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Power Vacuums

An Illiberal Peace in Nagorny Karabakh
Laurence Broers

Moldova's Trust Deficit
Petru Negură

Central Asia's Informal Patrons
Morgan Y. Liu

Russian Rights Work

Disability Activism Adapts
Svetlana Borodina

Faith-Based Interventions
Melissa L. Caldwell

Plus:

The Art of an Anticorruption Crusader
Alexander Etkind

Jokes and Repression in Belarus
Nancy Ries

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  Prakash Kashwan, University of Connecticut
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  Keith Makoto Woodhouse, Northwestern University

CURRENT HISTORY

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CONTENTS

CURRENT HISTORY

October 2021

"Adrift and unstable, the conflict was ripe for poaching out of its multilateral stupor by entrepreneurs of a new world order based on multipolarity."

Requiem for the Unipolar Moment in Nagorny Karabakh

LAURENCE BROERS

In the wave of self-determination conflicts that became a hallmark of the Soviet dissolution in the Caucasus, the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorny Karabakh was always an outlier. It certainly shared formative attributes with subsequent conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Chechnya: contested Soviet border delimitations, nationalist movements sweeping decrepit communist power structures aside, and the weak, fractious statehood of the republics that succeeded Soviet rule in December 1991. The secessionist victory in the first Karabakh war of 1992–94 was also consistent with the wider post-Soviet trend. With Armenia's support, the Armenians of Nagorny Karabakh broke away from Azerbaijan and established their own, unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR).

(Variant names and spellings reflect the territory's layered belongings and the competing geopolitical traditions claiming it. Nagorny Karabakh, with variant spellings Nagorno and Karabagh, is a name drawing on Russian, Turkish, and Persian, meaning "mountainous black garden." Armenian sources prefer Artsakh, a pre-Turkic Armenian name for the area in antiquity. Azerbaijani sources increasingly prefer just "Karabakh," rejecting the Soviet-era delimitation of a separate Armenian-majority highland space.)

Yet in several of its dimensions, the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict was not an archetypal Eurasian "frozen conflict" (if, indeed, such a thing exists). In its temporal dimensions, the conflict involved factors beyond the immediate dynamics

of the Soviet collapse. Beginning in February 1988, it was the early riser in the tide of nationalist mobilization that brought down the Soviet Union. Its early appearance reflected a unique history of reciprocal communal violence and mass displacements, going back to the early twentieth century.

In 1918, short-lived independent Armenian and Azerbaijani republics emerged from the Russian imperial collapse and contested their intermingled demographics through practices we would now call ethnic cleansing. The disputed borders were eventually pacified by the Soviet state, yet processes of ethnic homogenization continued. Enabled by the Soviet mania for promoting the indigenousness of "titular" nations (the ethnic majorities for which various Soviet republics were named) as an ideological gloss for the USSR's ostensibly non-imperial identity, cultural intelligentsias crafted discourses "othering" minorities as the illegitimate residue of historically recent migration.

In the late 1980s, when Mikhail Gorbachev introduced his *perestroika* policy to reform the USSR, the Armenians of Nagorny Karabakh saw an opportunity to raise grievances related to their status in Azerbaijan. They declared their desire to self-determine by unifying with Armenia. Communal violence rapidly ensued. For still-intermingled populations—Armenians in Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis in Armenia were each Soviet republic's largest minority—the impacts were devastating. More than half a million became refugees within two years, in a reciprocal demographic purge on a scale unseen elsewhere in the former Soviet Union.

In their spatial dimensions, the conflict's outcomes far exceeded the self-determination script of post-Soviet secessionists. The Armenian version of this script had originally focused on the

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Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO). Founded in 1923 by the young Soviet regime, this regional administrative unit ostensibly compensated its local ethnic Armenian majority with territorial autonomy in exchange for their incorporation into Soviet Azerbaijan. But the enclave geography created a dilemma. The core Armenian demand of the late 1980s—unification with Armenia—could be imagined only within a continued Soviet framework, or one necessitating a revision of Azerbaijan's borders.

This dilemma was resolved in the course of the first Karabakh war, in 1992–94. Armenian forces occupied a belt of territories around the NKAO. These gains doubled the size of the territory under the control of the NKR, but came at the cost of a new wave of forced displacement. Over half a million ethnic Azerbaijanis were forced out of their homes, and their towns and villages were looted.

Ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijanis was initially framed as a necessity to protect the Armenians of Karabakh from the very real threat of Azerbaijani ethnic cleansing. But over time, new meanings began to congeal around these lands. They became increasingly invested with an invented nostalgia depicting them as "liberated territories," restored to rightful Armenian ownership. The submergence of the Karabakh Armenians' self-determination claim within this expansive territorial vision entailed a growing moral ambiguity, enabling Azerbaijan to reframe the conflict as entirely irredentist in nature.

That the conflict was indeed irredentist, rather than secessionist, appeared to be confirmed by its specific structural dimensions: it became embedded at the interstate level between Armenia and Azerbaijan. "Parent states" enduring secession typically see geopolitics rather than local grievance as the true driver of frozen conflicts, which play out among an unrecognized republic or "de facto state" seeking secession, the patron state supporting its revolt, and the parent state. But in the context of what had started out as a unification movement among co-ethnic communities, the line between patron state and de facto state was particularly difficult to define in the Armenian case. This structure also put the Karabakh conflict at the center of the nation-building processes of two sovereign states. From the geographic periphery, Nagorny Karabakh moved to the conceptual center of Armenian and Azerbaijani national narratives, generating pithy formulations of nested—and non-negotiable—territorial belonging: "There is no Armenia without Artsakh!" "Karabakh is Azerbaijan!"

This totalizing effect combined with a fourth, strategic dimension of the conflict. Whereas in Eurasia's other frozen conflicts, it is the status quo power—Russia—that is militarily preponderant, in this case it was the challenger, Azerbaijan, that gradually attained preponderance. In 2006, Caspian oil began to flow from the Azerbaijani capital Baku, via Georgia, to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. In that year, and again in 2011, Azerbaijan's military expenditures doubled. While Armenia's arms procurements derived almost exclusively from its bilateral ties with Russia, Azerbaijan's oil revenues permitted the purchase of state-of-the-art equipment from Israel, Turkey, and others.

This newfound preponderance rapidly transformed the dynamics along the roughly 200-kilometer Line of Contact separating Armenian and Azerbaijani forces. What had been until 2014 a sniper's war, claiming 20–30 lives annually, became a low-intensity conflict characterized by regular skirmishing, experimentation with new technologies, the targeting of civilians, and occasional large-scale escalations, notably a "four-day war" in April 2016 that left more than 200 dead. The conflict was pervasive in every domain of Armenian–Azerbaijani relations, remilitarized through substantial rearmament, and punctuated by regular military crises. By the late 2010s, predictions of a major new war were commonplace.

Azerbaijan has emerged as the keystone of an illiberal regional configuration.

UNIPOLAR MEMORY

Beyond its temporal, spatial, structural, and strategic specificities, the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict was distinctive among Eurasia's territorial disputes for what might be called its "unipolar memory." It uniquely preserved a mediation structure and constellation of international actors that recalled the unipolar moment of the mid-1990s.

From the outset, international mediation efforts served a dual purpose: to resolve the conflict, and to institutionalize a new regional security architecture following the end of the Cold War. The mediation mission was taken up in March 1992 by the

Conference (after 1994, Organization) for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE/OSCE), founded on the basis of 1975's Helsinki Final Act.

A few weeks earlier, on January 30, 1992, the Soviet successor states had all been accepted as members of the Conference (to "loud and pro-longed applause," as then-US ambassador to the CSCE John Maresca recalls in his memoir). The British delegate observed that a conflict was ongoing between two of the new members, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and it was the CSCE's responsibility to act. After a show of hands for volunteers to form a group to prepare a peace conference, no fewer than 11 states signed up: Belarus, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Sweden, Turkey, and the United States. The Belarusian representative offered his country's capital as a venue, and the body that would come to be known as the "Minsk Group" was established.

The Minsk Group eventually stabilized in a slightly smaller configuration, minus the Netherlands and Portugal. From 1997, it was led by a permanent troika of France, Russia, and the United States. This structure emphatically embodied the ideals and assumptions of the mid-1990s unipolar moment. It inserted the ostensible victor of the Cold War directly into the mediation of a conflict that, in Washington's corridors of power, was both distant and barely known. The Group also embodied the predominant post–Cold War approach to Russia among Euro-Atlantic powers, both recognizing and seeking to contain the realities of its presence on the ground by bringing it—however unwillingly—into a multilateral framework. The presence of France, meanwhile, affirmed what in the 1990s appeared to be an unassailable certainty: the European destiny of the Caucasus.

OSCE mediation embodied the values and assumptions of the unipolar moment in two other crucial ways. First, the OSCE took decisions by consensus, granting voice to small powers and assuming that responsible states would work collaboratively to resolve problems according to the principles of the liberal international order. Second, those principles translated into an array of conflict resolution models based on liberal peacebuilding and democratic politics. Self-determination conflicts would be resolved through liberal alternatives to secession: territorial autonomy, self-governance, and the upholding of human and minority rights within parent states.

OSCE mediation was thus grounded in the quintessential mid-1990s belief in a "double convergence": democratic transitions, liberalized markets, and peacebuilding would converge internally to resolve legacy conflicts in post-socialist states, and these states would converge externally with Euro-Atlantic institutions and structures. Over the following quarter-century, these assumptions steadily withered away. The visions of a democratized and regionally consolidated South Caucasus both failed to materialize.

THE TWILIGHT OF LIBERAL MULTILATERALISM

Neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan converged internally on liberal democratic and market transitions. Between the end of the first Karabakh war in 1994 and 2018, Armenia had a "competitive authoritarian" regime with a multiparty system. Competitive electoral campaigns were neutralized by the use of administrative resources and, on several occasions, coercion to suppress protest. In 2018, Armenia belatedly experienced a "Velvet Revolution," an unexpected nonviolent uprising that ejected the stagnating regime and installed former journalist Nikol Pashinyan as prime minister. Over the following two years, reforms vied with populist inclinations as Pashinyan confronted the lingering influence of the former regime, for example in the judiciary.

In Azerbaijan, oil revenues enabled the development of a hegemonic authoritarian regime, built on the foundation of the former Soviet Union's first, and so far only, dynastic succession. Ilham Aliyev succeeded his father Heydar as president in 2003. Much like in Russia, the autarky afforded by oil wealth enabled Azerbaijan to practice a postmodern form of authoritarianism more reliant on public spending, co-optation, and narrative hegemony than actual coercion. A few years into its oil boom, in 2013, Azerbaijan became a consolidated authoritarian regime, according to the scale of political rights and civil liberties established by the US monitoring group Freedom House.

Neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan embraced Euro-Atlantic integration over their first quarter-century of independence. Armenia's potential for such integration was constrained by its security linkages with Russia. As a founding member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, Armenia also relied on a number of bilateral agreements with Moscow to compensate for the growing military asymmetry with Azerbaijan. Efforts to diversify its relations met with limited

success: Yerevan was forced by Russian pressure to renounce a quietly negotiated association agreement with the European Union in 2015, and to join Russia's Eurasian Economic Union instead.

In Azerbaijan's case, autarky enabled a transactional approach to integration with the West. Baku pursued a thin form of integration on the basis of limited partnership agreements with the EU, balanced by participation of different kinds in non-Western groups such as the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

The Minsk Group, meanwhile, operated as an iterative process in which one of the three co-chairs would push an initiative or proposal, backed up by the others, which would be discarded and replaced by the next co-chair's effort. The last time that the United States invested serious effort in the process was at peace talks it hosted in Key West, Florida, in April 2001. The talks failed, and six months later 9/11 transformed US foreign policy priorities in ways that sidelined the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict for the next two decades. For a time, French President Jacques Chirac took a personal interest in the conflict, culminating in another unsuccessful summit at Rambouillet in February 2006. After that, the United States and France increasingly deferred to Russian leadership: President Dmitry Medvedev led the Minsk Group's last significant push, ending in yet another fruitless summit in Kazan in June 2011.

Nagorny Karabakh moved to the conceptual center of national narratives.

For the next nine years, the Minsk Group circled in a diplomatic wilderness punctuated occasionally by summits, but more often by military crises along the Armenian–Azerbaijani front lines. As these crises displaced diplomacy, the Minsk Group increasingly embodied only the memory of unipolarity, rather than the anticipated convergence with liberal practices and norms of conflict resolution.

Still, this memory insulated the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict from resurgent Russian–Western bipolarity after the Ukrainian crisis erupted in 2014. Even as Eurasia's geopolitics fissured anew, the Minsk Group's institutionalized memory of the Russo-Euro-Atlantic consensus on resolving a conflict of more peripheral importance sustained a simulacrum of collaboration, though of a kind unable to adapt to consequential new currents and trends. Adrift and unstable, the conflict was ripe for poaching out of its multilateral stupor by entrepreneurs of a new world order based on multipolarity.

THE MULTIPOLAR MOMENT

The enclosure of conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transdniester, and the Donbas within the paradigm of Russian–Western rivalry expressed the European aspirations of the parent state in each case—Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Like these republics, Azerbaijan had also looked westward during its early independence. On the one hand, Baku had sought a transactional partnership to supply capital and know-how for exploiting its Caspian oil fields. On the other, it sought normative affirmation of its territorial integrity. While it found the former in abundance, the latter proved elusive.

This was largely because economic autarky afforded by oil rents translated into normative autarky. Whereas the Rose, Orange, and Euromaidan revolutions presumed "civilizational" conjunctures between Georgians, Ukrainians, and the "free world," Euro-Atlantic commitments to Azerbaijan's territorial integrity remained formal rather than substantive—as did Azerbaijani commitments to democratic norms and human rights. Azerbaijani petrodollars financed the extensive penetration of national and multilateral institutions in Europe and the United States through strategies of influence-buying, memorably dubbed "caviar diplomacy" by Gerald Knaus of the European Stability Initiative.

Normative autarky defined Azerbaijan's unique position among Eurasia's parent states as a skeptic of liberal multilateralism. Frustrated by what it perceived as tolerance of Armenian transgressions in Western capitals, Azerbaijan cultivated its own brand of multilateralism as a "middle power" and a variety of special relationships with other states similarly defined, notably Turkey, Israel, and Pakistan. At home, resentment of Western hypocrisy and orientalism featured strongly in an emotional culture that foregrounded national trauma and kept the humiliation of the 1990s alive for a new generation. Combined with lavish public spending, the strategy of demobilizing dissent by keeping society mobilized around the axis of the conflict was

largely effective. Protests in Azerbaijan have been few and far between in recent years, and generally easily dispersed.

But in July 2020, the Azerbaijani state was confronted by a form of protest that it could not easily quell. In the aftermath of another border clash, spontaneous crowds outraged by the killing of a popular general gathered in central Baku, calling for war with Armenia and breaking into the parliament building. Unlike the massive crowds in Belarus that had been protesting against President Alexander Lukashenko since the end of May, this crowd could not be dismissed as the product of Western funding or George Soros's putative influence. It reflected back at the regime its own narrative about the intolerable Armenian occupation, instilled in every Azerbaijani citizen from childhood.

Yet without a tested military capability, facing an entrenched enemy in a conflict in which the actions of great powers were likely to be both unpredictable and decisive, Baku needed an ally before starting a war. Here, Azerbaijan's agenda finally converged, not with that of liberal multilateralism, but with that of a key entrepreneur of a post-Western multipolar world—Turkey.

