www.uhr.se/en/start/recognition-of-foreign-qualifications/enic-naric-sweden/the-swedish-higher-education-system/

11 Jonatan Nästesjö, *Uncertainty, Worth, Identity: How Early Career Academics Navigate Evaluative Landscapes* (Lund: Department of Educational Sciences, 2024).

12 Ivalio Izvorski, Sergiy Kasyanenko, Michael M. Lokshin and Iván Torre, *Europe and Central Asia Economic Update, Fall 2024: Better Education for Stronger Growth* (Washington: World Bank, 2024).

IN SEARCH OF SOLIDARITY BETWEEN THE GLOBAL EAST AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

by **Birgit Poopuu** and **Benjamin Klasche**

Over the past four years, we have focused closely on imperial violence and how people respond to it. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has brought imperialism back to Europe and to the forefront of the consciousness of the people living there. After the invasion, we too provided analysis and taught about the postcolonial moment in the East[1]. In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where we are based, Russia's colonial and imperial ambitions have long been clear. Along with this knowledge came also strong criticism of Western Europe for failing to recognize them. Then came Hamas' assault on Israeli military bases and communities on October 7, 2024 and the subsequent violence of Israel directed at all inhabitants of Gaza. Many genocide studies scholars and international NGOs, including Human Rights Watch and the Israeli organization B'Tselem, have classified Israel's response as genocide. Some have even stated that it is a "textbook case of genocide."[2] Yet, pointing towards this colonial history and placing Hamas' actions in the context of decades-long Israeli oppression and "slow" genocide, attracted a lot of criticism. We have also pushed for seeing both Ukraine and Palestine in relation to each other as "interconnected and comparable in critical respects [...] where powerful states seize territory, erase subaltern identities, and deny national and minority rights".[3]



Keynote speakers: Nivi Manchanda and Madina Tlostanova at the opening of the conference.

The CEEShub's inaugural conference: "Between Peripheries: Critical-Relational Security from CEE and the Global South"

Date and location: January 22–25, 2026, Tallinn University, Estonia.

Organizers: Birgit Poopuu, Benjamin Klasche and Timothy Anderson, School of Governance, and Law and Society, Tallinn University. The CEEShub (Central and Eastern European Security Hub) is a research center at Tallinn University, with the aim of widening the security debates in CEE and uplifting new knowledge producers while increasing the capacity for evidence-informed policy making.

More info at: https://securityhub.ee

GIVEN THESE realities of imperialism and settler-colonialism ravaging Ukrainian and Palestinian communities, we were surprised to find that there was not just very little solidarity for Palestinians in Europe and the West, but also that there was very little solidarity for Ukrainians in the Global South (GS), a region fluent in identifying colonial violence. The lack of solidarity is evident, for example, in voting at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) over the last few years, where the G77 did not condemn Russian actions.[4] It begs the question of whether this is perhaps connected to the ambivalence of Ukraine towards the fate of the Palestinians and others in the Global South. Clearly, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's position is not ambivalent as he is openly aspiring to turn Ukraine into "Big Israel".[5] The fondness of Israel in Central and Eastern Europe is, of course, not limited to Ukraine, as the Estonian government just celebrated the opening of the Israeli embassy in Estonia. Estonian politicians routinely compare the country's situation with that of Israel – a democratic state threatened by an overwhelmingly large and hostile neighbor with imperial goals (Russia and the Arab world in this analogy). It has never made sense to us how many governments in Central and Eastern Europe were able to so pointedly identify Russian past and present aggressions as colonial and imperial in nature, but failed to see Israel's settler colonial project in the Levant.

The absence of solidarity

Naturally, the Global South has found itself quite comfortable in a rather "neutral" position towards Russia, while Ukraine has traditionally paid little to no attention to the Global South.[6] Yet even

more surprisingly, we saw that this divide was also present in academic debates, where scholars from the Global South denied their solidarity with Ukrainians because of their perceived privileges, and similarly, very few Ukrainian scholars used their platforms to advocate for the anti-colonial struggles of the South. Exceptions to these positions confirm the rule. It was this conundrum, the reluctance to see "other" oppressed, that led us to start thinking about the conference theme. We were further propelled by the notion of the Global East (GE), most prominently put forth in Martin Müller's article *In Search for the Global East: Thinking Between North and South*[7] in which he asks for strategic essentializing of the Global East to allow countries of the post-soviet space to escape its pertinent "in-betweenness" between North and South due to the fact that they are "too rich to be in the South, too poor to be in the North". You might ask: Where is the Global East? But Müller importantly notes that the important question is not where, but what it is. He calls it "slippery, hard to categorize" as it "contains colonizers and colonies, aggressors and victims; [and] some countries were both at the same time." Therefore, the Global East needs to be unpacked in a contextual way, and the essentializing refers to the importance of creating knowledge from the GE, and we further call for the distinguishing of the language of the political elite and many other groups who are more attentive to the risks of buddying up to the imperial project of the US.[8]

