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# New Eastern Europe

## IN THE THROES OF CRISES



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# Contents

## In the throes of crises

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### 7 When crises become political tools

Marcel H. Van Herpen

*In a crisis situation nothing is certain. We all share the unpleasant feeling that we are slowly losing the firm ground beneath our feet. And this crisis mood colours also our view of the future. Yet, there are actors who consciously and willingly cause crisis situations with the intention to profit from the ensuing chaos.*

### 12 Renewing the promise of European solidarity

Basil Kerski

*The war in Ukraine reminds us that the peaceful civic revolutions of 1989 – 91 have not yet been completed. Today Vladimir Putin is once again trying to stop Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity and reverse its dynamics. He is also the co-creator of a new nationalistic populism in Europe and the United States. The main goal of this movement is to destroy civic culture and solidarity among people.*

### 18 Is Europe's democracy in crisis?

Filip Kostelka

*Like their predecessors in the 1920s and 1930s, today's populists understand that by dividing society and delegitimising their adversaries, they can get away with blatant violations of the democratic rules.*

### 23 The EU economy may not be in the best shape, but Ukraine will not be abandoned

Lesia Dubenko

### 29 The easy times are behind us, but we are not giving up

Iwona Reichardt

*Poland responded generously to the mass inflow of refugees from Ukraine as Russia invaded in February last year. However, the need for help continues with every day of the war.*

### 35 Russian infrastructure attacks aim to create humanitarian crisis

Maciej Zaniewicz

### 42 Tackling the climate crisis in a time of war

Isabelle de Pommereau

### 51 A nuclear crisis or nuclear discourse?

Kinga Anna Gajda

*A nuclear threat which induces the fear of even a possible attack can serve as the perfect bogeyman.*

## Essays and Analysis

---

### 55 North Macedonia in the crosshairs of Russian propaganda

Jovan Gjorgovski

### 61 War at the border, protests at home. Pressure mounts on Moldova

William Fleeson

### 75 How Hungary's Russia connection undermines EU support for Ukraine

Gabriela Greilinger

### 82 Georgia's strong economic performance comes at a heavy price

Mackenzie Baldinger

*Since February 24th 2022, Georgia's economic ties and dependence regarding Russia have markedly increased.*

### 89 Puzzles of an extremely difficult level. The post-war recovery of Ukraine

Maciej Makulski

### 94 A Marshall Plan for Ukraine should prioritise harm done to humans, not buildings

Maksym Popovych

**101 The ongoing process of de-Sovietisation in Eastern Europe**

Nino Chanadiri

## Interviews

---

**106 The outcome of the war is crucial not only for the future of Ukraine**

Interview with Arkady Rzegocki

*"It is in Poland's interest to stop the imperial ambitions of its eastern neighbour. We will need many allies and partners to do so, led by the embattled Ukraine."*

## Lessons of cybersecurity from the war in Ukraine

---

**116 To war or not to war? Russia's cyber strategies in Ukraine 2014–22**

Dominika Dziwisz and Błażej Sajduk

*Had Moscow used cyber operations to substitute kinetic operations in February 2022, we would have seen a full-blown cyber war instead of a conventional invasion.*

**122 Putin's hidden war. How the Kremlin is bombing us on the internet**

Grigol Julukhidze

**128 Friend or foe? The role of social media during Russia's war in Ukraine**

Agnieszka Grzechynka

**135 The threat of digital surveillance**

Adam Reichardt

*Surveillance is nothing new when it comes to authoritarian regimes as it has always been a tool to keep control and maintain order. The rise of digital technologies, however, has made it easier for regimes to monitor and control their populations.*

**141 Moldova is being forced to adapt to hybrid warfare**

Marina Bzovii

## Stories and Ideas

---

**146 An independent Georgia or a Tiflis governorate?**

Wojciech Wojtasiewicz

*Today's Georgia is a country of contradictions. While most of the population has come out in support of Ukraine, the country has experienced a great amount of migration from Russia since the war.*

**165 Back home to the warzone. Emotions of displacement among returning Ukrainian migrants**

Olena Yermakova

## Art, Culture and Society

---

**177 This play is a political and social reflection**

An interview with Ishbel Szatrawska

## History and Memory

---

**184 Geopolitics, history and memory games. Jumping from the 20th to the 21st century**

Georges Mink

**193 How well-brought up girls became unbeatable warriors. The path from battle glory to modern feminism**

Andrzej Zaręba



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# Tackling the climate crisis in a time of war

ISABELLE DE POMMEREAU

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The Ukraine War Environmental Consequences Work Group came together in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The group brings together experts and journalists from around the world focused on the situation in the region. Their goals are to raise awareness about the war's **environmental damage**, lay the groundwork for a sustainable reconstruction of war-torn Ukraine, and prevent the war from being used as an excuse to put climate issues on the back-burner.