Turkish acquiescence to Euro-Atlantic coordination with Russia on the Karabakh conflict had long been an implicit assumption of the unipolar moment. Turkey's NATO membership and status as a core US ally in the Middle East had determined Ankara's cautious approach to its neighborhood in the post-Cold War period, despite Turkish elation at the prospect of a new Turkic world opening up in Eurasia after 1991. That sense of Turkic brotherhood was nowhere stronger than with Azerbaijan, embedded in a shared ethno-linguistic culture, and later in partnership in the multiple infrastructural initiatives involving pipelines, railways, and roads that link the two nations via Georgia. But that solidarity did not translate into an active policy of Turkish support for Azerbaijan in the Karabakh conflict, beyond the closing of the Turkish border with Armenia in 1993.

The change in this calculus was the most significant external factor in the onset of the war in 2020. Hardened by a failed coup attempt in 2016, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan reoriented domestic politics toward a nativist populism and unanchored Turkey's geopolitics from compliance with a unipolar order, positioning it as a rising regional power with aspirations of its own. Through a series of direct military interventions beginning in 2016 in Syria, leading up to a January 2020 operation in Libya that shifted the course of the conflict in that country, Turkey accumulated a wealth of experience in conflict theaters in what Ankara considers its "near abroad."

In the aftermath of the July 2020 border clashes, Turkish–Azerbaijani contacts intensified. We now know that those discussions identified a key window for military action in the final weeks before the US presidential election on November 3. Turkish and Azerbaijani decision-makers evidently calculated that at a global conjuncture of preoccupation with the fate of American democracy, the ravages of a global pandemic, and a host of other issues from the Belarusian protests to Brexit, little more than expressions of concern would be forthcoming from the liberal multilateral world they sought to challenge.

A FAILED DETERRENT

Although many commentators had issued advance warnings, the war that actually broke out on September 27, 2020, was still in many respects unforeseen. Most external observers, including this author, expected if not another "four-day war" like that of 2016, perhaps a two- or three-week war, with Azerbaijan recapturing part of the occupied territories around Nagorny Karabakh.

What in fact transpired was a 44-day war, in which Azerbaijani forces, buttressed by numerous forms of additional Turkish capability, overwhelmed Armenian defenses in several locations, recaptured the entire southern belt of occupied territories, and advanced to the heart of Nagorny Karabakh itself to take the strategically and symbolically key town of Shusha (known as Shushi to Armenians) on November 8. At this point, Russia brokered the fourth of several cease-fires in a trilateral agreement with Armenia and Azerbaijan. The agreement further mandated the return of all other occupied territories to Azerbaijani jurisdiction, the deployment of a Russian peacekeeping mission to parts of Nagorny Karabakh that remained under Armenian control, and a new regional configuration of open borders and transit routes.

The human cost was devastating, with some 4,000 Armenians and 2,900 Azerbaijanis killed in action, 170 civilians slain, and tens of thousands displaced, mostly Armenians from the heavily bombarded towns of Nagorny Karabakh. Replicating the practices of the first Karabakh war, no territory changed hands without ethnic cleansing. The Armenian population of the southern region

and town of Hadrut in Nagorny Karabakh was forced to flee to Armenia, and its community heritage was erased.

Armenian vulnerabilities were central to these outcomes. Armenia's strategic posture was centered on a multifaceted deterrent intended to prevent war. First, the prospect of a costly highland war was widely assumed to constitute a core deterrent, combined with the perception of Azerbaijan as a "soft state" incapable of withstanding a lengthy and casualty-heavy war. But new forms of Azerbaijani military capability neutralized this deterrent. Recently purchased Turkish drones were deployed to devastating tactical effect, eliminating Armenia's air defenses and then constricting its supply lines. Left without reinforcements, isolated Armenian frontline posts were overwhelmed with massive frontal assaults, some of them using mercenaries recruited from pro-Turkish militias in Syria to absorb casualties that would have been politically costly had Azerbaijani troops been sacrificed.

Another element of the Armenian deterrent was the prospect of punishment through counter-value strikes against non-military targets. Although Armenia does appear to have deployed Iskander-M precision ballistic missiles, their impact was minimal. Armenian forces also carried out missile strikes on the Azerbaijani cities of Ganja and Barda in an effort to deter further strikes on the towns of Nagorny Karabakh, but again the desired effect was not achieved despite a terrible cost in dozens of Azerbaijani civilian deaths.

Additionally, Armenian balancing with Russia generated expectations that Moscow would step in to prevent a major war. When this did not happen, it prompted furious debate in the Caucasus and beyond over Russia's "passivity" in the war's early weeks. These expectations underestimated two factors.

First, Azerbaijan was no "ordinary" parent state. Affinities between the Russian and Azerbaijani elites run deep and are free of the tripwires presented by Georgian or Ukrainian aspirations to Euro-Atlantic membership. Second, even if Russia was a major stakeholder in a multilateral coalition to prevent a new war, it had never signed up for a liberal peace. Its reputation took a serious hit from the keenly observed international spectacle of an army almost exclusively armed and equipped by Russia being destroyed by one largely (if far from exclusively) trained and equipped by Turkey. Yet the war also created an opportunity for the Kremlin to exclude a liberal peace.

This required Russia to escalate its commitments, deploying a 2,000-strong peacekeeping mission to Nagorny Karabakh under uncertain and risk-laden conditions, and to tolerate the presence of a new actor, Turkey, in what Moscow takes to be its own near abroad. Yet these commitments were grounded in an authoritarian, post-Western consensus. For Moscow, this was a more attractive outcome than overt support of Armenia—only a nominal ally in a deeply asymmetric relationship, and a country experimenting with democracy to boot.

Armenian vulnerabilities were compounded by a mythology of invincibility, nurtured by the strongmen who had savored victory over a disorganized Azerbaijan in the first Karabakh war. Russian President Vladimir Putin has said he persuaded Aliyev to cease hostilities just over three weeks into the 2020 war, on October 20. Apparently refusing to believe in the possibility of defeat, Pashinyan decided to fight on, and lost more.

> *Armenian vulnerabilities were compounded by a mythology of invincibility.*

AN ILLIBERAL PEACE?

There are two core underlying outcomes of the 2020 Nagorny Karabakh war. First is the regionalization of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict. It is no longer a conflict that a multilateral coalition of states seeks to mediate and resolve, but the object of a Russian–Turkish condominium directed at managing conflict through negotiation among relevant regional powers. Russia dominates the security field and remains the guardian of the November 9, 2020, cease-fire declaration. Its security agencies will control existing and prospective transit corridors across Azerbaijani and Armenian territory. Turkey has a secondary role in the new security arrangements, with a nominal presence at a cease-fire monitoring center. Yet it has cemented its role as Azerbaijan's patron. The Shusha Declaration of June 15, 2021, signed during a celebratory joint visit by Aliyev and Erdoğan to the recaptured city, formalized the partnership between the two states. Turkish firms will play a central part in the reconstruction of the de-occupied territories.

The second outcome is the conflict's transformation into a test case for "illiberal peace," or authoritarian conflict management (ACM).

Multilateral mediation sought to resolve conflicts according to the principles of the liberal international order, identifying issues of rights and representation as core to disputes, and practices of participation and inclusivity as vectors to peace. ACM, by contrast, seeks to homogenize political communities, reinforce existing power hierarchies, and exclude nonstate actors.

Azerbaijan's affirmations that the conflict is now "solved," and its relegation to "history" of the core underlying issue—the political status of the Karabakh Armenian community—reflect this approach. These implications of an illiberal peace make it clear that only the OSCE's Minsk Group provides a framework in which a genuinely comprehensive peace agreement addressing all issues contested by Armenians and Azerbaijanis is likely to be possible. The Minsk Group also retains the sole international mandate to negotiate an agreement.

Azerbaijan has emerged as the keystone of an illiberal regional configuration encompassing Russia, Turkey, and potentially Iran. The war allowed the Azerbaijani elite to pivot its legitimacy formula from petrodollar paternalism to strongman nationalism. This implies that the enemy image of Armenians may not recede in the Azerbaijani public sphere. Perhaps, like China's "Century of National Humiliation" narrative, Azerbaijan's national narrative will continue to focus on its quarter-century of humiliation as the foundation of its affective community.

For Armenia, its truncated defeat imposes the worst of all possible worlds. A residual Armenian Karabakh remains, but not one that Armenia can meaningfully influence, now that Russia has assumed all responsibilities in the territory. Yet Armenia's domestic politics will continue to be shaped in substantial ways by the existential destiny of Armenians beyond the nation's borders, whose fate is in other hands. Armenia is now delimited within borders it has never held as an independent state, with vulnerabilities that portend further embedding within a Russian security regime. A new era of compromised statehood beckons. Armenia will be torn between competing impulses to build a garrison state or maintain a path to what inevitably will be a fractious and imperfect democracy.

The framing of what is in conflict has also undergone a significant transformation. Although the interstate dimension has been salient over the past quarter-century, the conflict has always been multilayered. Armenia and Azerbaijan will continue to engage in strategic rivalry. Yet a fundamental outcome of the 2020 war that will become clearer over time is a shift in emphasis—from a territorial conflict focused on the regulation of a border between two states, to a conflict over the governance of majority–minority relations within a single state. The interlinking of the Armenian cause in Nagorny Karabakh with the Palestinian, Kurdish, Yezidi, Tigrayan, and other struggles in a new axis of twenty-first century resistance to coercive state-building can already be observed.

Overhanging the project of a regionalized illiberal peace is the question of how communities saturated with enemy images of each other will transact with, let alone trust, one another. With its stipulation to open borders, the November 2020 cease-fire statement constitutes a peculiar hybrid—more than a cease-fire but much less than a comprehensive peace agreement. Between the cessation of hostilities and the vision of a South Caucasus with open borders, latticed with transit routes and trade corridors, lies the vast middle ground of the incentives, motives, and fears of the communities living in the region. It is doubtful that Russia and Turkey have the will and capacity to sponsor the rehabilitation and reconstruction of vast swaths of western Azerbaijan de-occupied in 2020, as well as the kind of community-level confidence-building needed to transform Armenian–Azerbaijani relations and make regional connectivity plans viable.

These daunting, epochal agendas will make new conjunctures inevitable—between multilateral and multipolar, liberal and illiberal actors. But the unipolar moment of the 1990s will no longer be the lodestar for such conjunctures. Instead, the future of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict will reflect the mid-twenty-first-century dynamics of multipolarity, and interrogate the assumptions of its associated world order. ∎

"Interpersonal trust underlies the socioeconomic arrangements that shape the lives of Central Asians."

Trust and Informal Power in Central Asia

MORGAN Y. LIU

Central Asia still seems obscure to most outsiders, thirty years after the region's Soviet-created republics (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) became independent nation-states in 1991. The region has received international attention primarily when it serves as an economic and strategic playing field for prominent powers, such as Russia, China, the United States, international organizations (like United Nations agencies or the World Bank), or multinational corporations. Much journalistic, policy, and academic writing about the region has focused on themes that arguably derive from the interests of these big external players: hydrocarbon energy, economic development, military bases, political stability, ethnic identity, Islamic extremism, elite corruption, human rights, and civil society, to name a few.

These topics are certainly worthy of investigation, but one wonders what is missing in the usual rendering of the region. What are Central Asians themselves most concerned with? How are people constructing livelihoods amidst the economic hardship and political dysfunction that have characterized this post-Soviet region?

In what may be an important yet largely unnoticed regional trend, local leaders are assembling their own arrangements of businesses, institutions, and networks to enable entire communities to prosper. These leaders are often entrepreneurs who become patrons, mobilizing people and resources to accumulate power and dispense benefits to their constituencies. (In the situations surveyed below, they are all men; studies of women leaders are greatly needed.) The emerging picture is that these local arrangements, organized not by states but by individual authority figures, are becoming increasingly important in some parts of Central Asian life, three decades into independence.

Why are nonstate actors wielding influence in post-Soviet Central Asia? Simply put, these entrepreneur-patrons are operating in many areas of society, impacting how Central Asians are provisioned and organized, in ways that rival the supposed prerogatives of states. They are growing local economies, building infrastructure, providing political stability and security, increasing social and intellectual capital (building and funding schools, for example), offering social protections for the unemployed and pensioners, and establishing media and religious institutions. Taken together, their endeavors offer glimpses of a complex, variegated landscape of power, where much more is happening to determine a population's well-being than just the policies or activities of the state.

However, the communities organized by these leaders may not resemble what Western observers recognize as "civil society," the voluntary association of autonomous individuals. Rather, they emerge from the particular socio-historical contexts and political economies of the region. They represent Central Asian solutions to Central Asian problems.

Who are these nonstate actors, what are they up to, and how are they able to sometimes perform almost state-like functions? To find answers, we need to unpack how these figures are located within their communities and relate to their people, and how their endeavors are organized and institutionalized to channel money, resources, labor, connections, and knowledge toward certain ends.

A crucial factor in their success in making a difference on the ground is their ability to cultivate and sustain high levels of interpersonal *trust*. These local leaders can spend years carefully building their positions, crafting their images as

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patrons who act as benefactors for their local constituencies. They maintain trust by delivering material goods to their communities: jobs, commodities, loans, and aid. They also sustain trust by delivering what we may call capacity: education, information, opportunities, and networking. But it is perhaps the intangible benefits that most powerfully cement the relations of trust between patron and constituency: senses of solidarity, local pride, cultural flourishing, or religious piety.

A characteristic of how these Central Asian entrepreneurs exercise power is their great skill in navigating these multiple levels of maintaining trust with the community, from the most material to the most spiritual. They do so in a manner that resonates strongly with cultural sensibilities, mobilizing locally circulating tropes of legitimate authority, beneficent wealth, and moral personhood. These patrons make themselves indispensable, developing into elites who alone can work for the common good. In a context where the ability of states to promote the commonweal effectively remains under constant question, this is a claim carrying great resonance.

Interpersonal trust underlies the socioeconomic arrangements that shape the lives of Central Asians. The

> *Intangible benefits cement the relations of trust between patron and constituency.*

region had been seen as an environment of low general trust among strangers, especially after the dissolution of the collective purpose that state socialism had partially provided. The 1990s brought a disturbing period of socioeconomic instability that was read as a society-wide moral crisis as much as a material one—human relations became inhumane, selfish, and predatory. The Central Asian bazaar stood as a metaphor for the new market relations, a space of chaos, exploitation, and struggle.

This state of affairs could not endure; every society needs to somehow secure conventions of trust-building in order to function. Trust has underpinned cooperation in commerce throughout history, whether via kinship ties in a family business or through legal institutions binding participants in a modern corporation. Some creative Central Asians have come up with their own ways of solving the problem of communal trust to enable collective endeavor in the post-Soviet era.

ETHNIC AND ISLAMIC AFFINITIES

How are these relations of trust being organized into new arrangements, mobilizing people and resources? The evidence is admittedly fragmentary at this time. We are connecting dots from recent studies of various phenomena that the authors and subjects themselves do not necessarily identify as part of a trend. Still, we can attempt to paste these snapshots of Central Asian lives onto a bigger canvas, tracing how trust, as social capital, gets converted into economic and political impact.

A good starting point is to reconsider the many studies of ethnic identity in post-Soviet Central Asia. Much attention has been paid to how these states have elaborated nationalist ideologies that highlight the distinctive history and heritage of the ruling ethnic groups, and how these ideas take form in architecture, monuments, art, books, posters, museums, public performances, television programs, street names, school curricula, and political speeches. Other studies examine the situation of ethnic minorities, border disputes, conflicts over resources, or armed violence between ethnic groups.

