

Fair Observer

Monthly



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Fair Observer^o

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The Global Climate Crisis Is the New Frontier of Justice

Andreas Rechkemmer
January 4, 2022

Ultimately, the climate agenda is a matter of global justice and survival.

These past two years have made the international community finally realize that complex global challenges and crises will not go away easily and are likely to become the norm rather than the exception in this turbulent 21st century.

First, the COVID-19 pandemic is obviously far from over. While global vaccine distribution continues to be spotty and a matter of economic and political privilege rather than equality and fairness, new variants of the virus such as Omicron continue to emerge and suggest that the largest global health crisis in at least a century is here to stay for the foreseeable future.

It is tragic that the shortsighted, irresponsible attitude to just and equitable global vaccine distribution has now become the root cause for a seemingly infinite loop of viral mutations and spread. Indeed, the policies that are adopted by some countries allow new variants to incubate where vaccines are scarce, only to soon boomerang back to nations that are hoarding doses and patents alike.

Second, the rapidly deteriorating situation, the stunning collapse of the status quo and public order, and the ongoing humanitarian and human rights crisis in Afghanistan remind us of the inherent vulnerability and fragility of the international order and its institutions. Afghanistan is but one example of a fundamental shift in global and regional geopolitics and balance of power that is now ubiquitous. The consequence is that human security and justice seem to become even more disposable than before.

Third, the 6th Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) affirmed that the global climate crisis is not only real and impactful but certain to increase, perhaps exponentially, and become even much more destructive, disruptive and deadly than previously projected.

Keeping the Goal Alive

At the same time, the COP26 climate summit in Glasgow reinforced the widespread fear that it is increasingly unlikely that the 1.5°C goal sealed in the Paris Agreement — perhaps even the 2°C fallback position — can still be reached, meaning that unimaginable threats like mega heatwaves, floods, droughts, hurricanes and blizzards, food crises and famines, mass migration and violent conflicts are to be expected to rise throughout this century.

COP26, unfortunately, was more of the same: cynical delegations of certain industrialized countries, as well as ruthless fossil fuel lobbyists, coerced poor countries already hit hard by climate change into a defensive mode and dictated a watered-down compromise that is far from adequate. Despite some mitigation pundits — typically white, male and Western — praising COP26 for “keeping the 1.5-degree goal alive,” the point is not about what’s hypothetically feasible but is very much about what has been done and continues to be done to this world’s poor, marginalized, underdeveloped, disenfranchised and remote people?

Much of the Conference of Parties process carries the handwriting of neoliberalism and neocolonial rule. If those people in the South Pacific, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and elsewhere count, then why has the 2009 promise of COP15 in Copenhagen to make \$100 billion in support of adaptation needs available still not been met, even to 50%?

Why do the world’s worst greenhouse gas emitters still refuse to pay a single penny for the loss and damage to developing nations that they are responsible for? How dare wealthy carbon-emitting countries refuse to commit to immediate

and drastic emission reductions knowing that their selfishness will kill millions of people, wipe out entire species and make much of this planet uninhabitable?

See a pattern? What COVID-19, Afghanistan and climate policy as a global phenomenon have in common is the toxic mix of short-sightedness, selfishness and ruthlessness with which international solidarity, collective action and the noble cause of pursuing equality, dignity and justice in international relations are being sacrificed for short-term gain, dominance and privilege.

Forty years of largely unregulated capitalism, economic globalization and neoliberal rule have not furthered the spirit and goals of the UN Charter. They have ruined our planet, its ecosystems and habitats, and left humanity in a state of shock, turmoil and disintegration — closer to what Hobbes’ “Leviathan” described as the state of nature.

International Threat

By the way, climate change adds to other global risks and threats: It is intersectional, cross-cutting and compounding. Zoonoses, and therefore epidemics and pandemics, are on the rise also because of changing climates, temperatures, precipitation, humidity, biomes and expanding human habitats. Wars such as those in Sudan, Yemen and Syria have been precipitated by climate change, desertification, water shortage, crop failure and hunger — as is forced migration as a mass phenomenon. The list goes on.

We simply can no longer afford a business-as-usual approach or even a moderately progressive approach, let alone a backward approach. This century of complex crises requires a whole new type of global action and response unlike anything before it because peace, security, prosperity and statehood are at risk globally. New, innovative and disruptive legal, economic and political tools are needed, paired with technological advances, ethical and sustainable investments, social movements and large-scale behavioral change.

Ultimately, the climate agenda — and with it, many other issues of global concern — is a matter of global justice and survival. Measures and instruments must be atoned to yield the safety and well-being of the poor, the marginalized, the disenfranchised and the underserved. The resilience of the weak will determine the fate of the whole. If that is the case, humanity — and alongside it, other species, ecosystems and the planet — will benefit as a whole. If it isn’t, today’s hubris, ignorance and selfishness will come back as a mighty boomerang, much like Omicron, to haunt many wealthy nations.

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For Vladimir Putin, Survival Is All That Matters

Ian McCredie
January 5, 2022

In today’s Russia, there is no grand plan for the restoration of tsarist greatness or even the USSR.

In a recent article on Fair Observer titled, “Making Sense of Vladimir Putin’s Long Game,” Atul Singh and Glenn Carle make the case that Russia’s president has an overarching plan to bring back the tsarist empire. They contend that Putin has thought deeply about strategy and tactics and is influenced by Russian history, philosophy and the Orthodox Church in devising his actions. They assert that Putin’s dream is to restore modern-day Russia to its historic greatness and global power.

