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War, memory, and museums in Sarajevo

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editorial

Resilience. Small acts matter

Belarusian literature is under threat of being erased in Belarus, warns Olga Bubich in an essay on the oppression and persecution of Belarusian literature in Belarus. The regime is furthermore trying to silence Belarusian publishers, writers, and cultural activists working in exile, but more Belarusian-language books are currently published abroad than inside the country. The resilience of the Belarusian literary and academic community is, argues Bubich, an attitude that should also be adopted by culture workers in countries where censorship is only starting to be applied to suppress dissent and limit diversity.

The governance of culture, of a completely different nature and degree, is also discussed in a peer-reviewed article on artistic freedom and the marketization of art. The authors, Ann-Sofie Köping Olsson, Miikka Pyykkönen, Eglė Rindzevičiūtė, Ulrike Rohn, and Katri Talaskivi, address questions on subjects such artists as entrepreneurs, what constitutes artistic activity, and when concepts such as the cultural industries entered into cultural policies. They compare the respective developments and situations in Sweden, Finland, Estonia, and Lithuania.

*"**ENDURE, ENDURE** – endurance hones your soul* [...]" is a quote from the famous Ukrainian poet Vasyl Stus, who died in a labor camp in 1985. Repeating this quote to herself was one of the coping mechanisms the Ukrainian Natalia Shilo used while unlawfully detained in a Russian prison. Today, she is active in the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group (KHPG), an offshoot of Memorial. In a report in this issue, we learn about the KHPG's work with Ukrainians detained and captured by Russia, and the search for Ukrainians missing in the war. Most of the disappeared persons originate, as far as is known, from the Kharkiv region.

KHARKIV IS A REGION highly targeted by Russia in the war. Lives have been wasted, families separated. Residential buildings, museums, schools, and universities have been destroyed and almost wiped out in many cases. The theme section "Recovery and resilience in Kharkiv" documents and explains how a society succeeds in the maintenance of education, sport, and mental health services despite being under constant attack and on the verge of breaking down. The papers, writes guest editor Ilona Kostikova in her introduction, "provides a comprehensive socio-pedagogical map of Ukraine's wartime reality". Developing programs for children in distress and creating safe learning facilities are all examples of the resistance and recovery performed every day in Kharkiv. The Ukrainian university lecturers are, in the midst of war, fulfilling their professional responsibilities while also managing intense personal trauma.

Ninna Mörner



PER BOLIN, Professor Emeritus in History and former Director of Centre for Baltic and East European Studies, is the new responsible publisher for *Baltic Worlds*. His research concerns the modern history of the Baltic states, more specifically Latvia during the 1920s and 30s.

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Museums in Sarajevo as memory sites

"The presentation in the exhibitions of the Bosniaks as victims of aggression by Serbs and Bosnian Croats is the central idea.

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"Arrival did not complete the process of return.

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"The forest itself can be part of what makes life secure.

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PEN Belarus has created a special exhibition, "Belarus. Voices of Banned Books", gathering several stories of authors and their works that the state has condemned as "extremist," "harmful to national interests," or "undesirable information".

PHOTO: PEN BELARUS



A court decision in Belarus ordered the destruction of copies of the catalogue of the 2011 Belarus Press Photo competition, arguing that the photographs presented a distorted picture of Belarusian life.

PHOTO: CHARTER97.ORG

The silence of the Belarusian library

A struggle against disappearance

by **Olga Bubich**

abstract

This essay examines the escalation of book censorship and repressions against independent publishers in Belarus. While state registries mask the suppression as a minor statistical anomaly affecting a minimal percentage of the national bibliography, context reveals a centralized program of cultural erasure (and books published in Belarusian language, in particular). The regime targets the intellectual vanguard, liquidating independent publishing houses and criminalizing Belarusian-language materials to suppress civic dissent. Situated within a broader historical trajectory – from Imperial Russian and Stalinist repressions to contemporary practices – the domestic crackdown has forced an institutional exodus, shifting the center of Belarusian literature abroad. This study analyzes the resilience of the transnational publishing infrastructure operating in exile and calls for the global community's support in counteracting state-enforced amnesia.

KEYWORDS: Belarus, censorship, independent publishing, cultural erasure, literature in exile, totalitarianism.

In a recent interview[1] for *CBS News*, Ai Weiwei – one of the most influential contemporary artists living and working in exile – offered a striking example of censorship, sharing an episode from his own life. Having asked DeepSeek, an AI platform used in China, to give information about himself, he received an evasive response: "Let's talk about something else."

"So, you have basically been disappeared?" the host asked him.

"True, I'm a person who exists and does not exist at the same time", WeiWei replied. "I think it's an achievement."

Irony, as a short-term coping strategy, indeed allows us to describe banned authors as having *achieved* a bittersweet symbolic milestone. However, viewed from a broader historical perspective, there is little reason for self-mockery. Bonfires of undesirable literature – whether they take the form of public book-burnings or tacit online erasure – inevitably lead to intellectual impoverishment, collective amnesia, and the eventual destruction of society's capacity for critical self-reflection, which makes keeping our eyes peeled on censorship indices a civic duty.

In her Nobel Prize lecture *The Tender Narrator* (2019),[2] Polish novelist Olga Tokarczuk introduced a powerful counter-metaphor for cultural survival in describing the tendency to "narrate the world", indirectly comparing literature with a loom that weaves the collective story of a people. "A thing that happens and is not told ceases to exist and perishes," she warned. "This is a fact well known to not only historians, but also (and perhaps above all) to every stripe of politician and tyrant. He who has and weaves the story is in charge."

The necessity to once again raise public awareness of state censorship, almost a century after the Nazi book burnings, is per se quite alarming. Haven't we learned our lesson? Weren't most countries steadily moving toward democracy and celebrating human rights? Isn't freedom of expression one of the defining values of the contemporary world? The numbers, sadly, suggest otherwise, demonstrating that systematic restriction on freedom of speech – similar to the historical precedents of Stalinist censorship in the USSR during the 1930s–1950s, China in the period of the Cultural Revolution, or Argentina during the Dirty War – are not yet a thing of the past. And judging by the current scale of repressions, Belarus is a state that must urgently return to the international spotlight, with the country's intellectual *achievers* demanding worldwide attention and support.

The weight of 0.2%: Statistical illusions in banned books calculations

When evaluated through a purely statistical lens, book censorship in Belarus can easily be misread as a minor anomaly. If one closely examines the *Republican List of Extremist Materials*,[3] available online on the website of the Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus, the numbers seem reassuringly small. The list began tracking items in September 2008 and contains approximately 160 specific titles, many of them looking like texts that a civil society would mutually agree have no place in public circulation: neo-Nazi literature, antisemitic tracts, or ultra-nationalist Russian fascist propaganda.

On the other hand, the Belarusian state senses this very same threat in the shortlist of winners for the photojournalistic competition *Belarus Press Photo 2011*, whose work is featured in the eponymous photo book; in a poetic collection by the Gulag prisoner Larysa Heniyush; in *Selected Works*, by the 20th-century historian and academician Vaclaw Lastouski; and in Zakhar Shybeka's *Essays on the History of Belarus, 1795–2002* – the latter two of which were until only recently recommended as additional reading for high school children.

PARALLEL TO THIS COMPILATION, another frequently updated list[4] is currently in circulation on the same government website, with its titles explicitly designated as "printed publications containing information messages and/or materials the dissemination of which could harm the national interests of the Republic of Belarus." As of June 2026, this second registry lists 258 names – including entries that are no less surprising than the state's criminalized academicians. The veteran targets of this "potential harm to national interests" are Irvine Welsh (ten banned titles), William S. Burroughs and Ryu Murakami (five books censored each), and Chuck Palahniuk and Jeffrey Eugenides (two titles each).

When measured against the vast expanse of the national bibliography – which spans hundreds of thousands of entries that track every technical manual, state pamphlet, Soviet-era reprint, and textbook published over the last 30 years – the two lists' combined total of 418 banned or "extremists" volumes represents a mere 0.2% of the total catalogue. If one subtracts from that figure the truly dangerous or hateful titles, the number would even be smaller.

Moreover, when placed side-by-side with the 8,005 books censored after 2000 in the United States – a nation that routinely tops global lists of banned literature, according to the corresponding international archive[5] – the 418 Belarusian titles might not look like a reason for urgent vigilance. But to see beyond this statistical illusion, more context is necessary.

TO THE EXTERNAL observer, the Western narrative of book banning invokes localized, highly decentralized friction associated with morality policing or culture wars, such as when school boards and district libraries request specific themes or authors to be redacted and removed. In countries like the USA, these challenges are often balanced with counterweights in the market: If a school board censors a text, the open market remains untouched, and the writer might even see their national sales raise. Particularly curious citizens are still free to buy the disputed book online or read it on a digital device in their own living rooms. And obviously, no one faces physical dangers or state prosecution for purchasing or owning it.

The Belarusian model belongs to an entirely different category. Here, a book ban is a centralized, vertical program of state-mandated cultural liquidation, comparable to the implementation of the National Security Law in Hong Kong, which resulted in the elimination of hundreds of pro-democracy titles and the forced closure of independent newsrooms. In today's Belarus, when a title is blacklisted, it is removed from bookstores, schools, and both public and prison libraries. Furthermore, the publisher behind it will most likely be detained and designated as "extremist", with the publishing house itself either liquidated or forced to close.

In the span of twenty years, the number of books labelled as "extremist" in Belarus has raised fourfold, five independent publishing houses have been liquidated,[6] and at least 24 writers, translators, poets, publicists, and literary scholars remain in prison or under house arrest. Particular pressure is exerted on independent publishing initiatives that translate, print, and disseminate literature in the Belarusian language.

Between the gallows: Censorship in Belarus before the Soviets

However, the war on the printed word in Belarus did not start with the 2020 civil society crackdown. Nor did it start in 2008, when books in the Belarusian language or books proposing political reforms, like for example *A Special Opinion or Address of a Christian Woman*, by the civic activist and human rights de-



In 1772, Empress Catherine II issued a decree requiring all regional governors to conduct official correspondence, rulings, and administrative orders in Russian.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Romuald Podbereski (1812–1856) and Kastus Kalinouski (1838–1864) were among the most prominent intellectuals who fought against the erasure of the Belarusian language.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

fender Alena Hnauk – started being declared "*extremist*." In the history of Belarusian print culture and early censorship debates, one of the foundational places is taken by Francysk Skaryna, a pioneering 16th-century scholar celebrated as the father of Eastern European printing. Beginning in 1517, the same year Martin Luther published his *Ninety-Five Theses*, Skaryna printed 20 books of the Bible in the Belarusian redaction of Church Slavonic. His goal was to make sacred texts accessible to lay readers across the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – a massive, multi-ethnic medieval European state of which Belarus was a core part, together with today's Lithuania, Ukraine, and Poland.

Skaryna's innovative use of a vernacular language, as well as his extensive commentaries and encouragement of individual interpretation, challenged Orthodox hierarchies and provoked resistance on their side. Moscow authorities ordered copies of Skaryna's Bible to be burned, accusing the scholar of spreading heretical ideas and prohibiting his very name from Muscovite religious discourse throughout the 16th century.[7]

Following the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth between 1772 and 1795, the Belarusian lands were incorporated into the Russian Empire. Imperial authorities gradually introduced a system of political, linguistic, and cultural censorship aimed at strengthening their control and reducing local identities. In 1772, Empress Catherine II issued a decree requiring all regional governors to conduct official correspondence, rulings, and administrative orders in Russian. This policy was reinforced a year later by mandating Russian as the sole language of the provincial court system.

AMONG THE MOST prominent intellectuals whose printing initiatives in Belarusian presented a solid counterforce to the erasure of the language were Romuald Podbereski (1812–1856) and Kastus Kalinouski (1838–1864). As a publisher, scholar, and ethnographer, Podbereski dedicated his life to documenting the language, folklore, and material culture of the Belarusian countryside, establishing an early vernacular archive on the pages of *Rocznik Literacki* [Literary yearbook] and *Pamiętnik Naukowo-Literacki* [Scientific and literary journal]. These attempts to render the peasantry's language and traditions visible in print brought Podbereski into conflict with the censorship regime. In 1850, by personal order of Emperor Nicholas I, he was arrested and exiled to the Russian North, where he developed a severe mental illness and died in a psychiatric hospital. In his book *Kalinouski and the Political Birth of Belarus* (2020), Belarusian historian Siarhei Ablameika calls Romuald Podbereski "the first person to die for the new Belarus."[8]

Equally tragic was the fate of Kastus Kalinouski, the leader of the 1863 January Uprising against Russian rule and the publisher of *Mužyckaja Praŭda* [Peasants' truth], the first revolutionary newspaper published in Belarusian. Produced clandestinely, the paper addressed the peasantry directly in their native tongue, criticizing imperial oppression and advocating for fundamental social rights. After the uprising was crushed and Kalinouski executed, his writings were prohibited. His acclaimed collection of texts with the self-explanatory title *Letters from Beneath the Gallows* was treated as politically subversive and circulated primarily through the exile press.

Today, Kalinouski continues to occupy a central place in Belarusian cultural memory, serving as a symbol of struggle for freedom and national self-determination. His name has been adopted by the Kalinouski Regiment, a military formation of Belarusian volunteers fighting alongside Ukraine, and is commemorated through the EU's Konstanty Kalinowski Scholarship Program for displaced Belarusian students and researchers.

The historical parallel between Kalinouski's fight and contemporary Belarusian reality is vividly captured in the poem *Hanged Men*, by the prominent Belarusian poetess Vera (Burlak) Zhybul. In her verse, the installation of gallows on a street named after Kalinouski, and the local children's fascination with them as a new playground attraction, causes concern among the parents. Yet, the poem's chilling conclusion presents the prospect of state execution as morally preferable to collaboration with an oppressive regime. "It is definitely better if they grow into hanged men", Zhybul writes. "Being a hanged man is much better than being an executioner."

Dark Nights of Belarusian literature

The establishment of Soviet power brought a profound transformation to Belarus's cultural landscape. Unlike the Russian Empire, which had largely dismissed Belarusian as a mere regional dialect, early Soviet authorities in the 1920s–1930s initially promoted a policy of "Belarusization". During this brief window of relative cultural openness, Belarusian became the language of state administration, education, and publishing. An unprecedented national revival flourished, evidenced by the founding of the Belarusian State University in 1921 and the National Li-

brary in 1922, and by the publication of literary classics such as Yakub Kolas's *Novaya Zyamlya* [New land] (1923), *Symon Muzyka* [Symon the Musician] (1925), and the second part of the *Na Rostanyah* [At the crossroads] trilogy (1927). By 1928, about 80% of schools taught in Belarusian.[9]

BY THE END OF the decade, Stalin's consolidation of power was accompanied by growing suspicion toward nationalist movements across the Soviet Union. What had previously been encouraged as a manifestation of socialist nation-building was suddenly classified as a threat to political unity. In Belarus, the turning point arrived with the so-called *Case of the Union of Liberation of Belarus* – a fabricated prosecution of prominent intellectuals, academics, and cultural figures accused of nationalist conspiracy. Starting in 1930 with the arrest of the editor Pjotar Illjuchonak (1891–1945), the repressions affected numerous scientists and cultural workers, among whom were five academics including the historian, writer, and Prime Minister of the Belarusian Democratic Republic, Vaclaw Lastouski (1883–1938); the first president of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, Usievalad Ihnatouski (1881–1931); and the head of the Belarusian Language and Literature Section of the Institute of Belarusian Culture, Anton Balitski (1891–1937).

According to the data compiled by journalist Leanid Marakou (1958–2016) in his multi-volume directory *Repressed Literary Men, Scientists, Educators, Public and Culture Figures of Belarus. 1794–1991*, out of 108 intellectuals swept up in this single fabricated case, 90 were convicted and the remainder either perished or broke under torture before their verdicts could be read. Over 70% of those exiled to labor camps did not survive the harsh conditions there.[10]

IN A BITTER HISTORICAL rhyme, in 2024 the works of Vaclaw Lastouski, published as part of the *Belaruski Knihazbor* series[11] and containing historical essays and literary pieces that advocate for the country's independent cultural and historical identity, were categorized as "extremist" by Belarusian authorities.[12] The fact that the works of a founding father of the country's historiography have once again been banned, having been openly taught in schools for decades following Lastouski's rehabilitation in the late 1980s, serves as a sad reminder of the terrifying speed at which the boundaries of the acceptable can shift under authoritarian rule.

The era of ideological control inaugurated in 1930 with the fabricated case had another tragic milestone, which became known in the history of Belarus as the *Night of the Executed Poets*. On the night of October 29–30, 1937, 132 representatives of the Belarusian intelligentsia were executed by shooting in the basement of the NKVD internal prison and at Pishchalauski Castle in Minsk. Their bodies were subsequently dumped in mass graves at Kurapaty forest. Among the victims were some of the most significant figures of the Belarusian cultural revival, including 22 poets and writers, many of them still in their thirties and early forties.[13]

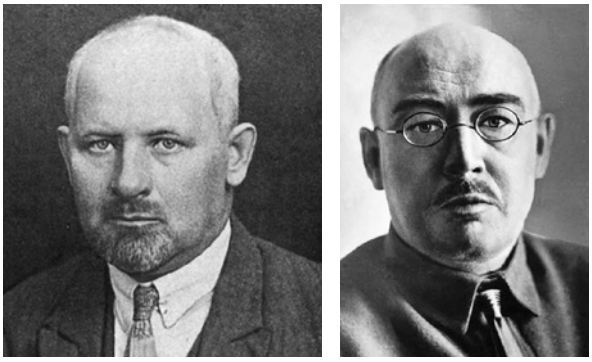


PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Vaclaw Lastouski, Prime Minister of the Belarusian Democratic Republic, and Usievalad Ihnatouski, president of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, were among the affected by the so-called *Case of the Union of Liberation of Belarus* in 1930.

As historian Iryna Kashtalyan notes, the silence that followed these forced disappearances lasted for decades afterward, with the fates of the missing intellectuals unknown to either their own relatives or the wider public. In an interview for *Dekoder*,[14] she recalls the fates of the poet Izi Kharik (an active member of the Poale Zion organization and author of thirteen books in Yiddish), who was convicted as "a member of a Trotskyist-Zinovievist" organization, and of the prose writer Platon Holavach (a leader of the Maladnyak literary group and the Belarusian Association of Proletarian Writers), sentenced to execution by firing squad for "organizing a terrorist group". The wives of both men were each sentenced to eight years in labor camps as "family members of traitors to the Motherland" and sent to the Karaganda NKVD camp in Kazakhstan. "In total, approximately 500 cultural figures were killed in the Byelorussian SSR during the Great Terror", says Kashtalyan. Needless to say, the literary works of the repressed remained excluded from public discourse for decades.

"OUT OF 108 INTELLECTUALS SWEPT UP IN THIS SINGLE FABRICATED CASE, 90 WERE CONVICTED AND THE REMAINDER EITHER PERISHED OR BROKE UNDER TORTURE BEFORE THEIR VERDICTS COULD BE READ."

THE DISCOVERY IN 1988 of the Kurapaty mass graves,[15] which contained the remains of between 30,000 and 250,000 victims of NKVD executions carried out in 1937–1941, transformed the forest into a sacred monument of national counter-memory. On October 30 of the same year, on the eve of Dziady (the ancient Belarusian ritual of honoring the deceased ancestors), the Belarusian Popular Front organized the first public commemoration there, drawing public attention to the need to revisit the traumatic collective history around the executions. Since then, the site has





PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The prose writer Platon Holavach and the poet Izi Kharik were among the 132 intellectuals killed during the *Night of the Executed Poets*, October 29–30, 1937. Their bodies were subsequently dumped in mass graves at Kurapaty forest (right).

remained a contested space of memory, with public gatherings repeatedly restricted and their organizers imprisoned. Activist Vitold Ashurak and artist Ales Pushkin, whose work was associated with these practices, both died in custody, while investigative journalist Dzianis Ivashyn,[16] who wrote about construction works in the vicinity of Kurapaty, was sentenced to thirteen years and one month for "high treason". In such a harsh climate, after 2020, most annual commemorations dedicated to Kurapaty[17] have been moved abroad to diaspora communities. Today, a new generation of diasporic poets, writers, musicians, and artists organize readings and online art projects abroad, viewing the preservation of the erased generation as their civic duty.

"The book is a truly formidable weapon"

To understand why the administrative machine in Minsk operates with such disproportional measures, it is enough to listen to the censors themselves. During a roundtable discussion on political journalism, held at the pro-government Union of Writers of Belarus in July 2022, Igor Buzovsky, the Deputy Minister of Information and a key member of the state commission task force for imposing internet restrictions in Belarus, spoke words that lay bare the mechanics of totalitarian thought:

> **It is a great blessing that we do not see them, that we possess the will, strength, understanding, and awareness that the book is a truly formidable weapon – indeed, the most powerful one. A failure to grasp that a book is a far more potent instrument and weapon than perhaps missiles and tanks is precisely what leads to the eventual need to deploy those very missiles and tanks. Social revolutions and upheavals occur, in part, due to the actions and initiatives of the elites. It is a well-known fact that the elites comprise just five percent of society who read books and shape social processes. The elites are the ones who write and read. If we neglect these processes and lose sight of this direction, we will have no future.**[18]

This candid admission openly strips away the regime's rhetoric. First, Buzovsky's chilling phrase – "*It is a great blessing that we do not see them*" – officially confirms the existence of the censorship that keeps the Belarusian intellectual landscape under control. The state prides itself on liquidating books, indirectly claiming themselves to be the heir to the Soviet *Glavlit*, the Main Directorate for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press under the Council of Ministers of the USSR, which until the final years of the USSR had operated as the official censorship organ to maintain the illusion of a contented, harmonious society.

Second, Buzovsky's explicit fear of the "five percent of society who read books and shape social processes" serves as an ideological manifesto for a cultural purge. Consequently, the blows of censorship are aimed directly at the cultural vanguard: the historians, writers, journalists, and independent publishers who keep the Belarusian language alive. If Olga Tokarczuk compared "world narrators" with weavers, for the Belarusian Ministry of Information they are weapon holders who should be silenced and kept at a distance from the larger public.

Belarusian publishing beyond the borders

These domestic legal and physical crackdowns inevitably triggered a massive institutional exodus. According to PEN Belarus, since the 2020 protests five independent Belarusian publishing houses faced liquidation:[19] *Limarius* and *Halijafy* in 2022, followed by *Januskievic*, *Knihazbor*, and *Zmicier Kolas* in 2023. The founder of the latter, translator Zmicier Kolas, remains in custody,[20] while the activities of his eponymous publishing house – founded in 1998 and specializing in Belarusian translations of world classics by authors such as Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Charles Baudelaire, René Descartes, and others – have been discontinued.

Beyond these five official liquidations, two other publishing houses were forced to suspend their work: *Medisont* in 2022 and *Technalohiya* in 2026. The closure of *Technalohiya* – one of the nation's oldest printing houses – was marked by the state's targeted detention of founder Vatslau Bahdanovich's entire family. Furthermore, in 2026, three more publishing initiatives were declared "extremist formations": the Krakow-based *Gutenberg Publisher* and the joint network of *Kamunikat.org*, *Januskievic*, and *Lohvinau*. The founder of the latter, Ihar Logvinau, had long operated under pressure, ultimately moving his production to Lithuania in 2014 after his domestic license had been revoked due to the "extremist" status of *Belarus Press Photo 2011*. This



PHOTO: SVABODA.ORG

Zmicier Kolas, founder of the independent publishing house with the same name, remains in custody since February 2026. The publishing house was liquidated in 2023.



PHOTO: PEN INTERNATIONAL

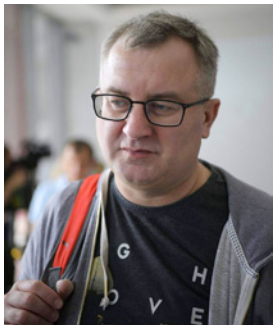


PHOTO: PEN BELARUS

The publisher Andrej Janushkevich has reopened the Belarusian bookshop Knihaŭka (left) in Warsaw, Poland.

harsh climate of repression inevitably breaks the physical and emotional health of the sector's remaining experts. In February of this year, Roman Zymberov, the 44-year-old poet, publisher, and owner of the online bookshop *kniger.by*, died following a sudden illness. Though he had been detained at the border in 2024, he had chosen to remain and work within Belarus until the very end.

APART FROM *Lohvinau*, which continues printing from abroad, a few other, more recently exiled publishing houses have also managed to resume their activities – although not without difficulties. One of them is *Januskievic*, who also reopened the Belarusian bookshop *Knihaŭka* in Warsaw. Back in Minsk, the shop had been raided by pro-government propagandists and security forces on its very opening day, leading to the confiscation of 200 books. Commenting for *Baltic Worlds* on the difficulties of relaunching his business, Andrej Janushkevich says:

> **Publishers in exile face classic émigré challenges: an ill-defined audience, a lack of firm footing, and low turnover – factors that cast doubt on future growth. Misunderstandings are common; local partners may trigger a "sanctions mindset" upon hearing the word "Belarusian", mistakenly conflating the anti-regime cultural diaspora with the state authorities of the Republic of Belarus. We hope for an understanding that we are cut off from our native soil – from our natural sphere of existence. Under these conditions, publishing any book – even one with clear commercial potential – becomes more than just a market activity.**

Janushkevich frames the current crisis as "unprecedented," adding that censorship in Belarus pursues a single strategic goal:

> **As part of the campaign against dissent, it seeks to destroy independent national culture – viewing it as an alien product. This amounts to a return to the USSR, where national culture served merely as a façade, a kind of "Potemkin village" for the outside world.**

Consequently, the center of gravity for Belarusian literature is shifting abroad, splitting into diverse, highly specialized nodes. Statistics for independent Belarusian printing suggest the number of such initiatives now ranges between 20 and 30.[21] Some have a narrow specialization, such as the Berlin-based *Hochroth Minsk*, a *Hochroth Verlag* imprint led by exiled poet Dmitry Strotsev; its focus is poetry. Others boast deep historical roots, like London's *Skaryna Press*, which evolved alongside the historic Francis Skaryna Belarusian Library and Museum. For its part, *Skaryna Press* handles an incredibly expansive catalogue, ranging from queer literature anthologies to historical photo books documenting Vaclaw Lastouski's ethnographic expeditions. Ihar Ivanou, the head of this publishing house, when commenting on his views for *Baltic Worlds*, sees in this displacement the historic emergence of a transnational Belarusian literary infrastructure – and potential for a future Belarus:

"TODAY, A NEW GENERATION OF DIASPORIC POETS, WRITERS, MUSICIANS, AND ARTISTS ORGANIZE READINGS AND ONLINE ART PROJECTS ABROAD."

> **Never before has Belarusian publishing existed under such conditions: Almost the entire independent sector operates outside the country. Alongside printing houses, we have bookshops, festivals, and literary awards. All of this could easily be transferred to Belarus if the country were to open up even a little.**
>
> **Being scattered across the world has also allowed Belarusians to encounter new cultures, perspectives, and opportunities. Paradoxically, this has worked to the benefit of our language. Here, in London, we are masters of our own business. No one registers, interferes, or encourages. I would not be surprised to learn that more Belarusian-language books are currently published abroad than inside the country. The regime has largely managed to stop the movement of books across the border in both directions. Nevertheless, encrypted books**

are nominated for literary prizes, and in this I see a possible indicator of our common literary space.

I publish books also for a future Belarus – for those who will bring changes in five or twenty-five years. They will have something to build upon, something that will help them move further and faster. For many Belarusian publishers, this work is also our mission, our devotion.

Similar are the thoughts of Nasta Karnatskaya, a former associate of the independent Belarusian bookstore *Knihauka*, who now works in exile as a literary blogger on the *Bellit* podcast, which currently has 167 episodes on YouTube. Detained in 2022 for distributing native-language literature, Karnatskaya describes how the trauma of the post-2020 crackdowns inverted the symbolic role of the native tongue, transforming the targeted cultural product into a distinct marker of identity. She further reflects:



Nasta Karnatskaya, blogger and former bookstore associate.

PHOTO: PEN BELARUS

We clearly observed a particular surge of interest in Belarusian literature and the Belarusian cultural sphere in general (including the appeal to the Belarusian language) after 2020. Then, the number of readers definitely increased; new people came to Belarusian books. Along with the rise in self-awareness, there was also a cultural upsurge. People discovered Belarusian books for themselves, surprised that so much world literature can be read in Belarusian. Moreover, the sociopolitical weight of the language underwent a drastic evolution. Our language had certainly been important before, often even denoting specific political views, but the events of the last six years have given it additional meanings. Especially in emigration, Belarusian has become a way for many of us to express our nationality, to distinguish ourselves from Russian speakers from other countries like Ukraine or Russia.

When analyzing literature in exile, Karnatskaya also admits that censorship has partially achieved the opposite result to the one desired. On the one hand, independent publishers are declared "extremist" and forced to flee the country, along with writers, journalists, and cultural organizations. On the other hand, new independent publishing initiatives are being launched abroad, as well as literary podcasts and online platforms dedicated to supporting emerging reading communities, which make great efforts to reach out to the audience on the other side of the border.

DOMESTICALLY, the grassroots hunger for books in the Belarusian language is evidenced, for example, by the 2025 statistics of Belarusian literature sales presented by OZ – the largest mainstream retail and book network operating legally inside Belarus. While official Ministry of Information figures[22] show that books published in the Belarusian language constitute a meager 10% to 14% of the country's annual printed titles and brochures,[23] overall sales of books by domestic authors skyrocketed by 200%, coupled with a 30% spike in demand for books in Belarusian specifically. At the top of the domestic commercial best-seller charts is Jan Barszczewski's *Szlachcic Zawalnia*,[24] a masterpiece of Belarusian gothic fiction written nearly 180 years ago.

YET, KARNATSKAYA ARGUES, as with any literary renaissance born out of crisis, this rise is now being followed by a decline. The need to search out new ways of preserving contact with the market of eight million Belarusian readers, who are increasingly affected by Russia's economic and cultural colonization, comes to the forefront, in parallel with the predictable exhaustion that comes with the realities of exile. Karnatskaya says:

As it seems to me, new, harsh everyday problems gradually appeared, and everything else receded into the background. Readers in Belarus are a bit out of reach for us now, and people in emigration are adjusting to their lives in a new place where a book is not always a necessity. It is deeply painful that we no longer have direct, physical access to our audience inside the country. Because right there, right now, there is a massive deficit of Belarusian cultural products. But due to bans, people inside cannot openly support what is being done in the cultural sphere abroad. They cannot even simply buy our books. The difficulties are also related to censorship, and therefore, when talking in a podcast about books that may be somehow dangerous for listeners from Belarus, you consciously also engage in self-censorship. The most banal phrase motivates me to continue – 'Who, if not us?'

Conclusion

The turn toward right-wing, populist, and authoritative modes of governance that Europe and the wider world currently face inevitably brings to the forefront the question of censorship, as social polarization remains a core premise that all these regimes share. This structural segmentation claims that the lived reality of individuals – the cultures they represent, the artifacts they produce, and the stories they share – can be artificially categorized into the desirable and the undesirable – with the latter subjected to exclusion, banning, and enforced forgetting.

Belarus, despite its location at the geographical center of Europe, appears to be at the vanguard of this modern censorship, with the scale of its repressions focused on the country's intellectuals, although not limited to them only. The nation's segmentation into self-censored or uncritical insiders on the one

hand and exiled creatives on the other – with the latter forced to combine basic survival as immigrants with the struggle to preserve their country's history, culture, and language – threatens to become the future of a segmented and polarized Europe.

Does this mean there is much that the rest of Europe can learn from Belarusian publishers and writers? Does it mean that the resilience of the Belarusian literary and academic community is an attitude that should also be adopted by culture workers in countries where censorship is only starting to be applied to suppress dissent and limit diversity? My answer is unequivocally yes. But at the same time, when talking about the silence of the Belarusian library and attempting to break it with the stories of our literary figures of the past and present, I would like to emphasize that in order to truly break it we need the attention of the global cultural community. Regardless of what side of the EU border the Belarussians are currently on, we need our stories to be integrated into the broader European and global cultural conversation, our challenges to be met with understanding and support, our books to be translated, and our authors to be given platforms for expression. We all know that censorship thrives on isolation and forgetting, and embracing disappearance with irony and self-deprecation is a defense strategy that would not work when what is at stake is the memory of an entire country, and the survival of the language of the first book printed in Eastern Europe.

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Visitors can write down their impressions of the exhibition on separate sticky notes, which are then attached to the walls. Museum of Crimes against Humanity and Genocide, image taken September 20, 2022.

PHOTO: JULIA DENTON-BARKER/FLICKR CC

The Sarajevo museums and preserving the memory of the Bosnian War and war crimes

by **Kateryna Shymkevych** and **Serhii Bilivnenko**

abstract

Museums in Sarajevo (BiH) serve as sites for preserving and re-examining the memory of the war and war crimes of the 1990s. Engagement with memory takes place across both micro- and macro-contexts, which helps to flesh out individual narratives, highlight the specific characteristics of events, and underscore traumatic aspects. In this capacity, these museums have evolved into educational and research hubs dedicated to addressing the memory of the war and attempting to overcome societal trauma. A drawback, however, is the focus on a single perspective – the Bosniak one – to the exclusion of the Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat perspectives on the war and the associated war crimes.

KEYWORDS: Sarajevo museums, Bosniaks, war crimes, Srebrenica, memorialization.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Bosnian society are the most severely affected among the countries of the former Yugoslavia by the dissolution of the federation and the war of 1992–1995. This is particularly important for the Bosniaks, who suffered the highest number of casualties during this war.[1] It was not merely a matter of physical or psychological losses; there was an attempt to destroy the Bosniaks as a nation by stripping them of their identity, statehood, history, memory, culture, and traditions, as well as their right to remember the past and build a future. Museums and museum spaces serve as reminders of this tragedy, drawing attention to it while simultaneously promoting peace, peaceful coexistence, and the prevention of similar crimes in the future. A country that during the Yugoslav period[2] was considered an example of religious tolerance, tolerance in general, and peaceful coexistence among different ethnic groups became, in the early 1990s, a reflection of the journalistic stereotype of the Balkans as Europe's powder keg. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, its consequences, and its significance for the state, society, and the entire post-Yugoslav space have proved complex, multilayered, and long-lasting. Researchers, artists, writers, and cultural figures are engaged in re-examining the war, its consequences, and the traumas of wartime and the post-war period. Museum spaces play an important role in this process; for several decades, they have been used as historical and educational centres and as places for preserving and re-examining the tragic events of the 1990s. In every city in BiH, one can find museums whose exhibitions, either in whole or in part, are dedicated to the 1992–1995 war, war crimes, and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. The largest concentration of such museums is in Sarajevo, where they have long been part of the educational process in schools and higher education institutions, centres for preserving memory, and venues for various commemorative and educational events. Importantly, Sarajevo's museums have become an integral part of the capital of BiH's tourism landscape and have developed into distinct tourist routes and destinations.

"RESEARCHERS, ARTISTS, WRITERS, AND CULTURAL FIGURES ARE ENGAGED IN RE-EXAMINING THE WAR, ITS CONSEQUENCES, AND THE TRAUMAS OF WARTIME AND THE POST-WAR PERIOD."

Museum spaces in Sarajevo and the war of 1992–1995

Bosnia and Herzegovina in its present form appeared on the map of Europe and the Western Balkans as a result of the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords at the end of 1995. The peace agreement created a rather complex state consisting of two entities (ethnic state formations), the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, as well as the Brčko District, which is simultaneously part of both entities. At the same time, there is a supranational international institution – the Office of the High Representative of the international community. A separate position of international supervisor was established for the Brčko District.

THE CAPITAL OF THE COUNTRY and of the Federation of BiH entity is the city of Sarajevo. In this entity, the vast majority of the population are Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats. In the Republika Srpska entity, the vast majority of the population are Bosnian Serbs. Representatives of national minorities live in each of the entities, including Turks, Albanians, Montenegrins, Roma, Macedonians, Jews, Hungarians, Italians, Romanians, and many others.[3] The constituent peoples of BiH are recognized as Bosniaks, Bosnian Croats, and Bosnian Serbs. According to the preamble to the Constitution of BiH, national minorities are classified as "Others".[4]

Reference to the state structure of BiH and the characteristics of its population is important for understanding how museum institutions in BiH are established and operate. Each entity upholds its own narrative of the events of the 1990s, which influences the creation of museum exhibitions and the preservation of memories of the war in BiH. In Sarajevo's museums, this subject is central. The focus is on presenting how the 1992–1995 war is interpreted specifically by Bosniaks. They use several definitions: the "Greater Serbian aggression against Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992–1995" and the "defensive liberation war". Meanwhile, Bosnian Croats use the term "Homeland War of 1992–1995", which echoes the term used in Croatia for the war of 1991–1995. Bosnian Serbs call the war a "defensive liberation war". Accordingly, Sarajevo's museums tell the story of the "Greater Serbian aggression against BiH in 1992–1995". The Bosnian Croat-Bosniak conflict is practically not depicted. The Bosnian Serb context is left out, as Serbs from Republika Srpska,[5] the Republic of Serbian Krajina[6], and Serbia are regarded as enemies. Consequently, military operations, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and the genocide in Srebrenica are examined through the lens of the narrative pres-

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA



The location of the Sarajevo tunnel's entrance is now a museum.



Sarajevo Tunnel Museum visitors watch educational videos. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA

ent in Bosniak and Bosnian Croat practices of public memory. A similar situation can be observed in museums in Republika Srpska, where Bosniaks and their political and state leadership are identified as the main perpetrators of the 1992–1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

MUSEUMS IN SARAJEVO whose exhibitions recount the war and war crimes began to be established in the Bosnian capital during the post-war period. The largest institutions include the Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the War Childhood Museum, the Tunnel of Hope (Sarajevo War Tunnel), the Military Museum 1992, Gallery 11/07/95, the Museum of Crimes Against Humanity and Genocide 1992–1995, the Museum of the Siege of Sarajevo 1992–1995, the Kovači Memorial Centre and Museum of Heroes of the Liberation War, the House of the Liberators – Žuč, and others. According to TripAdvisor rankings, these museums are among the most popular attractions among visitors to the city. Museum exhibitions have been created using archival documents and materials, photographs and video footage, objects, and personal belongings. These exhibitions are multimedia-based, and visitors are provided with audio guides so that they can independently select their preferred language and listen to accounts of each exhibit. The use of video and audio allows the exhibitions to "speak" to visitors, immersing them in the atmosphere of the 1992–1995 war and creating corresponding associations with documents, photographs, and people's personal belongings. The screening of documentary footage of the war, the suffering of civilians, and the provision of medical assistance to them under extremely difficult conditions makes an additional powerful impression.