These different contexts and problems could also be read as revealing efforts to consolidate communities of trust based on ethnic affinity. Whether it is Central Asian states defining post-Soviet terms of national belonging or local actors mobilizing communal projects for something or against somebody, ethnicity stands available as a basis for delineating the boundaries of trust for a common purpose. The social dynamics of ethnicity involve much more than that, but the desire for recognizable categories of people to trust in socioeconomic life is worth noting.

Another major concern of scholarship is the region's so-called Islamic revival. Some studies interpret the past three decades of mosque construction, modest dress, religious education, and Islamic observance as nationalist projects of restoring religious heritage suppressed by Soviet rule. Others see the phenomenon as driven by grassroots community building, the accumulation of prestige via piety, or the cultivation of virtuous character in obedience to God. In any case—and these interpretations are not mutually exclusive—the increase in Islamic activity does help establish circles of trust based on a shared commitment to faith.

Particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan since the 2000s, there has been a proliferation of "halal," or religiously compliant, business associations, as the sociologist Aisalkyn Botoeva has shown. Entrepreneurs in various sectors (retail, services, manufacturing, or distribution) establish private networks to exchange goods, capital, expertise, information, and labor within states where banking and judicial contract enforcement are not trustworthy. These business networks are by invitation only, based on personal relations and reputation.

A centerpiece of reputation and trust is the participants' very public piety. They practice Islam and claim to conduct business according to high religious standards of probity and social justice. Some customers and clients want to deal with them because they believe these enterprises avoid corruption and contribute to the commonweal through humane employment practices and charity.

One collective of pious businessmen operated in Andijan, Uzbekistan, providing credit, jobs, Islamic education, and aid to the city's communities. In June 2004, 23 of these men were arrested and accused of membership in an Islamic extremist group and of plotting to overthrow the state. Andijanis organized months of peaceful protests against these arrests, but on May 12, 2005, a group of demonstrators stormed into police stations and a military garrison, armed themselves, freed the 23 defendants, occupied the provincial government building, and called for the central government to acquit the businessmen and address the city's economic problems. The government suppressed the uprising with overwhelming military force, killing hundreds of mostly unarmed civilians.

The Andijan Massacre was a complicated series of events with many causes and contingencies. But a less noted aspect of the case is that, whatever else these 23 men were up to, their organization and operations resembled Islamic business networks across Central Asia that provide tangible economic benefits to their communities. That explains why crowds of ordinary people were rallying on their behalf for months before the violence—the business circle had accumulated a reservoir of trust within the city. It may also point to the real threat that these entrepreneurs posed to the Uzbekistani state. Their circle of enterprises was acting almost like a miniature private state, contributing noticeably to the socioeconomic needs of the city, and highlighting the government's shortcomings. The national state, unable to brook this rival, moved decisively to dismantle it.

LOCAL ARRANGEMENTS OF TRUST

Shared ethnic affiliation and religious commitment can facilitate relations of trust that get things done. But trust can be built by other means in Central Asia. One theme running through the cases considered here is that trust helps establish predictability in human affairs and business dealings. Trust stabilizes socioeconomic order.

Central Asian bazaars were seen as exemplars of unpredictability and disorder in the initial years of independence, as the prices, quality, and availability of goods varied seemingly without reason. By the 2000s and 2010s, bazaars had become quite orderly (though still crowded and noisy). The change came not only from state regulation and better supply chains. More significantly, according to the political scientist Regina Spector, some open markets in Kyrgyzstan became domains of successful commercial endeavor because innovative entrepreneurs created for themselves conditions of security and predictability. Wholesale bazaars such as Dordoi, outside of Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, emerged as major transit hubs for Chinese goods moving across Eurasia starting in the 2000s, even as the state's enforcement of regulations and contracts proved weak and inconsistent.

Dordoi's owner, Askar Salymbekov, forged personal relationships with high government officials, built up the market's infrastructure, and negotiated supplier pipelines to secure and expand his bazaar. Dordoi was also organized from the bottom up—traders formed their own union and appointed "elders" from among their ranks to protect and train the sellers on their market rows. The union negotiated with the police and tax officials to create a regularized system of taxation and inspection. It also mediated disputes between bazaar workers, forming a community of mutual help and camaraderie. Spector's research reveals that the bazaar workforce was multiethnic, bound together with the common goal of a well-run business environment.

Bazaars become efficient and profitable thanks to the work of different actors. Dordoi's sellers, their supervising elders, and their unions formed their own domains of cooperative trust. Their organization and activity were enabled by the political cover secured by Salymbekov, the market's owner. The state's relevance consisted mostly

of staying out of the way, according to terms personally negotiated by him. This case shows the importance of individual entrepreneurs, skilled in both business strategy and political positioning, when it comes to creating conditions of possibility for trust relations and economic activity.

Entrepreneurial figures like this are readily found elsewhere in the region. In rural Kyrgyzstan in the late 2000s, a man called "Rahim" by the anthropologist Aksana Ismailbekova succeeded rapidly in becoming an influential businessman and elected official. His power base was a former collective farm that was distant from the republic's urban centers. He soon became the big patron of the area. Rahim constructed social circles of trust that cleverly evoked culturally resonant imagery of Kyrgyz kinship and tradition, casting himself as a native son who promoted the prosperity of the village.

This patron inspired great loyalty from his many clients by offering them personal access to the money, equipment, and supplies of the farm in times of crisis. He also provided services such as resolving conflicts or dealing with the government, which he was competent to handle due to his personal connections with provincial and national officials, as well as his elected position. His patronage network mobilized resources and labor to improve the local economy noticeably. To top off his status as benefactor, he funded village construction projects, such as a mosque.

Rahim's case shows the subtle connections between official roles and informal influence. It also displays the interlaced roles of economic development, material benefits, political cover, ethnic culture, and eloquent rhetoric in building relations of trust. This entrepreneur was successful because he could adeptly juggle these very different forms of trust cultivation, turning social capital into economic and political capital, and vice versa.

A POLITICAL ENTREPRENEUR IN JALAL-ABAD

An intriguing parallel case is that of Kadyrjan Batyrov, an Uzbek entrepreneur who played an instrumental role in shaping some of the basic infrastructures of everyday life in Jalal-Abad, an Uzbek-majority city in southern Kyrgyzstan. He built and ultimately led an extensive suite of interconnected institutions that provided a broad range of services: a university, a newspaper, a publishing house, a school, a medical clinic, cultural centers, shops, bazaars, other commercial enterprises, a mosque, and a theater, among others. The material presence and economic impact of these projects became increasingly noticeable in Jalal-Abad starting in the 1990s. They were picking up speed during the 2000s, when I conducted ethnographic fieldwork there.

Similar to Salymbekov and Rahim, Batyrov was not only a successful businessman but also a political entrepreneur, working out innovative arrangements with governmental authorities to protect his endeavors from state interference or predation. Under Batyrov's patronage, ethnic Uzbeks, a minority facing discrimination, flourished under politically adverse circumstances in the 1990s and 2000s. This was a remarkable accomplishment given the troubled history of Kyrgyz–Uzbek relations in Kyrgyzstan, starting with the 1990 Osh Riots, a series of armed interethnic conflicts.

Batyrov helped create the conditions for vibrant economic and professional activity that provided employment and services to Jalal-Abad's Uzbek community and others. He did so by cultivating a personal relationship with then-President Kurmanbek Bakiev, an ethnic Kyrgyz who was also from Jalal-Abad.

Batyrov carefully crafted a public image of a patron acting not only for Uzbek interests but also for the common good of Kyrgyzstan. In my interviews with the leaders of Batyrov's institutions, they made emphatic claims about how the businesses provided essential goods, services, and jobs to Jalal-Abadis of all ethnicities. Batyrov's university in Jalal-Abad was called the Friendship of Peoples University, appropriating the Soviet trope of interethnic harmony. His Uzbek-language newspaper *Diydor* reported Kyrgyzstan's events as occurring in "our country," and referred to Bakiev as "our president," whereas news from Uzbekistan was placed in the "foreign" section. The newspaper's geographical categories were clearly signals to the Kyrgyz authorities, because its (Uzbek) readers in fact saw themselves as being more connected to people and places in Uzbekistan (whose border is less than 10 kilometers from Jalal-Abad) than in Kyrgyzstan.

In such ways, Batyrov positioned his institutions as loyal Kyrgyzstani outfits that bore no hint of Uzbek nationalism, a sensitive political trigger in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Nonetheless, Batyrov's

> *Patron-entrepreneurs are non-state actors embedded in and emerging from communities.*

urban enterprises literally went up in smoke during the country's 2010 political crisis, when opposition to Bakiev's rule, initially unrelated to the Kyrgyz–Uzbek question, evolved into a wider uprising. Uzbek majority cities in Kyrgyzstan's south, like Jalal-Abad, plunged back into interethnic violence. Kyrgyz mobs targeted Batyrov's institutions, revealing that his years of careful cultivation of relations with Kyrgyz leaders and the Kyrgyz community in the city had provided only fragile cover for his endeavors in a time of unrest. In the years since, no large-scale Uzbek-led organization has emerged in Kyrgyzstan.

Even though Batyrov's story appears to be one of failure, his accomplishments were extraordinary until external events overtook his work. During the first two decades of post-Soviet independence, he managed to construct an extensive set of profitable businesses and institutions that affected thousands of lives in the city. He connected with the population on multiple levels simultaneously, providing them with material benefits (markets, goods, services, jobs), capacity (education, news), and cultural-religious facilities (theater, cultural centers, mosques).

To the city's Uzbeks, Batyrov provided a sense of communal pride and belonging in their Kyrgyz-dominated country. The grand Uzbek patron of Jalal-Abad could do all this because he was skilled in cultivating and channeling relations of trust—very successfully with the city's Uzbeks, and successfully enough with the city's Kyrgyz—until a national crisis hit. He created a model of social and economic flourishing under unlikely political circumstances, and it worked well for quite a while.

PATTERNS OF PATRONAGE

There is a pattern to informal leadership in Central Asia, discernible even in the small number of documented cases considered here. These patron-entrepreneurs are central in organizing arrangements of people and resources that develop local economies and structure social life. They are creating the conditions for better provisioning populations, an accomplishment that is usually seen as the duty of the state, particularly under expectations set by the Soviet experience. These are nonstate actors embedded in and emerging from communities. Operating on a small scale, they address the socioeconomic challenges with which the post-Soviet Central Asian states have struggled: poverty, inequality, unemployment, inflation, poor education, corruption, injustice, and conflict.

There are notable trends in how these nonstate actors accomplish almost state-like functions, juggling affairs on multiple fronts. For starters, they tend to be *business* entrepreneurs who can effectively raise capital, secure supply chains, recruit talent, manage labor, read market signals, serve clients, expand their activities, and then turn a profit at the end of the day. They also tend to be *political* entrepreneurs who cultivate personal relations with relevant government officials, such as regional authorities, police, and taxation and inspection organs. A patron's political connections help his enterprises avoid state predation. In Batyrov's case, they also secured cover for an ethnic minority to pursue organized activity in a political context where any large-scale Uzbek endeavor is seen as potentially seditious.

Moreover, these patrons need to be skilled narrators, adept at crafting images of themselves as benefactors. They are elite figures who present themselves as serving not only their own personal enrichment and political ambition, but also the needs of the community. They do so by engaging in philanthropy, emphasizing the material benefits conferred by their businesses, and narrating their endeavors in terms of culturally resonant tropes, such as being an authentic native son of the land, grand patron of the city, or paragon of pious virtue. Claims about the moral character of the leader—honesty, selflessness, industriousness, courage—often underpin his image.

The cultivation of trust is a crucial thread running through these different endeavors. Successful local leaders maintain trust with constituents, partners, and political figures by offering arrangements of mutual benefit. Those material and social benefits both enable and are in turn enabled by the coordinated collaboration of the parties under the patron's leadership. Patronage, if cultivated well, has this kind of self-enforcing dynamic and thus fosters stability. Patrons' special manner of conducting socioeconomic relations and the particular cultural narratives that they use to craft their self-presentation as virtuous benefactors may be seen as specifically Central Asian characteristics of this phenomenon.

CONCEIVING CENTRAL ASIAN FUTURES

The ways in which community is organized and provisioned under this kind of patron represent Central Asian solutions to Central Asian problems

of economic hardship and political inequities. With most of the population living in poverty and the republics' wealth (deriving mostly from natural resource exports) disproportionately distributed to connected elites, the persistent question for most citizens is how to fashion viable lives amidst these structural disadvantages. Their needs present opportunities for local business-political entrepreneurs to mobilize people and resources into culturally resonant arrangements that create new economic and political possibilities, including for minorities subject to discrimination.

Contrast these communally embedded endeavors with many Western-led development programs. Far from a consultant's one-size-fits-all plan, these local entrepreneurs calibrate their strategies to the specifics of Central Asian social practices and moral sensibilities. American-style business skills, individualism, rights, and democratic participation have no place in the toolbox of these patrons. Rather, their model centers on an authoritarian "big man" carving out a private domain of personal trust relations that delivers tangible and intangible benefits to many dependents. The arrangements are paternalistic and communalistic, bound by feelings of moral obligation between patron and clients.

> *Local entrepreneurs calibrate their strategies to Central Asian social practices.*

No Western NGO would conceive of such a paradigm for communal flourishing. This is not the "civil society" of autonomous citizens in voluntary association that an outside analyst might promote.

These patterns in local leadership and organization do not imply that all Central Asians prefer a society of many local patrons to one with strong state institutions, consistent law enforcement, impartial courts, and equal treatment of citizens. Some are well aware of the differences in governance between their countries and others in the world, especially now that there are growing Central Asian diasporas and social media connections. Yet the existing socio-political realities at home make other options difficult to obtain in practice.

Patronage confers advantages over reliance solely on inadequate state structures. Moreover, many find the figure of a virtuous benefactor organically tied to the community to be a compelling presence—much more so than an abstraction such as the "rule of law." Some of these leaders do seem to deliver much of what they promise, improving lives in tangible ways. That may be more than development experts have accomplished in the region over the past thirty years.

These observations do not necessarily constitute an endorsement for this form of patronage as the best societal paradigm for Central Asia's future. Just because an arrangement has cultural resonance does not make it the eternal first choice for Central Asians, particularly if viable alternatives become truly available. Cultural sensibilities are not fixed, as seven decades under Soviet rule revealed. The task of conceiving and achieving alternatives is fiendishly difficult, but if Central Asians themselves take the leading role, it may be possible.

Notions of mutual obligation and common good inform the relations of trust cultivated by local patrons. If the mutuality of the commons could be extended to genuinely include people of all ethnicities and localities, then the interdependence of face-to-face community might be widened to approximate national civic belonging, but on terms connected with Central Asian communal experience. Likewise, if trust between familiars could be extended to bring about increased trust among strangers, social and business affairs would be conducted more effectively outside the sphere of personal networks. This amounts to reimagining the nation as a trust community where social differences matter less than the shared purpose of making a fair commonweal. In such a world, local patrons would become less necessary.

Certainly, there would be a constructive role for the state as well as mechanisms of accountability, but any effective societal paradigm needs to connect with the patterns and moral orientations of social life. Central Asians will have to reconcile the tensions between existing arrangements and what they may conceive as a more just society. This will require a novel synthesis. But if we have learned anything from this tour of ground-level trends in Central Asia, it is that the people of the region are creatively innovative. ∎

> "Moldovans themselves will have to break the vicious cycle of underdevelopment by building horizontal structures of social cohesion with genuine forms of solidarity, trust, and participation."