The authors imply that the same impulses motivate the Russian people, and that the

president is leading a popular movement. Nothing could be further from the truth. Putin is an opportunist, a kleptomaniac, a thug and a mafia boss. If he were leading a popular movement, he would allow free elections. But he does not, preferring killing, poisoning and imprisoning anyone who dares to stand against him. Vladimir Putin is motivated only by survival.

Restoring Greatness

The current crisis revolves around Ukraine, which Putin contends is not only an integral part of Russia but more resonantly the site of the original Kingdom of Rus and the wellspring of the Russian peoples. Incidentally, the word “Rus” is cognate with “rower” and most likely refers to the Vikings who came to the region from present-day Sweden in long boats. In 882, Kyiv was taken by Prince Oleg who established the first Rus dynasty.

This conquest is embedded in Russian consciousness, and many Russians consider Kyiv and the surrounding lands as an essential part of the motherland. However, over a long and complicated history, Ukraine has had many different rulers. For generations, Ukraine and Russia have had separate identities, and even Joseph Stalin, at the end of World War II, insisted that Ukraine was independent and should be granted separate membership with a vote at the UN. Most Ukrainians have always longed for independence from Moscow’s rule.

A stronger influence on Putin’s and many Russians’ thinking is the humiliation wrought by the Germans in 1917 with the enforcement of the Brest Litovsk Treaty. In 1917, Vladimir Lenin was determined to get Russia out of the Great War at any price. The Germans exacted crushing terms and took the Baltic states, Ukraine and Belarus from Russia. It was a disaster.

Fast forward to 2022, and the borders of that treaty are almost identical to the current borders of NATO, plus Ukraine and Belarus. If Ukraine were to join NATO (or the EU), then from Putin’s point of view, Moscow would be back at

its lowest point of the past 200 years and, worse, Germany would have prevailed after all.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union still actively haunting the Kremlin’s collective consciousness — President Putin called it the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century” — many Russians have sympathy for the contention that the West has taken unfair advantage of Russia’s weakness and betrayed alleged promises made to Mikhail Gorbachev at the end of the Cold War regarding NATO’s eastward expansion. Putin is naturally determined that the final act — Ukraine’s absorption into the West — does not happen on his watch.

What is more, he thinks he has identified an emotional, nationalistic issue which he can use to divert the Russian population from his failures. But Russia is, in fact, on the back foot, trying to avoid another humiliation, not restoring its greatness.

Weakness and Decline

Looking south, Russia has lost many of the territories it gained during the wars with Turkey and Iran in the 19th century. Armenia and Azerbaijan have not joined NATO, but Georgia would like to. Here too, Putin is trying to fend off more humiliation.

Moving east, the Taliban victory in Afghanistan is another disaster for the Kremlin. One of the main reasons, or the least bad option at the time, for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was to halt the rise of militant Islam that threatened to infect the Muslim states of the USSR, principally Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. You can bet Moscow is worried sick about the effect on its near abroad and the possibility of the Chechens, Dagestanis and Tartars rising up again with Taliban support.

Even farther east, Putin is on dangerous ground. Just over 8 million live in the Far East Federal District, which, at nearly 7 million square kilometers, makes up over 40% of Russia’s territory. The regional capital Vladivostok sits on land taken from China in 1860 and is regarded by

Beijing as one of the lost territories, along with Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. Migration from China into the region has been an issue for decades, prompting nationalist nightmares of a Chinese takeover.

Putin may be cozying up to China, but from a position of weakness. Russia cannot cope with a hostile Beijing that may eventually want to recover territory, or more. Putin may be pursuing friendship and alliances with China but he is dancing to Xi Jinping's tune.

Vladimir Putin's failures have led Russia into economic and national decline. The population is shrinking and is projected to drop to 135 million in 2050 from today's 146 million. Russia's GDP is about \$1.7 trillion, lower than Italy's and minuscule compared to the US at over \$20 trillion. The economy is wholly dependent on oil and gas exports in a decarbonizing world. Moreover, it is laden with punitive sanctions. There is not one single Russian company that has any sort of global presence to rival the likes of Coca-Cola, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Volkswagen, Samsung or Rolls Royce.

Still Dangerous

Much is made of the bungled reform of the Russian economy after the fall of the USSR, but Putin has now been in power for over 20 years and has done nothing — in fact, worse than nothing — to rectify matters. Instead, he has enriched himself and his henchmen enormously. Putin is now one of the richest men in the world, with critics estimating a fortune of some \$200 billion. Meanwhile, GDP per capita in Russia is a little over \$10,000 per annum, ranked 81st in the world by the World Bank, below China.

Putin has one overriding motivation — to stay in power. His crimes are so enormous that he fears terrible retribution should he ever lose his grip. Like all totalitarian dictators, he knows that he can only be replaced by whoever kills him.

Putin has to play a skillful hand. He is diverting attention to overseas adventures and playing on Russian emotions. Moscow cannot possibly hope to win a conventional war, being

massively outgunned by the West. Even the UK outspends Russia on defense, and Russia's \$48 billion military budget is puny compared to the \$768 billion allocated by Washington.

But Putin is still dangerous; he plays dirty and asymmetrically, using cyberattacks, election interference, irregular forces and acts of terrorism. Even a dismembered and impoverished state can wreak havoc. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and Iran's missile attacks on Saudi oil facilities are recent examples.