BUT IT IS NOT just that Soviet modernity is harder to grasp and less coherent; it is also that much less is known about it. The brutal colonial crimes of Western Europeans have created a Global South that has waged an incredible fight to create more visibility about its struggles in global centers of power. On the other hand, the Global East has almost no representation; it remains unknown - it is a silent bystander and has yet to make its perspectives known in global politics. This led to the comfortable myth of viewing the "Soviet Utopia" as a great alternative to US imperial violence. But this negates the experiences of peoples of the Global East that have been violently occupied, repressed and brutalized by the Soviet empire and want to "leave" it badly and join the West without adequate criticism of the project. Perhaps this is where we find the root of the lack of solidarity between the Global South and the East? In our view, a confident Global East can push back against the West's claims to universality and stand with the Global South in its long-running struggle over whose knowledge counts. Using the Global East as a method can "push towards an analysis of global connections and a decentering of knowledge production…It helps us avoid hemispheric binaries of rich and poor, powerful and powerless when thinking of the global"[9]. This matters because empires often manipulate the oppressed and turn them against one another. For many people, being trapped between two forms of power is an everyday reality. Again, we need to be able to hold the complexity of the notion that the Soviet Union brutalized the GE region and its people while it at the same time sided in solidarity with whoever happens to be on the other side of the US imperial project.

The Western gaze on Eastern Europe

The conference was not only about the connection of the two regions but about viewing security differently – a core theme of the Central and Eastern European Security Hub (CEEShub). Security has been at the center of European political discourse since 2022, yet it has also revealed enduring hierarchies in whose security is prioritized and who is authorized to "speak security". While the visibility of Central and Eastern European (CEE) actors has increased, dominant frameworks continue to center Western institutions and state elites, sidelining other voices. This is where the lack of epistemic power also carries over into the lack of agency assigned to countries in Central and Eastern Europe, which are either demoted by Western geopolitical thinkers to buffer zones or seen as an "Empty Steppe"[10] or *Bloodlands*[11] filled with disposable humans. Recently, a special issue discussing Ivan Kalmar's book *White but not Quite. Central Europe's Illiberal Revolt* carefully interrogates how the people in the East have been variously racialized and, owing to that, abused by different powerful actors from the West and by the imperial project in the region (then the Soviet Union, now Russia). For instance, the *Western gaze*, as Lewicki argues[12], has created stereotypical caricatures of Eastern Europeans so that they can be easily abused (e.g., cheap labor and human trafficking) and can be subject to civilizational projects as they are always seen as "not yet European enough".

"HOW CAN WE RETHINK SECURITY RELATIONALLY – AND FROM IN-BETWEEN SPACES OF KNOWLEDGE AND POWER?"

The CEEShub has been actively working towards strengthening the CEE agency by highlighting its epistemic power by centering knowledge from the region, especially by pointing to the marginalized and their experience. This is, of course, the theme the Global South is only too familiar with. These patterns echo broader dynamics across both the Global East and Global South, where lived experiences are often excluded from official security discourse. In places like Palestine and Syria, discourses that render civilians expendable remind us that security does not mean the same thing to everyone – and is not always experienced as safety. Our conference began from that shared terrain of marginalization to ask: how can we rethink security relationally – and from in-between spaces of knowledge and power?

Anti-colonial solidarity

Embracing the themes above, this conference offered a space to think through how our conceptualization of security changes once we start from a position of anti-colonial solidarity. Or as we put it: when we inhabit a space "in between peripheries". What changes in the way we think of security when we resist treating CEE as an exceptional case and instead situate it

within global structures of inequality, militarization, and securitization, alongside the Global South? We did not aim to flatten differences, but rather to carefully consider which privileges we hold and to what extent our security analyses resonate, if at all. We envisioned this conference to bring together thinkers from/on/ in CEE and the Global South to understand each other's lived experiences and oppressions, and to extend solidarity. We set out to create a space where we can safely start this conversation and think together.

Postsocialism and postcolonialism

Next to the open call addressed to a variety of scholarly communities, we actively attempted to guide the discussion towards debate and ultimately solidarity between the Global South and East by inviting keynote speakers broadly representing anti-colonial thinking in both spheres. First, we reached out to Professor Nivi Manchanda for her pathbreaking work on theorizing the role of race in security studies. In her writing, she asks "whether an anti-racist (sub)discipline is possible, and what strategies might tackle, and ultimately overturn, the racialized logics at the core of security studies"[13]. She also critically asks us to think about security from the margins, arguing that we need to "pivot towards the movements, the actors and the events that are shaping and challenging the contemporary security landscape."[14] This is very much in line with the CEEShub's critical-relational project. To "represent" the Global East, we turned to Professor Madina Tlostanova, who, in many ways, is one of the only scholars in the region centers on exploring coloniality in the post-Soviet space. Her exploration of the relationship between postsocialism and postcolonialism has offered some insights into why there is no solidarity between these spaces. She highlights, for example, that the Anglocentrism of postcolonial theory and the uneasiness of postcommunist thinkers to embrace the anti-capitalist and neo-Marxist critique that is inherent to postcolonial theory complicate intellectual and material solidarity. She further lays open the struggles of the Global East as a space emerging from defeatism and