Moldova's Thirty-Year Search for Independence

PETRU NEGURĂ

August 27, 2021, marked the thirtieth anniversary of the Republic of Moldova's independence since its secession from the Soviet Union. On such jubilee occasions, Moldovans wonder about the path their state has taken and where it is heading. Most believe that their country is going in the wrong direction, and trust in the judiciary and state institutions is low. Against this backdrop of dissatisfaction with the capacity and quality of government, citizens are more willing than ever to relinquish their nation's sovereignty by joining it with another state or a federal structure: an increasing number of Moldovans say they would vote in a referendum for unification with Romania. (Between its incorporation in the Russian Empire and the USSR, what is now Moldova was part of Romania from 1918 to 1940.)

Nonetheless, every four years, even those who have spent many years living and working abroad show up at the polls and vote. Each time, voters are faced with a sharply defined choice: between East and West, between authoritarianism and democracy, between corruption and good governance. Despite peaceful alternations between left- and right-wing governments, things never seem to turn in the right direction. Yet the overwhelming victory of the pro-Western Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) in parliamentary elections on July 11, 2021, symbolizes the hopes of Moldovans for a better-governed, corruption-free state.

In December 2020, former Prime Minister Maia Sandu won the presidency in a runoff against incumbent Igor Dodon. Then Sandu's PAS won the July elections with 53 percent of the vote, far ahead of its main competitor, the Bloc of Socialists and Communists (27 percent), and the Shor Political Party (6 percent), taking 63 of 101 seats. It was the first time in the history of Moldova that a right-wing or center-right party had won a parliamentary majority on its own. Sandu had initiated these early elections in hopes of gaining a majority of "honest people" to take back parliament from Dodon's Socialist Party of Moldova (PSRM), which had controlled the legislature in collaboration with the party created by controversial oligarch Ilan Shor.

This election campaign featured apocalyptic messages. With the Party of Communists, until recently their rivals, the Socialists formed an electoral bloc to fight against "fascism" and "union with Romania," even though there was no mention of unionism in the PAS program. For the most part, though, the Socialists focused on waging cultural battles, advocating for the "traditional" role of women in the family and railing against gay rights. Sandu, along with PAS and other right-wing and center-right parties, called on the electorate to prevent "thieves" and the "corrupt" from returning to power.

Both camps seemed to have forgotten the short-lived cohabitation in June–October 2019 between PAS, the Dignity and Truth Platform, and the Socialists. They had formed a coalition government, headed by Sandu, to oust the Democratic Party of oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc, who was accused of "capturing the state." This cohabitation ended abruptly amid mutual mistrust.

From the beginnings of the post-Soviet transition to the present, the question of social trust helps explain Moldova's difficult political evolution, as well as the public response to government policies such as the recent measures taken to

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address the COVID-19 pandemic. A comparison with some other ex-Soviet states will throw further light on Moldova's distinct trajectory.

A FRAGILE COMPROMISE

In Moldavia and other republics of the USSR, the late-Soviet *perestroika* reforms launched by Mikhail Gorbachev opened the way for political pluralism and (inadvertently) "national liberation" movements. The new political organizations had a strong ethnic component and predominantly nationalist agendas. Despite ideological components borrowed from Western political doctrines, Moldovan parties continued to invoke nationalist principles after the proclamation of independence in August 1991.

In March 1991, Moldovan authorities sabotaged the organization of a referendum on whether the republic should remain in the Soviet Union or separate from it. Unlike in the Baltic republics, the decision to declare independence in Moldova was made mostly by political elites under pressure from regional developments and street movements, but without a real popular mandate.

The emerging political pluralism hid a split among elites over which development path the young state should follow. Most members of parliament, despite quite divergent beliefs and backgrounds, were driven to vote for independence by the immediate political circumstances of the failed putsch in Moscow in August 1991, along with the broader context of national movements and the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

After independence, the "conservative" wing, comprising former Communist Party members, held a majority in parliament, forming a common front against the "reformist" and nationalist wing composed of the Popular Front and its ally, another faction of ex-Communists. Just three years after the new state was formed, a new Party of Communists, built on the debris of the Communist Party of the USSR, appeared on the political scene to launch a "velvet restoration," as the Polish public intellectual Adam Michnik dubbed a wider trend in the region of former Communists returning to power.

The few surveys taken from 1989 to 1991 revealed a population divided over Moldova's future. In a poll conducted in January 1991, 43 percent of respondents envisioned it as part of the USSR, 42 percent as an independent state, and 3 percent as part of Romania. The outcome varied from one ethnic and linguistic group to the next. While 55 percent of respondents who considered themselves ethnic Moldovans favored independence, only 9 percent of Russians, 8 percent of Ukrainians, 12 percent of Bulgarians, and 26 percent of other nationalities were pro-independence.

However, in a consultative referendum on March 6, 1994, in mainland Moldova (without Transnistria), 95 percent of participants voted for independence. Supporters of independence later brandished this result to counter demands for unification with Romania. The context in which the 1994 referendum took place was completely different from the mood just a few years earlier. By 1994, independence seemed to most Moldovans the only possible format of statehood, given that all other former Soviet republics, including Russia, had proclaimed independence. The only latent opponents of independence were the supporters of a union with Romania.

> *While the Baltic states focused on implementing reforms, Moldova was wasting energy on war.*

Moldovan authorities subsequently granted citizenship to all residents living in the republic at the time of the proclamation of independence, whereas the Baltic states denied their Slavic minorities the right to citizenship. Moldova's policy was regarded as a model of peaceful and democratic integration of ethnic and linguistic minorities. But interethnic controversies regularly surfaced in the public space.

The most ardent opponents of independence barricaded themselves in the Transnistrian region, a strip of territory east of the Dniester River, proclaiming it a separate republic. An armed conflict from September 1990 to July 1992 resulted in over 1,000 deaths. Albeit unrecognized by the international community, Transnistria had Russia's unofficial support. It became a haven for illicit trafficking.

A CAPTURED STATE

Compared with the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe, the ex-Soviet republics went through a deeper economic crisis because of their integration into the industrial and energy complexes of the USSR. Dependence on Russian resources continued after 1991. The Soviet industrial legacy in Moldova, one-third of which

was based in Transnistria, proved obsolete after the fall of the USSR.

Once the country gained international recognition, Moldovan authorities, like the leaders of other former socialist countries, started a radical economic and social "transition" to a market economy. It was undertaken with assistance from global financial institutions, primarily the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. "Liberalization, stabilization, and privatization" became the watchwords of this new liberal revolution.

Price liberalization implemented in early 1992 fueled hyperinflation, which severely devalued savings and impoverished most Moldovan citizens. The authorities curbed inflation by the end of 1993 by creating a new national currency, the Moldovan leu, with the support of the IMF. Subsequent Moldovan governments continued to diligently apply liberalization and monetary stability policies, drawing international praise. In 1995, the *Economist* hailed Moldova as "a model of correct reform." But this momentary success had a high price. By 1997, Moldova had become one of the most indebted countries in the region in per capita terms, relative to gross domestic product.

Another external factor shook this precarious stability: the economic and financial crisis that began in Russia in August 1998. Buffeted by a financial crisis in Southeast Asia and an extreme drop in prices for its crude oil exports, Russia defaulted on its debts. Since Moldova had maintained excessively close trade relations with Russia, its fragile economy was dragged into a recession that brought the nation to the brink of insolvency. To overcome the crisis, the government applied austerity reforms and pressed ahead with the privatization program.

The privatization of state enterprises and collective farms was officially intended to clear the way for the development of a real estate market, the restructuring of industries, and the establishment of corporate governance mechanisms. In reality, according to independent observers and the Court of Auditors, the sales of state enterprises lacked transparency and the Ministry of Privatization committed serious violations of the rules. Interests close to the government bought up profitable companies at prices much lower than their actual values.

For ordinary people, a positive aspect of privatization was the virtually "free" acquisition of apartments and houses by their inhabitants. But fraud schemes resulted in many vulnerable people losing their homes.

The privatization of public holdings continued in the decades that followed as a form of colonization of the state by vested interests at the expense of the public. These distorted economic policies created a fragile business environment, characterized by corrupt practices and clientelistic relations between private operators and government officials, fueling people's distrust of the new state structures.

Meanwhile, despite the efforts of the early governments to provide state support in the social sphere (education, health, and welfare), public services suffered a profound crisis in the late 1990s due to reduced funding and the regional financial crisis. Some 70 percent of the population fell below the absolute poverty line, with 50 percent under the threshold for extreme poverty.

> Political elites and society in Moldova were hesitant about independence.

In light of drastic budget cuts and chronic nonpayment of civil servants' wages (which were already less than the average wage), the emergence of petty corruption in the public sector was justified in the eyes of many Moldovans. The massive outflow of civil servants and other workers from public institutions and the agricultural sector produced a chain reaction of survival strategies, particularly informal trade, small-scale cross-border trafficking, and labor emigration. Distrust of state institutions, coupled with falling incomes and living standards, led to an unprecedented rise in anomic behaviors such as violence, alcoholism, drug addiction, and crime.

Amid massive pauperization and lack of public trust, a massive protest vote—and "restorative nostalgia," to use the late scholar Svetlana Boym's expression—facilitated the coming to power of the Party of Communists in 2001. Against expectations, the communist authorities continued the program of liberal reforms that was already underway. But despite some success in improving the business environment, corruption did not diminish in the 2000s. Under the communists, state capture by private interests continued to flourish, as it would under succeeding governments.

In 2003, the European Union announced its European Neighborhood Policy to provide

increased assistance to countries on the EU's periphery. Moldova's communist government restarted cooperation with international financial institutions and officially declared that European integration was a state priority. In 2004, relations with Moscow grew colder when President Vladimir Voronin refused to sign a federalization plan proposed by Russian authorities. This "Kozak Memorandum" stipulated the creation of an asymmetric federal state, according equal status and veto power to Moldova and Transnistria.

THEFT OF THE CENTURY

In April 2009, the Party of Communists' victory in disputed parliamentary elections set off street demonstrations that culminated in violent clashes with the police and the devastation of the parliament and presidential office buildings. The self-proclaimed liberal and democratic parties of the opposition successfully exploited these events. Fresh elections held in June 2009 brought them to power in a coalition that was welcomed by Western states and international organizations.

The new government pursued a series of liberal reforms, assisted by international financial institutions and an increase in foreign investment and remittances. On June 27, 2014, in Brussels, Moldovan and EU leaders signed an Association Agreement, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement. Starting that April, Moldovan citizens traveling to Europe's borderless Schengen area began to enjoy the benefits of a liberalized visa regime.

But growing tensions among factions within the government and high-level corruption scandals cast a shadow over the economic growth and achievements of the democratic coalition. The embezzlement of $1 billion from three banks in November 2014, called "the theft of the century," was carried out with the presumed involvement of figures in the highest government circles. It epitomized the failure of the rule of law and the dire extent of state capture in Moldova.

The "theft of the century" and other scandals further depleted the trust of Moldovans in state institutions. The percentage of Moldovans saying they had trust in the government plummeted from an already low 23 percent in 2012 to 7 percent in 2015.

The crisis also contributed to the reconfiguration of national politics. In 2015, in the wake of antigovernment protests, two new political forces emerged: the Dignity and Truth Platform (PDA), a self-proclaimed civic movement that later became a political party, and the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS). Both were structurally different from the traditional parties.

Created as a result of a bottom-up mobilization, PDA and PAS owed their existence to their supporters, not to opaque funding. Both parties avoided debates over national identity and geopolitics. Instead, they focused on fighting high-level corruption, ending state capture, and establishing the rule of law. In the July 2021 elections, the PAS capitalized on Moldovans' hopes for reforms and a real fight against corruption.

FALLING BEHIND THE BALTICS

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the international media regularly compared Moldova with the Baltic states. Moldova resembled them by more than a few criteria: surface area, the ethnic composition of the population, and their geopolitical location between Russia and Europe. However, the evolution of the Baltic countries during the 1990s and 2000s, and their status as EU members after 2004, made them completely different from Moldova.

Latvia's nominal per capita gross domestic product in 2019 ($20,291) was nearly 10 times higher than Moldova's ($2,232). In terms of quality of life, as measured by the United Nations Human Development Index, Latvia had a rating of 0.866 in 2019 and was listed among countries such as Slovakia and Portugal with a "very high" score. Moldova had a rating of 0.663, putting it among countries with a "high" score but below the average of 0.791 for countries in Europe and Central Asia.

Moldova and the Baltic states had different starting points in the transition race. The Baltic populations and elites early on demonstrated strong political will for leaving the Soviet Union and the Eurasian space. Referenda organized in 1989 and 1990 in each of the Baltic republics conferred legitimacy on this path. Starting with their declarations of independence and particularly after the failed putsch in Moscow, the Baltic states enjoyed considerable political and economic support from Western countries and international organizations.

Estonia, Latvia, and to some extent Lithuania were already highly industrialized. Agriculture contributed a minor share of the national income in these former Soviet republics, ranging from 10 to 15 percent in 1992, compared with 35 percent

in Soviet Moldavia. Following a decline in the early 1990s, the economies of the Baltic states have grown continuously since 2000. Besides external financial and technical assistance, higher-quality governance and consistent implementation of economic reforms aided the development of these countries.

In contrast with the Baltic states, Moldova's political elites and society were hesitant about independence. Although it enjoyed popular support at the end of the 1980s, the nationalist and pro-independence movement was largely limited to the pro-Romanian population and elites. Also, Moldova was slower to receive international support, primarily because the populations of the Baltic republics demonstrated their support for independence earlier, jointly, and in a determined way. (Also, all three Baltic nations had been independent states before their annexation by the Soviet Union in 1940.)

Moldova's economy had been mainly agrarian, with a limited industrial output. In the first few years after independence, from 1991 to 1998, authorities (representing the former elite) reluctantly implemented economic and political reforms. Public opinion perceived the economic changes, especially the privatization of enterprises, as fraudulent and disruptive, undermining citizens' trust in the ruling elites and the social contract.

The conflict in Transnistria had a disastrous economic impact on both banks of the Dniester River. The fighting itself, and the deployment of Russian troops in Transnistria, marked Moldova as a potential zone of instability within Russia's sphere of influence. In a period when the Baltic states focused on implementing reforms, Moldova was wasting energy on war.

Yet Moldova's relationship with Transnistria has now reached a relatively peaceful status quo, unlike the conflicts in Ukraine and the Caucasus. Today, 30 years after independence and the outbreak of the conflict, the scarecrow that repels foreign investment is more the chronic instability and the captive states on both banks of the Dniester than the conflict itself.

VIRAL SKEPTICISM

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how important institutional trust is for the successful management of a crisis. As in neighboring countries such as Ukraine and Russia, low confidence in public institutions in Moldova fueled widespread skepticism about the danger posed by the coronavirus and the government's response. It also led to ready acceptance of conspiracy scenarios, especially during the first phase of the pandemic.

According to a poll conducted in May 2020 by civil society group WatchDog.md, half of the respondents agreed that the virus "is no more dangerous than the common flu" and that steps taken to control it were "done intentionally to destroy the economy." Dodon, the president, himself downplayed the severity of the coronavirus in a program posted on YouTube in the period leading up to the November election.

A survey conducted in July 2020 found a high degree of socioeconomic insecurity among respondents: 63 percent said they were either afraid or very afraid that they would not be able to provide their family with necessities because of the pandemic. People with lower socioeconomic status expressed the highest levels of anxiety that they would be unable to cope with socioeconomic hardships, which have been compounded by the pandemic.

These fears are not unreasonable. According to official estimates, the income of the general population decreased during 2020 by 4.8 percent, especially in cities. Vulnerable groups—namely poor households (especially women), returned migrants, the self-employed, and young people who are not in employment, education, or training—have felt the sharpest declines in income during the pandemic, according to research commissioned by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

On April 1, 2020, two weeks after instituting a lockdown, the government announced a series of "pro-business and pro-citizen" measures. One measure provided for tripling the unemployment fund. Anyone dismissed during the state of emergency was entitled to receive monthly unemployment benefits equivalent to the minimum wage (2,775 Moldavan lei, equivalent at the time to $153).