Russia is in a weakened state and becoming ever weaker. There is no grand plan for the restoration of imperial greatness or even the USSR. The game is survival and Putin's own skin — and fortune. The West can play this game too. We have long experience of dealing with bullies, megalomaniacs and totalitarians. China too is watching carefully, and President Xi knows where his advantage lies.

***Ian McCredie** is a former senior British foreign service official.

Is Afghanistan Going to Break Apart?

Tabish Forugh & Atul Singh
January 10, 2022

The Pashtun-led Taliban are ripping up Afghanistan's fragile social contract by centralizing all power and creating conditions for civil war, disintegration and spillover into neighboring regions.

After the shambolic US withdrawal, Afghanistan faces an existential problem: Its very existence as a state is now in question. Most people forget that Afghanistan is a patchwork of disparate ethnic groups and remote villages. Unlike Germany or Japan, it is not and

has never been a nation-state. Since the 1880s, Afghanistan has been a state based on a loose coalition of poorly governed provinces, forgotten villages and marginalized ethnic groups.

A Chequered Past

For more than a century, different power centers in Afghanistan have had some sort of representation in the central government, even if they often got leftovers from the dominant Pashtun ruling class. This class was repressive and often bloody. Abdur Rahman Khan, the Iron Amir, conducted genocide against the Hazaras in the 1890s, erased a substantial part of the cultural heritage of Nuristanis by forcing them to convert to Islam, and confiscated fertile lands of Tajiks and Uzbeks in the north only to redistribute them to Pashtun tribes. Even a modernist king like Amanulla pursued the Iron Amir's policies. Yet, at the helm of power, there was generally a servant's seat at the table for other ethnic groups such as the Tajiks, the Uzbeks and even the Hazaras. This seat at the table along with the backing of superpowers, first the British and then the Soviets, kept the state and the political order intact.

When the Soviets invaded in 1979, the Pashtun-dominated order of Afghanistan gradually crumbled. Ideology trumped ethnicity, and groups like the Tajiks, the Uzbeks and the Hazaras rose in prominence. Much credit for this goes to Babrak Karmal, the president of Afghanistan from December 1979 to November 1986. When the Soviets withdrew in February 1989, this order collapsed. The battle-hardened mujahideen groups fought a brutal civil war in which Tajik leaders Burhanuddin Rabbani, leader of the Jamiat Party, and Ahmad Shah Massoud, known as the "Lion of Panjshir," held the upper hand.

The Pashtuns struck back through the Taliban and took over Kabul in 1996. They exercised power over most of the country while Massoud was leading the resistance to the Taliban government from the Panjshir Valley. He was killed in Afghanistan two days before the 9/11

attacks in 2001 by an al-Qaeda suicide squad masquerading as journalists on the pretext of filming an interview. Even after his death, the resistance to the Taliban continued and Massoud's fighters contributed heavily to the ground fighting that drove out the Taliban from much of the country, including Kabul.

In the five years of Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, the Pashtuns returned as the dominant military and political group. They ran an autocratic regime, marginalizing other ethnic groups and suppressing opponents. Hence, resistance to the Taliban was persistent and ferocious in many parts of the country.

The Post 9/11 Experience

The 9/11 attacks led to the American intervention and the creation of a new democratic state. Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, Turkmens and other marginalized communities became active participants in the political process. Despite its fragility and flaws, the post-2001 political order and its democratic components offered a unique opportunity for Afghanistan to transform into a functioning polity and society.

The governing Pashtun ethnonationalist elites, their non-Pashtun partners, including conservative warlords, and the reemergence of a Pashtun-led insurgency squandered the resources and opportunities that otherwise might have consolidated a civil and democratic political order.

The Taliban's forceful return to Kabul last August ended the post-2001 American-backed constitutional order. Today, chaos prevails and a fanatical Pashtun clergy has a vice-like grip on every aspect of Afghanistan's social, political and economic life. Furthermore, the Taliban are fanatical Muslims with ethnofascist tendencies and a profound apathy for Afghanistan's ethnic, cultural and political diversity.

In recent months, many analysts have been very charitable to the Taliban. In an interview with Fair Observer, political analyst Anas Altikriti said, "The reality is the Taliban have won and in today's world, they have the right, the

absolute right to govern.” If the right to govern comes from conquest, then Altikriti is right. Lest we forget, the Taliban have yet to win an election or demonstrate that they are actually capable of governing. Moreover, they are rigid, dictatorial and revanchist. An inclusive political formula that represents Afghanistan’s mosaic-like diversity is impossible so long as the Taliban remain exclusively in charge.

The legitimate aspirations of non-Pashtun ethnic groups such as the Tajiks, the Uzbeks, the Hazaras, the Turkmens and others are now dissolving in the acid of Sunni fundamentalism. The Taliban have marginalized them completely. These groups have no seat at the table, no representation in the decision-making process and have to live under the barrel of the Taliban gun.

In 2022, this situation is untenable. Non-Pashtun ethnic groups are fed up and want control over their destiny. Many Pashtun technocrats, including the former president, Hamid Karzai, have switched sides and are part of the ruling dispensation. They claim the Taliban are the source of stability and have formed the only organization capable of ruling the country. However, they forget an important point. Marginalized groups in Afghanistan are chafing under Pashtun hegemony. If the Taliban-led Pashtuns cling to their unilateral rule and convert Afghanistan into a centralized state, the country will indubitably and inevitably break apart.

