

# per Concordiam

*Journal of European Security and Defense Issues*

■ **RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE IN ITALY**

A pandemic response that speaks volumes

■ **HUNGARY MAXIMIZES ITS ADVANTAGES**

An agenda that defies democratic norms

■ **CENTRAL EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY**

Wielding cooperation as a geopolitical weapon

■ **INVESTING IN THE POLISH ALLIANCE**

Honoring agreements with a dedicated ally

PLUS

Kosovo moves toward European integration

The success of Uzbekistan's reforms

COVID-19, the law and life-or-death decisions



## The Challenges Facing **EUROPEAN DEMOCRACIES**

# features



## 7 'Only Freedom Can Work Such Miracles'

By **Ovidiu Dranga**, Romanian ambassador to Poland  
Strong alliances protect European democracies.

## 10 'From Russia With Love'

By **Ludovica Balducci**  
Italy and the geopolitics of COVID-19.

## 16 Playing All Sides

By **Dr. Pál Dunay**, Marshall Center professor  
Hungary's multivector foreign policy.

## 24 Weaponizing Subregional Cooperation

By **Ovidiu Dranga**, Romanian ambassador to Poland  
The case for Central European solidarity.

## 32 'For Our Freedom and Yours'

By **Maj. Brigid K. Calhoun**, U.S. Army  
Why a strong Poland is vital to U.S. national security.

## 38 The Last Puzzle Piece in the Western Balkans

By **Mimoza Ahmetaj**, Kosovo's ambassador in Strasbourg, France  
Kosovo moves toward full European integration.

## 42 Defense Reform and Professional Military Education in Uzbekistan

By **Col. Murad Ibragimov**, Armed Forces Academy of Uzbekistan, and **Dr. Gregory Gleason**, Marshall Center professor  
The Armed Forces Academy of Uzbekistan.

## 46 COVID-19 and Triage

By **Dr. Sebastian von Münchow**, Marshall Center professor  
Deciding on a patient's life in a democratic context.

## 54 The Belarusian Crisis

By **Pavlo Troian**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine  
The Belarusian crisis and the influence of Russia.

## 60 Renewing Leadership

By **Dr. Suzanne Loftus**, Marshall Center professor  
Democratic institutions must emerge stronger from the pandemic.

# departments

In Every Issue:

- 4 DIRECTOR'S LETTER
- 5 CONTRIBUTORS
- 7 VIEWPOINT
- 64 BOOK REVIEW
- 66 COURSE DESCRIPTIONS



## Book Review



### *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines Between War and Peace*

By **Oscar Jonsson**

Reviewed by: **Patrick Swan**,  
per *Concordiam* contributor

NATO and European Union states believe the sanctions aimed at Russia don't cross any red lines that would mean war; Russia believes they have crossed that line.

## On the Cover



Mounting economic and political pressures are stressing democratic institutions across Europe.

PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

Follow us on Facebook and Twitter



Facebook: @PerConcordiam  
Twitter: @Per\_Concordiam



**GEORGE C. MARSHALL**  
EUROPEAN CENTER FOR SECURITY STUDIES

*Welcome* to the 41st issue of *per Concordiam*. In this edition, we focus on democratic development and malign influence in Europe and the effects on the trans-Atlantic community.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and Iron Curtain, democracy appeared to have triumphed over tyranny in Europe. More recently, however, we have witnessed the deterioration of democratic institutions in some of the Central European countries that made breakthroughs in 1989. Russian and Chinese influence in Central Europe and the Greater Balkans have resulted in increased anti-liberal media propaganda, corrupt business practices among the elites, and policy divisions within the European Union and NATO. More and more, we are starting to see Russian and Chinese influence in other parts of Europe as well that threaten our democratic values and principles.

This edition begins with a short “Viewpoint” by Romanian Ambassador to Poland Ovidiu Dranga, while Ludovica Balducci follows up with an article on how the coronavirus pandemic represents a concrete opportunity for Russian soft-power investments in Italy. Dr. Pál Dunay explores the coronavirus pandemic in Hungary, highlights the risks involved in relying on China, and exposes Chinese and Russian intentions within Central European democracies through their aid and underlying use of soft power to gain influence and power. Dr. Sebastian von Münchow examines how Germany managed to avoid a triage in its hospitals during the height of the coronavirus pandemic. The article focuses on the potential weaknesses a democracy could face in the wake of a disaster in comparison to autocratic counterparts, yet highlights Germany’s overall success at tackling the pandemic without human rights violations.

Ambassador Dranga also examines how meaningful subregional cooperation in Central Europe has been triggered by the security concerns persisting in the area since the end of the Cold War. Mimoza Ahmetaj, Kosovo’s ambassador serving in Strasbourg, France, addresses how the pandemic is exacerbating current trends toward the appeal and lure of authoritarianism in the Western Balkans. Dr. Greg Gleason and Col. Murad Ibragimov look at the transformation within the military in Uzbekistan and its greater political relations in Central Eurasia. Pavlo Troian considers the role of Belarusian statehood in the context of the foreign policy paradigm of Russia. And U.S. Army Maj. Brigid K. Calhoun looks at the post-Cold War order and the importance of a strong, allied Poland that will remain critical to U.S. national security in the 21st century. Dr. Suzanne Loftus concludes by addressing the main themes of the issue that link the articles together.

We invite your comments and perspectives on this subject. Please contact us at [editor@perconcordiam.org](mailto:editor@perconcordiam.org)

Sincerely,

Keith W. Dayton  
Director



### Keith W. Dayton

*Director, George C. Marshall  
European Center for Security  
Studies*

Keith W. Dayton retired as a Lieutenant General from the U.S. Army in late 2010 after more than 40 years of service. His last assignment on active duty was as U.S. Security Coordinator to Israel and the Palestinian Authority in Jerusalem. An artillery officer by training, he also has served as politico-military staff officer for the Army in Washington, D.C., and U.S. defense attaché in Russia. He worked as director of the Iraqi Survey Group for Operation Iraqi Freedom in Iraq. He earned a Senior Service College Fellowship to Harvard University and served as the Senior Army Fellow on the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. Gen. Dayton has a bachelor’s degree in history from the College of William and Mary, a master’s degree in history from Cambridge University and another in international relations from the University of Southern California.



**Mimoza Ahmetaj** is Kosovo's ambassador serving in Strasbourg, France. She was a minister for European Union Integration and an ambassador in Brussels working with the EU, NATO, Belgium and Luxembourg. Prior to that, she served as ambassador to Slovenia. She is among the signatories of Kosovo's Declaration of Independence as a member of Parliament in 2008 and later was an advisor to the Kosovo prime minister.



**Ludovica Balducci** has a master's degree in international relations with a specialization in international security from the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. Her research focused on terrorism, geopolitics, transnational crime and the European Union, with a thesis on regional approaches to human trafficking and a published brief on human trafficking in the European Union.



**Maj. Brigid K. Calhoun**, U.S. Army, graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 2011 and served in the 173rd Brigade Combat Team (Airborne) as brigade assistant S-2; the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne) S-2; and Military Intelligence Company commander. She is currently pursuing a master's degree in policy management from Georgetown University and co-hosts the DoDReads: What Are You Reading? podcast.



**Ovidiu Dranga** is Romania's ambassador to Poland. He formerly served as deputy foreign minister and spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Romania's ambassador to Belgium. He has been deputy secretary of state for defense policy in the Romanian Ministry of National Defense and deputy head of the Mission of Romania to NATO.



**Dr. Pál Dunay** is a professor of NATO and European Security Issues at the Marshall Center and academic advisor of its Program on Applied Security Studies, European Security Seminar-East, and Senior Executive Summary courses. He has been director of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Academy and course director of the International Training Course in Security Policy at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy.



**Dr. Gregory Gleason** is a professor of security studies at the Marshall Center. Gleason served as the Ministry of Defense advisor at the Armed Forces Academy of Uzbekistan in Tashkent.



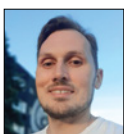
**Col. Murad M. Ibragimov** is director of the Department for the Study of Foreign Military Experience at the Armed Forces Academy of Uzbekistan in Tashkent.



**Dr. Suzanne Loftus** is a professor of national security and deputy chair of strategic initiatives for the Marshall Center. She obtained her doctorate in international studies from the University of Miami, where she also taught classes in international relations and foreign policy. She specializes in Russian foreign and domestic politics and trans-Atlantic security.



**Dr. Sebastian von Münchow** is the director of the European Security Seminar-East at the Marshall Center. He studied law in Berlin and Kiel, Germany, and in Lausanne, Switzerland, and earned his doctorate in international relations at Vienna University. He previously worked for the field missions of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in Kosovo.



**Pavlo Troian** is a diplomat who has served in the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 2009. He has worked in the ministry's press service and U.S. and Canada office as well as in the Permanent Mission of Ukraine to the Commonwealth of Independent States (in Minsk, Belarus) and the Embassy of Ukraine in Belarus.

**European Democracies**

Volume 11, Issue 1, 2021

*Contributing Editor*  
Dr. Suzanne Loftus

**George C. Marshall  
European Center for  
Security Studies**

**Leadership**

Keith W. Dayton  
*Director*

Dieter E. Bareihis  
*U.S. Deputy Director*

Helmut Dotzler  
*German Deputy Director*

**Marshall Center**

The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies is a German-American partnership founded in 1993. The center promotes dialogue and understanding between European, Eurasian, North American and other nations. The theme of its resident courses and outreach events: Most 21st century security challenges require international, interagency and interdisciplinary response and cooperation.

**Contact Us:**

*per Concordiam* editors  
Marshall Center  
Gernackerstrasse 2  
82467 Garmisch-Partenkirchen  
Germany  
editor@perconcordiam.org

*per Concordiam* is a professional journal published quarterly by the U.S. European Command and the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies that addresses defense and security issues in Europe and Eurasia for military and security practitioners and experts. Opinions expressed in this journal do not necessarily represent the policies or points of view of these institutions or of any other agency of the German or United States governments. Opinions expressed in articles written by contributors represent those of the author only. The secretary of defense determined that publication of this journal is necessary for conducting public business as required of the U.S. Department of Defense by law.

ISSN 2166-322X (print)  
ISSN 2166-3238 (online)

# TELL US WHAT YOU THINK



*Per Concordiam* is launching a series of surveys to explore the experiences of its subscribers and authors.

Use your smartphone to scan this QR Code or go to <https://perconcordiam.com/perconcordiam-survey> for access options.

## ALUMNI PROGRAMS

### Christopher Burelli

Director, Alumni Programs  
Tel: +49-(0)8821-750-2706  
[christopher.burelli@marshallcenter.org](mailto:christopher.burelli@marshallcenter.org)  
Languages: English, Slovak, Italian, German

### Alumni Relations Specialists:

#### Drew Beck

Western Balkans,  
Francophone Africa

Languages:  
English, French

Tel: +49-(0)8821-750-2291  
[ryan.beck@marshallcenter.org](mailto:ryan.beck@marshallcenter.org)

#### Jochen Richter

Western Europe

Languages:  
German, English

Tel: +49-(0)8821-750-2814  
[jochen.richter@marshallcenter.org](mailto:jochen.richter@marshallcenter.org)

#### Marc Johnson

Eastern Europe, Caucasus,  
Central Asia;  
Cyber Alumni Specialist

Languages:  
English, Russian, French

Tel: +49-(0)8821-750-2014  
[marc.johnson@marshallcenter.org](mailto:marc.johnson@marshallcenter.org)

#### Frank Lewis

Visegrád Four, Baltics, Middle  
East, South and East Asia;  
Counterterrorism Alumni  
Specialist

Languages:  
English, German

Tel: +49-(0)8821-750-2112  
[frank.lewis@marshallcenter.org](mailto:frank.lewis@marshallcenter.org)

#### Donna Janca

Americas, Anglophone Africa,  
Eastern Balkans, Mongolia;  
CTOC Alumni Specialist

Languages:  
English, German

Tel: +49-(0)8821-750-2689  
[nadonya.janca@marshallcenter.org](mailto:nadonya.janca@marshallcenter.org)



[mcalumni@marshallcenter.org](mailto:mcalumni@marshallcenter.org)

# 'ONLY FREEDOM CAN WORK SUCH MIRACLES'

## Strong alliances protect European democracies

By **Ovidiu Dranga**, Romanian ambassador to Poland

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on targets in the United States, the world witnessed an unprecedented wave of sympathy for America. In Romania, as in France, Germany, Japan, Poland and South Korea, people spontaneously expressed their unconditional solidarity with the families of those killed or wounded in what was a sophisticated, large-scale operation perpetrated by foreign citizens on American soil for the first time since Pearl Harbor. The world was in shock at the inconceivable — a strike against the world's superpower had happened in front of their very eyes. For the first time in its history, NATO activated Article 5 as it prepared for the war against terror.

The moral and operational grounds of U.S. leadership for what was to become a new crusade against evil, and one of its most insidious manifestations in modern times, have been unquestionable. Allies and future allies, friends and partners of America worldwide understood that this was the moment for action to protect the international community from what was widely acknowledged as a threat to our way of life, to universal values and to our common future. It was clear to everyone that participating in the coalition against al-Qaida was an investment in their own security and that being part of a coalition of more than 20 like-minded countries was also a contribution to a common, much larger good. The enemy was identifiable, and the solution was in reach and achievable. At least in theory.

Since then, many things have changed. An economic crisis has created worldwide turbulences, and a new one is looming. Russia has become more assertive and more aggressive, and China has risen as a strategic competitor to the U.S. The United Kingdom has left the European Union, and the tensions among EU member states over money, influence and the redistribution of power within the union have become difficult to deny. NATO and the EU have accepted new allies and partners who legitimately aspire to a stronger role in decision-making, in



Polish soldiers gather for a ceremony welcoming NATO Enhanced Forward Presence troops to Orzysz, Poland. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

line with their increasing contributions to Euro-Atlantic security and prosperity. Last but not least, the COVID-19 pandemic has put pressure on institutions, countries and ordinary people like never before in peacetime. Against this background, voices have grown louder in advocating a new approach toward U.S. engagement and commitments abroad, especially in Europe. What will come next?

As far as Europe is concerned, the answer may be easier. Europe needs America. A stable, secure and prosperous Europe remains inconceivable without a U.S. commitment to its security, redefined today as resilience in coping with multifaceted military and nonmilitary challenges. A strong American defense and economic presence in Europe guarantees that discussions about Europe's strategic autonomy will remain rather philosophical. Consequently, foreign enemies are deterred from interfering in European affairs — European elections and the

European economy included — with hidden agendas of hostile intrusion or strategic takeover.

The reason is simple. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain, democracy appeared to have triumphed over tyranny in Europe, but, as we all know, nothing should be taken for granted. The U.S. retains the capacity to intervene and protect the continent not only from outside interlopers but also from itself, by simply being present and acting as a solution provider or facilitator. America is the only geopolitical player with Europe-related interests and responsibilities that maintains a global security posture enabling it to act, if necessary, as an honest broker in or as the ultimate defender of Europe. If Europe wants to stay at peace with itself and the world, while being globally relevant, it needs to stay closer than ever to America, given the unprecedented international challenges and the interdependence that lay at the core of the trans-Atlantic link.

But America needs Europe as well. Let's take NATO's example. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is part of an alliance system created by the U.S. to preserve peace and order in parts of the world that had been torn apart by prolonged conflicts, chronic instability and regional rivalries. NATO protected Europe from a Soviet invasion and then continued to maintain relevance after 1989 through swift adaptation to a new security environment. And Europe has been there for America in return. Mira Rapp-Hooper is right when asserting in *Foreign Affairs*: "The alliance system lowered the cost of U.S. military and political action worldwide. Since the early 1950s, U.S. treaty allies have joined every major war the United

States has fought, despite the fact that for almost all these conflicts, they were not required to do so by the terms of their alliances." But will this be the case in the future?

For Central and Eastern Europe, the answer is yes. NATO's eastern flank has become pivotal to the allied defense posture since the illegal Russian annexation of Crimea. Against the background of what might happen should the situation in Belarus further deteriorate, front-line allies such as Romania and Poland — with a credible deployment of U.S. troops in these countries — will play a crucial role in preventing escalation or even conflict. Moreover, meaningful U.S. support for subregional cooperation initiatives such as the Bucharest Format (B9) or the Three Seas Initiative would be an investment in regional stability that can really promote opportunities for peace and prosperity. In partnership with Washington, Bucharest and Warsaw could develop new, more effective capabilities of their own to manage regional challenges and consolidate their profiles in the West — particularly in Washington and Brussels — as dialogue facilitators, cooperation enablers, peace promoters and agents of positive change in Europe's eastern neighborhood.

In a recent Center for European Policy Analysis report titled "One Flank, One Threat, One Presence: A Strategy for NATO's Eastern Flank," the authors concluded, *inter alia*,

---

British Army Challenger 2 tanks arrive in Paldiski, Estonia, as part of the deployment of the multinational NATO Enhanced Forward Presence battalion, an initiative to deter Russian aggression on the Alliance's eastern flank.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES





that “NATO should strengthen its deterrence posture in all domains and declare its capabilities across the entire Eastern Flank as FP [Forward Presence].” They also indicate as imperative “the establishment of joint multinational HQs that are focused on each of these regions [the Baltic and the Black seas] or, at a minimum, the establishment of appropriate intelligence fusion centers for the purpose of building situational awareness.” From a military standpoint, that would make perfect sense, but it might not be enough to deter strategic assertiveness or even aggression in the long run.

Military defense measures should be complemented by strategic economic endeavors meant to better integrate Central and Eastern Europe into global supply chains. They need to be redesigned anyway in the context of the ongoing pandemic to limit dependence on unreliable providers of energy, raw materials, health care equipment and essential spare parts for critical infrastructure. Relocating key production facilities from Asia to Central and Eastern Europe could solve some of the most pressing issues affecting manufacturing processes worldwide, such as the availability of qualified labor; security, quality control and proximity to destination markets.

Emerging economies such as Poland’s and Romania’s could be front-runners in this respect and turn into essential hubs for globalized innovation-powered industries and services, such as artificial intelligence, renewable (green) energy, bioagriculture, pharmaceuticals, dual-use high-technology research and development, aviation, cloud data storage and services, logistics and banking. In this context, it should be noted that experts such as Michael T. Osterholm and Mark Olschaker recommend in *Foreign Affairs*: “Despite the higher costs that it would involve, it is absolutely essential that the United States lessen its dependence on China and India for its lifesaving drugs and develop additional manufacturing capacity in the United States itself and in reliably friendly Western nations.”

A new business model that combines low living costs, outsourcing and remote working in Central Europe is changing the perception tech giants such as Google or Oracle have of countries such as Poland and Romania. Accessibility for venture capital, global exposure and higher connectivity could indeed put Central Europe on the front lines of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Areas such as Iași (eastern Romania) or Rzeszów (southeastern Poland), have already benefited from business-friendly ecosystems created by local authorities, big private companies and public universities. High-technology hubs have thrived and attracted multinationals, but also small and midsize companies in search of young entrepreneurs who prefer to work from home at a time of accelerated digital transformation. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance and cost effectiveness of remote working will change the labor market for decades to come.

Due to some particularities and comparative

advantages that Central Europe still enjoys, the region could become the Silicon Valley of Europe, a “startup region” as some have started to call it. Freelancer.com director Joe Griston was right when he told the “Central European Processing” blog on ZDNet that “freelancing is gaining popularity and confidence from larger companies, bigger corporations and organizations.”

Defense-related companies have seized new business opportunities and opened production facilities in Central Europe or are considering doing so in the not so distant future, inspired by others’ success in a marketplace where dual-use products have been profitably promoted. Lockheed Martin produces dual-use helicopters in Poland, and Damen Shipyards, a Dutch company, has produced military and civilian vessels in Romania for more than a decade. Their presence and their success ensure that Central Europe is safe for strategic investment in new, key, global supply chains whose disruption or malfunction would create high-cost effects for any aggressor.

It is now commonplace to say that the nature of conflict is changing, that the world we live in is one in which the many threats to security and prosperity are nonmilitary in nature and that we must adapt to these new circumstances. What has not changed, and with luck will not change in the foreseeable future, is the power of trust and confidence in each other and the deep conviction that together we can do better if we share a set of values that have inspired and united us and our predecessors for a long time. This is what can make the difference in difficult times.

In *The Light That Failed: Why the West Is Losing the Fight for Democracy*, Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes agree: “Unlike the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation cannot hope to defeat the West. What it does hope to do is to bring the West to the point of breaking into pieces, just as happened to the Soviet bloc and the Soviet Union itself in 1989-91.” When reading that, I recalled the emotions I shared with thousands of fellow Romanians when we lit candles for those who perished in the 9/11 attacks or when, one year later, we listened under heavy rain to U.S. President George W. Bush’s famous “rainbow speech” in Bucharest’s Revolution Square, after Romania and six other nations had been invited to join NATO.

I cannot think of a better way to close than the words of Romanian journalist Cornel Nistorescu, who in September 2001, while watching a charity concert dedicated to the victims of the horrific attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., asked himself: “How could so many Americans be able to sacrifice themselves for their fellow humans? What on earth can unite the Americans in such a way? Their land? Their galloping history? Their economic power? Money? I tried for hours to find an answer, humming songs and murmuring phrases which risk of sounding like commonplaces. I thought things over, but I reached only one conclusion. Only freedom can work such miracles!” □



**‘FROM  
RUSSIA  
WITH  
LOVE’**

# ITALY AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF COVID-19

By Ludovica Balducci | Photos by The Associated Press

**W**hen it comes to humanitarian crises and disaster, geopolitical games are usually suspended. That has not been the case with the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, the outbreak reignited past discontent in a European Union recovering from a “decade of division,” as *Forbes* magazine described it, caused by the 2008 financial crisis, the 2015 migration crisis and culminated in the Brexit process. In this already fractured context, the spread of COVID-19 has contributed to exacerbating the so-called North-South fracture. This divide has become even more evident now that the EU is working on a unitary economic response to the damage inflicted by the pandemic.