The war is the central theme, within which specific subjects are distinguished, including war crimes, the deaths of children, concentration camps, the genocide in Srebrenica, mass graves, the work of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995. These subjects are not secondary; they are just as central as the theme of the war itself. They are deliberately placed within the context of the war, highlighting key aspects that remain unprocessed and require continuous reflection.

A distinctive feature of Sarajevo's museum exhibitions is that each contains a substantial section devoted to the siege of Sarajevo and the suffering of its residents. Detailed accounts can be found at the Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina[7] and the Tunnel of Hope.[8] In 2023, the Museum of the Siege of Sarajevo 1992–1995 opened in the capital of BiH. It should be regarded as one of the important centres of remembrance of the siege of the city and its role in the lives of Sarajevo's residents.[9] The establishment of a separate museum focused on the siege of Sarajevo once again demonstrates that the tragic events of that time remain triggering and traumatic for Bosniaks. This is reflected in the museum's predominantly dark color scheme and in the selection of photographs, audio and video materials, and exhibits. To intensify the tragic effect and make the museum memorable, its name is displayed against a black background, with the letters glowing red. From the outset, this conveys to visitors an understanding that the history of the siege of Sarajevo struck a deeply personal chord with every resident of the city, and that this is a history of loss that must be continually recounted and brought to mind.

"THE USE OF VIDEO AND AUDIO ALLOWS THE EXHIBITIONS TO 'SPEAK' TO VISITORS [...]."

MUSEUMS PERFORM a specific function: they do not simply recount the tragic pages of 1992–1995; they are intended to build communication with younger generations and foreign audiences, particularly visitors to their exhibitions. For this reason, museums are invariably included in many of the tourist tours conducted in Sarajevo. In this way, the narrative is transmitted



War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo. PHOTO: KATERYNA SHYMKEVYCH



Prison in Museum of War and Genocide, Sarajevo. PHOTO: KATERYNA SHYMKEVYCH

to foreign audiences, with particular emphasis on the desire of the Serbs to destroy the Bosniaks, their history, and their culture. Museum exhibitions serve to preserve memory and sustain the state-building narrative of Greater Serbian aggression against Bosnia and Herzegovina. Museums therefore also function as educational and public outreach institutions, as well as teaching facilities, whose visits form part of school and university education in Sarajevo. This is particularly true of the students at schools, for whom museums organize interactive history lessons and various workshops that include discussions of the exhibitions and opportunities to express their own opinions on the events of the 1992–1995 war. Such activities are frequently held at the Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the War Childhood Museum[10], the Tunnel of Hope, Gallery 11/07/95,[11] and the Museum of Crimes Against Humanity and Genocide 1992–1995.[12]

Features of the exhibitions

War and war crimes are the central themes of each exhibition, allowing them to be identified as the macro-context of the exhibitions. Attention is consistently focused on Bosnia and Herzegovina's achievement of independence, with a detailed chronology of events, the course of military campaigns, and the Dayton Peace Agreement, which brought the war to an end. Crimes against the civilians – war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide – are presented as consequences of aggression against BiH. Separate subthemes preserved by the exhibitions as a memory of those events, while simultaneously serving as sources for studying the events of that period, include the activities of international humanitarian organizations, the work of the UN, the deployment of the United Nations Protection Force, and the establishment of safe areas for the civilian population. The establishment and activities of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) are an integral component of the macro-context. In this way, the exhibitions convey to visitors the information that international justice was applied to war criminals. A specific feature of how the ICTY is presented is the demonstration of crimes against Bosniaks and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the names of Slobodan Milošević, Radovan Krstić, Radovan Karadžić, Ratko Mladić, and others mentioned.

"WAR AND WAR CRIMES ARE THE CENTRAL THEMES OF EACH EXHIBITION, ALLOWING THEM TO BE IDENTIFIED AS THE MACRO-CONTEXT OF THE EXHIBITIONS."

The exhibitions are intended not simply to tell the story of the war and the crimes, but to give visitors an understanding of the existence of a deliberate Serbian plan against BiH and the Bosniaks. Therefore, the displays include materials on the formation of the idea of "Greater Serbia", the history of the establishment of Republika Srpska, and the destruction of Bosniak historical and cultural heritage. Attention is also paid to the existence of the separatist formation of the Bosnian Croats, the Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia, and its armed forces, the Croatian Defence Council, which fought against the government army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The presentation in the exhibitions of the Bosniaks as victims of aggression by Serbs and Bosnian Croats is the central idea that visitors are expected to remember and understand about the 1992–1995 war in BiH.

A DETAILED CHRONOLOGY is invariably provided of the signing of peace agreements with the Bosnian Croats (the Washington Agreement) in 1994 and with the Bosnian Serbs (the Dayton Peace Agreement) in 1995. These documents are considered important stages of the war that created modern, post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Materials on war crimes are intended to reinforce the "Greater Serbia" narrative and intensify the emotional percep-



Gallery 11/07/95 is an exhibition space aiming to preserve the memory of the Srebrenica tragedy and the 8,372 persons who perished in the massacres.

PHOTO: GALLERY 11/07/95

tion of the fact that the Bosniaks became victims of aggression and criminal acts. For this reason, the exhibitions contain accounts of victims of concentration camps[13] and the genocide in Srebrenica,[14] as well as objects and personal belongings of those affected (the murdered, prisoners, and refugees).[15]

The detailed presentation of crimes against Bosniak civilians can be traced in the micro-context of the exhibitions, where the narrative moves from the history of the war to the examination of specific types of crimes. The central narrative remains the genocide in Srebrenica. At the same time, the exhibitions emphasize that Bosnian Serbs committed genocide against Bosniaks in other cities in BiH – Zvornik, Goražde, Keraterm, and Bihać – highlighting the systematic nature of their actions. The exhibition materials show that only the killing of civilians in Srebrenica has been proven to constitute genocide by the ICTY. In Gallery 11/07/95 and the Museum of Crimes Against Humanity and Genocide 1992–1995, a substantial part of the exhibitions is devoted to the tragedy of Srebrenica, mass graves, and concentration camps. The aim and purpose are to convey that these crimes were so widespread that their consequences are still felt today. They are evident in the ongoing work of forensic experts at various mass-grave sites. Models of concentration camps and the arrangement of areas within museums as prison cells demonstrate the cruelty with which captives were treated.[16]

"THE EXHIBITION MATERIALS SHOW THAT ONLY THE KILLING OF CIVILIANS IN SREBRENICA HAS BEEN PROVEN TO CONSTITUTE GENOCIDE BY THE ICTY."

The themes of the siege of Sarajevo, the deaths of the city's residents, child victims, and the delivery of humanitarian aid to the city by international organizations through the tunnel beneath Butmir Airport (the Tunnel of Hope) can be identified as a separate area within the micro-context. This is a relatively local context within Sarajevo's Museum exhibitions, but it is an important part of preserving the memory of the events of 1992–1995.[17] This is why Sarajevo has separate museums dedicated to children and childhood during wartime,[18] the siege of Sarajevo,[19] and the Tunnel of Hope.[20] Through such local themes, museums expand the culture of remembrance of the war and crimes. In other cities in the country, these themes are not central, but a certain part of the exhibitions is invariably devoted to them. For example, the Museum of War and Genocide Victims 1992–1995 operates in Mostar.[21] It is a branch of Sarajevo's Museum of Crimes Against Humanity and Genocide 1992–1995. It presents accounts of war crimes by expanding the local context to include, among other things, the destruction of the Old Bridge in Mostar and crimes committed by the Croatian Defence Council against Bosniaks.[22]

THE PRESENCE OF macro- and micro-contexts in Sarajevo's museum exhibitions contributes to a detailed presentation of military operations and the disclosure of the characteristics and specific features of each type of crime against the civilian population. It

also makes it possible to preserve the memory of events without the risk of losing important meanings and narratives. Researchers who use museum exhibitions, their materials, and victims' testimonies have the opportunity to study the events of the 1992–1995 war systematically and consistently and to become familiar with the specific features of the "Greater Serbia" project, which the Serbian leadership used to justify crimes against civilians.

AT THE SAME TIME, it is worth emphasizing a certain fragmentary and one-sided nature of the exhibitions, as they do not address crimes against Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats or members of national minorities. Consequently, visitors are offered only a selected narrative about Bosniak suffering, one that is clearly constructed through the materials and testimonies presented. This negatively affects the fragmented preservation of the memory of these events, depriving museum visitors of the opportunity to make their own assessments and draw their own conclusions about the war and war crimes.

The instrumentalization of memory

The exhibitions and museums serve as instruments of the culture of remembrance concerning the 1992–1995 war and war crimes against Bosniaks. The exhibitions themselves reflect collected and systematized documentary, visual, and audio materials, which are presented to visitors and researchers in a specific form. Testimonies from victims of crimes or their relatives, recollections of Sarajevo residents, including children, representatives of humanitarian missions, politicians, and military personnel are incorporated into specific narratives conveyed through exhibitions, museum brochures for visitors, and educational and public outreach activities. The emphasis created in exhibitions through the use of dark colors, with important locations and themes highlighted through lighting and lettering (for example, in red),[23] shapes museum visitors' understanding of the events of 1992–1995.[24] The constant emphasis on victimhood, together with an indication of who is responsible for it, leads visitors to museum spaces to sympathize emotionally with the Bosniaks and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"VISITORS ARE OFFERED ONLY A SELECTED NARRATIVE ABOUT BOSNIAK SUFFERING, ONE THAT IS CLEARLY CONSTRUCTED THROUGH THE MATERIALS AND TESTIMONIES PRESENTED."

An additional effect is achieved through watching films, listening to video interviews, and studying cartographic materials and models. Complete immersion is achieved through discussions and debates, in which school pupils are most frequently involved. They are the category of visitors most emotionally vulnerable and capable of retaining the narrative of the victimhood of BiH and the Bosniaks for longer than adults.

In some museums, adult visitors have the opportunity to become part of the process of shaping memory. Visitors can write down their impressions of the exhibition on separate sticky notes, which are then attached to the walls. This is not the traditional practice of writing in visitors' books; rather, it is direct personal participation in the culture of remembrance.

Museums use exhibitions to instrumentalize a specific narrative about the war, Bosniak suffering, the genocide in Srebrenica, and the Serbs' desire to destroy Bosnian identity. This approach fully corresponds to the official narrative prevailing among politicians and historians, although BiH has no memory strategy. Nevertheless, the activities of museums and the creation of permanent exhibitions about the war in the country, crimes against the civilian population, and their consequences for society make it possible to speak of a systematic approach to preserving memory and promoting a culture of remembrance. This is precisely why museums have become part of thematic or general sightseeing tours, while exhibition materials are supplemented by sites of memory in Sarajevo's public spaces. These include various memorials dedicated to the city's deceased residents, commemorative plaques, and the marking of "Sarajevo Roses" on roads and pavements.[25] After visiting museums, visitors can continue exploring the history of the 1990s by walking around the city or joining one of the thematic tours offered as part of war (dark) tourism.

Conclusions

Sarajevo's museums and their exhibitions are created through the efforts of civil society organizations and activists, who attract foreign funding, seek grants, and promote exhibitions among residents and visitors to the city. State support remains a distant and, for the time being, unattainable prospect for many museum institutions, as does the development of a separate state strategy for studying, collecting materials, and preserving the memory of the war, the siege of Sarajevo, the genocide in Srebrenica, mass war crimes, and their consequences. Given the very complex state structure of BiH, the emergence of such a strategy is not under consideration. Attempts have been made, however, at the initiative of and under pressure from international and European organizations. The country's authorities were supposed to develop a transitional justice strategy, in which the history of the 1992–1995 war and war crimes would have been an important component. At the time, the proposal concerned a common strategy for all the peoples living in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Attempts were made, but they proved unsuccessful.

THE EMERGENCE of thematic museums and exhibitions initiated and created by civil society organizations is therefore logical. Without museums, it would have been impossible to preserve the memory of the war so systematically and consistently, pass on knowledge to young people and visitors to the Bosnian

capital, and raise and discuss complex and controversial issues within society. A significant shortcoming is the fragmented nature of the narratives, as the exhibitions in Sarajevo's museums and, more broadly, throughout the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina reflect only the Bosniak perspective on the war and portray the Bosniaks as victims. Interestingly, none of the exhibitions in this context contains either implicit or explicit expressions of hatred towards Serbs. On the contrary, the exhibitions are presented as a warning to people, who should understand what projects such as "Greater Serbia" and the initiation of aggressive, unprovoked actions by one state against another can lead to. The idea that evil is punished and that perpetrators must be held accountable for their crimes also runs as a common thread throughout the exhibitions.

Some exhibitions, such as those concerning Srebrenica or mass graves, may shock visitors with their detailed descriptions and testimonies, but this is done to warn people against committing similar crimes in the future. In other words, such exhibitions document events, preserve memory, and serve as safeguards incorporated into the process of remembering and the culture of remembrance. Sarajevo's museum landscape of memory of the war and siege is built not "from above" but "from below"– through the efforts of civil society activists, researchers, and ordinary city residents. The narrative here is sustained by individual human stories, oral history, and objects that bear witness, transforming "dark tourism" into "heritage tourism", as a universal instrument of advocacy and warning for foreign visitors and, at the same time, a nation-building instrument for Bosniaks. Although this landscape of remembrance remains distinctly Bosniak-centred and fragmented, it contains no language of revenge – only a clear demand for accountability for crimes, remembrance of the victims, and the desire to ensure that the tragedy never happens again.

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Baltic and Nordic perspectives
on cultural policies and marketization of arts

When artists become entrepreneurs

by **Ann-Sofie Köping Olsson**, **Miikka Pyykkönen**, **Eglė Rindzevičiūtė**, **Ulrike Rohn**, and **Katri Talaskivi**

abstract

This article examines how cultural policy initiatives in two Nordic and two Baltic countries have addressed the idea of cultural and creative industries and artistic autonomy in relation to artists' work. Drawing on a thematic analysis of national cultural policy documents in Finland, Sweden, Estonia and Lithuania, the study explores the long durée of cultural policy shifts from a welfare perspective safeguarding artistic work from political and commercial influences toward increasingly market-oriented and entrepreneurial approaches. Despite differing historical trajectories, the Nordic and Baltic countries exhibit similar patterns in integrating arts and culture into the cultural and creative industries sector and adopting a market logic for artistic work. The document analysis reveals a more turbulent transition towards viewing artists as entrepreneurial market actors in the Baltic states, whereas the Nordic countries have incorporated these ideas more incrementally, partially because of the earlier adoption of neoliberal principles. In all countries the political goal of merging cultural and economic policies was transformative of the artistic sector, provoking both resistance and pragmatic approaches from the stakeholders.

KEYWORDS: Artistic autonomy, cultural entrepreneurship, cultural industries, cultural policy, Baltic, Nordic.

Art and culture are arguably more present in people's lives today than ever before. Increased leisure time, improved communication infrastructures, and expanded marketing efforts, particularly through social media platforms, have significantly enhanced access to and increased household spendings on arts, culture and leisure activities. In this context it is interesting to revisit policy approaches to forms of art funding and conditions for artistic work. This article focuses on the development of official cultural policies, including arts funding, in Nordic and Baltic countries. It explores the long durée of this development to detail how welfare politics, aiming to free artists from political and commercial interferences (Nordic countries) and state-socialist centralized model of art administration (Baltic countries) evolved to converge into a set of policies that fundamentally redefined art and culture as an economic sector. In turn, the policy approach to artists also changed: creators being primarily seen as entrepreneurs and commercial operators.

Since the late 20th century there has been a growing policy emphasis on the so-called *cultural and creative industries/sector (CCI/CCS)* as a new strategic economic sector where independent arts organizations and artists increasingly are expected to operate as self-employed actors or entrepreneurs. This development started in the United Kingdom in the late 1980s and was extended in the 1990s when New Labour revised the principles of a welfare state cultural policies that sought to make art accessible to all socioeconomic groups. They also reviewed the governmental model of art funding, which was organized at the arm's-length distance, where art councils set priorities and distributed funding in coordination with, but independently of, the government. The reforms were informed by the ideas that introduced a neoliberal market logic into the art sector: approached as CCI/


KULTUURKAPITAL
ARM'S LENGTH PRINCIPLE
ARTISTIC FREEDOM
FOLKHEM
SAVITUMAS
LOOMEETTEVÕTLUS
CULTURAL WORKERS
UNESCO
CULTURE COUNCIL
KULTŪRINIS VERSLUMAS

CCS, art and culture were expected to generate income, employment and exports of economic significance within a competitive market economy.[1]

THE IMPLEMENTATION of these neo-liberal ideas in public cultural policy took shape of stimulating commercial activities, including entrepreneurship, adopting strategic management, instrumentalizing funding and outsourcing public services to non-governmental organizations and private enterprises. This policy approach was internationally embedded from its very start: the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) played a key role in emphasizing the economic productivity of art and culture by assembling and presenting statistical reports of the cultural and creative sector's contribution to wealth, gross value added, innovation and employment.[2] While UNESCO linked culture to economic and human development since the 1960s, the newly founded European Union (1992) too adopted an economic perspective on culture.[3] Throughout Europe, these reforms further crystallized and consolidated in national and international policy discourses on the creative economy that expanded in the 2000s.[4] In these discourses the figure of an entrepreneur was increasingly presented as a key – and ideal – subject of the work life.[5] In recent decades all these developments have resulted in ambitious national, international and regional governmental schemes to use the cultural and creative industries as an instrument for both economic development and social well-being.[6] This also entailed significant shrinking of arts and culture funding and strengthening expectation of artists to become self-employed market actors.

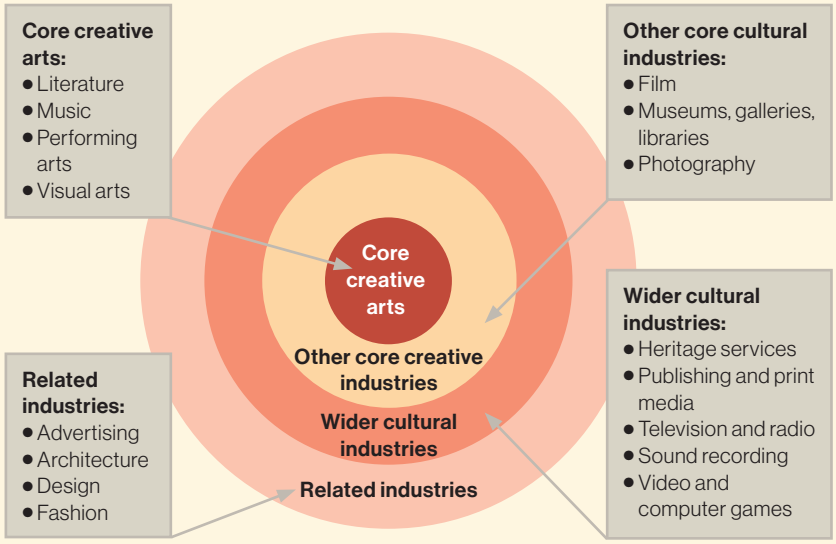
"ART AND CULTURE WERE EXPECTED TO GENERATE INCOME, EMPLOYMENT AND EXPORTS OF ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE WITHIN A COMPETITIVE MARKET ECONOMY."

While these developments have been widely researched in cultural policy scholarship, much of the academic debate on CCI revolves around big countries with large art markets. Furthermore, the intersection between the cultural industries and cultural entrepreneurship approaches and debates on artistic autonomy and artistic freedom remains insufficiently studied.[7] This article addresses this gap in knowledge by focusing on the selection of Nordic and Baltic countries, which are characterized by small domestic markets and a strong emphasis on social welfare. For instance, Sweden and Finland have had a long tradition of viewing culture as a public good supported through welfare policies rather than market mechanisms. As Estonia and Lithuania gained independence from the Soviet Union, they began reforms of what was then a state-dominated cultural sector and, in the early 2000s, incrementally introduced the concept of CCI as part of the Europeanization of national cultural policies. In this article we ask: How have the issues of cultural industries and cultural entrepreneurship been addressed in national policy documents in recent years? If and how is the idea of artistic autonomy constructed in the policy documents and does it clash or is reconciled with notions of cultural industries and entrepreneurship? The article draws on a specially conducted study of local policy responses to this changing landscape by examining how national public cultural policy programs, bills, and reports in Nordic and Baltic states have addressed artistic autonomy and the notions of cultural and creative industries.

WE FIND IT STRIKING that cultural policy development features similar dynamics in what are quite different political and cultural contexts in the Baltic Sea region, which raises questions about policy convergence and its local impacts. For instance, creators in all four countries share concerns that have been recently voiced by UNESCO[8] and EU[9]: these organizations are no longer worried about the disregard of the cultural sector's economic role; instead, they issue warnings about a growing political pressure globally as governments and societal actors impose diverse constraints on artists' rights to express themselves freely and to autonomously carry out their work with reasonable working conditions. International organizations have also begun to critique the "dark sides" of the economization: for instance, UNESCO[10] posits that the uncontrolled marketization of the art world and excessive reduction of public support aggravates the already existing precarization of the labor markets, endangering artists' possibilities to freely express themselves. In the Nordic context, these issues can be seen in the so-called culture wars,[11] i.e. populist political parties questioning national cultural policies, practicing political interference in cultural funding,[12] and creating self-censorship among cultural workers.[13] Furthermore, populist parties consider artistic work elitist, suggesting that those high art institutions and contemporary art forms that are "consumed" by a relatively small number of audiences should not be extensively publicly funded.[14] These trends reverberate in the Baltic states as well: for instance, in Lithuania, following the initial boom of cultural infrastructure funded by the EU structural funds, new debates about artists' welfare, poor pay and working conditions in the cultural sector emerged in the last decade. But these debates did not replace the question of artistic autonomy: a recent appointment of a new minister of culture from a populist party, who promised to crack down on the "elitist culture", in 2025–2026, stirred a large popular movement and protest which called the government to recognize the sector-specific values and artistic autonomy. This mobilization led to the change of the minister.[15]

Furthermore, the field of cultural policy is organized in similar ways in the four countries. In Finland culture was included in the Ministry of Education until 2010, when the Ministry was renamed to include both Education and Culture. In Sweden the Ministry of Culture was separated from the former Ministry of Education and Culture in the 1990s. While Estonian and Lithuanian govern-

ments had departments for art and culture in the 1920s–30s, during the Soviet period their cultural ministries were directly accountable to the Moscow-based all-union ministry. In the 1990s, Lithuania first established a Ministry of Culture and Education and later a Ministry of Culture, while Estonia maintained a separate Ministry of Culture. Accordingly, the analysis is based on national cultural-policy documents produced by ministries, arts councils and related public authorities in Finland, Sweden, Estonia and Lithuania, supplemented where relevant by policy reports from other government bodies. The corpus covers the period from the emergence of cultural and creative industries discourse in the 1990s to the most recent policy documents available for the study. We conducted a thematic analysis focusing on three interconnected dimensions: the framing of cultural and creative industries and entrepreneurship, the allocation of responsibility for artists' livelihoods, and the construction of artistic autonomy. The comparison therefore concerns not only what policies say about culture and entrepreneurship, but also which policy domain and institutional actor assumes responsibility for these issues.



The concentric circles model of the cultural industries by David Throsby, 2008.

THE ARTICLE IS ORGANIZED as follows: first, we discuss the key concepts. Then we outline the national cases detailing the development of the cultural policy discourses as they embrace the notions of art and cultural entrepreneurship and negotiate the idea of artistic autonomy and freedom. We conclude with a discussion reflecting on the parallels and divergences among the cases, which reveal the need for comparative analysis beyond the traditional framework of analyzing policy transformation in the Baltic states as a form of "catching up with the West", and pointing out the importance of considering artistic autonomy and freedom alongside the debate on art and cultural entrepreneurship.

Cultural industries, artistic autonomy and cultural entrepreneurship

Cultural policy in many Western countries has undergone an ideological shift, increasingly positioning the arts within the economic framework of CCI. These developments and their underlying assumptions remain contested both within the cultural sector and in academic scholarship. In this section, we clarify our understanding of CCI, artistic autonomy and cultural entrepreneurship, while treating entrepreneurship not as a self-evident characteristic of artistic work but as a historically and politically shaped concept whose meaning requires empirical examination.

The history and definitions of CCI policy have been widely studied. Here it suffices to note that national and international actors have developed different definitions of this emerging economic sector. Many have been influenced by Throsby's model of cultural industries, which places the core creative arts – literature, music, performing arts and visual arts – at its center and distinguishes increasingly commercial activities further from this core.[16] Today, CCI is best understood as a flexible boundary concept rather than a unified category. Its vagueness has enabled diverse policy strategies while also generating critique and resistance. Despite these differences, CCI policy has generally contributed to positioning arts and culture within an economic paradigm. We use CCI to refer to these broader policy developments and cultural industries (CI) when focusing on artistic work.

The notion of artistic autonomy is equally complex and contested.[17] We distinguish between artistic freedom, artistic autonomy and aesthetic autonomy as related but analytically distinct concepts. Artistic freedom primarily concerns freedom of expression and protection from censorship and political interference, while artistic autonomy refers to the capacity and material, institutional and professional conditions that enable artists to exercise this freedom and determine the content and conditions of their work. Artistic freedom has been established as a fundamental right, notably in Article 19 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, while UNESCO's Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions from 2005[18] further recognizes artists' freedom of expression and creativity.[19] The notion of aesthetic autonomy has a particularly long history as part of the Western art, which informs cultural policies. In the policy context, aesthetic autonomy concerns the relative independence of art from external political and commercial demands.

TWO FORMS OF NEGATIVE freedom have historically been central to this understanding of artistic autonomy: protection from direct political interference through arm's-length cultural policy, and protection from excessive commercialization and market pressures. The former was institutionalized in post-war cultural policy, including in the Nordic countries during the 1960s and 1970s, through state-supported but relatively autonomous funding institutions.[20] The latter concerns the risk that commercialization and commodification make art increasingly heteronomous, subjecting it to consumer demand, corporate interests and market logics.[21] Alongside these negative freedoms there is a positive dimension: artists require adequate social and economic conditions to exercise autonomy.[22] Artistic autonomy

is therefore inseparable from questions of inequality and material security.[23]

Recent developments in Nordic and Baltic countries, including reductions in public cultural funding[24] and growing expectations that artists operate as entrepreneurial actors contributing to economic growth,[25] have raised concerns about the effects of economic instrumentalization on artistic autonomy.[26] These developments are part of a broader policy shift associated with the creative economy and New Public Management (NPM).[27] Since the 1990s, international organizations and national governments have increasingly emphasized the economic value of culture, market-like forms of governance and entrepreneurial forms of work. NPM, in particular, sought to increase the efficiency of public administration by introducing market-like competition, giving rise to new governance arrangements that have been described as pseudo-markets and quasi-markets.[28] The cultural sector nevertheless operates within a mixed economy in which artists combine self-generated income, sales, public and private funding, and other forms of support.[29]

Entrepreneurship has consequently become increasingly visible in cultural policy and practice. The arts and cultural sectors have been considered fertile ground for entrepreneurial orientations because artistic work is often short-term, uncertain and fragmented, and survival may require skills associated with entrepreneurship.[30] Entrepreneurship has thus become an important model of labor and worker subjectivity within CCI policy.[31]

"ENTREPRENEURSHIP HAS CONSEQUENTLY BECOME INCREASINGLY VISIBLE IN CULTURAL POLICY AND PRACTICE."

THIS DOES NOT, however, mean that artists are inherently entrepreneurs or that entrepreneurial activity is necessarily equivalent to artistic work. The concept of the entrepreneur has a specific history in economic thought. Hébert and Link[32] locate the term in nineteenth-century French economic thinking, while Schumpeter[33] famously conceptualized the entrepreneur as an agent of innovation and economic development who creates new combinations in pursuit of economic value. Normative theories of entrepreneurship are important for understanding the historical construction of the idea, but they should not be treated as definitions of artistic work or as theoretical grounds for assuming that artists are entrepreneurs.

Some scholarship on cultural entrepreneurship has emphasized similarities between artists and entrepreneurs, including creativity, risk-taking, flexibility and the capacity to cope with uncertainty.[34] Ellmeier, for example, describes the emerging creative entrepreneurial workforce in terms of flexibility, independence, mobility and psychological resilience.[35] Other researchers, however, have stressed the complexity and fuzziness of entrepreneurial behavior within CCI.[36] Such similarities are analytically relevant, but neither do they by themselves establish that it is necessary nor desirable to understand artists through the economic category of entrepreneurship.

Indeed, the relationship between artistic work and entrepreneurship is complex and potentially contradictory. The entrepreneurial ideal promoted in contemporary cultural policy is tied to self-reliance, market orientation, competitiveness and economic value, whereas artistic autonomy entails the capacity to determine aesthetic and artistic goals and practices without undue political, commercial or other external pressures. At the same time, artists may engage in activities that can be described as entrepreneurial in practice, such as organizing work, seeking income, building networks or developing audiences. The existence of such practices should not, however, be taken to validate entrepreneurship as an ideological and normative model of artistic work.

THERE ARE THEREFORE both similarities and important differences between the entrepreneurial and artistic ideals. The Schumpeterian entrepreneur, often described in heroic terms, is oriented towards creating new combinations, markets and sources of economic value,[37] whereas artistic work may be oriented towards cultural, aesthetic, social or other values that cannot be reduced to economic growth. As Klamer[38] argues, artists may contribute to the common good through art despite precarious working conditions. The relevant question is therefore not whether artists resemble entrepreneurs in some respects, but what the category of entrepreneurship comes to mean when it is applied to artistic work and how its adoption affects artistic autonomy. We therefore approach cultural entrepreneurship as an empirically open and contested concept rather than as an inherent attribute of artists. Our analysis thus focuses on the tension between entrepreneurial expectations and the conditions of artistic autonomy, while remaining open to the diverse ways in which artists themselves understand and enact entrepreneurial practices. In what follows, we use artistic freedom primarily when referring to protection from censorship and political interference, while artistic autonomy refers to the institutional, economic and professional conditions that enable artists to determine the content and conditions of their work. Our analysis focuses primarily on the latter.

Nordic and Baltic cultural policies

As mentioned earlier, there is a strong policy isomorphism in the region: all countries have a Ministry of Culture or Ministry of Education and Culture that coordinates cultural policy on the national level, with municipal level and, except for Finland, regional dimensions. The funding systems in principle are also similar: the ministries directly and indirectly fund major cultural organizations, and all countries have specific art funding bodies that are more or less autonomous from the government. These actors form a coordinated and decentralized cultural-policy ecosystem in which the governments provide strategic direction and legal frameworks. For instance, in Estonia, the Ministry of Culture oversees strategic planning, funds major national cultural

institutions, and administers schemes for the arts, heritage, and creative industries. Complementing this is the Cultural Endowment of Estonia (*Kultuurkapital*) – a semi-autonomous, arm's-length funding body with its own revenue streams from cultural and gambling taxes. At the regional and municipal level local governments run their own cultural departments, fund theatres, galleries, museums, music and hobby schools, and support local festivals and public-art programs. The Lithuanian system is similar, where art funding is distributed by the arm's length body, the Council for Culture, which, however, does not have its own endowment and allocates funds from the government. In Sweden, all state authorities are autonomous and run on arm's length distance from the ministries, according to Swedish law. Since 2010 the Swedish regions have had their own cultural policy strategies and are responsible for the region's culture organizations in collaboration with the municipalities and civil society organizations with support from the Arts Council. Artists can apply for funding at both state and regional levels, and in some cases also from the municipalities. Historically there has been confusion about the responsibility for the cultural and creative industries policies. Initially it was assigned to the regions and the Ministry of Enterprise. However, lately the Cultural Ministry has taken a more visible role. The Finnish state administration of cultural policy is organized in a similar way to that of Sweden, with a strong position of artists' unions in distribution of Arts Council support. Unlike the Swedish system, Finnish municipalities, but not regions, play an important role in supporting local cultural activities; Finland also has significant national and regional private foundations supporting professional artistic work. Finally, both the Baltic and Nordic systems rely on strong and emerging artistic associations and unions. These organizations function as important intermediaries between the state and artists: they lobby for sectoral interests and participate in drafting cultural policy.

SWEDEN AND FINLAND

The trajectory of cultural policy development in Finland and Sweden aligns closely with that of other Nordic countries, where policy frameworks emerged from the ideological foundations of the post-World War II welfare state and were further shaped by the expansion of democratic principles during the 1960s and 1970s. In his analysis of Nordic cultural policy models, Duelund[39] delineates four distinct phases of transformation: Democratization of Culture (1960–1975), Cultural Democracy (1975–1985), Social and Economic Instrumentalization (1985–1995), and Political Colonization (1995–2007). Developments following 2007 largely represent a continuation of what Duelund terms political colonization of cultural policy, which has progressively evolved into a kind of economic colonization. Within this framework, artists are increasingly asked to position themselves as entrepreneurs or business owners, often involuntarily. This applies to Finland and Sweden, but there are important differences.[40] In this part we will highlight both the common developments and differences between Finnish and Swedish cultural policy regarding artistic freedom and marketization.

The origins of modern Swedish cultural policy can be traced to the 1930s, when the Social Democratic Party introduced its vision of the state as the "people's home" (*Folkhem*) committed to the welfare of all citizens[41]. This entailed rejecting the notion of art as an exclusive domain of the elite, and instead promoting culture as a universal right, accessible to all social layers. Consequently, the state should assume responsibility for guaranteeing equal participation in and access to art and culture. However, it was not until the 1960s that cultural policy as a distinct domain began to gain momentum through the government commission "Culture Council" whose efforts culminated in the first governmental cultural policy report in 1972[42] and the Cultural policy bill in 1974[43] with specific cultural policy objectives which have laid the foundation for all cultural policy initiatives in Sweden until 2009. Two objectives are of interest in this research. Firstly, that cultural policy should contribute to the protection of the freedom of speech and to create real opportunities for this freedom to be exercised, and secondly, to counteract the negative consequences of commercialism within the cultural field[44]. The Culture Council in Sweden rejected state or political interference in artistic practice. The term *arm's length principle* was not explicitly used in the government bill,[45] but the underlying idea was clearly present, which also applied to Finland. It was above all institutionalized through the establishment of the Arts Council of Finland (1967) – a new government agency – supporting artists and allowing them to participate in the decision-making on funding. The objectives and measures of the policy for promoting artistic activity were already formulated by the State Art Committee in 1965. In Sweden similar agencies, the Swedish Arts Council and the Swedish Arts Grants Committee, were inaugurated in 1974 and in 1976. Cultural democracy, accessibility of art independent of both geography and social class and giving high arts and culture an opportunity to flourish in a small market, were fundamentals common to cultural policy in both countries.[46]

In both countries there was a broad consensus on the neces-

KULTUURKAPITAL

LITHUANIAN COUNCIL FOR CULTURE

The Estonian *Kultuurkapital* is a semi-autonomous, arm's-length funding body with its own revenue streams from cultural and gambling taxes, which works as a complement to the Ministry of Culture. The Lithuanian Council for Culture works similarly, but does not have its own endowment.

sity of providing public support for artists and cultural activities according to the aforementioned ideas on supporting the work of artists. The Swedish Commission placed emphasis on artists', also called "cultural workers", working conditions addressing issues related to e.g. legislation on copyright, taxation and social security, on artists' funds and financial support for cultural mediators and organizers. The ideal was that cultural workers should be paid for their work, but in the end state support in the form of project funding and operating grants have become the most important funding for art and culture in Sweden.

IN FINLAND, QUESTIONS that could not be covered by state support for arts institutions, other support for arts and culture communities, and direct support for artists[47], were brought up for discussion at the very first stages of building the welfare state arts support system. Nevertheless, short-term (max 5 years) Arts Council's grants became the basis of individual artists' income. However, already in the 1978 Government's Report to Parliament on Arts Policy, other measures to create employment for artists were called for. The most significant measure was to complement the grants system in 1982 by 15-year grants – nationally to a token group of ten artists at a time.[48] In addition, the role of private foundations as funders of artistic work had been important since the 19th century.[49] In conclusion, the first Nordic welfare states' cultural policy framework emphasized the principles of freedom of expression, artistic autonomy and protection against the pressures of commercialization, i.e. freedom to work as a professional artist and ability to fully concentrate on making arts in their work life.

In the beginning of 1990s, a new cultural policy commission was assembled in Sweden. The main directive for the new commission was to evaluate the results of the 1974 cultural policy, but a lot of attention was also directed towards Swedish national values and heritage as a consequence of the Swedish EU membership. By the 1990s, the number of professional artists in both countries had increased significantly compared to the 1970s, placing significant strain on the public support system. In Finland, the 1992 *Kupoli*[50] committee appointed by the state stated that artists should be encouraged to increase their income from their artistic work instead of grants. This caused a need to seek solutions to new questions of artists' employment, taxation and social security. However, the public sector was still seen as the most important source of support for artists.