Federalism Is the Way Forward

To avoid a bloody partition along ethnic lines or a 1990s style civil war, Afghanistan needs a federal political system. Afghanistan is not France or the United Kingdom. It cannot be run out of a grand capital no matter how powerful the ruling class is. Like Switzerland and the United States, Afghanistan is an extremely diverse country with a history of local autonomy and a glorious tradition of bloody rebellion as the British, the Soviets and the Americans discovered at their cost.

Therefore, the balance of power in any political system that can work must lie with local, not national government. Such a system could turn Afghanistan’s disparate ethnic groups into building blocks of a new federal state and avoid the looming bloodbath due to the Taliban’s autocratic rule.

With China and Russia taking center stage, Afghanistan is increasingly forgotten. That is as risky as it is unfortunate. Conflict in Afghanistan could spill over into South and Central Asia, threatening global peace and security. Afghanistan needs dialogue between different groups ready to hammer out a territorial, judicial, and administrative settlement that leads to a functional union. Only then can we expect the fragile state of Afghanistan to survive.

***Tabish Forugh** is a policy analyst and a former Reagan-Fascell Democracy fellow of the National Endowment for Democracy. **Atul Singh** is the founder, CEO and editor-in-chief of Fair Observer.

Former Austrian President Heinz Fischer Talks to Fair Observer

Kourosh Ziabari & Heinz Fischer
January 12, 2022

In this edition of The Interview, former Austrian President Heinz Fischer talks about COVID-19, the refugee crisis and more.

Austria is known as a stable Central European country that is the capital of classical music. It is also the home of prominent figures in the world of science and philosophy, including Sigmund Freud and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

In 2014, Austria had the lowest unemployment rate in the European Union. That

trend declined in the years that followed, but the economy remained largely competitive. Austria is also one of the top 10 countries with the fewest number of unemployed young people among member states of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Austrians will head to the polls later this year for elections. The incumbent president, Alexander Van der Bellen, remains undecided over running again, but he is eligible for a second term in office. In the 2016 election, he defeated Norbert Hofer of the Freedom Party of Austria, thwarting his rival's attempt to become the first far-right head of state in the EU.

Recently identified as the world's fifth-most peaceful country in the 2021 Global Peace Index, Austria has seen substantial economic fallout due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The government's decision to introduce mandatory vaccination and hefty penalties for those who do not comply has stirred controversy.

Heinz Fischer, the president of Austria between 2004 and 2016, is a seasoned lawyer who had a long career in politics. He took his first step toward becoming a national leader in early 1963, when he served as a legal assistant to the vice president of the Austrian parliament. He later became a member of parliament himself and then served as the minister of science, before leading the national council, the lower house of parliament, from 1990 to 2002. He is currently the co-chairman of the Ban Ki-moon Centre for Global Citizens in Vienna.

I spoke to Dr. Fischer about the COVID-19 pandemic, the refugee crisis in Europe, the Iran nuclear talks in the Austrian capital and more.

Kouros Ziabari: Mr. President, according to Statistics Austria and the Austrian Institute for Economic Research approximations, the total fiscal costs of the COVID-19 pandemic for Austria amount to roughly €70 billion [\$79 billion] in the 2020-22 period. As of May 2021, the government had earmarked €37 billion for relief measures. Do you think this is a liability for the Austrian economy that may result in a

short- or mid-term recession, or is it a deficit that can be made up for soon? Has the government been able to handle the economic burden of the pandemic efficiently?

Heinz Fischer: When COVID-19 reached Austria and the first lockdown became mandatory, I was surprised to hear the finance minister from the conservative party announcing that he would compensate the economic burden with “whatever it costs.” This was unusual language for a conservative minister of finance.

All in all, the government's relief measures were crucial for reducing Austria's economic damage of the pandemic. The Institute for Economic Research as well as our National Bank claim that Austria will be able to go back to the path of economic growth; this will reduce unemployment and keep recession lower than a traditional conservative finance policy of strict zero deficit would have done. But the performance of the government fighting against COVID-19 was less successful.

Ziabari: It was reported that the government is planning to introduce mandatory inoculation starting in early 2022 and that those holding out will face fines of up to \$4,000. Of course, vaccination is the most effective way of combating the effects of the coronavirus. But does a vaccine mandate and handing out substantial penalties not go against democratic practice in a country known for its democratic credentials? You are no longer in office, but as an observer, do you support the decision?

Fischer: This is one of the hottest or even the hottest topic of current political debates in Austria. To answer your question promptly and directly: Yes, I believe it is necessary and legitimate to introduce mandatory inoculation — with justified exemptions — for a limited period of time in order to protect our population and our country in the best possible way. Other European countries start thinking in a similar way.

It is not a one-issue question. You have, on the one hand, the obligation of the government to

protect basic rights and individual freedom and, on the other hand, the obligation of the government to protect the health and life of its population. And it is obvious that there are different, even antagonistic basic rights, namely individual freedom on the one side and health insurance and fighting a pandemic on the other. It is not an either/or but an as-well-as situation. The government must take care of two responsibilities simultaneously, meaning that the democratically-elected parliament has to seek and find the balance between two values and two responsibilities.

If I remember correctly, a similar situation existed already two generations ago, when the danger of a smallpox pandemic justified an obligatory smallpox vaccination until the World Health Organization proclaimed the global eradication of the disease in 1980.

