



Wahid Wahid

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Ainejärjestö Sasha ry

Gazeta Sasha saa HYY:n järjestölehtitukea.



Mural displayed at the Kiemo Galerija, Kaunas Lithuania, 2020.

The gallery is located in the neighborhood of the former Kaunas Jewish Ghetto during World War II. The mural was placed there as a commentary on societal problems in the neighborhood today.

*Edita*





Text - Kristína Dovahunová  
and Oliver Reschreiter

As we celebrate Gazeta's 10th edition, it is truly remarkable to see how diverse each issue has been in terms of topics covered, writers featured, and themes explored. While not immediately obvious, one of the most challenging tasks in planning each issue of Gazeta is coming up with the so-called one-word theme. Taking inspiration from the previous Editors-in-Chief (thank you, Juho and Anna), we had a clear idea that this third edition of Gazeta for the year should align with the theme of the 2024 Aleksanteri Conference. In that sense, fortunately, this task of choosing a theme was already addressed when the conference title, Resisting Authoritarianism Across Eurasia, was announced.

As each edition of Gazeta evolves, so do the individuals who contribute to its development. We would like to acknowledge our outgoing editor-in-chief, Sierra, and extend our best wishes for her future endeavours. At the same time, we are excited to welcome Kristína Dovahunová, a first-year student of Russian, Eurasian, and Eastern European studies at the Aleksanteri Institute, who will join current editor-in-chief, Oliver, in leading Gazeta forward.

For the first time, we're excited to offer both an online and a print version of the magazine. Thank you to those who have engaged with us online, and a special thank you to those holding this physical copy that was available for purchase at the Aleksanteri Conference. Your support is invaluable, and we hope you'll continue to follow and engage with us in future editions.

As you flip through these pages, you'll find informative articles that resonate with the theme of the Conference in various contexts. We begin with a critical examination of Poland's recent political shift, questioning whether its path to liberal democracy is as straightforward as it seemed following the December 2023 change of government. We then delve into North Macedonia's prolonged struggle for EU accession, examining how internal reforms, along with the EU's inconsistent criteria and the impact of regional disputes and foreign influence have shaped its journey so far. We also highlight youth-led resistance in Georgia against the controversial foreign agents law, and investigate the cultural implications of authoritarianism, focusing on the suppression of the Belarusian language under Lukashenko's regime and the enduring significance of music during the Baltic states' Singing Revolution. Additionally, we draw attention to the plight of the Pamiri people in Tajikistan, highlighting their ongoing struggle against state repression.

Each article offers unique insights into the broader theme of Resistance and its various manifestations. We hope you find both inspiration and a deeper understanding of the struggle for democracy and freedom in our region.

Thank you for being part of this journey, and enjoy this edition of Gazeta Sasha! 

# Message from the Board of Sasha


To our current members and returning readers, a big welcome back. And to our new Sasha members and readers, a warm welcome to the city of Helsinki and the Aleksanteri Institute community. As the student association representing Aleksanteri Institute students, we are thrilled to have you join us in this dynamic academic and cultural environment. Whether you're here to begin your studies, attend the Aleksanteri Conference, or explore new perspectives on Eurasian studies, we hope you find both inspiration and belonging with like minded individuals.

We are particularly excited to welcome the new students who are starting their academic journey at the Aleksanteri Institute this year. As you embark on this new chapter, we encourage you to immerse yourself in the vibrant academic community, attend our events, and connect with fellow students and scholars. Your fresh perspectives and enthusiasm are invaluable, and we look forward to seeing the contributions you will make.



We would also like to extend a special welcome to scholars and guests from outside the Aleksanteri Institute who are attending the conference and engaging with our publication for the first time. Your participation enriches our discussions and broadens the scope of academic dialogue.

Many of Sasha's members will be actively participating and presenting at the Aleksanteri Conference. We encourage all conference attendees to engage with the student presenters and participants you may encounter throughout the event. These interactions offer an opportunity for the exchange of ideas across different stages of academic careers and provide a platform for meaningful dialogue.

Thank you for joining us in Helsinki, and we look forward to an inspiring and enriching conference experience with all of you. 

*Picture from one of  
Sasha's pub nights.*



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# Events Bulletin

In every Gazeta issue, we dedicate two pages to past and upcoming significant events shaping Central and Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Each edition spotlights key historical dates, important cultural events, and major elections. Dive in and stay ahead of the latest developments in the region!

## **56th Anniversary of Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia**

**10**  
Aug

In an attempt to stop the liberalisation reforms of Czechoslovakia's First Secretary Alexander Dubček, the Warsaw pact led by the Soviet Union initiated an overnight invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The invasion faced global backlash, including from within the Eastern bloc, as it exposed growing dissent against Soviet dominance.

## **33rd Ukrainian Independence day**

**24**  
Aug

As Ukraine enters the second year of Russia's full-scale invasion, the country remains resolute in its fight. On this Independence Day, a series of commemorative events were held both within Ukraine and around Europe, serving as a powerful demonstration of solidarity.

## **33rd Moldovan Independence day**

**27**  
Aug

Moldova's Independence Day comes as the country pushes for closer ties with the West while managing its historical links to Russia. With the war in Ukraine ongoing, Moldova's future independence and its path toward European integration are increasingly tied to Ukraine's ability to resist Russian aggression, as both nations confront similar challenges.

## **Azerbaijani Parliamentary Elections**

**01**  
Sep

Originally set for November, President Ilham Aliyev dissolved parliament in June, citing a need to avoid overlapping with the COP29 conference in November. However, the early elections likely aimed to catch opposition parties off-guard. As in past elections, Aliyev and his New Azerbaijan Party secured an easy victory in a vote deemed unfair.

## **Moldovan EU Referendum and Presidential Elections**

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**20**  
Oct

With a target date of 2030 for EU accession, this referendum will decide whether Moldova should amend its constitution to codify Moldova's EU aspiration and prevent any future governing parties from derailing this trajectory. The referendum will coincide with presidential elections, where pro-EU incumbent Maia Sandu currently holds a strong lead in the polls.

## **68th Anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution**

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**23**  
Oct

The Hungarian Uprising began as a student protest, which escalated into a nationwide revolt against Soviet-imposed policies. The uprising was brutally suppressed by Soviet troops in November, but it remains a symbol of resistance against totalitarianism.

## **Georgian Parliamentary Elections**

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**26**  
Oct

In the context of the aftermath of the passage of the foreign agents bill and the protest surrounding it, these elections are being seen as among the most consequential in Georgia's modern day history.

## **Uzbekistan Parliamentary Elections**

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**27**  
Oct

Uzbekistan will head to the polls with this being the first election featuring a mixed electoral system. However, due to the lack of genuine political competition, it is unlikely these elections will result in any real political changes.



ul. Zygmunta  
Łaskiego

# THE FALSE NARRATIVE OF POLAND'S RETURN TO 'DEMOCRACY' WITH THE ELECTION OF DONALD TUSK

Text & pictures - Lila Bednarska

*Written in late August 2024, Kłodzko, Poland*

**H**as Poland truly resisted the authoritarian right and populism giving an example to others?

On 15th October 2023, Polish citizens went to vote at a historically record turnout of 74,38%. Many had to queue for hours even until late evening hours to cast a vote, while some commentators described the day as the most important parliamentary election since 1989. Yet, in the Polish context, nearly all parliamentary elections are deemed as “the most important election since 1989”. With the benefit of hindsight, the election and results were perhaps momentous. Indeed, after 8 years the populist and illiberal party Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice; known as PIS) lost its mandate to govern after failing to gain sufficient seats to form a coalition in Sejm (the lower house of parliament). In its place, Koalicja 15 października (the October 15 Coalition) a combination of three groups: Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska), Third Way (Trzecia Droga), and New Left (Nowa Lewica) has taken over. Donald Tusk has returned as prime minister after 10 years.