IN 1997, the Council of Europe launched the report *In from the Margins. A contribution to the debate on Culture and Development in Europe*.[51] Regarding Finland, the Council encouraged productive cooperation between cultural and entrepreneurial sectors. It also emphasized the significance of cultural industries for other industries and the overall national economies. Regarding cultural industry, the 1999 committee report *Developing Cultural Industries in Finland*[52] cemented the term "cultural industry" in the Finnish cultural policy and started a new kind of cooperation between the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Trade and Industry, and the Ministry of Labor, which has become the norm after the millennium. The report states that "the narrowest way of defining cultural industry is the point of view of cultural entrepreneurship".[53] During the first decades of the new millennium, responsibility has been divided between ministries in such a way that business in the creative industries has been placed under the Ministry of Employment and the Economy, while more general policy on culture and artists' work has been placed under the Ministry of Education and Culture.[54]

The concept of cultural industry also began to appear in Swedish governmental commissions in the 1990s. In the cultural policy report *The Artist's Conditions*, they asked: "Is the artist a bohemian, an entrepreneur, or an employee?".[55] The report identified two distinct art markets: an institutional market, comprising public institutions and state-owned companies, and a private market, consisting of households and private enterprises. The policy expected to broaden participation in cultural life and, in turn, to stimulate demand for artistic products, thereby generating higher incomes for artists across both markets. However, by this time, both Swedish households and the cultural sector largely perceived art and culture as part of the public welfare, financed through tax revenues. Consequently, the growing number of artists faced mounting challenges in securing sustainable livelihoods. In the government report *Work for the artists,*[56] the commission highlighted the structural imbalance that prevailed in the artistic labor market. Many artists experienced long periods of unemployment between short-term engagements, and the fact that most operated as sole proprietors excluded them from the unemployment security system. To qualify for unemployment benefits, artists were required to dissolve their businesses, creating additional professional insecurity. At this time, discussions surrounding artistic autonomy were primarily framed in terms of artists' economic (in)security:

"BY THIS TIME, BOTH SWEDISH HOUSEHOLDS AND THE CULTURAL SECTOR LARGELY PERCEIVED ART AND CULTURE AS PART OF THE PUBLIC WELFARE, FINANCED THROUGH TAX REVENUES."

> **Artistic diversity, renewal, and quality presuppose professional cultural practitioners who can earn a living from their work and fully devote themselves to free and independent creation.**[57]

Artist organizations began to step in: for instance, in 1999, the new Theatre Alliance, funded by interest groups and a foundation based on collective agreement, offered affiliated actors a basic income between engagements, thereby reducing financial

insecurity. The model has since been extended to other art forms such as the Dance Alliance (in 2006) and the Music Alliance (in 2008).

In Finland, too, the situation of self-employed artists and artists' employment had been brought into discussion in the 1990s partly as a consequence of difficult times in the state economy. During the first decade of the 2000s, the example of the Swedish Theatre Alliance was discussed as a model for securing Finnish artists' income between miscellaneous forms of employment and employment services for artists were suggested. The proposal was never realized in Finland, but the idea of such alliances re-emerged in public discussion about artists' income 20 years later, along with suggestions of artists' salary and basic income. The diminishing scope of artistic work done outside employment or entrepreneurship was noted both in the proposal to pay attention to the volume of artistic training, and in the call to offer education in entrepreneurship for artists.[58]

THE MOST NOTABLE transformation in Swedish cultural policy discourse occurred after the phase that Duelund[59] describes as "Political Colonization," specifically following the Cultural Policy Commission of 2009.[60] Their report sought to fundamentally reshape the organizational structure of the national cultural policy by promoting and implementing market-oriented principles associated with cultural and creative industries. The Commission argued that market mechanisms and diversified funding provide the strongest guarantee of artistic freedom. They stated:

> **Commercialism alongside the issue of artistic quality has been the most politically and ideologically charged issue within cultural policy.**[61]

The Commission's report led to the removal of the objective of "counteracting commercialization" in the Government Bill 2009/10:3 *Time for Culture*. However, the proposed reforms provoked strong criticism from the press, political actors, and referral bodies, reflecting deep-seated tensions between cultural quality safeguarded by cultural autonomy and economic rationales. Finally, the most consequential change in Swedish cultural policy, of this time, was the introduction of the Cultural Collaboration Model, which decentralized responsibility by granting regions a greater role in managing cultural institutions and cultural life, supported by state co-funding. At the regional level, the cultural and creative industries were increasingly framed as key drivers of economic, social, and cultural development. This shift also introduced new expectations for artists, who were considered self-employed entrepreneurs or business owners often combining private income streams with limited public support. The government also initiated collaborations between e.g. the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Enterprise to further develop the CCI in Sweden.[62] But within the broader cultural field, this transformation was contested, as concerns about marketization and artistic autonomy persisted. The Arts Grants Committee published a critical report[63] with several international scholars and practitioners stating that art is *not* an industry like any other thereby questioning the concept of CCI and viewing the artist as an entrepreneur.

In the Finnish CCI policies, entrepreneurial work was by now mentioned as an equally functionable way of employment as grants and employment for artists, but: "in a small market functioning in a small language, such as Finland, public support of art has a lot of significance as a prerequisite of making art".[64] Toward the end of the decade, a lot of attention was paid to the supporting structures for creative industries and especially removing obstacles of their internationalization. The 2010 Ministry of Education and Culture's report *Creative growth and livelihood of artists*[65] included an attempt to bring together the discussions about artists' income sources and creative economy. Special features of artistic entrepreneurship are described:

> **Its goal is not growth, taking risks or entrepreneurship as a way of life. Entrepreneurship is a tool, not a goal.**

In this statement, cooperatives are recommended as a way of organizing freelance work[66].

The special character of artistic work is continuously brought up in the Finnish policy texts, and toward the end of the 2000s artists' salary was brought to discussion as a potential solution. Reports discussing this emphasized that artists could receive salary without losing their freedom to choose their means and topics. Also, the downside of working as a freelance artist outside employment or entrepreneurship was pondered:

> **Freedom of art is necessarily connected to freedom of expression, but situations where artistic work is not seen as work among others may lead to incomplete working conditions and to lack of constructs that protect an individual.**[67]

Enhancing artists' marketing and networking skills was mentioned as a way of helping businesses in the field to sustain and even grow.

THE DEVELOPMENT, which had already begun in Finland ten years earlier, re-emerged in Swedish national cultural policy documents in 2022. A new government inquiry "Creative Sweden!"[68] proposed a national strategy to promote the sustainable growth of businesses within the cultural and creative industries similar to the Finnish report from 2010. The Swedish report noted that 60% of all artists are business owners or entrepreneurs, and at the time the sector employed approximately 190,000 people, of whom 100,000 were sole proprietors. In the report *artistic freedom* was identified as a prerequisite for cultivating cultural values essential to innovation, robust democracies, value diversity, and the well-being and social cohesion of citizens. The old clash between commercialization and artistic autonomy was commented on by the commission:

> **We get the impression that cultural and media policy has distanced itself from cultural and creative indus-**

> **tries and companies [...] While the reality is that, in most cases, artists are actually entrepreneurs within the cultural and creative sectors.**[69]

This pragmatic approach to artists influenced the Swedish Ministry of Culture, which in 2024 introduced a new strategy for the cultural and creative sector, declaring it a "core industry" within the Swedish national economy. At the same time, the government reduced state funding for culture in the national budget, stating that the sector would need to seek financing from multiple sources and urged the sector to increase its efforts in international markets.

IN RECENT YEARS, these Finnish and Swedish visions of the growth and internationalization of creative and cultural entrepreneurship have resulted in less ambitious governmental visions. One reason for this is that the responsibility for cultural and creative industries has been divided between ministries: the creative industries have been placed under the ministries of economy, while more general policy on culture and artists' work has been placed under the ministries of culture.[70] To this day, both Swedish and Finnish artists' unions have continued to speak against unrestricted commercialization of artistic work. In addition to offering back-up in negotiations with commercial agents in the industry, they have continued to demand a social security reform recognizing the precarious labor market status of artists and cultural workers. In response, the working conditions of sole entrepreneurs and freelancers in the job market have been discussed repeatedly especially in Finland. For example, the Ministry of Education and Culture reports *Culture is always present* from 2022, *The Cultural Policy Report* from 2024, and Ministry of Employment and Economy report *Roadmap to the creative economy* from 2020[71] reflect these discussions, however, not many concrete, or, indeed, positive measures have been taken. Consequently, both Sweden's and Finland's current political and financial circumstances with significant cuts to arts and culture leave many independent artists waiting for sustainable solutions. In Finland private foundations have surpassed the state in amounts of direct support to artists. In Sweden, where arts and culture have enjoyed consistent state support since the 1970s, the recent government has now called on alternative financiers to step in. However, neither the existing legal frameworks nor Swedish cultural traditions yet seem to be conducive to such a shift.

ESTONIA AND LITHUANIA

Soviet occupation

Although modern cultural policy in the Baltic states was significantly shaped by dealing with the legacy of the centrally commanded political and administrative system of state cultural policy and cultural political economy, introduced by the Soviet government following the occupation and re-occupation of Estonia and Lithuania in 1940/1945, the overarching dynamic of shifting away from the welfare state model to neoliberal configuration of the arts and cultural sector also applies. Like in Sweden and Finland, as we show, the Baltic communities were critical towards marketization and entrepreneurship models, even though these were introduced as part of Westernization and de-Sovietization. Since the 1990s, both Estonian and Lithuanian policy makers selectively drew on the interwar experience of the 1920s-30s and pragmatically incorporated market-oriented elements of the international cultural policy.

THE SOVIET CULTURAL political economy was fundamentally state-driven: state agencies were the main commissioners of creative production. Due to the limited space, it is not possible to fully describe the Soviet cultural policy system, but for our purpose we would like to note the expansive and hierarchical administrative network that was established in the Baltic states. In Lithuania, starting in 1953 – once the armed anti-Soviet resistance was crushed – the republic entered the post-war reconstruction period, which entailed a rapid development of state-sponsored and state-controlled cultural institutions, alongside the emergence of an ethnically anchored, Lithuanianized version of state socialist cultural policy.[72] The Soviet Estonia followed a similar path: collectivist state ownership and centrally controlled cultural institutions mirrored the wider Soviet model, with differences shaped mainly by local leadership and historical-religious backgrounds. In all Soviet republics the Ministries of Culture were subordinated to the local *Politbureaus* and the Councils of Ministers, which in turn were subordinated to the all-union Moscow-based authorities. These ministries directly administered all major cultural institutions, including museums, theatres, cinemas, galleries, and presses. However, municipalities also operated local cultural administrations tasked with promoting the "cultural enlightenment" of the population through political education, as well as catering to cultural and leisure needs, a form of Soviet welfare state. Securing the population's wellbeing through cultural means was part of communist ideology. Collective participation in cultural activities was strongly encouraged, in line with socialist principles, and although the Soviet government paid lip service to individual artistic freedom, creative practices had to be subordinated to societal goals. State socialist culture was productionist: industrial enterprises built cultural facilities for their workers and promoted amateur cultural activities through clubs and competitions. A state-wide system of art training emerged through specialized schools, encouraging competition among amateur and professional artists, while official institutions distributed material resources and symbolic status through honorary titles, access to studios and monetary awards.[73]

"SECURING THE POPULATION'S WELLBEING THROUGH CULTURAL MEANS WAS PART OF COMMUNIST IDEOLOGY."

Soviet cultural production was also administered through the Artists' Union.[74] Access to tools, studios, and exhibitions depend-

ed on political loyalty. In the Soviet system, artists also organized into cooperatives to manage material resources; notably, artistic production destined for mass consumption subsidized "high art" even under Stalinism in the 1930s.[75] Distinctions between high culture and mass consumption were carefully maintained, shaping the artistic field in ways that mirrored cultural hierarchies on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Although culture and the arts served first and foremost ideological functions – to promote the Soviet system and shape "the Soviet man and woman" – their economic value was recognized. Following the 1960s *khozraschet* [self-financing] reforms, creative organizations were encouraged to generate revenue through subscriptions, sales, and performances. This opened limited but significant spaces for semi-market activity. Professional and amateur artists could, within constraints, sell cultural goods to improve their living standards – an underexplored domain of Soviet-era cultural entrepreneurship.

MANY SALES FORMED a shadow cultural economy, which was legalized during Gorbachev's reforms that allowed establishing private, profit-oriented cooperatives (1986–1988). In culture, some of the most successful cooperatives produced youth fashion garments, music and video recordings, magazines and newspapers, and operated entertainment venues, including small VHS screening rooms and music festivals. Towards the late 1980s, new television and radio frequencies were opened for privatization. Overall, an art-entrepreneurship perspective reveals a far more diversified cultural economy during the Soviet period than traditional scholarship tends to acknowledge: this must be noted when analyzing local responses to the Western programs promoting entrepreneurship.[76]

"AN ART-ENTREPRENEURSHIP PERSPECTIVE REVEALS A FAR MORE DIVERSIFIED CULTURAL ECONOMY DURING THE SOVIET PERIOD THAN TRADITIONAL SCHOLARSHIP TENDS TO ACKNOWLEDGE."

De-Sovietization, marketization and CCI

Both Lithuania and Estonia devised democratic models of art funding in the 1990s, a period that coincided with the vogue for entrepreneurship in public policy that dominated the decade.[77] However, the framing of the cultural sector as a component of the post-industrial economy, which was part of the late Soviet cultural policy, curiously disappeared from the 1990s cultural policy debates. In the Baltic context, the economic instrumentalization of culture was probably identified with the Soviet productionist ideology and tainted by the centrally commanded economy's failure to perform. In contrast to the economic role of culture, Baltic governments fully embraced the freedom of expression principle which was codified in constitutions and implemented through the governmental reform of the media and cultural sectors.

LITHUANIA

In the 1990s, the Lithuanian policy debates focused on the grave consequences of economic recession, but the proposed solutions were not marketization and entrepreneurship: policy makers and creatives called for continuation of state funding. Toward the end of the 1990s the number of directly funded cultural organizations in fact increased, not decreased, as the sector failed to generate income from the declining market.[78] Only in 2012 the legislative and executive functions of the Ministry were fully separated by establishing an arm's length institution, the Lithuanian Council for Culture.

THE FIRST STATE POLICY document, *Guidelines of Lithuanian Cultural Policy* (2001), principally focused on the public role of arts and culture as a source of national values, emphasizing their contribution to preserving the history and memory of Lithuanian statehood and nation. The *Guidelines* included the term "cultural industries," but there was no mention of the economic value of culture, and the industrial character of culture was not explored at length. In contrast, the notion of artistic freedom featured prominently, alongside with the intrinsic value of "national" art and culture was closely linked with democracy and sovereignty. The policy idea of CCI was introduced in Lithuania via the Open Society Fund in the first decade of the 2000s.[79] This policy innovation culminated with the Lithuanian *Strategy for the Promotion and Development of Creative Industries* (2007),[80] followed by subsequent strategies that were developed in relation to accession of the EU structural funds (culture becoming eligible in 2010), where cultural infrastructure was connected with the notions of growth.

Once backed with substantial funding, the idea that art and culture can have an economic impact – and contain a promise of economic wellbeing for creators – was embraced in Lithuania and led to the significant reshaping of the institutional and policy landscape. The National Association for Creative and Cultural Industries, established in 2008, lobbied for allocation of structural funds to creatives. The higher education sector introduced degrees in creative industries management which became top student choice in 2013. Pioneering academic studies of art entrepreneurship in Lithuania were published by the art historian Elona Lubytė, who also led the teaching in the area.[81] The same year the National Creative and Cultural Industries Association published a report where they used the term "entrepreneurship" (in Lithuanian, *verslumas*) estimating the international competitiveness of CCI.[82]

In this way, the idea of entrepreneurship, that artists should take charge of their own economic wellbeing, made its way into Lithuanian policy discourses.[83] The Ministry of Culture's policy

paper *The Development Directions for Cultural and Creative Industries (2015–2020)* (2015) noted that "artists are lacking business skills" and emphasized the need to support creative businesses. It established a priority area to grow CCI as part of the post-industrial, new technology-based development. Here the forms of the state support include "financial support mechanisms, clustering, marketing, encouragement of intersectorial collaboration and training in entrepreneurial skills [ER – in Lithuanian, *verslumo kompetencijos*]".[84] The Lithuanian long-term national strategy *Culture 2030* (2019) also included the term "cultural entrepreneurship," translated in Lithuanian as *kultūrinis verslumas* or "cultural business skills". Similarly, "cultural entrepreneurs" are translated as *kultūros verslininkai*. This direct translation sounds odd in the context of Lithuanian cultural discourses: the Lithuanian term *verslumas* has a very strong business and commerce connotations and does not contain reference to innovation and disruption as the English "entrepreneurship." Furthermore, the Lithuanian term also lacks the meaning of culture as an instrument of entrepreneurship more widely conceived, as in social entrepreneurship. It seems, in this way, that the Lithuanian translation of cultural entrepreneurship has followed the business-oriented model of cultural work, which probably explains why the term did not stick and is rarely used in everyday language.

CONVERSELY, THE NEW Law on the Fundamentals of State Cultural Policy (June 2024) reasserted the principle of artistic freedom positing that state cultural policy seeks to create "conditions to realise human cultural rights and freedoms" as the first priority, where the second priority is to "create conditions to acquire cultural or creative competences and to develop them". The cultural policy principles no longer emphasize nation building; this is toned down – last on the list – where "unique aspects of Lithuanian national culture" should be fostered and protected as part of the principle of "originality" (in Lithuanian, *savitumas*). They are framed in general terms around collaboration, diversity, internationalization, and, in response to the fast-developing digital and computer sectors, "respect to human creation," as it is noted that "culture is created by humans," where technology is "creation's instruments".

Just like in Sweden and Finland, the Lithuanian art practitioners, however, have little choice but to work in line with the cultural entrepreneurship model. In 2022, according to the Lithuanian Cultural Council, there were about 10,000 professional creatives in the country (data reflects the creatives registered with creative unions and those with a special artist status that enables access to welfare benefits). This constitutes a significant increase of the artists population, which was 6,976 in 2019. In 2021, 79% of artists were self-employed.[85] Salaries for cultural workers are at 67% of average salary and among lowest in the EU.[86] In 2021, a study found that only 21% of artists earn their living from creative practice, which is, however, an increase from 9% in 2001. In line with international trends, cinema and architecture are best paid in the cultural sector. Literature, which used to be highly remunerated during the Soviet period, brings in some of the lowest income.[87] At the moment of writing, artists' reliance on state funding remains high: public and private employment are about 50%/50% in the cultural sector. In 2024, the Ministry commissioned an evaluation of the "artists' creative and economic environment" which established that the median artist income forms only 78% of the average income and 21% of surveyed artists receive income that is below the national minimum pay.[88] To address the issues of low income and regulations, in 2023, the first artists' professional trade union was established and the debate about artists' working conditions has been launched. Despite significant investment in art infrastructure, 72% of Lithuanian artists work from home or in private studios.[89]

ESTONIA

Like in Lithuania, Estonia's cultural policy is anchored in the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, which defines the preservation of the Estonian nation, language, and culture as a fundamental objective of the state. This constitutional mandate is understood as a dynamic balance between safeguarding cultural continuity and heritage and fostering innovation, openness, and adaptation, which are seen as essential to cultural development in a modern society. The policy framework for culture was first comprehensively articulated after independence in 1998, when the Parliament of Estonia (Riigikogu) adopted its first post-Soviet cultural policy strategy.[90] A defining feature of this document was its attempt to reconcile innovation-oriented development with a strong commitment to national cultural identity and distinctiveness. Fiscal instruments, including tax incentives, were introduced, and the long-term sustainability of the cultural sector was explicitly emphasized.

CRUCIAL FOR THE SUPPORT of the creative field has been the Cultural Endowment of Estonia (*Kultuurkapital*), originally created in 1919 by writers, operational from 1925 to 1941, and reinstated in 1994.[91] At the moment of writing, the Cultural Endowment operates under the Ministry of Culture and channels funding to the cultural sector. One of its core missions is to support talented individuals by enabling their professional development and to recognize outstanding lifetime achievements through honorary grants. Like the Lithuanian Council for Culture, it is organized as an arm's length body that functions through rotating committees of artists, critics, and institutional representatives, thereby protecting funding decisions from direct political or partisan interference.[92]

During its first decade after reinstatement, the Cultural Endowment pursued a model of egalitarian decentralization, distributing relatively small grants widely across the cultural field. While this approach contributed to cultural vitality and diversity, it provided limited economic security for cultural practitioners. Around 2010, the funding philosophy shifted toward selective centralization, with larger and more concentrated support directed toward strategically important organizations and internationally visible artists. This shift mirrored broader changes in Estonian cultural policy, in which competitiveness, visibility, and sustainability increasingly complemented traditional concerns with diversity and access. A tension between supporting "people" (artistic labor) and supporting "concrete"

(infrastructure and prestige projects) became particularly visible in debates surrounding the construction of the KUMU Art Museum, financed through the Cultural Endowment and opened in 2006. KUMU came to symbolize both Estonia's cultural ambition and an enduring dilemma in cultural resource allocation.



"It's so easy to be an artist", by Inessa Josing (2000) at Art Museum of Estonia. PHOTO: INESSA JOSING

LIKE IN LITHUANIA, the EU accession in 2004 introduced the wider discourse of the creative economy and cultural entrepreneurship into Estonian policy debates, largely inspired by UK and Finnish models. Designers, architects, and the audiovisual and entertainment software sectors benefited most from this shift. Fine-arts practitioners, however, remained skeptical, viewing entrepreneurship as a potential threat to artistic autonomy. It was only around 2020 that this resistance began to soften. Art auctions gained broader legitimacy, and new Tallinn-based galleries started to actively build primary markets for young artists, signaling a gradual cultural shift toward market engagement even within the fine arts.

In 2014, the Estonian Parliament published the strategic document *Basic Principles of Cultural Policy until 2020*.[93] It reaffirmed the role of culture as a driver of national and local development and recognized the central role of municipalities in organizing cultural life. As a result, Estonia's cultural policy operates within a multi-level governance framework that combines national cultural programs with locally developed strategies. In addition to defining the main directions of cultural development, the *Basic Principles* explicitly recognized the growing importance of creative entrepreneurship (*loomeettevõtlus*). The state committed to directing funding toward strengthening the competitiveness of creative enterprises and to investing in cultural infrastructure, with particular emphasis on tourism and regional development. The document also acknowledged the precarious position of freelance creative professionals and stated that individuals should be guaranteed access to health insurance regardless of income regularity, provided that their income was subject to labor taxes and that they were registered as entrepreneurs. However, as of 2026, this provision has not been implemented, revealing a persistent gap between policy objectives and practical outcomes.

IN 2021, THE ESTONIAN Government published *The Cultural Development Plan 2021–2030* (shortly referred to as *Culture 2030*),[94] which served as the successor to the 2014 strategy. Like in Lithuania, *The Plan* establishes long-term objectives for the cultural sector and situates cultural development within broader societal and economic frameworks, including the national development strategy *Estonia 2035*, thereby underscoring the role of culture for society as a whole. A central objective of *Culture 2030* is to strengthen cooperation between the cultural sector and the broader economy. The plan emphasizes the importance of the private sector as a sponsor of culture and proposes legislative changes to encourage private and corporate funding for cultural activities.

Between 2008 and 2013, responsibility for developing the creative economy lay with the Estonian Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, focusing on awareness-raising, the establishment of support structures, and the promotion of intra-sectoral cooperation. Since 2014, this responsibility has shifted to the Ministry of Culture, accompanied by a stronger emphasis on export capacity and cross-sectoral collaboration. Financial support is largely provided through the European Regional Development Fund, with more than 14 million euro allocated for the period 2021–2027, including state co-financing and beneficiary contributions.[95]

ESTONIAN CULTURAL POLICY consistently emphasizes the professional sustainability of cultural workers, with a strong focus on lifelong learning, skills development, and professional training. Entrepreneurship education has become increasingly central, reflecting expectations that cultural professionals operate in hybrid cultural and economic environments. At the same time, the state has committed to improving remuneration, including raising the minimum wage of state-employed cultural workers with higher education and professional qualifications to the level of the national average wage. In 2023, the average gross monthly salary in the creative economy (1,627 euro) remained below the national average (1,832 euro).[96] As a result, hybrid income models are very common with cultural workers combining artistic practice with teaching, grants, or non-artistic work. Public funding continues to be a cornerstone of the sector. About 14.6% of total creative-industries turnover originates from the public sector (around 372.3 million euro), underlining the central role of publicly financed institutions in ensuring economic stability.[97]

Empirical mappings show a sector that is economically significant but structurally fragile. In 2023, Estonia's creative industries comprised 13,760 registered and financially active enterprises (8.8% of all firms), generated 868.9 million euro in added value (2.3% of GDP), and employed 26,574 people, or 3.8%

of total employment. While the number of enterprises has grown strongly over time, employment peaked in 2015 and has since declined, indicating a shift toward micro-enterprises, self-employment, and project-based work. The average creative enterprise employed only 1.9 people, compared to 2.7 nationally, and many enterprises reported having no employees at all, particularly in the arts.[98] Just like in Lithuania, the normative idea of a self-sufficient, heroic and profitable cultural entrepreneur is a policy ideal that has little relation either to the structure of the sector lived reality or lived reality of artists.

There is, in this way, an ongoing concern by the national cultural policy makers about the lack of progress of the CCI approach in both Estonia and Lithuania. Interestingly, with the changing political context, particularly growing polarization in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the normative idea of entrepreneurship appears to recede, giving way to renewed debates about artistic autonomy and freedom of speech. In 2025 Lithuania saw the first mass demonstrations on the scale unseen since 1988–1989 as creative communities gathered to protest against impediment of the self-regulation of arts, culture and media sectors.[99] Estonian theatre community joined a pan-EU protest to demand the government to secure the freedom of expression.[100] These protests reasserted the importance of the arm's length model at the same time re-introducing the political role of arts and culture as key pillars of democracy.



The cultural community protests in Lithuania 2025 were the first mass demonstrations on a scale unseen since 1988–1989. PHOTO: ROBERTAS RIABOVAS/BNS

Concluding discussion

Artistic autonomy and cultural entrepreneurship in the changing cultural policy

In this article, we have explored the travel of ideas of cultural industries and cultural entrepreneurship to Finland, Sweden, Estonia and Lithuania, situating them within longer historical developments and different institutional trajectories. Finland and Sweden developed cultural policies within the Nordic welfare-state model, emphasizing freedom of expression, artistic autonomy, accessibility and public responsibility for supporting the arts. Arm's-length arrangements sought to separate political decision-making from artistic funding, while grants and other forms of public support aimed to secure the conditions for artistic work. Estonia and Lithuania followed different trajectories, shaped by nation-building, Soviet rule and the transition to democracy and market economies. These differences continue to shape how artistic autonomy, public support and market participation are understood. In both Lithuania and Estonia, the cultural industries idea initially met resistance from artists, who shared a Kantian approach to "disinterested" art, an aesthetic value which had a political significance in the local context, where all cultural values were subordinated to the communist ideology during the Soviet occupation. However, even in these post-Soviet societies, this Kantian position was eventually replaced by the official, pragmatist approach that art should be socially and economically useful and form part of export goods, a key area for growth for a small economy.[101] Resistance to CCI among artists and decision makers was also a feature in Finland and Sweden, where the pragmatic turn also took place, albeit somewhat later in Sweden than in Finland.

SINCE THE 1990S, all four countries have experienced a growing policy emphasis on the economic dimensions of culture and on cultural and creative industries. This has brought entrepreneurship increasingly into cultural-policy discourse. Across the countries, policymakers have presented cultural entrepreneurship as a means of strengthening artists' economic self-reliance and reducing dependence on public funding. Yet our analysis suggests that this should be understood primarily as a policy project and discourse, rather than as an established social reality. How far artists actually identify with entrepreneurship and what entrepreneurial activity means in artists' everyday work, is a question policy documents cannot answer directly. Recent research suggest that it varies considerably. Our analysis is based mainly on policy documents and where we refer to artists' responses, we also draw on different kinds of positions documented, in public debates and in previous research, rather than on direct empirical study of artists themselves.

Cultural entrepreneurship as a contested policy project

The policy idea of the artist-as-entrepreneur draws partly on a romanticized representation of entrepreneurship, in which artists and entrepreneurs are seen as sharing qualities such as self-motivation, risk tolerance, independence, creativity and the capacity to create novelty under conditions of uncertainty.[102] These similarities should not, however, be treated as evidence that artists are inherently entrepreneurial. Rather,

they are part of a discourse through which particular qualities and forms of behavior are constructed as desirable for artists. In the policy material examined here, entrepreneurial orientation is repeatedly presented as something artists should develop.

This distinction is important because cultural entrepreneurship is not a neutral or self-evident category. The Schumpeterian entrepreneur, for example, is conceptualized as an individual agent of innovation and economic development who creates new markets and economic value.[103] Such a model cannot simply be transferred to artistic work. Artists may organize their work, seek income, develop audiences and take risks, but these practices do not necessarily make economic growth, profit or market expansion their primary objectives. Nor does the existence of entrepreneurial practices establish entrepreneurship as the appropriate identity or normative model for artists.

OUR FINDINGS instead suggest that entrepreneurship functions as a contested translation of artistic work into economic and policy terms. It is promoted as a solution to precariousness and limited public funding, but the conditions under which this solution is expected to operate are themselves politically produced. Cultural markets are not functioning commercial markets, but mixed and subsidized ones, in which artists combine grants, employment, self-employment, sales, private support and unpaid work.[104] Although an early ideal of cultural policy was to educate the masses in arts and culture so that they would become consumers on an art market there is no perfect market for arts and culture in the Nordic and Baltic countries. Rather, the ideas of CCI increasingly appear to refer to an imaginary market that struggles to materialize. The entrepreneurial ideal therefore sits uneasily within the actual institutional and economic conditions of artistic work. Digital platformization, streaming and generative AI further complicate an individualistic model of the entrepreneur by redistributing agency and value creation across platforms, technologies and networks.

Entrepreneurship and artistic autonomy

Across the four cases, we found a persistent tension between entrepreneurial expectations and artistic autonomy. Previous research does not suggest that artists uniformly reject entrepreneurship. Interest in entrepreneurial skills and practices has increased, particularly where public funding and stable employment are limited. In Finland, for example, younger artists appear more familiar with entrepreneurship and somewhat more positive towards it.[105] Yet studies also indicate that entrepreneurial practices may be adopted pragmatically rather than as an affirmative professional identity: entrepreneurship can be understood as one of the available ways of organizing work and income.[106]

THIS DISTINCTION between entrepreneurship as practice and entrepreneurship as normative identity is central to our interpretation of these developments. Artists may undertake entrepreneurial activities without accepting the policy discourse that presents the entrepreneurial artist as an ideal. Conversely, being formally classified as an entrepreneur may have consequences for social security and access to unemployment benefits, as documented in Sweden, Finland and Estonia. Such conditions can produce what has been described as compulsory entrepreneurship: artists are encouraged or required to assume entrepreneurial forms without necessarily acquiring the economic security associated with entrepreneurship.[107]

The relationship with artistic autonomy is consequently ambivalent. On the one hand, generating income independently of public funding can reduce artists' dependence on policy priorities and funding criteria. On the other hand, dependence on clients, markets and commercial demand may influence what artists create, for whom, and under what conditions. Entrepreneurship can thus function simultaneously as a possible source of independence and as a potential source of new forms of external control. The issue is therefore not whether entrepreneurship is inherently compatible or incompatible with autonomy, but under what institutional and economic conditions particular entrepreneurial practices expand or constrain artists' capacity to determine their work.

"ENTREPRENEURSHIP CAN THUS FUNCTION SIMULTANEOUSLY AS A POSSIBLE SOURCE OF INDEPENDENCE AND AS A POTENTIAL SOURCE OF NEW FORMS OF EXTERNAL CONTROL."

Our findings also show that the idea of artistic autonomy has not disappeared with the rise of cultural and creative industries policy. On the contrary, artistic unions, cultural-policy authorities and other actors in all four countries have continued to question the treatment of art as an industry and to emphasize the distinctive values of artistic work. This reflects the longstanding modernist construction of the cultural field around artistic freedom and relative independence from economic values.[108] For more than two decades, cultural-policy debates and research in the four countries have repeatedly problematized marketization, thereby reasserting artistic autonomy as a policy concern.

AT THE SAME TIME, the conditions underpinning autonomy have become more fragile. Public funding cuts and the expectation that cultural markets can provide sufficient income weaken the positive freedom of artists to sustain themselves without depending on commercial success.[109] This reveals a central contradiction in contemporary cultural policy: artistic autonomy may be formally affirmed while the material conditions required to exercise it are increasingly shifted towards individual responsibility and market participation. Recent scholarship similarly calls for renewed attention to art and culture as valuable in their own right and to the lived conditions of creative workers.[110]

An unresolved and empirical relationship

The comparative perspective does not therefore reveal a simple transition from publicly supported art towards market-oriented entrepreneurship. Rather, it shows a recurring attempt to reconcile artistic autonomy with expectations of economic self-reliance, entrepreneurship and market participation. The form this tension takes varies according to national policy legacies: aesthetic and common-good arguments are particularly visible in Sweden, pragmatic concerns about autonomy and livelihoods in Finland, post-Soviet understandings of artistic autonomy in Estonia, and questions of precarity and collective representation in Lithuania.

The contribution of this study is consequently not to establish a simple opposition between entrepreneurship and artistic autonomy. Instead, it demonstrates how entrepreneurship has been promoted as a policy solution and how this discourse has been translated into different institutional contexts. Across the four cases, entrepreneurship remains only partially established as an artistic identity and cultural policy objective. Artists continue to combine governmental and private grants, employment, self-employment, commercial income and unpaid work, while the meaning and significance of these practices remain contested.

Entrepreneurship should therefore be treated neither as an inherent characteristic of artists nor as a self-evident response to changing economic conditions. It is a politically and institutionally constructed category whose meanings and consequences must also be examined empirically. The key question for cultural policy is consequently not whether artists should become entrepreneurs, but how particular forms of entrepreneurialization reshape the economic, institutional and professional conditions of artistic work – and, ultimately, the possibilities for artistic autonomy. The tension between entrepreneurial expectations and artistic autonomy is thus not merely a temporary transition but an unresolved and constitutive feature of contemporary cultural policy.

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PHOTO: ANDERS MATTSSON

Yurii Shapovalov, former civilian detainee, showing photos of those who remain in captivity during a demonstration in Stockholm, April 2026.

The voices of missing Ukrainians in Russian captivity

by **Ninna Mörner**

Ukrainian authorities estimate that at least 16,000 civilians have been abducted and are currently being unlawfully detained by Russia. Russia refuses to disclose the whereabouts of those it holds in captivity, with the obvious intention of placing these "disappeared" people outside the protection of the law. This is argued by the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group (KHPG),[1] a Ukrainian human rights organization that, among other things, tries to locate missing Ukrainians, documents disappearances, supports families, and collects evidence that can be used in future legal processes.[2] In a database[3] the KHPG has registered around 9,200 cases of missing persons.

Including both prisoners of war (POWs) – Ukrainian combatants who have fallen into the power of the Russian state – and civilian detainees, Ukrainian authorities estimate that there are currently 90,000 Ukrainians missing as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine. There are international legal frameworks in place that regulate the treatment of both POWs and civilians at war. International humanitarian law (IHL) requires parties to an armed conflict to always distinguish between civilians and combatants as well as between civilian and military objects. While combatants cannot be prosecuted for mere participation in hostilities because of so-called combatant privilege (as long as they comply with IHL), civilians may be prosecuted for crimes they have committed, subject to the guarantees of a fair and impartial trial.

"**ACCORDING TO** IHL, the possibilities of detaining civilians during an armed conflict or occupation are strictly limited", explained Yevhen Zakharov, the longtime director of the KHPG and a former dissident, speaking while in Stockholm in a seminar organized within the framework of the project "Restore Human Rights for Victims of Russia's War".[4] He continued: "Unlawfully detaining a civilian constitutes a serious violation of the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention and is, therefore, classified as a war crime."

Norms of IHL require that both detained



PHOTO: ANDERS MATTSSON

Natalia Shilo and Yurii Shapovalov sharing their testimonies at a seminar in Stockholm, April 2026.



PHOTO: ANDERS MATTSSON

Back row: Mykhailo Romanov, Ausra Padskocimaite, Yurii Shapovalov, Kateryna Buriakovska. Front row: Natalia Shilo and Yevhen Zakharov.

civilians and POWs are treated humanely and guaranteed adequate food, clothing, and medical care. Families have the right to know the fates of their relatives. States are obliged to search for missing persons. Even during detention, civilians and POWs retain the right to communicate with the outside world, in particular with their families and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

There are thus fundamental rights that states must respect even during an ongoing armed conflict. International human rights law (IHRL) protects, among other things, the right to life, the freedom of expression, prohibits extrajudicial executions, and provides for an absolute prohibition of torture, inhuman, and degrading treatment. According to Yevhen Zakharov, enforced disappearance or deprivation of a person's liberty as a result of an abduction or kidnapping by state agents followed by the absence of information, is seen as one of the most flagrant violations of IHRL, as the individual is placed completely outside the protection of the law.

Missing Ukrainians and their families

Kateryna Buriakovska and Mykhailo Romanov are two human rights lawyers working for KHPG. We meet in a small room at the premises of Östgruppen för demokrati och mänskliga rättigheter (a Swedish NGO that supports democracy and human rights in Eastern Europe) in Stockholm together with the former civilian prisoners, Yurii Shapovalov[5] and Natalia Shilo.[6] Kateryna Buriakovska says that a large part of her working time is spent helping those who report their relatives as missing, and who fear that they have been captured by the Russian army and the regime. The relatives turn to the lawyers at KHPG to get some answers, some sign of life, or at least to talk about their concerns and meet someone who listens and makes an effort to help them. Buriakovska expresses a strong empathy for these relatives, for whom the uncertainty is draining. At every prisoner exchange, or whenever an area is retaken from Russian occupation, those seeking their relatives flock to try to get new information – has anyone seen my son in the picture? Has anyone heard anything about the inmates at this prison? Buriakovska says that the KHPG as an organization wants to convey a sense of hope to the relatives that those missing will one day be found and freed.

In 2018 medical doctor Yurii Shapovalov was abducted in occupied Donetsk while on his way from work. He was grabbed in the middle of the street with a black bag forced over his head. Yurii Shapovalov was accused of and later convicted in a sham trial for espionage, but the real reason for his detention was likely related to his participation in pro-Ukrainian rallies and tweets about how life in Donetsk has changed following the Russian occupation in 2014. Shapovalov was released in a prisoner exchange, after being detained for over seven years and subjected to violence, neglect, and torture. When he himself talks about his liberation from captivity, he prefers to return to and to advocate for those who did not participate in the prisoner exchange, and who were left behind when he and others were freed. Shapovalov says he can still see "their faces in front of him".