Italy, the first to be hit so violently by the virus, demanded more incisive responses from its “Northern brothers” to the damage to its economy and health system. Unfortunately, when Italy called for rapid intervention and begged for solidarity, the EU was unable to respond quickly and effectively. Rather, European states initially adopted a nationalistic me-first approach that has rendered the ground fertile to the growth of Euroskeptical sentiments. Italy, along with other countries such as Spain, Portugal and France, faced strong opposition from the Netherlands and Germany to the creation of new responses and the sharing of the economic burden the coronavirus has inflicted upon the EU. As stated in an article in *The Guardian*, this debate has “reopened the wound of the Eurozone crisis resurrecting stereotypes of profligate South and hard-hearted North.”

Russia has seized this new opportunity to further its geopolitical goals. Indeed, while European countries adopted nationalistic approaches to fight the outbreak, Russia presented itself as the Good Samaritan, especially toward Italy. Before any other European state mobilized to assist Italy in March 2020, Russia sent aircraft filled with experts and medical supplies. However, what Russia sent was largely useless for treating the virus, and the delivery can be considered Russian geopolitical gamesmanship in the heart of NATO and the EU. According to the *Financial Times*, the Russian move further eroded already weak pro-European sentiments in the face of expectations of solidarity from the EU that had not been met.

In light of this, the question can be asked: What is Italy’s role in Russia’s coronavirus geopolitics? The hypothesis is that Russia is using Italy as a Trojan horse in Europe, taking

advantage of the pandemic and of its already consolidated economic partnership and political influence in Italy. Over the past decade, Russian cultural influence in Italy has gained strength with the creation of Russian cultural institutes and an increase in cooperation and exchanges between embassies and universities in the two countries. Considering this scenario, as it has been argued, the coronavirus pandemic represents a concrete opportunity for Russian soft-power investments in Italy to undermine the EU and try to shift the balance of power further in its favor.

## THE NORTH-SOUTH EUROPEAN FRACTURE

The COVID-19 outbreak in Europe has highlighted the notion that Western countries tend to revert to nationalist approaches when under sudden and unexpected pressure. The North-South divide that emerged in the EU when it came to adopting a regional approach to the economic consequences of COVID-19 is not something new. Indeed, the EU that is facing the virus is an EU after a decade of division marked by financial crises, a migrant crisis and Brexit. During all these phases, EU member states have demonstrated a tendency to revert to national approaches when it comes to crises and to privilege national interests over regional integration strategies, as argued by Alasdair Lane in the *Forbes* magazine article, “North-South Divide: European Unity Strained By Coronavirus.” The same is true of the coronavirus outbreak in Italy and other member states. The closing of national borders, the disparities in the measures adopted, the lack of solidarity at the beginning of the pandemic, the absence of “communitarian spirit,” as Italy’s former Prime Minister Enrico Letta said, and the prevalence of a me-first approach have clearly shown the incapacity of the EU to react cohesively to a “make-it-or-break-it challenge,” as argued by Nathalie Tocci, director of the Italian think tank Istituto Affari Internazionali.

Italy was the first EU country hit violently by COVID-19 and instead of receiving immediate support from its European neighbors, doors were shut in its face. In March, Italy desperately called for the European Commission to activate the EU Mechanism of Civil Protection because of its need of medical equipment and personal protection devices. But “no EU nation had responded” to the call, as senior fellow Anton Shekhovtsov of the Free Russia Foundation noted in *The Kremlin’s Influence Quarterly*. Indeed, in preparing for the



Medical supplies are loaded onto a cargo plane outside Moscow in preparation for a flight to Italy in March 2020. The slogan, “From Russia With Love,” is written in English and Italian on the side of the truck.

spread of the virus across the region, every state has privileged its own needs and interests even though this policy approach is completely against the communitarian sense and the foundation of EU values. This reversion to nationalism has had multiple consequences. First, it has contributed to increasing Euroskepticism in Italy, a sentiment already strong in recent years. Second, it has created an opportunity for superpowers such as Russia and China to exercise their soft power over the West. Third, it has allowed the Italian political opposition to inflate the perception of imbalances across the EU. Indeed, as it has been argued by Jacques Delors, former president of the European Commission, what certain EU members overlooked approaching the pandemic is that it might pose a “mortal danger to the EU.”

The same approach and lack of solidarity have been evident when responding to the economic damage COVID-19 is causing. While the Eurozone was swept up by the economic damages of the pandemic, government representatives met several times to find a common solution. Italy, followed by 13 other states — among them France, Spain, Portugal and others most affected by the virus — have seen their economies frozen and have called for a cohesive and communitarian response in the form of “jointly issued coronabonds” — a significant rescue fund through which members would share the financial damages of the pandemic. Once again, the door was shut, a decision some

consider immoral and unethical. Since then the EU has changed its me-first approach and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has apologized to Italy, admitting that “too many were not there when Italy needed a helping hand at the very beginning.” But the initial response has already reduced trust in the EU, and many societies — first and foremost the Italians — won’t forget the lack of help. Only time will reveal the depth of the wound.

The reversion to nationalism by some European members has provided other superpowers with a significant opportunity. In particular, Russia and China have seen this inability to react cohesively as an opportunity to challenge Western dominance. Indeed, while EU members were busy adopting nationalistic approaches and failing to appreciate that the handling of the pandemic could shape the EU’s future, Russia was appearing to help the Italian government. Russia identified the COVID-19 outbreak as an opportunity “to strengthen anti-EU feelings and to reinforce the impression that the EU is crumbling,” and to demonstrate that Moscow was able to step in where “the EU and NATO failed” when the virus infected Italy, said Sergio Germani, director of the Gino Germani Institute of Social Sciences and Strategic Studies, in an interview for the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*. Using the slogan “From Russia With Love,” Moscow presented itself as Rome’s lifeline, being — together with China — the first responders to Italy’s desperate

call for help. These actions, together with the initial inaction of the EU, have reinforced Russian foreign-policy thinking that Western liberal democratic systems are unable to respond effectively to certain common threats.

## RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN ITALY

To understand why Italy is relevant to Russian geopolitics, it is important to understand the existing relationship between Rome and Moscow. For more than 75 years, the two countries have had “positive economic and political relations” strengthened by reciprocal “ideological sympathies,” according to the study, “The Kremlin Playbook 2” by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. A cultural relationship has strengthened in recent years as well.

Economically, Italy is a relevant Russian partner. The Italian energy companies Enel S.p.A. and Eni S.p.A. receive 40% of their natural gas from Russia. Additionally, the banking sector is a crucial pillar of Italian partnerships in Russia. Given the fragility and instability of the Italian banking system, Italy has reinforced its business in Russia. Unicredit and the Intesa San Paolo Group, the two main Italian banks, have significant interests in Russia. And recently the telecommunications industry entered into strategic partnerships with Russia. As “The Kremlin Playbook 2” reports, many high-ranking Russian government officials and oligarchs have made significant real estate investments in central and northern Italy — mainly in Tuscany, Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna. This corresponded with a 25% increase in Russian tourism in Italy in recent years.

The strong economic partnership is reinforced by political cooperation. Italian governments have generally identified Russia as a crucial economic and foreign policy partner, according to “The Kremlin Playbook Part 2.” Although some scholars assert that this partnership is sought only by right-wing governments, lately left-wing governments have demonstrated an interest in a relationship with Moscow. Under the administrations of former prime ministers Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni, Italy renewed significant economic agreements with Russia. Even after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, Italy continued cultivating its relationship with the Kremlin. Political collaboration between Moscow and Rome is marked by the personal friendship between Russian President Vladimir Putin and former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, whose administration built a strong economic partnership with Russia. In recent years, the Lega-M5S government coalition has reaffirmed the importance of Russia as a friend.

The cultural partnership has been cultivated in recent decades, according to the Germani Institute. Russian culture, language and geopolitics have gained significant traction in Italian universities. This has been the case at the University La Sapienza of Rome, where Russia-connected courses have found their place in several study programs, such as linguistic mediation, translation, language and foreign cultures, geopolitics and Russian studies. Many universities began sponsoring cultural exchanges and internship opportunities with Russian embassies and universities, especially the University of Moscow. Moreover, the number of Russian cultural institutes

and associations have largely increased over the past five years.

The scenario emerging from this brief overview of the Russian-Italian bilateral relationship reveals that in the European context, Italy represents Moscow’s most important ally, or its geopolitical pawn. Alternatively, Italy might be a Trojan horse with which Russia can undermine European stability and the Western liberal democratic system, as put forth by the scholar Artem Patalakh in his 2020 paper, “Italy as the Kremlin’s ‘Trojan Horse’ in Europe: Some Overlooked Factors.” The Kremlin’s approach in Italy at the outbreak of the pandemic can be seen as a validation of this hypothesis.

**While European countries adopted nationalistic approaches to fight the outbreak, Russia presented itself as the Good Samaritan, especially toward Italy. Before any other European state mobilized to assist Italy in March 2020, Russia sent aircraft filled with experts and medical supplies.**

## COVID-19 AND RUSSIAN GEOPOLITICS

At the beginning of March 2020, a tsunami of COVID-19 spread across Italy. The country was not prepared, and the health care system risked collapse. Many factors contributed to the escalation of the virus and the percentage of deaths. First, Italy was the first country to be hit hard by the virus. Second, Italy has the highest number of people over 65 years old in Europe, which, given the characteristics of the virus, has contributed to increasing the number of deaths and the number of those needing intensive care. Third, the coronavirus started spreading in March during Milan Fashion Week, Champions League soccer matches and the 2020 Final Eight basketball games. Visitors arrived from many countries. Fourth, over the past 10 years, the Italian health care system and its capacity have been damaged by defunding and public policy that favors the system’s fragmentation, according to an article in *Health Economics* by George France. Finally, given the initial underestimation of the magnitude of the crisis by central and regional authorities, no preventive approach was undertaken. All these factors strongly contributed to the devastating impact COVID-19 had in Italy. Unfortunately, Italy also had to face that other EU member states did not help when the tsunami arrived.

In March, when the central government realized the threat COVID-19 posed, the entire country was put on lockdown. From Lombardy to Sicily, shops — except grocery

stores and pharmacies — schools, bars, restaurants and other public spaces were closed. The economy was frozen, and people were forced to stay home and allowed out only for specified necessities. COVID-19 military hospitals were built in regions hit the hardest. Meanwhile, it seemed nothing could stop or at least slow the number of cases and deaths. The Italian Army's vehicles were used to transport bodies from Bergamo to other Italian cities because cemeteries were full. As this dramatic scenario played out, Russia stepped in to help. After a phone call between Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and Putin on March 21, the Russian president did not hesitate to demonstrate to Italy a solidarity that EU members had not. He sent aircraft filled with supplies to Italy as part of the "From Russia With Love" mission. However, it became apparent that the equipment and materials did not include what Italy needed — ventilators and personal protective equipment for doctors and nurses. Rather, the Kremlin sent experts and instruments for bacteriological disinfection and chemical-biological sterilization.

A close look at the composition, modalities and media promotion of the delivery reinforces the idea that Italy was being treated by the Kremlin as a Trojan horse in the EU. First, as Shekhovtsov suggested, the modality of the delivery was already suspicious: Why was the aid not delivered directly to one of the air bases in Bergamo? They were delivered first to Pratica di Mare near Rome and then sent more than 600

kilometers to Bergamo, a move that was not necessary but was crucial to Russia's strategy. Shekhovtsov also noted that having cargo travel across a NATO country for over 600 kilometers has the effect of impressing the population and gets the local media to promote Russia's Good Samaritan role — given that the same media underlined almost every day how the EU was not helping Italy. Second, as Shekhovtsov wrote, a long cargo trip across a NATO country — symbolic of a conquering force — might have been an image Russia wanted to send to NATO and to the U.S., its greatest competitor in the great power competition. Indeed, Italy has a pivotal role in NATO, given the number of bases in its territory and the numerous missions carried out there. The result was that Russia sent a message to the EU about its willingness to demonstrate solidarity with an ally. At the same time, the Kremlin tried to make it appear the EU and other liberal democracies were incapable of handling the crisis.

A *La Stampa* article argued that Russia's moves were part of a "geopolitical and diplomatic" strategy carried out by the Kremlin to once again challenge the EU and the liberal democratic system as a whole. Indeed, the Kremlin was quick to understand how the indifference demonstrated across the EU to Italy's situation was providing an opportunity to challenge the West. Finally, a third factor has to be considered: the propaganda Russia spread for the operation, which Shekhovtsov suggests signals the Kremlin's geopolitical intentions in Italy. After the phone call between Conte and Putin, the Russian Ministry of Defence sent 18 press releases in three days about Russian's mission to Italy. The "From Russia With Love" slogan was distributed in Russian and Italian, of course, but also in English. Plus, Russia-controlled state media, in particular Sputnik, used explicit anti-EU language with big headlines, such as "EU left Italy practically alone to fight coronavirus, so Rome looked for help elsewhere" and "Watch: Italians praise Russia, deride EU after Vladimir Putin sends in coronavirus aids." Across the international media, the images of the Russian aid delivery projected Russia as Italy's lifesaver.

## CONCLUSION

Even though COVID-19 represented the first critical global challenge after World War II, Russia did not miss an opportunity to exploit it to influence the balance of great power competition. Of course, many factors made the COVID-19 outbreak in Europe — and particularly in Italy — appealing to Russia. First, when the virus initially spread in Italy and the Italian government called for help, the other EU members reverted to nationalistic policies. Second, as a consequence of the health emergency, most European economies collapsed — especially in the southern states — and the EU had to find a solution to the economic damage caused by the pandemic. Although in speeches every EU member showed solidarity and expressed grief regarding the Italian situation, the search for a common solution to Italy's economic problems caused a deep North-South fracture. Indeed, while most members called for a joint solution, other countries wanted to keep a nationalistic approach. The fracture grew when certain state leaders appeared to show little



Russian President Vladimir Putin, left, and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte arrive at a conference in Berlin, Germany. Putin responded quickly to Conte's call for help battling COVID-19 in Italy.



respect toward the countries suffering the most.

In this scenario, the Kremlin saw an appealing opportunity to expose the fragility of the Western liberal democratic system. While the EU was failing to unite, Russia rushed in to “help” Italy, a country that more than once has adopted an approach to the Kremlin different from that of other EU members. It is not a new hypothesis that Russia might see Italy as its Trojan horse in the EU. This has consequences at the geopolitical level. Why did Russia react so quickly? Why Italy? And why promote the gesture so much? From a geopolitical point of view, Russia wanted to demonstrate how, even if under pressure and facing the same emergency, it was ready to sacrifice itself to help a friend when countries in the EU did not immediately act. In this way, Russia appeared as a Good Samaritan in a country where Euroskeptical sentiment was already well-rooted because of the perception of unequal treatment among EU members. Of course, this geopolitical strategy was revealed in the way Russia promoted the shipment and after it was learned that the equipment and biological experts that were sent were of no use.

Russia’s actions did solicit a European reaction. Days after the Russian delivery, some European states started sending help to Italy and offered to move patients from intensive care units when Italian hospitals were collapsing. Plus, Brussels and NATO countries immediately

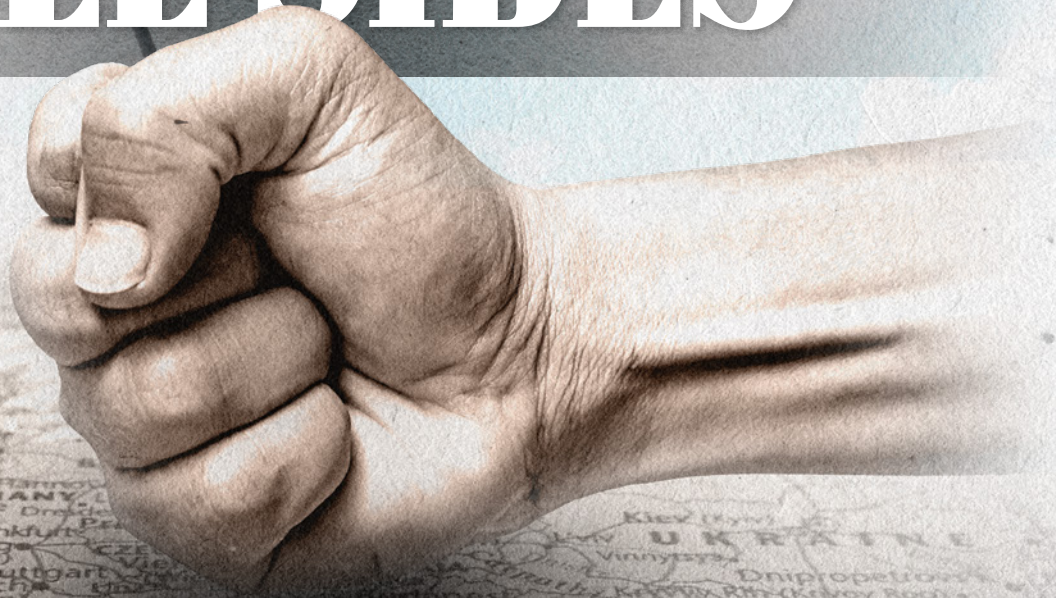
identified the Russian move as a geopolitical one. Whether the EU acted out of compassion or in reaction to the Russian actions remains unknown. But the consequences of leaving one of the most important EU members in Russia’s hands was a risk the EU could not afford. To put it in global terms, if the Kremlin strategy had achieved the desired effect, it would have seriously challenged the Western system. To some degree, the pandemic reinforced Kremlin talking points about a reversion of the liberal democratic system — based on cooperation, institutions and solidarity — to a nationalistic approach.

If EU members start privileging economic interests over communitarian ones, Russia will find fertile ground to exercise political and economic influence and try to challenge U.S. dominance in the West. Indeed, the risk is that when one European state, in this case, Italy, turns to Russia and exposes the fragility of the EU, that challenges the consistency of the democratic system in Central Europe. Unfortunately, while facing the pandemic, the West did not provide a strong unilateral response and reverted to nationalistic policies that do not fit into the liberal ideology. In this way, it provided Russia an opportunity to reinforce its position. What remains to be seen is how the EU will manage the second wave of COVID-19 and Russia’s reactions to that. What is certain is that great power competition never stops, even during a global humanitarian disaster. □

Medical staff tend to a patient in the emergency COVID-19 ward at the San Carlo Hospital in Milan, Italy.



# PLAYING ALL SIDES





# HUNGARY'S MULTIVECTOR FOREIGN POLICY

By Dr. Pál Dunay, Marshall Center professor

## SYSTEMIC FOUNDATIONS

Hungary has gained political attention way beyond what would seem normal for a country of its size (less than 100,000 square kilometers), population (9.7 million) or economic weight (0.2% of world nominal gross domestic product, or GDP). This is due to the unique political course it has taken since 2010 when Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was elected and formed his government. He was reelected in 2014 and 2018 and has a fair chance to continue in office after 2022. When Orbán's Fidesz party came into office in free and fair elections in 2010, its main effort was to guarantee it would not lose subsequent elections. As a former Fidesz politician insightfully quoted Orbán: "We need to win only once, but we need to win big." The realization of this project started immediately. The following elements seem to be the most important:

1. The government promptly announced that ethnic Hungarians beyond the border were eligible for Hungarian citizenship. Although unacceptable to some of Hungary's neighbors, such as Slovakia and Ukraine, where dual citizenship was not recognized, other states, including Romania and Serbia, where together 1.4-1.5 million Hungarians lived, could take advantage of it. Moreover, Hungarian passports are also available in other states, often in violation of the national laws of the country of citizenship. This contributed to increasing the number of voters in Hungary's national elections, first gradually and later significantly. As of spring 2020, the number of ethnic Hungarians beyond the borders who possess Hungarian passports exceeded 1.1 million in a country where the eligible resident voting population is 7.924 million. In the last two parliamentary elections 95-96% of so-called Hungarians beyond the borders voted for Fidesz.
2. The media law was changed, resulting in the full dominance of radio and television by the Fidesz government. Several further measures, none of major importance alone but of significant effect taken together, complemented the legal change. Freedom House categorized Hungary as only "partly free," an inauspicious first for a European Union member-state, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) found there to be a "lack of critical reporting in the traditional media." Whenever its control of the media and its strong pro-government bias has been challenged, the government points to the freedom of the print press,

which is read by only 4% of the population and is of little relevance. Social media has remained inclusive, despite attempts to constrain its freedom. However, the president of the National Authority for Data Protection and Freedom of Information has initiated a new law, which, if adopted, would enable national authorities to regulate Hungarians' Facebook profiles and eventually block them, which would constitute another step toward censorship.

3. Constitutional change has followed suit, with the old Constitution being replaced by the Basic Law. Constitutional revision was long overdue, but the Basic Law's adoption largely ignored divergent views and provided very little time for consultation, resulting in a law that has been amended and revised nine times since its adoption. This clearly demonstrates that the Basic Law is a flexible political instrument and does not aim to provide for stability in the legal system.
4. The judiciary did not remain unaffected, either. A new National Judiciary Office was established under the leadership of Tünde Handó, the spouse of a Fidesz party founder and formerly influential Fidesz member of the European Parliament. She managed the appointment of court leaders single-handedly and often arbitrarily. More important, a new prosecutor general was appointed for a renewable nine-year term. According to the law, the prosecutor general can only be removed if a successor is elected by a two-thirds majority of the legislative branch. As it is unlikely that other political forces would have such a large majority in the parliament, the current situation could perpetuate itself. In full harmony with this situation, the Hungarian government rejected joining the European Public Prosecutor's Office.

Orbán's final objective has been clear from the very onset. A fine-tuned multichannel mechanism was put in place to realize two objectives at once: 1) Create a situation that guarantees the stability of this government over the long run and across election cycles, and 2) avoid a highly visible and sudden turn away from democracy. However, as in every political process with many dependent and independent variables, built-in feedback processes and mechanisms have remained essential to constantly optimize the outcome and to avoid situations of massive domestic popular opposition or rejection by partners in the West, not only by the EU, but especially by the United States and Germany.