"PARTICIPANTS APPEARED TO SPEAK PAST ONE ANOTHER OR REMAIN NARROWLY FOCUSED ON STRUGGLES WITHIN THEIR IMMEDIATE CONTEXTS"

feelings of backwardness; and yet calls attention to the inadequateness of both postcolonialism and postsocialism to express a universal experience across these spaces but that all differences and local peculiarities considered, she asserts that "there is a lot in the experience of the ex-second and ex-third worlds that allows for a meaningful dialogue and joined agency in the future".[15]

WE IMAGINED it might be difficult to come together and start conversations that have not been happening so far. During the conference, we noticed that rather than engaging with one another's positions, participants appeared to speak past one another or remain narrowly focused on struggles within their immediate contexts. Overall, rather than taking the sometimes-difficult steps required to imagine solidarity between the Global East and the South, there was a marked tendency to remain enclosed in the familiar narrative of one's own struggle and to elevate it. Often, the panels were visited by like-minded people, and there was a certain reluctance to meet and listen. We noticed that participants were at times still constrained by their positionalities and found it difficult to extend understanding. Hence, the opening and closing sessions were particularly tense, as the "two sides" appeared to encounter each other for what seemed almost for the first time. Nevertheless, there were clear indications of listening and learning. At the same time, fundamental disagreements on certain issues were openly expressed, which occasionally created discomfort among participants. This can nonetheless be considered a significant achievement of the conference, as it compelled scholars to step outside their academic bubbles and engage in dialogue with one another. For instance, one participant admitted that "the conference was deeply illuminating for me, especially on the topic of Ukraine". It felt uncomfortable at times, but all change is grounded in these feelings.

Epistemic violence

This matches patterns of engagement similar to those that have played out on recent scholarly platforms. Scholars from CEE have positioned themselves against the West's ignorance, erasure and epistemic violence.[16] Yet this is often done without deeper questions about colonial and imperial erasure elsewhere. At times, it seems the Global East has newly discovered the very real coloniality of the West against them, but an important analytical frame tends to be missing: the need to connect this discussion to the West's ongoing coloniality *vis-à-vis* the Global South. It is our suspicion that this situation is a product of not considering the role of whiteness or even white supremacy. What we mean is that questions about how and when the Global East has benefited from the global colonial structure, and what this means in relation to past and present violence in world politics, are usually not considered. Lewicki suggests the question of "what is [the CEE country's] relationship to Whiteness?" needs to be probed beyond prejudices and across histories of racism.[17] Further, the Global East has attempted to find fault with the Global South's project, either by citing its poor track record of extending solidarity to the GE or by pointing to its problematic relationship with the Soviet Union. At the same time, it is clear that there is insufficient awareness of the state-led authoritarian socialism practiced by the Soviet Union. We will now discuss these matters in turn.

AS SOON AS Russia's aggression took place, the West and East looked upon what they labelled African alleged mutism on the matter of Ukraine. Yet, as Siba Grovogui stresses,[18] the matter is much more complex and cannot be seen in an acontextual way. The West and the East cannot turn a blind eye to US imperialism and then

ask for immediate solidarity from African states when they are in a position of need. Grovogui explains this in the following way:

> **Put differently, *Africans are only called upon to express themselves on international relations only if and when their penchant for consistency and bluntness supports Western positions and interests*. Otherwise, their views, however coherent, are disregarded and the persons and entities pronouncing them presented as nuisance. If pressed, I suspect that vast majorities of African jurists would categorically deplore Russia's invasion of Ukraine as an abomination and a crime. The crime would be the crime of aggression. *The one crime that Western powers and Russia coalesced to exclude from the initial list of punishable crimes in the Rome Statute* that created the International Criminal Court. Weren't Africans among ones that fiercely advocated that the crime of aggression be added to the Rome Statute. This inclusion finally happened in Kampala on the 20th anniversary of the treaty. Even so, barely 40 states have ratified the Kampala Amendments. *The US and Russia have yet to sign the actual treaty*, let alone the Kampala Amendments.**

This suggests that solidarity is difficult to emerge when it is expected only in one direction. It instead requires a shared practice of condemning crimes and impunity wherever they occur. The problem with dealing with global coloniality and the relations this entails is that for a very long time, different parties have positioned themselves *vis-à-vis* the imperial power in their neighborhood rather than staying vigilant about how the US and Russia, in concert, uphold global coloniality. Which always leads to the question: Who, at the end of the day, benefits from violence in Ukraine, Palestine, Venezuela, Sudan, Yemen, Myanmar, Lebanon, Iran, the DRC and elsewhere?