Yet the support measures announced by the government for businesses and employees amounted to just 1.2 percent of GDP. That was extremely low compared with the aid provided to enterprises in Western countries (28.5 percent of GDP in Germany), other countries in Central and Eastern Europe (6.2 percent in Poland), and even the Eastern Partnership countries (6.9 percent in Georgia). According to the UNDP, 91 percent of Moldovan enterprises that participated in the survey did not receive any aid from the state,

and only 3.6 percent benefited from some support measures during the pandemic.

The anemic and inconsistent actions taken by the Moldovan authorities to counter the virus and its socioeconomic effects have only further weakened trust in government and other state institutions. The most vulnerable people, who felt the lack of support from the government most acutely, have the least confidence in the state. Young people and others with lower socioeconomic status, less education, and diminished confidence in institutions are most likely to deny the severity of the pandemic and express disagreement with the measures taken by the state to mitigate its effects.

BREAKING THE CYCLE

The Canadian political scientist Lucan Way has characterized Moldova (along with Ukraine and Russia) with the unflattering concept of "pluralism by default." According to Way, pluralism—not full democracy, which is still nonexistent in Moldova—was a side effect of the weak state. Captured by vested interests, state institutions were incapable of pursuing a coherent modernizing agenda. A viable democracy and the rule of law would require a "powerful state" with competent and independent institutions, unaffected by private interests and geopolitical influences. Other factors leading to "pluralism by default" and "weak authoritarianism," according to Way, are a weak civil society and divides over national identity and geopolitics among the country's elites.

The way to escape the current political and societal crisis thus lies in breaking the cycle of "pluralism by default" by strengthening state institutions and civil society. Before there can be a renewal of political elites and real institutional reform, Moldovans themselves will have to break the vicious cycle of underdevelopment by building horizontal structures of social cohesion with genuine forms of solidarity, trust, and participation. A strong civil society, organized from the bottom up, would put pressure on elites and decision makers to undertake effective reforms for the benefit of the country.

A strong civil society could also help tackle crises, compensating for the low capacity of state institutions. As the sociologist Zeynep Tufekci has shown, Hong Kong's success in limiting the spread of COVID-19 in its early phase was due not to an effective government response but to civil society's grass-roots mobilization to distribute sanitary masks, disinfectants, and other basic necessities, drawing on civic infrastructure and organizational capacity developed during protest movements in previous years.

Cultural and identity differences could become a basis for Moldova's enrichment rather than division if people could overcome the discord provoked by politicians eager to hide their incompetence and iniquities. Studies suggest that Moldovan society has a fairly high degree of interethnic cohesion. Daily relations among people of different ethnicities and affiliations are peaceful.

Corrupt privatization processes fueled people's distrust in the new state structures.

Likewise, relations with Moldovan citizens in Transnistria are quiet and cooperative, despite provocations from politicians on either side of the Dniester. This is a big difference from conflicts in the Caucasus and in Ukraine, where relations between citizens in the territories involved are poisoned by deep resentment and mistrust.

Given these peaceful interactions among the country's various ethnic and social groups and with the people of Transnistria, Moldova has real potential to build a truly pluralistic society. Toward this end, the new government should work to strengthen social cohesion instead of sowing discord. There is a need for bottom-up engagement that makes reform and renewal a collaborative project of both state and society. In the absence of such a "country project," as Moldovans call it, even an honest government with good intentions risks consuming itself in honorable but futile attempts. ∎

Strategies of Disability Activism in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia

SVETLANA BORODINA

Despite the common stereotype of people with disabilities living completely immobilized and segregated lives in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, they have actively participated in shaping their conditions. Depending on the historical and political moment, their tactics have varied. Through independent and institutional activism, petitioning the state, running mutual aid organizations, building networks, and making art, people with a variety of disabilities have shifted, adapted, and challenged the status quo. They have not followed the familiar model of taking their protests to the streets or confronting lawmakers. But Russian disability activism has a rich history and has taken many forms.

Disability and Equality
Second in a series

A unified movement based on the idea of disability rights as universal human rights did not emerge during the Soviet era, though such activism was beginning in the West at that time. Nor did communities driven by disability pride materialize. Instead, several different groups—the blind, the deaf, war veterans, and people with mobility impairments—developed their own forms of activism through which they engaged with society and challenged the conditions in which they lived.

Due to the differences in their social standing and resources, the forms of community available to them, and their varied capabilities and needs, these groups did not have much contact with each other. They focused on fighting for the well-being of people like themselves, rather than offering a political critique of the Soviet system—or, later, of capitalist Russia. They all worked to improve living conditions and access to resources within the political system they inhabited.

WILLING SOVIET WORKERS

For blind and deaf people, the revolutionary years provided an opportunity to free themselves from the tutelage and charity that were their usual lot in tsarist Russia. After the February 1917 revolution ended tsarist rule, pioneering organizers in two independent associations, the Union of the Blind and the Union of the Deaf-Mute, fought for legal equality and freedom from guardianships, which were granted in July 1918.

Both activist groups soon backed merging with the state apparatus to ensure systemic support. The All-Russia Society of the Blind (VOS) was founded in 1923 and the All-Russia Society of the Deaf (VOG) in 1926, both functioning under the Commissariat of Social Assistance. This became one of the USSR's first cases of institutional activism in the form of state-run societies. But as historians Claire Show and Maria Cristina Galmarini-Kabala argue, this close connection with the state did not discredit activists' work.

Throughout the Soviet era, VOS and VOG activists refused to equate blindness and deafness with helplessness. They claimed agency by demanding job access and educational opportunities. Aiming to demonstrate that their members' capabilities were no less than those of sighted and hearing citizens, they advocated for the right to live independently and engage in useful work.

Against commonplace depictions of disabled Russians dependent on alms, they counterposed images of capable blind and deaf people. They proclaimed their readiness and desire to transform "uncultured" and "illiterate" disabled people into conventionally productive Soviet subjects. In

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this way, the activists appealed for state support by promising to normalize disabled populations for a future of usefulness to the collective. They argued that people with disabilities could become full-fledged Soviet citizens if they received the necessary help and access.

Yet such productivist rhetoric solidified harmful stereotypes about blind and deaf (and other disabled) people, affirming that in order to be considered "whole," they needed to change themselves to fit into the labor force As Galmarini-Kabala says of the Soviet system of disability support, it "combined humanitarian impulses and invasive forms of discipline and control."

The shortcomings of Soviet industry and educational and housing infrastructure hindered the the activists' work. Schools for children with disabilities lacked equipment and were in poor condition; urban environments were inaccessible; plants lacked the equipment and diversification to employ disabled workers successfully. Many employers held prejudices against hiring blind and deaf workers, fearing that they would be slower and less productive than their able peers. This inadequacy of material infrastructures was a considerable barrier even for those with disabilities that did not preclude them from joining the labor force.

> *Disability rights activism in the USSR did not pursue political goals.*

VETERANS IN THE VANGUARD

During World War II, much of the Russian population experienced physical and mental trauma. Widespread sectors of the economy and infrastructure were damaged or ruined; the health care system was overwhelmed. The war also resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of disabled people. Among them were veterans disabled by war who claimed the right to special treatment earned by their service.

Disabled veterans introduced a new element to the relationship between the state and citizens with disabilities. They insisted on the symbolic debt that the state and society owed them as soldiers who had sacrificed their bodies for their country and were thus entitled to privileges and benefits. Their demands challenged the extant rehabilitative model, which was focused predominantly on vocational training and called for attention to other aspects of well-being: family, marriage, friendship, affection, and care.

Under Stalin, any form of independent political organization (except those authorized by the state) was prohibited. But veterans managed to establish connections among themselves. They planted the seeds for a movement that would eventually flourish.

After Stalin's death, organizing became somewhat easier. In 1956, thirty mobility-impaired people on scooters gathered in front of the Moscow headquarters of the Communist Party's Central Committee to protest the state's inability to guarantee disabled war veterans the same rights that Western capitalist countries did. Later that year, a new Moscow-based organization was founded—the Soviet Committee of War Veterans (SKVV).

Despite demands to extend the committee's purview to advocating for disabled veterans and improving their living conditions, its official goal was to produce international and domestic propaganda. During the SKVV's meetings, activists pushed to make the committee a centralized organization of veterans, analogous to the VOG or VOS.

Although the committee was slow to change its mandate, activists took the initiative to form local mutual aid groups, often flying beneath the party's radar. As historian Mark Edele notes, in the 1960s such groups existed in military schools, officers' housing, factories and other enterprises where veterans worked, and local history museums across the country. In 1965, the Central Committee finally granted the SKVV permission to establish local chapters.

In 1976, however, the Central Committee ordered a downsizing of the SKVV. But the veterans' movement continued lobbying for special rights and status, which it won in 1978. The movement was finally allowed to establish the All-Union Organization of Veterans of War and Labor (VOVVT) in 1986. Edele observes that unlike the SKVV, which had focused more on international propaganda than on promoting veterans' interests, the VOVVT "combined such interest politics with service to the Soviet state."

DISSIDENT ACTIONS

Not all self-organized groups of disabled people drew recognition and appreciation from the Soviet state. The anthropologist Sarah Phillips has noted a stream of disability rights activism

that emerged in the 1960s from disability group homes, or *internaty*. Shared experiences and dissatisfaction with their living conditions fueled their activism.

Among the activists cited by Phillips is Gennadii Gus'kov, a polio survivor and an advocate for establishing the All-Union Society of the Disabled. He collaborated with local authorities to push for improved job opportunities, with some positive results. But after associating with dissidents, he lost state support.

Another prominent example of activism that lacked state authorization was the Action Group to Defend the Rights of the Disabled, founded in 1978. The three founding members of this group —Valeriy Fefelov, Yuriy Kiselev, and Faizulla Khusainov—all had mobility impairments. Like Gus'kov, they sought to establish an All-Union Society of the Disabled.

They published information bulletins documenting the living conditions and experiences of people with disabilities in the USSR and appeals to the authorities to defend their rights. They also connected with international disability organizations, mainly in Europe. The Soviet authorities perceived the group as a threat to the regime and harassed its members. Their apartments were searched and they were threatened with arrest and imprisonment.

Fefelov fled to West Germany. In 1986, he published the book *There Are No Invalids in the USSR!* It detailed the problems faced by Soviet citizens with mobility impairments, including universal inaccessibility, inadequate medical care and hospital equipment, poor-quality prosthetics and assistive technologies, long waiting times, bureaucratic indifference, and a lack of job opportunities for wheelchair users.

Disability rights activism in the USSR did not pursue political goals. Yet bureaucrats treated these activities as a threat to disrupt the political system and the socialist project.

While the later Soviet period brought new openings for war veterans, deaf people faced a different situation. Historian Claire Shaw emphasizes that the VOG was initially driven by a revolutionary impulse to "free" deaf people from the presumption of defectiveness and open up opportunities for them to become valued Soviet citizens. With the development of hearing aid technologies and the expansion of welfare over the years, the society's activist impulse gradually declined. Also, when deaf enterprises became successful, they were usually taken over by non-hearing-impaired management and bureaucracy. This led to depreciation of the deaf community in the late Soviet years.

POST-SOVIET OPENINGS

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the development of information technologies dramatically diversified the scope of Russian disability activism. Suddenly there were many ways for disabled people to push for social change: participating in NGO-led projects (newly allowed by the state); lobbying through centralized organizations such as the All-Russia Societies of the Disabled, the Deaf, or the Blind; running support groups; channeling corporate responsibility funds toward disability inclusion; pressing for implementation of legally mandated changes in private and public institutions; engaging in art activism; or creating content on social media platforms. Some also went out to the streets to protest—a tactic that has become increasingly unavailable in recent years.

Russia signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2008 and ratified it in 2012, committing to taking steps toward ending disability-based discrimination. In December 2014, President Vladimir Putin signed a range of amendments to existing federal laws to reflect the UNCRPD's principles and requirements.

In 2011, the federal government launched Accessible Environment, a national program directing unprecedented funds to making spaces, services, and information accessible to people with disabilities. Alternative domestic funding sources, such as presidential grants and substantial support from large corporations, also began flowing to the projects of various socially focused disability organizations.

But this is often not enough. During my ethnographic research in Russia, several NGOs told me that insufficient financial resources, shortages of workers, mind-boggling amounts of red tape, and normalized exclusion of people with disabilities were the most difficult problems they faced. These were more pressing than other factors that have gained international notoriety, such as government surveillance and the "foreign agent law," which makes it hard for Russian NGOs to receive foreign funding.

Much post-Soviet disability activism has been harbored within NGOs. Their size, goals, and

working methods will vary, but these groups can raise funds domestically and obtain state-authorized status. Currently, it is essential for NGOs to emphasize that their programs are not part of a political critique, but instead are social projects to improve the living conditions of a vulnerable population.

Collaborations with local elites—including members of the ruling party, United Russia—often serve as a prerequisite for the viability of certain NGOs. During my research, I observed that although such collaborations tie NGOs to the political establishment, they also provide access to channels through which NGO workers and their constituencies can promote their interests.

Since the legal changes implemented in 2014, prominent museums and cultural centers have begun to develop accessibility and inclusion programming. They are now holding educational seminars, debating definitions and best practices, and adapting their services to reach more diverse audiences on more equitable terms.

These museums include the Polytech Museum and the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow, the Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg, and the Yeltsin Center in Yekaterinburg. They have limited resources and expertise, and not all have employed experts with disabilities to shape their accessibility initiatives. The programs they have launched vary in quality and scope, ranging from critical research labs on forms of inclusion to segregated programming whereby people with different kinds of impairments can access exhibitions only through "special tours."

Activism on behalf of people with cognitive disabilities who live in institutional care facilities known as *psycho-neurological internats* (PNIs) is also notable. Scholars such as Anna Klepikova and Anna Altukhova, as well as NGO workers and journalists, have revealed that PNIs are in dire need of reform. They are overcrowded, understaffed, and underfunded; they rely on the tools of punitive psychiatry, and they deprive residents of their legal decision-making capacity. As Klepikova observes, once someone enters the system, it is virtually impossible to leave. On social media, the hashtag #stoppni (#стоппни) denotes posts about alternatives (such as supported living homes), as well as reports on problematic aspects of the current system and opposition to building new PNIs.

In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, several Moscow- and Saint Petersburg–based NGOs carried out an "evacuation" campaign. They managed to move more than 30 people out of PNIs and into apartments provided with assisted-living care. This operation was part of the longer history of lobbying for PNI reform by NGOs and prominent activists such as Nyuta Federmesser.

FINDING A VOICE

A sketch of the Russian disability activism scene would be incomplete without considering some individual activists with disabilities. Based on interviews I conducted in June 2021, here are three portraits of activists whose work is not directly realized through established institutions. They may help build a more nuanced understanding of the diverse and sometimes divergent tactics of contemporary disability activism in Russia.

Jerry Mercury, from Saint Petersburg, identifies as a nonbinary, transgender, neurodivergent self-advocate. He is a poet, musician, artist, filmmaker, and blogger. He uses his own experiences to generate a critical, anti-ableist narrative about neurodivergent people in particular, and people with other disabilities in general. His work in multiple creative forms is informed by critical insights from feminist and civil rights discourses, which is uncommon in Russia.

His first film, *Setting Off with Malcolm*, was made singlehandedly in 2020 and featured Jerry performing a symbolic death of his old, socially conditioned self to regain freedom and dignity. In 2021, he has been working on a sequel, *Saffron March*, about how that initiation ritual changed his life and opened the way to self-advocacy. He now openly identifies as an "invalid," reclaiming a label often used in Russia in a pejorative sense.