The economic foundations of the conservative Fidesz government were based on three factors:

1. The world financial crisis was largely over when the Orbán government was formed in 2010, and 10 years of steady economic growth followed (but has now come to an end due to the COVID-19 pandemic).
2. In the 2010s, Hungary received, per capita, the largest amount of structural funds from the EU.
3. During this period, approximately 700,000 Hungarians left the country to work abroad. Their remittances have reached approximately 3.4% of national GDP.

These three sources contributed significantly to the country's economic development. Together, in some years, they have contributed as much as 10% of GDP. This provided a solid foundation of stability.

How this large amount of extra wealth was allocated and what it meant for political stability requires a brief elucidation. It is sufficient to mention two main tendencies:

1. A reduction of spending on education, health care and social services and their relative share of GDP. The number of students in higher education declined significantly, while the minimum monthly pension payment has remained 28,500 Hungarian Forints (approximately 80 euros) for 10 years.
2. Central state administration's share of government expenditures increased, to include state propaganda (and a nearly constant confidential polling of the population); some elements of law enforcement (including

a praetorian guard officially named the Counter Terrorism Centre, but with a far broader mandate than its name would indicate); defense; projects in which the prime minister held personal interest, such as building/renovating football stadiums and construction of a special railway line to his childhood village; and routinely hosting major sporting events that regularly and massively exceed budgeted expenses.

From 2012 (the first full year from which data based on the Orbán government were available) to 2019, Hungary fell from a rank of 46-47 to 70-73 on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index. Hungary is now ranked as the second most corrupt EU member state and is approaching the worst-performing, Bulgaria.

In light of the above, it is not surprising that the population regards the state of health care and corruption as the country's two most severe problems. However, this does not mean that the electorate attributes blame to the government and would vote against the current power holders. Even if many would, the more than 1 million voters in neighboring countries and those who depend on social benefits would still guarantee a majority to the current government. According to the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights report on Hungary's 2018 elections, minorities and others in public works, dependent upon the local (overwhelmingly pro-Fidesz) governments that administer the funds, are vulnerable to intimidation and vote buying. In both 2014 and

Hungarian soldiers secure an area while searching for pro-Taliban fighters near a village in northern Afghanistan. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



2018, the OSCE determined that the elections were free but not fair due to the massive discrepancy in access to the media, primarily television broadcasting. At the same time, the electoral system discriminates against Hungarian citizens who live and work in the West. They cannot vote by mail while ethnic Hungarians in neighboring countries can. Expatriates living in the West must go to a Hungarian consulate on Election Day.

It is difficult to classify Hungary's political system. First, it is widely agreed that the Orbán regime is neither a full-fledged democracy, nor a dictatorship. The hybrid systems between represent a wide range of options, some closer to democracy and some more characterized by features of a dictatorial regime. Second, the Orbán regime has evolved over the past 10 years and, consequently, a static analysis in any one time does not offer a nuanced picture. Although the regime has clearly accumulated more and more dictatorial features and opposition politicians would be tempted to regard it as a dictatorship, many others either regard it as a democracy or conclude that as long as elections are being held and the legislature functions, the system cannot be identified as a dictatorship.

### INTERNATIONAL REPERCUSSIONS

Hungary is a small, integrated country that depends upon its partners and allies in multiple senses. But due to globalization and regional integration, it is largely impossible to determine the role of external factors in Hungarian internal politics.

#### *Hungary and the West: beyond loyalty*

Hungarian political scientists András Bozóki and Dániel Hegedűs got closest to the matter of Hungary's external relations when they analyzed one of the country's crucial external relationships in their March 2018 article in the journal *Democratization*. They concluded that the EU fulfills three functions: 1) a systemic constraint, 2) a supporter and 3) a legitimizer of the regime. These functions are not exclusive to Hungary and would apply to any country that meets these requirements: 1) Have a hybrid regime or what the authors call a "defective democracy," and 2) are net beneficiaries of the EU cohesion policy (i.e., receive more from the EU budget than they contribute). Hungary stands out in two respects: It has attracted the highest per capita amount of EU cohesion funding during the last decade, and it has done the most to diminish democracy, the rule of law and checks and balances, and has done so in a more declaratory manner than any other EU member state. Some other member states are actually delighted at Hungary's readiness to confront the EU.

Hungary has remained remarkably immune to the challenges that stem from the incompatibility between its political course and EU expectations, including those regarding values and principles. Before listing the main constraining elements, it is necessary to make a difference between two of them — the system of political conditionality reflected by the European Commission and European Council and the conditionality reflected in the judgments of the European Court of Justice. Hungary has quite successfully realized its interests in the former but much less so in the latter. However, for

the Hungarian government there is an important difference between the two. Whereas the former may result in political tremors, the latter largely remains a professional matter of low visibility.

Even those with strong reservations toward the current Hungarian government, in particular its significant constraint of democracy, have to recognize that Hungarian foreign policy has achieved a lot to realize the government's interests, whether or not these correspond with the interests of the Hungarian people. There are a number of very simple factors.

1. Hungary has been an EU member state since 2004 and "has a seat at the table." As the EU is a mix of a *sui generis* supranational entity and an intergovernmental organization, membership means that Hungary's consent is necessary to every decision that is taken by consensus, including approval of the multiannual financial framework. This makes Hungary's position as strong as any other member state.
2. There is no legal rule that says a member state could be expelled against its will. This guarantees a strong position.
3. The voting rights of a member state can be suspended (including in the European Council). However, it is conditional on the consent of every other member state. Hungary can only face this consequence if no other member state objects. This makes the position of the country strong if there is any other country ready to conclude a "defense and defiance alliance." Poland and Hungary have such an alliance, and the support of some other states (e.g., Bulgaria and Slovenia) cannot be excluded.
4. Fidesz, the largest party comprising the Hungarian government, is a member of the European People's Party (EPP), the largest party conglomerate in the European Parliament, which is internally divided over whether Fidesz should be allowed to remain a member. Although Fidesz's rights are suspended in the EPP, the decision to fully remove Fidesz has not been advanced, although there is large consensus that it disrespects the rules and fundamental values of the party coalition. Fidesz knows that its membership has value to the EPP because it may be reluctant to lose the 12 Fidesz votes.
5. Hungary's EU policy is pragmatic and utilitarian. At its basis one may find various morally objectionable tenets. Hungary's support can be gained, but usually not without a price. The time is past when the Hungarian government was grateful to have been accepted into the EU and played along. Now, it is ready to contribute to the multiannual financial framework only if it gets its "fair" share of EU funds.
6. While it is easy to understand what Hungary is up to in the EU, it is difficult to address it within the framework of a rule-based system and in a "gentlemanly" manner while the Hungarian government pushes rules to their limits and disrespects extrajudicial prescriptions.

The Hungarian government's main concern is that it will be deprived of EU funds, a major source sustaining the regime. Former Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg once said in an interview that the Orbán regime will come to an end when the EU money runs out. Although that is a simplification, EU funding is a major factor supporting regime stability. Hungary has frequently violated the rules on EU financial assistance, which has been identified by the European Anti-Fraud Office. In some cases, the violation was on such a scale that the international press paid attention, for instance when Orbán's son-in-law caused more than 40 million euros in damage with an investment that badly failed to meet standards. However, as in several other cases, the government paid the massive fine to the EU. This is a disturbing pattern: A crony or relative of the prime minister undertakes a project co-financed by EU funds. When it fails to meet requirements or is significantly overpriced, the resulting fine is paid by the nation's taxpayers from the state budget — and any profit stays with the crony.



Tanks maneuver during a ceremony in Tata, Hungary, in July 2020 after the Hungarian Army purchased tanks from Germany. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The Hungarian government makes efforts to avoid difficulties within the EU, particularly with Germany, the biggest and — for Hungary — most economically important member state. Orbán knows that Germany is decisive both in bilateral relations and as a potential promoter of his interests in various international organizations, first and foremost in the EU. Germany is Hungary's primary trade partner. In 2017, total trade reached \$64 billion with a small surplus on the side of Hungary. Germany represents 27.3% of Hungary's exports and 25.9% of its imports. (Hungary's next largest foreign trade partner is Slovakia with a share of 5.2%.) Hungary is Germany's 14th largest trade partner, right behind Russia and ahead of Japan. More important, Germany is by far the largest investor in Hungary, including some large greenfield investments, such as the Audi and Mercedes factories and the BMW factory to be built in the years to come. The three cities that host those factories are firmly in the hands of pro-government political forces. While Hungarian exports to Germany overwhelmingly consist of ready-made, high-value-added products, German companies are also important for keeping

unemployment low (3.5% before the COVID-19 crisis) in Hungary. The companies previously mentioned are regarded as the most-liked employers in the country and the Hungarian government takes care that they feel at home in Hungary, granting ready access to its highest levels.

Beyond this high-level interdependence, there are important similarities between the two countries. Although on different scales, both countries are export economies. Hungary realizes 85% of its GDP in the export of goods and services. The two countries have never had an adversarial relationship. They fought together in two world wars. And both have worked to have cooperative relations with Russia for more than a decade.

Whereas the Hungarian leadership perceives the EU as an entity that can be "played," it plays a different game with Germany. There, Hungary carefully measures the limits of its freedom, and when the two countries are at loggerheads, there is a very different reality below the surface. This was clearly noticeable in policy differences regarding the migration crisis. Whereas Hungary tried to keep the migrants out of their country (and often treated those who did arrive poorly, limiting them to so-called transit zones, which were later closed due to a May 2020 ruling by the European Court of Justice that classified one transit zone as detention) or let them cross the country to reach their dream destinations in Western Europe, Germany provided asylum to more than a million people. However, Hungary's firm line of defense against further migration along the Balkans route (in contradiction of international law) alleviated the refugee situation in Germany after 2015.

Hungary opposes the sanctions against Russia, declaring that they do not achieve anything. It presents exaggerated and fabricated data when complaining about economic losses suffered due to the sanctions. However, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó has declared openly that Hungary is in no position to abolish the sanctions. This statement preceding EU meetings to decide on the extension of sanctions reduced the pressure on Germany. Such a tacit understanding is fostered by frequent informal diplomatic exchanges in the framework of which Hungary also receives input from Germany on the limits of its *Sonderweg* (special path) relationship.

More recently, a new subchapter opened in German-Hungarian relations. Hungary purchased German armaments valued at 1.76 billion euros in 2019. This includes 44 new Leopard 2A7+ tanks and 24 Panzerhaubitze 2000 self-propelled artillery guns, making Hungary the largest importer of German-manufactured armaments. Moreover, as the transaction was between NATO member states, it was apparently problem-free. Whether Hungary has the military need to purchase such pieces of armament is beyond the scope of this analysis, though there is speculation in Hungary that the deal is intended to silence German reservations over Hungarian policy. Perhaps it could be characterized as "killing two birds with one stone." In addition to further intensifying economic cooperation with Germany, it addressed another shortfall: Hungary's traditionally meager defense spending. A decade ago Hungary spent approximately 1% of its GDP on defense, but in 2014 the government committed to reach or exceed the 2% NATO threshold by 2024. In addition, NATO advises

that 20% of total military spending should be on purchasing armaments and equipment or on the modernization of major weapons systems. With this purchase and others, Hungary will spend 1.66% of its GDP on defense in 2021, thus approaching the 2% goal in a timely manner. (Due to the COVID-related contraction of the Hungarian economy in 2020, the percentage will be even higher.) Additionally, 25-30% of the total will be spent on upgrades recognized by the Alliance. Hungary has also created a 2-billion-euro joint venture with the German arms manufacturer, Rheinmetall.

Hungary has taken advantage of the EU's hesitation and soft reaction to the undermining of shared EU values. On taking power in 2010, the Orbán government made an abrupt change compared to its predecessors: taking a classical realist stance in foreign policy. In NATO, where Hungary has been a member since 1999, its policy was that of continuity for a number of years, continuing to pay little attention to, and spend little on, defense. In compensation, it participated in operations that were of symbolic importance to the Alliance and its leading member, the U.S. It contributed to NATO's International Security Assistance Force and Operation Resolute Support missions in Afghanistan, it has a large component in the Kosovo Force mission, and it hosts the NATO Centre of Excellence for Military Medicine. Those factors make Hungary a more-recognized ally within NATO

than during the socialist-liberal governments between 2002 and 2010. However, the political assessment of Hungary is also shaped by other circumstances.

The Hungarian government has paid particular attention to its relations with the U.S., partly due to its weight in the international system and Hungary's largely negative experience with Washington in 2000-2002 during Orbán's first term. At that time, Orbán's government was challenged on various grounds, including anti-Semitism, its purchase of Swedish Gripen aircraft instead of American F-16s, and a few others, such as the belated and somewhat hesitant demonstration of solidarity with the U.S. after the 9/11 terror attacks. Orbán tried to avoid the reemergence of similar problems after returning to power in 2010. Still, due to such reasons as curtailing individual and political freedoms and certain cases of corruption that affected U.S. firms, relations remained bumpy. The administration of then-U.S. President Barack Obama had strong reservations toward Orbán's government, symbolized by the lack of an official bilateral visit with Obama in Washington.

Orbán was the first European head of government to predict and verbally support the victory of U.S. President Donald Trump months before his election in November 2016. Following the election, his understandable expectations of a visit to Washington were not realized until 28 months into Trump's term of office. There is written evidence from U.S. government circles of how divided the administration was and indicating strong reservations toward Hungary's political course. While during Obama's presidency the discord between Washington and Budapest was noticeable, it became more concealed after January 2017. There were pending

Migrants walk along a railway track after crossing the Hungarian-Serbian border near Röszke, Hungary, in August 2015. During the refugee crisis, Hungary defied the European Union and took strong measures to block irregular migration to and through the country. REUTERS



issues, including Hungary's too-close association with Russia, energy policy, the opening of an international investment bank in Budapest run by the son of a Russian intelligence operative, and the continuously postponed purchase of U.S. armaments and increasing clarity that the U.S. will have a relatively small share of Hungary's defense market. These issues were raised in Budapest by then-U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in February 2019, but Hungary later walked back many promises made during his visit.

However, following a number of unfulfilled promises, in August 2020 Hungary signed a declaration of intent to buy the National Advanced Surface to Air Missile System, which includes both air-to-air and surface-to-air missiles at a value of nearly \$1 billion. It is clear that the Hungarian government no longer felt it was in a position to resist mounting U.S. pressure without facing potentially adverse political consequences.



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán speaks during a news conference after a European People Party (EPP) Political Assembly on his Fidesz party in March 2019. The EPP suspended Fidesz's voting rights. REUTERS

When Hungary is confronted with questions about its commitment to democracy, checks and balances, rule of law or human rights, officials often refer to Fidesz having won free and fair elections (three parliamentary, three municipal and local, and two European Parliament) and mention the country's independence (sovereignty) and its membership in various Western organizations as legitimizing factors. Recently in appearances, Orbán has regularly referred to himself as a "freedom fighter." Irrespective of the facts, this demonstrates an important change, moving from the rational-legal legitimacy to a charismatic one — following the example of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Prior to 2010, loyalty and allegiance toward Western institutions and partners was an unquestionable feature of Hungary's foreign policy. This has become conditional on concrete advantages to both the country and the regime and has coincided with the disappearance of any kind of gratitude for successful Western integration, modernization and massive enrichment. Irrespective of its nonalignment with European values and often-wasteful use of allocated resources, Hungary wants active support from its major Western partners and for them to refrain from criticizing or undermining the regime

due to its policy course. The Hungarian government likes to have it both ways: taking advantage of European integration and interdependence while maintaining maximum autonomy and a traditional approach to sovereignty. Orbán said in August 2020: "In our eyes the West has lost its attraction. ... Europe must find its future in such a way that neither side forces its own life and worldview on the other. This is the alpha and omega of European unity today. Europe must find its future in such a way that neither half imposes its own view of life and the world on the other." This statement by the prime minister of an EU and NATO member state must be more appreciated in Moscow and Beijing than in Brussels.

### *Hungary and the East: toward dependence*

After the collapse of communism and the political system change in 1990, Hungary took a more pragmatic stance toward the Soviet Union, and then the Russian Federation, than other Eastern-bloc countries with historically more burdened relationships, such as Poland and the Baltic states. When it had been clear for some time that Orbán would be the next prime minister of Hungary, he visited St. Petersburg in 2009 as a guest to the conference of Putin's United Russia party. After Orbán formed his government in 2010, Russian-Hungarian relations reached a new and lasting high: annual bilateral meetings between Putin and Orbán, Russian investment in Hungary, some involving large Russian loans, headquartering a large Russian international bank in Budapest with full diplomatic status, and conspicuous types of cooperation, such as between state security organs and providing some members of the Russian establishment with Hungarian passports.

As the Hungarian government began heading in the direction of authoritarianism, it was glad to find a partner that would not object to its political course. The Russian leadership knows how to attract politicians disenchanted with the West, determined to perpetuate their own power, and reluctant to be challenged on the grounds of a value-based system of politics. In turn, Hungary fit into Moscow's long-term objectives — a relatively small NATO and EU member state, lacking strong historical animosity toward Moscow and ready to cooperate on certain economic projects, and also weaken Western unity at an affordable price. Cooperation has become multifaceted, extending to Russian investment in Hungary, energy cooperation and reassurance that Hungary does not support EU sanctions against Russia.

However, bilateral trade data do not substantiate particularly intensive relations. Trade between the two states was valued at \$6.5 billion (with a large surplus on the Russian side due to the export of oil and gas) in 2019. Russia's share of Hungarian foreign direct investment (FDI) is fairly insignificant: It is not among Hungary's 10 biggest investment partners. However, a few investment projects may make a big difference. Among them, the most important is two new reactor blocs in Hungary's Paks Nuclear Power Plant, which was built by the Soviet Union. This project symbolizes various problems of economic cooperation simultaneously:

1. The reactors are not in service anywhere in the EU, so there is no evidence that they meet EU requirements.

2. Due to administrative problems, the project is significantly delayed.
3. The investment will cost more than 12 billion euros and will be financed by a 10 billion euro credit from Russia. The Hungarian government has already drawn 80 million euros of credit while the project is stalled.
4. The project remains extremely divisive in Hungarian society due to safety and environmental concerns, costs, and heavy dependence on Russian credit to finance the project.

In matters that bind Hungary to Russia, Budapest is reluctant to make concessions. However, when it encounters stiff resistance from a major partner, it has stepped back, such as when Budapest attempted to purchase 30 Russian military helicopters in 2016 for \$490 million. After backing out of that deal due to American warnings, Hungary decided to overhaul its aging fleet of Mi-17 transport and Mi-24 combat helicopters in a much smaller deal with Russia that nonetheless did not make Hungary's helicopter fleet NATO compatible.

The Hungarian government's program of eastern opening includes various partners. On its face, there is no reason to have strong reservations: If there is opportunity due to rapid economic growth in the East, Hungary should take advantage of it. Whereas the opening may not present a problem *per se*, there may be wider ramifications. Can intensive interaction remain confined to the economic sphere, or does it carry the risk of Hungary being absorbed into a broader political agenda, in particular of such players as Russia and China?

Whereas relations between Budapest and Moscow became far more intensive when Orbán formed his government in 2010, improvement in relations with China was gradual. Beijing's aspirations have also changed with the One Belt One Road (OBOR) infrastructure scheme, later renamed the Belt and Road Initiative. Hungary found this a good opportunity to complement its bilateral effort. It benefited from China's business practices, including intergovernmentalism, opaqueness and comfort with corrupt practices.

Chinese investment in the Hungarian economy is far more significant, including a huge investment in the high-speed railway connection between Belgrade and Budapest, scheduled to be completed by 2025 and financed through a Chinese loan of \$1.766 billion (85% of the total cost of \$2.078 billion) by Lőrinc Mészáros, Orbán's closest crony and the richest man in the country. It is widely debated if and when there will be return on investment. Even optimists assume that the investment will not be profitable in the next 130 years. The conditions of the credit provided by the Chinese Export Import Bank have been made confidential for 10 years in Hungary and the contract was signed in April 2020 when no attention could be paid due to COVID-19. In a 10-year period (2010-2019), Chinese FDI in Hungary increased from \$500 million to \$4.5 billion. Chinese companies employ 15,000 Hungarians.

Beyond the economy, Hungary is a favored destination for Chinese tourists and where approximately 70,000 Chinese citizens live permanently. Direct flights connect Budapest with Beijing and Shanghai. Confucius Institutes and classes, as

well as the China-CEE Institute, complement this network of cooperation. Hungary also declared in 2019 that it would rely on Huawei in acquiring 5G technology (Huawei is the second largest Chinese investor in Hungary since 2005).

Hungary has constantly supported China at multi-lateral fora, including the EU and the Visegrád 4 group. Budapest has undermined consensus several times related to human rights issues in China. In 2017, Hungary refused to sign a joint letter denouncing the reported torture of detained lawyers in China, breaking EU consensus. In 2019, Hungary was among those EU member states that refused to condemn China's treatment of the Uighur ethnic minority. In 2018, Hungary was the only EU member that did not sign a joint letter asserting that OBOR runs counter to the EU agenda for liberalizing trade and pushes the balance of power in favor of subsidized Chinese companies. Hungary insisted upon removing any comment critical of China at a Visegrád 4 meeting with then-Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2018. Overall, Hungary has become a Chinese Trojan horse in the West.

## CONCLUSION

Hungary has, since 2010, attempted to combine its membership in Western institutions — intimating a “clean bill of health” as far as its democratic credentials — with the development of a highly diverse foreign policy orientation. It has rebalanced its relations post-accession while benefiting from the advantages of Western integration. Prime Minister Orbán's regime is a long way from the spirit of the words he used in opposition 13 years ago: “We opened the door to the West, and we showed the Russians, the Soviet Union, communism the door. And we are sending a message to the future not to let it all climb back through the window. Oil may come from the East, but freedom always comes from the West.” Eight years later, as prime minister, he stated in the capital of Kazakhstan: “It's a pretty weird feeling that one has to go east to feel at home.”