The foreign commentators issued headlines such as “Thank you, Poland, for showing faith in EU values under threat from the au-

thoritarian right”[1], “A reason to be hopeful: in Poland they’ve kicked out the right-wing populists. Britain can too”[2], “With Opposition Gains, Poland Looks to Unwind an ‘Illiberal Democracy’”[3]. The spirits were highly optimistic. But should they have been?

**T**he glorious return of Donald Tusk to domestic politics and the prime minister's office is not a case for optimism. When I started primary school Donald Tusk was the prime minister, as I'm completing a master's degree, he's still in charge. It feels like we're back in 2014 and have not made little or no progress in shaping the domestic political scene. Indeed, in 10 years, the Civic Coalition and the centre-right establishment failed to produce an alternative nation-level leader. This encapsulates one of the challenges of the Polish political scene – there is little to no space for new faces and younger faces. Consider also long-term strategy and legacy, who is going to take over the Civic Coalition when Donald Tusk is gone? Is there anyone there who can prevent the party from crumbling into an insignificant thing of the past? Paradoxically, these are issues the Law and Justice struggles with too as Jarosław Kaczyński ages. Furthermore,

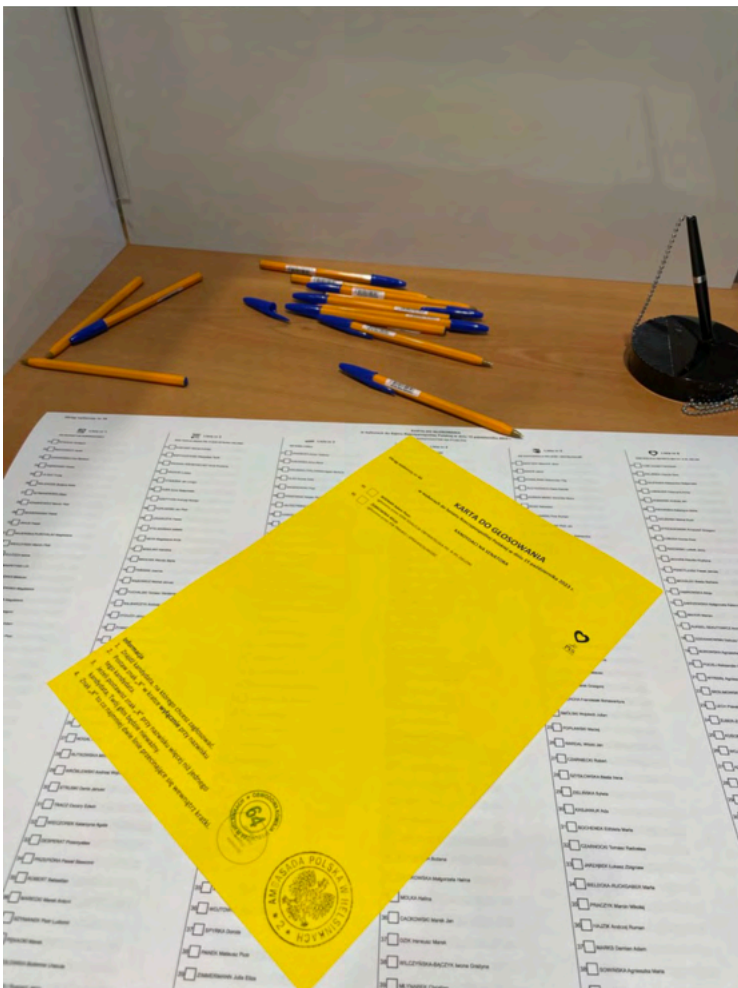


this is not particularly encouraging for young people to engage and participate in politics if the political faces are increasingly older men.

Surely, PIS or more accurately United Right (Zjednoczona Prawica), losing the grip over the government was enjoyable. After all, the party and people responsible for effectively banning abortion in all cases, destroying the judicial system and directing Poland towards authoritarianism and illiberalism have been removed. Yet, their removal from government will not magically repair the damage that has been done. Especially, when the new governing coalition is neither saint nor politically healthy.

A closer look at the governing catch-all coalition should be a sufficient explanation of why Poland has a long way to go until it unwinds authoritarian tendencies and ultra-conservative policies (e.g. abortion ban). The coalition combines mid-left party, centre voices and conservative right-wingers. More precisely, each coalition group is made of multiple smaller parties and groups. There is no unity in values. The whole purpose of the coalition is to keep PIS out of power. Nothing else. Unsurprisingly, in those circumstances, reverting Poland onto a liberal track is unachievable.

The newly elected government ended 2023 with an upheaval at a public service broadcaster Telewizja Polska S.A., which during the PIS-rule has become extremely politicised and propagandistic in tone. Undeniably, transforming the state's broadcaster into a more independent BBC-esque company is desirable. The new government opted for a revolutionary approach, the legality of which can be questioned, that still backfires. It had an opportunity to show that they are indeed different, better than the PIS government. The coalition government didn't use it, instead starting their term in poor, authoritarian-esque style. One thing is clear: if the new government wanted to stay away from measures on the verge of breaking the rule of law, it failed within its first month.



The PIS government has been notorious for eradicating women's rights, in particular for practically eliminating abortion access. According to the manifesto's Civic Coalition, the party should have introduced legal, safe and accessible abortion until the 12th week. It's been nearly a year and instead of taking a step forward, the government has taken a step back. On the 12th of July 2024, the parliament rejected a bill for decriminalisation of abortion up to the 12th week. A coalition partner Polish People's Party (Polskie Stronictwo Ludowe known as PSL) in the majority voted against the bill demonstrating the lack of value unity. Most controversially, the conservative Civic Coalition MP Roman Giertych missed the vote, further indicating internal cracks within the party. The abortion vote leads to a question of whether in this term liberalising abortion access is even possible. Considering that "the women's hell" and women's electoral mobilisation were significant issues that may increase discontent among pro-liberalisation groups and eradicate any remaining trust in the Civic Coalition and the governing coalition putting a possibility of the second term at risk.

At first glance, Poland is a success story of resisting authoritarian rights and populism. The populists and authoritarians are no longer in government. And Poland is again a good girl in the EU. Polish foreign policy looks professional once again thanks to Radosław Sikorski as Minister of Foreign Affairs. But the story of authoritarianism, illiberalism and populism in Poland is far from being over. PIS is still a major political power, while Konfederacja (Confederation), an even more right-wing populist and conservative party, has gained seats in the European Parliament. As the new government approaches a year in power, it has made little to reverse the destructive years of the PIS government or build back better. Instead, it feels like Poland remains in limbo where changes are constantly being promised, but little is done. Donald Tusk and Civic Coalition have promised to complete 100 things in the first 100. Out of 100, a few were actually completed. The rest remains forgotten in the ether. Unsurprisingly,

*“At first glance, Poland is a success story of resisting authoritarian rights and populism. - - But the story of authoritarianism, illiberalism and populism in Poland is far from being over.”*

therefore, the majority – 62 per cent — believes Tusk’s government is not keeping up to its promises.[4]

**W**ill the Tusk’s government be able to reverse this poll? Probably not. Time is of the essence, and we have experienced a year of wasted opportunities. Personally, I am not disappointed or surprised that the coalition government, and, in particular, Civic Coalition, have not implemented their manifesto’s promises yet. To be disappointed, one needs to believe

in the promises first. I never did. The question is, however, what will happen in the next three years and will the liberal-centre voters become discontent with the coalition government? Will the Civic Coalition and other coalition partners secure a second term after the disappointing start of the first one? We’ll see in the 2027 parliamentary election, but for now, the authoritarian right and populism are not yet buried in Poland. The next test comes in spring 2025 when the Polish women and men will elect a new president. **g**

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[1] Will Hutton (2023). Thank you, Poland, for showing faith in EU values under threat from the authoritarian right. In: *The Guardian*.

[2] Polly Toynbee (2023). A reason to be hopeful: in Poland they’ve kicked out the rightwing populists. Britain can too. In: *The Guardian*.

[3] Andrew Higgins (2023). With Opposition Gains, Poland Looks to Unwind an ‘Illiberal Democracy’. In: *The New York Times*.