ANOTHER ISSUE is that historically the Soviet Union has been positioned as an antithesis to the US imperial project and thus its politics has been romanticized and unfortunately often not studied from the point of view of those who had to live under the brutal terror and violence of this state-led socialism. The reasons for this are multiple, but two that we should carefully interrogate are: First, there is not a lot of awareness about the racialization of Eastern Europeans and the crimes and cruelty of the Soviet Union's policies[19]. Second, there is a refusal to critically assess why the Soviet Union supported anti-colonial movements in the Global South. This was not done to offer alternatives to imperialism and colonialism but to engage in inter-imperialist struggle with the US.

Non-arrogant perceptions

We locate a certain reluctance to listen to one another. The first keynote speaker, Madina Tlostanova, in an effort to set the stage for the conference, argued that "bottom-up transversal agency" is needed to truly think through the predicaments we are currently facing. Turning to Maria Lugones, Tlostanova gestured to her idea of a "non-arrogant perception" and invited us to relax the binarism in our gazes. Lugones's term of playful world-travel is invaluable, as it posits[20]:

> **[...] a horizontal practice of resistance to two related injunctions: the injunction for the oppressed to have our gazes fixed on the oppressor and the concomitant injunction not to look to and connect with each other in resistance to those injunctions through traveling to each other's 'worlds' of sense.**

"THIS SUGGESTS THAT SOLIDARITY IS DIFFICULT TO EMERGE WHEN IT IS EXPECTED ONLY IN ONE DIRECTION."

Maria Lugones reminds us to carefully think through our complex relationality with others. Can this not be a link for a coalition of non-arrogant perceptions from the peripheries? Perhaps, from here, we can offer a critical-relational imagination of security that is curious about imperial violence in all its guises, from the perspective of the oppressed.[21]

The second keynote by Nivi Manchanda teased out what the privileged owe to those living under oppression and discussed "fugitive solidarity" as a critical concept that could perhaps shed light on the question many writers have asked: how should the more privileged extend solidarity? Looking at Jean Genet's experience of extending solidarity to the Black Panthers and Palestinian resistance, Manchanda offers a preliminary roadmap for how one can use their privilege to stand against the oppressors and the death worlds they have created. In this way, as Manchanda argues, Genet's praxis was characterized by refusing the borders that structured life between him and his comrades by using his white privilege against racism in the US and against the genocide of the Palestinians.

"Between Peripheries"

The conference concluded with a roundtable discussion that underlined once more that thinking through the violence we are witnessing now is uncomfortable, painful and difficult. This roundtable demonstrated quite clearly that we need to be willing to sit with uncomfortable realities and not deflect. A particular exchange that captures the work ahead and was reiterated multiple times went something like this: The audience asked: "How can we make commensurable the efforts to support Ukraine with weapon systems while the same weapon systems and the military-industrial complex that produces them are delivering these weapons to Israel to slaughter Palestinians?" And a response to this question, but also to other versions of this question, was that "I don't like that my country (Ukraine) is used to create a response to violence in Gaza." Furthermore, "Why should we rank suffering?"

THIS EXCHANGE illustrates how analyses of imperialism often remain tied to identifying a single culprit rather than recognizing that imperialisms exist in plural; and that they are deeply connected with each other. Further, discussions of solidarity require contextual analyses that attend to the privileges and power relations different actors hold, and to how these shape both their praxis of solidarity and their analysis of imperialism. Indeed, this dialogue clearly portrays the value of thinking about resistance and solidarity "Between Peripheries," as the aim of our conference explicitly emphasized. The example above underscores the importance of the concept of global coloniality. It raises the question of how we can remain critical of the harms inherent in the military-industrial complex, while at the same time, with contextual nuance, analyze how this system may, in one instance, support the efforts of the oppressed groups in their struggles, and in another, stifle their cause and violently suppress them. There is an urgency to understand these dynamics if we want analyses of colonialism and imperialism that offer a more relational understanding of how they operate across spaces. This is not about creating a hierarchy of suffering; rather, it is about interrogating how the present system of militarism itself produces and solidifies such hierarchies. In other words, it is possible to recognize that oppressed peoples have the right to defend themselves in both contexts, while also acknowledging that in some cases the wider structures of global coloniality operate decisively against them. Under such conditions, resistance cannot be sustained in isolation. We therefore cannot afford security conceptualizations that leave some insecure; celebrate and analytically legitimize militarism in one context while remaining silent in another. The generative, if at times difficult, conversations at the conference showed the need to further explore the possibilities and limits of solidarity.

Birgit Poopuu and **Benjamin Klasche** are the Co-Directors of the Central and Eastern European Security Hub (CEEShub) at Tallinn University.

Acknowledgements: We would like to thank Çağla Demirel for encouraging us to submit the review to Baltic Worlds and giving us extremely useful comments on the draft of the manuscript. This review was written as part of the Horizon Twinning project "A critical relational perspective on peace & security in CEE", Project number: 101159581. Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (REA) or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

references

1 Maria Mälksoo, "The Postcolonial Moment in Russia's War Against Ukraine." *Journal of Genocide Research vol.* 25 (2023): 471–81.