Also in 2021, Jerry started his third project, *The Non-Loneliness Train*, which will include a long-term series of interviews about being neurodivergent, as well as his self-advocacy blog, available on Facebook. By the time of our interview, he had created the first part of a series called *Internal Inclusion*, about his experiences as someone who values his neurodivergence while facing the same environmental and social barriers as other disabled people.

> *Many institutions stubbornly resist prioritizing accessibility.*

Finding and deciding to express one's own voice amid normalized ableism in Russia is not easy. It requires undoing one's own internalized ableism and recognizing the systemic nature of disability-based exclusion and discrimination. It also may involve encountering irritation and misunderstanding in an audience unwilling to hear about its own privileges and complicity.

CLAIMING AGENCY

Alena Levina is a 33-year-old Moscow-based artist and accessibility expert. Although she previously lived without disabilities, she now uses an electric wheelchair and is also hard of hearing. Through performances, feminist critiques, art exhibitions, public talks, professional work on accessibility, and day-to-day negotiations of the terms of inclusion, Alena helps her audience unpack its deep-seated, harmful assumptions about gender, sexuality, disability, and other markers of difference.

Alena is a co-founder of *Women | Disability | Feminism*—a feminist platform unique in Russia for holding critical and open discussions of the intersections of ableism, patriarchy, sexism, heteronormativity, homo- and transphobia, and other forms of systemic oppression. In a country where addressing issues of sexuality has become increasingly tricky and feminist agendas often draw snide remarks, this platform offers a rare outlet. In 2019, it organized a feminist festival and published an open-access zine with stories by disabled women and translations of critical texts. Alena is currently working on Inva-Protest, a grassroots project against domestic violence, run by women with disabilities.

Alena also works with organizers of various events across the city—concerts, raves, shows, exhibitions, talks—to make them accessible to people with disabilities. Afterward, she documents her experiences on Facebook, publicizing the barriers to participation by disabled people as well as possible solutions.

Alena also uses performance as a critical tool. As I wrote this essay, I followed her public performance on the in/accessibility of a major art institution in Moscow—Vinzavod—where she was enrolled in an educational program. The performance was broadcast on Instagram. Alena and two other activists (Sasha Kurlenkova and Anna Ustalost') performed Russian *chansons* in Vinzavod's yard and solicited donations. After collecting about 8,000 rubles (nearly $115), Alena donated the proceeds to Vinzavod to help it acquire a portable ramp.

To a Russian eye trained to stereotype disabled people as beggars and to regard institutions such as Vinzavod as temples of art, this was a profoundly symbolic performance. It subverted power hierarchies and disclosed the stubborn resistance of many institutions to prioritizing accessibility. An artist with disabilities, collecting donations as if they were alms, drove home the dehumanizing effect of institutional disregard.

CROSSING THE DIVIDE

Mikhail Voytsekhovsky, a blind professional massage therapist, is also a founder of an NGO that promotes disability inclusion. But his activism transcends the boundaries of any projects organized by the group. For Mikhail, social encounters, relationships, and actual experiences—as opposed to discourses, rights, entitlements, and labels—are what matters. He creates opportunities for people with and without disabilities to collaborate: by learning, traveling, hiking, sailing, freediving, and simply hanging out together.

When I asked him about his approach, he said: "I think that the best strategy is demonstrating your own example and creating a positive personal experience of interaction between participants." He added, "We can talk about the importance of interaction" between people with and without disabilities, but until someone "actually experiences this interaction," such persuasion does not work. Without engaging across the divide, inclusion will not materialize—there simply won't be anyone who knows how to enact it.

Mikhail's focus is on individual people and their ability to change the status quo through changing their practices and patterns of engagement with others. He works to normalize connections across the dis/ability divide. In a way, his activism is prefigurative: by forging relationships with abled people, Mikhail demonstrates the possibility of a society in which disability no longer serves as a reason for segregation.

He told me that after he had attended a special high school for blind children, he realized that society lacked a positive model of engagement between people with and without disabilities. "Society was oriented to help me, not to interact or communicate with me as an equal partner," he said. To change that, he decided to work from the ground up, making each collaboration, encounter, and hangout part of a broader social change.

ISOLATION AND DEBATE

Digital activism has been growing among disabled people in Russia, at least among those who have sufficient resources to access social media platforms. YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, VKontakte (a popular Russian social media platform), and Twitter offer opportunities for self-expression and community-making that have long been denied to people with disabilities. Yet increasing state surveillance of citizens' digital content and social media activities, together with ongoing issues concerning privacy and cyber bullying, have created new risks for disabled digital activists.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many of the preexisting vulnerabilities of people with disabilities, leaving them with fewer opportunities for direct contact and support. Institutional care facilities set stricter visitation policies—during the initial lockdown, volunteers and relatives could not visit PNIs. Some abled people mobilized volunteer brigades or support services. Disabled activists also organized, aiming to use the situation to bring visibility to the isolation that people with disabilities had faced for many years before any lockdowns.

People with disabilities faced isolation long before any lockdowns.

One example of such activism is the digital campaign #амывсегдадома (#butwearealwaysathome), launched by Ivan Bakaidov, an IT specialist with cerebral palsy, and the Polytechnic Museum of Moscow. On March 17, 2020, Bakaidov posted on his Facebook page a call for people with disabilities to share their experiences and creative solutions for staying at home for prolonged periods of time. He identified a few goals for this campaign:

> I would like to urge people to sympathize with those who cannot leave their homes due to their physical disabilities. I would like you to document the services that are becoming popular now (like food delivery or free online cinema) for people with disabilities. After all, #butwearealwaysathome. I also want to invite people with disabilities to [share] their life hacks and stories about living within four walls under this hashtag. Now is the moment when we can convey our position to abled people.

In response, on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, VKontakte, and TikTok, people with disabilities and parents of disabled children began sharing their stories about isolation that some had endured for many years. This exchange stirred debate by drawing parallels between the immobilization that people with disabilities experience due to an inaccessible environment, which starts in their own apartment buildings, and the temporary isolation imposed on abled people by the pandemic.

Some have applauded the comparison, noting that it has allowed people with disabilities to educate abled readers about their daily lives, revealing years of unjust treatment and the mentally and physically harmful impacts of isolation. But others have rejected the parallel, arguing that for abled people, measures to cope with temporary lockdowns were short-term and did not compare with the struggles of those enduring long-term isolation, often resulting in depression and other mental health problems.

Some also pointed out an ableist aspect of pandemic coping strategies: accommodations that people with disabilities have wanted for years, including remote work and online services, were normalized and became widely available.

Bakaidov's post drew criticism for hardening the dichotomy between us ("people with disabilities") and them ("abled people"). Some criticized the sentiment that the experiences of disabled peers should serve to inspire abled people. Others disagreed, noting that some people in wheelchairs travel the world, and arguing that individual discipline and willpower can help overcome barriers and allow people with disabilities to live richer lives. Some used the occasion to ask for financial donations or other help to purchase expensive equipment or treatment. In a word, this digital campaign created an opportunity for abled and disabled people to meet and debate.

These are just some of the latest examples of the plethora of activist strategies that disabled people have employed throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in Russia. They call for acknowledging the essential role of people with disabilities as active, participating citizens, despite the fact that their participation has long been silenced and rendered invisible. ∎

How Faith-Based Human Rights Work Gets Done in Moscow

MELISSA L. CALDWELL

In 2001, a congregant of one of Moscow's oldest and largest Protestant churches was violently attacked while standing on the sidewalk outside the church building. The police were called for assistance but declined to investigate. Although the victim was African and members of the congregation of St. James (a pseudonym) were certain that the assault was racially motivated, the official police statement described the event as "hooliganism," a catch-all phrase for graffiti, public drunkenness, vandalism, and general delinquency.

This was not an isolated event, and certainly not the first time that one of the church's own members had been attacked. Over the course of my ethnographic research in Moscow since the mid-1990s, I have known many people from African countries, including many congregants of St. James, who were harassed or physically assaulted. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Moscow newspapers carried accounts of attacks against African residents, and I frequently recognized the names of victims. In one of the most shocking incidents, a member of the church, the daughter of an African diplomat, was pushed off a bridge into the Moscow River. (Fortunately, she was not seriously injured.)

These events, and the increasing frequency and brazenness with which they seemed to occur, were deeply distressing to members of St. James. Congregants—both white and black, Russian and foreign—struggled with the fact that they could not keep their own community safe. Putting their concerns and their faith into action, they expanded the congregation's social assistance programs and added programs focusing explicitly on racial justice.

Twenty years later, St. James is a recognized leader in Russia's human rights sector. Individually and in partnership with a diverse community of faith-based and secular communities in Moscow, the church promotes tolerance and inclusion and campaigns against discrimination. Its congregational activities include assistance programs for Russia's black, biracial, African, Middle Eastern, and other minority communities. Over the past year, St. James has explicitly connected this work for racial justice in Russia with the Black Lives Matter movements spreading across the United States and around the world.

HUMAN RIGHTS FOR WHOM?

To outside observers, Russia probably would not immediately appear to be a country that acknowledges or protects human rights. Over the past decade, Russia has been a dangerous place for social justice proponents who advocate for more progressive, democratic policies and laws.

The most prominent examples are the 2012 arrests, trials, and imprisonment of members of the feminist punk rock group Pussy Riot, the 2015 assassination of former Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov, who was known for his progressive political stance and opposition to President Vladimir Putin's administration, and the 2020 poisoning and 2021 imprisonment of opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Less visible, but no less significant, have been the many cases of harassment, displacement, imprisonment, forced exile, and even murder of environmentalists, feminists, disability rights activists, LGBTQ activists, and members of religious, ethnic, and racial minorities.

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While this authoritarian trend has deepened since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, activists already faced difficult conditions well before then. Over the long term, they have worked out ways to navigate ambiguous or tense relations with the state.

In the summer of 2009, while I was conducting research in Moscow on faith-based social justice programs, I attended a luncheon hosted by a US diplomat who facilitated connections and funding opportunities for the city's nonprofit organizations. The guests were all women—among them were Russian and foreign diplomats and government officials; staff members of international development agencies, and Russian social service charities and NGOs; and human rights attorneys. Despite the cocktails and festive menu, there was a palpable sense of concern and sadness. A recurring topic was the increasing restrictions on human rights groups, and civil society more generally, being implemented by the Russian government. Many attendees interpreted this as an explicitly regressive political move.

Many also spoke of an incident several days earlier: two disability rights activists in another region of Russia had been brutally killed. These were just the most recent murders in a string of violent attacks against social justice activists. Several women at the luncheon had known the victims personally, and they were both horrified by the news and terrified that they might be the next victims.

During that same summer, colleagues who worked for a faith-based Moscow social welfare program that I had been following for many years published a report on racial discrimination in Russia, with particular attention to violence against black Russians and African migrants. In their 2009 survey of several hundred people from African countries living in Moscow, 89 percent of respondents reported that hostile race relations affected their daily lives. Nearly 75 percent said they had been verbally attacked, and nearly 65 percent reported having been physically attacked. (Despite populist representations of a nation that is culturally, ethnically, and racially homogeneous, Russia's population is, in fact, highly diverse as the result of several centuries of internal migration and Soviet projects of socialist internationalism that drew students, artists, and other professionals from around the world, most notably from socialist African countries.)

After the report's publication, one of the authors, a journalist who had spoken publicly about his own experiences as an African student living in Moscow, received harassing messages and death threats. A Russian human rights attorney matter-of-factly told me that death threats were a common occurrence. She fully expected that she could be killed for doing her job.

Yet Russia is home to an active network of individuals and groups committed to protecting human rights and supporting the country's most vulnerable communities, especially its racial and ethnic minorities. The difficult work they do is especially notable in the context of the Russian government's increasingly nationalist orientation, which has been visible in actions such as the 2012 "foreign agent" law, aimed at organizations presumed to have connections with "foreign," especially Western, governments and ideologies.

This hostility have been expressed through censures and closures of programs and deportations of foreign aid workers and volunteers. Faith-based communities have experienced similar difficulties. The organizations that I have been tracking for the past 25 years have all suffered different forms of persecution, including raids by the tax police, loss of property, visa cancellations, and even deportations of foreign congregants and staff.

> *Russian faith-based organizations benefit from their historical legacy as moral leaders.*

Despite these challenges, activists engaged in anti-racism programs and other human rights activities continue to do the hard, dangerous work of advocating for change and justice. Among these groups, faith-based communities like St. James and its partners stand out for the scope of their activities and the magnitude of their impact. Summing up the extent to which Russian activists rely on these faith-based programs, one of the country's leading human rights attorneys told me that St. James and its counterparts "do the work that we wish we could do."

A LEGACY OF ACTIVISM

How do Russia's faith-based organizations manage to do the work that others wish they could do? How do they tackle critical human rights issues that reveal inadequacies in the Russian state's ability to ensure fairness and justice for all of its

citizens and residents, while also maintaining productive relationships with the state and society?

Most immediately, Russian religious organizations benefit from their historical legacy as moral leaders. Today's faith-based human rights activists are just the most recent manifestation of Russia's long tradition of civic-oriented religious activism. Five hundred years ago, Russia's different religious communities were already supporting the imperial government by addressing critical political, economic, and social issues: food relief, health care, and shelter for orphans, the elderly, and the disabled, as well as expressing their support for national defense and civic engagement more generally.

During the Soviet era, the state shut down religious and private charities and transformed social assistance into a state responsibility. But faith communities at home and abroad found ways, both formal and informal, to continue providing aid such as food relief and medical supplies, and to advocate on behalf of religious minorities. In the late Soviet period, President Mikhail Gorbachev's reform policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, coupled with a series of political, economic, and environmental crises, created openings for grassroots citizen groups to set up (and reintroduce) organizations devoted to civic engagement, social assistance, and human rights.

At that moment, St. James and other faith-based communities intensified and formalized their assistance programs to care for Moscow's most vulnerable residents: the elderly; veterans and other survivors of World War II; people with disabilities or addictions; orphans; the homeless; ethnic, racial, and religious minorities; and refugees and asylum seekers. Among the varied services they provided were food relief, housing, medical care, job retraining, educational support, and legal representation.

These activities continued into the beginning of the post-Soviet period, when restrictions on religious and foreign organizations were loosened. Russia experienced an influx of foreign organizations dedicated to encouraging the country's transition to a capitalist democracy and the growth of a robust civil society. Most prominent in these efforts were international development agencies and nongovernmental organizations funded by foreign donors.

Working quietly behind the scenes were faith-based communities representing Russia's incredibly diverse religious traditions: Russian Orthodox, Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Baptists, Quakers, the Salvation Army, Muslims, and Jews, among many others. Through partnerships with Russian government agencies and civic groups, these faith-based communities formed a robust, alternative assistance sphere that coexisted alongside the formal social welfare system.

By the early 2000s, many foreign-supported development programs were completing their projects and leaving Russia. This was partly due to the changing priorities of international funders and partly due to pressure from the Russian government. Meanwhile, faith-based communities expanded their programs and partnerships. At this time, Moscow was home to a vibrant and expansive interfaith coalition of Orthodox and other Christian and non-Christian congregations. They publicly intervened in domestic socioeconomic and political issues, including migration, xenophobia, racism, homophobia, and human rights violations.