"FAMILIES HAVE THE RIGHT TO KNOW THE FATES OF THEIR RELATIVES. STATES ARE OBLIGED TO SEARCH FOR MISSING PERSONS."

TEACHER OF mathematics and physics, Natalia Shilo, was arrested in the spring of 2021 while trying to visit her sick mother in the city of Horlivka, also in Donetsk region. She has always been open about her pro-Ukrainian position and had anonymously expressed her views about the Russian occupation on Twitter. Natalia Shilo was falsely accused of espionage and spent four years in Russian captivity and, later, house arrest. In April 2025, she was released in a special operation by the Military Intelligence Service of Ukraine (HUR) and returned to Kyiv.

Natalia Shilo and Yurii Shapovalov say that those who have been held in Rus-



PHOTO: KHPG

Natalia Shilo aims to inform the world about what women experience in Russian captivity.



PHOTO: OMBUDSMAN OF UKRAINE

A prison exchange August 14, 2025 in which 84 Ukrainians returned home, 33 military personnel and 51 civilians – among them Yurii Shapovalov.

sian captivity, like themselves, are often asked by relatives of the missing and detained who else they have seen and heard about – where are they, how are they, are they alive?

Yurii Shapovalov also talks about how unbearable it was when he had been taken prisoner not to know how his elderly mother was doing. Sadly she passed away while he still was detained. He was not allowed to visit her funeral. Natalia Shilo, for her part, describes the worry she felt for her relatives and friends, and how difficult it was not knowing if her loved ones even knew that she was alive.

The abuses suffered by prisoners

Both Yurii Shapovalov and Natalia Shilo describe how, immediately after being captured, they were subjected to verbal, psychological and/or physical abuse, and how they were deprived access to food, sleep, hygiene products and basic sanitary facilities. This violent shock treatment seems to be the modus operandi of the Russian military, aimed at communicating to prisoners that they are completely at the mercy of their capturers. Shapovalov gives a detailed account of how he was locked in a room with a hood over his head, brutally beaten, subjected to mock executions and thrown around the room by soldiers. Guards came in in shifts to beat him. He was then taken to an ice-cold room without windows or toilets, where he was housed with around 50 other prisoners. He recalls how they were forced to stand for many hours, and how they were made to sing Russian songs.

"RUSSIA, HOWEVER, CLAIMS THAT ITS ACTS ARE NOT WAR BUT MERELY A 'SPECIAL MILITARY OPERATION' – IMPLYING THAT THE LAWS OF WAR DO NOT APPLY."

The KHPG systematically documents the abuses suffered by POWs and illegally detained civilians, such as torture and inhumane treatment, collecting the information and storing it in its different databases. The KHPG is pushing for war crimes to be documented and evidence collected during the war so that justice can be done and those responsible held accountable. The abuses that have been committed are completely contrary to existing norms of international humanitarian law. Russia, however, claims that its acts are not war but merely a "special military operation" – implying that the laws of war do not apply. At the same time, in practice it is acknowledged that it is a war and that the captives are prisoners of war, because they are regularly exchanged for captured Russian troops.

It is also important to gather information and evidence regarding the abuses so that those who have been liberated can obtain the formal status of victims of the Russian regime's aggression and thus access certain agreed rights provided by the Ukrainian state, such as financial compensation for the suffering they have endured.

THE KHPG follows a holistic approach, focusing on providing legal, psychological, financial, and humanitarian support to victims of Russia's war-related crimes. This means that the KHPG offers support and provides networks so that those who have been illegally detained and suffered abuses can process their trauma, regain their dignity, and once again take part in everyday life.

Ausra Padskocimaite, Doctor of International Law and project manager at Östgruppen, underlines the crucial role that a strong civil society plays during times of crisis, stating that "when the state must focus on its survival and defence, the contribution of civil society becomes even more important".

Life after liberation

Many of those who have themselves been captured also choose to help and support other victims, aware that their own traumatic experiences can be a valuable resource in the work of providing Ukrainian victims of Russia's war with help and recognition. Yurii Shapovalov mentions December 29th and Alumni – two organi-

zations founded by former civilian prisoners' men who provide support to other former detainees.

After her release, Natalia Shilo started participating in the work of the organization Come on, sisters!, which supports current and former female prisoners, including Natalia herself while she was in captivity. The organization focuses on offering peer and psychosocial support and help reintegrating the women who have been released, for example, by ensuring that they are met by someone who understands what it is like to come out of captivity. "Many of them have not seen their children and families for a very long time, we also try to help them with reintegration", says Shilo, adding that, having been prisoners themselves, those working in the network understand the specific trauma, isolation, and abuse that these women have been subjected to. She shares that while she herself was not subjected to physical violence, she was constantly intimidated and humiliated, including by having to shower in front of male guards, and having 24-hour surveillance in her cell.

When asked what helped them survive Russian captivity, Yurii Shapovalov says that, from the very beginning, he decided that he needed to prioritize his physical survival. However, he also relied on the support of other inmates and even recalls small moments of humanity in the most unexpected places; how pro-Russian separatists who were imprisoned in the same cell, shared with him clothes, a blanket, and utensils – none of which were provided by the administration. Natalia Shilo says that in order to preserve her mental well-being she decided to focus strictly on the "here and now". She found strength in friendship with Ukrainian prisoners, particularly Natalia Vlasova[7] (still remaining in prison). Natalia Shilo says she also drew strength from the work of Vasyl Stus – a Ukrainian poet and dissident who died in the Soviet labor camp in 1985, citing the first words from his famous poem "Endure" (*Terpy*): "Endure, endure – endurance hones your soul [...]"

Despite their difficult experiences, both Yurii Shapovalov and Natalia Shilo are determined to rebuild the lives they once had and to continue supporting former prisoners, and not forgetting the ones still in captivity.

YURII SHAPOVALOV thought he was completely forgotten after being missing for over seven years but was overwhelmed by all the support and care he received following his release.

"Many of my friends and colleagues from Donetsk came to visit me and there was a lot of support and help available", he describes. Yurii Shapalov, who has relocated to Kyiv, hopes to eventually return to his work as a neurophysiologist, and to care for Ukrainian children affected by the war. Today, he is primarily committed to raising awareness about the difficult situation of those who remain in Russia's captivity, in order to make sure they are not forgotten by the wider world.

Ninna Mörner is the editor-in-chief of *Baltic Worlds*.

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T4P (Tribunal for Putin) Database of Suspected War Crimes: Statistical information

The information contained in the database makes no claim to be complete and final. Statistical data derived from category "Type of Incident", September 30, 2026. Source: https://t4pua.org/en/stats

Disappearances, total:	3086
Kharkiv Region	1869
Donetsk Region	467
Zaporizhzhia Region	336
Kyiv Region	127
Kherson Region	95
Luhansk Region	44
Mykolaiv Region	32
Chernihiv Region	29
Sumy Region	27
Dnipropetrovsk Region	8
Odesa Region	2
Crimea	1

Unlawful detention, total:	1312
Kharkiv Region	274
Kherson Region	212
Donetsk Region	201
Kyiv Region	190
Zaporizhzhia Region	188
Chernihiv Region	101
Luhansk Region	87
Mykolaiv Region	32
Sumy Region	12
Odesa Region	6
Zhytomyr Region	3
Crimea	1

BALTIC WORLDS
Theme: Recovery and resilience in Kharkiv

Guest editor: **Ilona Kostikova**

Introduction.

From underground learning to national recovery

THE TRANSFORMATION OF UKRAINIAN UNIVERSITIES IN WARTIME

The war in Ukraine is still ongoing.[1] It affects all aspects of life: from safety,[2] to education,[3] to health.[4] This special section provides a comprehensive socio-pedagogical map of Ukraine's wartime reality, illustrating a society that is touched by the war on every structural level. It reflects a nation forced into a "hybrid" existence, where education is literally driven underground to preserve intellectual sovereignty, and where youth development pipelines are severed by infrastructure destruction. The section captures the intersection of physical danger and psychological endurance, documenting how faculty maintain a sense of professional mission despite profound emotional exhaustion.[5] Collectively, the section portrays the Ukrainian experience not just as a humanitarian crisis but as a deliberate act of institutional resistance, where the maintenance of education, sport, and mental health becomes a vital front in the struggle for national continuity.

These three essays and the reports are unified by their rigorous examination of institutional and human resilience within Ukraine's educational, social, and psychological infrastructure during the full-scale Russian invasion. Overall, the papers analyze how systemic military aggression necessitates a radical shift in pedagogical, sporting, and ethical paradigms. From "underground" teaching and learning at universities to the survival of youth athletic pipelines and the emotional endurance of faculty, these works highlight the intersection of emergency adaptation and national identity. For journal readers, this collection offers a rare empirical window into sectoral survival under existential threat, providing a blueprint for maintaining educational, intellectual, and physical sovereignty amidst the war in Ukraine. The interview reflects Ukraine's wartime reality by documenting the strategic adaptations required to sustain teachers' training at a university under constant threat, providing a vital narrative of institutional problem-solving amidst systemic disruption. For readers, it offers a rare first-hand case study in maintaining pedagogical standards and organizational resilience during the war using the case of Kharkiv city, located near the Russian border.



H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University after Russian attack (authors' own photo, July 2022).

THE ESSAY "Education as resistance: Wartime university practices and decolonization in Ukraine" shows the reality of teaching and learning at the university in Kharkiv city. The contemporary global landscape, while still navigating the residual complexities of the post-pandemic

era, has been profoundly destabilized by the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. This act of military aggression transcends mere territorial conquest; it represents a deliberate attempt to dismantle the cultural and intellectual foundations of a sovereign nation. For the higher education sector, particularly in frontline cities like Kharkiv, this war has shaped a cascade of socio-legal and existential emergencies that threaten the very continuity of knowledge production. This article, "Education as resistance", addresses the urgent necessity of reframing wartime university adaptations, not merely as emergency logistics but as vital acts of decolonization and epistemic resistance.

THE AIM OF the research is underscored by the systemic destruction of educational infrastructure. Kharkiv, once a vibrant "student capital", has seen its universities transformed into frequent targets of hostilities. When the physical sanctity of the classroom is violated, the constitutional right to education – a cornerstone of Ukraine's socio-legal fabric – is placed in immediate danger. This study posits that the survival of the university under such conditions is a prerequisite for the survival of the nation's intellectual sovereignty. By examining the experiences of Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, the authors illuminate how the institution has successfully synthesized student safety with high-quality instructional delivery through the pioneering use of "underground classrooms".

The necessity of this work lies in its critical examination of the "decolonial stance" adopted by the Ukrainian higher education system. The ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war is interpreted here through the lens of long-standing colonial pressures, where the aggressor seeks to reassert influence over the content and orientation of knowledge dissemination. Consequently, the preservation of a Ukrainian-centric curriculum and the maintenance of institutional autonomy become dominant concerns. The essay explores how the conversion of deep bomb shelters into fully equipped learning environments, the "underground university", serves as a symbolic and practical manifestation of resilience against Russian aggression.

"KHARKIV, ONCE A VIBRANT 'STUDENT CAPITAL', HAS SEEN ITS UNIVERSITIES TRANSFORMED INTO FREQUENT TARGETS OF HOSTILITIES."

Furthermore, the essay provides a nuanced analysis of the psycho-emotional and logistical frameworks required to sustain education in a high-risk setting. It investigates the shift from traditional physical classrooms to subterranean and blended learning formats, ensuring that the development of Ukraine's youth is not permanently derailed by the trauma of war. By documenting these unprecedented transformations, the essay offers a compendium of instructive insights for the global academic community, serving as a proposal for institutional resilience in conditions of armed conflict. Ultimately, this research asserts that the Ukrainian university's wartime evolution is a profound act of self-determination, safeguarding the nation's right to produce its own knowledge and protect its cultural identity.

THE ESSAY "Transformation of youth sport education in Ukraine under war: Perspectives on recovery" reveals the changes in youth sport education in Ukraine during wartime. The full-scale military invasion of Ukraine has triggered a systemic disintegration of the public sector, with the sphere of physical training and youth sport education facing particularly acute, cumulative challenges. Traditionally viewed through the system of the Long-Term Athlete Development framework, youth sport serves as an essential pipeline for athletic reserves and as a critical mechanism for social integration. However, the current macrosystemic shock of the Russian-Ukrainian war has radically disrupted these developmental trajectories, necessitating an urgent and systematized investigation into the sector's structural transformation and recovery.

The work's primary objective is to provide a systemic assessment of structural transformations, and to formulate a theoretical framework for the recovery. It argues that recovery must move beyond emergency crisis management toward a resilient educational model that integrates trauma-informed rehabilitation into athletic training. Through qualitative policy analysis and data triangulation from international bodies such as the UNDP and UNICEF, the study identifies patterns of institutional loss and resilience.

THE INTEREST OF this essay stems from the deformation of learning environments. The war acts as a decisive exogenous shock that deforms students' micro- and mesosystems – families, sports schools, and instructional training processes – leading to a "talent pipeline" collapse. With physical activity among children near frontlines declining by 40% to 60%, the risk of somatic and anxiety disorders has increased, making the restoration of youth sport education a matter of Ukrainian national health and psychosocial stability.

This essay is necessary to address the multilayered "hybrid threats" targeting the sports sector. In territories temporarily occupied by Russian troops, the authors document the instrumentalization of sport for the militarization and indoctrination of youth, a clear violation of Olympic principles. Concurrently, the study highlights the insidious impact of "sportswashing", where international competitions are used to manufacture political legitimacy for the Russian aggressor, creating profound ethical dissonance for the global sports movement. By analyzing these factors, the essay substantiates the need for ethical governance and robust sanctioning mechanisms to protect the integrity of Ukrainian national systems.

The significance of this work extends to global sports sociology and pedagogy. By conceptualizing the fragility of pedagogical pipelines in state-centralized sys-



The university lecturers have classes in Genetics at Kharkiv Lyceums in the basement of security reasons. PHOTO: KHARKIV LYCEUM

tems during the war, the authors offer a replicable theoretical model for assessing sectoral resilience. The essay concludes that sustaining the sector requires internationally coordinated financial mechanisms and a shift toward specialized infrastructure funds, ensuring that the integrity of the international sports movement is preserved even among the most severe geopolitical crises.

THE ESSAY "University staff's mental health in wartime: Personal experiences, emotional well-being, and support mechanisms" underlines the importance of mental health in wartime. In the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian university lecturers have been thrust into working conditions without global precedent. Navigating air-raid alerts, displacement, and the existential threat of daily life, these educators continue to fulfill their professional responsibilities while managing intense personal trauma. This essay addresses a critical gap in contemporary research by providing systematic quantitative evidence on how specific wartime stressors influence occupational burnout and functional impairment among academic staff at universities.

The urgency of this study is rooted in the dramatic rise of emotional exhaustion (EE) among faculty members, particularly in heavily affected regions such as Kharkiv, Sumy, and Dnipro. While burnout is a recognized challenge in global higher education, the "demands-resources" equation undergoes a radical shift in wartime. Demands multiply in intensity and unpredictability, while material and organizational resources break apart. This research is essential for informing university policies that are able to support staff who are working under conditions that would typically paralyze institutional functioning.

A central finding of this study, and a key reason for its importance, is the discovery of a non-linear progression in burnout. While emotional exhaustion is prevalent in nearly 80% of Ukrainian respondents at the universities, negative affective reactions and cynicism remain strikingly low. The authors suggest that non-material resources, such as civic duty, professional identity, and a sense of mission, serve as powerful protective mechanisms. This challenges traditional linear models of burnout, such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory, and invites a reconsideration of how resilience operates under extreme conditions.

The essential nature of the essay is emphasized by its empirical focus on the correlation between personal wartime exposure and professional functioning. The study reveals that direct personal connections to the war, such as having relatives in the Armed Forces, significantly amplify stress and exhaustion. Moreover, it demonstrates that functional impairment is more closely associated with internal emotional exhaustion than with external infrastructural damage. This insight is vital for institutional leadership, demonstrating that support strategies must move beyond organizational logistics to address individual trauma loads.

By utilizing Spearman's rank correlation and adaptive self-report instruments, the research provides a rigorous quantita-

"WHILE EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION IS PREVALENT IN NEARLY 80% OF UKRAINIAN RESPONDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITIES, NEGATIVE AFFECTIVE REACTIONS AND CYNICISM REMAIN STRIKINGLY LOW."

tive analysis into the dynamics of burnout in conflict-affected contexts. The paper concludes by recommending targeted psychological support and the reinforcement of "mission and purpose" as key strategies for sustaining professionalism and reducing long-term professional attrition. Ultimately, this work serves as a unique resource for international scholars and policymakers, offering profound insights into the psychological endurance of the academic community during armed conflicts.

THE INTERVIEW OFFERS A powerful and rare glimpse into the extraordinary measures taken to maintain educational standards during the Russian-Ukrainian war is is given by the Rector and Vice-Rector of H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University in their two reports. They speak about educational resilience, describing how professors and students continue their work not only online but also in bomb shelters and at underground "MetroSchools" in Kharkiv, in order to ensure learning never stops. It is shown how the university has adapted to the war by creating different educational structures such as the Educational and Scientific Laboratory of Special and Inclusive Education. It highlights a vital, often overlooked consequence of war: the increasing number of children with special educational needs (SEN) due to physical and psychological trauma. The collaboration with UNICEF to build the specialized laboratory shows how international support is being transferred into immediate, local action. The work of Skovoroda Hub – a free digital environment – and the STEM Centre at the University, both of which provide practical science and technology training to help overcome "educational losses" caused by years of online learning, is described in detail.

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Education as resistance

WARTIME UNIVERSITY PRACTICES AND DECOLONIZATION IN UKRAINE

Figure 1. O. M. Beketov National University of Urban Economy in Kharkiv ruined by Russian rocket (authors' own photo, February 2023).

by **Tatiana Fomenko**, **Liudmyla Holubnycha**, **Tetiana Besarab**, **Svitlana Mykytiuk**, and **Denys Besarab**

abstract

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has generated unprecedented threats to the nation's educational system, compelling universities to develop innovative survival strategies against imperial aggression. Using Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University as a case study, this article examines how higher education functions as a decolonizing force during armed conflict. Drawing on document analysis, visual documentation, and thematic analysis, the study explores how wartime adaptations, such as transforming deep bomb shelters into classrooms and student housing, preserve the right to education and reinforce Ukraine's intellectual sovereignty. Student choice data reveal an empowered learning community navigating blended and distance learning according to safety needs. Ultimately, these subterranean and digital adaptations transcend pragmatic necessity; they constitute acts of epistemic resistance that safeguard cultural identity, institutional autonomy, and the nation's right to produce its own knowledge. The "underground university" thus emerges as a practical manifestation of education's decolonizing power during war.

KEYWORDS: Higher education, education during war, in-person instruction, online education.

Scarcely had the global community recovered from the coronavirus pandemic, with its attendant restrictions and necessary adaptations across nearly every facet of human activity, when Ukraine was subjected to a bloody, brutal, and arguably historically devastating war, unleashed by an aggressive neighbor driven by imperialist ambitions. This act of aggression, rooted in a long history of colonial subjugation, has not only inflicted physical devastation on Ukraine but also threatens to undermine its cultural and intellectual sovereignty, necessitating a critical examination of the decolonization of education in the face of conflict.

Russia's prolonged and brutal war against Ukraine has created a cascade of socio-legal emergencies, requiring a deep investigation into the nation's ability to endure. The deliberate targeting of civilian spaces has shattered the core of Ukrainian social life. Even as millions of Ukrainians departed, millions more have demonstrated resilience by continuing to reside in the country amidst ongoing rocket attacks. Ukrainian universities also continue to function under these unsafe circumstances.[1] Critically, education (a legally protected human right) has been drastically undermined, particularly in war-adjacent regions. The resulting

collapse of educational systems jeopardizes the development of Ukraine's youth, making urgent intervention crucial. The city of Kharkiv, bordering Russia, has been subjected to relentless, devastating attacks, showcasing the depth of damage to educational infrastructure (Figure 2). This sustained assault has compelled Kharkiv, which was a student capital of Ukraine, to pioneer inventive educational solutions to maintain learning continuity.

THE SACROSANCT NATURE of the right to education, a cornerstone of Ukrainian constitutional law, is an indisputable tenet deeply embedded within the nation's socio-legal fabric. This constitutional mandate, reflective of a societal commitment to cultivating an informed citizenry, has been profoundly challenged by the imposition of martial law, a direct consequence of the Russian Federation's protracted military aggression. Furthermore, the ongoing conflict can be interpreted as an attempt to reassert colonial influence, impacting not only the physical infrastructure of the educational system but also the very content and orientation of knowledge dissemination. Therefore, the preservation of Ukrainian educational sovereignty and the promotion of a decolonized curriculum become paramount in this context.

Educational institutions within conflict zones, historically recognized as epicenters of intellectual development, have been transformed into frequent targets of hostilities, resulting in extensive infrastructural dilapidation and the effective nullification of conventional pedagogical methodologies. The systematic destruction of educational facilities, coupled with the forced displacement of both students and academic personnel, has precipitated a critical educational crisis. Moreover, the pervasive atmosphere of insecurity and psychological trauma, a direct result of relentless bombardment and the ever-present threat of violence, has exerted a deleterious impact on all stakeholders, including educators, students, and their respective familial units. The psychological sequelae of this conflict have engendered significant impediments to effective learning, necessitating a comprehensive, holistic approach to educational provision that addresses both academic and psycho-emotional exigencies.

"THE CITY OF KHARKIV, BORDERING RUSSIA, HAS BEEN SUBJECTED TO RELENTLESS, DEVASTATING ATTACKS, SHOWCASING THE DEPTH OF DAMAGE TO EDUCATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE."

The ongoing conflict has necessitated a fundamental transformation in the delivery of educational services, forcing the implementation of novel pedagogical approaches that accommodate the stringent limitations imposed by wartime conditions while simultaneously preserving the constitutional right to educational access. The conventional model of physical classroom instruction has been rendered largely unsustainable in areas of active conflict, mandating the exploration and adoption of diverse alternative learning strategies. In this context, the primary focus has shifted to ensuring the safety of educational participants, placing their physical and psychological welfare at the forefront of all considerations. This imperative to protect students and educators has spurred the development of inventive solutions, including the establishment of subterranean learning spaces and the integration of blended learning frameworks. This adaptation, however, must also be viewed through the lens of decolonization, ensuring that the educational content remains free from external influence and promotes a Ukrainian-centric perspective. Consequently, the adaptive restructuring of the educational system to these unprecedented and demanding circumstances is indispensable for its continued functionality, thereby highlighting the relevance and immediacy of this investigation. The tenacity demonstrated by the educational system in Kharkiv stands as a poignant illustration of the unwavering dedication of the Ukrainian populace to the pursuit of knowledge, despite facing immense adversity, and to resisting the colonial ambitions of the country's aggressive neighbor.

CONSIDERING THE extraordinary and unparalleled obstacles encountered in the pursuit of ensuring educational entitlements during periods of armed conflict, this scholarly inquiry confronts a central and exigent question: How can the core necessities of participant security, psycho-emotional welfare, and the provision of high-quality instructional services be effectively synthesized and perpetuated within a setting characterized by continuous warfare? The exploration of this question transcends the realm of theoretical contemplation, representing an essential undertaking geared toward the safeguarding of the nation's intellectual resources. To illuminate this intricate and multilayered problem, this study embarks upon a meticulous and detailed examination of the experiences of Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, with particular attention directed toward their innovative adaptation of teaching and learning methodologies within the confines of bomb shelters. These case studies provide a critical perspective through which to analyze the pragmatic implementation of educational entitlements in a context marked by elevated risk, yielding significant insights into the strategies deployed to sustain educational continuity. In particular, this research will meticulously scrutinize the operational structures, pedagogical approaches, and, crucially, the demonstrable influence on the educational experiences and academic achievements of both students and faculty directly impacted by the ongoing hostilities. The analysis will explore the logistical frameworks, pedagogical methodologies, and psycho-emotional dimensions inherent within these adaptive initiatives, thereby offering a holistic and nuanced comprehension of their operational effectiveness and substantive impact. Eventually, by analyzing these diverse and pioneering adaptive strategies, this study seeks to advance a



Figure 2. H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University after Russian attack (authors' own photo, July 2022).

more profound and nuanced comprehension of the mechanisms by which the fundamental right to education can be upheld and actualized within the exigencies imposed by armed conflict, and to elucidate the diverse modalities through which educational institutions are responding to these unparalleled and formidable operational contexts. This investigation endeavors to meticulously chronicle and critically analyze the adaptive capacity and inherent resilience of the Ukrainian educational system, thereby yielding a compendium of instructive insights that may serve as a valuable resource for other nations contending with analogous exigencies.

Literature review

The context of the war in Ukraine, driven by imperialist ambitions, has brought into sharp focus the critical need to examine and adapt educational practices. That is why our literature review explores scholarly perspectives on decolonization in education, with a particular emphasis on the challenges and adaptations necessitated by armed conflict, drawing parallels with global decolonization efforts and responses to educational disruptions. The review also establishes the conceptual and historical foundations necessary to analyze Ukraine not only as a site of military aggression, but also as a space where education actively negotiates and resists long-standing colonial pressures.

It is crucial to start the research of the issue from the historical context of decolonization and its relationship to education, particularly in conflict zones. This is explored by Burton.[2] His investigation of African students seeking higher education during periods of colonial rule demonstrates how conflict and the denial of educational opportunities can lead to innovative, albeit challenging, pathways to knowledge. This historical lens provides a valuable framework for analyzing the resilience of Ukrainian education under wartime conditions. Similarly, Jackson[3] examines how representations of imperialism and decolonization have evolved in US textbooks, highlighting the shifting narratives and the marginalization of colonial actors. This analysis underscores the importance of critically examining how history and knowledge are constructed and disseminated, especially in times of conflict and transition. In applying these insights to Ukraine, it becomes necessary to recognize Russian imperial policy as a form of coloniality that has historically targeted Ukrainian culture, language, and educational institutions.

WITHIN THE PROPOSED framework, several scholars highlight the systemic issues that impede equitable education. For example, Uleanya, Rugbeer, and Olaniran,[4] in their research on a South African university, identified factors such as the language of teaching, students' prior educational experiences, and institutional policies as all contributing to poor learning outcomes. They advocate for the decolonization and restructuring of educational systems to better serve students and align with sustainable development goals. The stated call for decolonization in post-colonial educational settings finds resonance in the Ukrainian context, where the war can be seen as exacerbating existing post-colonial



Figure 3a. Bomb shelter for students (authors' own photo).



Figure 3b. Classroom in the bomb shelter (authors' own photo).

challenges. This parallel also supports the argument that decolonization is not limited to contexts of historical overseas colonization but extends to diverse geopolitical forms of domination, including the post-Soviet imperial legacy.

It is important to understand that decolonization itself is a complex and multifaceted concept, as outlined by Stein et al.[5] The researchers discuss the various undertones of decolonization, as well as the complexities and paradoxes associated with its implementation within education. Stein and Andreotti[6] further elaborate on this problem, framing decolonization not as a singular event but as an ongoing process that requires denaturalizing modern/colonial perspectives. Such perspective is crucial for understanding the difficult situation in Ukraine, where educational adaptations must address both the immediate crisis and the long-term project of decolonization. Specifically, Ukrainian institutions must simultaneously respond to physical threats and to epistemic threats (attempts to erase or subordinate Ukrainian knowledge traditions), making their adaptations an important empirical site for studying "decolonization under conditions of active warfare."

It is only natural that, recently, a large number of studies devoted to the Ukrainian problem have appeared. For instance, the role of higher education in peacebuilding and decolonization is examined by Svyrydenko et al.[7] The scholars propose a multidimensional approach that integrates philosophy, policy, cultural studies, history, law, and political science. They also suggest that experiences from other conflict-affected regions, such as Israel and the Palestinian territories, may offer valuable insights for Ukraine. This perspective aligns with the need to consider the long-term implications of educational practices in Ukraine, not only for immediate survival but also for post-conflict reconstruction and decolonization. Such studies also reveal that higher education institutions become critical agents in restoring cultural sovereignty and rebuilding intellectual autonomy after violent conflict.

THE PRACTICAL CHALLENGES of maintaining education during wartime in Ukraine are detailed by Marchenko,[8] Fiialka and Kornieva,[9] and Zhyhora et al.[10] Specifically, Marchenko[11] describes the initial disruption of education and the subsequent adaptation to online learning, emphasizing the need to preserve the structure of the university and preserve academic potential. Fiialka and Kornieva,[12] focusing on journalism education, highlight the need for safety training, ethical considerations, and psychological resilience among students. Zhyhora et al.[13] examine the innovative solutions implemented by Ukrainian educational institutions to ensure continuity of learning, such as video conferencing, mobile applications, and learning management systems. These investigations highlight the immediate adaptations made by Ukrainian educators and students. However, they do not address how these adaptations intersect with the broader project of reclaiming cultural, linguistic, and epistemic sovereignty, i.e. the key markers of decolonial educational practice.

In conclusion, the literature reviewed reveals that the challenges faced by Ukrainian educators and students during the war

are multifaceted, encompassing not only the need to maintain educational continuity but also the imperative to address long-standing issues of decolonization. However, existing research has yet to specifically address the unique challenges and adaptations of teaching and learning within bomb shelters, underlining a significant gap in the literature that this chapter aims to fill. This focus represents the novelty of our article. The experiences of those in Ukraine, while unique in their specific context, resonate with broader global themes of decolonization and educational adaptation in the face of conflict and systemic inequities. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by conceptualizing subterranean learning spaces as sites of decolonial agency, and by analyzing how wartime adaptations strengthen educational sovereignty against imperial aggression.

Thus, the purpose of the work is to examine how Ukrainian higher education institutions, specifically Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, are adapting to the challenges posed by the ongoing war, with a particular focus on the ways in which these adaptations reflect and enact a process of decolonization. This analytical lens enables us to bridge the theoretical discussions from global research with the empirical realities of Ukrainian higher education under siege.

Methodology

To achieve the stated purpose, our investigation employed a combination of research methodologies, namely:

- document analysis (university documents, reports, and official statements related to the organization of educational activities during the war). This was necessary for gathering the primary data for our study and included examining policies and procedures related to the use of bomb shelters, the implementation of online and blended learning, and the provision of support services to students and faculty;
- visual documentation (photographic evidence of the adaptations made by the university, specifically the conversion of bomb shelters into classrooms and student housing). These visuals, provided by the authors, offer a tangible representation of the university's efforts to create safe and functional learning environments;
- thematical analysis of these data sources was used to identify key patterns and trends in the university's adaptation strategies. This analysis focused on how these strategies reflect a decolonizing approach, emphasizing resilience, self-determination, and the prioritization of local needs and the preservation of cultural identity in the face of external pressures.

IT IS IMPORTANT to acknowledge the limitations of this methodology. The study is primarily focused on a single institution, Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other universities in Ukraine. Additionally, the reliance on document analysis and visual documentation may not capture the full range of experiences and perspectives of students and faculty. Future research could benefit from incorporating interviews or surveys to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of the war on higher education in Ukraine.

Despite these limitations, this methodology provides a valuable framework for understanding how one Ukrainian university is navigating the challenges of war and enacting a process of decolonization through its adaptation of educational practices and infrastructure.

Results

Decolonization, conceptualized as a perspective that foregrounds community, indigenous lifeways, and knowledge systems,[14] provides a salient analytical framework for examining Ukraine's educational challenges amidst the current armed conflict. This conflict transcends a mere territorial dispute, encompassing a more expansive struggle against imperialist designs, as Ukraine endeavors to assert its sovereignty and safeguard its cultural and institutional autonomy. In the Ukrainian context, decolonization is understood not only as the dismantling of inherited Soviet/Russian epistemic dominance but also as the active restoration of cultural, linguistic, and educational sovereignty. This foregrounds education as a domain where colonial pressures are both experienced and resisted. Russian military aggression functions simultaneously as physical violence and as an attempt to reassert epistemic and cultural dominance, making the educational sphere a critical arena of resistance.

"EXISTING RESEARCH HAS YET TO SPECIFICALLY ADDRESS THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING WITHIN BOMB SHELTERS."

Within this study, we operationalize "education as a decolonizing force" through three interrelated dimensions: 1) epistemic resistance, i.e. the continued production and dissemination of Ukrainian-centered knowledge in defiance of efforts to erase or replace it; 2) infrastructural resilience, i.e. the material reorganization of educational space (including the transformation of underground shelters into classrooms), which ensures the uninterrupted exercise of the constitutional right to education; and 3) pedagogical agency, understood as the capacity of students and instructors to choose learning modalities, sustain academic community, and enact self-determined educational practices despite wartime disruption. Each of these dimensions becomes empirically traceable in institutional responses, spatial adaptations, and teaching and learning interactions documented in the case of Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University.

Within this operationalization, decolonization is understood not metaphorically but as a set of educational practices that actively contest the coloniality of power shaping the region. The "underground university" thus functions as both a material and

symbolic form of epistemic sovereignty: It maintains continuity of Ukrainian civic, legal, and cultural narratives; reorganizes academic space in ways that defy intended paralysis through violence; and cultivates pedagogical autonomy by enabling students to participate in education on their own terms, whether online or physically underground. These practices demonstrate that decolonization in wartime is enacted through educational persistence and collective agency, rather than through policy declarations alone.

FOR A PERIOD exceeding three years, the Ukrainian educational community has been engaged in a complex and multifaceted process to identify and implement optimal pedagogical approaches. Within this context of national crisis and resistance, it is important to note that substantial disparities exist across the nation in the application of these approaches. Specifically, the modalities of educational provision within higher education institutions exhibit significant variation, contingent upon the geographical proximity of these institutions to zones of active military conflict. Ukraine encompasses a vast territory spanning 603,628 square kilometers, a factor that contributes to its status as the second-largest country on the European continent. A considerable portion of approximately 20%, situated in the eastern and southern regions, is currently under temporary occupation, and these areas are subject to ongoing military confrontations. The challenges posed by this occupation and the ongoing hostilities have necessitated innovative and adaptive responses from educational institutions, which are viewed by many as a key part of the decolonization process. These spatial inequalities also highlight an important dimension of decolonization: Institutions closest to the front lines must defend not only the physical space of learning but also the cultural and epistemic continuity that colonial violence seeks to disrupt.

In the context of armed conflict, the imperative to safeguard educational institutions as sanctuaries assumes a position of heightened criticality. Contemporary Ukraine exemplifies this exigency, where the aggressor nation has demonstrated a disturbing proclivity for targeting educational facilities as sites of military engagement. The scale of this issue is particularly pronounced in Kharkiv and its surrounding region, where nearly half of all educational institutions have sustained damage or been rendered completely inoperable due to bombardment and artillery shelling, as illustrated in Figure 1. These attacks not only represent a violation of international humanitarian law but also constitute an assault on the cultural and intellectual heritage of Ukraine, a heritage that decolonization seeks to reclaim and protect. The systematic destruction of universities aligns with colonial strategies of suppressing cultural autonomy by dismantling institutions of knowledge production. Therefore, every act of educational continuity in such conditions becomes an act of epistemic resistance.

CONSEQUENTLY, HIGHER education institutions situated within the aforementioned regions were compelled to undertake relocations to safer areas in the west of the country. These relocations enabled the provision of instruction to students either within conventional university classroom settings or through a blended learning approach. To prioritize the well-being of both students and academic staff, those higher education institutions located in close proximity to zones of active hostilities have transitioned to delivering educational services exclusively via online modalities. This transition to online learning, while necessary for safety, has also presented challenges in maintaining the quality of education and the sense of community that is central to the decolonizing mission of education. Despite these challenges, digital and blended modalities also represent important decolonial strategies: They preserve access to Ukrainian-led education, prevent epistemic displacement of students, and sustain national academic ecosystems even under extreme threat.

"CONSEQUENTLY, HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS SITUATED WITHIN THE AFOREMENTIONED REGIONS WERE COMPELLED TO UNDERTAKE RELOCATIONS TO SAFER AREAS IN THE WEST OF THE COUNTRY."

In August 2022, the State Service for Quality of Education in Ukraine administered an anonymous online survey targeting educators, education-researchers, and students within both higher educational and vocational institutions. The survey sought to evaluate the preparedness of educational process participants for various modalities of instructional delivery during the 2022/23 academic year. The findings were subsequently disseminated through official government channels. A total of 24,000 individuals participated in the survey, a figure that lends both representativeness and reliability to the results obtained and allows for a more nuanced understanding of the educational landscape.

Within the segment of respondents affiliated with the higher education system (69.4%), a substantial proportion indicated their willingness to resume in-person educational activities during the specified academic year. Approximately one in ten respondents stated that their respective institutions intended to commence the academic year with a traditional, classroom-based mode of instruction. Nevertheless, a considerable number of higher education institutions elected to implement a blended teaching and learning model, characterized by an alternating schedule of in-person and distance learning sessions.[15] This blended approach represents an attempt to balance the need for safety with the desire for a more traditional educational experience, and can be seen as a manifestation of the resilience and adaptability that are central to decolonization. It also underscores an important dimension of operationalizing decoloniza-

tion: preserving student agency in choosing a learning modality that aligns with their safety, psychological well-being, and capacity to remain engaged in Ukrainian education during wartime.

Notably, a significant majority, comprising 80% of all respondents (both students and academic staff), perceived the implementation of the distance educational format as an effective strategy during the wartime conditions prevailing in the nation.[16] This finding underscores the crucial role that technology has played in maintaining educational continuity, and its potential to contribute to more flexible and accessible forms of education in the postwar period, which could further support efforts at decolonization. The ability of Ukraine's higher education system to harness technology to maintain epistemic continuity directly resists the colonial strategy of severing populations from their cultural and intellectual institutions.



Figure 4. The space for sleeping in a bomb shelter (authors' own photo).

IT IS ALSO PERTINENT to emphasize that, notwithstanding Russia's widespread military aggression against Ukraine, domestic higher education institutions persist in conducting courses for international students and actively recruiting applicants from abroad, employing specific admission protocols for foreign enrollees. This practice further underscores the significance of the distance learning model, as a mutually acceptable solution for all parties involved, and highlights Ukraine's continued engagement with the global academic community, even in a time of crisis. This continued engagement is a further way that Ukrainian universities are resisting the isolation that can be a tool of colonization. Indeed, maintaining an international academic presence and visibility is an essential element of asserting Ukrainian epistemic sovereignty on the global stage.