2 Raz Segal, "A Textbook Case of Genocide": Israeli Holocaust Scholar Raz Segal Decries Israel's Assault on Gaza", *Democracy Now!* Available at: https://www.democracynow.org/2023/10/16/raz_segal_textbook_case_of_genocide

3 Çağla Demirel, "Solidarity islands in a sea of violence reflections on memory, genocide, and the summer of 2025" *Baltic Worlds* vol. 18 no. 2 (2025): 87-90.

4 Mahama Tawat, "The Russia-Ukraine War: Understanding the Global South's Vote at the UN and Its Implications for the Current World Order." *Third World Quarterly* vol. 46 no. 16 (2025): 2019–36.

5 https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/5/zelenskyy-says-wants-ukraine-to-become-a-big-israel

6 Yuliia Kurnyshova, "Ukraine and the Global South: The Ambiguities of a Postcolonial Perspective." *New Perspectives: Interdisciplinary Journal of Central & East European Politics & International Relations* vol. 32 no. 3 (2024): 272–89.

7 Martin Müller, "In Search of the Global East: Thinking between North and South", *Geopolitics* vol. 25 no. 3 (2020): 734–755.

8 Julian Go's argument about the anticolonial standpoint needs to be taken seriously if we go beyond essentializing geographies and are interested in speaking to anticolonial politics. See in more detail: Julian Go, "The Promise of Anticolonial Social Theory", in eds., Sujata Patel and Maureen Eger, *Anti-Colonial Global Scholarship* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2025).

9 Müller, "In Search of the Global East" (2020).

10 Olga Burlyok, "The myth of the 'empty steppe': how Europe misimagines Ukraine," *RAAM* October 14, 2025. Available at: https://platformraam.nl/artikelen/2913-the-myth-of-the-empty-steppe-how-europe-misimagines-ukraine

11 Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands. Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

12 Aleksandra Lewicki, "When, How, and in Relation to Whom is 'Race' at Play in Invocations of 'Eastern Europe'?" *Cultural Sociology vol. 18*(3) (2023): 416-421.

13 Nivi Manchanda, "The banalization of race in international security studies: From absolution to abolition", *Security Dialogue* vol. 52 (2021): 49-59.

14 Manchanda, "The banalization of race in international security studies" (2021).

15 Madina Tlostanova, "Postsocialist ≠ Postcolonial? On Post-Soviet Imaginary and Global Coloniality", *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* vol. 48 no. 2 (2021): 130–42.

16 Tereza Hendl, Olga Burlyuk, Mila O'Sullivan, and Aizada Arystanbek, "(En) Countering Epistemic Imperialism: A Critique of 'Westsplaining' and Coloniality in Dominant Debates on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine." *Contemporary Security Policy vol. 45(2)* (2024): 171–209.

17 Lewicki, "When, How, and in Relation to Whom is 'Race' at Play?" (2023).

18 Siba N'Zatioula Grovogui, "Putin's Ukraine aggression: how should an African respond?" *International Politics* vol. 60(1) (2023): 214-235.

19 Tereza Hendl & Selbi Durdiyeva, "On Collateral Damage, Selective Anti-Imperialism and the Path to Liberation." *American Communist History vol. 24(1–4)* (2025): 53–83.

20 Maria Lugones, *In Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing coalition against multiple oppressions.* (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003): ch. 4.

21 There is a need for an anticolonial standpoint that does not romanticise USSR politics like it has been done by many leftist thinkers who quote USSR leaders who committed heinous crimes rather than those who had to live under the USSR. For instance, Hendl and Durdiyeva (2025) argue that: "the voices of the affected and resisting populations are not given a proper hearing within Davis' account and the content of her speeches shows that their oppression is not taken into serious consideration."

Published online

PHOTO: JULIAN NYČA /WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



At the banks of the river Drina in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Wild peace and unruly memories

Why is it so easy to remember war and so hard to remember peace? In order to bring forth memories of peace we need to reconceptualize what we mean by peace. I propose the term *wild peace* as a conceptual and potentially radical move that engage our imagination and capture the lived, embodied and agential dimensions of peace. Memories of wild peace are unruly as they hold the power to unsettle hegemonic narratives and point to alternative futures. I argue that unruly memories of wild peace are important at the present time, when the very idea of peace is contested and undermined.

PICTURE A SMALL village that climbs the hills above the river Drina in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Snow lies in thick layers on haystacks and rooftops. Some houses have smoke rising from the chimney rising, while others are abandoned ruins.

The text is based on a keynote lecture held at the conference "Nothing to Remember? Politics, Practices, and Agents of Commemorating Peace" GCSC, University of Giessen, Germany, January 22–23, 2026.
The lecture is published in full-length at https://balticworlds.com/wild-peace-and-unruly-memories/

Gordana, let's call her that, walks up the gravel road through the snow to her elderly neighbor's house, carrying an armful of firewood. She places the logs neatly by the door.

Later, she explains to me: "I care for her a lot. She is alone after the war. Of course I care for her. She is my neighbor".