[4] Jakub Czermiński (2024). Czy rząd Donalda Tuska wywiązuje się z obietnic? Jednoznaczny wynik sondażu. In: *Rzeczpospolita*.

## About Lila Bednarska



Lila is a law graduate from King’s College London, currently pursuing a Master’s in Russian, Eurasian, and Eastern European Studies at the University of Helsinki. She has diverse experience in research, project management, and communications, working with think tanks, NGOs and private companies. Her research interests centre around political and economic issues in Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus.



# North Macedonia's struggle for EU Accession



Resistance has become the defining characteristic of North Macedonia's long and arduous journey toward European Union membership. For nearly two decades, the country has navigated a complex web of internal reforms, diplomatic disputes, and external pressures, all while struggling to meet the EU's stringent accession criteria. Yet, despite its efforts, North Macedonia finds itself repeatedly blocked, both by its own unresolved tensions and by an EU that seems reluctant to fully embrace the Western Balkans. This persistent resistance—against foreign influence, internal divisions, and an EU that offers more hurdles than hope—continues to shape North Macedonia's fight for a place in Europe's most exclusive club.



Mural in Skopje on Skenderbeg Square, named after the Albanian hero, Gjergj Kastrioti Skenderbeg.

It has been 20 years since the “big bang” enlargement of the European Union (EU) to Central Eastern Europe. The Western Balkan states have been on the radar for EU membership for well over a decade. Now, Ukraine and Moldova are seemingly approaching concrete accession talks, fast tracking the process that some countries have lusted after for years. The accession of Ukraine and Moldova to the EU is still years away but it does appear to the Western Balkans as unfair treatment.


At the heart of the EU’s enlargement process are the Copenhagen criteria, designed to ensure that new members are stable, democratic, and compatible with the Union’s values and standards. Historically, the EU has employed a ‘carrot and stick’ approach to encourage countries both inside and outside the Union to comply with its requirements. However, in North Macedonia’s case, the stick has been wielded more frequently than the carrot, eroding the country’s confidence in the EU. Despite efforts to meet these stringent criteria, North Macedonia’s candidacy has dragged on for nearly two decades. Much has been done to meet the EU’s criteria, but internal problems, disputes with neighbouring EU member states, and the influence of foreign powers all add to the unsuccessfulness of North Macedonia accession to the European Union.

This leads to a broader question: do the Copenhagen criteria and other EU

accession rules truly hold consistent value? Examples like Cyprus in 2004, where sovereignty was overlooked, or Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, where concerns about rule of law were brushed aside, suggest otherwise. Such precedents make countries like North Macedonia wonder if their struggles are in vain. This scepticism is further fueled by the rapid candidacies of Ukraine and Moldova, where significant issues like corruption and the rule of law remain unresolved. For the Western Balkans, these inconsistencies deepen frustration over the EU’s reluctance to move forward with their accession talks.

Amid these frustrations, the rise of far-right and conservative nationalist movements across North Macedonia is no exception. In the recent presidential elections, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova (VMRO-DPMNE) won by a landslide. She is the first female president of the country and has promised to advocate for women’s positions in the country. Her party, VMRO-DPMNE<sup>1</sup>, has expressed disdain for agreements like the ‘Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness and Cooperation’ with Bulgaria (2017) and the Prespa Agreement with Greece (2018). These agreements, while vital for EU accession, have faced growing opposition within North Macedonia, particularly regarding the country’s name change and the treatment of its Bulgarian ethnic minority. The contentious nature of these treaties illustrates the complex

[1]Conservative and nationalist party which today is anti-EU, anti-NATO, and pro-Russian.



Road North Macedonia must navigate. Corruption, strengthening the rule of law, and economic reforms remain central to its EU aspirations, yet these diplomatic disputes with Greece and Bulgaria have become primary obstacles. The Prespa agreement changed the country's name from 'the Republic of Macedonia' to North Macedonia as Greece had been blocking the start of accession talks based on contention in the name use. Large parts of northern Greece, parts of Bulgaria as well as the whole of North Macedonia lie on the geographical area of Macedonia. Thus, Greece has been vetoing based on historical and cultural factors before the name change in the constitution of North Macedonia. In her inauguration

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with their  
accession talks”*

speech, Siljanovska-Davkova refused to use the constitutional name of North Macedonia which angered the Greeks yet again. In addition, the ‘Good-Neighbourliness’ treaty with Bulgaria has been adrift. Bulgaria requires North Macedonia to address its Bulgarian ethnic minority in its constitution and this was prepared by the previous government headed by the Social Democrats. However, with the current government, the amendment to the constitution is looking impossible to implement. Consequently, North Macedonia has no chance to join the European Union if two existing member states continue to block the accession talks.

**E**conomically, North Macedonia has made some notable progress according to the latest EU report regarding the country's suitability to join the union. The country is at a good level of preparation in terms of the functioning of the market economy and has had moderate success preparing its economy to withstand competitiveness and market forces in the EU. This follows previous reports for being positive in the economic realm whilst the latest report was negative towards progress in fighting corruption, strengthening the rule of law, and independence of courts. Like many other Western Balkan countries, North Macedonia also suffers from 'brain drain' and the mismatch between needs and skills in the developing labour

market. This hinders the economic potential of the country. Economic development is being fostered by the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) made with the EU in the early 2000s and this for instance lets some North Macedonian products enter the Union duty free. It further supports the adoption of the ‘acquis’ and aids with policy harmonisation.

Compounding these internal and external challenges is North Macedonia’s strategic location, which makes it a focal point for foreign influence. The Western Balkans as a whole are pulled in multiple directions—toward the EU, Russia, China, and Türkiye. While the North Macedonian ruling party maintains a friendly stance towards Russia, the nation as a whole opposes Russian aggression. Meanwhile, Türkiye has sought to strengthen ties with North Macedonia, recently proposing a strategic council for cooperation and aiming to double bilateral trade. China’s interest, tied to its Belt

and Road Initiative, also underscores the region’s importance in global geopolitics, particularly given North Macedonia’s proximity to Chinese-controlled infrastructure in Greece. These foreign influences further complicate North Macedonia’s EU aspirations, making it a battleground for competing interests.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of North Macedonia’s EU membership application, yet the path forward remains unclear. While the country has taken concrete steps toward accession, the constant rejection and competing foreign interests have left many in North Macedonia disillusioned. As the EU continues to dangle the promise of membership, the growing influence of external powers and the internal struggles within the country suggest that the battle for the Western Balkans is far from over. **g**

## About Jenni Kirkinen



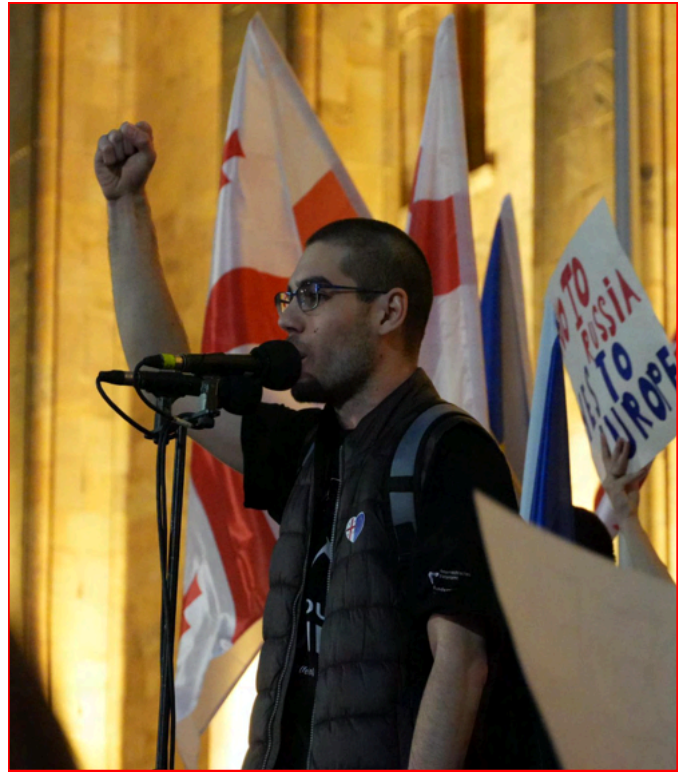
*Jenni is a young professional with experience from EU foreign, security, and defence policy. She is currently completing an internship with the Finnish Defence Forces. Additionally, she is completing her Master’s degree in Russian, Eurasian, and Eastern European studies while graduating from European and Nordic Studies at the end of November. Previously she completed her Bachelor’s degree in International Studies from Leiden University. Jenni is interested in Russian security policy, all things EU, and a good iced latte.*