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On a wintry Thursday in Berlin, journalist Angelina Davydova is in her home in an online meeting with a group of environmental advocates from three continents. They have organised a unique kind of editorial board meeting. Separated by oceans and time zones stretching sixteen hours, pulled away from their personal and work lives by the war and, often, amidst blackouts and air raids, the group has come together to brainstorm the next “issue” of their Ukraine War Environmental Consequences (UWEC) Work Group. The group, created eight months ago in the wake of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine for a readership around the globe, documents, monitors and analyses the war’s environmental repercussions and points the way towards potential solutions.

How the Ukraine war was talked about at the recent United Nations climate summit in Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt (COP 27) is one of the overriding themes for the coming issue that November. Other key questions include “Should Ukraine build a Danube Canal?”, “What is the war’s invisible impact on Ukraine’s forests?” and “What is the state of Russia’s environmental civil action today?” Ideas for stories, profiles,

new investigations and interviews swirl. So do suggestions about fundraising and updating the website. Loose and open-ended, the agenda evolves with the input of the contributors. There is no cosy editorial office for the group, which sees itself as part analytical think tank, part rigorous journalistic project. Rather, members meet on Zoom while chatting on Telegram, the online platform most resistant to power outages. Wildlife biologist Oleksii Vasyliuk has found time to participate during the couple hours of power he gets every day from Vasylykiv, a provincial town near Kyiv. Eugene Simonov, a river conservation specialist originally from Russia, has joined in from Canberra, Australia, where he lives in self-imposed exile now after the Kremlin labelled him a “foreign agent” 15 years ago. Other UWEC members – activists and scientists, researchers, journalists and translators – have joined in from Lithuania, Georgia and the United States.

### Keeping climate in the debate

“We all work with very sad topics, but doing what we do is very important,” Davydova says. A St Petersburg environmental journalist and expert who, in the years leading up to the war, had worked toward raising awareness about the importance of climate change in Russia, Davydova has been rebuilding her life in Germany since fleeing her country in March. “We all work on the same projects, and we communicate, and for me it is very important.”

While there are other non-profit groups that monitor the environmental impact of military conflicts, including the Conflict and Environment Observatory in Britain or Pax for Peace in the Netherlands, “our project isn’t only analytical, it is media,” Davydova tells me. The stories are all published in Russian, Ukrainian and English but beyond the language issue, the group aims to reach citizens around the globe. “It is important to collect, verify, monitor, analyse and write about it in a way that people can understand,” says the 44-year-old journalist.

With the work group, Davydova embodies a little-talked about, invisible effort to fight the insidious toll of the Ukraine war. Both online and global, it is led collectively by a loose partnership of like-minded environmental advocates. Its goals are to raise awareness about the war’s environmental damage, lay the groundwork for a sustainable reconstruction of war-torn Ukraine, and prevent the war from being used as an excuse to put climate issues on the back-burner in and beyond Ukraine.

If the tragic human toll of the war is not glaring enough, its **environmental impact** is also substantial, but less covered.

The stakes are high. If the tragic human toll of the war is not glaring enough, its environmental impact is also substantial but less covered. It is profound and far-reaching, in fact it “is likely to be the most lasting impact of the war, because contaminated soils, deteriorated health conditions of populations exposed to various kinds of military pollution, exterminated forests and so on,” says Eugene Simonov, a 35-year veteran environmental scientist who coordinates the Rivers Without Boundaries project. “And all those immediate impacts are likely to last for long and, to a great extent, define the conditions in which people in the zone of conflict will still survive for decades to come.”