Ziabari: Moving on from the pandemic, Austria was one of the countries hugely affected by the 2015-16 refugee crisis in Europe. When the government of former Chancellor Sebastian Kurz came to power, it took a hard line on migration and made major electoral gains as a result. Now, with the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, a new wave of westward migration appears to be in the making. Does Austria have a moral and human responsibility to protect asylum-seekers fleeing war and persecution, or should the responsibility be outsourced to other nations for certain reasons?

Fischer: My clear answer is, yes, Austria has a moral and human responsibility to protect asylum-seekers on the basis of international law and the international sharing of responsibilities.

Of course, we must discuss the numbers, the conditions, the possibilities, etc. of the respective country. But immediately saying no, we will not take women from Afghanistan, or we will not participate in burden-sharing of the European Union with the excuse that earlier governments many years ago already accepted a substantial

share of refugees, is not acceptable. One cannot outsource humanity and moral duties.

Ziabari: How is Austria coping with the effects of climate change and its human rights implications? While the average global surface temperature rise from 1880 to 2012 has been 0.85° Celsius, it has been 2° Celsius for Austria. Austria's target for 2030 is to cut greenhouse gas emissions not covered by the EU Emissions Trading System by 36%, but the International Energy Agency has forecast it may only achieve a 27% benchmark. Will Austria need external help to overcome the challenge? Are you positive it can fulfill the EU expectations?

Fischer: I do not think that Austria needs external help to fulfill its climate commitments. I do, however, think it is urgently necessary for the Austrian government to find a way forward in combating the climate crisis, a way that does not only cut greenhouse gas emissions, but which will also help to achieve societal consensus on the measures that are to be taken. This means the government must also be supporting social coherence.

Combating climate change is a multi-stakeholder effort and includes a just transition to clean energy, rapid phase-out of coal and end to international fossil fuel finance. In Austria in 2018, already 77% of electricity came from renewable energy sources and the number is constantly rising. While building a sustainable and climate-friendly future, we must, however, not forget to create green jobs, uphold human rights around the world and leave no one behind. I am positive that Austria will fulfill its EU expectations because it has to. There is only one planet, and we have to protect it with all means.

Ziabari: Let's also touch upon some foreign policy issues. The former US president, Donald Trump, was rebuked by European politicians for alienating allies and spoiling partnerships with friendly, democratic nations and embracing repressive leaders instead. But

Austria-US relations remained largely steady, and despite Trump's protectionist trade policies, the United States imported a whopping \$11.7 billion in goods and services from Austria. Do the elements that undergirded robust Austria-US connections still exist with a transition of power in the White House and a change of government in Austria?

Fischer: Yes, the relations between Austria and the United States have a long history and stable basis. Austria has not forgotten the prominent role of the US in the fight against Hitler. It has not forgotten the Marshall Plan — 75 years ago — and other ways of American support after World War II. The United States was a lighthouse of democracy in the 20th century, including the time of Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Franco, Horthy, etc. in Europe.

Of course, the Vietnam War, the political and economic pressure on countries in Latin America, the false arguments as the basis for a military invasion in Iraq and the heritage of racism have cast shadows on US policy. But having said all this, it is also true that the US has strengths in many fields of foreign policy and good relations between the US and Europe are a stabilizing factor in the world.

I would like to add that Donald Trump was and still is a great challenge for democracy in the US and a danger for the positive image of the United States in Europe and elsewhere.

Ziabari: Are you concerned about the tensions simmering between Russia and the West over Ukraine? Should it be assumed that Russia's threats of deploying intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe are serious, or are the Russians bluffing to test the West's resolve, particularly now that one of Europe's influential leaders, Angela Merkel, has departed? Are Russia's complaints about NATO's exploitation of Ukraine to expand eastwards and the ongoing discrimination against Ukraine's Russian-speaking populace valid?

Fischer: Yes, I am concerned about the growing conflict between Russia and the West, and this conflict has a long history. World War II was not started by Russia, the Soviet Union, but brutally against them.

After World War II, there was a bipolar world developing between the East and the West, between Moscow and Washington, between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. After the fall of the Iron Curtain and the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new situation emerged. Gorbachev was honestly interested in a more peaceful world. He was accepting over the reunification of Germany and accepted the former Warsaw Pact member East Germany to become a member of NATO.

But the deal was that Russia's security should not be reduced, and other parts of the former Soviet Union should not become part of NATO. And, in this respect, Ukraine is an extremely sensitive issue. It is already a while ago, but let's remember how sensitive the United States reacted to the so-called Cuban Missile Crisis — the stationing of Russian weapons near the US. NATO weapons at the border of Russia are not supportive of peace and stability.

Ziabari: German Chancellor Angela Merkel stepped down after 16 years in power. Aside from being referred to as the de facto leader of the EU, she was praised for her leadership during the eurozone debt crisis and her role in mustering global solidarity to fight COVID. What do you think about the legacy she has left behind? In terms of relations with Austria, do you think her differences with the government of Sebastian Kurz on immigration, Operation Sophia and the EU budget blighted the perception that Austrians had of her?

Fischer: Angela Merkel was a great leader, crucial for Germany, crucial for Europe, crucial for human rights, crucial for peace. I admired and liked her. When former Austrian Chancellor Kurz and former German Chancellor Merkel shared different views, Merkel was, in my opinion, mostly on the right and Kurz on the wrong side.

She was “Mrs. Stability and Reliability” in a positive sense.