It is easy to understand the Hungarian government's agenda: It is realism that tries to maximize its advantages and gives in only to superior power. The Hungarian government is getting away with a domestic political agenda that defies Western democratic norms, preserving its political stability irrespective of how it gained power, and aligning its policy with undemocratic states that are tacitly delighted that Hungary weakens the community of democracies. Hungary's leadership offers economic opportunities to its government-dependent oligarchs and cronies and more importantly, high profits to foreign capital. As long as Audi, Mercedes, Siemens, Deutsche Telekom, Gazprom, Rosatom, Huawei, Wanhua and the Sichuan Bohong Group are happy, the Hungarian government can count on a favorable external environment irrespective of its regime. This peacock dance, buying external support for a hollow autocratic system at the expense of the people, costs more and more to millions of impoverished Hungarians who are also deprived of a chunk of their freedom. Hungary gives testimony to the crisis of a value-based system of international relations. □



# WEAPONIZING

## *Subregional Cooperation*

### The case for Central European solidarity

---

By Ovidiu Dranga, Romanian ambassador to Poland

---

**M**eaningful subregional cooperation in Central Europe has been triggered by the security concerns surviving in the area since the end of the Cold War. Although often encouraged from the outside, subregional cooperation in Central Europe has been acknowledged by countries involved as a necessity and turned into a geopolitical “weapon” or an instrument of “realpolitik” in their struggle for relevance and influence.

Its value stems from the capacity to efficiently prevent, deter and counter future hybrid subconventional security challenges and threats

coming primarily from the East, but also from the possibility to be used as a force multiplier, for promoting a positive subregional agenda in terms of connectivity, digitalization, sustainable development or growth. Central Europe has received growing attention from great powers (the United States, Germany, Russia and China) motivated by security and/or economic interests. In this context, Central European subregional cooperation could strengthen the sense of “en marche” solidarity, forging new ways of interaction to the benefit of the region’s strategic resilience inside the Euro-Atlantic community.



## Security along the eastern flank

The current security situation along NATO's eastern flank is precarious. Multifaceted security challenges coexist and reinforce each other against the background of prolonged political instability in Europe's eastern (and southern) neighborhood, pending issues on the trans-Atlantic agenda, international turbulences caused by a global redistribution of power, influence and resources, and a looming crisis of confidence in multilateralism as currently known. The most evident and threatening are the illegal Russian occupation of Crimea, Moscow's military aggressiveness in the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea, the crisis in eastern Ukraine (Donbas), the likelihood of hybrid-war operations such as cyber attacks and renewed uncertainties or controversies related to energy supply. Energy blackmail, hostile subconventional military activity and cyber risks make for a highly dangerous cocktail of negative security trends along NATO's eastern border, with the potential for escalation.

The dominant issue on the regional energy agenda is the controversy over Nord Stream 2, a Baltic Sea natural gas pipeline that will connect Russia to Germany, circumventing Central Europe, and in particular, Ukraine. The main concern is the likelihood of it being used as part of a broader strategy to consolidate Russia's dominating position on the European gas market. Despite the adoption of an amendment to the Gas Directive during the Romanian presidency of the Council of the European Union (January-July 2019), which clarified the EU's approach on the issue, recent developments indicate that Nord Stream 2 has turned into one of the most controversial topics on the trans-Atlantic agenda. Central Europe, given its dependence on Russian gas, has the most to lose from a gas war involving Russia, the U.S. and the EU.

The situation on the cyber front in Central Europe is fragile and prone to further deterioration if decisive preventive measures are not taken. According to NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, "cyber attacks are becoming more frequent, more complex and more destructive. From low-level attempts to technologically sophisticated attacks. They come from states and nonstate actors. From close to home and from very far away. And they affect each and every one of us." According to the European Council on Foreign Relations: "Cyber threats have increasingly moved beyond financial theft, cyber criminality, and intelligence collection into much more aggressive actions designed to shape national debates, referendums and elections in European countries. According to a Europol analysis, "Europe's increased vulnerability to hybrid attacks is not a risk inherent in technological progress and globalization: It is a matter of choice. Europe has settled on a laissez-faire approach to these issues." Things have become even more complicated because of China's problematic stance on cyber security.

Russia's aggression toward Central Europe and NATO's eastern flank has its roots in pre-Vladimir Putin policy. According to published reports, intensified military exercises and buildups in Crimea and Kaliningrad, including anti-access/area denial capabilities and nuclear-capable missiles, are only the latest episodes in a series of actions directed against NATO and its eastern flank members. The common view is that Russia started a neo-imperial policy toward former Soviet states and beyond after Putin's statement that the Soviet Union's demise was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century. In reality, according to Estonian politician Marko Mihkelson, this happened immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991) when the Kremlin "started taking back the old empire, calling it consolidation of the Russian world. The concept of near abroad was quickly introduced to separate the former empire from the rest of the world." A set of policies and enterprises aimed at regaining



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Russian President Vladimir Putin watches a navy exercise from the Marshal Ustinov missile cruiser in the Black Sea off the coast of Crimea in January 2020.

its great power status, its international prestige and influence, was introduced. This included the creation of frozen conflicts in Georgia and Moldova, constantly opposing NATO enlargement and an anti-West posture during the war in the former Yugoslavia, including the Kosovo crisis. There are reasons to believe that all of these steps were, in fact, part of a grand strategy, having at its core tactical hybrid harassment of or subconventional attrition warfare with Western powers and Western structures, until new geopolitical circumstances and the evolution of Russia itself would enable a more assertive Russian strategy in Europe and beyond. In a Cold War logic of confrontation, that would not exclude strategic encirclement of NATO's eastern flank.



A Russian passenger train crosses a bridge linking Russia and the Crimean Peninsula in 2019, a trip that Ukrainian officials said illegally carried people across the Ukrainian border. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Insecurity along NATO's eastern front is indeed induced by, but not necessarily limited to, Russia and its policies. Since the NATO Bucharest summit in 2008, when allies could not agree to offer Ukraine and Georgia the Membership Action Plan (MAP), it seems that the West has lost the strategic initiative. Since then, NATO and the EU have only reacted to actions staged by external players or to unexpected evolutions of difficult-to-contain crises in its proximity (Georgia in 2008, Libya in 2011, Syria in 2011, Ukraine in 2014). As Sebastian Sprenger of Defense News noted, the authors of 2019's "Munich Security Report" described a sense of "Westlessness" paralyzing the trans-Atlantic community. In this context, geopolitical adventures and adventurists proliferated, making room for strategic-disorder seekers and/or status-quo contesters to advance toward Central Europe, especially from the south and the east. After a long period when the West had set the agenda in the region and international law was observed, in a matter of less than five years, everything, including illegal occupation of foreign territories and unpunished or unopposed military aggression, was again possible without anybody being held responsible.

The financial crisis, Brexit, the migrant crisis and the subsequent offensive of populism in some EU countries, combined with the halt of the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans that was seen by many as a strategic mistake, fueled a sense of insecurity in Central and Eastern Europe. Under these circumstances, in some Central European capitals, doubts were expressed about whether European and Euro-Atlantic solidarity will pass the stress test. It raised the question of what will happen should a new, deeper crisis

emerge. In the words of British author Nick Cohen: "Today, Eastern European nations are again surrounded by threats, from Russian adventurism in the east to sublimation under EU policies in the west."

Thus, front-line states have understood that, despite differences and inequalities, despite divergent interests and sensitivities, they must join means and ensure the promotion of a common, positive agenda. Moreover, they ought to prove that they are ready to cooperate like never before for the common good. In fact, Central European states should be expected to commit and take risks for the sake of the values they have been sharing in pursuit of their vision.

### Meaningful subregional cooperation

**The V4:** Since the collapse of communist regimes in Central Europe, former Soviet satellite states have developed meaningful forms/formats of subregional cooperation using security as a central trigger or motivating factor. The Visegrád Group (Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia), launched in 1991, was the first. It was one of the most coherent attempts by countries in post-1989 Central Europe to create a flexible, noninstitutionalized framework for interaction between governments that included dialogue about issues of mutual interest. In the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal from Central Europe,

security remained a key element in discussions about Poland's, Hungary's and the Czech Republic's political futures in Europe. According to Polish author Jacek Więclawski, "the factor of the external threat was fundamental to the effectiveness of the Visegrád cooperation at its initial phase. Hence, the perspective to join NATO and the European Union was not only the aim of the transformation, but also the escape from the 'grey zone' of security between the falling USSR and the West."

## “Today, Eastern European nations are again surrounded by threats, from Russian adventurism in the east to sublimation under EU policies in the west.”

of state for European and Eurasian affairs. The newly constituted group, informally labeled V10, made a valid contribution to a broader dialogue on security by incorporating ideas and perceptions developed by 10 new members of NATO soon after their integration into the Alliance. U.S. participation was pivotal because it made clear to all new NATO members what Washington saw as priorities of the common security agenda and how common objectives, from

energy security to stabilization or fighting terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq, could be achieved.

Although they took place before Russia's aggression in Georgia and long before the illegal annexation of Crimea, these discussions revealed a commonality of views between the U.S. and allies that were part of what was later to

be called NATO's eastern flank. It made participants realize that an intensified dialogue in such a format would make sense because it would allow for a common understanding of security challenges in NATO's eastern neighborhood and the Western Balkans. On the other hand, it was only natural for Central European countries to have a strategic dialogue with an ally that had the political will and military means to intervene decisively, if necessary, in a regional crisis that could affect NATO.

This approach proved useful 10 years later, in the wake of the NATO Warsaw summit, where NATO heads of state or government agreed to establish an enhanced presence in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland to "demonstrate as part of our overall posture, allies' solidarity, determination, and ability to act by triggering an immediate Allied response to any aggression," as a Warsaw summit communique put it. Judy Dempsey, a nonresident senior fellow at Carnegie Europe, observed that, contrary to Germany, France and Italy, who argued that NATO's Article 5 would discourage Moscow from attacking Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania, "the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Central European states counter that defense guarantees without the necessary forces, plans, and presence deter no one. This group has succeeded in pushing through the upgrades in the defense of the Eastern flank." The outcome of the Warsaw summit was remarkable. The enhanced forward presence has become an undeniable reality and NATO's defense posture has been reinforced ever since, from Estonia to the north to Romania and Bulgaria to the south, with a special emphasis on the Black Sea.

It seems that the B9 has been reasonably successful so far in approaching regional security, particularly against the background of evolutions in Europe's eastern vicinity. It achieved a certain degree of geopolitical significance, in the context of NATO's adaptation to a changing security paradigm, but has not yet reached a necessary level of visibility and its scope does not yet include any EU-related security issues, although all B9 countries belong to both NATO and the EU.

But for various reasons, the Visegrád group (which became known as the V4 after Czechoslovakia separated into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993) was unsuccessful in assembling an actionable common security agenda for more than two decades. It was not until recently that the V4 countries managed to approach security issues collectively. The first successful step in this direction came in 2010, when V4 countries signed a memorandum on air force training cooperation. Soon afterward, defense ministers of the V4 countries decided to establish a battlegroup led by Poland. In 2011, an intriguing new idea was flagged since it made a clear connection between the U.S. presence in Europe, the NATO Strategic Concept and regional groups. In essence, a Stratfor analysis noted: "For all V4 countries, a coherent Europe-wide security alliance anchored by a strong U.S. presence is preferable to any regional grouping. But the latest NATO Strategic Concept, created at the end of 2010, shows an alliance lacking in coherence. For the V4, the main problem with NATO is that not all European states share their level of concern regarding Russian intentions on their Eastern borders. Breaking off into regionally focused security groups with common security interests therefore makes sense." Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea changed the paradigm in terms of how the eastern flank was approached by the Central European allies and by NATO as a whole. It made clear that subregional security cooperation in Central Europe could make a difference in successfully bringing up the issue of NATO's eastern border. The aim was to build and hold the political consensus that the eastern flank has to be defended.

**The B9:** The Bucharest Format, or the B9, which launched in 2015, was not the first attempt by the new NATO allies to gather and discuss security matters. Political directors from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia had met in Vilnius, Lithuania, in 2005, where they were joined by the U.S. principal deputy assistant secretary

**The 3SI:** The Three Seas Initiative (3SI), launched in 2015, aims to bring subregional cooperation in Central Europe to a higher level of complexity and sophistication. It was deemed to be a game changer by setting a new level of ambition in regional cooperation in terms of scope, resources and outcomes. By simply focusing on infrastructure, connectivity and energy, 3SI intended to extend the regional cooperation agenda. Projects in these fields have been funded through EU mechanisms precisely because of their complexity and high costs.

3SI tried to bring added value in its focus on the North-South corridor, given that most railway and highway connections had been designed as East-West “bridges,” linking Central and Eastern Europe to the West, as part of the Trans-European Transport Network and subsequent European corridors. Yet, less can be said of the rail-to-sea connection between Baltic Sea ports in Poland or Lithuania and the Adriatic and Black Sea points of entry for non-European goods, including energy, especially liquified natural gas. According to the Bucharest Summit Joint Declaration in 2018, 3SI was developed to fix that by ambitiously designing projects in three areas: communications, energy and transport. By introducing an economic dimension, “the Three Seas Initiative came as a welcome addition to the B9 security-centered format, further expanding regional cooperation and integrating it with EU policy and strategy,” wrote Oana Popescu, director of the GlobalFocus think tank, in the *Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*. After an ambitious start, the initiative started facing difficulties and opposition. Some voices claimed the 3SI had the potential to jeopardize EU unity and cohesion, when unity and cohesion were already being questioned in many EU capitals by populists and nationalists. Others interpreted 3SI as a “Plan B” with regard to the EU or as a rival to German activities.

The 3SI summit in Bucharest in September 2018, attended by the European Commission president and the German foreign minister, proved that the initiative is fully compatible with the European project and that it has no hidden (anti-German) agenda. Moreover, by delivering a list of 3SI projects eligible for funding through the 3SI Fund financial instrument, the meeting in Bucharest went far beyond declarations of intent, unfulfilled expectations and unrealistic ambitions. It promised a results-oriented approach and encouraged sectorial cooperation, acknowledging in a joint declaration, “the critical role of the private sector and financial institutions in ensuring the success of the goals of the 3SI.” In the end, the summit broadened the political traction of the initiative: Not only German and American officials attended, but other states (Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia) were represented, presenting 3SI as inclusive and open. Additionally, a business forum was organized and a network of national chambers of commerce was established, engaging the private sector in a coordinated manner. Notably, the summit in Bucharest was attended by financial institutions such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the World Bank. In this way, 3SI achieved political and economic results.

## Conclusions: capabilities, proximity, attitude

Central Europe has turned into a regional conglomerate of states that, while strongly and irrevocably embedded in the Euro-Atlantic community of values and institutions, has developed a certain geopolitical identity and a geostrategic relevance of its own. Frequent and various interactions at multiple levels have brought people and institutions together. It has opened up new, unexplored channels of communication among leaders and practitioners, between business people and public authorities from countries with different institutional or political cultures. In short, it created the sentiment of belonging to a community where cooperation is possible, desirable and profitable and, moreover, where participants are genuinely comfortable with each other because they are equal stakeholders in the expected outcome of their work. Communities of purpose and interoperability have been easier to achieve, and cooperation seems to have prevailed over competition.

Accounting for 100 million inhabitants (one-fifth of the EU’s total population), Central Europe is thriving. With an average annual growth rate of more than 3% for almost a decade, the region has been the beneficiary of a strong increase of foreign direct investment since the early 1990s, has received a significant amount of EU funds, and hosts regional headquarters and offices of several multinationals, according to studies by Intereconomics and the EU’s statistical office. With a contribution of more than 8% to the EU’s gross domestic product, Central Europe is already a voice on key EU foreign policy subjects, such as those pertaining to the Black Sea and the Western Balkans, but also on energy and cohesion policy. Many EU projects, such as the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the Black Sea Synergy or the Danube Strategy, refer to or originated from Central Europe. Their cumulated output and outcomes have shaped the EU agenda and introduced new ideas into the debate over the future of the European project and the EU’s role as a global player, including its relationships with Russia and China. Central European countries such as Romania and Poland are pivotal for ambitious EU projects under the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) policy and have constantly advocated for deeper NATO-EU cooperation.

Regional cooperation has added value to already existing Central European credentials in the area of foreign policy, security and defense. Central Europe will be an inseparable part of any meaningful cooperation initiatives in the EU’s eastern and southern vicinity, given its strong voice in favor of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans and its firm stance on EU sanctions against Russia.

**Central Europe and NATO:** Central Europe has been central to any far-reaching discussion on NATO’s defense and deterrence posture even before two waves of enlargement (1999 and 2004). Currently, 14 of 30 NATO members belong to this region and the Western Balkans. As a direct consequence of their coordinated efforts, Central European NATO allies host six NATO regional headquarters, eight NATO Force Integration Units, 11 NATO Centers of Excellence,



four battlegroups and more than 5,000 NATO troops on a rotating basis. But beyond numbers, Central Europe has been instrumental in raising informational and situational awareness regarding Russia's aggressive military posture and strategic assertiveness by pointing constantly and effectively to the threat from the east in various NATO bodies and meetings. Regional cooperation boosted Central Europe's contributions to NATO's transformation and its renewed emphasis on territorial defense and Article 5 operations. Central European voices have indeed been united in advocating a larger presence of NATO troops and equipment along the eastern flank, but also in drawing the attention of the Alliance as a whole to what could be the main political priority in the coming years: preserving allied unity, solidarity and cohesion in confronting any competitor and any adversary, if needed.

**Central Europe and the U.S.:** Subregional cooperation in Central Europe has been encouraged and facilitated by the U.S., which has been perceived as the indispensable guarantor of impartiality and meaningfulness. The region has been high on the American foreign policy agenda for almost a century. As American diplomat Daniel Fried observed: "In Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, America had included arrangements for Central Europe as an integral element of a general post-WWI settlement." Regarding what America should do now, Fried shared the view that the "U.S. needs to be present in and with Central Europe, with a strategic message about why the West and its values matter." And America is doing exactly this. Sending troops to the Baltic states, Poland and Romania, supporting B9 and 3SI

Demonstrators wave Georgian national flags in front of the Parliament building in Tbilisi and denounce the government as overly friendly to Russia.  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

cooperation initiatives and helping countries defend against Russian aggression sends the signal that enforcement of red lines in Central Europe is credible.

**Central Europe and the trans-Atlantic link:** Central Europe can provide opportunities for stronger, meaningful NATO-EU cooperation, therefore contributing to a more balanced, reinvented trans-Atlantic link. The B9 and 3SI belong to the same category of endeavors designed to reinforce each other and promote, at the same time, defensive and offensive agendas. The strategic resilience of Central Europe and NATO's eastern flank could very well be part of an enlarged common NATO-EU agenda. Its deterrence dimension could stem from the unmatched ability of both organizations to build dual-use capacities and capabilities (such as rail-to-sea North-South connections from the Baltic to the Adriatic and Black seas) that are interoperable and complementary. Central Europe could be a testing ground for a new, productive trans-Atlantic solidarity and interdependence, motivated by the fight for global relevance, not (only) by fear.

**Central Europe and Russia:** Central European countries are the NATO and EU members most affected by Russia's renewed aggressiveness. Their new but not yet fully assumed geopolitical identity derives from their geographical proximity to a resurgent, ambitious and opportunistic

global player. Subregional cooperation along NATO's eastern flank, perhaps incomplete and maybe still modest, has made a crucial contribution to this identity. Central Europe has been one of the main sources of informational and situational awareness on what is going on beyond NATO's eastern frontier. As a direct result of regional coordination, NATO took several steps away from its post-Cold War strategic complacency toward Russia, injecting a renewed political energy into defense investments meant to counter the Russian threat.

A united, strong and resilient NATO eastern flank could deter aggression by making any offensive operation more costly and more dangerous for the perpetrator. The value added of Central European states' individual efforts to strengthen national resilience is their cumulative impact, enhanced by regional cooperation, on the common capacity to resist pressure and repel Russia's subconventional or hybrid attacks that target societal and economic vulnerabilities. As designed by the B9 and 3SI, regional cooperation in Central Europe would indeed favor "bringing together a varied community of people, military and civilian, all invested in defending what they hold dear," Johanna Möhring, an associate researcher at the Thucydide Centre in Paris, writes in the web publication *War on the Rocks*. On this basis, it could be easier to draw red lines in Central Europe, the crossing of which would be immensely detrimental to Russia and intolerable for the West.

**Central Europe and Poland-Romania:** Poland and Romania are the largest eastern flank countries. Their combined population and gross domestic product account for more than half of Central Europe's population and gross domestic product, and their combined defense budgets amount to approximately 15 billion euros annually. It was no coincidence that Warsaw and Bucharest assumed a leading role in promoting regional cooperation in Central Europe as a defense delivery vehicle, using their posture within NATO, their special relationships with the U.S. and their similar positions on key subjects such as Russia, arms control and PESCO. Romania and Poland have developed a unique model of partnership based upon mutual acknowledgement of strengths and weaknesses, actionable diplomatic and military rapprochement and common regional responsibility. Mutual deployment of troops has been part of that model. Regional cooperation gave Romania and Poland space to exercise their ability to mobilize regional resources and streamline regional efforts for the benefit of regional security as part of a larger undertaking to make NATO and the EU aware that the eastern flank is indeed the first line of defense against eastern threats and challenges and deserves the full attention of all Allies.

The slow yet tangible progress of both the B9 and 3SI pushed Central Europe higher on the Western security supply chain. Romania and Poland, which host or are expected to host key NATO air defense capabilities, have been facilitators

---

An officer of the Donbas volunteer battalion holds the battalion colors in Kyiv, Ukraine, in 2014. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



and enablers of both initiatives and their roles remain central to regional cooperation because there are reasons to assume Bucharest and Warsaw share the view that, as Möhring writes, “defense and security cooperation is a child of necessity, animated by deeper geopolitical trends and driven by efficiency and legitimacy considerations.”