The war’s direct environmental legacy is obvious. Bombings and rockets are destroying wetlands and forests, transforming vast swathes of protected nature into mass graves and spilling toxic material into rivers. It is less visible how the war has disrupted international, including scientific, cooperation on climate change and the environment, weakened oversight and led governments, not only in Russia, to roll back key decarbonisation steps they had painstakingly taken over the past few years. And the aftermath is likely to linger long after the bombings have stopped, Simonov stresses.

### **Turning the tide of environmental disaster from exile**

The Ukraine War Environmental Consequences (UWEC) Work Group is an attempt to turn the tide, fending off the barrage of propaganda and misinformation that has filled the airwaves. The concept was born in May, weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine when alarmed scientists and experts started documenting what they saw, often remotely, from Ukraine to Lithuania, the United States to Australia. Belarusian journalist and environmental activist Aleksei Ovchinnikov for example, issued “environmental war digests” on his Belarus Green Portal. He had fled to Ukraine in 2021 because of the oppression and imprisonment his environmental activism had led to in Belarus but was in Georgia on February 24th and remains there today.

Oleksii Vasyliuk from Vasylykiv in Ukraine had published a myriad of war-related analyses on the website of the Ukrainian Nature Conservation Board, which he co-founded. In Australia, river scientist Simonov connected with Jennifer Castner, an American environmental and human right activist long involved with Russia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Ukraine with whom he had cooperated on common projects whose command of the Russian language would prove invaluable. “Now that it is no longer safe or ethically and logistically possible for non-Russians to participate in meaningful advocacy work in Russia, I was excited to join Ukrainian,

Belarusian and Russian environmentalists and journalists in creating the UWEC Work Group,” says Castner, director of the Altai Project, which aims at protecting wildlife and indigenous peoples in Siberia and the Far East.

As for Davydova in St Petersburg, she soon saw that her hands would be tied if she stayed: protesters against the Kremlin’s “special operation” were reprimanded and civil society groups, including those with an environmental agenda like “Friends of the Baltics”, were named “foreign agents”.

In the pre-war days UWEC members had operated in the same environmental circles in Russia and other countries. Most knew and trusted each other. If the war tore them from their daily tasks, now it was uniting them around a common determination to join forces and spread the word collectively on the war’s environmental consequences outside Ukraine. “In Ukraine, this was obvious, but I wanted people in other countries to know about it,” says wildlife biologist Vasyliuk, who says that so far, some nine Ukrainians have contributed to the UWEC effort in one way or the other. Davydova, an internationally respected figure who is both a professional journalist and climate change expert, brings to the group “very high standards of fairness and reliability”, Vasyliuk admits. “Thanks to her, our team has a reason to consider itself ‘media’ and not only a group of experts.” Presenting verified information, although very challenging in a war, is a crucial part of the UWEC mission. Vasyliuk says the group strives to “reduce fake news about the consequences of the war – unfortunately, there is a lot of it.”

Eugene Simonov, speaking from Australia, concurs that “it’s important to keep the problem visible (the war’s impact on the environment), rely on more or less proven facts, and make society aware of the choices it faces. There is also a lot of less reliable information around so we have to figure out what is more reliable as experts.” The hurdles are huge, and they include life-and-death issues and the effort to get as much information as possible without endangering Russian scientists. Simonov’s status as a so-called foreign agent “makes it toxic for many actors to deal with me,” he says. “They have to report that they are dealing with foreign agents and who knows what happens after.” He adds that “we are trying not to expose our Russian colleagues who are in Russia and are helping us.”

### **A story of resilience and defiance**

In many ways, Davydova’s link to the UWEC Group is a natural continuation of her global life journey, at the crossroads of journalism, civil society advocacy and science. She grew up amidst the upheavals of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, with her mind turned towards discovering the world. As a child, she would spend





Photo courtesy of Angelina Davydova

Journalist and activist Angelina Davydova decided that fleeing Russia was her only option to continue her work. The rockets raining down on Ukrainians were also shattering her work, her life. “All I had been working on for many years – building informal contacts between scientists and western colleagues, and pushing for an environmental agenda in Russia – now, all of a sudden, a lot of it was irrelevant,” she says.

hours peering at world maps she had plastered on the walls of her parent’s dacha southeast of St Petersburg.