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# Voices of Youth Resistance

Georgia's Fight for Freedom and a European Future – an interview with a student activist



Text — Kristína Dvohunová

Pictures — Kristína Dvohunová, Irakli Gedenidze, Giorgi Ekaladze

In 2024, Georgia witnessed the biggest resistance movement in its modern history. Anti-government protests erupted after the reintroduction of the controversial "foreign agent" law, which had initially been proposed in 2023 but was swiftly abandoned following a wave of popular dissent. This law, seen by many as a step toward Russian-style authoritarianism, reignited fears over the future of democracy and European integration in Georgia. In this interview, we talk to Giorgi Ekaladze, a student activist and a civil society representative from Tbilisi, about the recent developments, the mobilisation of student protest movement and the reaction of the Georgian civil society to the illiberal practices and restriction of basic freedoms.

**The new foreign agent law has sparked significant controversy in Georgia and the EU**

**back in spring 2023 and 2024. Can you explain what this law entails and why it has been so fiercely opposed by so many Georgians?**

In May 2024, the Georgian parliament passed a law requiring non-governmental organisations (NGOs) receiving 20% or more of their funding from abroad to register as entities "pursuing the interests of a foreign power." The law also provides for a monitoring mechanism based on an anonymous statement meaning that whenever the Ministry of Justice wishes, it can conduct monitoring and thereby artificially limit the activities of an organisation.

The wording is interesting — when first proposed in 2023, it required NGOs and media to register as "foreign agents." In 2024, the term was changed to

acting in the interests of a foreign power". The word 'agent' has a bad connotation in countries of the former Soviet Union so they changed it. It was a strategic step from them.

What is important is the context this "Russian law" was introduced in. Last year, Georgia was granted EU candidate status and expected to begin EU accession talks. But introducing the law like this was a direct sabotage of Georgia's European future. With this law, we can't continue on our EU integration journey and the integration is halted. This is why people gathered to protest – they wanted to make it clear that they do not wish to go the Russian path.

**Where did the name "Russian law" come from, and how has the government justified enacting it?**

The law is called "Russian law" because it mirrors legislation introduced in Russia twelve years ago. It is the exact same law, perhaps the wording is different, but the content, context and intentions are exactly the same. This name had a crucial

impact on our winning in 2023 when the bill was introduced. It became clear that passing it would align the country with Russia, an enemy that invaded Georgia and continues to occupy 20% of its territory. This association played a crucial role in mobilising opposition to the law.

The Georgian Dream's (GD) narrative is that if it wasn't for us, there would be another war in Tbilisi. GD claims they are the ones who want to avoid the war at any cost – and that's actually smart. They tried to compare the law to the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). They argued that the legislation was not inspired by Russia but was instead a measure to ensure transparency, a fundamental Western value. This was accompanied by some conspiracy theories about how NGOs organise colour revolutions in Georgia. This year, the narrative changed a little – the conspiracy about NGOs funding revolutions was still there, but they stepped up their claims. They claimed that NGOs are corrupt, that they use large amounts of funds to organise training in luxury resorts and that they act on orders from foreign powers. According to them, if a donor



gives funds to a NGO, they also order services from the NGO.

**Georgia has long relied on foreign aid and investments, and even Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze has a history of working with foreign-funded organisations like USAID and Open Society**

**Georgia. How do you explain this sudden shift in the government's narrative?**

My explanation is that they aren't honest. The government knows that the law mirrors Russian legislation and understands its implications. They say that they are preventing war in the country,

but I think their actual interest is to become a corrupt country where they can earn much more money than in a functioning democracy. The narratives change as much as they like in order to please the people – they are populists and they know that some people will buy it.



The government is fully aware that Georgian NGOs are not enemies or revolutionaries; many GD members, including MPs, come from the civil sector. A recent point made by a journalist underscores this hypocrisy — she suggested that everyone involved with foreign-funded organisations since 2000, including Speaker of Parliament Shalva Papuashvili, who led the

German Development Agency for 17 years, should also register under the new law. She remarked, "I will register, but I will be the third, right after Shalva and Irakli Kobakhidze."

**It's interesting that you mention this — according to a poll from December 2023, 79% of Georgians express support for EU membership.**

**How should we understand this?**

We don't understand it either. In fact, over 85% of the population supports European integration. This contradiction is part of how the GD won elections. Their main slogan was "With dignity to Europe," and they still claim that Georgia will achieve EU membership by 2030.

However, they also argue that to avoid war in Tbilisi, Georgia must be pragmatic with Russia. So, they push two narratives: being pro-European and aiming for EU membership, while simultaneously advocating for a pro-Russian stance to maintain peace. And some people really believe this.

when the biggest protest was held in Tbilisi, there were actually two parallel marches coming from the banks of the Kura river. I was leading the march on one bank while other protesters advanced from the other side. We united at the Square of Europe, forming one large crowd. My mother was in

wasn't only the Gen-Z, but multiple generations marching for the same cause, that's what made the protest special.

**Let's talk about Gen-Z again. As an outsider, every time I read about the protests or watched videos, young people were at the forefront.**

*“The fact that **it wasn't only the Gen-Z**, but multiple generations marching for the same cause, that's what made the protest **special**.”*



**With a population of just 3.7 million, the protests of 200,000 people were the largest in Georgia's modern history. The resilience of the Georgian people is remarkable, despite reported cases of intimidation and violence. What do you think are some of the key factors driving this unwavering determination?**

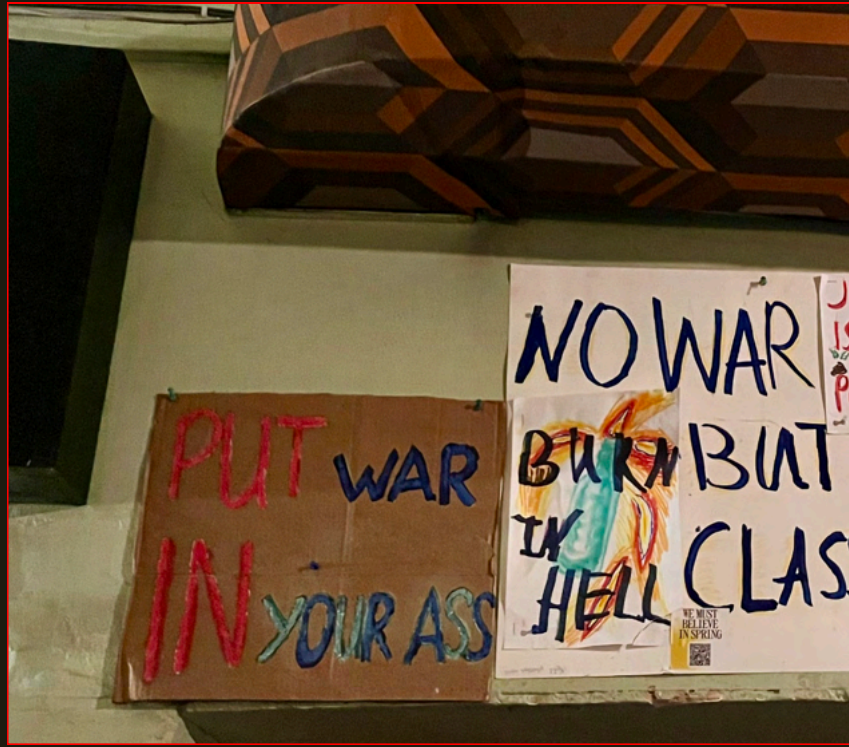
I think what made these protests special was that they were intergenerational. I will share my personal story: on May 11th,

the front of this crowd with me holding the banners. I was standing there, watching my mother holding a banner with a hashtag #whatthechildrenwant and watching other parents standing there with their children. Before the third reading of the law, we stayed outside for the whole night. And during the whole night, my mother was standing next to me. I'm 23 years old and my mother is 50 – it's not easy for her to stand the whole night outside, but she wasn't alone, many young people had their parent beside them and the fact that it

**How do you explain that this particular issue resonated so strongly with students and young people?**

The main thing to consider here is that we dislike Russia unconditionally. We are not afraid of fear mongering or the war. We are the first generation born in independent Georgia, the first generation with the freedom to act and to defend our freedom at all costs. We don't know what it's like to lose independence and we do not carry the generational trauma. Our parents and grandparents saw the war, but

*“We know that all those laws on foreign agents and LGBTQ propaganda will be repealed after the election if we win. **And I am pretty sure we will.**”*



our generation was too young back then. Even when they used tear gas or water canons towards us, we were not scared. We understand the true meaning of freedom and we will fight for it.