## Recommendations: Get stronger, stay united, be relevant

For subregional cooperation to succeed, it must follow a clear set of objectives and be carried out according to a set of principles. It must serve interests and solve problems. Regional cooperation is not an aim in itself; rather, it is a vehicle to deliver a fair number of dividends to all stakeholders and work for all participants as a multiplier of force and influence. If countries involved decide to continue cooperating in Central Europe, they should consider the following recommendations:

- **First**, subregional cooperation in Central Europe should remain connected to the EU agenda. Together, V4, B9 and 3SI countries can further contribute to a more balanced, yet comprehensive and ambitious EU foreign policy and security agenda, especially regarding the future of EaP and EU enlargement. V4, B9 and 3SI could serve as instruments to further anchor EaP countries and Western Balkans candidates to EU membership in the European mainstream, by a selective and well-prepared engagement with pro-European political forces and civil society in these states, helping them overcome temporary obstacles and shortcomings. Central European states are best positioned for that because their own integration experience is still fresh and easier to transfer and share, but also because they now know how to draw the attention of great powers to the geopolitical value of an area when that value is not always obvious to everyone. V4, B9 and 3SI agendas could be correlated and adapted to include EaP and Western Balkans issues to a larger extent.
- **Second**, within NATO, Central Europe must secure a strong common voice and a solid profile. Capitalizing on the success achieved in highlighting the eastern flank’s importance, B9 countries can consider an articulated, balanced and ambitious contribution to future debates regarding a New Strategic Concept of the Alliance. This process could be mutually reinforced with an academic dialogue on strategic issues among Germany, Poland, Romania and the U.S., mediated or framed by the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. At the same time, B9 allies could develop a more effective strategy to further shape NATO and EU agendas regarding strategic forecasting and strategic thinking, hybrid warfare, cyber security, military mobility and nuclear policy in close correlation with eastern flank countries.
- **Third**, Central Europe must be more vocal and more effective in supporting/advocating a stronger U.S. presence in and commitment to the region militarily, politically and economically. Joint and periodic endeavors in Washington could make the difference in capturing the attention of the U.S. Congress, the American academic community and the American press.
- **Fourth**, Central European states must stay united against military aggression and illegal annexation of foreign territories, and in defending international law and human rights. Values, principles and norms matter as the first line of moral and psychological defense against those who challenge the validity of democratic mechanisms and institutions.
- **Fifth**, a stronger, deeper dialogue/cooperation among B9 countries could result in joint/common assessments on security challenges and a common understanding of priorities and means to achieve common/shared objectives. One of them could be reaching regional cognitive interoperability together with military interoperability and creating capabilities in the area of strategic planning as part of NATO’s defense planning. Joint procurement projects/programs and a certain division of labor among Central European allies in terms of training and education can only serve that purpose and facilitate strategic interdependence, seen as an asset for Central Europe and for NATO. In this context, B9 allies could look into the feasibility of a “B9 Consortium of Military Academies,” a functional network of academic institutions serving, among others, the purpose of sharing lessons learned and best practices in training and education, with special emphasis on internalizing warfare experience accumulated by Central European allies in various theaters of operation since joining NATO. Integrating air defense systems and an intensified dialogue on (counter) intelligence should be top priorities for B9 countries as well. Cost effective projects that address interoperability and cooperation in these areas should be considered and budgeted appropriately in the next five to 10 years.
- **Sixth**, successful subregional cooperation must strike the right balance between affordability, acceptability and appropriateness. Central European states have invested a considerable amount of resources in regional cooperation. So far, the results have outweighed or at least matched associated expectations with all existing formats. In the future, the cost effectiveness of regional cooperation should be observed. V4, B9 and 3SI must deliver, otherwise public support could be lost.
- **Seventh**, one of the highest priorities for Central Europe is north-south mobility and connectivity, including digitalization and the transport of energy. Mobility and connectivity are relevant for security and important to development and growth. Central European countries could therefore use subregional cooperation to promote an ambitious regional innovation agenda on digitalization with the aim of creating an innovation friendly information technology ecosystem.
- **Last but not least**, Central European countries should work cooperatively for the common goal of strategic resilience. Once achieved politically, this could be translated into a new set of policies that could make the eastern flank geopolitically significant and impossible to overlook by any global player with interests in Europe and its close proximity. Central Europe would then remain central to the Euro-Atlantic agenda for long enough to become universally acknowledged as worth investing in, defending and developing. □

# *‘FOR OUR FREEDOM AND YOURS’*



Royal Castle and Old Town  
in Warsaw, Poland ISTOCK





# WHY A STRONG POLAND IS VITAL TO U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY

By Maj. Brigid K. Calhoun, U.S. Army

**T**hroughout the summer of 2020, Poland steadily secured headlines across United States media outlets, renewing discussions about the nation's history, its relationship with the U.S. and its role in NATO. The month of May that year marked the 75th anniversary of World War II's end and the 100th anniversary of Polish-born Pope John Paul II's birth. These consequential 20th century milestones recalled Poland's decisive contributions to victory and freedom during World War II and the Cold War, providing timely historical context for significant defense developments in June.

Polish President Andrzej Duda visited the White House three weeks after U.S. President Donald Trump announced an intended 9,500 troop reduction in Germany, spurring debate about U.S. commitment to NATO and the possibility of a permanent U.S. base in Poland. In response, a bipartisan cohort of U.S. members of Congress argued that the troop reduction would destabilize Europe to Russia's advantage. But Trump signaled that some of the 9,500 troops could be sent to Poland and even reaffirmed a September 2019 bilateral defense cooperation declaration during Duda's visit. In February 2021, the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden announced a thorough force posture review and halted all European troop withdrawal plans. While

some lawmakers and defense experts object to a permanent U.S. presence in Poland, the Eastern European nation may in fact be the United States' most committed and most vital geostrategic ally in Europe. A strong, allied Poland remains just as important to U.S. and NATO interests in the 21st century as it did in the 20th century, especially as the post-Cold War world order has given way to great power competition and an uncertain post-COVID-19 global environment.

As a U.S. Army officer who served 3½ years in Europe training alongside NATO allies, both my official and leisure experiences in Poland left a profound impact on my worldview. Although far from a national security expert, I believe a historical examination of Poland's centrality to U.S. and European security should guide national leaders and policymakers in confronting the challenges of great power competition today. Poland remains committed to its proud tradition of defending the Western world from military and cultural invasion. Poland's contributions to U.S. national interests date back to the American Revolution, when generals Tadeusz Kosciuszko and Casimir Pulaski helped the Continental Army defeat the British. As the U.S. rightfully prioritizes the Indo-Pacific theater to counter a resurgent China, national security leaders must economize existing U.S. forces in Europe by positioning them where they can best protect NATO's vulnerable flanks.

## NATO's Anakonda 2016 Exercise

At the beginning of June 2016, the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne), and I traveled from our home base in Vicenza, Italy, to Ramstein Air Base in Germany to prepare for the largest NATO war game since the end of the Cold War: exercise Anakonda 16. We joined over 30,000 military members from 24 countries to conduct simultaneous operations across Poland to defeat a fictional enemy that had invaded the country from the east. This invasion invoked Article 5 of the NATO charter in which an attack against one nation constitutes an attack against all. Our final rehearsal took place June 6, and I felt honored to continue the spirit of U.S. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower's "Great Crusade" with our NATO allies on the 72nd anniversary of D-Day.

As part of the 173rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, the only American airborne brigade stationed in Europe, my battalion loaded planes in Ramstein and jumped into Poland hours later. Our mission was to seize Świdwin airfield in

northwestern Poland, defeat the enemy force that occupied it and prepare for a follow-on mission, which our higher headquarters told us would likely be a nighttime helicopter air assault to seize the enemy-controlled town of Wędrzyn, 70 kilometers to the south. In reality, Świdwin airfield would be defended by a company-size group of 100 Polish soldiers role-playing the enemy.

Because battalion intelligence officers usually "dual hat" as exercise planners, I had been in contact with the commander of this Polish company to ensure the scenario would satisfy our units' training objectives for the exercise. I was immediately impressed with the professionalism and dedication he exhibited in the planning phase, and my admiration only increased when I hit the ground and watched my battalion battle his company for control of the airfield. The Poles put up a tough fight, employing defensive and disruption tactics similar to what the Russian military used in its 2014 invasion of the Crimean Peninsula. The "Crimean model" had become the training

A British C-130J plane drops paratroopers near Torun, Poland, during a multinational jump with soldiers and equipment from the U.S., Great Britain and Poland as part of the Anakonda 16 exercise.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



standard for most of our NATO exercises, and the Poles took it very seriously due to their geography and history with Russia.

Seeing the open terrain of Poland during Anakonda put history into context for me. Northwest Poland boasts optimal open terrain for swift vehicular and armored maneuvers with very few natural obstacles. With only one brigade of U.S. tanks in Europe at the time, I could envision how quickly Russian vehicles and tanks could attack across Poland toward major NATO bases in Germany if a 21st century confrontation did occur. Given Russia's conquest of Crimea just two years earlier, it was prudent for NATO to conduct an exercise of this size and scale, and in this location. The parallels between World War II and this exercise were not lost on the Russians, either; their media highlighted that the exercise occurred just weeks before the 75th anniversary of Operation Barbarossa, Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union, with whom Nazi Germany had been allied at the beginning of the war. More recently, Russian leaders and media routinely decry NATO exercises as provocative saber-rattling, some claiming that they could be used to mask a real invasion of Russia, as occurred with Barbarossa.

Anakonda 16 ultimately set conditions for expanded partnership with Poland and the Baltic states, which NATO solidified at its July 2016 Warsaw summit through the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) initiative. The EFP resulted in the assignment of four multinational battalions — separately led by Germany, Great Britain, Canada and the U.S. — to Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, representing the largest addition to the NATO defense posture in a generation. In turn, Poland and the Baltic states honored this commitment by steadily increasing defense spending to meet NATO requirements. By 2019, they constituted four of only eight member states to spend the targeted 2% of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defense, according to the NATO secretary-general's "2019 Annual Report." By comparison, since 2013, Germany has spent less than 1.4% of its GDP on defense. Greece, Romania and Bulgaria also steadily increased defense spending between 2013-2019, with each nation exceeding the 2% goal in 2019. The 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy specifically listed burden-sharing with allies as a requirement under two of the four vital U.S. national interests, which explains why President Trump considered reallocating troops to nations that meet the NATO requirement.



The defense spending of Poland, Greece, Romania and Bulgaria, the countries which constitute the exposed eastern and southern flanks of Europe, reflects their shared assessment of and willingness to confront the threats posed by Russia, China and other adversaries. In September 2019, President Duda and then-U.S. Vice President Mike Pence signed an agreement strengthening 5G security guidelines, a move that signals Poland's rejection of the Chinese-owned telecommunications company Huawei, whose equipment the Trump administration argued poses a grave security threat. Poland further demonstrated its commitment to NATO interoperability and military modernization in January 2020 by becoming the 10th NATO country to sign an agreement with the U.S. to purchase F-35 fighter jets. These commitments have also accompanied tentative, ongoing plans for the U.S. to establish a permanent military base in Poland to further deter Russian aggression.

Paratroopers from the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Division and the Polish 6th Airborne Division participate in a multinational exercise near Torun, Poland, in advance of the Anakonda 16 exercise.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

### Lessons from Monte Cassino and Krakow

A separate experience with the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, in January 2017 reinforced my understanding of Poland's commitment to its allies. We conducted a staff ride to Monte Cassino, the Benedictine abbey south of Rome that witnessed four long, bloody battles between January and May 1944. The Germans had fortified the abbey's surrounding high ground as part of the Gustav defensive line to prevent an Allied penetration of Italy. The Allied forces, composed of U.S., British, Canadian, French and Polish Army Corps, launched a series of assaults from January to May to break

through the Gustav line. The 2nd Polish Army Corps, led by Lt. Gen. Władysław Anders, successfully executed one of the final assaults against the Germans.

When the abbey fell to the Allies on May 18, 1944, Polish soldiers raised their nation's flag over it. Today, on a hill northwest of the abbey rest 1,052 soldiers of the 2nd Polish Army Corps who gave their lives over five months fighting alongside their U.S. and British allies. The inscription on the cemetery's memorial reads: *"For our freedom and yours / We soldiers of Poland / Gave our soul to God / Our bodies to the soil of Italy and our hearts to Poland."* Sadly, Poland's freedom would not be realized for almost another 50 years. In February 1945, just months after the final battle of Monte Cassino,

the Yalta Conference decided Poland's fate. Allied leaders ceded control of Poland to the Soviet Union; Soviet troops had already moved into the country and established a provisional pro-communist government. The Polish people would spend the next five decades resisting Soviet control.

Outside of military exercises, I was fortunate to visit Kraków, Poland, on leisure trips with my parents in February 2017 and December 2018. We toured the cathedral and castle on Wawel Hill, which boast a millennium of Polish national history and are symbolically analogous to America's National Mall and Arlington National Cemetery. At the castle, we learned about Poland's instrumental role in defeating European invaders at two decisive engagements

Graves memorialize a bloody World War II battle at the bottom of Monte Cassino in Italy.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



in history: the Battle of Vienna in 1683 and the Battle of Warsaw in 1920. In both engagements, Polish troops stood as the last line of defense between Western civilization and enemies intent on destroying it.

In April 1683, five months before the Battle of Vienna, the Austrian Habsburgs entered into an alliance with the Holy Roman Empire and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in response to the increasingly aggressive and expansionist Ottoman Empire. The Habsburgs invoked the alliance's assistance in September, after Vienna had been under Ottoman siege for two months. Polish King Jan Sobieski III quickly mobilized his forces, leading 20,000 cavalry to Vienna. Ultimately, Poland's heroic cavalry charge during the battle led to decisive victory and prevented a probable Ottoman takeover of Europe. Less than 250 years later, at the Battle of Warsaw, Polish forces once again defended Europe from an eastern invasion. While the rest of Europe recovered from World War I, a newly independent Poland became the target of Vladimir Lenin's Red Army in Russia's civil war. Lenin and his military commanders, having consolidated power at home after a string of military victories, sought to expand the Bolshevik revolution further into Europe by attacking through Warsaw into Germany and eventually France. After suffering successive defeats against both Russian and Ukrainian Red Army factions, the Poles took a final stand at Warsaw and repelled the communist forces. The "Miracle at the Vistula" thus prevented the spread of communism across Europe in the immediate aftermath of World War I. Poland maintained its independence for 19 more years until Hitler's army invaded in September 1939. Poland's actions at Vienna and Warsaw echo the lessons of Monte Cassino about the nation's historical willingness to stand and fight alongside and for allies at critical moments in Western history.

## Conclusion

From our nation's birth to the present day, Poland has steadfastly remained one of America's most reliable allies. As repeatedly demonstrated throughout modern history, a strong Poland begets a strong Europe, both of which advance U.S. national security interests. From Vienna to Monte Cassino, Polish soldiers have safeguarded Western civilization against forces aiming to destroy it. Pope John Paul II, the first Slavic pontiff, perhaps best summarized their contributions during his June 1979 speech

in front of Warsaw's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, declaring:

"In the ancient and contemporary history of Poland this tomb has a special basis, a special reason for its existence. In how many places in our native land has that soldier fallen! In how many places in Europe and the world has he cried with his death that there can be no just Europe without the independence of Poland marked on its map! On how many battlefields has that soldier given witness to the rights of man, indelibly inscribed in the inviolable rights of the people, by falling for 'our freedom and yours!'"

*Investing in a stronger alliance with Poland, a nation that has continuously fought and sacrificed for more than their own freedom, will strengthen NATO and best deter Russian aggression.*

As U.S. national security strategy justifiably "pivots to the Pacific" to address threats posed by China, policymakers and national security leaders must maintain America's existing commitments to NATO and especially honor agreements with dedicated allies such as Poland. The Poles have repeatedly met NATO's 2% of GDP guideline, are eager to host U.S. forces and reside in an ideal geographic position to respond to Russian threats. Opportunities abound for the U.S. and Poland to expand existing bilateral defense agreements to increase intelligence-sharing, military equipment and technology acquisitions, and professional military education exchange programs. Investing in a stronger alliance with Poland, a nation that has continuously fought and sacrificed for more than their own freedom, will strengthen NATO and best deter Russian aggression. □



PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

# THE LAST PUZZLE PIECE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

## KOSOVO MOVES TOWARD FULL EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

---

By **Mimoza Ahmetaj**, Kosovo's ambassador in Strasbourg, France

---

**A** pandemic is harassing the global population while a shift in geopolitical trends from liberal to authoritarian is increasingly visible in some long-standing democracies. Propaganda, political corruption and election interference are only a few of the tools being used to undermine democratic values. This trend has transformed governments and shaken stable societies in Europe and beyond. Democracy is a term coined for a government of the people, by the people and for the people. In contrast, dictatorship is a rigid form of government in which people are not given the liberties they could otherwise get in a democracy.

I come from a country that transitioned from a centralized form of government to a democracy, and understanding how people can prevent and overcome dictatorships has been one of my major concerns for many years. This has been nurtured in part by a belief that human beings should not be dominated and destroyed by such regimes. I have lived that reality and know many people who have suffered under dictatorships. I have learned about the terror of communist rule in various countries from books, personal experience and personal contacts. The terror of these systems remains especially poignant to me because they were imposed in the name of liberation from oppression and exploitation. A lesson from Kosovo's liberation and independence and the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia is that successful struggles against dictatorships can be waged. Over the centuries, we have

seen various dictatorships collapse or stumble when confronted by defiant, mobilized people. Often seen as firmly entrenched and impregnable, some of these dictatorships proved unable to withstand the concerted political, economic and social defiance of the people.

**A lesson from Kosovo's liberation and independence and the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia is that successful struggles against dictatorships can be waged.**

The pandemic and quarantine have served as food for thought when analyzing the reality surrounding us and the reality that we are living with. The year 2020 brought to the surface a variety of crises that were then complicated by political, military or economic crises. When a country's economic growth isn't the result of the democratization of society — as is the case in China or Russia, both being authoritarian states — that successful economy becomes a threat for poor and unsustainable democracies rather than an added value. We have witnessed the government of China and its approach toward Hong Kong protesters fighting for more freedom, or the plight of Uighurs, Kazakhs and other Muslim minorities in China struggling for human rights.

The same can be said of Syria and Middle Eastern countries that have been at a crossroads for some time, trying to overcome dictatorships. The 2020 elections in Belarus and the disputed win by President Alexander Lukashenko is another instance in which “democracy” is used as a tool to dominate people and not to serve their interests. It does not matter whether it is Russian President Vladimir Putin, Lukashenko or Chinese President Xi Jinping — they have one thing in common and that is the motivation and action taken to shut out the Western values that threaten the authoritarian rule of their countries. Though the Berlin Wall fell 30 years ago, the division between East and West remains. The fact that the European Union hasn’t been able solve the pan-European issue and successfully integrate all the countries committed to being in the EU has presented an opportunity to the East to come up with offers, be it financial, political or military, to those countries left out of the EU.



Riot police charge down a street during anti-government gatherings in Hong Kong to protest a national security law many see as China's attempt to oppress democratic freedoms. GETTY IMAGES

This is best described and visualized in the Western Balkans, a region of six countries that together have a population similar to that of the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia (17.9 million). Located in the heart of Europe and surrounded by the EU, the region presents a hot spot and chessboard for all possible political and military maneuvering. The Western Balkans, over the previous century, has proved to be a region where major powers exercised their influence, be it militarily, politically, economically or ideologically. The beginning of World War I, several Balkan wars and lastly the bloody dissolution of the former Yugoslavia are still very present in people’s memories.

Because of its geopolitical position — surrounded by EU countries and NATO member states with access to the Adriatic — and with a history of nonalignment

with East or West, the region continues to attract the attention of third states, whether from the East, South or Southeast. The Balkans are perceived as a small bite for giant powers, yet have proved to be the opposite.

**In the Western Balkans, it was hoped that by now the “isolation wall” affecting the region and the process of EU integration would have fallen.**

Appointments or elections of a rapporteur to any multilateral organization reveal the deep fragmentation and quest for domination in the region. Kosovo’s latest experience with the election of a rapporteur to the Council of Europe (CoE) was a manifestation of this gamesmanship. But this was more than a game. I witnessed an open confrontation over values and democratic civilizations between a German Christian Democratic Union (CDU) parliament member and Russian intelligence agency member. This is not the first time Kosovo has had a rapporteur in a multilateral organization such as the CoE, United Nations, the European Parliament, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and others. But by supporting the German member of parliament, Kosovo reaffirmed its pro-Western orientation and sent a message that it will not allow authoritarian forces to represent Kosovo in relevant institutions such as the CoE and the European Court for Human Rights, Europe’s highest institution of justice.

The recent transitional situation regarding the EU and Brexit along with the divergent attitudes toward the EU’s future and enlargement in particular have left few alternatives to Western Balkan states. Some have turned to the East, fueling Putin’s ambitions in the Balkans and Europe. Russia’s influence is obvious, particularly through its financing of political parties and attempts to influence civil society, the media, military arms and other matters important to free societies. This aggressive Russian campaign is aimed at shifting the global political order.

Today’s Russia is neither Gorbachev’s nor Yeltsin’s; it is Putin’s. It’s been more than 30 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the Western Balkans, it was hoped that by now the “isolation wall” affecting the region and the process of EU integration would have fallen. Kosovo has managed to prevent Russia from interfering in domestic politics because of its pro-Western policy and the massive public support for the U.S. and for EU engagement. Russia’s attempt to undermine this pro-Western national consensus in Kosovo emerged in 2019 during the aforementioned election of the rapporteur for





Kosovo to the CoE. Russia supported Alexei Kondratiev, a Russian senator and colonel in the Russian military intelligence service (GRU) who is close to Putin. Kondratiev was accused of kidnapping a woman while serving with the Russian military in Kosovo in 1999-2000 and was forced to leave the country.

His election would have meant a permanent blockade of Kosovo's path to state-building and EU integration. His engagement would have been dedicated to returning Kosovo under Serbian sovereignty. In that case, it would have been Russia representing Kosovo's interests and its citizens in the CoE. That would have prevented Kosovo from joining multilateral organizations because the impact of CoE reports is not limited to the CoE, but has direct relevance to the EU, where 60% of a country's progress report is based on the findings of its CoE reports. EU integration cannot be imagined without CoE membership because it is mandatory for states to implement and align their observance of human rights and the rule of law with the *acquis communautaire*, the EU's community of laws. Kondratiev's election would have significantly boosted Russia's attempts to influence the Western Balkans and exclude the EU from the region.