As of 2021, many of these interfaith partnerships have been institutionalized, legally recognized, and, most importantly, publicly authorized as official nongovernmental assistance organizations. In a sign of this official acceptance, several of the most progressive organizations prominently occupy buildings adjacent to federal government buildings, including those occupied by branches of the security services. They regularly provide space for activists who are engaged in a range of controversial areas: health care for undocumented migrants, shelter for homeless persons, anarchist peace movements, and pro-Palestinian advocates, among others. The prominence and even visibility of these organizations and their interventions is remarkable in a context in which the state has been shrinking the space for secular civil society.

CIVIC PARTNERS

Although today's faith-based activists are increasingly taking on issues in ways that publicly challenge the Russian state's authority and values, the communities that have proved most effective have been careful to present themselves as civic partners whose efforts support the state and its citizens, even if their beliefs are not always fully aligned with the state's interests. This is not always an easy task, as my interviews with faith leaders showed.

In 2009, just as these organizations were beginning to become more prominent, I had a conversation with several Salvation Army officers about

how they tried to promote human rights agendas while remaining respectful of authority. One said:

> There are changes in our approaches here in Russia, depending on the leader. . . . We try to stay within the bounds of the law. We intercede for the disenfranchised who have no voice and we do it in a way that does not blame the government. We are working alongside the government and working with the government.

Such perspectives have been echoed in the comments of other clergy over the past twenty-five years. The experiences of three ministers, ordained in different denominations and leading congregations whose members frequently criticized and protested against the Putin administration, are especially revealing of these unexpected alliances. Each noted that while their theological and personal beliefs required them to call out injustices, they did so in ways that were respectful of the state, even when they disagreed with the government and its policies.

One of the three, who sometimes worried that his congregation was too openly oppositional in its politics, was nevertheless invited by authorities to provide spiritual care to inmates at one of the country's "secret" prisons. Another, whose congregation actively supported progressive causes at home and abroad, was tapped by federal officials to travel secretly to Russia's Far East to assist North Korean defectors.

Faith-based communities formed a robust, alternative assistance sphere.

The third minister led a congregation whose members included political and economic migrants from African and Asian countries. Many lacked legal authorization to work or live in Russia and were homeless or in precarious housing, and at risk of racist attacks or harassment from the police or employers. For many years, the minister had extended temporary shelter in his own home to undocumented migrants. Their physical presence in his apartment block, a building occupied by many high-ranking government officials, drew attention to his work and congregation. He decided that by not flaunting his views and by offering spiritual hospitality but not permanent shelter, he could abide by his ethical and legal responsibilities and be left alone by local authorities.

Over the past year, clergy at congregations with close spiritual and social connections to St. James have publicly shown their support for the Black Lives Matter movement and allowed political opposition groups to meet in their public spaces. They have also been allowed to continue their in-person services with undocumented migrants and racial minorities, despite Moscow's pandemic restrictions.

Even as the Russian state has appeared to be hostile to both human rights and minorities, it has worked closely with faith-based organizations to provide vulnerable communities with access to resources, including pastoral care. These partnerships, even when tense and conflicted, demonstrate that faith-based groups can engage in social action directed toward the civic good in ways that are simultaneously respectful of the state and productively critical. In so doing, they allow glimpses of humanitarian impulses even within the Russian government.

MAKING HUMAN RIGHTS HUMANE

Perhaps a bigger challenge facing Russian faith-based activists is the need to comply with human rights laws and procedures—set by the government, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and international agencies that mediate and process rights cases—while also remaining true to their spiritual beliefs. Clergy and staff with Russian faith-based communities believe that the international human rights values and policies they try to uphold can be more restrictive and harmful than Russian approaches and attitudes.

They must find ways to be responsive and responsible to legal and governing bodies both in Russia and in the international human rights community. They must also reconcile the disparity between what they can do, as defined by law and practice, and what they want to do, in accordance with their sense of personal and theological ethics, when responding to the people who approach them for help.

These conflicting imperatives are evident in the experiences of congregations that support people applying for refugee status, asylum, and resettlement. In the early 2000s, the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) invited St. James to start a nongovernmental program that would conduct preliminary screenings for asylum and resettlement applicants. At the same time, the

International Committee of the Red Cross and other international organizations included St. James in their efforts to institute anti-racism and anti-xenophobia tolerance programs in Russian schools and community groups. St. James was a logical partner for these programs, given the church's long-standing anti-racism efforts, its reputation among Moscow's migrant communities, and its strong relationships with local, federal, and international government officials and agencies.

After accepting these invitations, St. James's minister and staff members became frequent collaborators in a number of initiatives. In some cases, they were asked to provide expert advice for other groups that wanted to implement anti-racism and anti-xenophobia programs. In other cases, St. James staff received training from the UNHCR and other relevant Russian and international diplomatic and legal agencies in order to assist applicants for asylum and resettlement.

St. James's staff soon discovered that the rigid legal and bureaucratic procedures of these organizations often impeded their ability to pursue ethical human rights work. For instance, in the summer of 2009, the staff received a difficult case involving twin brothers from Cameroon. The teenagers were physically identical, except that one had a massive scar across his face. Both had been conscripted as child soldiers, which was the basis for their asylum claims. Shortly after conscription, they were separated and assigned to different commanders. As factions changed allegiances, the brothers ended up on opposing sides. After escaping separately, they found each other and made their way to Russia. Although Russia may seem an unlikely destination for asylum seekers, it is officially a receiving country in partnership with the United Nations. And despite strict border controls, it is often easier for would-be asylum seekers to enter Russia than other countries, especially in Western Europe.

Both young men had compelling stories and legitimate details to back up their claims. Yet the official policies did not treat their experiences as equally valid and qualifying. One brother had been given a privileged position by his commander and was forced to commit crimes against the group to which his brother belonged. According to the requirements set out by the UNHCR, one brother was officially a victim and potentially eligible for asylum, whereas the other was classified as a perpetrator and therefore ineligible, despite his age and forced conscription.

Deeply upset by this, the staff decided to recommend both brothers for further screening. In their follow-up meetings, they carefully navigated the rules of what they could and could not reveal about the process, counseling the young men on how to present their cases in ways that reconciled the differences between their experiences. This skirted the line of what was permissible, but staff members later confided that they felt obligated to treat the brothers with compassion and ensure that both had an equal chance at asylum.

St. James's minister and screening staff knew that their credibility with the asylum and resettlement authorities depended on their ability to be fair and uphold the regulations. Yet the rules were abstracted from real individuals, and the staff felt that the consequences of rejecting one of the brothers would be too dire to contemplate. They believed that it was better to risk being reprimanded for leniency.

A DOUBTFUL CASE

In a similarly difficult dilemma, the St. James screening committee dealt with a potential trafficking case that began when the minister received an international call in the middle of the night. The caller, identifying himself as an African living in Germany, said his sister had recently arrived in Russia from Sierra Leone and had been robbed of her documents at a Moscow train station. He asked if someone from the church could help her replace her papers and continue on to Germany. The man called repeatedly over the next few hours; with each call he was more demanding. The minister informed him that his sister should come to the social services program the next morning.

When the woman arrived, she was accompanied by two imposing African men. Matthew, the Kenyan office manager, showed the three to a waiting area, and then told his colleagues that something did not feel right. The minister and staff members visited with the woman and her companions for a few minutes and then returned to their office to discuss the situation. They agreed that the woman appeared frightened and gave no signs that she knew the men with her. When Matthew, following screening protocol, moved the woman to a private interview room, the men angrily insisted on staying with her. Their demand was rejected.

Alone with the church's staff, the woman repeated the same story: she had arrived at a Moscow train station and her documents were stolen.

She could not, or would not, identify the station or explain how the theft occurred. The identity of her relative in Germany changed: at different moments he was a brother, an uncle, a friend. All she wanted were new documents and money to travel to Germany. In the waiting area, the two men made similar requests.

The staff and the minister were certain it was a case of trafficking. (Many migrants arrive in Russia through unofficial and even illicit channels and are financially indebted to the individuals who facilitate their transport and entry documents.) They privately advised the woman that they could not supply documents or travel money, but they could provide safety, contact the relevant authorities, and advocate on her behalf. The young woman apathetically declined and said she would go stay with some people she knew from Sierra Leone who lived in a town several hours away. Then she left with the two men. Later, the minister and staff lamented that they were sure that she was in trouble, but they could not intervene without her assent because they were constrained by the policies set out by the national and international organizations with which they worked.

BLACK VOICES

Like several other faith-based programs in Moscow, the majority of St. James's permanent staff comprised Africans with professional training who had lived in Moscow for many years. Several were married to Russians and had parented biracial children who were Russian citizens. Yet when these staff members were invited to anti-racism workshops, they often discovered that organizers perpetuated false narratives about Russia's black communities, urging them to share their experiences as victims of racist attacks rather than their expertise in racial issues, Russian bureaucratic procedures, and organizing strategies.

St. James' white clergy, staff, and affiliates tried to center the voices and experience of their black colleagues as expert professionals. At one workshop I attended, the international organizers repeatedly directed all of their technical questions to the white physician who worked with St. James. Instead of answering, he consistently moved the microphone over to his black colleague.

Even more difficult for the staff was the reality that their own colleagues and fellow congregants

Activists work around and even rework the structures of the system.

often were ineligible for resettlement according to the official rules. This was especially troubling in the cases of three African men who had been church members and social services staff workers since the late 1980s. At the beginning of the post-Soviet period, each man could have claimed political asylum and support designated for victims of racist attacks, but subsequent changes in national and international eligibility criteria had disqualified them. Even though they were trained to help other asylum seekers and had been instrumental in establishing the church's anti-racism programs, as well as others across Moscow, they themselves could not benefit from these programs.

By 2016, the St. James community had creatively worked around the system to help these men and their families resettle abroad. Church members helped one man apply to graduate school, secured a job for a second, and found a congregation in another country willing to provide political sanctuary for the third. They had also introduced more proactive strategies for reaching potential trafficking victims and providing them safe and secret access to assistance.

THE POWER OF FLEXIBLE INDETERMINACY

For Russia's faith-based communities, denying assistance to people who are clearly in need challenges deeply held values about the most basic rights of being human. This has inspired faith-based activists to work around and even rework the structures of the system in ways that they find more beneficial and ethical.

Such tactics include carefully calculating the number of case files that do not meet official criteria that staff can "accidentally" forward before they lose their credibility. Activists have also persuaded sympathetic case managers from the UNHCR, IOM, and Russian legal agencies to hold informational workshops, where they can advise potential asylum seekers about how to create their files before they formally submit their documents and are no longer eligible to receive outside advice or support for navigating the application system.

In other instances, faith communities have parlayed their religious status to provide sanctuary to individuals who are at risk of persecution from authorities. Several congregations offer informal housing and meeting space to activist groups in church buildings that are next to federal security

agencies—and presumably under their direct surveillance.

For Russia's faith-based human rights groups, working with such indeterminacies and contradictions reflects what anthropologist Didier Fassin has described as the paradoxes of "humanitarian governance." These involve tensions between reason and values, between knowing the right procedures and policies and doing what is believed to be the right thing. The experiences of Moscow's faith-based activists demonstrate that these tensions are the reality of human rights work in Russia today.

On a daily basis, these activists grapple with difficult questions. Which is the more effective response for people in need—food, shelter, and protection; a compassionate ear; or public intervention in Russian politics? Is it better to follow the rules, or to ignore or bend them? How can they be good civic partners to the state and society when their work is inherently critical of them?

Faith-based organizations can invoke their presumed status as moral authorities to engage in activities that would otherwise be considered to oppose the state's interests. They also can use their status as responsible civic partners to maneuver strategically and effectively around the uncertainties and inadequacies of federal and international law in order to advance their own ideas about the best possible outcomes for people in need. In the cases I have observed, activists insist that they do not resort to lying when they work around existing structures to extend their ability to help. Nor are they working against Russian laws or prevailing political currents.

By working directly with indeterminacy, Russian faith-based communities can mediate between competing interests and constituencies in ways that are respectful to all. At the same time, their work in the gray areas between systems creates possibilities for Russian governmental bodies to realize their own humanitarian impulses, even if they are otherwise overshadowed by more public human rights problems and antagonisms. These activists are able to tackle controversial and, in the Russian context, even dangerous issues such as anti-racism, diversity, and social justice by presenting alternative humanitarian perspectives and approaches. In so doing, they take on what other human rights workers describe as "the work that we wish we could do." ■

The Art of Navalny and the History of Corruption

ALEXANDER ETKIND

His enemies see him as an illegitimate pretender to the Russian throne. His fans are captivated by his ability to survive assassinations and withstand torture. I was among those who nominated Alexei Navalny for the Nobel Peace Prize, and I am going to explain why I believe he deserves this honor.

The award will be announced in October 2021, and the ceremony will take place in Oslo in December. Concerned world leaders, excited Russian émigrés, and former Peace Prize laureates (such as Lech Wałęsa, who also nominated him) would all congratulate the dissident with much gusto. Navalny would look good in a tailcoat; for all his vivacity, there is something old-fashionedly prim and direct in his bearing. But he will not have the chance to wear one: Navalny will stay in a penal colony east of Moscow, where his only possible moves are to a punishment cell or the prison hospital.

In a June interview with NBC, President Vladimir Putin refused to guarantee that Navalny will get out of prison alive. But on this and many other occasions, Putin avoided mentioning Navalny's name, using strange figures of speech ("a Berlin patient," "this prisoner") as if he had neurotic fears about saying it aloud, or—as Moscow gossip has it—because the Russian president's favorite hermit from Mount Athos forbade him from naming his enemy. In the meantime, policemen search the branches of Navalny's political organization, his followers are banned from taking part in elections, and a young man has been sent to prison merely for wearing a T-shirt that said "Freedom for Navalny."

SECULAR SAINTHOOD

If Navalny were awarded the Peace Prize, he would be the fourth laureate to receive it while incarcerated. The first was Carl von Ossietzky, a German journalist who received the prize in 1935 for revealing the details of German rearmament, which was forbidden by the Treaty of Versailles. The Germans were rebuilding their aviation industry in secret collaboration with the Soviets, training their pilots on bases in Western Russia (as shown recently in *Babylon Berlin*, a noir television series). Ossietzky investigated these classified activities in a series of scandal-provoking articles. Convicted of treason in 1931, he was granted amnesty a year later but refused to emigrate. Immediately after engineering the Reichstag fire of 1933, the Nazis arrested Ossietzky again. He accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in a note that his friends smuggled from a concentration camp near Oldenburg where he endured long-term torture. The Nazis banned any mention of Ossietzky's name and forbade German citizens from accepting future Nobel prizes.

Several months later, Ossietzky died of tuberculosis, which he caught in the camp. A few years after that, Nazi pilots annihilated the Soviet airfields and schools that had given them shelter and training. In 1991, the University of Oldenburg was renamed after Ossietzky. It was not easy: university officials and the state of Lower Saxony had to go to court over this renaming, with the local authorities fighting against it.

The Nobel Peace Prize is akin to canonization, and Ossietzky's story demonstrates two conditions that turn a public figure into a secular saint. One is bravery and strength under torture; the other is less obvious. A true hero of our time chooses to address its most strategic, historically central issue while it is still invisible to others. Such a figure is more than a prophet—she is a rainmaker. The secret of her art, her particular miracle, is turning her discoveries into banalities, or even obscenities, that the public appropriates as its own. In doing so, she shapes dominant perceptions of the core issue of her time—anticipations of the

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forthcoming catastrophe. For Ossietzky, this issue was German rearmament. For Navalny, it is Russian corruption.