**How did you manage to unite the students and young people and bring them to the streets in 2023 and 2024? What was your role there?**

In 2023, I was a Law student at Tbilisi State University. Together with my fellow students, we mobilised people within the university and later joined the big protests in front of the parliament.

I also organised a university protest against Irakli Kobakhidze. Back then, he was the GD's Chairman and a professor at the Law faculty. We decided to organise a protest during his lecture. You know, his specialisation is Constitutional Law and he is the author of the country's current constitution as well. Our constitution says that all constitutional bodies must take all measures to ensure the full EU and



NATO integration. So naturally, this was a huge moral discomfort for us, that this professor teaches us about Constitutional Law and yet he is part of a party that drafted a law on foreign agents.

We organised a silent demonstration – we had to be very careful when choosing our form of protest as we were still at the university and could face repercussions. They could use anything they could against us. So we chose the silent protest – we stood in the hall leading to the classroom, creating a shamecorridor for him. It was actually the biggest protest at the university at that time. But Irakli did not show up. We thought it was our win that he did not show up as it was clear that he was afraid to look in our eyes.

I am taking a gap year so I did not organise any student protests. But being part of an NGO, we formed an informal coalition with other NGOs in Georgia and we organised all of the protests this spring, including the biggest one on the 11th of May.



**Has the perception of Georgian NGOs changed in the recent months and have you noticed any negative attitudes?**


I would say that people in general now have a better, more positive attitude towards us as we try to show tangible examples and benefits of our work. But this does not mean that everyone supports us – yes, the perception of NGOs is growing, but many people still believe in GD’s “pragmatic” approach that says that this law will help Georgia avoid the war on its territory. There is also this common belief that if NGOs receive funding, they must follow the donors’ orders. They don’t understand that the donors can provide funds just for someone to develop themselves. They say – when there is money, there are intentions. And the intentions are never good.

**At the time of this interview in August 2024, the government launched its registry of foreign agent NGOs and media. What is the general reaction to this and is there a consensus among Georgian NGOs and media?**

Most NGOs, including two of mine, are resisting and will not register. We are not going to obey the Russian law. There are exceptions to this, for example GONGOs (government-organised NGOs) or organisations that work in the harm reduction sphere, they have to register so that they can provide their services to the vulnerable, and I understand that. But the absolute majority of organisations, and ironically it's the organisations towards which this law targeted, are not going to register.

**The Parliamentary Elections are planned for October 26, 2024. The GD has been preparing by amending the electoral code and weakening civil society, and a controversial anti-LGBTQ bill was passed in June. What are the next steps for the resistance movement, and how can international supporters help?**

Right now, our priorities include raising funds for information campaigns and observation missions to monitor polling stations across Georgia. We are actively fundraising for this purpose. We also need to mobilise all immigrants

abroad, even the illegal ones. There are many Georgian immigrants abroad – despite the visa liberalisation with the EU, some people overstay and they are scared to vote in the elections. We need to make it clear that if they go to vote at the embassy, they will not be arrested for voting. We need government officials to say this. We know that all those laws on foreign agents and LGBTQ propaganda will be repealed after the election if we win. And I am pretty sure we will. 

## About Kristína Dohunová



*Kristína is a first-year student of the Master's in Russian, East European and Eurasian studies at the University of Helsinki. Her research interests and professional background involve civil society, democratic transition and elections in the EU Eastern Neighbourhood region. Kristína holds an MA in Politics from the University of Glasgow, with a year abroad spent at the University of Amsterdam.*

Mural for the Belarusian Opposition in Wrocław, Poland.



# Змагацца

is not “to struggle,” it is “to resist”  
– on the situation of the Belarusian language in Belarus

Text — Alicja Kielpińska  
Picture — Lila Bednarska

**H**ow does a language become endangered? There are as many answers to this question as there are languages in danger but for the Belarusian language, the answer is the authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko. Or is it Alyaksandr Lukashenka?

The first being the English transliteration of the dictator’s name in Russian. The second coming from Belarusian. In 2006, Lukashenka claimed that there are only two great languages worldwide – Russian and English. Belarusian, according to him, is a poor language, which cannot express anything great. Lukashenka has been in power since 1994, the same year the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus was adopted. To see the document, I went to the Belarus Legislation Databank where I read this:

“The online version of the Belarus Legislation Databank contains the complete set of laws of the Republic of Belarus, acts of the President of the Republic of Belarus and the Government’s decisions (only in Russian and Belarusian

language). To search in the Belarus Legislation Databank, go to the Russian variant of this page. The Constitution of the Republic of Belarus and Codes of the Republic of Belarus are available there in Russian free of charge.”

And so, in the Russian version of the constitution “available free of charge,” I found article 17: “The state languages in the Republic of Belarus shall be the Belarusian and Russian languages.” This article effectively makes Belarus a bilingual country, just like Finland with Finnish and Swedish as the two official languages. Well, actually, not at all like Finland.

**A**ccording to the UNESCO World Atlas of Languages, Belarusian is spoken by about 2.2 million people in Belarus, while Russian is spoken by around 6.7 million. These data align with the results of the latest census from 2019, where only one-fourth of Belarusians reported using Belarusian at home. Additionally, there was a noticeable drop in the number of people who identified Belarusian as their native

## *“Why does UNESCO consider the Belarusian language within Belarus vulnerable?”*

tongue, which was 60% compared to 85% twenty years earlier. With 2.2 million speakers, Belarusian has significantly more speakers in Belarus than the 300,000 Swedish speakers in Finland. So why does UNESCO consider the Belarusian language within Belarus vulnerable?

During his trial in 2011, Belarusian Nobel Peace Prize winner and activist Ales Bialiatski demanded translations of the Criminal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure — the laws under which he was being tried—into Belarusian. He also requested that his trial be conducted in Belarusian. Both motions were denied.

Research conducted by Belarusian human rights activist Alina Nahornaja on the accessibility and discrimination of the Belarusian language in Belarus

documents numerous instances of linguistic discrimination across many aspects of society. According to the study, 77.8% of respondents answered “yes” to the question, “Do you face difficulties when using the Belarusian language?”. The participants also share their personal stories. One participant Hienik recounted: “On the third day [of my arrest for participating in mass protests], the trial finally started for the inmates of our cell. The trial was held online, and the judge didn’t bother going into details. Someone was randomly sentenced to 13 days of imprisonment, someone to 15. I was sentenced to 20 days. And I know why — because I spoke Belarusian.”<sup>1</sup>

Since the protests in 2020, official propaganda has started referring to Belarusian speakers contemptuously as “*zmahars*”. The word comes

from the Belarusian “змагацца,” meaning “to struggle,” or “to grapple with something.” In the eyes of the propagandists, zmahars are just powerless trolls, active, especially on the internet. Zmahars, themselves, see their struggle as a road to a better future – a free and democratic Belarus.