But the CoE assembly instead elected Peter Beyer, the CDU member from Germany, as its new rapporteur for Kosovo. It marked the first time that Kosovo's favored candidate has been elected as rapporteur in the CoE and is exactly what Kosovo needs. The competition was fierce and touched on all the geopolitics in Kosovo. Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Russia was facing off with Germany in Kosovo as it tried to impose its dominance in the Balkans and throughout Europe. This was a confrontation between East and West, between democratic and authoritarian values, the past and the future, the will of the citizens of Kosovo and the interests of some member states. It was not an easy game to play in a multilateral organization like the CoE, with 47 member states, where Russia is a member and a top



A man holds Kosovo and U.S. flags as he attends a ceremony in Pristina in 2019 marking the 20th anniversary of the NATO intervention that cleared a path for independence. GETTY IMAGES

donor and where the U.S. is a donor but not a member and therefore has no vote. Kondratiev's defeat sent a message to Russia that not everything can be bought and manipulated, particularly the will and desire of Kosovo and its pro Euro-Atlantic determination. Over the years we have learned to side with democratic powers and those who helped liberate and build the state of Kosovo.

The election of Beyer is a binding agreement that will facilitate and lead Kosovo throughout the process of membership to the CoE. It is a message to Russia that it's the EU and the U.S. that will speak on behalf of Kosovo and its people because over the years they have invested human and financial capital in Kosovo, with thousands of soldiers still actively serving in Kosovo and a Kosovar diaspora close to 1 million living in Western Europe and the U.S. who are contributing to their homeland.

This was a watershed moment for the Balkans. Had the Russian candidate been elected, the mosaic of Russian dominance would be completed in the Balkans. However, winning this battle does not mean the war is over. There will be many battles ahead until Kosovo completes the process of state building and state consolidation. But make no mistake, this was a clear message to the U.S. and the EU that Kosovo will always be grateful for each of their engagements and for their continued support. Once again, good intentions and commitment prevailed over dictatorships and the authoritarian systems they tend to impose. □

# *Defense Reform and Professional Military* **EDUCATION** *in* **UZBEKISTAN**

## The Armed Forces Academy of Uzbekistan

By **Col. Murad Ibragimov**, Armed Forces Academy of Uzbekistan, and **Dr. Gregory Gleason**, Marshall Center professor

**A**s the entire system of international relations is transformed, Central Eurasia is experiencing mounting threats to international and regional security. To meet these challenges, Uzbekistan has instituted unprecedented reforms across the entire spectrum of government and society, emphasizing defense reform in particular.

The unique challenges to international security and cooperation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 have placed a premium on the responsibility, agility and resourcefulness of governments around the world. The more capable of adaptation and adjustment, the more likely the government is to successfully address the multiple security challenges caused by the shifting contours of the international security terrain. The modernization of defense capacity requires updating doctrine and protocol, but that is not sufficient in itself; defense modernization is not an act but a process of continuous improvement.

One of the most salient features of Uzbekistan's current defense modernization program is the government's deep commitment to undertake significant and ongoing internal reforms and improvements in all spheres of economic, social and governmental affairs. One of the government's highest priorities is improving relations with foreign countries, particularly

Uzbekistan's nearest neighbors. Defense reform is playing a key role in the improvement of foreign relations. Improvement in professional military education in Uzbekistan is one of the fundamental pillars in the formation of stable and constructive relations with foreign countries.

Sweeping governmental reforms were introduced soon after Shavkat M. Mirziyoyev was elected president of Uzbekistan in December 2016. Uzbekistan's reforms had an immediate, discernible effect on the public atmosphere and soon had an empirically demonstrable effect on leading indicators of social and economic progress. From his first days in office, Mirziyoyev brought in a skilled, innovative team of government officials to begin implementing profound reforms in all areas of state development, particularly in defense and security institutions. In the early days of Uzbekistan's reform programs, new leadership was announced at the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The National Security Service was reorganized as the Uzbek State Security Service in 2018. A key public security organization, the Uzbek National Guard, founded in 1994, was greatly expanded in 2019. The Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan was expanded and given new responsibilities as the country's leading foreign policy think tank.



An Uzbek soldier stands at attention during Uzbekistan's Independence Day celebration. Uzbekistan declared independence from the Soviet Union on August 31, 1991. REUTERS



STAFF SGT. STEVEN COLVIN/U.S. ARMY

## The success of Uzbekistan's reforms

In addition to improvements in the security-related institutions, Uzbekistan also undertook a broad and ambitious program of modernization in the social and economic spheres, focused on improvements in the legal and policy framework of commercial activities and the improvement of health and social support services. The government began a systematic process of liberalizing the economy, first through fundamental currency modernization in 2017 and commercial enterprise privatization in 2018.

The effects of improved social and commercial policies were soon recognized and applauded by commercial interests and international organizations. For instance, in January 2020 World Bank Vice President Cyril Muller, head of the office of the European and Central Asian region, observed that Uzbekistan's lending program had grown to be the second largest in the region, second only to Turkey. That is significant in itself. The World Bank includes in the European and Central Asian region: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. This group of countries includes all the states of the post-Soviet communist world. Turkey, of course, was never a communist country, and most institutions do not categorize it today as either in Europe or in Central Asia. If one sets Turkey aside, Muller's statement implies that Uzbekistan, drawing more World Bank lending than all the other countries in the bank's region, represented the largest support portfolio among all the post-communist countries that emerged from the Soviet Union's disintegration.

The importance of Uzbekistan's economic, social and governmental reforms extends beyond the country's borders, to the entire Central and South Asian region. Uzbekistan is playing an increasingly important role in the region as a rapidly developing and stabilizing factor. In foreign policy, Uzbekistan occupies a geographical position that bridges

East and West, North and South. Uzbekistan's role in Afghanistan's reconciliation efforts illustrates the country's importance in the region.

In February 2018, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani chaired the meeting leading to the Kabul Declaration, making a critical appeal to warring parties for reconciliation of Afghanistan's long-enduring conflicts. The United Nations Security Council in March 2018 endorsed Ghani's appeal for the "comprehensive and inclusive Afghan-led and Afghan-owned political process to support reconciliation." President Mirziyoyev, at the close of the Tashkent Peace Conference on Afghanistan in March 2018, offered to host Afghanistan reconciliation negotiations in Tashkent. A new phase of Afghanistan reconciliation negotiations opened, offering new hope to bring an end to the country's 40-year strife. Bad-faith negotiations and divisive tactics could undermine Afghanistan's stabilization. This underscores the enduring importance of Mirziyoyev's insistence on an Afghan-led direct dialogue between the Afghan central government and opposing domestic political forces to restore peace and legitimacy. Uzbekistan's efforts to promote this dialogue and reconciliation process stand out as one of the most important current developments in the Central and South Asian region. Uzbekistan's defense and security reforms are a fundamental part of Uzbekistan's continued contribution to peace and security in the region.

Soldiers from Uzbekistan and the United States train together during the Invisible Sentry exercise in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in February 2020.

## Defense reform and professional military education

During the Soviet Union's disintegration, Uzbekistan adopted a number of key national security and defense policies that were focused on protecting the national security of the newly established independent state. In May 1992, Tashkent served as the meeting place for the post-Soviet states that adopted the Collective Security Treaty (CST), an important stabilizing factor in the final stages of the Soviet Union. In signing

the CST, the former Soviet socialist republics set out to build new national security capacities adapted to a new age and a new set of national security requirements. The first years of post-Soviet independence were marked by simply building on existing practices and policies of Soviet military practice. Gradually, the Soviet conventions and practices were overtaken by substantial defense reforms.

For two decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, Uzbek military practice was still to a large extent inherited from the Soviet period. In 2010, the Uzbek government officially identified the importance of new practices and policies and new ways of thinking about national security. The Uzbek Armed Forces Academy was identified as the premier professional military educational institution. It was assigned responsibility to combine the functions of military educational institutions, including service colleges, staff and command colleges and strategic-level war colleges, into a single, leading professional military institution. The current reforms appear to be reinforcing this trend in the country's defense reorganization.

In the context of continuing globalization and the transformation of the entire system of international relations, the military and political situation in the world is increasingly characterized by an expansion of the spectrum of challenges and threats to international and regional security: the intensification of geopolitical tensions, and the growing predominance of forceful approaches to resolving conflicts and crisis situations.

A big step forward was taken when the Defense Doctrine of the Republic of Uzbekistan was adopted on January 9, 2018. It defines the main characteristics of modern military conflicts:

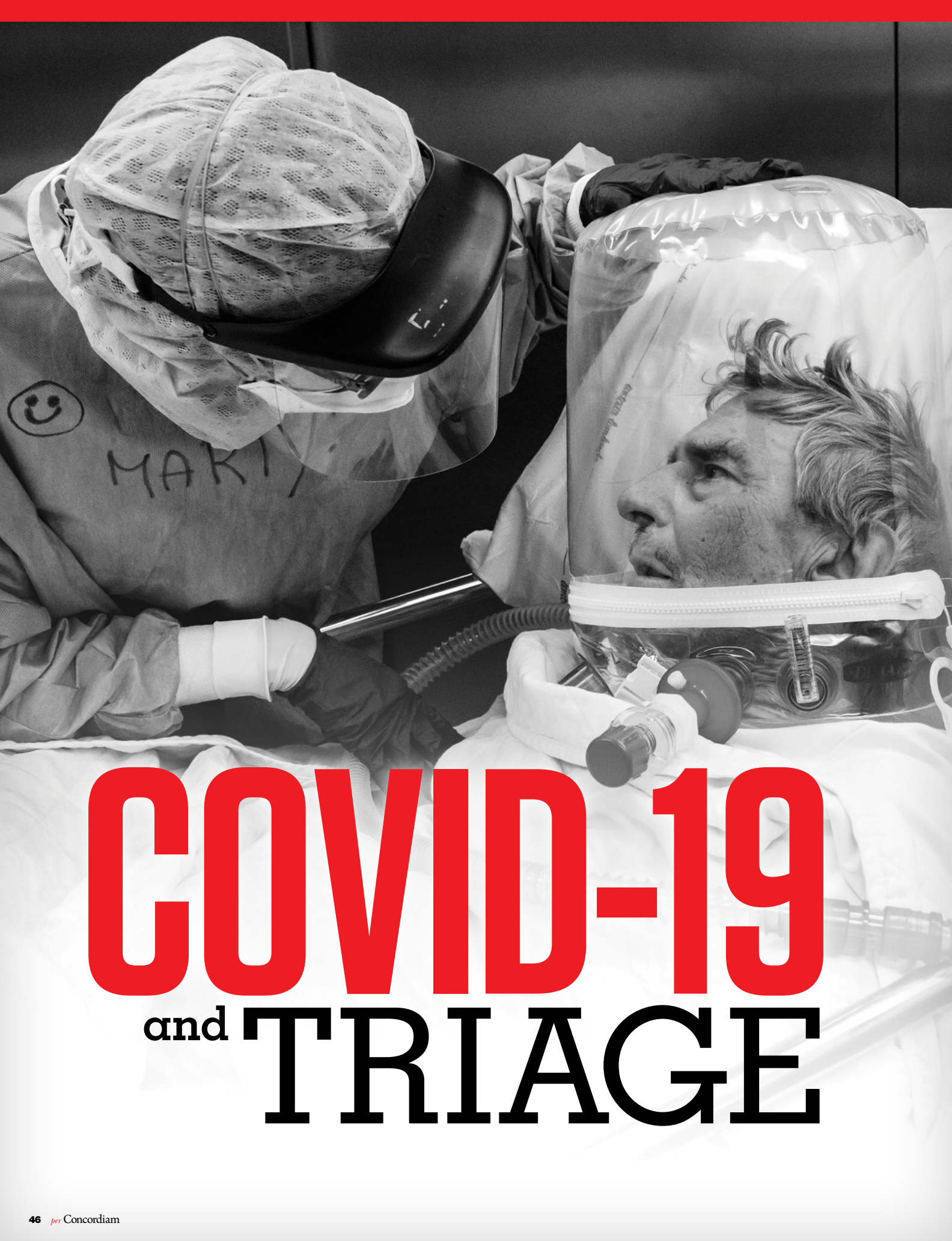
- Preparatory informational and psychological propaganda campaigns aimed at establishing political justification and shaping international public opinion on the need to use military force to resolve an outstanding dispute.
- The use, along with military force, of nonmilitary measures (political, economic, information-psychological and others).
- The use of high-precision weapons, electronic warfare, unmanned aerial vehicles and robotic systems, network automated control systems; the ability to pinpoint targets on the entire territory of the opposing side; high mobility and employment of self-sufficient groupings of forces.
- The participation of special operations forces, illegal armed formations, private military companies and other hired personnel using sabotage and terrorist fighting methods; broad involvement and high vulnerability of the local population.
- The disabling (disruption of functioning) of important state infrastructure, the destruction of which can trigger large-scale emergency situations, including transborder crises; and a high probability of the rapid transformation of one form of military conflict into another.

In terms of implementing the goals of the new defense doctrine, it is critical to prepare a cadre with the skills and

knowledge necessary to implement national security objectives. In February 2013, the Ministry of Defense asked the United States Embassy in Tashkent to assess the Uzbek Armed Forces Academy. At that time, the Uzbek government was particularly interested in promoting bilateral cooperation in the field of military education to promote Uzbekistan's professional military education (PME). The Office of the U.S. Secretary of Defense offered to help develop a program of cooperation in contemporary PME. At roughly the same time, the Uzbek Ministry of Defense requested similar assistance from NATO. These Uzbek requests eventually resulted in an exchange program called the Defense Education Enhancement Program, or DEEP. NATO established a Partnership for Peace Training Center in Tashkent. The U.S., in close consultation with partners, developed a PME program for the Uzbek Armed Forces Academy. The thematic for the PME focused on applied topics, such as courses in counterterrorism, civil emergency planning, staff officer training and familiarization with international standards. The U.S. DEEP program was based on demand-driven stimulus, involving consultations and discussions between U.S. and Uzbek experts in professional military education. Following the DEEP program, the U.S. government provided additional support through the Ministry of Defense Advisor program of the U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency. The program provided an ongoing PME specialist physically situated within the Uzbek Armed Forces Academy as a continuous source of PME exchange.

The initial stages of the DEEP program focused on providing new instructional models and new curriculum materials. A high priority was placed on shifting from a static to a dynamic instructional model. A static model relies on one-directional presentation of course material assimilated in rote fashion by students. A dynamic model differs in that, while it includes the presentation of conventional curriculum content, it also presents material in the context of instructor-student interaction, thereby encouraging analytical reasoning, appropriate initiative, and the implementation of innovative adult learning technologies including exercise-based instructional modules.

On the basis of discussions and exchanges, it is clear that the PME specialists at the Armed Forces Academy clearly recognize and appreciate the importance of understanding international standards in teaching methods, in particular regarding advanced standards of methodology and judgment, critical thinking and data-driven evidence. The Uzbek Armed Forces Academy emphasizes the importance of interoperability along the lines of international standards. This modern orientation includes the development of courses on familiarization with NATO's organization and processes, staff planning procedures, counterterrorism and civil emergency planning, as well as classes that relate to technological advances such as advanced distributed learning. The inclusion of lessons learned from recent armed conflicts, such as in Afghanistan and Iraq, have provided an important component to the Uzbek Armed Forces Academy's modern PME curriculum. □



# COVID-19

and TRIAGE

# Deciding on a Patient's Life in a Democratic Context

By Dr. Sebastian von Münchow, Marshall Center professor

Most countries in the wider trans-Atlantic space try to adhere to democratic values, the rule of law and respect for human rights. Regarding the latter, the right to life and the inviolability of human dignity are prominently enshrined in most of their constitutions. They form the very foundation of the moral and ethical core beliefs of the international community of liberal-minded states. As a result, the health care sectors of these countries attempt to cure all patients regardless of their backgrounds or affiliations. Doctors apply state-of-the-art medical treatments to try to cure the most serious of diseases. However, this maxim was challenged when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Europe and North America.

In early 2020, the Western public was not overly concerned about news of the coronavirus. That changed dramatically when COVID-19 began to spread at the end of February that year. The virus was especially virulent in Western Europe. Hot spots were Barcelona, London, Bavaria, northern Italy and the French region of Grand Est. Reports of Lombardian and Alsatian hospitals in distress began appearing in European news outlets. By mid-March, the public was shocked to learn that Italian physicians had too few ventilators to save all COVID-19 patients. Most European hospitals did not have a sufficient number of intensive care units equipped with desperately needed ventilators. Consequently, doctors were forced to decide which patients received which treatments. The Italian Society of Anesthesia, Analgesia,

Resuscitation and Intensive Care (Società Italiana di Anestesia, Analgesia, Rianimazione e Terapia Intensiva, or SIAARTI) issued recommendations for doctors on how to deploy scarce resources. Prioritizing medical treatment is called triage. In essence, it can be a life or death decision. With regard to the principles laid out above, triaging patients might be incompatible with the constitutionally safeguarded right to life and its accompanying protection. This article aims to shed light on the question of how democratic states can adhere to their highest constitutional principles while facing a pandemic.

**Most European hospitals did not have a sufficient number of intensive care units equipped with desperately needed ventilators. Consequently, doctors were forced to decide which patients received which treatments.**

## What is Triage?

Under normal conditions, health systems make all resources available to save a patient's life. However, the very nature of mass accidents, catastrophes, armed conflict, terrorist attacks or pandemics may force the health sector to prioritize its capabilities and capacities according to what is manageable. This is where triage comes into play. The term originates from the French verb *trier*. It means sort, select or separate. In the

A nurse attends to a COVID-19 patient in Bergamo, Italy.  
AFP/GETTY IMAGES

medical context, triage is a classification with regard to the urgency and intensity of measures needed to treat a patient. For instance, a lightly wounded patient needs less attention than one who is severely wounded. The situation becomes problematic when a patient has suffered severe injuries that require personnel and equipment

of survival of the wounded. Already, at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, tags were used to indicate each soldier's diagnosis. During World War I, the triage and tag procedure became more sophisticated. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, purely medical considerations were coupled with the overall aims of the conflict parties. This led to more categorizations of treatment priorities. For instance, soldiers enjoyed priority over civilians and one's own soldiers enjoyed priority over the enemy's injured. The triage and tag system developed further during the Cold War era. Under the assumption that a nuclear war would extremely limit the health sector's capacity to treat the injured, medical staff were prepared to apply a rigorous prognosis to those who could possibly survive radioactive contamination.

Today, most health sectors have developed an advanced system of tags for medical first responders in case of a mass casualty incident. The triage tags are meant to enable personnel to effectively and efficiently distribute limited resources and provide the necessary immediate care for victims until additional help can arrive on the scene. The tags are usually color-coded.

## In Europe, the practice of prioritizing medical treatment dates back to the time of the Napoleonic armies. Military medics based their therapies on a prognosis of the chances of survival of the wounded.

A field medical crew cares for an injured French soldier during a reenactment of the Battle of Austerlitz. The practice of medical triage dates to Napoleonic armies.

REUTERS

that could affect the survival of others. Medical staff must then analyze the probability of a patient's survival in relation to the available resources to save as many lives as possible.

### Triage in History

In Europe, the practice of prioritizing medical treatment dates back to the time of the Napoleonic armies. Military medics based their therapies on a prognosis of the chances







Black stands for “expectant,” meaning the injured person is expected to die. In such a case, patients only receive pain-relieving medication. Red is for patients who have suffered life-threatening injuries and signals the need for immediate treatment. A yellow tag means that the person has non-life-threatening injuries but that urgent help is required. Green labels indicate individuals with minor injuries. Most modern ambulance vehicles and mobile intensive care units are equipped with a stack of triage tags to prioritize the injured for subsequent medical transport and treatment in the case of a mass casualty event.

Narrowly understood, triage is a toolkit designed to be medically useful in the event of a mass casualty incident or disaster. Its underlying philosophy is called “utilitarianism.” Utilitarianism attempts to provide the most benefits to the highest number of people possible. As a normative ethical theory, it intends to maximize well-being for all affected people. It dates back to philosophers such as David Hume and John Stuart Mill in the 18th and 19th centuries. However, a purely utilitarian approach to justify medical triage might not stand a legal assessment. Emphasizing the state’s responsibility to protect the right to life, lawyers might look at triage decisions differently.

### Legal Considerations

The aforementioned SIAARTI guidelines basically mirror the triage classifications. Faced with a limited number of ventilators and trained staff to treat all those infected with COVID-19, the guidelines made three recommendations for Italian clinicians. First, priority should be given to those who have a greater likelihood of survival. Second, focus on patients who have more potential years of life. Consequently, patients with underlying conditions and elderly persons who are deemed to stand less of a chance of surviving the coronavirus may not be treated in favor of healthier and/or younger patients whose chances of recovery are higher. Lastly, clinics are advised to make maximum use of the scarce resources for as many patients as possible. Some doctors voiced dismay at being asked to apply these recommendations.

The situation in Germany was in some ways similar. In March 2020, virologists and epidemiologists calculated that approximately 40,000 intensive care units would be needed to cope with the expected number of patients throughout the Federal Republic. At the time, hospitals had roughly 10,000 ventilators on hand. The Deutsche Interdisziplinäre Vereinigung für Intensiv- und Notfallmedizin (DIVI), a German association equivalent to the Italian

Hospital employees at the Brescia hospital in Lombardy, Italy, tend to patients at a temporary emergency structure where new arrivals presenting COVID-19 symptoms were tested in March 2020. Italy’s medical system was overloaded during the early weeks of the pandemic.