“I imagined I would travel there one day,” she says. The reality of environmental disasters dawned upon her early. In the summer after Chernobyl in 1986, when a medical condition led her to the Leningrad Regional Children’s Clinical Hospital, she heard about the children coming from the disaster zone to be treated in her hospital in the aftermath of the nuclear catastrophe. “We all knew about it.”

If in preschool she had to learn Lenin’s biography by heart, her primary school brought a different experience. On the first day of fourth grade she was greeted with a large banner with the words “*Perestroika = Glasnost + Democracy*” hanging outside the school. Later, various Soviet-era youth movements that had structured the lives of so many Russian youths disintegrated into nothing overnight. And the transition had been brutal. Many young people fell into material consumption and chaos. Then in 1998, she took part in an international youth exchange programme in Thuringia which opened new perspectives for her. Later, she studied economics in St Petersburg before learning journalism in the field, by attending trainee programmes in different countries, including at Deutsche Welle in Germany.

After completing a journalism fellowship at the Oxford-based Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in 2006, Davydova joined the German Russian Exchange, an international non-profit created in the 1990s to promote democracy

and peaceful cooperation between Germany, Ukraine, Belarus and other Eastern Partnership countries.

The arts are what got her hooked on the environmental cause. In 2008 she was asked to lead a unique international arts event in St Petersburg: “The Moving Baltic Sea Festival”. For six weeks, a ship sailed along the Baltic coast, from Greifswald to St Petersburg. Whenever it dropped anchor, in Gdańsk, Kaliningrad, Riga or Narva-Jõesuu, residents were invited to events connecting ecology and culture, from discussions to films and photo exhibits. Davydova believes in the power of culture in raising interest in climate issues. Before the war broke out, she remained active in projects weaving together the arts and environmental causes. She spoke at Eco Cup, a festival which, before the war, brought international environmental films to Russia and served as an environmental expert to help launch Russia’s first festival of environmental theatre.

From being a journalist, she took the next step, becoming a voice in efforts to bring climate change issues into the national dialogue in Russia. In 2008 she attended the UN climate summit for the first time and has been attending ever since, as an observer. Climate change “was a new topic in Russia”, she said. Huge forest fires ravaging southern Siberia made it clear that things needed to change. The Kremlin took initial steps, even adopting climate change legislation. Eventually Russia joined the Paris Agreement in 2019. It was hugely important, Davydova says. “Whatever happens in Russia environment-wise has global implications. What Russia does or does not do matters for the rest of us.”

In Russia, Davydova “played an absolutely crucial role in the Russian and wider European environmental community, in trying to link various Russian stakeholders to ongoing climate policies and processes, and trying to talk with various forces in Russia and outside to develop some kind of momentum for climate solutions,” Simonov says. He has known Davydova for years. “She was good at developing some common ground and making people talk to each other and helping them exchange information.”

On the international scene Davydova is known as “the first influential climate journalist in Russia who raised awareness about the theme for the public”, says Alexander Vorbrugg, a senior researcher at the University of Bern (Switzerland) Institute of Geography who specialises in Eastern European countries. “She covers quite some ground.”

In September Vorbrugg partnered with Davydova to organise a workshop called “Political Ecology and the new political environments in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: A collective search for strategies.” It was an attempt to give a platform

Angelina Davydova believes in the power of culture in raising interest in issues related to the climate crisis.

to specialised scientists from around the world with an interest in environmental issues from the region – including to some Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarusian scientists forced into political exile and war refugees – to find ways to continue working together.

### **“Did we do enough?”**

It did not take long for Davydova to see fleeing Russia as her only option. The rockets raining down on the Ukrainians were also shattering her work, her life. “All I had been working on for many years – building informal contacts between scientists and western colleagues, and pushing for an environmental agenda in Russia – now, all of a sudden, a lot of it was irrelevant,” she admits. “I felt sad, a bit lost.”

She fled, catching a direct flight to Istanbul. From there, watching the news on the television, she discovered the human dimension of the war – the bombings. She stayed two and a half weeks at a friend’s house to “catch my breath and plan further”. Berlin, where she knew people and the language was a logical destination. Yet rebuilding her life there has been a rough journey, she says.