It is, however, understandable that both students and faculty generally prefer in-person interaction. To guarantee the right to education, preserve stability within the educational sphere, and fulfil the objectives of education, the state is endeavoring to maximize its efforts within the constraints imposed by martial law. Significantly, contemporary Ukrainian legislation empowers educational institutions to autonomously determine educational formats and the organization of the educational process, encompassing flexible scheduling and thereby enabling the adaptation of educational activities to the exigencies of martial law. This legislative flexibility is essential for ensuring institutions are able to respond to the diverse and evolving challenges of wartime, and to assert their autonomy in the face of external pressure. Institutional autonomy, i.e. the ability to self-govern educational processes in defiance of external coercion, is itself a cornerstone of decolonial practice, positioning universities as agents of national sovereignty.

Consequently, both the Kharkiv authorities and university administrators are actively exploring diverse avenues to facilitate the resumption of on-site instructional activities. Moreover, a prevalent view holds that online education is generally perceived to be of lesser quality compared to traditional classroom-based instruction. Thus, during the summer of 2023, a number of higher education institutions in Kharkiv (located approximately 200 kilometers from zones of active military engagement), possessing deep and extensive subterranean facilities with the potential for conversion into bomb shelters equipped with classrooms conducive to teaching and learning, began preparing for the 2023/24 academic year in order to provide their student body with the option to pursue on-site instruction. This proactive approach demonstrates a commitment to both safety and educational quality, and exemplifies the agency that is a key part of the decolonizing process. By reclaiming underground spaces as classrooms, institutions symbolically and materially assert that Ukrainian education will continue to thrive even under the most hostile colonial conditions.

ACCORDINGLY, AT Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, which possesses extensive multi-level subterranean facilities, these spaces have been adapted into both classrooms and bomb shelters, equipped with essential amenities such as proper ventilation systems, sanitary facilities, potable water reservoirs, electrical generators, public address systems, fire alarms, and multiple emergency egress points, as depicted in Figures 3a and 3b. The adaptation of these spaces is a concrete example of how institutions are working to maintain a sense of normalcy and provide a safe and effective learning environment, even in the midst of war. Here, educational continuity becomes an operational marker of decolonization: It demonstrates that the university refuses to allow colonial violence to interrupt the production of Ukrainian knowledge.

Moreover, Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University equipped student hostels with bomb shelters (Figure 4). This comprehen-

sive approach to student safety and well-being underscores the university's commitment to its community and its determination to continue functioning as a center of learning and culture. Ensuring students' ability to remain in Ukraine while studying prevents the displacement of future Ukrainian intellectual capital, which is another key element of resisting colonial erosion.

WITHIN THIS CONTEXT, in the 2023/24 academic year, students at the university were given the opportunity to acquire their higher education in the educational format that is the most psychologically comfortable and acceptable for them individually, in order to achieve better academic results. Thus, nearly half of the first-year student cohort (49%) elected to engage in a blended learning modality, comprising remote (online) lectures and on-site practical and seminar sessions. The remaining portion of the first-year students (51%) opted for fully remote instruction,[17] as did 53% of first-year students in the 2024/25 academic year. Such data demonstrates that more than half of the student body either have concerns about their safety or have left the country, a factor that presents ongoing challenges for the university. For academic staff, this arrangement afforded instructors the opportunity to juxtapose various facets of distance and on-site modes of educational delivery, providing valuable insights into the efficacy of different pedagogical approaches in crisis situations. The flexibility of these arrangements also represents an operational indicator of decolonization: Student autonomy, localized decision-making, and the preservation of Ukrainian educational agency all counteract the coercive force of colonial aggression.

Initially, the intended utilization of subterranean classrooms was limited to periods coinciding with aerial bombardment warnings. However, the extremely short flight duration of missiles targeted at Kharkiv from the Belgorod region within the Russian Federation – approximately 40 seconds – means that detonations frequently precede the activation of air raid sirens. Consequently, the concentration of numerous individuals in a single location poses a significant hazard. Moreover, practical experience has revealed that the frequency of such alerts in Kharkiv necessitates that student cohorts, accompanied by their instructors, relocate to basement classrooms with considerable regularity, often every double period. This practice has proven to be suboptimal due to several factors. Firstly, valuable instructional time is lost during the transition. Secondly, students experience a diminished capacity for concentration following relocation, necessitating the reiteration of previously covered material. Thirdly, disciplinary challenges have been observed in certain groups. As a result, the prevailing decision of the university's administration has been to conduct conventional educational activities exclusively within subterranean classroom facilities. This decision, while driven by safety concerns, also reflects a commitment to maintaining the integrity of the educational process in the face of significant disruption. It reinforces the principle that education in Ukraine will persist autonomously, irrespective of colonial violence or attempts to dismantle academic life.

Consequently, contemporary university instruction in Kharkiv is delivered across a spectrum of modalities, encompassing both on-site classroom instruction within university-operated bomb shelters and synchronous distance learning facilitated by platforms such as Zoom, with pedagogical approaches tailored to prioritize the psychological well-being of students. Within the classroom setting, instructors employ both long-established pedagogical techniques (including the utilization of printed texts, blackboard instruction, and audio-visual resources) and innovative methodologies such as gamified learning,[18] interactive whiteboards,[19] and mobile technologies.[20] The integration of these diverse pedagogical approaches highlights the adaptability and resilience of Ukrainian educators in the face of adversity. More importantly, these pedagogical strategies operationalize decolonization by reinforcing Ukrainian-led curricula, pedagogy, and intellectual culture, thereby preventing the erasure or replacement of local knowledge systems despite conditions of war.

THE PERSISTENCE of educational provision amidst such exigent circumstances, as exemplified by institutions like Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, embodies the decolonial tenet of repudiating subjugation. These institutions safeguard and perpetuate the intellectual and cultural distinctiveness of the nation, even in the face of aggression aimed at its suppression. Moreover, this adaptation signifies a dedication to local self-determination and the rejection of imperialist narratives that endeavor to erode Ukraine's autonomy and the capacity of its populace to flourish independently. In this sense, the university's practices constitute both symbolic and material acts of decolonization, which preserve not only the physical continuity of learning but also the epistemic independence of Ukrainian scholarship. The integration of decolonization into this discourse accentuates the pivotal role of education as an instrument for resisting neo-colonial pressures and cultivating a resilient society that steadfastly refuses to succumb to external domination, even during periods of profound hardship. The universities are sending a clear message that they will not be conquered. Thus, the Ukrainian wartime educational landscape provides a rare and significant empirical example of decolonization enacted in real time under active conditions of aggression, expanding theoretical understandings of what constitutes a "decolonizing force" in higher education.

"THE UNIVERSITIES ARE SENDING A CLEAR MESSAGE THAT THEY WILL NOT BE CONQUERED."

Discussion

Our study sought to scrutinize how Ukrainian higher education institutions, specifically Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, are adapting to the challenges posed by the ongoing war, with a particular focus on the ways in which these adaptations reflect and enact a process of decolonization. The investigation

results reveal a complex interplay of resilience, adaptation, and a steadfast commitment to maintaining educational continuity in the face of profound adversity. These adaptations, we argue, are not merely pragmatic responses to wartime exigencies but also represent a form of resistance against imperialist domination and a manifestation of decolonizing agency.

Particularly, the findings of our study resonate with and expand upon the observations of other scholars examining the impact of the war on Ukrainian higher education. For example, Galynska and Bilous[21] highlight the significant challenges that distance learning presents in wartime Ukraine, including issues of accessibility and effectiveness. While their research focuses on the National University of Food Technologies, the challenges they identify – such as the location of students and faculty, the ability of educators to develop and deliver online courses, and equitable access to resources – are clearly echoed in the experiences of Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, as evidenced by the data on student preferences for blended or fully online distance learning.[22] The fact that a substantial portion of students at Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University opted for fully online instruction, even when in-person options were available, suggests that these accessibility and safety concerns are widespread and deeply felt. The stated example can be interpreted through a decolonial lens, insofar as the disruption of the traditional educational paradigm by an external force (Russian armed aggression) necessitates an evaluation of educational approaches to ensure inclusivity and continued access to knowledge. The adaptations made by Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, in embracing both online and blended formats, demonstrate an attempt to address these challenges while upholding the educational rights of all students, regardless of their location or circumstances.

IN PARALLEL, Sokol and Melko[23] broaden the scope of the discussion by analyzing the challenges facing higher tourism education in Ukraine, including digitalization, distance learning, and the outflow of students to foreign educational institutions. The abovementioned challenges, exacerbated by the war, are interconnected with the decolonization framework in several ways. The outflow of students, for instance, can be seen as a consequence of the disruption and instability caused by the imperialist aggression of the Russian Federation, potentially leading to a loss of Ukrainian intellectual capital. The adaptations made by Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, in providing safe and accessible teaching and learning environments, can be interpreted as a countermeasure to this trend, seeking to retain and empower Ukrainian students within their own national context. Furthermore, the emphasis on digitalization and innovative teaching methods, as observed at Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, aligns with Sokol and Melko's call for improved educational approaches in distance learning. Such digitalization measures, while driven by necessity, can also be viewed as a tool for decolonization, enabling the dissemination of knowledge beyond the physical constraints imposed by the armed conflict and potentially democratizing access to education.

Zayachuk[24] provides a comprehensive overview of efforts to ensure quality higher education in Ukraine during the war, highlighting the legal framework, the destruction of educational infrastructure, and the various initiatives undertaken by the state, universities, and international institutions. The scholar's study findings underscore the immense challenges faced by Ukrainian universities and shared by Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University. The adaptation of the university's spaces into bomb shelters, as documented in our research, directly addresses the issue of safety and preservation of infrastructure, which Zayachuk identifies as a key concern. [25]Moreover, the blended learning approach adopted by Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University reflects the broader trend of improved and wider implementation of online education systems, which Zayachuk[26] recognizes as a crucial response to the war. The emphasis on student safety and high-quality education, which Zayachuk's[27] survey data reveals as a top priority for Ukrainian universities, is clearly evident in the actions of Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, whose efforts to provide both safe physical spaces and flexible learning modalities demonstrate a commitment to these principles. The adaptation of Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University also reflects a form of resilience, showing the university's dedication to its educational mission. This resilience can be seen as a rejection of the colonizer's attempts to disrupt Ukrainian society.

In the context of our study, Lugovyi et al.[28] discuss, on the one hand, the broader context of globalization, sustainable development, and the COVID-19 pandemic, which have already influenced the development of higher education, and on the other hand, how Russian military aggression has added another layer of complexity. The researchers outline key areas of change, including infrastructure destruction, decreased institutional capability, and restrictions on international academic mobility. The situation at Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University exemplifies these challenges. The adaptation of bomb shelters into classrooms is a direct response to the destruction of infrastructure and the need to maintain institutional capability. The blended learning approach, with its combination of online and on-site teaching, reflects the restrictions on traditional academic mobility and the need to find alternative ways of delivering education. The university's actions, in this context, can be seen as a form of resistance against the disruption and displacement caused by the aggressive invasion, and as an attempt to preserve its role as a vital educational institution within Ukrainian society.

MOREOVER, AN ANALYSIS of the impact of the war on Ukraine's higher education system was made by Antoniuk,[29] who focuses on the losses incurred and the forced transformation processes that are shaping the future of postwar education. The study highlights the problems of security and the preservation of infrastructure, human resources, and the student body, which are all directly relevant to the situation at Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University. The university's adaptation of its facilities, and its efforts to maintain educational continuity, address these challenges head-on. Furthermore, Antoniuk emphasizes the importance of digital technologies, innovative approaches, and international

cooperation in preserving higher education. The blended learning model and the use of technology at Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University exemplify the adoption of digital technologies and innovative approaches. The university's actions demonstrate a proactive response to the threats posed by the war.

Finally, Sibruk et al.[30] discuss the crucial role of educators in fostering educational competencies and enhancing student competitiveness in the job market during wartime. The authors emphasize the need for students to develop such qualities as adaptability, critical thinking, and resilience. These soft skills are not only essential for navigating the challenges of war but also central to the decolonization process, which requires individuals to be empowered, self-reliant, and capable of challenging dominant narratives. The adaptations made by Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, in ensuring the continuity of education and providing a safe and supportive learning environment, contribute to the development of the abovementioned qualities in its students. The university's commitment to in-person teaching and learning, where possible, also acknowledges the importance of communication and social interaction, which Sibruk et al.[31] highlight as crucial during times of armed conflict.

IN CONCLUSION, the adaptations of Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, while driven by the immediate need to maintain educational continuity and ensure safety, also represent a profound act of decolonization. By refusing to succumb to the disruptive forces of war, the university is actively resisting imperialist domination and asserting its commitment to Ukrainian self-determination. The blended learning model, the transformation of bomb shelters into classrooms, and the prioritization of both online and on-site instruction all demonstrate a multifaceted approach to education that is both resilient and empowering. The university is not only preserving its function as an educational institution but also playing a vital role in safeguarding Ukrainian cultural and intellectual identity during a time of profound crisis. The findings of our study, when considered in conjunction with the work of other scholars, underscore the critical role of education in resisting oppression, fostering resilience, and shaping a more just and equitable future for Ukraine.

Conclusions

Having examined how Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University has adapted to the challenges of the ongoing war in Ukraine, with a specific focus on how these adaptations reflect and enact a process of decolonization, we have revealed that the university has implemented a range of strategies to maintain educational continuity and ensure the safety of its students and faculty. These strategies include the transformation of the university's basements into functional teaching and learning spaces (as well as into bomb shelters for those students who live in the university student hostels), the implementation of blended and online learning modalities, and the provision of ongoing support services.

Such adaptations are not merely pragmatic responses to wartime conditions. Rather, they represent a proactive effort to assert the university's autonomy, preserve Ukrainian cultural and intellectual identity, and resist the disruptive forces of external military aggression. Within the framework of decolonization, the adaptation of higher education to wartime exigencies, exemplified by the transformation of basements into instructional spaces, embodies a decolonial response. This response underscores resilience, self-determination, and the prioritization of localized necessities over external impositions.

THE FINDINGS of the study highlight the following key points: 1) Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation and resilience in the face of significant challenges; 2) the university's adaptation strategies reflect a commitment to both the safety and the educational needs of its students and academic staff; 3) the application of technology and the creation of safe teaching and learning environments have been crucial in maintaining educational continuity; 4) the university's actions can be interpreted as a form of resistance against imperialist domination and an assertion of Ukrainian self-determination; and 5) education, in this context, plays a vital role in preserving cultural heritage and fostering a sense of national identity.

In conclusion, the case of Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University provides a compelling example of how higher education institutions can adapt to the challenges of war while simultaneously enacting a process of decolonization. The university's efforts to maintain its educational mission in the face of adversity serve as a testament to the resilience of the Ukrainian people and the enduring power of education to shape a nation's future.

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The transformation of youth sport education in Ukraine under war. Perspectives on recovery

by **Ihor Hrynchenko**, **Serhii Palevych**, **Ivan Danylishyn**, **Olena Chaika**, and **Vitalii Kyrpenko**

abstract

This study systematizes the transformative impacts of the full-scale military invasion on Ukraine's youth sport education systems and substantiates multilevel recovery strategies within the Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) framework. The analysis focuses on how macrosystemic disruptions affect the pedagogical continuity and developmental pathways of young learners. A qualitative analytical approach was employed and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides the theoretical lens. The findings reveal a critical disintegration of the "talent pipeline" due to the destruction of educational infrastructure, the forced migration of the pedagogical core (coaching staff), and the militarization of sports-based learning in occupied territories. The results extend LTAD theory by demonstrating its structural vulnerability under prolonged crises and identifying primary pathways of institutional and educational erosion. Recovery requires a transition from emergency management to a resilient educational model that integrates psychosocial support into athletic training.

KEYWORDS: Youth sport education, ecological systems analysis, LTAD, pedagogical continuity, psychosocial rehabilitation, sportswashing.

The full-scale military aggression against Ukraine has triggered a systemic disintegration across all sectors of public life. The sphere of physical culture and sport education – specifically youth sport training environments, which serve as the institutional pipeline for athletic reserves and a decisive mechanism for socialization – has faced multifaceted, cumulative challenges.[1] These challenges form a cascading effect ranging from the physical destruction of educational and athletic facilities to long-term human capital deficits and a critical decline in the psychosocial well-being of young learners.[2] Consequently, the functioning of youth sport education under conflict conditions has emerged as a paramount concern, necessitating a systematized investigation of its structural transformation.

In sports sociology and pedagogy, youth sport is traditionally analyzed through the Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) framework.[3] This concept posits physical activity as a tool for primary socialization and pedagogical skill acquisition. However, military aggression acts as a decisive exogenous shock that radically disrupts this developmental and educational trajectory. The theoretical conceptualization of this impact is grounded in Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979),[4] which suggests that macrosystemic crises – specifically war – radically transform all levels of a child's developmental environment. Conflict deforms micro- and mesosystems (family, sports schools, and the instructional training process), leading to prolonged psychosocial consequences. Available studies



Infrastructure devastation: The destroyed "Polytechnic" Sports Complex in Kharkiv. PHOTO: CAROL GUZY/ZUMA PRESS WIRE/ALAMY

suggest that physical activity among children in conflict zones declines within a range of 40 to 60%, directly correlating with an increased risk of somatic and anxiety disorders.[5]

THE ONGOING MILITARY aggression acts not merely as an external disruptive factor but as a structural social rupture that alters the very logic of educational sport systems. As argued in recent conceptual frameworks, sport systems must navigate a "changing world" where global crises redefine the social value, pedagogical integrity, and institutional sustainability of athletic activity.[6] In Ukraine, this macrosystemic shock is triggering a cascading failure across all levels of youth development pathways.

A decisive feature of the Ukrainian case is the presence of multilayered hybrid threats. In temporarily occupied territories, sport education is instrumentalized for the militarization and indoctrination of youth, representing a direct violation of Olympic principles and educational ethics.[7] Concurrently, the sector is targeted by "sportswashing" strategies on the international stage. Scholarly assessments indicate that state-linked "sportswashing" is utilized to manufacture political legitimacy and mitigate international criticism following the invasion.[8] The participation of athletes associated with the aggression in global competitions creates profound ethical dissonance and complicates the efficacy of sanctioning mechanisms intended to protect the integrity of the international pedagogical and sporting movement.[9]

Beyond its immediate practical relevance, this study contributes to the educational and sports science literature by conceptualizing the fragility of pedagogical pipelines in state-centralized systems during protracted conflict. By synthesizing the Ukrainian experience through an ecological lens, the paper offers a replicable theoretical model for assessing sectoral resilience, thereby bridging the gap between emergency crisis management and long-term educational recovery in global sports sociology and pedagogy.

The primary aim of this study is to provide a systemic assessment of the structural transformation within Ukraine's youth sport education (YSE) environment under war-induced macrosystemic shock and to formulate a theoretical framework for its pedagogical recovery based on the LTAD model. To address this objective and the identified research gap, the present study focuses on the following two research questions: 1) How has war-induced macrosystemic shock structurally transformed the institutional foundations and "pedagogical pipelines" of youth sport education systems in Ukraine? 2) How can Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) frameworks be recalibrated within an ecological systems perspective to ensure pedagogical continuity and recovery under conditions of systemic disintegration?

Methodology

The study constitutes a qualitative policy-analytical and theoretical synthesis rather than an empirical intervention study. A qualitative analytical design is prioritized over quantitative approaches due to the extreme volatility of the research environment

and the necessity to capture complex, non-linear institutional and educational transformations that standardized statistical metrics alone may fail to reflect. Critically, this analysis does not seek to establish direct causal inference; instead, it focuses on identifying and modeling structural patterns of systemic disintegration and pedagogical resilience under conflict conditions. This framework is specifically chosen to capture the complexity of educational transformation under conditions of macrosystemic shock, and to model the disintegration of developmental pathways through a multilayered synthesis of institutional data and scholarly evidence.

Data selection and source synthesis

To ensure the validity of the qualitative synthesis and avoid ad hoc compilation, the document selection was guided by three rigorous criteria:

- *Institutional Authority:* Priority was given to reports and regulatory frameworks from recognized national (MMS, NOC, Office of the General Prosecutor) and international bodies (UNDP, IOC, UNICEF).
- *Chronological Relevance:* Focus on data covering the 2022–2025 period to capture the longitudinal trajectory of the conflict.
- *Theoretical Alignment:* Documents were selected based on their capacity to provide evidence for the micro-, meso-, or macrosystemic levels of transformation within the pedagogical LTAD framework.

THE METHODOLOGY consists of three integrated components:

- *Documentary and Policy Analysis:* A systematic review of official reports and regulatory frameworks from the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Ukraine (MMS), the Office of the General Prosecutor, the National Olympic Committee (NOC), and the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. This was supplemented by strategic evaluations from international organizations, including the UNDP, IOC, and UNICEF, focusing on the continuity of sport education.
- *Secondary Quantitative Assessment:* Synthesis of statistical datasets from open-access sources, including economic damage reports,[10] state infrastructure recovery programs (Platforma vidnovlennia Ukraïny, n.d.), and analytical status reports on educational athletic infrastructure.[11]
- *Systematic Literature Review:* An evaluation of peer-reviewed research[12] and specialized analytical platforms utilized for theoretical and pedagogical interpretation within the LTAD framework.[13]

TO ENSURE THE ROBUSTNESS of the findings, the study employs data triangulation. This involved the cross-comparison of official government statistics on destruction, empirical publications on socio-psychological and pedagogical consequences, and international monitoring data regarding geopolitical challenges. This multi-perspective validation mitigates the risks associated with the use of secondary data in active conflict zones and ensures the integrity of the analytical model.



The "Angels of Sport" memorial honoring the legacy of fallen sports professionals and coaches. PHOTO: KYIV CITY STATE ADMINISTRATION

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary data sources and the constraints of conducting primary fieldwork in active conflict zones. However, triangulation across institutional, academic, and international datasets mitigates these limitations, ensuring the analytical robustness of the findings and their applicability to the broader discourse on educational resilience.

The analysis of empirical data identified several systemic clusters documenting the impact of military aggression on Ukraine's youth sport education (YSE) environment.

Infrastructure and educational-economic impact

As of February 2025, reports document damage or destruction to over 600 athletic facilities, including more than 200 youth sports schools (YSS). Examples are shown in Figures 1 and 2. These findings are corroborated by both official data on destroyed educational sports infrastructure[14] and independent analytical assessments.[15] Economic assessments indicate aggregate losses within the combined education and sports sectors (2022–2024) of approximately USD 5.5 billion, a figure validated through the KSE-led damage assessment framework.[16]

At the regional level, 100 percent of YSS in Kharkiv and 80 percent in the Dnipropetrovsk region transitioned to remote or hybrid instructional operations.[17] Current data suggest a significant decline in educational engagement; for instance, preliminary survey-based evidence indicates that 66.6 percent of youth are identified as non-active.[18] Furthermore, analytical extrapolations under a pessimistic scenario suggest a projected 50 percent decrease in the national athletic reserve by 2030, assuming the persistence of current migration and educational-infrastructural deficits.[19]

Human capital and the pedagogical pipeline

Casualties include over 500 athletes and educators (coaches).[20] The memorial to fallen sports professionals and coaches is shown in the image of *Angels of Sport*. Migration and mobilization have

resulted in the displacement of approximately 2 million young people and a decisive portion of the YSS pedagogical staff.[21] Enrollment in YSS decreased from 434,000 students in 2020 to an 8 percent coverage rate among the youth population in 2024.[22] In temporarily occupied territories, sport education programs (e.g. "Zarnitsa 2.0") are instrumentalized for the militarization and ideological indoctrination of youth, representing a substantial violation of educational ethics.[23]

Psychosocial and developmental indicators

Systematic data record PTSD symptoms in approximately 40 percent of children.[24] Furthermore, 60 percent of youth in frontline and de-occupied territories lack stable access to structured sports-based learning.[25] Monitoring of middle-school students shows a regression of motor-learning indicators in remote training formats compared to traditional offline sessions.[26] Frequent air raid alerts result in the interruption of training cycles, affecting the pedagogical continuity of instructional loads.[27]

Organizational and geopolitical factors

Competitive activity has been restricted due to the restructuring of national championships and safety requirements.[28] On the international stage, tensions persist regarding the participation of Individual Neutral Athletes.[29] Analytical platforms document the use of sports for propaganda purposes and as a way of bypassing sanctions, which creates decisive ethical challenges for the international educational sport movement.[30]

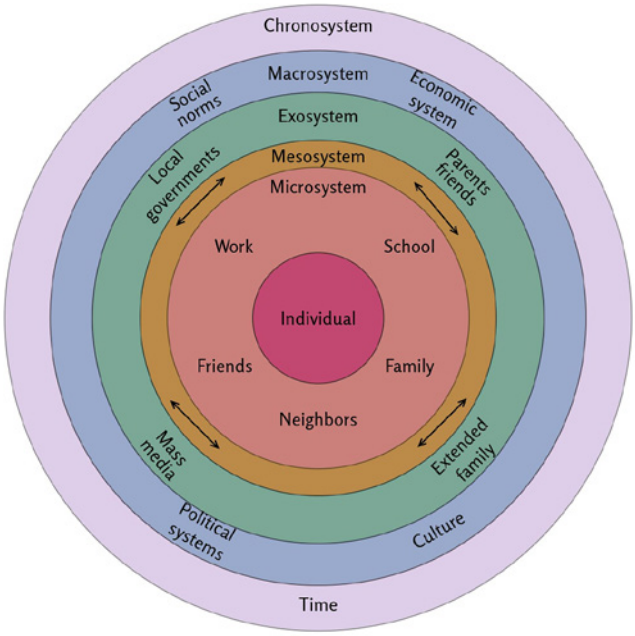
Institutional response and educational resilience

Adaptive management strategies have been implemented to maintain basic pedagogical functionality.[31] National initiatives, including the presidential program for the reconstruction of 100 YSS and 18 sports boarding schools, are primary components of the recovery strategy, currently in the planning or early implementation phases (Platforma vidnovlennia Ukrainy, n.d.).

Discussion

Macrosystemic Shock and Ecological Disintegration

The disintegration of Ukraine's youth sport education (YSE) environment demonstrates that institutional destruction creates a structural bottleneck, rendering traditional developmental models non-functional. Consequently, Ukraine serves as a critical case for assessing how prolonged military aggression acts as a decisive macrosystemic shock, radically altering the social, legal, and economic parameters of societal operation.[32] Analyzing this critical case provides essential insights into the structural limits of educational athletic systems under extreme pressure.



Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory model.

SOURCE: SIMPLYPSYCHOLOGY.ORG

The war acts not merely as an external factor but as a structural social rupture that alters the very logic of the sport education system. Recent conceptual frameworks suggest that educational sport systems must navigate a "changing world" where global crises redefine the social value, pedagogical integrity, and institutional sustainability of athletic activity.[33] In Ukraine, the impact propagates through lower hierarchical levels, where the collapse of the mesosystem – driven by infrastructure devastation – undermines the decisive links between sports schools and local communities. Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory model is shown in the image.

Consequently, a profound dysfunction of the microsystem emerges: Chronic stress and PTSD symptoms in young learners[34] signify a microsystemic overload. To our knowledge, the Ukrainian case represents one of the most extensive instances of institutional disruption of pedagogical sport networks documented in recent literature, where the systematic targeting of the centralized YSE network indicates a deliberate undermining of the institutional base for human capital reproduction.

Deformation of the pedagogical LTAD framework

Current conflict conditions precipitate a systemic deformation of the LTAD framework, as the primary principles of continuity and progressive pedagogical cyclicity become untenable under martial law. This deformation challenges the foundational pillars of successful sport education policies; according to the SPLISS 2.0 framework, the effectiveness of an educational athletic system is contingent upon the synergy between financial support, integrated developmental pathways, and institutional stability.[35]

"THE WAR ACTS NOT MERELY AS AN EXTERNAL FACTOR BUT AS A STRUCTURAL SOCIAL RUPTURE THAT ALTERS THE VERY LOGIC OF THE SPORT EDUCATION SYSTEM."



Infrastructure devastation: The destroyed "Desna" Stadium in Chernihiv. PHOTO: COURTESY OF DESNA

In the Ukrainian context, this manifests through three substantial disruptions:

- *Instructional Transitions:* The loss of qualified pedagogical personnel and reduced training volumes impede the qualitative transition between the "Learning to Train" and "Training to Train" stages, effectively disrupting specialization and learning mechanisms.
- *Competitive Practice as Learning:* Logistical barriers limit the essential competitive practice required for the "Training to Compete" stage, creating decisive risks of "lost generations" in national sport education.[36]
- *Remote Learning Limitations:* Evidence confirms that while digital programs offer a temporary logistical bridge, they cannot fully compensate for in-person instructional training in ensuring motor and pedagogical development.[37]

Institutional resilience versus resource scarcity

The national sport education system demonstrates significant institutional resilience through adaptive management, yet a widening discrepancy persists between localized viability and total resource needs. The resilience demonstrated by Ukrainian sports schools aligns with theoretical models of organizational adaptation in the "Sport for Development and Peace" (SDP) sector. External systemic factors force organizations to abandon traditional instructional trajectories and adopt flexible, survival-oriented strategies to maintain their social and pedagogical impact.[38]

Evidence of this resilience is found in the 2030 State Targeted Social Program[39] and regional initiatives.[40] However, the volume of aggregate economic losses (USD 5.5 billion) significantly exceeds current internal recovery potential.[41] This suggests that while local pedagogical adaptations are crucial, structural stabilization necessitates a strategic shift toward global financial intervention.

Geopolitical dimensions and educational ethics

The instrumentalization of youth sport education in occupied territories for indoctrination and the persistence of "sportswashing" strategies represent a direct threat to the ethical integrity of the international pedagogical and sports movement.[42] In the European context, this substantiates the necessity of consistent international sanctioning policies to prevent the use of sports as a tool for legitimizing aggression, thereby ensuring the ethical and educational stability of the global athletic community.

Conclusions

The systemic analysis of the multifactorial impact of military aggression on Ukraine's youth sport education (YSE) environment leads to the following conclusions:

- *Theoretical Implication: Macrosystemic Regression.* Military aggression functions as a decisive shock triggering a cumula-

"EXTERNAL SYSTEMIC FACTORS FORCE ORGANIZATIONS TO ABANDON TRADITIONAL INSTRUCTIONAL TRAJECTORIES AND ADOPT FLEXIBLE, SURVIVAL-ORIENTED STRATEGIES TO MAINTAIN THEIR SOCIAL AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPACT."

tive regression of the pedagogical sector. The destruction of educational athletic infrastructure and substantial economic losses have resulted in a profound structural dysfunction of the athletic ecosystem. This regression confirms that macrosystemic instability directly correlates with the erosion of the foundational structures required for youth development and pedagogical stability.

- *Impact on LTAD: Educational Pipeline Disruption*. Destructive factors have distorted the Long-Term Athlete Development framework, transforming it from a progressive trajectory into a fragmented process. Reduced training volumes and the limited efficacy of remote formats impede the transition between stages of specialization, undermining motor-learning continuity. At the microsystemic level, widespread psychosocial traumatization serves as a primary barrier to the continuity of the national pedagogical pipeline, necessitating new resilience-based approaches to sport education.
- *Institutional Viability and Resource Gaps*. While the system demonstrates resilience through state-led strategic programs and adaptive pedagogical management, the scale of damage significantly exceeds domestic capacity. The recovery process requires a strategic transition toward sustained international financial support and targeted global investment to bridge the widening resource gap and ensure the long-term sustainability of the educational athletic network.
- *Geopolitical and Ethical Frameworks*. The crisis in YSE is inextricably linked to hybrid warfare, including the ideological indoctrination of youth in occupied territories and "sportswashing" strategies on the international stage. Protecting the integrity of the national pedagogical space requires a transition from sectoral administration to a robust framework of security and ethical governance. This is decisive for ensuring that sport remains a tool for positive development rather than a mechanism for political instrumentalization.

Recommendations

These recommendations are derived from the analytical synthesis and theoretical interpretation presented above. They are intended to inform evidence-based policy discussions regarding the structural recovery of the youth sport education sector. The scale of the macrosystemic shock necessitates multilevel strategic interventions to ensure pedagogical resilience:

Strategic interventions at the macro- and exosystemic levels

- *Targeted financial intervention:* The establishment of a specialized fund for educational sports infrastructure recovery should be considered in order to mobilize international donor support. Investment volumes require alignment with the documented USD 5.5 billion in damages to ensure the restoration of institutional pedagogical capacity.[43]
- *Geopolitical resilience and ethical governance:* It is recommended to adapt sports diplomacy strategies to minimize the "sportswashing" effect. Strengthening international sanctioning frameworks requires a consistent, principle-based approach to protect the ethical integrity of the global educational sports movement and prevent the instrumentalization of young learners.[44]

Restoring mesosystem integrity and LTAD continuity

- *Development of secure educational hubs:* The establishment of regional secure sports-education hubs in stable areas should be considered a priority to restore the decisive links between sports schools and local communities.
- *Ensuring instructional continuity:* These hubs require the provision of uninterrupted access to specialized infrastructure and competitive practice. Such measures are essential to prevent the further degradation of pedagogical specialization stages and to sustain the continuity of the national talent pipeline.[45]

Interventions at the microsystemic level and human capital

- *Integrated psychosocial and pedagogical rehabilitation:* The implementation of psychological rehabilitation programs within sports schools is recommended in order to restore the developmental readiness of young athletes. This process requires the adoption of trauma-informed pedagogical practices to address the widespread psychosocial consequences of the conflict.[46]
- *Preservation of the pedagogical core:* A robust system of grant support and professional incentives for coaching and teaching staff, particularly in de-occupied and frontline regions, should be considered. Preserving this professional core is decisive for the reproduction of athletic potential and organizational adaptation under external systemic factors.[47]

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University staff's mental health in wartime

Personal experiences, emotional well-being, and support mechanisms

by **Yuliia Sytnykova**, **Liudmyla Rybalko**, and **Valentyna Tyurina**

abstract

The ongoing full-scale war in Ukraine has significantly transformed the higher education system, placing increased professional demands on faculty members under prolonged stress. This study empirically examines the psycho-emotional well-being and burnout-related symptoms of 94 academic staff from Kharkiv, Sumy, and Dnipro. Data collected via adaptive self-report instruments were analyzed using Spearman's rank correlation. Results indicate substantial emotional strain, with 79.8% of respondents reporting moderate-to-high emotional exhaustion. The correlation analysis showed that respondents with direct personal connections to the war, such as relatives in the Armed Forces, were significantly more stressed and emotionally exhausted. Interestingly, despite high emotional exhaustion, negative affective reactions remained low, reflecting how collective professional identity and civil obligation as non-material resources mitigate cynicism and counteract the traditional Maslach Burnout Inventory model. Furthermore, functional impairment correlated powerfully with internal emotional exhaustion rather than external infrastructural disruptions. Consequently, support strategies must address individual trauma loads, reinforcing mission and purpose as key non-material resources to reduce long-term professional attrition.

KEYWORDS: University lecturers, wartime Ukraine experience, occupational burnout, work-related functioning, wartime stressors.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has forced university lecturers into working conditions that few education systems in the world have ever encountered. Alongside routine academic responsibilities, they now navigate air-raid alerts, displacement, infrastructural instability, separation from family members serving in the Armed Forces, and the ongoing uncertainty of daily life. In this environment, the professional role of a lecturer becomes inextricably linked to the personal experience of war. Moreover, their academic work, including teaching and advising, persists amidst an existential threat. This underscores that learning continues within universities not because conditions allow it, but because society demands it and, crucially, because it serves as a vital existential necessity for the lecturers themselves. The images show university professors in their damaged and ruined universities trying to collect and save their professional and personal stuff.

This convergence of professional and personal pressures has no close analogue in pre-war occupational stress. For international scholars, the Ukrainian case provides a unique lens through which to observe how educators maintain professionalism when the usual balance between demands and resources is radically disrupted. It raises some questions that transcend national borders: How does academic work adapt when crisis becomes the norm? What allows lecturers to continue teaching under conditions that would typically paralyze institutional functioning? And which psychological resources remain vital when material and organizational supports erode?



Interior of the H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University building after being shelled by the Russian Federation: university faculty members arrived to retrieve their remaining belongings and clean up shattered glass in the classrooms. PHOTO: PRIVATE ARCHIVE

Burnout, which is classically defined by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment,[1] provides a central framework for understanding these processes. While burnout has long been recognized as a chronic challenge in global higher education, research in stable environments assumes that job demands and institutional resources exist within relatively predictable boundaries. The Job Demands-Resources model[2] explains this dynamic well under normal circumstances. However, in wartime, the "demands-resources" equation undergoes a profound change. Demands multiply in both intensity and unpredictability, while some resources, like emotional, organizational, and infrastructural, erode simultaneously.

RECENT STUDIES FROM Ukraine[3] clearly highlight this shift. Emotional Exhaustion among university faculty has risen dramatically, reflecting the dual burden of professional instability and personal threat exposure. The depersonalization, as the cynicism component, is typically expected to increase in parallel. However, it remains strikingly low in several wartime samples, as established during the study. This suggests that non-material resources, such as civic duty (teaching), moral responsibility, professional identity, and solidarity, may serve as protective mechanisms, enabling lecturers to sustain their professionalism despite deep emotional strain. This phenomenon challenges linear models of burnout and invites a reconsideration of how resilience operates under extreme conditions.

Despite growing qualitative accounts, one significant gap persists: we still lack systematic quantitative evidence linking specific wartime stressors, for instance, relocation, institutional damage, proximity to violence, and personal involvement in the war, to measurable psycho-emotional outcomes among lecturers. Similarly, the direct correlational mechanism through which emotional exhaustion leads to functional impairment remains insufficiently examined in the current wartime context. Addressing these gaps is not only scientifically important but also essential for informing university policies that support academic staff working under crisis conditions. Therefore, this study proceeds with an empirical investigation to provide the necessary correlational data on the mechanisms through which extreme war conditions influence stress, burnout, and functional impairment among faculty in the most affected regions of Ukraine.