Ihar Sluchak, a lawyer and a Belarusian language activist, who has been forced to flee the country due to his human rights activity, says that Belarusian-speaking citizens in Belarus are an unprotected and vulnerable group. According to Sluchak, the access to education entirely in Belarusian (especially in the cities) is limited, the same applies to the healthcare sector. About 1% of all legal acts in the country are written in the language.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Viasna Human Rights Center based in Minsk, after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, people in Belarus started to switch from Russian to Belarusian as a sign of protest - not to speak the aggressor’s language. While it is possible for a language to survive (and thrive) without a state, it needs people or in the case of the Belarusian language, *zmahars*. People who will send appeals so that more Belarusian appear in public spaces, people who will speak Belarusian even if the reaction they get is “speak a normal language”, people who will teach their kids to be proud of the Belarusian language, people who will resist.<sup>3</sup>

[1] Alina Nahorjnaja (2023). *Accessibility and Discrimination of Belarusian Language in Belarus*.

[2] Katsiaryna Lutsevich (2024). “The fight for my language made me a refugee” In: *Global Bar Magazine*.

[3] *Language as a protest*. (2024) In: *Viasna*

## About Alicja Kiełpińska



*Alicja is a Master's student of General Linguistics at the University of Helsinki and a graduate of Scandinavian Studies at University College London. Her linguistic expertise and interest is in researching multilingual communities and their language practices. She is also interested in language policy and how it shapes language use or shift.*

# Behind the Belt and the Road:

The Pamiri People and the  
Hidden Costs of Tajikistan's  
Infrastructure Projects

As Gazeta frequently publishes articles with a focus on the human and community element, we thought it important to highlight a particular story that often goes overlooked amid the broader geopolitical discussions—how large-scale infrastructure projects, like those under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), are actually affecting local communities. In this case, we focus on the Pamiri people of Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO). This piece draws inspiration from a brief visit to the GBAO in 2022 by one of the authors, who has since developed a deep interest and appreciation for the region and its unique culture.



Text & pictures - Oliver Reschreiter  
and Lila Bednarska

Amid the fervor surrounding China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Tajikistan stands out as a particularly staunch supporter within broader Central Asia. Tajik President Emomali Rahmon has endorsed the BRI, seeing it as crucial for modernizing infrastructure and attracting foreign investment. One such significant project under the BRI is the rehabilitation of the Kulma-Khorog-Dushanbe highway, connecting Tajikistan and China via the Kulma Pass border crossing, Khorog, and Dushanbe. This highway, long neglected since the Soviet Union's collapse, is the only road connecting western Tajikistan and the eastern Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO).

The redevelopment of this key route promises notable advancements in transportation connectivity between China, the GBAO, and Tajikistan and in theory will provide much needed repair work to the highway. Yet, beneath these promises of greater connectivity, questions remain about the actual local benefits the project will deliver.

Numbering approximately 300,000 today, the Pamiri people are an Iranian ethnic group indigenous to the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province (GBAO) in eastern Tajikistan. Though ethnic Tajiks also trace their origins to Iranian tribes, the Pamiri community, as the indigenous people of GBAO, have their own distinct linguistic, religious, and cultural identity. The term "Pamiri" emerged in the mid-20th century, referring to a group of people who speak one of several eastern Iranian languages, collectively known as Pamiri languages. Unlike their Tajik counterparts, the Pamiri people are Ismaili

muslims, followers of the Nizari Ismaili Shia branch of Islam, with Aga Khan IV serving as their spiritual leader.

This distinct identity has historically set the Pamiris apart, both culturally and politically, leading to tensions with the central government. In the midst of the Soviet Union's collapse, the Lal'i Badakhshan political party would emerge during the waning months of the Soviet Union, formed with the purpose of advocating for and protecting Pamiri rights. Amid Tajikistan's civil war in the 1990s, Lal'i Badakhshan and the Pamiris, allied with





the United Tajik Opposition, faced severe reprisals from pro-government factions, notably the Popular Front. This conflict escalated into a brutal confrontation, compounded by an economic blockade that further isolated the Pamiri region, exacerbating their plight. In response, a significant number of Pamiris who had been residing in western Tajikistan sought refuge in the GBAO, only to face targeted ethnic violence from the Popular Front along the way. Survivors of these events shared their harrowing accounts, solidifying the GBAO's status as a resilient bastion of opposition against the central Tajik government.

Following the end of Tajikistan's civil war in 1997, Emomali Rahmon's government claimed victory but faced significant challenges due to national fragmentation. By the mid-2000s, Rahmon consolidated authoritarian rule by neutralizing former adversaries and extending his authority across most of Tajikistan. However, despite these efforts, resistance persisted in the GBAO, which still bore the scars of war and ethnic cleansing. Amidst continuing efforts by the Pamiri people to pursue their own agency within their own region, Rahmon has pursued a hostile agenda, inten-



tionally neglecting the region while prioritizing development in Dushanbe and his native Danghara region. Since the civil war's end, the central Tajik government has conducted several 'security operations' in the GBAO, targeting dissent through the targeted killings of community leaders. The most recent crackdown in May of 2022, the bloodiest since the civil war, resulted in dozens of deaths and imprisonment of hundreds of Pamiris and the killing of local political leader Muhammadboqir Muhammadboqirov. Due to the information and internet blackout instituted however, the true death toll and events of May 2022 remain uncertain. However, what is known is that since the end of Tajikistan's Civil War, all demonstrations and attempts by the Pamiri people to advocate for their own autonomy have been unsuccessful, always ending in death and imprisonment by the Tajik government.

Rahmon himself has made no secret of his role in these crackdowns saying he person-

*“For the Pamiris, the prospects of benefiting from trade and development are dim.”*

ally authorized the security operation against ‘terrorist elements’. It is perhaps no coincidence that mere months later, construction work would begin on the highway rehabilitation project led by China’s Road and Bridge Corporation under the BRI.

For both Tajik and Chinese authorities, the suppression of dissent in the GBAO will be seen as a positive development. For China, suppressing dissent in the region enables the advancement of its infrastructure projects, thereby deepening Tajikistan’s integration within the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Furthermore, the absence of visible dissent (anti-government demonstrations) and stability in Tajikistan is considered crucial from China’s security perspective, as it reinforces what they see as regional stability. For Rahmon, the rehabilitation of the highway will allow the central government to further solidify control in the GBAO, allowing ease of access for government forces deeper into the mountain-

ous region. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, it will also allow Rahmon to further control and profit from Tajikistan’s lucrative and illicit opium trade between Afghanistan and Europe.