And her legacy? She belongs with Konrad Adenauer, Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt to the four great German leaders after World War II. Under her leadership, Germany was the most stable nation in the European Union and her relationship with Austria was a mirror to her character, namely balanced, friendly and correct.

Ziabari: In the past couple of decades, Europe has been the scene of multiple terror attacks with hundreds of casualties, including the November 2020 shooting in Vienna, which European officials and media unanimously blamed on Islamist terrorism and political Islam. What are the stumbling blocks to the normalization of relations between secular Europe and its Muslim community? Is this civilizational, generational clash destined to last perennially, or are you optimistic that the two discourses can come to a co-existence?

Fischer: The melting of different nationalities, cultures and religions is always a difficult task. The Austro-Hungarian monarchy finally collapsed because of unsolved conflicts between European nationalities.

Conflicts become even more difficult when they include different religions and ethnicities. We can say that the conflict between our German-speaking, Czech-speaking, Hungarian- or Polish-speaking grandparents is more or less overcome, but the conflict between Christians and Muslims will last longer. We can study this in the United States. But it is my personal hope that multi-religious integration is possible in the long run in a fair and democratic society.

Ziabari: Talks to revive the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, are underway in the Austrian capital. Are you hopeful that the moribund agreement can be brought back to life? Do you see the determination to save the accord in the Iranian side and the other parties, for the benefit of international peace and security?

Fischer: I was very happy when the 2015 JCPOA was signed between Iran, the United States, China and several European countries. And I believe it was one of the very wrong and unwise decisions of Donald Trump to withdraw from that agreement. To revitalize this agreement is, as we can observe these days, very difficult.

As you asked me about my opinion, I am inclined to a more pessimistic outlook, because the present Iranian leaders are more hardliners than the last government and President Biden is under heavy pressure and has not much room for compromises. On the other hand, I recently met a member of the Iranian negotiation team in Vienna and, to my surprise, he was rather optimistic.

One of my wishes for 2022 is a reasonable and fair solution for the JCPOA negotiations and a détente between Iran and the Western world. But the chances for a positive outcome seem to be limited at the moment.

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The Real Message of Adam McKay’s “Don’t Look Up”

Peter Isackson
January 18, 2022

The year’s most talked about movie focuses as much on cultural decline as climate change and signals the death of satire.

Released just before Christmas on Netflix, Adam McKay’s “Don’t Look Up” instantly became the most talked about movie of 2021. The professional film critics immediately weighed in, mostly with unfavorable reviews. By the following week, the reviews

were being reviewed. “Don’t Look Up” had taken on the status of an event rather than a piece of entertainment or a work of art.

The reason for this curious phenomenon, similar to what occurred for the movie “Bonnie and Clyde” 55 years ago, lies in the fact that, while capturing the mood of an epoch focused on the very real possibility of the collapse of civilization, as a work of art, the movie is visibly flawed in a number of ways that no professional critic could ignore. Given McKay’s track record and the star power he brought together in the case, the critics felt that the film failed to live up to its advertised promise.

When the viewership statistics began appearing, the disconnect between critical assessment and the public’s appreciation became flagrant. “Don’t Look Up” broke the record for Netflix viewership for a new release. The gap in judgment between the critics and the public itself became a topic for discussion in the media.

Some may see this as a demonstration of the inexorable loss of prestige of movie reviewers in the era of social media. Once respected pillars of popular journalism, most consumers now see cinema critics as irrelevant. This has something to do with the ambiguity of cinema itself. Traditionally consumed in a dark movie theater as a collective experience amid a responsive audience, most people now watch their movies at home on television. The distinction between movies and TV has become increasingly blurred.

Getting Talked About

No one doubts that audiences were drawn to the film principally through the appeal of the star-studded cast featuring, among others, Leonardo DiCaprio, Jennifer Lawrence, Meryl Streep, Ariana Grande and Cate Blanchett. But there may be another cultural factor that complements the roster of stars: the power of the traditional and non-traditional news media. That includes the uncountable bevy of pundits on social media. Commentary on the news has become another form of entertainment, thanks in part to its much lower production costs than Hollywood movies.

Once the critics had done their job, most outlets in the US treated the film’s release and reception as a news story in and of itself. The media began talking about the movie, no longer in terms of its artistic success or failure, but as a kind of psy-op designed to sensitize the public to the urgency of combating climate change. Anyone with access to Netflix felt obliged to watch it.

By becoming not only a much-viewed work of entertainment but more significantly an object of endless discussion in the media, the movie achieved the director’s real goal: getting talked about. The attention the media is still giving “Don’t Look Up,” weeks after its Netflix release, reveals more about the state of US culture than it does about the movie itself. It highlights the paradox, specifically targeted in the movie’s satire, of the public’s addiction to the media’s blather and its growing distrust of all institutions, including the very media to which the public is addicted.

Were the Critics Right?

In the case of “Bonnie and Clyde,” released in 1967, Newsweek’s Joe Morgenstern “initially panned [the movie], only to come back and proclaim it (wisely) a great movie,” according to David Ansen (a later Newsweek critic and a friend of mine). Morgenstern penned a second review celebrating Penn’s accomplishment. I’m not sure I agree with David about it being a great movie, but “Bonnie and Clyde” became such a popular success that Morgenstern had to sit down and rethink the cultural conditions that made it, if not a great movie, then at least a movie for its time. And what a time it was! 1967 is remembered as the year of the “summer of love,” a propitious moment for any cultural artifact that could be perceived as being “for its time.” More significantly, “Bonnie and Clyde” became a trend-setter for the next generation of filmmakers.