Aim and objectives

The aim of this study is to empirically analyze the correlational links between specific, quantifiable wartime stressors and the primary dimensions of burnout (emotional exhaustion) and functional impairment among university lecturers in the conflict-affected regions of Eastern Ukraine. To achieve this aim, the following specific objectives were established: 1) to quantify the prevalent levels of perceived stress, emotional exhaustion, functional impairment (including negative affective reactions) among the surveyed lecturers; 2) to analyze the strength and direction of associations (using Spearman's rank correlational) between lecturers' personal wartime exposure (e.g., relocation status,

relatives in the Armed Forces) and their measured psycho-emotional outcomes (emotional exhaustion and perceived stress); 3) to examine and compare the strength of the correlations between emotional exhaustion and functional impairment, and between external structural stressors (e.g., university damages) and functional impairment, thus formulating practical recommendations for the academic community in crisis context.

Literature review

Occupational burnout among university faculty is widely conceptualized as a dysfunctional response to prolonged imbalance between job demands and available personal or organizational resources, typically manifesting through emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and reduced professional efficacy. Pre-war systematic reviews consistently demonstrate that burnout among academics is shaped by sociodemographic and psychosocial factors, with younger age, lower professional experience, elevated emotional labour, and organizational constraints being the strongest predictors of EE and DP.[4] Longitudinal syntheses from 2005 to 2020 similarly highlight the persistent vulnerability of university lecturers to emotional depletion due to increasing workload demands and declining institutional support.

This pattern is reinforced by a recent systematic review and meta-analysis, which confirmed that job stress is a robust and consistent burnout predictor across higher education settings globally.[5] Empirical studies in stable contexts further confirm that EE plays a central role in deteriorating professional functioning. It is significantly associated with productivity loss, reduced teaching quality, absenteeism, and presenteeism.[6] Actual research on resilience additionally shows that internal resources can mitigate the progression from emotional fatigue to cynicism and impaired professional functioning.[7]

However, psycho-emotional risks for educators escalate not only in war but also in other large-scale crises. A recent comprehensive review covering the pandemic and post-pandemic years (2020–2023) revealed that teachers worldwide experienced substantial increases in burnout indicators, stress, workload, and emotional instability due to rapidly changing teaching conditions and heightened demands.[8] Studies conducted during the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine after 2014 already documented that proximity to hostilities, personal danger, displacement, and infrastructural disruption substantially intensify stress levels and accelerate the development of burnout among educators.[9]

SIMILARLY, STUDIES AMONG Ukrainian students show that exposure to wartime conditions leads to heightened perceived stress and anxiety, emphasizing the broad psychosocial impact of conflict within educational communities.[10] Really, the full-scale invasion in 2022 amplified these risks to an unprecedented degree, combining extreme personal stressors, as home loss, repeated evacuations, threats to life, service of relatives in the Armed Forces, in other words, with radically altered work conditions.

Multi-wave wartime investigations (2022–2024) demonstrate a continuous intensification of EE and a gradual rise in DP, suggesting that prolonged exposure to traumatic events and chronic instability depletes emotional resources in line with the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory.[11] These conclusions are corroborated by studies reporting that Emotional Exhaustion is the most persistent and dominant component of burnout among lecturers during the war.[12]

The war also introduced a set of environmental and technological stressors that further burden academic staff: sudden transitions to fully remote teaching, disrupted internet connectivity, power outages, infrastructural instability, and increased administrative complexity. Investigations of technology integration and pedagogical practice in wartime institutions reveal that these conditions substantially increase cognitive load, compromise teaching quality, and heighten emotional strain.[13]

“ACTUAL RESEARCH ON RESILIENCE ADDITIONALLY SHOWS THAT INTERNAL RESOURCES CAN MITIGATE THE PROGRESSION FROM EMOTIONAL FATIGUE TO CYNICISM AND IMPAIRED PROFESSIONAL FUNCTIONING.”

Complementary research on university employees’ psychological state highlights widespread anxiety linked to personal and familial threat, uncertainty about the future, instability of living conditions, and the need for frequent relocation or sheltering during bombardments.[14] These stressors collectively contribute to sleep disturbances, emotional instability, decreased motivation, and loss of professional continuity, which are frequently reported by Ukrainian academic staff during the ongoing crisis.[15] Additional findings indicate that demands associated with distance learning intensify both EE and DP through blurred work-life boundaries and constant monitoring pressures.[16]

Despite the severity of these conditions, a distinct pattern has been consistently observed in Ukrainian wartime studies: while EE levels are significantly elevated, DP remains comparatively low. This atypical divergence from classical MBI trajectories suggests that moral obligation, professional identity, and civic responsibility serve as important non-material resources buffering the transition from emotional depletion to cynicism.[17] Within the Conservation of Resources (COR) framework, these internal resources may function as protective factors that slow or prevent the degradation of emotional exhaustion into professional disengagement and negative affective reactions.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that extreme war conditions produce a unique psychosocial profile among university lecturers: high levels of emotional exhaustion, closely tied to personal wartime stressors, coexist with a preserved or even strengthened professional identity, which inhibits the develop-



Ihor Hrynchenko, PhD in Education and Associate Professor at the Department of Olympic and Professional Sport, Sports Games and Tourism, stands at the main entrance of H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, destroyed by Russian shelling. PHOTO: PRIVATE ARCHIVE

ment of depersonalization. However, despite the breadth of research on burnout during the war, a notable lack of systematic quantitative evidence remains regarding the specific wartime stressors (e.g., personal involvement in the war, relocation, university damage) that link to distinct psycho-emotional outcomes.

Crucially, the direct correlational pathway between emotional exhaustion and functional impairment (FI) has not been sufficiently examined in the wartime context. These gaps underscore the need for an empirical correlational study that can elucidate the mechanisms by which extreme war conditions affect stress, emotional exhaustion, and functional impairment among lecturers in regions directly impacted by the conflict.

Research hypotheses

Based on the review of the literature on occupational stress and crisis management, the following hypotheses were formulated for empirical testing. The primary hypothesis (H1) posits that there is a positive and significant correlation between the personal proximity to wartime stressors (e.g., relatives in the Armed Forces, relocation) and the intensity of negative psycho-emotional outcomes (perceived stress, emotional exhaustion). Secondly, we hypothesize (H2) that the strength of the correlation between emotional exhaustion and functional impairment will be stronger than the correlation between functional impairment and external structural stressors (e.g., university damages), indicating that functional decline is primarily an internal consequence of depletion.

Methodology

This study was conducted as an anonymous online survey with a quantitative empirical design. This approach was chosen due to security constraints associated with martial law, as well as the need to reach respondents from different regions. This survey is targeted at university lecturers from the Kharkiv, Sumy, and Dnipro regions, regions located in eastern Ukraine, and exposed to constant shelling and heightened danger throughout the study period.

Data were gathered through a Google Form questionnaire developed by the authors, consisting of two main thematic sections. The first section covered participants' socio-demographic characteristics and their experience of living and working under wartime conditions. The second section assessed their psycho-emotional state and teaching practice under prolonged stress conditions. This component included items conceptually adapted from internationally validated psychometric instruments. Specifically, perceived stress was assessed using a single-item measure conceptually derived from the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10).[18]

Emotional exhaustion was measured using a composite index of 2–3 items based on the Maslach Burnout Inventory – Educator Survey,[19] adapted to facilitate rapid evaluation of faculty experiences under high-stress wartime conditions. To accurately reflect the unique wartime professional context, functional impairment (FI) was assessed through a composite index capturing work-related difficulties (e.g., reduced concentration) and motivational decline in teaching activities. Additionally, negative affective reactions (NAR) were captured through items measuring increased irritability toward students and colleagues, reflecting an adapted form of the cynicism component of burnout. All items were ranked using 5-point or 10-point Likert-type scales, enabling both descriptive and correlation statistical analyses.

A total of 94 university lecturers completed the survey. Data collection took place between May and July 2025. This timeframe was marked by intensive shelling and significant emotional strain on the civilian population. Data were processed in Microsoft Excel for initial data entry and descriptive statistics. All inferential

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of study participants (N = 94)

Variable	Category	*n*	%
Gender	Female	67	71.3
	Male	27	28.7
University type	State University	93	98.7
	Other	1	1.1
Age	Up to 25 years	1	1.1
	26–35	11	11.7
	36–45	20	21.3
	46–60	43	45.7
	Over 60 years	19	20.2
Academic Seniority	Up to 5 years	11	11.7
	6–10	7	7.4
	11–20	14	14.9
	21–30	38	40.4
	Over 30 years	24	25.5

Table 2. War-related contextual characteristics of study participants (N = 94)

Variable	Category	*n*	%
Relocation Status	Temporarily Relocated	36	38.3
	Remained in place	33	35.1
	Temporarily relocated and subsequently returned	25	26.6
Teaching Format	Online Learning	58	61.7
	Face-to-face	10	10.6
	Blended Format	26	27.7
Workload Change	Increased	56	59.5
	No Change	24	25.5
	Decreased	14	14.9
Institutional Damage	Confirmed Damage	67	71.3
	No Reported Damage	26	27.7

statistical analyses were subsequently conducted using Jamovi Cloud, an open-source platform built on the R programming environment. The platform was selected due to its transparency, reproducibility, and suitability for non-parametric statistical analysis. To test the formulated hypotheses, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (ρ) was employed to examine the strength and direction of the associations between the study variables.

Result of study

1. Demographic and professional characteristics of participants

The study involved 94 university lecturers from the Kharkiv, Sumy, and Dnipro regions. The cohort, consisting predominantly of female lecturers (71.3%, n = 67), and nearly all participants (98.7%) were employed at state universities. Owing to the categorical nature of the demographic variables, age and academic seniority (teaching experience, TE) were summarized by frequency distribution. The most represented age group was 46–60 years (45.7%), followed by the 36–45 years' group (21.3%) and the respondents over 60 years (20.2%). Similarly, the largest professional experience groups were those aged 21–30 years (40.4%) and those with more than 30 years of experience (25.5%), indicating a mature cohort with established careers and their own teaching style based on the appropriate moral values. Contextual data related to wartime experience revealed pronounced disruption in participants' personal and professional lives.

Specifically, 38.3% (n = 36) reported having temporarily relocated from their permanent place of residence, while an additional 26.6% (n = 25) experienced displacement but later returned. Approximately 35.1% (n = 33) remained in their original location throughout the study war period. Considering the prevailing security environment in these frontline regions, the most prevalent teaching modality was online learning (61.7%), followed by a blended format (10.6%).

Furthermore, a considerable portion of our participants, 71.3% (n = 65), confirmed that their educational institution had suffered direct physical damage or partial destruction due to shelling. The majority of participants (59.5%) reported that their workload had increased significantly or slightly since the start of the war. The reasons for it were not examined during this study. Notably, 79.8% (n = 75) of the respondents reported having family members or close acquaintances serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, underscoring the high level of personal involvement and continuous threat exposure within the sample, which is likely a source of vague apprehension and anxiety. These contextual variables illustrate the acute and multifaceted stressors that influence the participants' psycho-emotional state. In our research, they were named as war-related contextual characteristics. A detailed breakdown of the socio-demographic and war-related contextual variables, including the specific categories for age and seniority, is provided in Tables 1 and 2.

2. Psycho-emotional state and job satisfaction in the wartime context

The conducted data analysis revealed significant findings regarding the psycho-emotional state of the faculty members under continuous wartime conditions, which were presented here.

The direct assessment of perceived stress, using a 10-point scale, showed a high mean score of M = 7.48 (SD = 2.26). This also aligns with the self-reported impact of the war on daily life, which averaged M = 8.26 on a 10-point scale (SD = 1.76). It confirms a profound disruption to routine and pervasive psycho-

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for psycho-emotional variables in the wartime context (N=94)

Variable	Scale range	Mean, M	Standard deviation, SD	Min	Max
Perceived stress	1–10	7.48	2.26	1	10
War's impact on daily life	1–10	8.26	1.76	3	10
Emotional exhaustion	0–4	2.43	1.13	0	4
Negative affective reactions	0–4	0.94	1	0	3
Generalised distress index	0–4	1.96	1.22	0	4
Functional impairment	0–4	1.81	1.23	0	4
Job dissatisfaction	0–4	1.69	0.97	0	4

logical distress within the sample as one of the infinite destructive consequences that war can have on people. (Note that the selected scale range for the burnout items was 0–4, where 4 represents the highest frequency/level.)

Moreover, this finding is strongly corroborated by the assessment of other symptoms related to professional burnout. A substantial number of lecturers (52.1%, n = 49) reported noticing some common symptoms (fatigue, apathy, irritability), and a striking number of those respondents (73.5%, n = 36) directly linked their diminished condition to the military events in Ukraine. They stated that their fatigue, apathy, and irritability were solely dependent on war conditions. The emotional exhaustion (EE) score was markedly elevated, with a mean of 2.43 (SD = 1.13), indicating a high frequency of feeling emotionally drained. In contrast, negative affective reactions (NAR) (reflecting cynicism and irritability and were considered in this study as a combined index NAR) were found to be relatively low, averaging M = 0.94 (SD = 1.0), suggesting the preservation of professional empathy despite the personal difficulty and war threats.

Furthermore, the analysis of specific psycho-emotional symptoms showed high levels of non-specific distress. The composite index for generalized distress (anxiety, sleep disturbance, and hopelessness) averaged M = 1.96 (SD = 1.22), which forms a persistent emotional background for academic activity. The high standard deviation indicates significant variability in individual trauma processing, suggesting that while some faculty members maintain resilience, a substantial subgroup operates at the limit of their psychological endurance. This distress serves as the latent kick for emotional exhaustion, explaining why professional functioning becomes increasingly challenging to sustain without targeted psychological interventions.

A comparison of the results shows that the level of functional impairment (M = 1.81, SD = 1.23) is slightly higher than job dissatisfaction (M = 1.69, SD = 0.97). This suggests that while lecturers face significant cognitive challenges, such as difficulty concentrating, their professional identity remains largely intact. The emotional strain is evident, as 18.1% of the respondents reported frequent crying, which highlights the substantial effort required to continue working under such conditions. Ultimately, these findings indicate that academic work provides a sense of stability and normalcy. Although the war limits their capacity to perform specific tasks, it does not undermine their professional commitment, suggesting that maintaining work duties is a key practical way of coping with the ongoing war. A summary of the descriptive statistics for all measured psycho-emotional variables is presented in Table 3.

TO PROVIDE A MORE granular assessment of professional burnout within the faculties, the frequency distribution for emotional exhaustion (EE) and negative affective reactions (NAR) was categorized into three established levels (low, moderate, high), consistent with the Maslach Burnout Inventory scoring framework. The cutoff points for these levels were determined using the quartile method (Q_1 and Q_3) applied to the sample's scores. The analysis revealed a critical level of strain regarding emotional resources, where a significant majority of the sample reported high or moderate exhaustion.

"WHILE MOST LECTURERS CONTINUE TO FULFIL THEIR PROFESSIONAL DUTIES, THEY DO SO AT A HIGH PERSONAL COST, APPROACHING THE LIMITS OF THEIR EMOTIONAL ENDURANCE."

The distribution analysis of emotional exhaustion (EE) highlights the widespread nature of the crisis within the academic community. With 79.8% of participants falling into the moderate or high EE categories, it is clear that most faculty members operate within a "high-risk zone". While only 20.2% of respondents remain in the low-risk category, the prevalence of moderate exhaustion (59.6%) suggests a state of chronic strain. Therefore, it can be assumed that, while most lecturers continue to fulfil their professional duties, they do so at a high personal cost, approaching the limits of their emotional endurance.

In sharp contrast, the distribution of negative affective reactions (NAR) revealed significant preservation of professional empathy. The very low mean score of M = 0.94 (SD = 1.0) confirms that cynicism and detachment are now rare among faculty members. Specifically, approximately 75.5% (n = 71) of our questionnaire participants reported low or minimal levels of negative affective reactions (scores of 1 or less). In comparison, only 24.5%

Table 4. Spearman's rank correlation matrix of wartime stressors, burnout indicators, and professional functioning

Variables	Age	TE	RE	UD	RAF	SL	EE	NAR	FI	JDS
Age	1									
TE	0.780***	1								
RE	0.085	0.003	1							
UD	0.112	0.012	0.518***	1						
RAF	-0.212*	-0.094	-0.065	-0.010	1					
SL	-0.091	-0.006	0.132	0.123	0.403***	1				
EE	-0.195	-0.154	0.191	0.16	0.317**	0.586***	1			
NAR	-0.286**	-0.162	0.056	-0.118	0.180	0.263*	0.465***	1		
FI	-0.121	-0.145	0.214*	0.148	0.160	0.408***	0.737***	0.562***	1	
JDS	-0.025	0.055	-0.04	-0.075	0.207*	0.306**	0.294**	0.471***	0.451***	1

Note. Spearman's rank correlation matrix (ρ) between wartime stressors and psycho-emotional outcomes (N=94,df=92). Stressors: RAF (relatives/colleagues in the Armed Forces), RE (relocation after 24.02.2022), UD (university damages/closures), Age, TE (teaching experience). Outcomes: SL (perceived stress level), EE (emotional exhaustion), NAR (negative affective reactions), FI (functional impairment), JDS (job dissatisfaction). Significance levels: *p <.05; **p <.01; ***p <.001.

(n = 23) of them reported scores greater than 1, which indicates that it is a subgroup at risk for professional detachment. This divergence in burnout components highlights that the primary impact of the war is emotional exhaustion (EE), while negative affective reactions (NAR) show high resilience.

3. Correlation of wartime stressors and psycho-emotional outcomes

A correlation analysis was performed to empirically examine the hypothesized association between exposure to wartime contextual factors and the severity of psycho-emotional outcomes. Given the ordinal measurement level and the non-normal distribution of the data, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was applied.

To ensure rigorous interpretation of the result, the correlation strength was evaluated in accordance with widely recognized effect size criteria proposed by Cohen[20]: negligible (ρ<.10), weak (.10<ρ<.29), moderate (.30<ρ<.49), and strong (ρ>.50). The obtained correlation matrix, displaying the coefficients between all studied variables (N = 94), is presented in Table 4.

OUR CORRELATION MATRIX analysis revealed several statistically significant and theoretically essential relationships. Some details were considered. Firstly, it was proven that the key dependent variables, such as stress level (SL) and emotional exhaustion (EE), were the most sensitive to personal and existential threat factors. The strongest external correlation with stress was found for the war-related factor of "relatives or colleagues in the Armed Forces" (ρ=0.403, p <.001), indicating a moderate correlation. This factor also demonstrated a moderate relationship with emotional exhaustion (ρ=0.317, p <.01). Therefore, the results obtained confirm our initial hypothesis that the emotional burden and constant anxiety associated with having loved ones in high-risk zones are primary external determinants of psychosocial distress and personal imbalance. By contrast, objective structural losses, such as university damages/closures (UD), showed only a weak correlation with SL (ρ=0.123) and EE (ρ=0.161). This fact suggests that personal threat takes precedence over material loss in the lecturers' experience.

Furthermore, the analysis indicated that, although there is a weak link between relocation (RE) and stress level (ρ=0.132), there is a moderate correlation between RE and emotional exhaustion (ρ=0.191) and functional impairment (FI) (ρ=0.214,p <.05). It should be noted that more than 60% of respondents are forcibly displaced persons or have experienced displacement for a certain period of time. Therefore, despite forced displacement being a less acute stressor, it becomes a chronic source of exhaustion and a practical impediment to carrying out work duties.

In addition, significant internal links were identified between the psycho-emotional outcomes. Emotional exhaustion, for example, was found to have a strong correlation with stress levels (ρ=0.586, p<.001), as well as an exceptionally strong correlation with functional impairment (FI) (ρ=0.737, p<.001). The coefficient obtained was the highest observed in the correlation matrix (Table 4), suggesting a strong association between emotional exhaustion and certain cognitive difficulties, such as impaired concentration and reduced motivation.

THIS CONFIRMS OUR second hypothesis, demonstrating that internal depletion is the primary driver of functional decline. The analysis of the correlation matrix with regard to negative affective reactions (NAR) demonstrated weak and negligible correlations with most external factors, supporting the finding that NAR was present at low levels among the sample of respondents.

However, factor NAR revealed a moderate negative correlation with age (ρ=-0.286, p<.01). This suggests that younger lecturers may be more susceptible to cynicism and professional detachment than their older colleagues, reflecting differences in professional resilience that accrue across generations.

In summary, the correlational analysis provides robust evidence of a clear, sequential pathway of distress among academic staff. Moreover, it confirms that the psycho-emotional state is fundamentally a function of personalized acute threat exposure, specifically having relatives or colleagues in the Armed Forces (ρ=0.403), which rapidly translates into chronic internal depletion (from SL to EE, ρ=0.586), serving as the primary antecedent of functional impairment (from EE to FI, ρ=0.737). This pattern aligns with the stress-spillover and demand-resource models, in which personal life demands overwhelm professional coping resources. However, the findings also highlight the presence of protective factors, as demonstrated by the statistically significant negative correlation between age and NAR (ρ=-0.286, p<.01). This suggests that professional maturity acts as a buffer against cynicism. The obtained empirical data provide a solid basis for subsequent discussions on theoretical implications and the development of targeted crisis intervention strategies.

Discussion

Really, the main goal of our study was to empirically evaluate the psychosocial condition and professional burnout of Ukrainian academic staff during the full-scale war, with particular attention to the correlation between defined contextual stressors and the measured outcomes. So, the results obtained shown that, despite demonstrating substantial resilience in their professional identity, the academic staff is experiencing pronounced emotional strain. This suggests a critical dichotomy in the manifestation of burnout under prolonged crisis conditions, and it is a phenomenon that necessitates a contextually grounded theoretical interpretation.[21]

"A KEY FINDING OF OUR STUDY IS THE MARKED DIVERGENCE BETWEEN HIGH EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION (EE) AND THE SUSTAINED LOW MEAN LEVEL OF NEGATIVE AFFECTIVE REACTIONS (NAR)."

The descriptive findings, namely, the high prevalence of emotional exhaustion (EE) (79.8% in the moderate-to-high range) and elevated self-reported perceived stress level (ρ=0.586,p < .001), are consistent with established literature on trauma-exposed professionals in high-demand, low-resource environments. This is strongly supported by recent evidence showing significantly increased burnout among Ukrainian educators under prolonged conflict conditions.[22]

Similarly, studies of social field and IT professionals exposed to military stressors or crisis-driven workloads report elevated levels of emotional exhaustion and perceived stress levels in comparable environments.[23] Critically, this pattern is consistent with broader psychosocial models of burnout among aid workers and crisis professionals,[24] which emphasize the primary role of workplace stressors and emotional coping strategies. This perspective is further supported by the fundamental principles of the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory,[25] which posits that stress stems directly from the actual or anticipated loss of valued resources.

Furthermore, the conducted correlational analysis established a clear etiological mechanism for the observed distress, showing that the most potent external drivers of both perceived stress (ρ=0.403, p < .001) and emotional exhaustion (ρ=0.317, p= .002) were rooted in structural disruption but in the immediate personal connection to the war effort, namely having relatives or colleagues in the Armed Forces (RAF). This finding aligns with existing models that describe the potential impact of conflict-related stressors on professional well-being.[26] These models theorize that the primary impact on functional capacity follows an indirect pathway through chronic, war-related daily stressors, such as worry over loved ones (like relatives or colleagues in the Armed Forces).

For the educational sector, this means that the core threat to teaching quality originates not primarily from institutional challenges (e.g., damaged infrastructure, UD), but from the unmitigated, individual emotional toll of the war. The negative correlation between institutional damage (UD) and emotional strain that we observe confirms this, indicating that traumatic stress from the personal sphere prevails over the organizational demands of the university. Similar observations regarding the predominance of psychosocial stressors over organizational challenges have been documented in studies of other critical sectors.[27]

A key finding of our study is the marked divergence between high emotional exhaustion (EE) and the sustained low mean level of negative affective reactions (NAR). This result suggests a possible deviation from the traditionally assumed linear progression of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) model,[28] (which posits that high EE inevitably precedes depersonalization (cynicism). This fact is best interpreted through the lens of collective professional identity and purpose. Namely, in the context of the war, the sustained low level of NAR (M = 0.94) suggests that the academic community maintains a state of active moral engagement. The sustained professional empathy and connection, despite overwhelming fatigue, functions as a powerful collective coping strategy rooted in a sense of civic obligation to the educational mission.[29]

This perceived purpose acts as a potent, non-material job resource within the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, actively mitigating the development of cynicism even as emotional reserves are depleted. Moreover, this framework, which links job resources to well-being and engagement, is robustly supported by systematic literature reviews[30] and research demonstrating the protective role of resilience against burnout among univer-

sity faculty[31]. The established link between the JD-R framework and teacher resilience[32] also confirms that this adaptive capacity serves as a crucial buffer against detachment.

The analysis of functional outcomes in the present study suggests that emotional strain may lead to occupational decline. Specifically, we observed a robust positive strong correlation between EE and functional impairment (FI) (ρ=0.737***), suggesting that depletion of emotional resources may serve as a proximal antecedent of functional impairment. This pattern is consistent with the resource-depletion processes described in the Job Demands-Resources (JDR) model, whereby high job demands combined with limited emotional resources can undermine performance. Although no prior study has directly quantified this specific relationship among Ukrainian academic staff, previous research has documented substantial increases in burnout dimensions and associated functional challenges during the wartime context[33].

Furthermore, the statistically significant negative correlation between NAR and Age ρ=-0.286, p=.005) suggests that greater age may confer a protective effect against cynicism. While this correlation is based on our empirical data, general systematic reviews indicate that sociodemographic factors, including age, are important determinants of burnout prevalence.[34] This is consistent with the theoretical framework of resource accumulation,[35] whereby older, established faculty may possess more developed coping strategies, greater professional resilience, and a clearer sense of professional identity, potentially buffering them from questioning the value of their work relative to younger colleagues experiencing heightened career and existential uncertainty.[36]

Overall, these findings provide robust empirical evidence concerning the burnout dynamics among Ukrainian academic staff in the context of the ongoing war. All hypotheses concerning the leading role of personal stressors (H1), the direct link between emotional exhaustion and functional decline (H2) were confirmed. These results underscore the critical influence of individual trauma, highlighting the need for targeted, resource-based support for the academic community.

Conclusion

The empirical findings of this study offer a critical snapshot of the psychosocial condition of Ukrainian academic staff, highlighting the dichotomy between profound emotional strain and resilient professional identity during the full-scale war. The primary conclusion is that emotional exhaustion (EE) is highly prevalent (79.8%), driven predominantly by the personal trauma load (relatives/colleagues in the Armed Forces – RAF), which is consistent with the stress-spillover hypothesis and models of distress in conflict-affected populations.

Crucially, the negative affective reactions (NAR) dimension remains remarkably low, suggesting that a strong sense of moral engagement and civic obligation acts as a powerful non-material Job Resource within the academic community, mitigating the development of cynicism despite high EE. Furthermore, the analysis confirmed that the depletion of emotional resources (EE) translates directly into functional impairment (FI), while greater age offers a protective factor against cynicism.

This research offers a significant theoretical contribution by providing quantitative empirical support for the non-linear progression of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) model in high-stakes, purpose-driven environments. It demonstrates that collective identity and moral purpose can serve as crucial moderating variables, challenging the assumption of an automatic transition from exhaustion to professional detachment (cynicism).

Consequently, the practical implications of these findings are direct and vital for institutional policy. Given that the main stressor is the personal toll of the war (RAF), universities must shift focus from structural repairs to providing accessible, confidential, and sustained psycho-emotional support programs tailored to coping with non-work-related trauma. Simultaneously, institutional leadership should actively recognise, value, and promote the academic mission not merely as a job requirement, but as a crucial contribution to national resilience and post-war recovery; this reinforcement of moral purpose should be integrated into institutional communications as a resource (in line with the Job Demands-Resources model). Finally, intervention programs should be specifically targeted: while general support is needed for all staff experiencing EE, specialised training in coping mechanisms and professional identity confirmation may be particularly beneficial for younger faculty members (who have demonstrated higher vulnerability to NAR) to help them accrue professional resilience more quickly.

“THESE RESULTS UNDERSCORE THE CRITICAL INFLUENCE OF INDIVIDUAL TRAUMA, HIGHLIGHTING THE NEED FOR TARGETED, RESOURCE-BASED SUPPORT FOR THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY.”

In conclusion, addressing the “exhaustion-impairment” link while fostering the “mission-empathy” buffer is essential for preserving the human capital of Ukrainian higher education during and after the conflict.

Limitations

The interpretation of this study’s findings should be approached with an awareness of several methodological limitations arising from the unique circumstances of data collection. First, the non-probability, convenience sampling approach was dictated by the security risks inherent to research under martial law, which fundamentally restricts the generalizability of the results beyond the specific cohort of lecturers from the surveyed regions. Second, the reliance on self-reported data renders the results susceptible to biases inherent in survey research, such as social

desirability bias and recall bias, particularly when participants retrospectively evaluate their exposure to stress.

Due to the cross-sectional design of the study, which captured data at a single temporal point (May-July 2025), no causal inferences can be drawn. This design also limits the ability to assess the long-term dynamics of change in psycho-emotional states over the extended conflict period. Finally, the pervasive emotional context of active conflict during the data collection period must be acknowledged as a factor that may have influenced both the stability and patterns of participants' psycho-emotional short-term self-assessments.

In light of these reasons, future longitudinal studies, ideally employing probability sampling where circumstances permit, would be invaluable in verifying and extending the insights presented here. Such research could further explore the sustainability of professional resilience and the long-term impact of chronic wartime stress on the academic sector.

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University professors and lecturers delivering physics lessons to schoolchildren at the STEM Center in Kharkiv. PHOTO: AUTHOR

PERFORMING EDUCATION AGAINST ALL ODDS

Experiences from H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University

There are many difficulties and challenges for higher education in war zones. Rector Yurii Boichuk and Vice-Rector Volodymyr Borysov, at H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University in Kharkiv, have personal experience of providing education against all odds. They describe how they have been organizing the educational programs at their university; Yurii Boichuk presents the work with strengthening the education for Children with Special Needs (SEN) and Volodymyr Borysov describes the importance of providing both online and offline education in times of war.

The educational and scientific laboratory of special and inclusive education

In 2024, the university staged a successful international cooperation with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) with the project "Strengthening inclusive education for children with special educational needs, in particular children with disabilities, in the Kharkiv region"(UKR/PCA2024395/PD2024482). It was aimed at creating a safe, barrier-free, and comfortable educational environment for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in the Kharkiv frontline region, in order to support children in their development and socialization. Because of the war, in recent years there has been a tendency toward an increase in the number of children with special educational needs in Ukraine. This is due to the consequences of the war, the impact of environmental and social factors on health, and increased effectiveness in diagnosing psychophysical disorders.

The listed factors have caused physical and psychological trauma to a significant number of children, who consequently require corrective and developmental assistance. In the context of such changes, it is important not only to expand opportunities for inclusive education, but also to ensure that specialists are trained who are capable of working effectively with children with SEN using modern methods and technologies. High-quality training of future specialists in the field of special and inclusive education is impossible without practical mastery of modern technologies for corrective and developmental assistance.

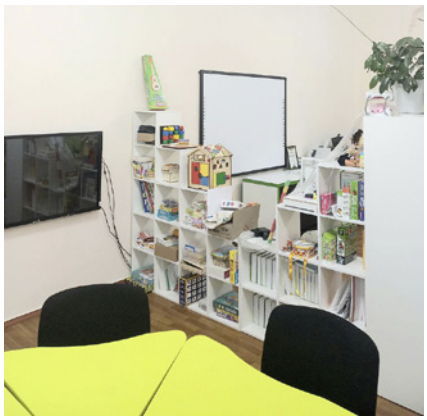
FOR THIS PURPOSE, the Educational and Scientific Laboratory of Special and Inclusive Education was created as a structural unit within the Department of Special Pedagogy at H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University's Faculty of Natural, Special and Health Education. UNICEF helped to equip the laboratory. Its main tasks are:

1. Developing practical skills for university students majoring in 016 "Special Education" when providing corrective and developmental assistance to children with special educational needs.
2. Mastering modern technologies that support psychological and pedagogical activities and interaction between students.
3. Obtaining experimental material by students in the specialism "Special Education" for use in writing bachelor's and master's qualification works and conducting research.
4. Carrying out consultative and educational activities for parents of children with SEN.
5. Providing methodological assistance to educational institutions offering inclusive education, and to special educational institutions in the Kharkiv region, in order to offer a wide range of services to children and their families.
6. Developing educational content for teachers who provide corrective and developmental services to children with special educational needs.
7. Holding seminars, courses, and round tables with students, teachers, and lecturers in order to develop the inclusive competence of inclusive education specialists.
8. Developing methodological recommendations for organizing work with children with special educational needs in pre-school and general secondary (special) educational institutions.

THE MAIN FUNCTIONS of the laboratory are:

1. Studying, summarizing, and disseminating national and international experiences in the field of providing educational and corrective developmental services to children with special educational needs; developing the regulatory and legal framework for innovative pedagogical activities; and familiarizing education workers in the Kharkiv region with this framework.
2. Providing scientific, methodological, and organizational support for experimental pedagogical research in pre-school and general educational institutions in the Kharkiv region.
3. Exercising general control over the progress of experimental pedagogical research at the regional level in Kharkiv.
4. Providing corrective and developmental services and classes to children with special educational needs.
5. Providing consultations to parents of children with special educational needs on issues of development, education, and upbringing in the family environment.
6. Offering scientific and methodological support for advanced training courses for students, teachers, and lecturers at pre-school and general educational institutions in the Kharkiv region that deliver educational, corrective, and developmental services to children with special educational needs.
7. Organizing, coordinating, and conducting scientific and practical conferences, seminars, round tables, etc. on the problem, preparation, and publication of scientific, methodological, and informational publications.
8. Cooperation with international organizations, as well as with the National Academy of Pedagogical Sciences of

"BECAUSE OF THE WAR, IN RECENT YEARS THERE HAS BEEN A TENDENCY TOWARD AN INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN UKRAINE."

Laboratory equipment for children with special educational needs. PHOTO: AUTHOR




Laboratory equipment for parents, teachers, and lecturers who care for and work with children with special educational needs. PHOTO: AUTHOR

Ukraine, different national research institutes, institutions, and higher educational institutions, the Kharkiv Academy of Continuing Education, and the All-Ukrainian Association of Correctional Teachers.

THE LABORATORY was equipped with special tools (see above) for the correction of the psychophysical development of children with special educational needs within the framework of the implementation of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) project "Strengthening inclusive education for children with special educational needs, in particular children with disabilities, in the Kharkiv region" (UKR/PCA2024395/PD2024482).

Result of the laboratory work

During 2024–2025, information about 5,522 children with SEN was collected and analyzed, including for the age groups 0–5, 6–18, and 18+. This information was analyzed in the following areas: location, type of education, categories of difficulty, access to services, service needs, and parents' willingness to participate in programs.

Seven professional development programs were developed by the university for teachers, including teachers of the deaf, teachers of the blind, speech therapists, and special education teachers (remedial psychologists, teachers of the mentally disabled, psychologists, physical education teachers specializing in rehabilitation, etc.). 140 teachers were trained in frontline communities in Kharkiv, and 586 specialists took part in training sessions at the laboratory (see above).

The university developed master's programs to train specialists to work with children with these needs. In 2024–2025, 140 master's applicants enrolled in the specializations 016 Special Education and 053 Psychology. The educational programs "Education of the visually impaired. Education for the deaf and hard of hearing" and "Rehabilitation Psychology" were developed. Seven programs were developed for working with children with various categories of educational difficulties. 12,945 classes were aonducted for children with SEN, with 320 children receiving services thanks to the efforts of 123 specialists.

DURING 2024—2025, 496 educational institutions (228 pre-school educational institutions and 268 general secondary educational institutions) were surveyed. Google questionnaires were used, and administrative resources were consulted. An analytical report with detailed statistics and conclusions was prepared by the laboratory. Services using the laboratory's equipment were provided to 1,200 children. Different equipment has been transferred to the educational institutions in 15 Kharkiv communities, and to 5 education departments in the Kharkiv region.

Different programs were provided for parents. Six educational and awareness programs were developed that took into account different types of developmental disorders in children (hearing, vision, speech, intellect, etc.). Some courses were also organized for parents, with 96 online classes (October-November 2024), 84 online meetings (December 2024–June 2025), and 22 offline meetings held with parents in Kharkiv communities. 1,003 parents were involved in meetings. With this, parents gained knowledge of how to better support their children's learning and development at home.

The laboratory work was thus implemented comprehensively, covering all key target groups – children with SEN, teachers, parents, and educational institutions. Significant improvements were achieved in understanding the situation at both the city and regional levels in Kharkiv, ensuring access to quality services, staff training, and specialist equipment for inclusive educational institutions.

Yurii Boichuk is Rector at H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Kharkiv, Ukraine.

PHOTO: AUTHOR



Schoolchildren taking lessons in biology, physics, and chemistry. Spring 2025, a series of online classes designed to help students prepare for university entrance exams was delivered at the Skovoroda Hub in the shelter of the main building of H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University.





University lecturers holding classes in shelters and basements at Kharkiv lyceums #162 and #153.

The Skovoroda Hub and the STEM Center

Offering education both online and offline

The Skovoroda Hub

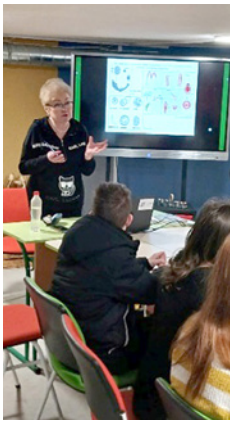
The Skovoroda Hub is a free educational environment created for all learners at H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, in Kharkiv, Ukraine. The Skovoroda Hub began operation on February 2, 2023. The idea for its creation arose during the Russian-Ukrainian war because of the need for online education. From the very beginning, the hub has been an environment that combines the work of our lecturers, professors, and speakers with modern digital technologies. The hub uses Google platforms to develop its website; Telegram, WhatsApp, and YouTube accounts to disseminate information; and Zoom and Google Meet to hold online classes.[1] Initially, only schoolchildren were invited to the hub. The hub began by working exclusively online because of the security situation in Kharkiv. However, "STEM education for all" later began working offline with schoolchildren in the university's bomb shelter, providing offline classes held under the title "STEM education. Physics, chemistry and biology offline".[2]

The hub now operates in several areas, providing schoolchildren from local communities in the Kharkiv region with the opportunity to acquire new knowledge and skills. University specialists conduct methodological and educational seminars, workshops, lectures, and training sessions on a variety of topical issues. All activities are reflected on the hub's website, where information is constantly updated and disseminated through social networks.[3]

IN 2025 THE SKOVORODA Hub website[4] demonstrated stable activity and audience interest, collecting 42,265 views, 5,445 hours of viewing time, 431 new subscribers, and 624,984 impressions with a CTR of 3.7%. This indicates that the content is well indexed and actively consumed through searches, recommendations, and external sources. The most noticeable surge in activity occurred during the exam period in June.The channel is characterized by pronounced seasonality, as is typical of educational content, and the high retention and click-through rates of individual videos highlight the quality of the topics and presentation. Successful videos can serve as a benchmark for creating further content.