WHY DO I BEGIN this reflection on memories of peace with this seemingly entirely ordinary act? I do it because my encounter with Gordana struck me as not at all ordinary, in fact it felt extraordinary. At the time, I was conducting my doctoral research on international justice and local reconciliation processes in this war-ravaged Bosnian region. Most of the time I felt unease. I stumbled through conversations thick with discourses of danger and ethnonationalist divisionism, brimming with silence about the suffering of the other. Everyone I interviewed in this area, including Gordana, repeatedly told me how much they feared their neighbors who had been "on the other side" during the war. They omitted that these feared neighbors had been the main victims during the conflict and that some of the gravest war crimes committed against the Bosniak population had taken place in this town, causing almost the entire Bosniak community to flee. Those who didn't were killed. Only a handful of people had returned, and they now lived precarious lives, one of them being the elderly



woman who had no firewood to heat her damaged house.[1]

And then there was this moment of kindness and care. It was one of those moments when you as a researcher realize the gap between speech and practice; the recognition that narratives and actions coexist in complex, sometimes contradictory ways.

I SAW THAT in the midst of an extremely polarized, war-infused context, practices of peace were taking place.

Instances like these are easily overlooked. Like other researchers who work ethnographically, I have had many more spectacular and more overtly political encounters in "the field". But this story speaks to precisely the point I want to make here: that the undramatic deeply matters. The simple act of caring for a neighbor – expressing compassion through embodied practice – was significant for the elderly woman who struggled with the cold, and it was something that carried conceptual implications. What I encountered at this moment was peace as something embodied, felt, lived.

Yet when I spoke with Gordana and others like her, these practices were rarely mentioned. They were shrugged off: *This is nothing. It is just what we do.*

This, then, is peace that appears to be "nothing to talk about." And, to echo the theme of this conference, peace that consequently may seem to be "nothing to remember."

To start noticing and searching for the lived experience of peace stands in sharp contrast to how peace is most often approached in scholarly work. The field of peace and conflict research (that I am part of) has devoted a great deal of analytical energy to the overarching architectures of peace: peacekeeping missions, diplomatic negotiations, peace accords, transitional justice mechanisms, and postwar institution-building. These are indispensable dimensions of peacebuilding and deserve sustained scholarly attention

But peace also happens elsewhere – and otherwise. It happens in silence as much as in speech; through gestures as much as through written declarations. Sometimes it takes the form of public protest, sometimes of quiet defiance, acts so small they barely register as political at all. Peace that is glimpsed. Viewed like this, peace is not an endpoint reached after violence ceases, but an ongoing, fragile, and uneven process shaped by power, violence, and historical legacies. It is in this sense that I speak of wild peace. I do not necessarily mean wild peace in an empirical or descriptive sense, rather proposing it as a conceptual intervention that capture our imagination and insists on the transformative potential of such processes.

[...]

Johanna Mannergren is a Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Södertörn University

reference

1 Johanna Mannergren Selimovic, "Remembering and Forgetting After War. Narratives of Truth and Justice in a Bosnian Town", *Political Psychology* vol.36, no.2: (2015): 231–242.

Published online

Elections.
Hungary before the Change?

I HAVE BEEN monitoring academic freedom and institutional autonomy in the region for the past few decades. Hungary stood out as an underperformer. I understand the sense of relief so many feels in Hungary and beyond after the devastating defeat of Viktor Orbán. At the same time, I would be cautious about expecting a straightforward improvement. Even if Orbán and Fidesz were decisively weakened, Péter Magyar himself comes from a nationalist-conservative milieu, and his politics and rhetoric are inspired by Poland's PiS and, more importantly, by Fidesz voters, and the Fidesz-built infrastructure of power stays. The expectations are as high as they were in 1989 for a "system change". What is to be changed in the field of higher education and research?

READ THE FULL report at: https://balticworlds.com/hungary-before-the-change/

Andrea Pető is a Professor in the Department of Gender Studies at Central European University (CEU), Vienna, Austria, and a Member of the Advisory Board of *Baltic Worlds*.



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS/ALAIN ROLLAND

Péter Magyar and Viktor Orbán in the EU Parliament, 2024.

Newly defended theses

Four new dissertation theses have been presented by students from the Baltic Graduate and East European Studies School (BEEGS), Södertörn University in 2026.

ELLEN JACOBSSON (148), Practical Knowledge, *Integrators. Contradictions in Practice*

This thesis investigates contemporary practices focused on facilitating the integration of those who, for various reasons, are perceived as standing "outside" society. The practices represent a societal response to a perceived need for integration.

NICHOLAS LAWRENCE (149), Philosophy, *Salomon Mainmon's Life; or, the History of the Imagining I*

This thesis breaks with tradition by reading Salomon Maimon's Lebensgeschichte as a work of philosophy. Rather than the mere re-telling of a story, Maimon's pragmatic treatment of his own life history is interpreted as a philosophical act grounded in his own system of thought.