When she left St Petersburg, she also left behind the knowledge that what she was doing “made a lot of sense, had an impact” and that she had witnessed the birth of “exciting, brave” independent media initiatives. Now she would have to start all over again. She battled anxiety by diving into work and travelling around the world. As a fellow with the NGO Media in Cooperation and Transition until December

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see that fleeing  
Russia was her  
only option.

2022, and as a climate projects coordinator with n-ost, a cross-border journalistic network, she trained climate journalists, collaborated on pan-European projects, and worked on multi-disciplinary projects related to climate change, such as “Climate Caravans”. She has given lectures on Russian civil society and climate change at Indiana University Bloomington (US), for example, and has written for think tanks such as the

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. She also continues to jointly run the “Eurasia Climate Brief”, a podcast that gives a voice to environmental experts from the Eurasia region.

Wherever she went – Georgia, Turkey, France, Lithuania, Kazakhstan – she stumbled upon old acquaintances from home who, like her, had escaped the war. “That’s when I realised that my previous life is gone,” she says. “I had the feeling that my whole circle of contacts was crumbling.” Compounding the feeling of uprootedness was the passing of old friends from the St Petersburg she knew. “I began

asking myself: where am I, what makes the basis of my life? What makes sense for me to do, how can I help other people?”

Then a question began to haunt her. “Have we done enough? Did we do the right things if we couldn’t prevent things from happening,” she says, referring to Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine.

### **A sense of purpose and belonging**

Angelina Davydova says that she feels calmer and more grounded today in large part due to the Ukraine War Environmental Consequences Work Group. “When I speak about what I am doing, I put this group in a special place,” she says. “We are doing something unique. It is not just documenting, monitoring, and archiving the impact of war. We are a group where people from Ukraine and those originally from Belarus and Russia are still talking to each other.”

From Australia to Berlin, Georgia to Ukraine, the UWEC global partnership testifies to something big: the ability of human beings from belligerent countries to unite around the common good. The war has wreaked havoc on the lives and work of many environmental advocates, forcing them to “start changing what we are doing and who we could reach,” says Simonov. The UWEC is their way to fight the war the best way they can.

“But there are high risks associated with dealing with us if you are in Russia because we call the war “a war” and are telling more or less objective stories of its impact, and pointing fingers at those who cause the impacts whenever necessary.”


From Canberra, Simonov says that while “we are all in flux, we are at war,” the work group has become “part of my identity. I believe that this is one of the places where I am most needed.” He says his connection with the group is a way to “internalise” this war. “Some people hide from it in drinking, some engage in actual support of the war such as mutual killing, some burn their passports in front of embassies. I am an environmental activist and researcher, and UWEC is my attempt to apply my competences to help address and confront the war’s impacts. So while the war is on and its impacts are acute, this is my station of duty.”

In the first days of the war, Vasyliuk’s home, the Ukrainian town of Vasylkiv near Kyiv, played a decisive role in the war: outgunned residents fought off Russian troops, preventing them from capturing the town’s military airbase, thus keeping the Ukrainian capital safe. Many of those who died in combat were ordinary citizens, not professional soldiers. Vasyliuk says that although most Ukrainians “now categorically have cut all ties with Russia,” the bonds with the Russian members of the work group, most of whom now live outside of Russia, are strong. “I feel sad



that Putin has created conditions in which they not only became exiles but also have to fight against their own country for justice and dignity.”

Tuning into UWEC’s weekly editorial meetings has been a herculean task for Vasyliuk. Air-raid sirens sound practically every day. Russian rockets have often rained down on his city. He remembers the time when massive airstrikes plunged his city into darkness, forcing him to interrupt the meeting.

“When the rockets are flying, the power plants in Ukraine are turned off to reduce possible damage, so there can be spontaneous power cuts.” Juggling his work and environmental activism with daily television appearances and only a couple hours of electricity each day, is extremely stressful, he admits. But he says he can remember only two times in more than six months when he could not connect with the weekly work group meetings. The group is important to him, he says. “This is a team of professionals who are well versed in what they talk about, and it is a team of very sincere, positive people. I hope that I can shake hands with my colleagues one day.” 

Isabelle de Pommereau is a journalist and reporter. Originally from France, she is based in Frankfurt and works as a correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Deutsche Welle* and *Alternatives Economiques*.