A Telegram channel run by the Skovoroda Hub is used to promote the hub's events, with more than 1,000 pupils, students, and teachers from Ukraine, the United Kingdom, Germany, Poland, and France participating.[5] Currently, the subscriber base consists of pupils and students at all levels of higher education; of university staff, school teachers, and employees at H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University; and of ordinary citizens from local communities.[6] The hub was expanded in order to provide an environment in which participants in the educational process – that is, school teachers and university lecturers – have the opportunity to improve their digital skills. University staff and schoolteachers have the possibility to improve their skills in applying digital technologies in the educational process, from working with electronic learning materials to introducing interactive services and digital formats for presenting information. This approach ensured the development of a common digital environment where all participants, regardless of their role, are able to master new tools, increase the effectiveness of their interactions, work with information at a qualitatively new level, and confidently use digital technologies in their daily and professional activities.

In the first half of 2025, a series of meetings titled "Digital Education for





University lecturers holding offline classes at two Kharkiv lyceums.



The Skovoroda Hub demonstrates experiments in physics and chemistry for students at the "Metroschool".

All – From Digital Literacy to Digital Mastery" was held for schoolteachers and university staff. An intensive course was also organized in 2025. The content of the classes was aligned with the school computer science curriculum, and the flexible teaching methodology considered the age characteristics of the participants and was adapted to their needs. The classes were held at the Skovoroda Hub from April to May 2025 in an offline format. Also, as part of the hub's work, in November 2025, lecturers from the Faculty of Foreign Philology held a series of webinars on "Methods of teaching English in mixed-level groups of students". Teachers, lecturers, and students from various educational institutions in Ukraine joined the webinars online, with up to 30 participants attending each event. The webinars covered the advantages and disadvantages of teaching foreign languages in multi-level groups of students; strategies for organizing English language teaching; issues relating to the differentiation of content, process, and learning outcomes; and techniques for adapting teaching materials to the needs of students.

THE MOST POPULAR activity in the hub is preparation for exams. The exams are online tests required for university entrance in Ukraine. The National Multi-Subject Test is used for bachelor's degrees, while the Unified Entrance Examination test is mandatory for all master's degrees. It includes a foreign language test and a general academic competence test (consisting of verbal and logical blocks of professional knowledge in the respective specialism, e.g. law, economics, management). The Unified Entrance Test is a test of research methodology skills and is required for entrance to PhD studies.

During 2025, more than 300 participants from Kharkiv city and the Kharkiv regions (such as Lozovsky, Zolochivsky, Izyumsky), Kryvyi Rih city in the Dnipropetrovsk region, Germany, the Netherlands, Ireland, and other countries joined the preparatory classes in mathematics, Ukrainian, and English for the Unified Entrance Test. More than 100 participants from different cities throughout Ukraine (including Kharkiv, Kyiv, Vinnytsia, and Lviv) joined the preparatory classes for the National Multi-Subject Test covering the Ukrainian language, mathematics, the history of Ukraine, the English language, biology, physics, and chemistry, as well as preparation for writing a motivational letter for applying to university.

"THE MOST POPULAR ACTIVITY IN THE HUB IS PREPARATION FOR EXAMS."

The STEM Center

The term "STEM education" is an abbreviation of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Throughout 2025, the STEM Center operated at the Skovoroda Hub at H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University.[7] The STEM Center provided theoretical and practical training for university students in the implementation of STEM education in their professional teaching activities; conducted training courses for scientific, teaching, and pedagogical staff; conducted classes for schoolchildren; and organized and conducted events to promote STEM education (developing and disseminating online content, holding conferences, etc.), as well as developing and testing scientific and methodological support for the implementation of STEM education.

IN ORDER TO PROVIDE theoretical and practical training for university students in the implementation of STEM education in their professional teaching activities, the content of educational programs was improved for training pre-service teachers of mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, and computer science, for both bachelor's and master's students.[8]

In 2025, the Institute of Postgraduate Education at H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University organized training courses at the STEM Center for supporting teaching staff in the implementation of STEM education. This consisted

of three modules: general training, psychological and pedagogical training, and professional training.[9] A specialized advanced training course for secondary school Computer Science teachers on the topic of STEM technologies in education has also been developed and implemented.[10] The special course program (30 or 18 hours) covered the practical issues of implementing STEM education in secondary schools such as implementing the didactic principles of the "New Ukrainian School" reform or how to employing the latest tools for student activities.

In 2025, under the coordination of the STEM Center at the Skovoroda Hub for blended education,[11] online and offline classes in STEM education were held for schoolchildren.

Online and offline classes

After six years of online learning – two years of pandemic and four years of the Russian-Ukrainian war – schoolchildren need live interaction, socialization, and communication. Offline classes for schoolchildren in grades 7–11 were prepared and conducted by the Department of Physics and Chemistry in the first semester of 2025.

Offline classes were also held with schoolchildren in grades 7–11 at the departments of the Faculty of Natural, Special and Health Education in the first semester in 2025.

In addition, online classes were conducted with schoolchildren in grades 7–11 by our professors and lecturers at the Department of Physics and Chemistry in 2025.

As part of its cooperation with schools in Kharkiv, the STEM Center at H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University joined the "Weekend University" project, an educational marathon for schoolchildren in Kharkiv and the Kharkiv region organized by local universities. In February 2025, university professors and lecturers provided classes to schoolchildren from various schools in Kharkiv, held not at the university but at the Metroschool (situated in Kharkiv's underground Metro system) and at some of the city's underground schools.[12] For example, at an underground school in the Novobavarsky district of Kharkiv, a class on 'Robots and Digital Learning' was held for 10th and 11th grade students in which university lecturers presented the possibilities of working with modern technologies in robotics.[13]

In March 2025, the Kharkiv Palace of Children's and Youth Creativity hosted a math tournament titled "Pyramid" in a bomb shelter. It aimed at integrating a STEM-oriented approach to education with the requirements of school reforms. The event was attended by seventh-grade students from 23 lyceums in Kharkiv and was an important event in mathematics, especially in the context of a total of four years of online learning in Kharkiv and the region due to the full-scale Russian invasion.[14]

THE UNIVERSITY continues to develop online and partly offline education, digital learning, and STEM initiatives, despite the challenges of war. It highlights real achievements, support for children, teacher training, and the creation of innovative learning spaces. It shows resilience, educational transformation, and community engagement in crisis conditions. The combination of statistical evidence, practical activities, and human-centered support makes education both informative and inspiring, demonstrating how education can remain a powerful force for stability, recovery, and future development.

Volodymyr Borysov is Vice-Rector at H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Kharkiv, Ukraine.

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1 The website is https://sites.google.com/hnpu.edu.ua/khnpu-eduhub; the Telegram channel is https://t.me/eduhubKhnpu; and the YouTube channel is https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCYI0yA8sHKYb81c3-ECJNKQ.

2 The hub is governed by the Regulations on the Educational Hub.

3 The Skovoroda Hub website, created by the Center for Digitalization of Education at H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University using the Google Sites platform, is the main information resource providing comprehensive and up-to-date information about the hub's activities. To enable asynchronous operations, all videos of meetings, seminars, lectures, and training sessions are posted on the Skovoroda Hub YouTube channel in separate thematic blocks. See https://sites.google.com/hnpu.edu.ua/khnpu-eduhub

4 Ibid.

5 This was achieved thanks to the active work of the public relations department, which effectively advertised and promoted the hub on social networks.

6 Information on the Skovoroda Hub is distributed via the WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram accounts of H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, in addition to distributing letters to local communities. This comprehensive approach allows information to be effectively communicated to different target groups and ensures maximum coverage.

7 The center was based at the Skovoroda Hub for blended learning, the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics, and the Faculty of Natural Sciences, Special and Health Education, in accordance with the Regulations on the STEM Center. See: http://hnpu.edu.ua/sites/default/files/files/Normat_dokum/Pol/Pol_STEM_tsentr.pdf.

8 The topics of master's students' research were also expanded to include the implementation of STEM education in secondary schools. During the center's operation, thematic academic disciplines and blocks of elective academic disciplines were developed and implemented for bachelor's and master's students. See http://smc.hnpu.edu.ua/studentu/dytsypliny-za-vyborom/10-studentu/19-bloky-vilnogo-vyboru-bakalavry.

9 A course on STEM Technologies in the Educational Process, designed to correspond to 5 ECTS credits (150 hours, duration of study 1 month), was offered. See https://drive.google.com/file/d/1LNMBO3GwCBKxPrjkzbc1cxP-lfcVbU0m/view.

10 See https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_5wa23uJSDxMeAso8ozJYELn-fu8FibC/view.

11 See https://sites.google.com/hnpu.edu.ua/khnpu-eduhub/%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BA%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8?authuser=0.

12 See also: Ilona Kostikova, Volodymyr Borysov, Tamila Shcheblykina, Maryna Vasylieva, and Olha Pochuieva, "Resilience of school infrastructure: Children's right to education in wartime Ukraine", *Baltic Worlds*, vol. 19, no. 1, 78–87. Available at: https://balticworlds.com/resilience-of-school-infrastructure/.

13 High school students explored the possibilities of programmable electronic circuits, working with the "Znatok" constructor and the Arduino Nano microchip, and used Makey Makey to turn ordinary objects into interactive sensors. See: https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1XjAM4Nd4V/.

14 See https://www.facebook.com/share/p/16F6Dp1YhW/.



The Daškevica sisters arrived in the United Kingdom under the auspices of the Baltic Cygnets scheme in order to work in a hospital. Left: Archival photo, 1947. Right: Zigrīda Daškevica (1927–2025) in her apartment in London. She is interviewed several times between 1990 and 2011.

PHOTO: LATVIAN NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVE

Diasporic heritage and remigration

IDENTITY, MEMORY, AND RETURN AMONG SECOND-GENERATION LATVIAN EXILES

by **Maija Krūmiņa** and **Ginta Elksne**

abstract

This article examines the remigration of second-generation Latvian exiles who relocated from the United Kingdom to Latvia in the 1990s after the restoration of independence. Drawing on life-story interviews, the study approaches return not as a purely demographic or economic phenomenon, but as a biographical and identity-shaping process. It analyzes how Latvian identity maintained within exile families, participation in diaspora youth organizations, political socialization, and accumulated professional capital shaped both the decision to return and subsequent settlement trajectories. The findings suggest that remigration emerged through a multidimensional constellation of factors: structural opportunities in post-socialist Latvia, language competence and Western-acquired skills, family considerations, and a consciously articulated wish to "be Latvian in Latvia." At the same time, return involved negotiating tensions between an ideologically constructed homeland and post-Soviet realities. The study highlights remigration as the transformation of inherited belonging into lived social participation.

KEYWORDS: Exile Latvians; return migration; identity and belonging; post-Soviet Latvia; intergenerational memory.

Latvian exile communities that formed after the Second World War were shaped by the experience of forced migration and a powerful nostalgia for the lost homeland. This sense of loss became a central element of collective identity in exile. Over several decades, attachment to Latvia was actively maintained and reproduced, even as exiles adapted to new social and cultural environments in their host countries and passed on these identity frameworks to the next generations.

The restoration of Latvian independence in 1991 marked a decisive turning point, leading to what can be described as a post-exile period. Yet only a small proportion of exiles and their descendants chose to return permanently to Latvia.[1] During fifty years of separation, both the exile communities and Latvian society had undergone profound changes. The post-exile reality was therefore marked by tensions between long-sustained hopes and memories, contemporary social realities, and visions of a future that no longer aligned with earlier expectations – a dynamic also observed in broader post-exile contexts.[2]

In the Baltic states, however, this encounter unfolded amid the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reconstruction of independent statehood. Remigrants entered societies undergoing rapid political, economic, and institutional change, which shaped both decisions to relocate and subsequent experiences of settlement.

THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES the remigration experiences of second-generation Latvian exiles, asking how forms of Latvian identity shaped within the family and exile institutions, participation in youth organizations, and accumulated professional capital influenced both the decision to return and the process of resettlement in Latvia. Drawing on perspectives from post-exile studies and narrative identity,[3] the article approaches remigration as a biographical process through which inherited memories, exile experiences, and contemporary life in Latvia are integrated into meaningful narratives of belonging. The empirical analysis is based on six life-story interviews with second-generation Latvian exiles who relocated from the United Kingdom to Latvia during the 1990s; all interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms.

The article makes an empirically grounded contribution to research on second-generation ethnic return by demonstrating how diasporic heritage, transmitted through family memory, language, cultural practices, and institutional participation, acquired practical significance when it converged with professional opportunities, family circumstances, and the structural transformations of post-Soviet Latvia. Rather than privileging identity or economic opportunity as a single cause, the analysis examines how these dimensions intersected within individual biographies and how inherited belonging was subsequently renegotiated through everyday life in Latvia.

The first section outlines the historical and theoretical context of Latvian exile and second-generation return. After presenting the data and methodology, the empirical sections examine family-based identity formation, participation in diaspora youth organizations, decisions to remigrate, and experiences of settlement. The conclusion considers how inherited belonging became translated into migration decisions and lived social participation.

Latvian refugees and the formation of the exile community

The Latvian exile community emerged in the final phase of the Second World War, when approximately 200,000 Latvians fled westward in 1944–1945 as the Red Army reoccupied Latvia. While some departures followed German evacuation plans, many families fled independently under chaotic and rapidly changing wartime conditions. The decision to leave was shaped by direct experience of the first Soviet occupation (1940–1941), marked by repression and mass deportations, as well as by fear of renewed Soviet rule.[4]

By the end of the war, approximately 178,000 Latvians were located in the Allied occupation zones in Germany, with smaller groups in Sweden and elsewhere in Europe.[5] In displaced persons camps, refugees established schools, churches, choirs, publishing initiatives, and political organizations. These institutions supported material survival and provided a setting in which displacement could be collectively interpreted. As Inta Gāle-Carpenter has argued, exile became an organizing principle that restored purpose to lives disrupted by war and forced migration.[6] Refugees began to describe themselves as *trimdinieki* – exiles committed to preserving Latvian culture abroad, opposing Soviet rule symbolically and politically, and working toward the restoration of an independent state. Shared memories of pre-war Latvia, the experience of flight, and the loss of homeland formed what can be understood as a community of memory.[7]

"BY THE END OF THE WAR, APPROXIMATELY 178,000 LATVIANS WERE LOCATED IN THE ALLIED OCCUPATION ZONES IN GERMANY, WITH SMALLER GROUPS IN SWEDEN AND ELSEWHERE IN EUROPE."

BETWEEN 1947 AND the early 1950s, most Latvian refugees resettled in the United States, Canada, Australia, Great Britain, and other Western countries.[8] Churches, Saturday schools, youth organizations, cultural associations, publications, and political advocacy groups maintained Latvian language and cultural practices while sustaining the restoration of independence and eventual return as a shared political horizon. Even as everyday life became increasingly rooted in host societies, return remained an important moral and symbolic reference point.

The intention to return nevertheless weakened over time.



Approximately 200,000 Latvians fled westward in 1944–1945 as the Red Army reoccupied Latvia.

ILLUSTRATION: RAGNI SVENSSON

Drawing on surveys conducted among Latvian exiles in the United States between 1957 and 1987, Pēteris Norvilis found that an aspiration that had been nearly universal immediately after flight gradually declined: fewer than three quarters of respondents expressed a clear intention to return in 1957, and approximately half did so by 1979.[9]

The restoration of Latvian independence in 1991 marked the formal end of exile and created, for the first time in five decades, a real political possibility of return. At the macro level, the collapse of the Soviet Union removed the structural barriers that had long made remigration impossible. Yet the long-anticipated return did not unfold on a mass scale. Decades of separation had reshaped both Latvian society and diaspora communities abroad, and the idea of return now had to be negotiated within concrete life circumstances. Research has shown that practical considerations – family ties, established professional careers, and social integration in host countries – combined with perceived cultural differences and uncertainties about belonging, significantly limited the scope of return migration.[10] Structural change, in other words, made return possible but did not make it inevitable.

THE LATVIAN CASE formed part of a broader transformation of European migration following the end of the Cold War. Kulu and Tammaru identify ethnic return migration as a significant feature of post-socialist Europe, encompassing both political refugees and their descendants returning from Western countries and co-ethnic populations relocating from other parts of the former Soviet sphere.[11] Their analysis of Estonia, which is particularly relevant to Latvia, shows that return after the restoration of independence was historically differentiated and selective rather than a uniform movement toward an ancestral homeland.

Studies of ethnic return migration also identify tensions arising from the presumed cultural proximity of co-ethnic migrants. Although returnees may possess facilitated access to citizenship and be expected to integrate naturally, identities and social practices formed abroad can produce simultaneous experiences of home and foreignness.[12] This tension is especially pronounced for the second generation. Conventional definitions of return migration imply movement back to a previously inhabited place, whereas individuals born abroad "return" to a homeland known primarily through family narratives, inherited memories, cultural practices, political commitments, and occasional visits.

In his study of Latvian and Estonian exile descendants, Delaney Michael Skerrett argues that settlement in the ancestral homeland is often shaped by emotionally charged memories of loss, occupation, and injustice transmitted across generations.[13] Such narratives can create a sense of belonging and a moral relationship to a place not known through previous residence. The central question is therefore not simply why second-generation exiles returned, but how Latvia became imaginable as a place to which they could meaningfully return.

Górny and Osipovič address a similar question in their study of second-generation British Poles. Their respondents were generally well integrated into British society but retained Polish language practices, cultural attachments, and identification with Poland.[14] To interpret this relationship, it is useful to distinguish between a "private" homeland grounded in lived attachment to the place of one's upbringing and an "ideological" homeland sustained through identification with an ancestral nation.[15] For

second-generation exiles, Latvia could not function as a private homeland in the same sense as their country of birth. Instead, attachment was constructed through family memory, language, citizenship, cultural and religious life, diaspora organizations, and engagement with political developments in Latvia. Their relocation may consequently be understood as remigration only in an expanded sense that distinguishes inherited belonging from previous residence.[16]

RECENT WORK on diasporic return further complicates any straightforward equation between return and geographical movement. Alatas and Slama argue that diasporic return should not be reduced to travel or permanent resettlement in an ancestral homeland. They instead draw attention to processes of re-embedding and re-encountering through which individuals enter, recover, or renegotiate diasporic frameworks, relationships, and identities.[17] Their intervention is useful here not because the Latvian cases lack physical relocation, but because it shifts analytical attention from movement itself to the social and identity-related processes through which return becomes meaningful. Physical remigration may thus represent one particularly consequential moment within a longer process of diasporic identification rather than its beginning or inevitable culmination.

This perspective also helps distinguish emotional attachment from an intention to relocate. As Alatas and Slama note, drawing on *Appadurai* (1996), emotional ties to an ancestral homeland can make return, whether physical or otherwise, morally significant without necessarily generating a desire for permanent return.[18] The Latvian case therefore requires attention to the additional biographical, institutional, and structural conditions through which inherited attachment was converted into an actual migration project.

"DECADES OF SOVIET RULE, HOWEVER, HAD PRODUCED SUBSTANTIAL CULTURAL, LINGUISTIC, AND EXPERIENTIAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DIASPORA AND LOCAL SOCIETY."

Seen in this light, the existing scholarship offers complementary but not identical interpretations. Studies of ethnic return migration emphasize the political and structural conditions that enable co-ethnic relocation; work on inherited memory and ideological homelands explains how descendants can develop meaningful attachments to places in which they were not born; and recent debates on diasporic return caution against treating physical movement as the sole or self-evident expression of belonging. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that second-generation remigration cannot be explained either by structural opportunities or by inherited identity alone. Rather, return emerges through the intersection of political change, diaspora socialization, family memory, and individual life trajectories.

VIEWED FROM THIS perspective, second-generation exiles who relocated to Latvia in the 1990s occupied an inherently ambivalent position. They possessed important forms of privilege, including citizenship by descent,[19] Latvian language competence, ethnic belonging, diaspora networks, and often Western-acquired professional capital. At the same time, they faced expectations of "natural" integration based on presumed cultural proximity. Decades of Soviet rule, however, had produced substantial cultural, linguistic, and experiential differences between diaspora and local society. As Brenick and Silbereisen suggest, the ethnic homeland, while symbolically central, may in practice feel unfamiliar, requiring migrants to navigate between inherited identity, societal expectations, and lived realities that diverge from imagined belonging.[20]

The analytical issue is therefore not simply whether second-generation exiles felt Latvian or regarded Latvia as home. It is how an inherited and ideologically sustained relationship to Latvia was translated into a practical decision to relocate, and how that relationship was subsequently revised through everyday encounters with post-Soviet society. In this respect, the Latvian case allows the article to examine remigration as both physical relocation and a continuing process of biographical re-embedding, in which symbolic belonging is tested, modified, and enacted through social participation.

Data and methodology

The empirical material consists of six life-story interviews with second-generation Latvian exiles born in the United Kingdom during the 1950s and 1960s who permanently relocated to Latvia during the 1990s. The interviews were conducted in 2016 within the Latvian National Oral History (NOH) Project as part of a broader research initiative on Latvian remigration. Life-story interviews are particularly suited to examining return migration as a biographical process because they allow participants to connect migration and return decisions, family and kinship relationships, life-course transitions, and post-return experiences within a single narrative, while situating these experiences in broader historical, cultural, and social contexts.[21] In-depth biographical interviews also make it possible to explore aspects of practical consciousness by encouraging participants to reflect on motivations and influences that are not normally articulated in everyday life.[22]

The interviews were selected from the NOH remigration collection according to three criteria: the respondents belonged to the second generation of Latvian exiles, had been born and raised in the United Kingdom, and had settled in Latvia after the restoration of independence. The purposive sample is not statistically representative; rather, it brings together respondents with a shared historical background, generational position, and migration trajectory. This relative homogeneity enables a comparative examination of how people socialized in similar exile settings interpreted their decisions to relocate and their subse-



Displaced persons from Greven refugee camp taken to Münster station for transport to the ship for England. May 1947.

PHOTO: VOLDEMĀRS BLANKENBURGS/UK LATVIAN DOCUMENTATION CENTRE AND ARCHIVE



"Balt Cygnet" was known as a European Volunteer Worker or EVW Scheme, which brought over 14,000 Latvian Displaced Persons to Britain between 1946 and 1950. The picture shows one of the first groups of Balt Cygnet in London. PHOTO: NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF LATVIA

quent settlement in Latvia. The focus on the United Kingdom reflects the composition of the available interview material rather than a comparative host-country research design.

THE BRITISH LATVIAN exile community provides an important context for these narratives. Formed mainly by displaced persons who arrived through the European Volunteer Worker schemes after the Second World War, it was smaller than Latvian communities in North America and Australia, and many of its members subsequently re-emigrated overseas. Organizations such as Daugavas Vanagi and the Latvian National Council in Great Britain promoted the preservation of Latvian language and culture, the non-recognition of the Soviet occupation, and political advocacy for the restoration of independence. Although intermarriage and integration into British society contributed to the weakening of organized community life during the 1960s and 1970s, the Latvian national awakening of the late 1980s revitalized diaspora organizations and political engagement with the homeland.[23] The study therefore examines this particular exile context rather than comparing Latvian communities across different host countries.

The analysis combined a biographical perspective with inductive thematic comparison and attention to the narrative construction of experience. From a biographical perspective, migration is not treated as an isolated event but interpreted within a broader life course in which past experiences, present circumstances, and future aspirations shape mobility decisions.[24] Narratives are understood not simply as records of past events but as socially situated accounts through which respondents organize experience, negotiate identities, and attribute meaning to their decisions.[25]

THE ANALYTICAL PROCESS was iterative. Each interview was first examined as a complete life story, with attention to how respondents retrospectively connected family history, identity formation, remigration, and settlement. The interviews were then compared across cases to identify recurring themes and interpretative patterns. The analytical categories were not predetermined by the literature but developed through repeated engagement with the material and were subsequently interpreted in relation to existing research. The principal themes included family socialization, language, participation in diaspora organizations, professional and family trajectories, motivations for remigration, and experiences of settlement. This approach made it possible to analyze both what respondents recounted and how they constructed remigration as a meaningful part of their biographies.

The sample has important limitations. It does not include individuals who considered remigration but remained in the United Kingdom, those who returned to Britain after relocating, or those who regarded their settlement in Latvia as unsuccessful. The material is therefore shaped by selection and survivor bias and cannot support generalizations about second-generation Latvian remigration as a whole. Instead, the study offers an interpretative analysis of how one purposively selected group of successfully settled remigrants understood and narrated the relationship between inherited belonging, relocation, and life in Latvia.

Family-based identity formation in childhood

The life stories identify the family as the primary setting in which Latvian identity was sustained, and the possibility of future remigration first became imaginable. As Elizabeth L. Curiskis argues in her study of intergenerational return within the Latvian diaspora, everyday practices such as language use, attitudes toward homeland, and interpretations of historical experience create an emotional and symbolic framework through which the second generation later understands belonging and return.[26]

The life stories examined here echo this insight. Latvian

ancestry, purposeful upbringing, and systematic language transmission functioned as both symbolic and practical "start-up capital". Although the respondents were born in the United Kingdom and had visited Latvia only occasionally before independence, being raised in Latvian reduced the distance between an inherited homeland and the prospect of living there.

In several narratives, maintaining Latvian identity in the family extended well beyond everyday language use and involved systematic participation in exile community life. Parents are often described as committed patriots and active members of diaspora organizations who structured family routines around Latvian activities such as Saturday schools, choirs, youth groups, concerts, cultural events, and summer camps. For example, Rota summarizes her childhood by saying that "there was more Latvian life than English life", while Ivars and Juris recall speaking Latvian consistently at home and encountering English primarily upon entering school. In Juris's case, his limited English proficiency initially even caused concern among school authorities.

AT THE SAME TIME, life stories reveal that the maintenance of Latvian identity was not always a seamless or unproblematic process. For many second-generation respondents, particularly during adolescence, participation in Latvian institutions, most notably Saturday school, generated tension. Compulsory attendance sometimes clashed with the desire to integrate into local peer groups. Kārlis, for instance, recalls an emotional conflict between sports and friends on the one hand and the obligation to attend Latvian school on the other. Yet he also acknowledges that the "first stage" structured by his parents later proved to be an important foundation for sustained attachment. Ivars, in his turn, normalizes such resistance with humor, describing it as almost universal among second-generation children, while Valters links his reluctance not only to generational distance and pedagogical style but also to childhood difficulty in perceiving the practical value of what was being taught in Latvian Saturday schools. At the same time, he remembers Latvian summer camps in markedly positive terms, highlighting the emotional intensity of shared activities such as songs, sports, discipline, and "lessons about the fatherland", as well as the strong sense of community created by younger instructors and peer groups.

"LATVIAN ANCESTRY, PURPOSEFUL UPBRINGING, AND SYSTEMATIC LANGUAGE TRANSMISSION FUNCTIONED AS BOTH SYMBOLIC AND PRACTICAL 'START-UP CAPITAL'."

These accounts also suggest that second-generation ethnic identity was not simply transmitted intact from parents to children. Drawing on Isajiw's typology, Miezitis (1990) distinguishes three patterns of ethnic identity maintenance: the transplantation of the old culture, a rebellion pattern, and a rediscovery pattern in which individuals invest elements of their ancestral past with renewed symbolic meaning.[27] The narratives examined here display elements of this movement: Latvian practices initially imposed by parents could be resisted during adolescence but later reinterpreted as personally meaningful sources of identity. Family and community institutions therefore did not mechanically produce remigration; rather, they provided cultural, linguistic, and symbolic resources that respondents could subsequently appropriate and translate into their own biographies. This process also illustrates that intergenerational identity transmission should be understood as dynamic rather than deterministic: parental socialization created dispositions and resources, but respondents themselves actively reinterpreted these within changing historical and personal circumstances.

AN IMPORTANT AND socially complex dimension of identity maintenance also concerns the experience of exile as loss. In childhood, this was often felt as the absence of an extended kinship network. Rota, for instance, recalls a sense of injustice when comparing herself to classmates who regularly visited grandparents and relatives, while her own extended family remained in Latvia or had been dispersed by war and repression. In her account, the Latvian exile community partially substituted for the missing family network but in ways that were emotionally ambivalent:

> **I had many Latvian aunts and uncles, but they were not our relatives. They were single Latvians without families, and we would visit them so that they wouldn't be alone. We were meant to keep alive the joy of being Latvian and to let those older people feel happy that I spoke Latvian, that I wore the folk costume, that I could recite a poem. They would all cry. Those are my memories. We were like a doll placed in front of everyone.**

This recollection captures the dual character of community life in exile: it generated belonging and continuity, yet it could also produce a sense of performance and instrumentalization.

Beyond language and organized community life, some narratives point to another strategy of sustaining identity: the material and spatial reconstruction of the homeland in the host country. For instance, Juris recalls his childhood home in Birmingham as a deliberate attempt to recreate a rural Latvian farmstead:

> **We had a large garden with big trees and three fields where potatoes were planted. [..] I spent my youth planting potatoes and digging them up. And that was my completely normal Latvian life. Only later did I realize that it was a Kurzeme[28] farmstead that had been recreated there.**

Gardening, growing potatoes, keeping bees and chickens, and sharing domestic life with older relatives who had never fully

learned English made Latvian belonging part of embodied everyday routine. The homeland was thus not only narrated or represented symbolically; elements of its landscape and social world were recreated within the British domestic environment. Such practices gave respondents a form of mediated familiarity with a country in which they had never lived.

FINALLY, THE LIFE STORIES indicate that maintaining Latvian identity also involved political socialization. Several respondents describe having internalized, from an early age, a particular interpretation of history and a morally charged stance toward occupation and Soviet rule which was often reinforced by parents' public engagement in exile organizations and political activities. For example, Ivars frames his presence in Britain not as a natural condition of belonging but as the outcome of a historical rupture deeply internalized within the family. In his life story, he recalls his father's strong political engagement in exile as well as the emotional intensity that accompanied it:

> **I absorbed that sense of anger – anger at what had happened and why. I think that's where the feeling came from that we didn't really belong in England. It felt like some kind of – there's an English word for it – aberration, just a glitch of history. It just happened that we ended up in England.**

This narrative connects family memory with the sense that life in Britain resulted from historical injustice rather than voluntary migration. As Skerrett has observed in relation to Latvian and Estonian exile descendants, ethnic identity and attachment to the homeland were socially and emotionally transmitted through family narratives, national symbols, and memories of collective trauma.[29] These processes contributed to the construction of Latvia as an ideological homeland: a place not grounded in respondents' previous residence but made meaningful through inherited memory, language, domestic practices, and political interpretation.

The family therefore provided the initial resources through which Latvia became imaginable as a potential place of residence. These resources did not determine remigration, nor were they experienced uniformly across the life course. Their significance emerged through later reinterpretation, as inherited practices and memories were incorporated into respondents' own identities and combined with the personal and historical circumstances that eventually made relocation possible.

Youth engagement in diaspora organizations

Whereas the previous section examined family-based identity transmission during childhood, this section focuses on a later stage in the life course, when participation in youth organizations became increasingly voluntary and contributed to the consolidation of Latvian identity through peer networks and civic engagement.

The analysis shows that alongside the family, self-initiated



European Researcher's Night 2025 – station of the project "Navigating Post-Exile: Transformations and Transitions in the Latvian Exile Community after 1991". PHOTO: M. KRŪMIŅA



Pop-up exhibition from the Latvian National Museum of Literature and Music collections dedicated to authors associated with the post-exile period. PHOTO E. KURSĪTE



The Latvian diaspora festival "Bērzes Strazdi" takes place in the United Kingdom every year. The festival attracts hundreds of Latvians who gather to celebrate Midsummer. PHOTO: BĒRZES STRAZDI/FACEBOOK

engagement in Latvian youth organizations played a significant role in consolidating identity and shaping the possibility of remigration. Most interviewees describe active participation in diaspora political and civic structures, particularly the European Latvian Youth Association[30] (ELJA) and its cross-border networks, as an important phase in their biographies. These narratives reveal that organizational environments functioned not merely as mechanisms for preserving "Latvianness," but as spaces of socialization which formed agency, civic competence, and peer-based belonging.

Several respondents describe ELJA as renewing or strengthening an attachment that had weakened after they finished school or began university. Kārlis, for example, recalls that the organization allowed him to re-enter a Latvian social environment and meet peers beyond the relatively narrow circle of his local community. His account illustrates that second-generation identity was not transmitted linearly or sustained with equal intensity throughout the life course. It could be resisted, weakened, and later reactivated through relationships that offered belonging independently of parental obligation. As Levitt and Waters observe, second-generation engagement with transnational networks may vary across life stages while accumulating significance over time.[31] ELJA was therefore important not as a single formative event but as part of an ongoing renegotiation of identity and belonging.

AS A EUROPE-WIDE NETWORK, ELJA brought together Latvian youth from different countries and facilitated participation in international congresses. It created a transnational Latvian social space while also providing practical experience in travel, networking, organizational work, and cross-border cooperation. Latvian belonging was thus experienced as dynamic and transnational, as well as structurally distinct from the socialization horizons available to peers in Soviet Latvia.

This civic dimension became particularly significant during the late 1980s. Kārlis recalls protests, letter-writing campaigns, and public information initiatives intended to raise international awareness of the situation in the Baltic states. Such activities shifted the emphasis from preserving cultural traditions to enacting Latvian identity through political participation. Respondents could experience themselves not merely as custodians of an exiled community's memories but as actors capable of contributing to political change.

ELJA also offered a generationally distinct form of community. Valters remembers encountering people of his own age whose attitudes seemed "more relaxed, freer, and more open" than those of his father's generation. He acknowledges that, as a child, he had been unable to fully understand the physical and emotional consequences of his parents' forced displacement. Thus, youth organizations provided an intermediary space in which the inherited political commitments of the exile community could be retained while Latvian identity was reformulated in ways that were socially and emotionally meaningful to the second generation.

The friendships and networks formed in these settings sometimes extended into post-exile life. Valters doubts that he would have settled permanently in Latvia had he not joined ELJA at the age of sixteen. Many of his peers subsequently moved to Latvia and remained active in civic initiatives. In his narrative, the organization thus functions as a bridge between exile socialization and later life in Latvia, providing social continuity and relationships that made relocation more imaginable.

Importantly, this organizational engagement coincided with the gradual opening of borders and political liberalization, allowing contact with peers from Latvia. Valters recalls that at first his relationship to Latvia as a state was not clearly articulated; what mattered was the discovery of a Latvian-speaking peer community. With the onset of the *Awakening* period and the increasing presence of visitors from Latvia, youth events became spaces in which Latvia as a political phenomenon acquired concrete meaning:

> **The event where I first truly saw Latvia as a state in its own right was, to some extent, the 8th World Latvian Youth Congress.**[32]

Participation in youth networks also affected everyday language practices. Ivars describes a "turning point" following an ELJA congress, when conversations with his Latvian girlfriend shifted spontaneously from English to Latvian and continued in Latvian thereafter. Language thus ceased to be primarily an inherited obligation and became a natural medium of peer and intimate communication. Its significance lay not only in linguistic competence but in the relationships through which that competence was used and sustained.

For some respondents, diaspora networks also shaped educational and geographical mobility. Through Latvian contacts in Britain, Rota attended the Latvian Gymnasium in Münster[33] and later studied at a German university. These experiences expanded her contacts with people from Latvia and created opportunities to visit the country before independence. Organizational participation therefore contributed to transnational biographies in which mobility, adaptation, and network-building had already become familiar before remigration.

Taken together, participation in ELJA and similar structures operated simultaneously as a mechanism of identity consolidation (language, peer-based belonging), as a school of political agency (protest, advocacy, transnational coalition-building), and as an infrastructure of social capital (lasting friendships and networks that later extended into Latvia). These components did not predetermine remigration but accumulated as biographical resources that made the decision to relocate more plausible once structural conditions allowed it.

The decision to return

The life stories suggest that second-generation remigration in the 1990s cannot be explained by emotional attachment or ideological loyalty alone. Respondents had to integrate relocation into ongoing life trajectories involving careers, family formation, and their children's futures. Language competence and attachment to Latvia made return imaginable, while employment, income

security, professional prospects, and family circumstances influenced whether it became practically feasible.

The economic transformation of the early and mid-1990s created particular opportunities for diaspora Latvians. As Western companies entered the Baltic markets, individuals who combined Western education and professional experience with Latvian language skills and cultural familiarity occupied an advantageous position. For Pēteris, corporate restructuring in London coincided with an opportunity to represent his firm in the Baltic states. Relocation therefore became possible without abandoning his professional trajectory or accepting substantial economic insecurity. His subsequent involvement in Latvia's institutional environment illustrates how Western-acquired expertise, together with linguistic, cultural, and social ties, became valuable in both state-building and the emerging private sector.

A SIMILAR STRUCTURE appears in Kārlis's narrative, where return is prepared through regular visits to Latvia and a gradual familiarization with local conditions, as well as through marriage to a woman from Latvia, which transforms relocation into a shared family project. He emphasizes the importance of not "moving blindly," but securing employment in advance that would allow him to utilize experience accumulated in London. For his turn, Juris describes how his professional pathway to Latvia unfolded through international projects linked to the introduction of Western expertise into post-Soviet economies, including legal assistance in developing securities legislation. Although accepting a position in Riga felt "a bit early" in career terms, he describes return after independence as a matter of timing rather than possibility: professional decisions were ultimately subordinated to an intended life geography centered on Latvia.