MOA HÖGLUND (150), History of Art, *Platser att minnas på. Venedigbiennalen 1991–1993, postsocialism och de nationella paviljongerna* [Places of Remembrance. The Venice Biennale 1991–1993, post-socialism and the national pavilions]

Places of Remembrance examines the cultural functions served by the Hungarian (1909–), Polish (1932–), and Czech-Slovak (1926–) pavilions in the Venice Biennale's Giardini during the early 1990s.

LAURA LAPINSKÉ (151), Gender Studies, *Care to live. Everyday strategies among single mothers in Lithuania*

This dissertation, *Care to Live*, offers an in-depth ethnographic study of well-educated single mothers navigating everyday life in Kaunas, Lithuania – a post-socialist semi-periphery marked by structural precarity.

Visit: https://balticworlds.com/tags/doctoral-thesis/

Listed in Scopus

Baltic Worlds' statement of purpose

BALTIC WORLDS is a scholarly journal published by the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies at Södertörn University, since 2008. It publishes articles in social sciences and humanities as well as environmental studies, practicing a double-blind peer-review process, by at least two independent specialists. *Baltic Worlds* is listed in Scopus, the Norwegian bibliometric register (DHB), and included in DOAJ, and Sherpa/RoMEO.

There are no fees for authors or users. *Baltic Worlds* is an Open Access Journal and all content is freely available online, without charge to the user or his/her institution. In order to present multi- and interdisciplinary ongoing research to a wider audience, *Baltic Worlds* also publishes essays, commentaries, interviews, features and conference reports. All content relates to the Baltic Sea region and the wider Central and Eastern European area, including the Caucasus and the Balkans.

Baltic Worlds regularly publishes thematic sections with guest editors, enabling deeper explorations into specific fields and research questions. International scholarly collaborations are encouraged. *Baltic Worlds* wishes to advance critical engagement in area studies and to apply novel theoretical and methodological approaches to this multifaceted field.

SINCE FEBRUARY 24, 2022 the journal has in response to Russia's full scale invasion taken the decision to not publish articles that generates credit for researchers affiliated with universities that have signed the letter of support for Putin and his war, or employed at universities supported by the Russian state.

The journal's Scholarly Advisory Council consists of international scholars, representing different disciplines and with specific knowledge on the area.

The Scholarly Advisory Council

contributors

Ilga Vālodze Ābelkina



Research Assistant at the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia.

Eva Ievgeniia Babenko



PhD Researcher at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, Åbo Akademi University.

Magdalena Banaszkiewicz



Associate Professor in Cultural Anthropology at the Department of Intercultural Mobility Studies, the Jagiellonian University in Krakow.

Volodymyr Borysov



Holds a PhD in Philology and is an Associate Professor and Vice-Rector at the Department of General Linguistics and Romano-Germanic Philology, H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Kharkiv, Ukraine.

Alexandra Brankova



Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of Political Science, Swedish Defence University and an Affiliated Researcher at the Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University.

Olga Bubich



Belarusian Freelance Journalist, Photographer and Memory Researcher, temporary based in Berlin.

Mariana Budjeryn



Senior Researcher at MIT Center for Nuclear Security Policy.

FSC MIX Papper FSC® C074394
KLIMATKOMPENSERAD CO2 AV TRICORONA
SVANENMÄRKT Trycksak 3041 0417

Joakim Ekman



Professor in Political Science and the Director of CBEES at Södertörn University.

Florence Fröhlig



Associated Professor in Ethnology, and the Director of Studies of BEEGS (Baltic and East European Graduate School) at CBEES, Södertörn University.

Gilda Hoxha



Lecturer at Universiteti Mesdhetar i Shqiperise, Albania.

Robert Jacobs



Historian of Nuclear Technologies, is a Professor Emeritus at the Hiroshima Peace Institute Hiroshima City University and a Visiting Professorial Fellow 2025-2028 at the School of Humanities and Languages, University of New South Wales.

Tatiana Kasperski



Associate Professor, is a Project Researcher at the Department for Historical and Contemporary Studies at Södertörn University.

Benjamin Klasche



One of the Co-Directors of the Central and Eastern European Security Hub (CEEShub) at Tallinn University.

Ilona Kostikova



Doctor of Science in Education, holds a PhD in Philology and a PhD in Education, and is a Full Professor and Head of the Mykhailo Hetmanets Department of Theory and Practice of the English Language and Foreign Literature, H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Kharkiv, Ukraine.

Johanna Mannergren



Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Södertörn University.

Simo Mannila



Adjunct Professor in Sociology at the University of Helsinki.

Stanislav Menzelevskyi



PhD candidate in Film Studies at the Media School at Indiana University, Bloomington, US.

Viktoria Naumenko



PhD in History, Researcher and project staff member at the Public History Department, Fern Universität in Hagen.

Olena Pareniuk



PhD in Radiobiology, is a Senior Researcher at the Division for Nuclear and Radiation Safety, Institute for Safety Problems of Nuclear Power Plants, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.

Andrea Pető



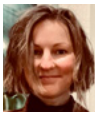
Professor in the Department of Gender Studies at Central European University (CEU), Vienna, Austria and Member of the Advisory Board of *Baltic Worlds*.