AFF/GETTY IMAGES



An undertaker wearing protective equipment delivers a coffin to the Monumental Cemetery in Bergamo, Italy, in March 2020, when hundreds of people were dying daily of COVID-19.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

SIAARTI, also issued a set of recommendations. They are comparable in principle, but details differ. For instance, the DIVI guidance does not contain a similar recommendation to base decisions on the assumed life expectancy of patients. It also forbids prioritization based solely on age or social criteria. The DIVI does, however, recommend prioritizing patients based on higher survival probability and that medical personnel constantly assess all patients in a hospital, including those not infected by the coronavirus. The assessment has to take into account the prognosis of all patients regardless of their disease. Hence, newly arrived patients with promising prognoses might mean patients in need of ventilators are denied them in favor of the newcomers.

The desperate situation in spring 2020 and the DIVI recommendations caused a discussion among the legal and philosophical communities on how triage decisions could be made in accordance with the law. At first glance, a doctor's decision to refuse or abort a treatment might constitute a crime under the German Criminal Code; that would be Section 212 applying to homicide/manslaughter: "Whoever kills a person ... incurs a penalty of imprisonment for a term of at least five years."

In a triage scenario, criminal lawyers already differentiate between a doctor's refusal to treat a patient who is likely to die (omission) and a physician's decision to shut down a ventilator when the patient is expected to die soon (commission). While omission does not necessarily lead to criminal liability, because there is

no duty to save a life, active interference might be a punishable offense. Still, that does not determine whether such an action might be justified. Being mindful that a clinician could remove the ventilator from a dying patient to use it for another with better chances of survival, a judge might apply Section 34 of the Criminal Code: "Whoever, when faced with a present danger to life, limb, liberty, honor, property or another legal interest which cannot otherwise be averted, commits an act to avert the danger from themselves or another is not deemed to act unlawfully if, upon weighing the conflicting interests, in particular the affected legal interests and the degree of the danger facing them, the protected interest substantially outweighs the one interfered with."

However, this only applies to the extent that the act committed is an adequate means to avert the danger. The problem is that the German Federal Constitutional Court decided in 2006 that sacrificing innocent lives in favor of another group violates the unconditionally protected human dignity principle enshrined in Article 1 of the German Basic Law.

The legal academic community also elaborated on the question of whether there is a different criminal liability for doctors in cases of *ex-post* triage or *ex-ante* triage decisions. The term *ex-post* triage describes the above-mentioned situation when a doctor switches off the ventilator in favor of an incoming patient with a better prognosis. *Ex-ante* triage describes when a doctor has to decide which of two patients gets the one respirator, according to the predicted chances for recovery. Some scholars acknowledge that, faced with an insurmountable clash of medical, ethical, legal and moral obligations, this is a dilemma for the physician.

Other legal scholars support recognition of a so-called supra-judicial justification. They recommend applying *mutatis mutandis* Section 35 of the German Criminal Code, commonly referred to as the necessity defense: "Whoever, when faced with a present danger to life, limb or liberty which cannot otherwise be averted, commits an unlawful act to avert the danger from themselves, a relative or close person acts without guilt." Another school of thought claims that a patient whose chances of survival are low would hypothetically be willing to interrupt his treatment to save a fellow human being with better chances of survival. Finally, a number of legal scholars simply suggest accepting the fact that triage constitutes a criminal liability for a clinician.

The debate intensifies and slides into the discipline of philosophy when two patients who have the same health prognosis compete for a respirator. This could mean that medical personnel apply their own personal moral beliefs. Is a younger life worth more than an older one? Should a pregnant woman be given priority over a male? Is the patient a father or a single man? Some suggest that the physician should base his decision on the so-called fair innings argument, which justifies refusal to treat an elderly patient in favor of a younger one based on the perception that the death of an older person is unfortunate but the death of a younger person is tragic.

In “Corona Triage – A Commentary on the Triage Recommendations by Italian SIAARTI Medicals Regarding the Corona Crisis” in the *Verfassungsblog*, philosophy Professor Weyma Lübke argues against the utilitarian justification of maximizing the number of years of life saved. She believes that this principle leads to inhumane consequences and introduced the following scenario: According to this principle, a 60-year-old woman would have to be denied treatment with a ventilator in favor of a 20-year-old man, even if she could very likely (70%) be saved by the treatment. Without the treatment she would die. The 20-year-old would probably survive even without treatment (70%), but his probability of survival could be improved to almost 100% with the treatment. This calculation shows that in such a case, more years of life could probably be gained if the 20-year-old was ventilated, not the 60-year-old. Lübke continues: “Rights are non-aggregatory. In times of shortage, they do not need to be maximized, but rather specified in a just manner.”

Admittedly, none of these approaches seems to be fully satisfying. Neither the German nor the Italian recommendations, nor the respective academic debates offer a definitive course of action to avoid criminal liability. A doctor’s decision on a human’s fate in a triage scenario seems to lie “beyond justice.”

### The ‘Beyond Justice’ Dilemma

Some staged propaganda operations by Eastern Hemisphere powers have insinuated that the Western model of rule-based democracy is failing to cope with the pandemic. Does the discussion on legal and ethical dilemmas mean that democracies will fail due to their own norms and principles when challenged by COVID-19? A brief historical review reveals that the current search to find an adequate response to the legal and ethical dilemmas involved has been ongoing for more than 2,000 years.

In the 2nd century B.C., the Greek philosopher Carneades came up with an ethical-legal thought experiment: Two shipwrecked sailors find a plank in the sea that can only carry one person. One sailor swims faster and gets to the plank first. The other sailor makes it to the plank, but since he is stronger, he pushes the first sailor off. The sailor who was thrown off the plank drowns and the sailor who successfully fought for the plank is later rescued. Carneades and his followers pondered whether the surviving sailor could be tried for homicide or murder.

The “Plank of Carneades” was later debated by the ancient Roman philosopher Cicero in the 1st century B.C. Cicero favored the survival of the person who could make credible claims to contribute to society. Immanuel Kant also revisited the scenario in the 18th century and argued that the state might not be able to punish the surviving sailor, but he may nevertheless be culpable. In any case, the Prussian enlightenment philosopher refused to apply the *necessitas non habet legem* (“necessity has no law”) maxim to Carneades’ scenario. If the “Plank of Carneades” case were to be tried before a German criminal court today, the surviving sailor would most probably be found guilty of having committed a crime according to Section 212. However, his attack on the sailor who got to the plank first would be excused under the above-cited necessity-defense provision according to Section 35 of the Criminal Code.

Another scenario that demonstrates the shortcomings of law in relation to moral and ethical challenges is a case modeled on Gerhart Hauptmann’s late 19th century novel *Bahnwärter Thiel* (*Signalman Thiel*). The legal scenario is based on a signalman watching as his son crosses train tracks while a train full of passengers approaches. If the signalman flips the switch, diverting the train, it will crash causing numerous casualties. If he does not, the train will hit his child. While this scenario was actively debated in German law schools, an English court had to decide a case of morality, ethics and legality. The 1884 case of *R v. Dudley and Stephens* dealt with three shipwrecked sailors, two of whom survived. The question for the court was if they were guilty of homicide because they killed and ate their shipmate. The judges found that there could be no necessity defense based on legal precedent or because of ethics and morality. The judges believed that preserving “one’s life is generally speaking a duty, but it may be the plainest and the highest duty to sacrifice it.” They also questioned the self-given power of the two surviving sailors

to decide whether the third person should be killed for the sake of their survival. The accused were sentenced to death, but later pardoned and released.

Turning to modern times, a 2006 case at the German Federal Constitutional Court needs to be revisited. In response to 9/11, the parliament enacted the German Aviation Security Act in early 2005. This law allowed the German Armed Forces to down a commercial airliner if it was apparent that the plane was being used as a weapon by hijackers. The former president of the Federal Republic, Horst Köhler, raised doubts about the act's legality at the time. Although he ultimately signed the act, he recommended that the Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe check its compliance with German constitutional principles, including the inviolability of human dignity principle and the right to life.

Ultimately, two former interior ministers of German federal states challenged the Aviation Security Act. The pro-Aviation Security Act camp argued that a plane with 100 passengers must be shot down to save the lives of 80,000 people if the hijackers intended to direct the plane into a sold-out football stadium. The opposing side argued that the lives of the passengers in the plane were just as valuable as those of the football spectators. The judges basically decided in favor of the latter view. Weighing one life against another is unconstitutional regardless of any qualitative or quantitative considerations. The ruling meant that the state would not decide who should survive; in this case, a smaller group of passengers or a larger crowd of football spectators. Interestingly, two federal ministers of defense in two different coalition governments during this time period declared they would have ordered shooting down a hijacked plane to prevent more casualties on the ground. However, they both stressed that they were mindful of the dilemma and promised they would have stepped down from their positions the very same day.

## Summary

No reasoning could produce a satisfactory course of action with regard to the legal dilemma encountered when human lives stand in the balance. In this regard, authoritarian regimes have an advantage when dealing with pandemics. They have no need to consider ethical and legal values such as the inviolability of human dignity or the right to life. Thus, rule-of-law-abiding democracies may lag behind those that abuse pandemics to showcase their models

of single-power rule. There is a more than 2,000-year history of Western philosophers and jurists struggling to come up with benchmarks for when one life might trump another.

Humanities scholars and lawyers have also attempted to define when the person making a life-terminating decision is criminally liable and when such an action might be justified, excused or understood as “beyond justice.” Rigid authoritarian regimes can simply prioritize available medical assets for the survival of loyal cadres, essential functionaries, powerful family clans, wealthy oligarchs, or along ethnic, religious or other group affiliations. In addition, access to legal remedies is often limited. As a result, authoritarian regimes need not fear that relatives will attempt to seek criminal justice on behalf of deceased family members.

In Europe, the panic to not overburden health systems and thereby cause more deaths in hospitals led to Europe-wide shutdowns of public life. Governments introduced harsh restrictions to enforce social distancing. Schools, airports, restaurants, bars, gyms, retail shops and some administrative inner-state borders were closed. Visits to hospitals and nursing homes were prohibited. Office workers were encouraged to telework from their homes. By the end of March 2020, many European cities had turned into ghost towns, but the curve of COVID-19 infections did flatten and reports of physicians triaging patients disappeared. The subsequent months were used to identify available treatment capacities in other European countries and to outfit the health sector with additional intensive care units.

Germany, for instance, was able to reach the desired 40,000 beds with ventilator machines. Certainly, other aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the economic impact of the shutdown, mattered more in the public debate. Yet the enormous investments in Germany's critical health sector helped the Federal Republic avoid triage decisions. So far, the judicial impact of medical decisions has not been tested. While this article was being written, there was no case filed at Europe's highest court dealing with human rights violations. Legally, it would be possible to turn to the Strasbourg-based European Court of Human Rights. For instance, dependents of a deceased patient may turn against a member state refusing to try a clinician for a particular triage decision. The court could then indirectly assess whether Article 1 (The High Contracting Parties shall secure to everyone within their jurisdiction the rights and freedoms defined in Section I of this



Convention) and/or Article 2 (Everyone's right to life shall be protected by law) of the European Convention on Human Rights were violated.

## Outlook

Recommendations like the ones from SIAARTI or DIVI still circulate in European hospitals. At this stage, they are a medical basis upon which a doctor might make a triage decision. Henceforth, utilitarianism still shapes the medical decision-making process, taking into consideration a higher probability of survival and the use of limited resources to save as many lives as possible. In parallel, legal and philosophy scholars will continue to discuss whether the suggested courses of action could constitute a criminal liability.

The SIAARTI or DIVI guidelines are what they are: sets of recommendations by associations of medical experts. They are not law. In addition, these expert associations are not representing any governmental authority that could be held responsible. From a lawyer's view, it seems desirable that if basic rights are essentially to be interfered with that these encroachments be based on a solid law. Triage decisions do constitute interference with regard to an essential right, which is the right to life.

While it was understandable that intensive care experts felt the need to draft guidelines for their doctors during the peak of the pandemic, it would also appear necessary to exclude them from criminal liability. For practical and obvious reasons, society should expect that the health sector is doing its utmost to cure patients, especially in cases such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. Doctors should not also have to fear being prosecuted for homicide.

Finally, the triage dilemma of trying to cure the maximum number of patients with limited resources is linked to a democratic society's expectations in terms of foreseeability. Going forward, it will be imperative that the law describes the conditions under which triage can occur. For legislators, this means revisiting a centuries-old debate about this moral, ethical and legal dilemma. Nevertheless, clarifying how the very fundamental right to life and inviolability of human dignity can be maintained while countering the virus is worth the effort. In view of the ongoing global competition regarding governance models, triage laws would be a written statement on how patients are to be cured in an ethical and nondiscriminatory manner. □

A nurse in the isolation ward of the university hospital in Essen, Germany, seals a virology bag with a medical COVID-19 sample in March 2020.

AFF/GETTY IMAGES





# *The Belarusian* **CRISIS**

## **And the Influence of Russia**

By **Pavlo Troian**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine

PHOTOS BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

**T**he large-scale protests after the August 2020 presidential election in Belarus are proof that many Belarusians are not ready to accept the victory of incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko that was announced by the Central Election Commission. According to the official results, he won more than 80% of the votes. The situation was further aggravated by the unprecedented level of police violence against protesters who took to the streets to express their disagreement with the official election results. The Belarusian authorities relied on Russian support and accused the West of organizing protests with the aim of overthrowing the government. However, Lukashenko made similar accusations against Russia before the election protests. Why did the situation turn upside down? Let us consider the reasons.

Lukashenko has ruled the country for 26 years and is the longest-reigning leader of a European country (not counting monarchs). He was first elected in 1994, and reelected in 2001, 2006, 2010 and 2015. In 2004, he initiated a referendum that removed from the constitution a limit to the maximum number of terms the same person can hold the presidency. During his tenure, Lukashenko has repeatedly been accused of restricting civil rights and freedoms and usurping power. There were accusations of organizing political assassinations — several opponents of

---

A woman in a former Belarusian national flag reacts as opposition supporters gather during a rally to protest the official presidential election results.

Lukashenko disappeared without a trace in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Western countries, in particular the United States and members of the European Union, have on several occasions imposed sanctions against Lukashenko and a number of people close to him. He is often called “the last dictator of Europe” in the Western press.

The country’s relations with the West changed significantly after the Russian aggression against Ukraine in the Crimea and Donbas, which began in 2014. Largely because Minsk has become an international platform for negotiations to resolve the situation in Donbas, Lukashenko has managed to establish contacts with the West and gradually have certain sanctions lifted. In 2020, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and then-U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Minsk. For the first time in 12 years, the U.S. and Belarus agreed to exchange ambassadors. There have been major changes in domestic politics as well. Until 2014, the Belarusian state considered all Belarusian speakers to be oppositionists. Politically, Belarus was considered Russia’s closest ally.

## ***The country’s relations with the West changed significantly after the Russian aggression against Ukraine in the Crimea and Donbas, which began in 2014.***

Everything changed in the spring of 2014. After the Russian attack on Ukraine, an active advertising campaign started in Belarus to popularize the Belarusian language, national traditions, ornaments and clothing. For example, for several years a “Vyshyvanka Day” has been held in Belarus. (The Vyshyvanka is the embroidered shirt in the Ukrainian and Belarusian national costumes. It is not part of the traditional Russian costume). In recent years, Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs Vladimir Makei and other high-ranking officials have often worn Vyshyvkas. This was meant to bring into the consciousness of Belarusians the origins of their country and its distinct culture compared to Russia’s. Perhaps Lukashenko understood that what happened in Crimea and Donbas, where the local population lived for many years within Russia’s de facto cultural space, could be repeated in his country.

Since 1994, when Lukashenko was first elected president, Russia’s influence in Belarus grew steadily, reaching a peak in 1999 when the Treaty on the Creation of the Union State of Belarus and Russia was signed. According to its provisions, the two states should merge into one and be known as the Union State, with a common flag, coat of arms, currency, a single

army, parliament, council of ministers and other supranational authorities. Some believe that Lukashenko signed the agreement in the hopes of leading the Union State in the future. But it was not Lukashenko who became the successor to then-Russian President Boris Yeltsin, but the protégé of the Russian secret services, Vladimir Putin. After that, the desire of the Belarusian president to follow the path of integration diminished sharply. Over the more than 20 years of the Union State project, practically nothing outlined in the integration plan has been implemented. There are only a few formal institutions that are independent of the influence of the two states. For example, there is the position of the state secretary of the Union State, currently held by Grigory Rapota. However, neither the state media of Belarus nor Russia actively publicize his work.

The Russian side has consistently blamed Lukashenko for the lack of progress in implementing the provisions of the Union State treaty. Lukashenko, in turn, has spoken about the primacy of economic integration and demanded Russian energy resources at domestic Russian prices. Over the past 20 years, relations between Russia and Belarus have had their ups and downs. At the same time, no one has essentially questioned their allied character. Since 2018, Russia has become more and more insistent that Belarus transition to deeper integration and the creation of supranational authorities. Minsk, in turn, started talking about compensation for the shortfall in revenues of the Belarusian budget because of Russia’s oil taxes. Then-Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev responded with a choice: Deepen integration and count on benefits, or keep everything as it is and lose Russia’s financial and economic support.

During 2018-2019, Minsk and Moscow negotiated to deepen integration. According to media reports, talks covered the unified tax code, the foreign trade regime and the civil code, a unified accounting of property and similar social guarantees, almost unified banking supervision, a unified regulator of the oil, gas and electricity markets, and harmonized state regulation of industries. Many Western and Russian experts linked Russia’s pressure on Belarus with Putin’s desire to solve the problem of retaining power after 2024, when his next presidential term expires. It was assumed that Putin would become the president of the new united Russia-Belarus state. One way or another, Russia began firmly demanding that Lukashenko give up some of the power, transferring it to the supranational level and, in fact, consent to the gradual loss of his country’s sovereignty. This did not suit Lukashenko, and relations between the two countries reached unprecedented levels of tension. In 2019, probably at the personal request of Lukashenko, Russian Ambassador to Belarus Mikhail Babich was recalled. At the end of 2019, negotiations on deepening the integration of Belarus and Russia were frozen. In 2020, Putin resolved the issue of reelection by amending Russia’s constitution and resetting his presidential terms. After that, Russia relented for a while, easing the pressure on Belarus. However, it looks like it was just a tactical retreat.

In 2020, a presidential campaign began in Belarus that initially did not threaten Lukashenko, who held all levers





Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko

of influence. Nevertheless, the campaign from the very start developed differently from the expected scenario. Previously, Lukashenko's competitors were the so-called systemic pro-Western oppositionists, who called for a sharp break in relations with Russia, the return of the Belarusian language to the status of sole state language and other initiatives. These oppositionists did not enjoy wide support and it was easy to tie them to the West, as Lukashenko had repeatedly done before. At the beginning of 2020, Sergei Tikhanovsky, the creator of the popular "Country for Life" YouTube blog, Viktor Babariko, the head of the Russian-capitalized bank Belgazprombank, and former Deputy Foreign Minister Valery Tsepkalo unexpectedly announced plans to run for president. All three were nonsystemic oppositionists. They were speaking Russian and did not demand the severing of ties with Russia. Instead, Tikhanovsky, Babariko and Tsepkalo focused on the country's fatigue from Lukashenko and the need for better economic management. These oppositionists excited Belarusians and revived a long extinct political life in Belarus.

By bringing criminal charges and arresting candidates, and by denying their admission on the ballot, Belarusian authorities managed to neutralize the competition. Sergei Tikhanovsky and Viktor Babariko were imprisoned on charges of violation of public order and money laundering, respectively. Tsepkalo, like Tikhanovsky and Babariko, was denied registration as a candidate. Fearing persecution, he left the country. As a kind of political lightning rod, authorities registered as a presidential candidate Tikhanovsky's wife, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who is not a professional

***By bringing criminal charges and arresting candidates, and by denying their admission on the ballot, Belarusian authorities managed to neutralize the competition.***

politician. Most likely, the Belarusian authorities soon regretted that decision. Despite a short election campaign, she managed to gather all opposition forces around her and became the symbol of changes yet to come. After the election, Tikhanovskaya, like many Belarusians, did not recognize Lukashenko's victory. Large-scale protests began across the country. In addition to rallies, Belarusians staged economic protests, such as strikes, boycotts of goods produced at state-owned enterprises, and nonpayment of utilities and fines. As a result, a large-scale political crisis broke out in the country, which affected the economy. Belarus' gold and foreign exchange reserves fell in August 2020 by almost \$1.4 billion. The national currency depreciated sharply. In addition, many local information technology companies either moved to other countries or indicated they were considering that possibility.

Russian journalists interview Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, left, in Minsk in September 2020.



## Media Influence

A significant percentage of Belarusians feel that they are part of the Russian cultural space. The older generation watches Russian TV channels, while many people who are middle-age are guided by Russian and pro-Russian internet media and social networks such as Vk.com (Vkontakte.ru) and Classmates (Ok.ru). At the same time, young people use the Russian Telegram messenger for communication. It has become especially popular and is used as a news aggregator and for the coordination of protests, leading some in the media to declare the situation in Belarus the world's first "Telegram revolution." Telegram is a project of Russian executive Pavel Durov, who holds oppositional views and left Russia a few years ago. Telegram messenger has continued functioning in Belarus despite internet lockdowns blamed on the government.

There are claims that the protests in Belarus are fueled and coordinated by pro-Western Telegram channels, such as Nexta. That may be so. However, in early 2020 dozens of anonymous Russian and pro-Russian Telegram channels took tough stances toward Lukashenko. Popular channels such as Belorussian-Russian Dialogue, Tricotage and Bulba of Thrones disseminated messages such as "Lukashenko's regime is doomed" and actually called for a change of power in Belarus. There are reports that these channels are administered from Russian territory and possibly connected to the Kremlin. Lukashenko has accused Russians of spreading fake news about him by using Telegram. Additionally, criticism of Lukashenko by both traditional and new Russian media increased in early 2020 and continued until Election Day. For example, in May 2020 the

state-owned Channel One Russia, available in Belarus, aired a report that Belarus significantly underestimated the number of COVID-19 deaths. After the report, the film crew was stripped of its accreditation and expelled from Belarus. Lukashenko has repeatedly called COVID-19 "Corona psychosis" and refused to introduce quarantines, meaning the TV report was an attack against him personally.