Practical opportunities, however, acquired significance within narratives of identity and belonging. Ivars presents return as a decision about the cultural and linguistic environment in which his children would grow up:

> **If we want our children to be Latvian, we have to make a big decision.**

In his account, Latvian identity could no longer be maintained exclusively through the symbolic and institutional practices of diaspora life; it also required a choice about residence, everyday language, and the family's future. The statement does not establish identity as the single cause of remigration but shows how relocation was retrospectively constructed as a practical enactment of belonging.

The life stories also reveal emotionally charged moments of affirmation that reinforced the decision. Juris recounts that after publicly declaring his intention to return, next morning he woke up with an inner conviction that "I am going home." He acknowledges that such experiences are difficult to explain to those for whom Latvia is not an "imagined homeland," but an unproblematic everyday environment. The significance of such narratives lies not in establishing whether Latvia objectively constituted "home", but in showing how respondents themselves constructed return as a morally and emotionally meaningful biographical transition.

ANOTHER RECURRING theme concerns remigrants' attitudes toward the "real" Latvia after 1991 and their capacity to accept the gap between the Latvia preserved in exile memory and the everyday realities of the post-Soviet state. Some members of the diaspora refrained from returning because they perceived Latvia as insufficiently "free", citing the continued presence of former Communist Party elites or incomplete decolonization, and because their expectations were shaped by an idealized image of interwar Latvia. By contrast, the interviewees who did relocate emphasize a willingness to accept Latvia as it was, recognizing that different historical experiences – exile and Soviet life – produced divergent perspectives. In this sense, remigration appears not merely as spatial relocation but as a moral and political stance: to move to Latvia implied accepting responsibility to engage, contribute, and improve, rather than waiting for an idealized correspondence with inherited visions of the past.

"THE ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION OF THE EARLY AND MID-1990S CREATED PARTICULAR OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIASPORA LATVIANS."

Across these narratives, remigration emerged when professional opportunities, family circumstances, and inherited attachments converged within particular biographies. None of these dimensions operated independently: practical opportunities made relocation feasible, while the desire to live and raise a family in Latvia gave those opportunities biographical meaning. Return was thus narrated neither as a purely strategic career move nor as the automatic fulfillment of ethnic identity, but as a decision through which professional, familial, emotional, and political considerations were brought together.

Expectations, encounters, and trajectories of settlement

Physical relocation marked the beginning of a continuing process of settlement in which expectations formed in exile encountered the social, linguistic, and professional realities of post-Soviet Latvia. Although language competence, professional capital, and diaspora networks facilitated relocation, respondents describe experiences ranging from rapid adaptation and new friendships to culture shock, exclusion, and disappointment.

A central tension in many narratives concerns the gap between the Latvia constructed in exile and the Latvia encountered after 1991. For instance, Valters describes his pre-1994 understanding of Latvia as "conceptual" and "artificial," shaped by his parents' memories and by accounts from individuals who had not lived in Latvia since the end of the Second World

War. Upon settling in Latvia, he quickly realized that there was a substantial discrepancy between inherited narratives and lived reality. Even if the imagined Latvia had matched reality, he notes, adaptation would still have required time: everyday routines, social norms, and professional cultures were not directly comparable to those in Britain. His account illustrates how the ideological homeland constructed in exile became reinterpreted through everyday encounters with the social realities of post-socialist Latvia.

Rota similarly recalls having perceived Latvia during childhood as something "sacred" and distant. Only after settling there did cultural references learned in exile acquire concrete meaning: songs about birch groves, rivers, and landscapes became connected to places she could experience directly. The homeland was therefore not simply found upon arrival but transformed from a symbolic reference point into an everyday sensory and social environment.

SETTLEMENT WAS ALSO shaped by the ambivalent status of "exile Latvians" in post-independence society. Respondents encountered curiosity and sympathy but also suspicion and stigmatization. Kārlis recalls that his Western background made him a marked figure at work: colleagues tended either to like or dislike him intensely, sometimes judging him according to his origin rather than his performance. Stereotypes portrayed exile Latvians as unable to understand local society because they had not experienced Soviet rule, or as unsuccessful emigrants who had returned to "teach others how to live". Such attitudes created a symbolic boundary between forms of Latvianness shaped by exile and those grounded in Soviet-era experience. Belonging was therefore evaluated not only through language and descent but also through historically specific biography.

"RESPONDENTS ENCOUNTERED CURIOSITY AND SYMPATHY BUT ALSO SUSPICION AND STIGMATIZATION."

These tensions were intensified by the broader socio-psychological climate of the 1990s. Kārlis describes what he calls the "post-independence blues": an initial euphoria followed by economic strain, disillusionment, and the pressures of transformation. At the same time, Western societies were often idealized in popular imagination, reinforced by imported media and narratives of rapid prosperity. Remigrants thus entered a social context that simultaneously idealized "the West" and projected resentment or suspicion toward those arriving from it.

IN SOME CASES, tensions were not merely symbolic but practical and occasionally confrontational. For example, Rota recounts an incident in which she became trapped in an elevator, and neighbors refused assistance because she did not ask in Russian, labeling her a "fascist who had come back"[34]. The episode reveals the persistence of ethnolinguistic hierarchies and post-Soviet power dynamics in urban space. Adaptation, in such moments, meant learning to navigate local norms without necessarily accepting them as legitimate.

Language constituted a further layer of complexity. Although Latvian proficiency was an important resource, the sociolinguistic environment of the 1990s remained strongly shaped by Soviet language policies, under which Russian had become practically indispensable in many urban, professional, and interethnic settings. Russian therefore continued to be widely used in some workplaces and in communication with Russian-speaking residents. Respondents who lacked Russian proficiency could experience exclusion when conversations or meetings shifted into Russian. At the same time, lexical and semantic differences between exile Latvian (often preserved in forms closer to the 1940s standard) and colloquial Latvian shaped by Soviet experience produced misunderstandings. Kārlis's examples, idioms like *pupu mizas* ("bean peels")[35], or expressions such as *atšifrēt* ("to decipher")[36] – illustrate that the gap was not merely lexical but experiential. He associates this indirect, allusive style of communication with Soviet-era practices, where direct speech could be risky. Language thus functioned as an imprint of historical experience embedded in everyday interaction.

YET THE NARRATIVES also highlight resources that facilitated settlement. First, new friendships in Latvia were crucial. For example, Valters emphasizes that in Latvia he could form relationships based on shared interests rather than solely on ethnic belonging, which was a shift from exile contexts, where Latvian identity itself was often the primary basis of socialization. In this sense, Latvian identity moved from being a community-defining criterion to an unmarked background condition within a more diversified social field.

Second, several interviewees stress the importance of accepting Latvia as a dynamic and changing state rather than expecting correspondence with an idealized interwar past. This acceptance functioned as a psychological strategy that reduced the risk of disappointment and allowed respondents to focus on practical engagement.

Third, everyday life in Latvian, i.e., the ability to conduct business, access services, and interact socially in one's primary language, emerges as a deeply motivating dimension. For Rota, the simple fact of using Latvian as a fully operative language in professional and public life was itself a source of fulfillment, particularly given the partiality of linguistic experience in exile. This linguistic normalization was complemented by sensory and spatial encounters with forests, trees, and rivers that Rota had previously known mainly through Latvian school lessons and folk songs, transforming a homeland sustained symbolically from afar into a lived environment. At the same time, her reflections on regulatory complexity, business challenges, and early experiences of pressure or informal expectations reveal a dual perception: Latvia is simultaneously attractive and demanding, a space requiring the learning of new "internal rules."

Settlement thus involved more than adaptation to a new environment. Through friendships, work, language, conflict, and everyday spatial experience, respondents revised the meanings attached to Latvia and to their own Latvianness. The ideological homeland inherited in exile neither disappeared nor corresponded fully to post-Soviet reality; it was gradually reworked into a form of belonging grounded in social relationships and everyday participation.

Conclusions

The six life stories examined in this article present second-generation remigration as a biographically grounded process in which inherited belonging, practical opportunities, and individual aspirations converged within a specific historical context. Family socialization, Latvian language competence, participation in diaspora institutions, and political engagement made Latvia imaginable as a potential place of residence. These resources did not lead automatically to relocation, but they acquired practical significance after the restoration of independence created new possibilities for mobility, employment, and participation in Latvian society.

Professional opportunities, family circumstances, and inherited attachments should therefore not be treated as competing explanations. Western education, professional experience, language competence, and diaspora networks helped make relocation feasible, while emotional attachment and the desire to build a life in Latvia gave that possibility biographical meaning. In several narratives, the wish to "be Latvian in Latvia" formed part of this constellation, but it operated together with career considerations, family projects, and perceptions of the country's future. Remigration was thus narrated neither as the automatic fulfillment of ethnic identity nor as a purely strategic response to economic opportunity.

Arrival did not complete the process of return. Respondents had to reconcile an ideological homeland sustained through family memory and exile institutions with the social and cultural realities of post-Soviet Latvia. Culture shock, linguistic differences, unfamiliar workplace practices, and ambivalent attitudes toward "Western Latvians" challenged expectations of natural integration based on common descent and language. At the same time, friendships, professional relationships, everyday use of Latvian, and sensory and spatial familiarity gradually created new forms of embeddedness. In this process, Latvia was transformed from an inherited symbolic homeland into a lived, though not uncomplicated, social environment.

THE ARTICLE CONTRIBUTES to research on second-generation ethnic return by showing how diasporic heritage becomes relevant to migration when it intersects with particular biographical and structural conditions. It also demonstrates that return involves more than movement toward an ancestral homeland: inherited forms of identity are tested and renegotiated through everyday participation after relocation. The findings are limited to a purposively selected group of six remigrants who remained in Latvia and described broadly successful settlement trajectories. They cannot explain the experiences of those who decided not to relocate, returned to the United Kingdom, or regarded remigration as unsuccessful. Within these limits, the study offers an empirically grounded account of how inherited belonging was translated first into a decision to relocate and subsequently into lived social participation.

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Lithuania's border forest. Summer 2026.
PHOTO: JULIJA KEKSTAITE

A glitch in the machine

Contesting militarized futures through the forest

by **Julija Kekstaite** & **Aimee Herring**

abstract

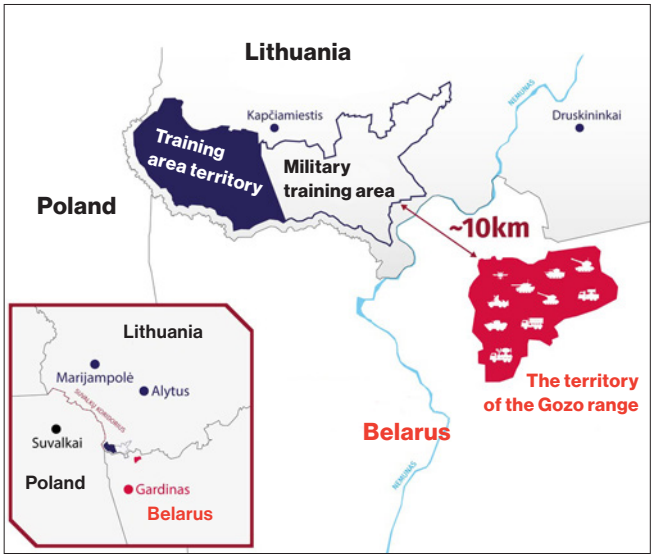
Russia's aggression against Ukraine has contributed to a sense of uncertain sovereignty (Klumbytė 2019, 2022) in Eastern Europe, manifesting in accelerated militarization. This essay invites a more nuanced debate around militarization and borderland futures. Following a series of protests against the construction of a military training ground (*poligonas*) in Kapčiamiestis, Southern Lithuania, we suggest that the forest disrupts the *technē* (Scott 1998) of militarization by creating glitches in its practice, the abstracted logic of territorial legibility and calculation. The forest has become a site from which unexpected alliances between local residents, environmentalists, and neighboring Polish communities have begun to articulate alternative understandings of life, temporality, and security, resisting the reduction of the forest to strategic military terrain.

KEYWORDS: *poligonas*, militarization, forest, Lithuania, borderland.

On December 15, 2025, the residents of Kapciamiestis, a small township of five hundred residents at Lithuania's southernmost border with Poland, learned – in their words – "along with the rest of the nation" – of the government's plans to build a *poligonas* (Lithuanian for military training ground), directly adjacent to their municipality. The news was presented via a post on the Ministry of National Defense's website. The proposed training ground would not only appropriate part of Kapčiamiestis' local forest, displacing 13 farmsteads and annexing approximately 2,000 private land plots, but would ultimately span 146 square miles and encompass five nature reserves. The presence of the *poligonas* (we use the Lithuanian terminology to draw upon socio-historical connotations and indexicality) would ultimately mean the presence of 4,000–5,000 NATO troops conducting military exercises in an area known for its dense forests, mushroom picking, and rivers that attract kayakers from across Lithuania.

DECEMBER'S ANNOUNCEMENT took residents by surprise, even shock. A week later, the crowd of local residents who gathered to meet with government officials packed the meeting space and spilled out onto the street, voicing concerns that families who had lived for generations in the area would be displaced,

The Kapčiamiestis training ground will enhance the security of Lithuania's southern border



Kapčiamiestis poligonas' plan as presented on the Ministry of Defense website.

ecotourism destroyed, and that the presence of the poligonas would inevitably draw military confrontation to Kapčiamiestis itself. Representatives from the Ministry of Defense and accompanying government officials appeared unprepared to address the residents' concerns with anything other than a narrative of the poligonas' essential role in national security. They were booed down and jeered several times.[1]

BY EARLY JANUARY discontent had transformed into organized protest. Local activists circulated a petition against the poligonas which gathered over 13,000 signatures, and a new slogan had been taken up on social media: "Kapčiamiestis for Life – Not a Poligonas!" (Kapčiamiestis gyvenimui – ne poligonui!). A second public meeting that went even more poorly than the first circulated virally on-line, attracting national attention. At the center of these interventions, however, was not simply opposition to military infrastructure. A particular organizing principle and a moral center to their argumentation emerged – the forest. Evoked as a source of livelihood, heritage, and local identity, the Kapčiamiestis forest came to embody all which seemed to be at stake with the construction of the poligonas. With local resistance growing and messages of support coming in from elsewhere in Lithuania, was it possible that the forest was proving a glitch in what otherwise seemed an inevitable escalation in militarization?

The role of the forest in Lithuanian memory

Defense of the forest quickly became a unifying rallying cry that helped solidify not just local opposition to the poligonas, but also drew in support from outside the region, including from allies that otherwise might not politically align with residents in an area which tends to lean conservative. But why?

To begin to address that question, it is important to consider the role of the forest in Lithuanian historical memory and national identity. Once renowned across Europe for its vast wilderness,[2] the Lithuanian forest figures prominently in myth and folklore as the home to mysterious beings, sacred and otherwise, informing Baltic neopagan practices, the celebration of traditional holidays such as Shrove Tuesday, and even contemporary children's literature. It's density has provided sustenance and a source of livelihoods for generations in the form of mushrooms, berries, and space for bee-keeping practices. It has also provided shelter for stories figures such as the 19th century book smugglers that helped keep the Lithuanian language alive under Russian occupation, and the armed partisan resistance against the Soviets. That same density has also figured in more troubling histories, serving as the site of atrocities committed by both the Soviets and the Nazis during WWII, and more recently, as the defining feature of the deadly Green Border between Belarus and the European Union.

Perhaps of more immediate relevance to Kapčiamiestis residents, following Independence in 1991 forests that had been largely forgotten became a profitable resource not just for a burgeoning ecotourism trade, but for lumber, much of which was and continues to be logged by Scandinavian companies. All over the country, the clearing of the forest has become a deeply troubling issue for many, not just as a threat to a shared cultural resource, but in connection to outside, even foreign interests. This history matters for understanding the Kapčiamiestis mobilization: residents are not simply defending a mythical, pristine wilderness, but a forest already shaped by competing practices of extraction, recreation, and livelihood. In addition, environmental claims should not be understood as inherently emancipatory. Scholarship on "ecobordering"[3] draws attention to the ways in which environmental narratives can themselves become folded into projects of bordering and exclusion, including by casting migration from the Global South as an environmental threat while obscuring the political and economic processes that produce ecological crises.

"ONCE RENOWNED ACROSS EUROPE FOR ITS VAST WILDERNESS, THE LITHUANIAN FOREST FIGURES PROMINENTLY IN MYTH AND FOLKLORE AS THE HOME TO MYSTERIOUS BEINGS [...]."

Protests continue: "Hands off the Forest"

By January, the Kapčiamiestis Community Forest Association (Kapčiamiesčio Miško Bendruomenė) had been formed, and was raising funds. Publics concerned with the protection of for-



Driving through Lithuania's borderlands one sees an increasingly securitized border infrastructure. PHOTO: JULIJA KEKSTAITE

ests countrywide, some of which had already been organizing for several years and documenting the impact of the poligonai established in Pabradė and Rūdininkai, took up the cause and circulated discussions of the topic on-line. Members of Girių Inspekcija [Forest Inspection] and Apginkime Miškus! [Let's Defend the Forests] began offering legal and tactical advice, and in a very symbolic move, protesters came together January 24, to form a 3 km long human chain of about 1,000 people from Kapčiamiestis to the border with Belarus, a reference to the 1989 Baltic Way protest against Soviet occupation. When protests moved from Kapčiamiestis to Vilnius during Parliamentary discussions of the poligonas, signs read, "Hands off the Forest" (Šalin Rankas nuo Miško); another read, "nature rejects political violence – she is our shared responsibility." The historical and potential future significance of the forest to national security was also emphasized. One attendee of the first public meeting reminded government officials of the celebrated history of the decade-long guerilla resistance against the Soviets which operated in forests across the country, including near Kapčiamiestis, commenting, "Partisans went to us for food; when you cut the forest, where will you go," and posts on-line emphasized the role of forests as natural barriers and places of shelter in (anticipated) wartime.

Debates about economic and national security – ostensibly settled with the assurance of government payouts to landowners and an undeniable geopolitical risk – could not be extricated from debates about the forest itself. As discussion and voting favorable to the poligonas moved forward in parliament, with a request for an environmental and noise impact assessment having failed to slow down the process, the Community Forest Association decided to raise the issue internationally. In coalition with nearby communities in Lithuania and across the border in Poland, it lodged a complaint with the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, arguing that construction of the Kapčiamiestis poligonas without environmental review violated the Espoo Convention, which requires the evaluation of the environmental impacts of major projects with potentially significant cross border effects. Although the construction of the Kapčiamiestis poligonas received final approval from the Seimas (parliament) on April 23, at the time of our writing (September), the complaint is being discussed at the meeting of the Implementation Committee of the UNECE.

From the limits of democracy to the glitch

Why did the concerns of Kapčiamiestis and other nearby communities seem to fall on deaf ears not only of the government, but also most of the country outside of a highly localized region? How is it that environmental concerns deemed significant enough to warrant international review drew in support only from highly specific local and environmentally minded publics?

As scholars have noted, Russia's protracted war against Ukraine and the international community's tepid response, as well as Russia's increasingly provocative rhetoric and hybrid at-



Attendees exhibiting national symbols during the border hike on the National Day February 16, 2026.

PHOTO: JULIJA KEKSTAITE

tacks against the Baltics[4] have exacerbated a sense of uncertain sovereignty in Lithuania,[5] provoking increasingly radical assertions.[6] The joint Russian-Belarusian ZAPAD military exercises, which hosted representatives from 20 countries and took place at a training site approximately 10 kilometers from the Lithuanian and Polish border earlier in September, appear to have only further heightened the sense of vulnerability. The space for nuanced political discussion seems increasingly limited, and those who would question militarization, let alone securitization of the borders, risk their loyalty to the nation being questioned, or worse, being characterized as a *vatnikas*, or a mouthpiece and supporter of the Russian government and its propaganda. Indeed, despite legitimate concerns, Kapčiamiestis residents felt compelled to qualify their statements when speaking in public and/or to the press, such as when the city chairwoman explained:

> **We're not against a poligonas, we're not vatniks, and we're not against the security of Lithuania [...] it's just that Kapčiamiestis is not the place to build a poligonas.**[7]

"WHAT ARE WE PROTECTING, AND WHAT FORMS OF LIFE GET TO BE SACRIFICED IN THE PROCESS?"

Despite such clarifications, opposition to the poligonas has been widely dismissed as part of Russian disinformation campaigns.[8] The question, then, is not simply why these residents failed to stop the poligonas. It is also what their mobilization makes visible about the limits of the political space in which such questions can be raised. On the EU's eastern border, forested borderlands have become politically significant through competing projects of military defense, environmental conservation, and security governance.

The limits of democracy and the contours of the political

In their analysis of intersecting conflicts in Poland's Bialowieza Forest, the primeval woodland stretching across the Polish-Belarusian border, Blavascunas and Cope[9] describe the forest as "a site of, participant in, and provoker of a series of protests". These include environmental mobilizations against logging and in support of bark beetle rewilding, local opposition to conservation measures grounded in concerns over livelihoods dependent on logging, and competing nationalist and activist mobilizations against and in support of migrating people from the Global South crossing the forest during the so-called EU-Belarus border crisis.[10] Bringing these struggles together as an emerging "ecology of protest," Blavascunas and Cope expose the limits of democratic politics by raising the question of what, and who, is allowed to count as a political subject.

BUILDING ON THIS INSIGHT, we see how the mobilization of environmental claims by border residents and their allies regarding the Kapčiamiestis forested borderlands points to another possibility: that of an expansion of who and what happens to count as a political subject, as well as a disruption of technocratic categories of governance and its legibility.

The mobilization around the planned military infrastructure brought together actors who do not necessarily share a political project: local residents on both sides of the border, summer house owners, environmental activists, and politicians whose broader political commitments may and do differ considerably.

On February 16, the national holiday "Day of the Restoration of the State", the Kapčiamiestis community organized an eight-kilometer hike that we travelled to attend. Almost everyone participating was wrapped in Lithuanian flags, as a display of patriotism. Such deployment of national symbols was striking given media representations of local opposition to the planned military training area, in which residents have been portrayed as Russian "trolls" or as anti-state. One of the men we met after the walk wearing a "Ne – poligonui" [No to the military training area] pin told us that he and two friends came from Kybartai [border town in southwestern Lithuania] 1,5 hours' drive, to take part in the march. Thinking back on a skeptic's comment "why are you coming here? Everything has already been decided" he exclaimed:

> **But if we think like that, they'll just continue doing whatever *they* want here. I said, that's exactly why we need to come. I came to show my support.**

While some participate in explicitly nationalist forms of political identification or its expression, others talk of possibilities of peaceful co-existence with the authoritarian neighbor as their satellite antennas catch Belarusian television waves.

THIS POSES A CHALLENGE of where to place the critique of the poligonas that centers the forest across the left-right divide. It seems that the residents of Kapčiamiestis are not protesting against the security imperative altogether. But by speaking from their own situated experiences, they show that there are more elements at stake than simply *the threat* of authoritarian neighbors and the response to it.

This makes the forest analytically significant. Border residents' interventions bring into view questions of the possibility of attaching different meanings to redefine what counts as life, time, and security, expanding the political space for contestation or *the political*. What are we protecting, and what forms of life get to be sacrificed in the process? What are the limits of logic beneath the calculus of expanding military infrastructures?

In other words, it is not only that residents are mobilizing environmental language, but that they unsettle the frame/logic through which it is made governable, showing that not everything can be mapped, measured, and calculated.

In his analysis of large-scale state planning projects that re-

structure nature and society, from 19th century scientific forestry, to Soviet collectivization, to Le Corbusier modernist urban planning, James C. Scott[11] shows how states rely on a logic of *techne*: an attempt to make complex social and material worlds legible through abstraction, measurement and calculation. The border zone makes this logic particularly tangible. Entry into the area requires a permit issued by the State Border Guard Service (VSAT), while movement is monitored through an infrastructure of cameras, listening, and thermal devices. Kapčiamiestis poligonas plan is also subjected to such logic of top-down decisions of territorial zoning and calculations. The coalitions around questions of the forest show how techne's vision fails to capture multiple valences of meaning that forest affords.

We understand this as a glitch in techne of militarization.

Glitches of techne

First glitch. Forest as a living ecosystem, not a resource to be contained

In the infamous meeting with government representatives and the military, which was also streamed live, residents confronted what was presented as a consultation over the planned military training ground. The meeting was heated: residents were subjected to standing up for the national anthem (some remained seated), followed by a presentation in which the military and government representatives showed some maps and tried to assure the residents that their land and forest would be compensated at market value, or even more favorably and those whose houses were not in the poligonas territory but next to it would be able to stay. Some residents rose to challenge the logic underpinning this valuation. For them, the forest could not simply be assigned a price tag "in euros": it was an ecosystem, a site of attachment and memory.

HERE WE SEE a clash of different logics of valuation. From the perspective of state officials, the forest is rendered as a resource that can be measured, valued and transformed. What we observe here suggests that Foucauldian accounts of the governing of life and death through biopolitics in the borderlands are insufficient on their own. Instead, Povinelli's concept of *geontopower*[12] draws our attention to the ways in which late liberal tactics and discourses govern not only life in the borderlands, but also, and perhaps most importantly here, the political boundary between what counts as Life and Nonlife. Residents and environmental activists challenge this boundary by insisting that the forest carries emotional, cultural and affective value, while also drawing attention to the ecosystems and animals that inhabit it. In doing so, they unsettle the assumption that the forest can be reduced to a resource or an interchangeable object.

Security beyond military infrastructure: Forest as shelter and an ally

Another glitch that we observe concerns the notion of security. If the State frames security primarily in terms of military power and territorial defense, residents themselves understand the forest as a potential source of safety. This is evident, for instance, in references to the forest as a site of WWII partisan resistance. Here, the forest is remembered not simply as territory to be controlled or defended, but as an ally, shelter and source of protection. Security, in this account, does not necessarily require the transformation of the forest into military infrastructure; the forest itself can be part of what makes life secure. This also exposes some contradictions in relation to other security and militarization projects planned in Lithuania, such as reswamping or rewildering of territories into a natural border of defense,[13] where nature itself is strategically mobilized in the service of "defense", revealing how techne can manipulate and reorganize the boundary between life, value and security.

Time beyond the urgency of now: forest temporality

Lastly the limits of techne become apparent in how time is imagined, experienced and valued. While the State frames the future through the inevitability and urgency of war, this temporal horizon comes into friction with multilayered temporalities of border residents and activists. Border residents in their protest communication repeatedly refer to the forest as something to be enjoyed and experienced by the future generations – a long-term temporality that stands in conflict with that of military urgency. Environmental activists on their part invoke an even more expansive post-human temporality. Mindaugas Docaitis, director of Girių Inspekcija, a grassroots environmental organization opposing forest exploitation in Lithuania, reflected on how some of the border residents, after sustained efforts to protest the military training ground, may eventually burn out:

> **Maybe it's not worth it to burn oneself out over this. Nature will grow back; we just won't see it.**

His reflection offers us a different temporal horizon altogether. It acknowledges the possibility of political failure in protesting the military training ground while placing hope beyond the human temporal scale. In this sense, the forest also unsettles techne through the temporality that exceeds the state's urgent calculative horizon.

As we keep pondering these glitches, the conclusion we draw is that the forest cannot be fully contained, nor can it be fully computed as it glitches the techne data set. It is a lived environment, entangled with human and more-than-human relations, histories, and futures. Whether or not the glitch is permanent remains to be seen.

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review

A big little book on Donbas.
A memory book for the multicultural Ukraine

Life in Spite of Everything: Tales from the Ukrainian East

Victoria Donovan (London: Daunt Books, 2025), 273 pages.



Victoria Donovan (University of St Andrews) started traveling to Donbas and collecting material for her research in the Ukrainian east in 2019, drawn largely by the parallels she found there with her original home region of Wales. Since the Russian full-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022, this research work has been on hold. As the writer says in the preface of her new book, "the anger and sadness has poured over onto the pages of my writing [...], the only story that I am able to write". The result is probably the best book anyone could read right now on the often misunderstood and purposefully misinterpreted Ukrainian east.

Unlike in the common understanding, Donbas actually has a long industrial and mining history. It was salt that first attracted both people and governments to the Ukrainian east, where besides chalk materials such as flint, gypsum, limestone, and coal have all also been utilized for centuries. They are still there, as Donovan describes in a separate chapter on minerals, geology, and nature in Donbas. The region was originally called "Dike pole" [wild fields], but it was multiethnic rather than empty, populated among others by Tatars and Cossacks – once headquarters of the Zaporozhian Cossacks, is not far away. Following Catherine II's reign, it belonged to the border zone that defended the expansive Russian Empire against Turkic peoples.

THE MINING INDUSTRY was launched in Donbas in the mid-19th century, utilizing Belgian capital and British-Welsh know-how. Donovan links this with colonialism – the British empire covered almost half the world at that time, Belgium had its Congo, and Russian Empire was expanding into Central Asia. Mining experts and workers were exported from Wales to Donbas, and in Belgium the region was occasionally called the tenth Belgian province. This international link persisted until the Russian revolution, and some Welsh influence can still be found with a discerning eye. Donovan also points out the parallels between the British colonization of Wales and the Russification of Donbas. The center of the mining industry was dubbed Hughesovka by a Welsh ironmaster named John Hughes, who founded the New Russia Company in 1869 – today, the city is called Donetsk. By 1910, Ekaterinoslav province, including Hughesovka, produced over half of the coal and iron ore output in all of Russia. Donovan defines early mining activity in the region as both colonialist and extractivist, based on the exploitation of workers and resources alike. She sees a parallel here with practices in British and French plantations, and with British mines in India.

Donbas has suffered massively in the civil war, although the local population has, according to the writer, largely attempted to stay out of conflicts. For instance, Konstiantiynivka changed hands 27 times within a period of months in 1919, and the region was by described as a cemetery of miners and steelworkers – today, Konstiantynivka is again on the frontline. In Soviet times, Donbas was packed with largely made-up mythology, including the national legend Aleksei Stakhanov's well-known story. Donovan coolly describes it as "the literal smiling face of the Stalin-era terror" and reminds us that the "Shakhty affair", in which 53 mining engineers and directors were murdered shortly before Stalin's death, also took place in Donbas. Stakhanov survived the purges. In 1957, during the thaw, he moved back to Donbas, where he spent the last period of his life drinking, like many of his disillusioned compatriots.

THERE ARE MANY local heroes who still enjoy high popularity today, such as Makar Mazai and Volodymyr Boiko in Mariupol. Donovan has a keen eye for local and regional specifics and shows respect to the industrial heritage of eastern Ukraine, with all its environmental and other problems – to life as it was lived and experienced locally up until February 2022. Those working for decommunization (a process very much in progress in Ukraine, where remnants of Soviet life are often considered "historical trash" and accordingly gotten rid of) should keep in mind that culture is not only to be found in museums, concert halls, and architectural treasures but also in urban infrastructure, with the region's hill-like slag heaps and factories forming "part of what it means to be from and to belong to this place", as Donovan states. She describes the process of transition in independent Ukraine without mercy:

> **Those particles that descend to your lungs were part of the most recent chapter in this history that saw market transition turn to market theft and made billionaires of business-savvy swindlers.**

In order to give a more complex view of Donbas's industries, I want to mention here Artemivsk with its famous champagne factory, which is also recalled by Donovan. Unlike most factories, it used the traditional method (*méthode champenoise*) in its production; the grapes were from Crimea. The city was renamed Bakhmut in 2016, and the ongoing war made it world-famous. No champagne is produced there now, and in practice the city no longer exists.

The writer traveled extensively in Ukraine-governed Donbas, visiting the towns and localities now in the front zone, razed to the ground by the war and sometimes occupied by the



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Mariupol in the 19th century.

Russian army. As her Ukrainian friends said: "All the places that we saw, are gone now. Victoria had an exclusive tour." Donovan describes an activist who meets others from Ukraine, often fled from the Russian-occupied part of the country, such as Luhansk or Donetsk. Mariupol was one of the hubs for this activism up until 2022, Sievierodonetsk – "Bright City", as Donovan calls it – was another one. Although she does not long for the industries that once polluted the Azov sea to return to Mariupol, she mourns the annihilation of the city at the hands of the Russian invaders, with potentially tens of thousands of civilian victims. Similarly to Mariupol, Sievierodonetsk has also effectively been destroyed since 2022. Russia is presently rebuilding Mariupol as a kind of holiday resort, a macabre project of reconstruction in the light of what happened there. This "renewal" may well succeed in this phantasmagoric world – new apartments are already up for sale in Russia, while the old Mariupol is gone.

VICTORIA DONOVAN'S *Life in Spite of Everything* is a memory book for the multicultural eastern Ukraine and Donbas, now perished due to external aggression and local bandits. Photos and maps included in the book are most informative in this context. Its nostalgic, aggressive tone and feeling of overwhelming sadness is compelling; despite all the losses, it honors human strength and perseverance, showing that a tragedy does not block memories or the spirit of activism. Donovan wants to write "for, not about the people", as she says – to avoid writing as a "parasitic act" that exploits the suffering of others. She succeeds, informed and enriched by both her Welsh roots and her academic background.

There were already 1.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) when Donovan was writing her book; by the end of 2022 the number was 5.9 million, while 5.7 million had left the country for Central and Western Europe. Some of the writer's friends end up in hip Lviv, where air alerts do happen but rather seldomly, and where people live quite a normal life – although the city is crowded with people from the east, the war is not there on the doorstep. Donovan finds that there are now two Ukraines, one where the war happens and another one where it does not. This may be some challenge to the present Ukraine.

Donovan also points out the discrimination people from the east sometimes face in western Ukraine for not being "Ukrainian enough". She does not bring up the language issue here, obvious to any reader: her friends and contacts, albeit probably bilingual, were most likely originally Russian-speakers but may now be moving to Ukrainian due to the stigma around speaking Russian. For Ukrainian locations, the writer uses correctly Ukrainian names. She also brings up the sad history of Lviv (Lemberg), where one third of inhabitants were Jewish before WWII. They perished in the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators. Forty-one synagogues were destroyed in Lviv during the Nazi occupation, with the first, very small new synagogue opened in 2016.

Life in Spite of Everything has as an important by-product in that it shows, once more, the hypocrisy and miscalculations of Putin's Russia. While officially maintaining that the war was started in order to protect Russian-speakers in Ukraine, who were supposedly threatened by its government, the main burden of the war against Ukraine has fallen on Russian-speakers there. The criminal war has destroyed their domicile and killed Russian-speaking Ukrainian soldiers and civilians in masses, and keeps on doing so. The "logic" may lie in the fact that Putinist policy holds these people as traitors to be punished, since they do not welcome the aggression as a friendly gesture.

Donovan ironically describes how Ukrainians were expected – and not only by the Russian government, unfortunately – to be "empty-headed pawns without political will or vision of their own", which turned out to be untrue. The result is the largest war in Europe, and one that has now continued for longer than WWI.

AS A RESULT, the Russian language has in practice disappeared from Ukraine, while the phrase "russkiy mir" has lost any real cultural meaning and is now generally seen as a perverse nightmare from which hundreds of thousands of decent and gifted Russians wanted to flee. The Putin government's insistence that Russian be given the status of an official language in Ukraine has become absurd. Victoria Donovan's big little book takes a long and critical perspective on colonialism. Sometimes I wonder whether it is still premature to speak about "postcolonial studies" – are we not back in colonial times?

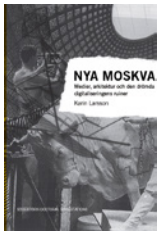
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Newly defended theses

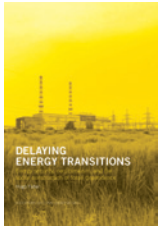
Two new dissertation theses have been presented by students from the Baltic Graduate and East European Studies School (BEEGS), Södertörn University in 2026, since the latest issue was published.

KARIN LARSSON
Media and Communication Studies
Medier, arkitektur och den drömda digitaliseringens ruiner [Media, Architecture and the Ruins of a Digital Dreamworld]



This dissertation examines the architectural renewal of Moscow during the 2010s as the dream of the world's political, economic, technological, and aesthetic progress after the end of the Cold War. The study places particular emphasis on the role that digitalization and digital technologies have played in Moscow's renewal, as well as on the actors within the sphere of global architecture who have contributed to sustaining this dream by participating in the creation of what was envisioned as a more beautiful, smarter, and more comfortable Moscow.

HUGO FABER
Political Science
Delaying Energy Transitions: Energy security, neoliberalism, and the social construction of fossil dependence



This dissertation explores how the economic decline of fossil and nuclear industries is resisted through new ways of representing them as necessary. It argues that energy policy is dominated by experts and elites, and studies the discourse within these circles. Using poststructural policy analysis, the thesis studies three cases in three articles through an empirical material of 56 elite interviews and 91 policy documents. The cases consist of political decisions to manage the decline of peat in Finland, oil shale in Estonia, and nuclear power in Sweden. The cases are compared in this book. The thesis contributes to scholarship on energy security, energy transitions, and neoliberalism, and argues for an increased dialogue between these literatures.

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Russian elections: **Narrowing space for political freedom**

ON *BALTIC WORLDS* website October 1, we published an essay on the Russian parliamentary and regional elections of September 2026, "To vote, or not to vote? And how to vote? Strategies and divergent views among Russian anti-war civil society and politicians in exile", by Valentina Dalla Francesca, PhD student in Sociology at Masaryk University.

The elections took place amid tightening state control over the electoral process and severe restrictions on dissent, she writes. The essay examines how anti-war civil society and opposition politicians responded through diverse strategies, from "smart voting" to boycotts and symbolic protests. In particular, it considers the role of independent media in helping voters make more informed choices. Although these initiatives do not signal the emergence of a broader political force capable of challenging the regime in the long term, they point, according to Dalla Francesca, to the persistence of limited forms of political agency within a narrowing political space.

Read the full report: https://balticworlds.com/category/elections/



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Yabloko party convention in Moscow under the "For Peace and Freedom" slogan, June 27, 2026. Yabloko was later excluded from elections on the grounds that it had received donations from Russian citizens living abroad.

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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.

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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.

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