Can we compare our era with the ebullition of the sixties? Can “Don’t Look Up” pretend to be the “Bonnie and Clyde” of the 21st century?

Because of COVID-19 and Donald Trump, 2020 and 2021 may be remembered by future generations as two years as significant as 1967, 1968 (assassinations of MLK and RFK, “mai 68”) or 1969 (Woodstock). Then again, future generations may simply remember these two years as a period of gradual but certain decline marked by a debilitating indifference to the impending crisis that “Don’t Look Up” wants us to respond to.

McKay intended “Don’t Look Up” to be a satire. The mood of the movie is clearly satirical, but some critics noticed that the plot and characterization easily broke the mood, slipping dangerously at times into parody. True satire treats a serious subject seriously before introducing the elements of ironic perspective that subtly or unsubtly undermine the characters’ pretention of seriousness. For a director, this means controlling both the timing and the gap between the sober and the comic.

Hollywood satire, which always employs humor, has traditionally fallen into two broad categories: dramatic and comic. The Marx Brothers were specialized in comic satire. It achieved its effects through immediate exaggeration of recognizable social behaviors, almost always including the relationship between a woman from the American upper class (Margaret Dumont), an upstart male gold digger (Groucho) and a penniless southern European immigrant trying to make it in WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant) America (Chico).

In this Marxian (rather than Marxist) world, the three brothers in real life represented three different types of cultural marginality. Chico’s character comprised both Italians and Jews; the mute Harpo represented an extreme form of marginality, combining the handicapped and the poet (and natural musician). He even had his place in the poor black community (Harpo’s “Who dat man?” in “A Day at the Races”). All three of the Marx Brothers embodied, in contrasting ways, characters bent on destabilizing a self-satisfied majority that could neither understand them nor integrate them into their

putative order. The very existence of the three non-conformists challenged the legitimacy of the institutions they interacted with.

Comic vs. Dramatic Satire

The Marx Brothers may have produced raucous comedy intended to provoke non-stop laughter, but their humor was built on a foundation of social satire. Audiences didn’t necessarily think about it in that way. They didn’t exit the movie theater reflecting deeply on the presumption, injustice and cluelessness of the ruling class. But the worlds and situations the Marx Brothers interacted with skewered a range of institutional targets: political and military (“Duck Soup”), academic (“Horsefeathers”), the arts (“A Night at the Opera”) or even medical (“A Day at the Races”). In so doing, they subtly altered the audience’s perception of the class system in the US and some of its most prestigious institutions. All of these movies appeared during the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Like Jonathan Swift in “Gulliver’s Travels,” the Marx Brothers created parallel worlds, clearly differentiated from our own, in which recognizable social and transactional behavior became exaggerated to the point of producing immediate comic effects that highlighted the illogic and even injustice of the real world. Like the Marx Brothers, Charlie Chaplin, W.C. Fields and Laurel and Hardy produced variants on the same principle of comic satire. Each created and gave life to distinctive marginal personalities, at odds with respectable society and usually defeated by it.

Dramatic satire has in common with comic satire the aim of making its points by producing laughter. But it follows a radically different set of rules. Instead of throwing absurdity straight in the face of the audience by staging wildly exaggerated behavior designed to challenge and upset the veneer of seriousness attributed to what is presented as “normal society,” dramatic satire first takes the time to create the audience’s belief in a realistic situation that will later be challenged by an unexpected event or external force. It turns

around an anomaly that erupts to provoke reactions from a range of characters unprepared for the surprise.

In other words, dramatic satire gives deadpan seriousness a head start. It is the gap between the nature of the anomalous event and the quality of the characters' reaction that produces what comes across not as the pretext for a joke, but as unintentional humor. In the history of cinema, the most perfect example of dramatic satire — and the most appropriate to compare with “Don't Look Up” — is Stanley Kubrick's 1964 film, “Dr. Strangelove” or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb,” the archetypal doomsday satire. McKay was acutely aware of that when he made “Don't Look Up.”

Kubrick's drama literally turns around the plot device of a Soviet “doomsday machine” that, if triggered, will destroy human life on the surface of the earth. The plot begins in total seriousness, like any dramatic movie. The key to its brilliance as satire is the gradual pace at which the exaggerated behavior of some of the characters unfolds. Playing their designated roles to the hilt, the politicians and generals become overtly comic when they go one step (and sometimes two or three) beyond what is reasonable.

There are several points in the first third of the movie where it becomes apparent to the viewer that they are watching a comedy. But this happens gradually and only through significant, but credible details in the dialogue, such as Brigadier General Ripper's obsession with “purity of essence.” As the plot develops, at key moments, the comedy can erupt at the highest level of absurdity, as when President Muffley interjects: “Gentlemen, you can't fight in here, this is the war room.” Such absurdly comic moments emerge logically, without ever undermining the fundamentally dramatic plot structure as it builds toward a final crescendo that will be followed by an instantaneous release.

Adam McKay's Compromise

McKay's script attempts to respect the same principle of dramatic satire as “Dr. Strangelove.”

The initial scenes reveal the introverted scientist (DiCaprio) and his research student (Lawrence) making the disquieting discovery of a comet certain to strike the earth within half a year. The impending catastrophe is fully confirmed before the audience can get a reasonable feeling for the characters. That is the movie's first glaring flaw. The apparent tension seems unjustified. The audience doesn't yet care enough about the characters to start seriously worrying about whether they or the earth they (and we) stand on will survive the comet's assault.