THE MILDEWED PALACE

A lawyer by training, Navalny has reshaped himself into a single-purpose journalist and politician. In online videos enjoyed by millions of Russians, he has exposed the large-scale acts of graft and theft committed by high-ranking Russian officials. Navalny has made it clear that there is more to this "corruption" than financial crimes of absurd proportions. When a modern state, with its monopoly on violence and taxation, turns into a storehouse of illegitimate wealth, it taints its own citizens and infects other countries with massive distortions of truth and justice. For politicians, the massive, trillion-dollar scale of this enterprise makes it too big to fail; for common people, it is too large to see.

This is where Navalny's art—his visual, ironic, personalized rhetoric—comes to the rescue. One after another, Navalny's exposés turned dozens of elected politicians and selected oligarchs into comically hapless targets. He revealed their manors, yachts, bodyguards, and courtesans. He contrasted their senseless, tasteless luxury with their relatively modest salaries and the even more modest results of their executive activities. He combined screenshots of financial statements with bird's-eye views (often captured by drones) of Palladian columns, Olympic pools, and gargantuan meadows, all fenced in by very tall walls and guarded by very muscular keepers.

For all the visual ingenuity of his videos, the true secret of Navalny's success was his continuous commentary—funny, relentless, and sometimes bawdy. In a 2017 video unveiling the grand palace of Russia's then-Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, he zoomed in on a neoclassical cottage in the middle of a lake. The cottage turned out to be built for ducks. Quacking rubber ducks became a symbol for Medvedev among protesting youth.

In his January 2021 report on a palace on the Black Sea that allegedly belonged to Putin—and, of course, was many times bigger than Medvedev's—Navalny reveled in detailing a gold-plated toilet brush and a ludicrous "acqua disco" with a stripper pole located in convenient proximity to the master bedroom. Yes, his comments were

His ultimate weapon is his own suffering body.

poshly, a Russian word celebrated by Vladimir Nabokov that simultaneously translates as "vulgar," "posh," and "slimy." But what was truly *poshly* was Putin's villa.

Symbolically, Putin's most notorious crony, Evgeny Prigozhin—who is believed to have organized Russian military operations in Ukraine, the St. Petersburg troll factory that made propaganda for Donald Trump, and, most recently, mercenary camps in the Central African Republic—started his career as Putin's personal chef. For these people, the move from their outlandish kitchens at home to reckless aggression abroad is quick and easy.

Refusing to pay taxes or comply with regulations while accessing unlimited resources, these princes of darkness preach and practice turbocharged Machiavellian policies with the sole purpose of spreading their corruption. These people have no fear of the state; they *are* the state. Inept managers, they are efficient corrupters. Every untaxed and uncontrolled dollar buys, bribes, and kills more than a regulated one. Corrupted wealth generates more evil per dollar, and this explains its global expansion. There is a *gradient of corruption*, and corrupted rulers push it forward, working through their trade partners, agents, and mercenaries.

Corruption is imperialist in the same way that colonization was. But it always defeats its purpose. After a billion dollars were spent on its construction, Putin's palace was eaten by mildew. Many more stolen millions were wasted on its reconstruction, which remains unfinished—this time, due to Navalny's revelations.

Navalny's art offers a peaceful, progressive response to the global corruption crisis. In fighting this scourge, he carries on the noble tradition of the muckrakers—American journalists of the Progressive era. It was President Theodore Roosevelt who first spoke of the "men with the muck rakes," using an image from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, to weigh in on the aggressive journalism of his time. These muckrakers were truly influential: for example, the publications of the historian and investigative journalist Ida Tarbell led to the passage of antitrust legislation and the dissolution of the Standard Oil Company.

Another of the historians who discovered, with much surprise, the forces of corruption in the new democratic era was John Dalberg-Acton,

a professor at Cambridge, who wrote that "absolute power corrupts absolutely." Taking this statement a step farther, I would say that total corruption destroys totally. Yet there are limits to this mildew. At home, the limits are set by saintly heroes like Ossietzky or Navalny. Abroad, the global public is losing patience as it watches how dark money is used for poisoning enemies, bribing officials, bullying courts, and interfering in elections.

STRATEGIC SUFFERING

Navalny aired his "Putin's Palace" exposé immediately after being poisoned in Siberia, healing in Germany, and returning to Russia. The video was watched over 100 million times. Responding to Navalny's call, on January 23, more than 100,000 people took part in peaceful protests that stopped traffic in 110 Russian cities. More than 3,000 were arrested that day.

But the palace is still home to mildew rather than, say, orphans or the elderly. Moscow lurches from one lockdown to the next, while Navalny remains in prison. Would he have achieved more if he had stayed in Germany? Igniting revolution from abroad is a well-tested Russian tradition. Alexander Herzen, Leon Trotsky, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn did that.

Navalny's return needs a strategic explanation. With his training in law and finance, his short but memorable fellowship term at Yale in 2010, his fluent English and hipster looks, Navalny is very much a part of the global cosmopolitan elite. However, he has spent most of his political career deconstructing this image. He talked approvingly about "conservatism," proposed to regulate the growing presence of foreign guestworkers, and mixed the crowds of "nationalists" and "liberals" while marching on the streets of Moscow. Clearly, he was distancing himself from the global rent-seekers, resource traders, and mega-polluters whom he and his followers correctly see as enemies. At a time when every nation is unhappy with its elite, Russia's oily cosmopolitans appear particularly unproductive.

While oligarchs keep their families in Europe or North America, Navalny and his family insisted on returning to Moscow. He paid for it with a coma, a hunger strike, and now the moral humiliation and sensory deprivation typical of Russian penal colonies. His ultimate weapon is his own suffering body. The aims are global, but the means are singular.

This reinvented biopolitics is what the ancient martyrs did while fighting with their times. Also rejecting emigration, Andrei Sakharov, the wisest of Russian dissidents, voluntarily presented his body for humiliation, torture, and hunger. More recently, the "actionists" such as Petr Pavlensky contributed their shocking corporeal performances—arguably the most original and effective branch of modern art—to the protest culture of the 2010s.

Hopefully, Navalny's choice will be appreciated by the embattled Nobel Committee. Much more importantly, I hope it will be celebrated by post-pandemic Russian voters. But I have no doubt that it will be remembered by global historians. ∎

Jokes and the Walls of Consciousness

Nancy Ries

Widespread protests began in Belarus in the spring of 2020, after opposition political figures were disqualified as presidential candidates or imprisoned. Once the election took place that August and President Alexander Lukashenko's regime declared that he had won with an impossible 80 percent of the vote, the protests expanded with previously unimaginable speed, ubiquity, creativity, and scale throughout the country, even reaching small cities and towns. This was Lukashenko's sixth election victory, by all accounts the fifth rigged or falsified one. Something about this latest fraudulent result pushed more people over the edge into protesting than in any previous cycle. Although worsening regime brutality this year has driven most protesters off the streets and opposition leaders into exile, resistance nevertheless has continued, taking many forms of action—political, diplomatic, communicative, symbolic, and artistic—via networks both within and outside Belarus.

Humor and Rumor in the Post-Soviet Authoritarian State
Anastasiya Astapova
Lexington Books, 2021

In a June 2021 interview with Deutsche Welle, the author and Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich spoke to the depth of inner change that Belarusian citizens have experienced in these many months of protests and the brutal crackdown on the opposition. Alexievich, herself one of tens of thousands of Belarusians in exile because of that crackdown, declared that anti-regime protesters, journalists, activists, and other citizens will not or cannot go back to being "slaves" to the Lukashenko regime. The rhetoric Alexievich employs is dramatic and declamatory, as befits her national and global stature. She presents an image of a population that emerged from its Soviet history well-practiced at both endless suffering and the infliction of political pain. But the protesters, she says, "will never be who they were before the summer of 2020."

Anastasiya Astapova's book *Humor and Rumor in the Post-Soviet Authoritarian State* was in press in mid-2020, just as Lukashenko's election rigging and the protests against it were unfolding. Far from being rendered obsolete by the political turmoil and concomitant shift of consciousness, Astapova's study of "political folklore" is a remarkable resource for grasping the vernacular logic and style of everyday Belarusian discourse on the cusp of these profound events. The jokes and rumors that Astapova catalogues offer a tantalizing snapshot of political culture at a critical moment. To her great credit, and that of her publisher, she was able to incorporate some astute reflections on the election aftermath at relevant spots throughout her book, though the bulk of her material was collected over the decade prior to 2020.

Herself from Vitebsk, Astapova is currently a professor of folkloristics at the University of Tartu, in Estonia, and has published widely on Belarusian political folklore and nationalism. Her book has clearly benefited from her opportunities to engage with and do interviews in Belarusian diaspora communities in countries like Sweden, the United States, Lithuania, Russia, Poland, and China, and from her contacts with informants in Minsk, Vitebsk, and a number of smaller cities in Belarus.

Astapova notes the wide spread of familiar political folklore across the former Soviet region and more globally. One of the significant contributions of this book is its meticulous inventory of "plots and motifs" that have circulated worldwide and over many decades in authoritarian contexts (most recently via the Internet). Except for a few very localized examples, most of the individual jokes Astapova presents from interviews (67 joke plots or types, each with many variations) are accompanied by inventories of the same joke forms recorded in Soviet Russia (across all eras, from the 1920s to the 1980s), East Germany,

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Spain under the Franco regime, Cuba, Mexico, Venezuela, Egypt, Iran, and many other countries. This extensive contextualization helps demonstrate both the transmissibility of joke lore's "DNA" and its importance within authoritarian regimes.

Humor and Rumor provides a baseline catalogue of these political jokes and stories as they manifest in Belarus, outlining the broadly shared political consciousness that Alexievich asserts was transformed wholesale by the protests. As she classifies, analyzes, and contextualizes Belarusian political humor, Astapova argues that these jokes deliver potent packages of political pedagogy, warning, and limit-setting. The study of joking in authoritarian societies is important, as Astapova and many other discourse theorists insist, because jokes convey what Soviet writer Abram Tertz called a "spore"—"a model of reality in its entirety." Jokes serve as essential maps of political danger, transmitting everyday lessons about the nature of the social world, strategies for guiding sociopolitical behavior and action, and a sense of the rules, norms, and boundaries of conformity or critique.

HOLLOW LAUGHS

"On an everyday basis," writes Astapova, "surveillance rumors and jokes about the fears of oppression remind people of the danger of persecution and advise them on how to avoid it (mainly by avoiding any open dissent)." But jokes also reproduce hegemonic understandings and dispositions toward obedient quiescence, since they "normalize shocking and horrendous situations, making them seem quotidian and mundane." Political jokes in Belarus encapsulate succinct, ironic lessons about surveillance, public fear and passivity, and the absurdity of political practices, notably the performativity (a potent strain of Potemkinism) that characterizes Lukashenko's endless rule.

For instance, a couple of jokes illustrate how people reflect at a meta-level on the disposition required for enduring authoritarian rule. Astapova notes that this one, with many variations for different contexts, is the second most often-told joke among all those she gathered:

> There is a nail in the bench, the boss orders his subordinate to sit on the nail, and then asks, "Are you comfortable?" The subordinate answers, "Yes,

I am comfortable." The boss says he cannot understand how sitting on the nail can be comfortable, and the subordinate then admits that indeed this was not that convenient, but he thought it was supposed to be like that.

In another anecdote making fun of Belarusians' political quiescence, the devil contrasts the behavior of Russians, Jews, and Belarusians placed in a boiling cauldron. Members of the first two ethnic groups jump out to escape, while the Belarusians jump out "only to add firewood and then climb back into the cauldron."

Over time, authoritarian regimes engineer the circumstances needed to ensure that independent political agency has little space to exist. In her highly relevant chapter on election humor, "Election without Choice" (the pun *vybor bez vybora*), Astapova quotes a joke that captures this reduced space for decision or action: "Belarus holds a referendum: 'Do you want Lukashenko to become president again?' The answer choices are: 'Yes, I am not against this'; 'No, I am not against this.'"

Jokes serve as essential maps of political danger.

Jokes that play on this restriction of space for action or even for logical thought have circulated widely in the 2020 election's aftermath. Here is one found in online stories and election-related joke collections: A guy is walking down the street in Minsk, very close to the protests, when suddenly a police car pulls up. Cops jump out of the car and start beating the guy up. He yells, "No, please, stop! I voted for Lukashenko!" One of the cops responds, "Shut up, you liar! No one voted for Lukashenko!"

Astapova observes that humor is so embedded in people's everyday existence that "jokes emerge naturally, commenting on every new political tendency in the country." But the genre of authoritarian political folklore is a discursive frame highlighting immutable logical constraint. Thus this recent anecdote about political exile: "Whoever is the last one to leave Belarus, please turn off BelAES," the nuclear energy station. The joke suggests that the only escape from Lukashenkoism would require the entire population to exit the country.

In a well-known 1997 essay, anthropologist Alexei Yurchak argued that "the whole symbolic order of interconnected signifiers" of late socialism (such as official pop culture, school curricula,

slogans, posters, mass rituals, and political jargon, as well as the anecdotes that circulated in parodic public commentary on them) disclosed the immutability of the political system. He noted the particular kinds of humor that reveal "not only one's inability to struggle against the official ideology, but also one's inability to struggle against one's own simulated support of this ideology." An electoral joke recorded by Astapova drolly captures this point: "The level of democracy in our country is so high that no one is afraid to say you-know-what about you-know-who."

Astapova's book as a whole depicts this imprisonment of consciousness. Genres of discourse such as political folklore have congealed to form a mental cellblock. They set the boundaries of the space of free action, the delimitations of what can and cannot be voiced or even conceived. Because of their wide circulation, within and beyond singular regimes, jokes have extraordinary power to simulate a feeling of resistance while didactically rehearsing the power and immutability of authority.

Rising chorus

Yet moments of transformation do arrive. Alexievich's declaration that the protesters "will never be who they were before the summer of 2020" hints at the spread of resistant consciousness. But by what means can resistance break through the hegemony of authoritarian violence on the one hand and quiescent consciousness on the other?

A different genre of discursive performance suggests an answer to this. If, as the work of Astapova, Yurchak, and many other theorists suggests, verbal lore transmits didactic "packets" of essential instruction, reproducing authoritarian consciousness, verbal lore can also transmit other messages in different packaging—and begin to replace authoritarianism through another communicative genre.

Writing in Russian in the journal *Ab Imperio* in 2020, Belarusian State University journalism scholar Siarhej Zelianko catalogued many of the placards in the spring and summer protests, finding them expressive of newly formed alliances across classes and groups of Belarusians. Zelianko calls the slogans, memes, and demands on these placards a "chorus of voices" that might lay the basis for a new chapter of Belarusian history.

Following this chorus metaphor, it is instructive to consider the impact of another transnational genre of political folklore: the protest song. All across Belarus, protests were animated by musical themes, none more powerful than the Polish protest song "Break the Prison Walls" (*Mury*), which was played and sung at rallies in support of opposition presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (and her husband, Sergei Tikhanovsky, the original candidate whom she replaced after he was imprisoned):

> Pull the teeth of bars from the walls,
> Tear off the chains, break the whip!
> And the walls will fall, will fall, will fall,
> And will bury the old world.

Protesters have sung *Mury* (a song with roots in the anti-Franco and Polish Solidarity movements that has appeared in many other contexts since the early 1980s) at hundreds of rallies. Dozens of YouTube videos show people singing it in gatherings enormous and tiny, across and beyond Belarus, from May 2020 to the present.

The earnest hopefulness of *Mury* profoundly contrasts with the political folklore Astapova compiled in the past decade of her fieldwork. It is too soon to say whether the cynical realism and harsh pedagogy of the joke can yield in a lasting way to—or maybe even combine with—the striking sincerity of the song, especially in the face of continuing and ever harsher repression by Lukashenko's regime. But *Mury* symbolizes the transformation that Alexievich heralds: a renovation of political imagination and the inner disposition which undergirds it. ∎