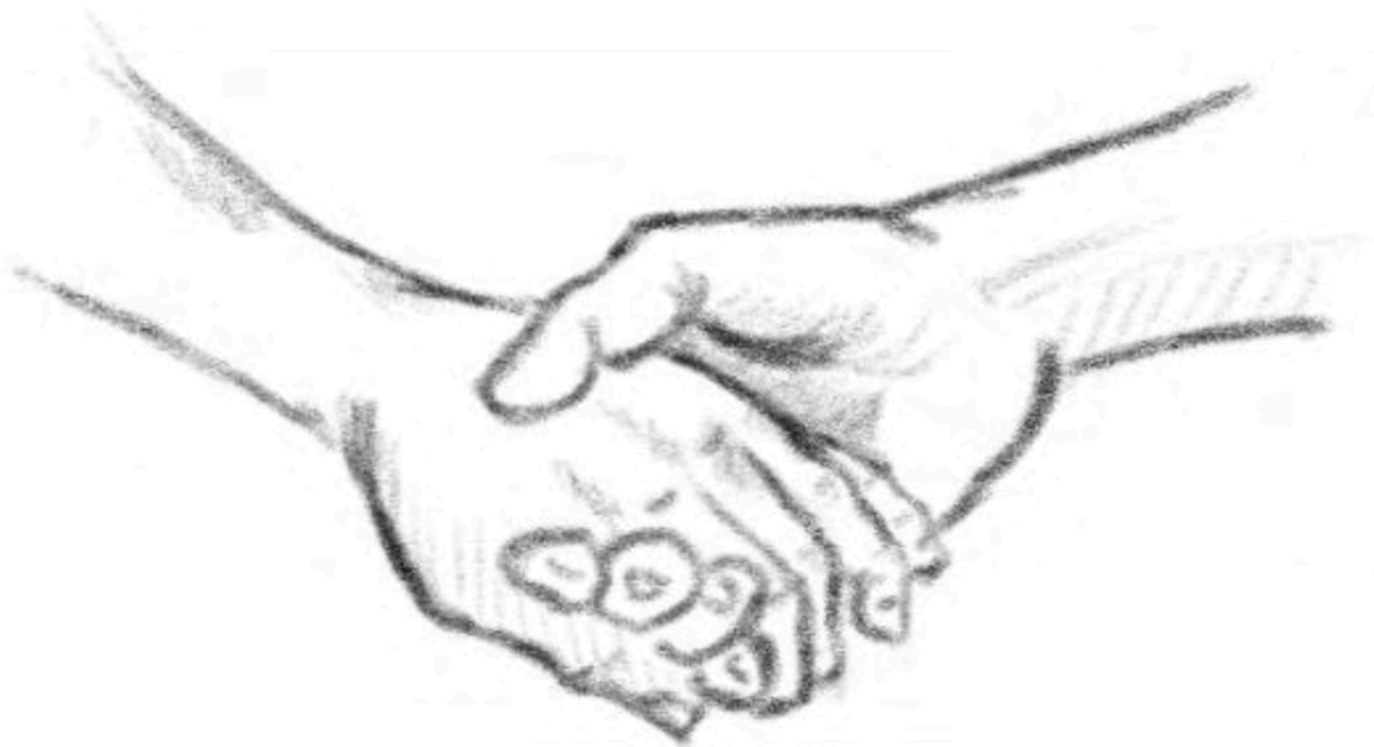
**F**or the Pamiris, the prospects of benefiting from trade and development are dim. Rather, it is likely the populace will continue to struggle with intensified government repression. Chinese involvement in the region is poised to solidify Rahmon’s grip on power rather than bring about tangible benefits for the Pamiris. The Tajik central government will likely prioritize keeping visible dissent in the GBAO managed as a means to keeping the door to China’s investments open. Rahmon’s recent visit to the GBAO’s regional capital of Khorog in August 2023 should not be mistaken for a conciliatory gesture; rather, it underscores the entrenched power dynamics that further oppress an already marginalized populace. 

## About Oliver Reschreiter



*Oliver is a current Masters student at the University of Helsinki studying Russian, Eurasian, Eastern European Studies. He completed his Bachelors in European Studies with a thesis on Azerbaijani and EU energy diplomacy. His regional interests lie in South Caucasian and Central Asian affairs, with a particular focus on energy affairs, trade, and development. Outside his studies, he frequently travels between the regions and is a particularly big fan of Plov and Khachapuri.*

# THIS IS THE SINGING REVOLUTION:



*The Essential Tracks,  
All in One Resistance*

Text - Bente van Leijden  
Picture - Oliver Reschreiter  
Illustration - Pamela Mullo

## What is The Singing Revolution?

**B**etween 1987 and 1991, a revolution took place in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. With the Baltic Way as its most historically remembered feature, the Baltic countries' people literally joined hands, paving the way for the reclamation of their sovereignty from the Soviet Union. The Baltic Way, also commonly known as the Baltic Chain, was one of several noteworthy events taking place in the Baltics during this period. If one were to witness this chain back in 1989, they would notice one particular feature: the people were not just showing their resistance, they were also singing it. The revolution between 1987 and 1991 was coined, The Singing Revolution, back in 1988 by Estonian activist Heinz Valk. As expected, this name reveals the primary feature across the three countries that were resisting authoritarianism and fighting for their independence. Through singing protest songs in particular, the people of the Baltics strengthened their national identity and thus, their resistance from their occupier, which would eventually contribute to their independence.

## Music and resisting authoritarianism

**W**hat is the role of music in resisting authoritarianism? I argue that it is an important feature in the creation of a national identity. Music

and national identity can for example be rooted in a shared tradition, including songs that people sing during celebrations such as Christmas or Midsummer. These songs have been sung for decades or even centuries, and singing them immediately creates a connection between the participants. It can also be historically significant, for example through the existence of national anthems. As events such as the Olympics show, there is a strong connection between national pride and national anthems- after all, when an athlete receives a gold medal, they will play their country's anthem. Furthermore, the language of the song itself further cements the feeling of national identity. Singing songs in someone's native language, particularly protest songs, contributes to a feeling of togetherness with the people who share the same language. This can be seen on a national level, as I will explain in the following paragraphs, but also on a smaller level with minority languages. These songs can strengthen the feeling of national identity, but they do not necessarily mention nationalistic sentiments in the lyrics itself. While it is not uncommon for historically significant songs in particular to be clearly nationalistic, the shared feeling of a national identity is more important than the text itself.

## The Baltics Are Waking Up

**A**s this article's title already suggests, I wish to highlight several songs which were essential in The Singing Revolution. These songs can be di-



vided into two sections: protest songs that were created for the revolution, and songs that turned into protest songs despite not being created with the revolution in mind.

The first song I will discuss, arguably considered the anthem of this revolution, is a rock song titled “The Baltics Are Waking Up”. This song perfectly encapsulates the power of music in resisting authoritarianism: it brought people together and became representative for their shared goal of independence. This song was, unsurprisingly, created as a protest song for the revolution. One of its most powerful elements is that it has lyrics in three different languages: Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian. This protest song created a feeling of both national and shared identity. People could feel pride in the representation of their own language and nation in the song, as well as experience a feeling of sharing this space with

the other languages, and thus the other Baltic countries. The national identity did not just consist of the nation- it also included the region, the Baltics. In the lyrics of the song, this sentiment of a shared identity and thus shared goal of resistance returns as well: the countries are referred to as ‘three sisters’ who have to stand up for and defend themselves. In the lyrics, these sisters have been travelling together for many years, and they almost fall asleep after fighting for centuries and ‘sacrificing ancient honour’. However, the song encourages these sisters to wake up. The lyrics even call out the country’s names individually, specifically asking them to wake up and defeat the sea by ‘the will of freedom’. The allegory is obvious, yet effective. It references the historical struggles that the Baltic countries have faced, and calls them out individually while also reassuring the feeling of a

shared goal. It had the desired effect as well: The Baltics Are Waking Up became the anthem of The Singing Revolution, capturing its essence in 5 minutes and 32 seconds. This was the song that was heard on the streets when people were holding hands and creating The Baltic Way. I highly recommend watching a video to further understand the feeling that this song conveys. The many videos and images of The Singing Revolution with this protest music playing in the background truly shows the power of a shared identity in resisting authoritarianism.

## Protest music and history

Certainly, “The Baltics Are Waking Up” is a perfect example of a protest song fulfilling its purpose. Similarly, songs with titles such as the Estonian song “Eestlane olen ja eestlaseks jään” (“Estonian I Am and Estonian I Will Be”) or the Lithuanian one “Pabudome ir kelkimės” (“We Woke Up, Now Let’s Get Up”) reach their intended goals of creating a sense of national identity and a feeling of a shared goal of resistance against authoritarianism. These songs, among many others, were created specifically during and with the purpose of being performed in The Singing Revolution. However, there were also songs which are less obvious as protest songs upon first sight. These are songs that turned into protest songs because they also created a feeling of national identity. For instance, the Latvian song “Saule, Pērkons, Daugava”

(“Sun, Thunder, Daugava [river]”) was heavily inspired by the poem “Daugava” written by famous Latvian poet Rainis. The song, composed as a choir song, was already performed several times before it turned into an anthem of

the revolution. I believe there are two reasons for this song to have turned into a protest song: firstly, the historical significance. Rainis is considered one of the most influential Latvian historical figures, both in literature and in Latvian nationalism. Using an influential figure as a source for this song therefore creates a connection to the shared history between the Latvian people. Secondly, the song, like many of Rainis’ poems, relies heavily on patriotic symbolism and therefore creates a strong feeling of nationalism. For instance,

the lyrics include lines such as “Latvia was laid down by the Sun” and “The sun ordered God, to dig out the Daugava”. Using this creation myth, the song emphasises the importance of the existence of Latvia as an independent place rather than as a part of the Soviet Union. The song was even considered to become the new Latvian national anthem, truly showing its importance in the Latvian national identity.