Olha Pochuieva



Holds a PhD in Education and is an Associate Professor at the Department of Pedagogy, Foreign Philology and Translation, Simon Kuznets Kharkiv National University of Economics, Kharkiv, Ukraine.

Birgit Poopuu



One of the Co-Directors of the Central and Eastern European Security Hub (CEEShub) at Tallinn University.

Oksana Semenik



Art Historian, Curator and Researcher working in Kyiv.

Kateryna Shavanova



PhD in Genetics, is a Chemist-Dosimetrist, Khartiia at the National Guard of Ukraine.

Tamila Shcheblykina



Doctor of Science in Education and a Professor at the Department of English Philology, H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Kharkiv, Ukraine.

Maryna Vasylieva



Holds a PhD in Pedagogy and is an Associate Professor at the Department of English Philology, H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Kharkiv, Ukraine.

Denys Vyshnevskiy



Head of Department at Chornobyl Radiation and Ecological Biosphere Reserve.

Would you like to become a contributor?

We welcome you to send in a proposal for articles of different genres. Instructions on the peer-review process, the journal's publication ethics, and its' style guide is all to be found on the web: https://balticworlds.com/submission/

Please contact the editor before sending in ready papers, and for suggestions of future theme sections: ninna.morner@sh.se

CBEES Distinguished Lecture.
Challenges of knowledge production in the war-torn society
Speaker: Viktoriya Sereda.
Date: May 6, 2026.
Time: 2 PM–3:30 PM.
Place: On-site (MA796, CBEES, Södertörn University) and online (obligatory registration).
Visit: https://www.sh.se/kalender?

BALTIC WORLDS

A *Baltic World's* event

Panel discussion. **Chornobyl 40 years after the disaster**

To mark the 40th anniversary of the Chornobyl Disaster *Baltic Worlds* in this issue publishes ten essays by historians, art researchers, ethnologists, and life scientists working on Chornobyl issues, with most of them coming from Ukraine, but also from Belarus, Western Europe and North America. The multidisciplinary collection of essays is guest-edited by Tatiana Kaspeski, researcher at Södertörn University, and Oksana Semenik, art historian and curator based in Kyiv. Together, the essays give an overview of the multiple, layered memories of Chornobyl – as a symbol of technological failure, a reminder of national tragedy and resilience, and a place for international technoscientific cooperation and collective reflection about nuclear, and other, technogenic risks. The particular focus of the issue is on Chornobyl exclusion zone and the ongoing war that constitutes the all-too-real background of the disaster 40th commemoration

PLEASE JOIN US on May 28, 2026, at the premises of the Foundation for Baltic and East European studies for a panel discussion on Chornobyl 40 years after the disaster and the impact of the ongoing war. Tatiana Kasperski will lead the discussion with four panelists whose works are in this *Baltic Worlds* volume.

Olena Pareniuik, radiologist at the Institute for Safety Problems of Nuclear Power Plants, and Kateryna Shavanova, specialist in genetics and currently serving in the National Guard of Ukraine, will consider the achievements of the science in the Chornobyl zone and how scientific work has been affected by the war.



An aerial photograph of the Unit 3 and Unit 4 reactor building in Chornobyl after the explosion.

PHOTO: FLICKR CC

Art historian Oksana Semenik and ethnologist Florence Fröhlig will explore meaning-making about the disaster in, respectively, art and literature. Semenik will talk about the political and metaphysical dimensions in Maria Prymachenko's striking and colorful paintings dedicated to disaster. Fröhlig will consider how the remembrance of the disaster in Svetlana Alexievich, *Chornobyl Prayer,* and the poem *To Prypiat* by Lyubov Sirota, are as invisible scars, silent traumas people carry with them and cannot erase or suppress.

PANEL DISCUSSION. CHORNOBYL 40 YEARS AFTER THE DISASTER

Date: May 28, 2026.
Time: 3 PM–5 PM.
Place: The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies, Slupskjulsvägen 10, Stockholm.
Registration: https://forms.office.com/e/VRDxvh5Lct?origin=lprLink
Panelists: Florence Fröhlig is an Associate Professor in Ethnology, and the Director of Studies of BEEGS (Baltic and East European Graduate School) at CBEES, Södertörn University. Oksana Semenik is an Art Historian, Curator and Researcher working in Kyiv. Olena Pareniuk, PhD in Radiobiology, is a Senior Researcher at the Division for Nuclear and Radiation Safety, Institute for Safety Problems of Nuclear Power Plants, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. Kateryna Shavanova, PhD in Genetics, is a Chemist-Dosimetrist, Khartiia at the National Guard of Ukraine.
Moderator: Tatiana Kasperski, Associate Professor, is a Project Researcher at the Department for Historical and Contemporary Studies at Södertörn University.
Welcome remarks: Sara Packalén, Director, The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies. Ninna Mörner, Editor-in-chief, *Baltic Worlds*, Centre for Baltic and East European Studies.