However, the rhetoric of the Russian media has changed dramatically since then. Putin was one of the first to congratulate Lukashenko on his electoral victory. After that, Russian channels began accusing the Belarusian protesters of radical nationalism and fascism, while accusing the West of organizing protests. Lukashenko invited employees of the Russian TV channel Russia Today to work in Belarus, replacing a number of local TV presenters who resigned in protest of state policies. The same pro-Russian Telegram channels, which earlier called for Lukashenko's overthrow, now do not support the protesters and advocate unification with Russia as the only way out of the political crisis.

## Russia's Strategy

So why did Russia provoke protests in Belarus? Obviously, not for the victory of an opposition candidate or the holding of fair democratic elections in the country. And the point is not that Russia could not have its own candidate in the elections. If desired, a pro-Russian politician could be found. Moreover, taking into account Russia's influence in the media sphere, a victorious Russian-backed candidate is possible. However, Russia has practically no democratic countries as



A woman and her child in Minsk, Belarus, react during a government crackdown on a protest supporting the Coordination Council, which was created to facilitate talks with President Alexander Lukashenko on a transition of power.

allies. Authentic democratic elections in Belarus would lead to an open discussion of the pros and cons of relations with Russia. Candidates would have to speak publicly about plans for further integration with Russia. According to opinion polls, the deepening of such integration is not supported by a majority of the population. This means that such an election could not be carried out in a democratic Belarus. Moreover, the democratization of the country would inevitably lead to the emergence of pro-European forces in the local parliament and a gradual drift away from Russia.

Obviously, the goal of the Russian media attack was to weaken Lukashenko as much as possible, with the aim of further coercing him into integration. One must assume that Putin is moving in this direction. The brutal suppression of mass protests, police violence, and the arrests of journalists and public activists have already led to new Western sanctions against Lukashenko and the country's top leadership. The door for improving relations between Belarus and the U.S., as well as the EU, is closed for now, at least while Lukashenko remains in power. This, in turn, pushes Belarus into the arms of Russia. Only Putin volunteered to protect Lukashenko. Putin has stated that Russia is ready to send its forces to support "law and order" in Belarus. The Russians have made it clear they are ready to support the Belarusian economy with loans. Naturally, Putin's help will not be free of charge. The Russian leader will remember all past grievances and demand guarantees of deepening integration.

Realizing he has no other allies, Lukashenko has turned to Putin. He stated that together with Putin he would defend

the common fatherland "from Brest to Vladivostok." There is no doubt that Russia will now demand the practical creation of this common fatherland. However, declarations alone or the creation of new decorative integration bodies will not be enough. Lukashenko may have to pay for Putin's support with a part of his country's sovereignty.

Of course, it is better to be the president of your country than a vassal of Russia. Lukashenko may try to continue his attempts to maneuver and delay integration. In this case, Russia may switch to another plan for the transition of Belarusian power. By no means will it be a democratic transition, but a constitutional reform publicly supported by Russia. It may be in Putin's interests to redistribute power in Belarus so that it passes to a group of defense and security officials linked to Russia in one way or another. Lukashenko has repeatedly stated that he is ready to carry out constitutional reform and share power. In the case of public support from Russia for such an idea, he actually will have no choice.

Even the West can support the idea of constitutional reform in Belarus. Yet it is worth remembering that the beneficiary of such a reform can be Russia. Therefore, the West needs to closely monitor ongoing events and actively respond to everything that happens. At the same time, it is necessary to be careful and not give Russia a reason to declare Western interference in the internal affairs of Belarus. Because the scenario of forceful resolution of the crisis — under the pretext of saving Belarus from Western provocateurs — always remains on Putin's table. □



# RENEWING LEADERSHIP

DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS MUST EMERGE  
STRONGER FROM THE PANDEMIC

By Dr. Suzanne Loftus, Marshall Center professor



could be argued that the 2008 global financial crisis was the major catalyst for many of the subsequent domestic issues that have developed and lingered throughout the European Union until today. Recovery across the Eurozone has been uneven, and the ensuing sovereign debt crisis drove Southern Europe into a second recession in 2012. Today, growth across the EU has been measured as less inclusive than before the 2008 crisis in terms of economic convergence between countries and within countries — the encouragement of which was a strong motivating factor for having created the Eurozone in the first place.

According to the World Bank’s “EU Regular Economic Report,” before the crisis it would have taken 30 years for EU countries to achieve similar per capita income levels. After the crisis, it is estimated that convergence will take seven times longer. In addition, poverty levels across the Eurozone worsened until 2013, recovered slightly by 2015, but have never returned to pre-crisis levels. Even though gross domestic product (GDP) per capita recovered by 2011, the bottom 40% of the population saw its income share fall, substantially increasing inequality. Southern Europe was particularly affected. Simultaneously, rapid technological change has been polarizing the labor market because automation is displacing workers, who are then forced into below-average earning positions in the service sector. Moreover, the population is aging, which has decreased the share of the working-age population and therefore total labor earnings. For these reasons, among other cultural and political reasons, populism in Europe has gained momentum; populists claim to be the voice of the forgotten, promising radical change from the establishment.

Another noticeable trend in the past decade is that democracy in Europe is on the decline, according to

indicators such as the Economist Intelligence Unit and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem). Europe has seen six shifts in regime classifications over the past 10 years. Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia lost their status as liberal democracies and transitioned downward to electoral democracies. This backsliding has occurred primarily in the areas of media and civil society.

Certain security crises have exacerbated the already-existing tensions in Europe. In 2015, Europe received more than 1 million people fleeing conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, which led to a severe crisis that unsettled the continent as it struggled to deal with the influx. This came at a time of rising anti-immigration sentiment and Euroskepticism, which was occurring as a result of the economic difficulties and the general tendency to blame migrants for one’s mishaps. Anti-immigration sentiment also came as a result of an increased perception that European “identity” was being challenged by non-European migrants. The difficulties in handling the crisis sparked substantial media attention, encouraged heated debates on immigration policy, and activated skepticism toward immigrants across society. These sentiments were then reflected in votes for right-wing populist parties across the continent, which capitalized on immigration fears.

In terms of security, the continent is divided on its threat perceptions. While the south sees immigration as the greatest threat, Eastern nations are more concerned with Russia — a perception that increased multifold after Russia annexed Crimea. The lack of shared threat perception among allies is not only visible in the security dimension, but also in the business and political arenas. Several European leaders have been building closer ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin due to commonly shared beliefs and business interests. In addition, Europe



Russian President Vladimir Putin, second from left, shakes hands with Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov in January 2020, as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, right, looks on during a ceremony in Istanbul to mark the formal launch of the TurkStream pipeline, which will carry Russian natural gas to Southern Europe through Turkey. REUTERS



Then-European Council President Donald Tusk, from left, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg and then-European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker sign a new joint declaration on EU-NATO cooperation in Brussels in July 2018. REUTERS

gets the bulk of its energy from Russia, and therefore continues to engage in business deals on this front, no matter how Russia behaves internationally. A good example of this would be the decision between Russia and Germany to go forward with the construction of the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline, a decision that has left a bitter taste in the mouths of many allies.

After the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, a sharp rift in Europe's relations with Putin took place. Russia, for its part, has not hesitated to take advantage of preexisting divisions within the EU to bolster its position and relatively weaken the West. It is evident that many of Europe's populist parties have close ties with Putin. A survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations found that a majority of what they call "insurgent" parties across Europe are positively inclined toward Putin's Russia. These parties are generally suspicious of the United States, skeptical of the European project and against excessive migration. This is useful for the Kremlin because it helps legitimize its policies and amplifies the reach of Russian disinformation. Most of these parties oppose EU sanctions on Russia and don't believe in the implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with Ukraine. Their stance comes from shared conservative values, the belief in national sovereignty and a rejection of internationalism and interventionism. For many, Russia is seen as a counter to the U.S.

Today, we are witnessing the reemergence of geopolitical great power competition among the U.S., China and

Russia. We are also witnessing the rise of nationalism and authoritarianism. The digital revolution has made it much easier to spread disinformation. These trends have created a threat to democracy on every continent. While China can be considered a peer competitor to the U.S., Russia is more of a disrupter and, due to the power imbalance, uses asymmetric tactics to subvert its adversaries. Russia has invested heavily in its influence operations, most notably in the realm of information warfare. It also uses its economic weight in the energy sector to exert influence over other governments' policies, which is most notable in Eastern Europe. In addition, it funds far-left and far-right political movements with the aim of sowing discord in democratic politics and promoting pro-Russian sentiment.

China's tactics include building leverage over governments, institutions, businesses and individuals. It also spends great resources on media. Abroad, there are hardly any remaining independent Chinese-language media outlets. China has invested greatly in the infrastructure of partner nations, which have now developed economic dependencies on China. Due to their dependence, they are often coerced into supporting China's political and diplomatic positions. Aside from this, China has been accused of conducting cyber espionage to steal intellectual property. Both Russia and China have regularly engaged in covert and coercive influence operations, viewing this as a normal feature of engaging with other countries. They have often exploited similar vulnerabilities in democratic societies.

Face masks from China are unloaded on the tarmac at Paris-Charles de Gaulle Airport in France in May 2020. REUTERS



Greeks protest construction of a controversial new migrant camp near the town of Mantamados on the island of Lesbos in February 2020. AFP/GETTY IMAGES



During the COVID-19 pandemic, which has spared no one, as European nations struggled to combat the virus and to unite and help one another with needed equipment, Russia and China did not pass up the opportunity to “come to the rescue” and present themselves as heroes while their media campaigns discredited the EU and the U.S. In the Balkans, China is regarded as having been a friend throughout the pandemic, and in Italy, perceptions of the Russians and Chinese have improved dramatically. The Chinese embassy in France accused French politicians and medical workers of failing to assist their citizens. China’s embassy in Italy promoted Beijing’s capability and willingness to provide support to Europeans in need. These efforts were intended to depict China as a partner and paint European cohesion and American leadership as absent. As long as the West doesn’t act against disinformation campaigns, the Russians and the Chinese will continue to use this tool to their advantage. As the EU set out a plan to tackle an “infodemic” of false information about COVID-19, it has accused Russia and China of running disinformation campaigns inside the EU. While it has often charged Russia with doing so, this was the first time the European Commission publicly named China as a source of disinformation trying to undermine European democracies.

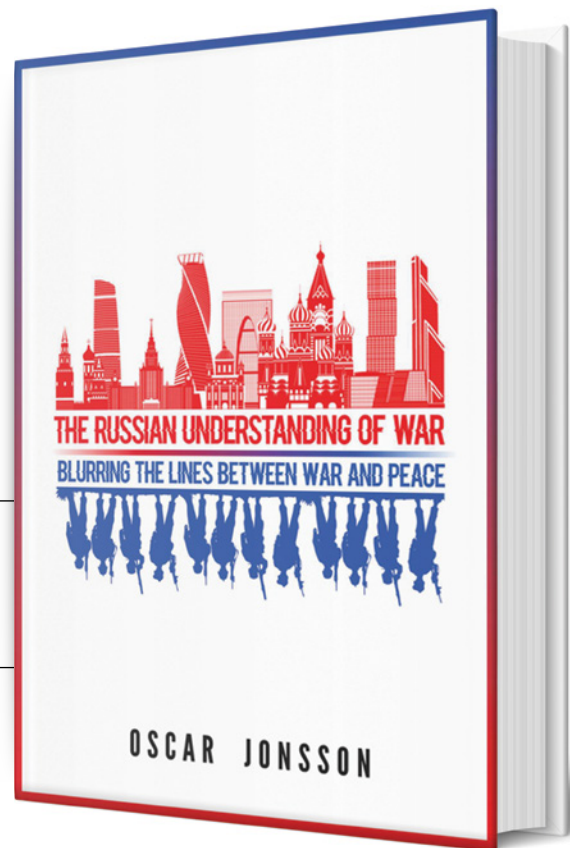
The economic crisis likely to follow the pandemic will only further exacerbate these trends on the European continent. The failure to come together undermines the goal of shared long-term prosperity and integration. In addition, the failure by the EU and the U.S. to remain united will lead to a further rift in trans-Atlantic relations at a time when it is particularly important to stand strong and united. Countries in the West need to tackle disinformation from Russia and China and actively engage each other in trade, public health and security and in developing an overall recovery plan after the pandemic. Moves must also be made to lessen energy dependence on Russia, specifically in Eastern Europe where some nations are as much as 100% dependent on Russia. The West needs to reestablish credible deterrence by making it clear to adversaries that they will respond assertively to malign interference in their domestic affairs. The U.S. and its allies need to improve information sharing to better coordinate a policy response to disinformation campaigns, cyber hackings, bribery and corruption, and election security. The West also needs to advance a clear and coherent narrative about its values, and the U.S. needs to make clearer its role in the world. It is not too late to salvage our place in the world and reestablish our priorities. □

# BLURRED LINES

**AUTHOR:** Oscar Jonsson

**PUBLISHED BY:** Georgetown University Press

**REVIEWED BY:** Patrick Swan, *per Concordiam* contributor



Oh, for the days of clarity when nations declared war on their adversaries with courteous diplomatic notes and formal declarations by telegram, as Austro-Hungary did with Serbia to start World War I in 1914. Today, such notifications may occur rudely by tweet, if they occur at all.

Instead, we face a blurred state, where we don't know with certainty whether nations are in an actual state of war because they no longer state so emphatically. What's worse is when only one of these nations believes it is at war and the other ignorantly thinks there is still peace between them.

That's the situation we have today between Russia and Western states, according to Oscar Jonsson, in *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines Between War and Peace*. Jonsson is the former director of the Stockholm Free World Forum think tank and was once a subject-matter expert for the Swedish Armed Forces. He writes that Western states have taken actions they perceive as being short of war — sanctions, democracy promotion and information operations. In Russia's understanding, however, these amount to war and represent a direct threat to the regime's survival. Put another

way, NATO and European Union states believe their actions don't cross any long-standing, accepted red lines that would mean war; Russia believes they have crossed that line.

Take the “color revolutions” in Eastern Europe and Western Asia. Russia sees them as a form of war that the West has orchestrated to topple friendly governments on Russia's borders. Moscow understands this as the West's main geopolitical tool to achieve its political objectives. The revolutions amount to a form of warfare that presents Russia the unpalatable options of meekly accepting changes in such governments as a *fait accompli*; invading these countries either outright or covertly, with “little green men” not officially affiliated with Russia; or responding in kind, aggressively, with its own information-war measures of nonkinetic composition.

Russia traditionally understands the character of war as armed violence, applied to a political goal while explicitly rejecting nonmilitary means, Jonsson writes. But, because the West is employing



nonviolent means so effectively, Russia believes they are equivalent to violence and represent a change to war's character. In response, Russia has sharpened its focus by blurring these boundaries.

Russia's political and military leaders will not state publicly and unilaterally that their views on the character of war have changed. Such a declaration would, among other things, go against the concepts that inform international law, most notably the concept of armed attack but also the Russian federal law "On Defense," which relies on an understanding of war defined by armed violence, Jonsson states. They believe it was the West that changed the character of war to include offensive nonmilitary means with no such public declaration. The disconnect comes from the West seeing no need for a declaration because it considers its nonmilitary measures as aimed at avoiding war, whereas Russia sees them as amounting to war.

The Western understanding has been more binary, with a war/peace divide, Jonsson writes, while the Russian understanding of war has always been closer to the view of permanent struggle and insatiable insecurity. There is a clashing of visions between how Western states construct security based on the idea of expanding democracy and the rule of law, and that of the Russian leadership whose power is predicated on the absence of both. Russia views Western constructs as designed to destabilize autocratic states' grip on power and cause their populations to revolt in the name of Western values. Even if NATO is not interested in or in a position to launch a military offensive against Russia, Jonsson writes, NATO is still positioned well to threaten Russia with nonmilitary means that would undermine the legitimacy of and may even serve as an existential threat to Russian leadership. The mismatch between perceptions of war is generated by a fundamental mismatch in national interests, values and the desired world order. This means the underlying conflict will not be solved by a detente.

If nations conceive that the use of armed violence is losing its relevance as a criterion for the onset of war, what legitimizes the other forms of violence becomes more arbitrary and more a matter of perception. An example is Western sanctions on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. The West stated these were a very limited response in lieu of acting more forcefully. However, the Russian leadership interpreted the sanctions as a form of warfare to engineer regime change in Russia.

Russia misinterpreted Western actions and intentions, its understanding colored with equal bits insecurity and paranoia. This can turn Western states' actions into a perceived master plan to dismember

Russia. Jonsson states this acknowledgement is not an argument against sanctions or similar measures because they can have ethical or strategic benefit, but rather a call for awareness among policymakers about the consequences when provocative words don't match the stated limited intentions of actions.

The West first needs to acknowledge that its fundamental assumption about Russia is fallacious, Jonsson states. Western nations believe it is up to them to choose whether they enter a war with Russia, an assumption that underlies every action that simultaneously seeks to punish Russian hostility while "avoiding escalation." The problem is that this view assumes the current situation is one of peace. A Russian leadership that sees itself and its interests targeted with nonmilitary subversion is one that equates such actions as equivalent to use of force — that is, as acts of war. Russia believes the West has blurred the traditional borderline between war and peace with such actions. The West does not. But, Jonsson reminds us, it is only necessary for one party to see itself in the blurred area for war to exist.

Maintaining that a war is active, albeit with nonmilitary means, Russia has expanded its tools in the information sphere. These span from state-controlled international news media and nongovernmental organizations to troll factories guided by the presidential administration and intelligence and security services' active measures that are amplified in social media. All of these have a unified goal to undermine societal cohesion and support for Western unity, according to Jonsson.

What is Russia's war aim? It wants to stop what it sees as the West's encroachment into its spheres of influence in neighboring countries. It may even desire to reverse the tide. Hence, Russia's approach seeks to destabilize not only the cohesion in individual states but also the broader West, which is manifested in the EU and NATO, Jonsson writes.

Because Russia views the West as having blurred the boundary between war and peace, it will respond in kind to further blur the battlefield with its own increased use of nonmilitary means. This understanding of battling an existential aggression underlies why Russia is more determined, more willing to take risks, and more proactive than a complacent West that believes itself to be in a period of peace. Even though Russia's power base is weaker than the West's, Jonsson states that to succeed a unified and determined West needs to acknowledge being in a conflict with Russia. Western policymakers need to be exposed to Russian thought on war and security to avoid the recurrent temptation to base their Russia policy on wishful thinking and best-case assumptions. Their own survival may depend upon it. □

# Resident Courses

Democratia per fidem et concordiam  
*Democracy through trust and friendship*



## Registrar

George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies  
 Gernackerstrasse 2  
 82467 Garmisch-Partenkirchen  
 Germany  
 Telephone: +49-8821-750-2327/2229/2568  
 Fax: +49-8821-750-2650

<https://www.marshallcenter.org>  
[registrar@marshallcenter.org](mailto:registrar@marshallcenter.org)

## Admission

The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies cannot accept direct nominations. Nominations for all programs must reach the center through the appropriate ministry and the U.S. or German embassy in the nominee's country. However, the registrar can help applicants start the process. For help, email requests to: [registrar@marshallcenter.org](mailto:registrar@marshallcenter.org)

## Check the Marshall Center Website for Updates on Course Schedules

### PROGRAM ON APPLIED SECURITY STUDIES (PASS)

The Marshall Center's flagship resident program provides graduate-level education in security policy, defense affairs, international relations and related topics such as international law and counterterrorism. A theme addressed throughout the program is the need for international, interagency and interdisciplinary cooperation.

### PROGRAM ON COUNTERING TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME (CTOC)

This resident program focuses on the national security threats posed by illicit trafficking and other criminal activities. The course is designed for government and state officials and practitioners who are engaged in policy development, law enforcement, intelligence and interdiction activities.

### PROGRAM ON TERRORISM AND SECURITY STUDIES (PTSS)

This program is designed for government officials and military officers employed in midlevel and upper-level management of counterterrorism organizations and will provide instruction on both the nature and magnitude of today's terrorism threat. The program improves participants' ability to counter terrorism's regional implications by providing a common framework of knowledge and understanding that will enable national security officials to cooperate at an international level.

### SENIOR EXECUTIVE SEMINAR (SES)

This intensive seminar focuses on new topics of key global interest that will generate new perspectives, ideas and cooperative discussions and possible solutions. Participants include general officers, senior diplomats, ambassadors, ministers, deputy ministers and parliamentarians. The SES includes formal presentations by senior officials and recognized experts followed by in-depth discussions in seminar groups.

### PROGRAM ON CYBER SECURITY STUDIES (PCSS)

The PCSS focuses on ways to address challenges in the cyber environment while adhering to fundamental values of democratic society. This nontechnical program helps participants appreciate the nature of today's threats.

### SEMINAR ON REGIONAL SECURITY (SRS)

The seminar aims at systematically analyzing the character of the selected crises, the impact of regional actors, as well as the effects of international assistance measures.

# A DOUBLE DOSE ONLINE

Read current and past issues of *per Concordiam*

<https://perconcordiam.com>

Submit articles, feedback and subscription requests  
to the Marshall Center at: [editor@perconcordiam.org](mailto:editor@perconcordiam.org)



Get the freshest *global security news* updated weekly:

transnational  
**weekly**  
<https://www.marshallcenter.org>



## CONTRIBUTE

Submit articles and feedback to the Marshall Center at [editor@perconcordiam.org](mailto:editor@perconcordiam.org)

## SUBSCRIBE

For more details, or a **FREE** subscription to *per Concordiam* magazine, please contact us at [editor@perconcordiam.org](mailto:editor@perconcordiam.org)

## FIND US

Find *per Concordiam* online at:

Marshall Center: <https://www.marshallcenter.org>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/PerConcordiam>

Twitter: [https://www.twitter.com/per\\_concordiam](https://www.twitter.com/per_concordiam)

GlobalNET Portal: <https://members.marshallcenter.org>

Digital version: <https://perconcordiam.com>