Similarly, the Estonian song “Minge(m) üles mägedele” (“Let’s Go Up To The Mountains”) was also inspired by a poem by Estonian poet Mihkel Veske. This poem was then turned into a song by Alo Mattiisen, and subsequently became part of the so-called “Five Patriotic Songs” of the Singing Revolution. While the song was specifically created to be a protest song, it was not the intention of the poet when it was written in the 19th century. Like “Daugava”, it shows the significance of cultural history in national identity, and therefore in

*“The national identity did not just consist of the nation - it also included the region, the Baltics.”*

resisting authoritarianism as well. After all, this history belongs to the Baltic people rather than the Soviet Union.

## Music and revolution: an (academically) underrated duo

When thinking about resisting authoritarianism, people will often conjure up images of violent revolutions- a literal resistance by resisting arrest, resisting to back down in the face of danger. I do not wish to reduce the significance of these revolutions and the sacrifices many people make while resisting authoritarianism. However, I wish to highlight the importance of studying (popular) geopolitics/culture as an inherent part of this political discourse as well. Music has the power to become a symbol for (nonviolent) resist-

ance as can be seen thanks to The Singing Revolution. Cliched as it may be, the power of music and culture as a whole cannot and should not be underestimated. They are a tool for creating a shared identity, whether national, such as feeling as an Estonian, or international, the feeling of belonging to the Baltics as a whole. The Singing Revolution consisted of songs that highlighted this identity through factors such as a shared language, history, tradition, or a combination of more than one of these. The songs discussed in my article are only a few highlights of the repertoire that is available to find online, and I highly recommend listening to them. This is the music that helped the Baltic states show that they resist authoritarianism, and which would lead to them gaining their independence. Music can be revolutionary, and I believe it should be studied as such. 

## About Bente van Leijden



*Bente is currently pursuing her Master's degree in Russian, Eurasian and East European studies at the University of Helsinki. She previously received a Bachelor's degree in International Studies from Leiden University and a Master's degree in East European studies from the University of Amsterdam. Her main interest is in the role of popular culture in political discourse in the Russian/Eurasian region and particularly the role of culture in revolutionary movements. She is also interested in memory studies, (socio)linguistics, and heritage studies.*

# recipe: Podbitá fazuľa



Text & picture - Kristína Dovahunová

One of my fondest memories from when I was around 5 years old, growing up near the East Carpathians, is from a late August afternoon in Zboj, northeastern Slovakia. I remember my dad lighting the fire with the branches and wood that we gathered from the nearby forest. The summer wood was so dry that it was consumed by the flames immediately—but we had to wait longer for the first hot coals to appear. My dad then added the potatoes, covered them with the coals,

and we waited again. I was so hungry. After 45 minutes, he took the potatoes from the ashes, placed them in a wooden basket, and shook them well so that the burnt pieces of skin fell off, leaving us with slightly charred, peeled potatoes. We'd take a potato, juggle it from one hand to the other to avoid burning our fingers, then smear a healthy amount of butter on top and sprinkle it with salt. Biting into it, you'd wonder—how can two ingredients create one of the most fascinating flavour combina-

tions you've ever tasted? I wish I could describe this experience better, but I can't—partly because I wouldn't be able to prepare it in our small Helsinki apartment, but mostly because it wasn't just the potatoes and butter for me; it was the connection to Rusyn traditions, family, and the beautiful environment of the primeval forests of Poloniny National Park that I can't recreate here.

**R**usyn food is known for its simplicity, relying on locally available ingredients like potatoes, cabbage, beans, and mushrooms. This simplicity reflects the agrarian lifestyle of the region, where food was often a product of what was readily available. Meat was traditionally reserved for special occasions, such as Easter. North East Slovakia, along with the bordering regions of Poland and Ukraine, contains the largest concentration of Rusyns (Ruthenians) in Europe. Despite numerous challenges of forced assimilation, the Rusyns maintain a distinct culture, customs, and language—a unique blend of neighbouring Slavic languages that is sometimes unintelligible to speakers of Slovak. Imagine my amusement when I brought over friends from Central/Western Slovakia and found out they didn't understand what my grandma was saying!

**A**fter 41 years of authoritarian rule ended with the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989, Rusyns, along with other minorities, were able to freely reclaim their identity. They now com-

prise the fourth largest national minority in Slovakia and have their own recognized minority language, which was codified in 1995. In municipalities where over 15% of inhabitants speak Rusyn, the language can be used in official communication. The Rusyn community has established various cultural associations, hosted festivals, and operated institutions such as the Alexander Duchnovič Theatre in Prešov, which performs in Rusyn. In 1998, a Rusyn department was created at the University of Prešov's Institute of National Studies, later transformed into the Institute of Rusyn Language and Culture in 2008. The national public broadcaster also dedicates a television show in the Rusyn language, focusing on the lives and culture of the Rusyn community and promoting this cultural heritage to the broader Slovak population. And that's something I'd like to continue now by sharing my favourite recipe with you. While I only made it home a few times a year after I moved away for university, despite the distance and the long intervals between my visits, there is one constant that always awaits me: my mum's warm soup. She would make all kinds of soups over the years, but 'Podbitá fazuľa' was the one that I always looked forward to the most. Podbitá fazuľa, or creamy bean soup with sauerkraut, is a traditional dish in Rusyn cuisine that embodies the simplicity of the culinary traditions, while providing a hearty and rich flavour.

Here's how you can make it:

# ingredients

1 cup of dried brown beans (soaked overnight)  
1 bay leaf  
1 tablespoon butter  
1 onion, chopped  
1 carrot, cubed  
1 parsley, cubed  
2 cloves of garlic, minced  
1 cup of sauerkraut  
1 cup of cream

Salt and pepper to taste  
Water or broth to cover

*\*If you're like me and don't have dried beans on hand, you can substitute them for canned beans, but if you can, do use the dried ones for a deeper flavour.*

# instructions

1. For dried beans: wash the beans and soak them in water overnight. When soaked, change the water and cook beans until soft (1 hour) together with bay leaf and salt. Drain, but keep the bean liquid.

For canned beans: strain the beans, but keep the bean liquid for later.

2. Get your ingredients ready.

3. In a pot, melt the butter and sauté the chopped onion, carrots and parsley for 5 minutes.

4. Add minced garlic, and, if using canned beans, bay leaf. Cook for another minute.


5. Gradually add the sauerkraut and cooked beans to the pot.

6. If using dried beans: add your bean cooking liquid and cream.

If using canned beans: use the canned bean liquid and top up with water. Add cream.

7. Simmer the soup on low heat for about 10 minutes, allowing the flavours to meld together.

8. Serve warm, and feel free to add a bit of chopped parsley on top for extra freshness.

Enjoy! 

# Gazeta Sasha Backstage

Meet our talented team of layout designers! They are the ones responsible for bringing each article of our magazine to life and make it visually pleasing for you to read.

## About Lotta Aro



*Lotta is a Master's student at the University of Helsinki, currently pursuing a degree in European Area and Cultural Studies, with a regional focus on Russia and Eastern Europe. Her main interest lies in women's rights and role in society, especially in times of conflict. Apart from her studies she enjoys books, long walks with her dog and (of course) designing layouts for Gazeta!*

## About Lucy Rudloff



*Currently pursuing a Master's degree in European and Nordic Studies at the University of Helsinki, Lucy focuses on Arctic state policies and narratives. She has extensive experience in event management and communications, among others as Young Program Coordinator at Arctic Frontiers. Next to her studies, Lucy practices her graphic design skills through projects covering social media graphics, poster design and of course layout design for Gazeta Sasha.*

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