A quick transition leads us to the corridors of the White House in Washington, DC. We spend some time with the troubled scientists who are kept waiting before meeting President Orlean (Meryl Streep). She turns out to be a clever composite of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. There's even a gratuitous hint of a link to Barack Obama, the secret smoker.

The characters in “Dr. Strangelove” are each given the time to appear as reasonable, conscientious, professionally competent human beings. Their irrationality and moral failure only appear as they attempt to deal with the impending threat. In contrast, “Don't Look Up's” president and colleagues are simply the embodiments of the algorithm that now dominates US politics, aimed at winning elections. This is where the mood of the movie moves from satire to parody.

We then move to New York where a serious news bureau modeled after The New York Times and a daytime TV interview show demonstrate the same algorithmic principle predicated this time essentially on optimizing ratings. At this point, the spectacle of increasingly trivial behavior by all the establishment parties definitively takes over.

What follows is a dynamically edited series of acts and scenes that riff on the gap between the serious intentions of the scientists and the endless venality and psychological triviality of politicians, entertainers and techno-capitalists. The specific critique of institutions and the media is usually on target. But it too often appears to be an exercise of making fun of what is visible every

day in our media simply by duplicating its most consistent behaviors.

The Difficulty of Satirizing Hyperreality

In other words, McKay's parody suffers from the already hyperreal nature of what it seeks to critique. The culture it puts on display, already accessible in today's media, is too recognizable and predictable, in a certain sense, too true to (hyperreal) life. It may be a thankless task to try for comic effect by further exaggerating anything in the real world that is already so exaggerated in its triviality and cynical efficiency that on its own it tends to be laughable. McKay ends up faithfully reproducing a world that, through its media, endlessly parodies itself.

That may be what made the critics feel uncomfortable. The actors do their best to parody what it already a parody. The movie rarely achieves the sense of queasy discomfort satire normally seeks to inspire. "Dr. Strangelove" does so by slowly building that discomfort to a fever pitch. Kubrick shows his characters thinking, strategizing, trying to adapt to an unusual situation. McKay's characters too often appear to be reading from a script. We never get the impression that they are grappling with anything. Instead, they are playing out their algorithmically determined roles.

Perhaps the real lesson, worth being talked about, from "Don't Look Up" is that in a world so dominated by the hyperreality projected not just by our media but also by our politicians, technology gurus and even academics, true satire is no longer possible. When the media reaches the level of superficiality and sheer venality that it has achieved today, as revealed in every scene of "Don't Look Up," the link to reality in today's culture is too tenuous for effective political satire to be produced.

Hollywood Satire and Contemporary History

Over the past century, Hollywood has produced many successful and indeed unforgettable satires. They fall into a variety of styles and with a wide range of comic techniques. "Duck Soup" (Marx

Brothers), "Blazing Saddles" (Mel Brooks), "M*A*S*H" (Robert Altman), "Mulholland Drive" (David Lynch) and many others stand as great Hollywood satires that achieved their effect by creating largely unbelievable frameworks that become believable by virtue of the director's control of exaggeration, coupled with the capacity to build a coherent intricacy of contrasts and conflicts in the plotting.

"Don't Look Up" never quite makes up its mind about whether it wishes to embrace "Dr. Strangelove's" focused drama or the liberated wackiness of Mel Brooks. That may be why the critics found it to be an unsatisfying hybrid. In its defense, however, we should recognize — and future generations should note — that it does stand as an effective parody of the most predictable behavior of public figures incapable of responding to an existential crisis because they have been programmed according to a different set of algorithmic rules. For that reason, the film should be considered a resounding success. It has raised in the public forum the most troubling question concerning the climate crisis: that even our awareness of it cannot serve to find a solution. The system we are trying to save is built to resist anyone's saving it.

For all its cinematic quality, brilliant humor and critical success, "Dr. Strangelove" had no immediate impact on the arms race. Still, it is worth noting that when Ronald Reagan was elected president, sixteen years after the movie's release, as he was making the rounds of the federal government's installations, upon visiting the Pentagon he "asked the chief of staff to show him the war room of Dr. Strangelove." The Hollywood actor, who had spent plenty of time in his earlier career in sound studios, believed Kubrick's set was real.

Reagan's public anti-communist philosophy was not radically different from Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper's as detailed in "Dr. Strangelove." The man who, before his election, "had argued that the United States was falling behind the Soviets in the nuclear competition" personally initiated the negotiations that led to

the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), “the first treaty that required U.S. and Soviet/Russian reductions of strategic nuclear weapons.” Could it have been Reagan’s memory of the lessons of “Dr. Strangelove” that ultimately guided him towards that decision?

A Tale of Two Cold Wars

The original Cold War nuclear arms race Kubrick denounced in his movie is still going on to this day. Perhaps more than ever it can be triggered in a heartbeat. In contrast, climate change promises a slow agony, whose groans may already be discernible. America’s current president, Joe Biden, says he wants to rein it in but seems incapable of exercising any real leadership to achieve that goal.

At the time Kubrick was shooting “Dr. Strangelove,” John F. Kennedy was still president. In his first year of office, JFK called for the abolition of nuclear weapons “before they abolish us.” In the summer of 1963, he initiated the first nuclear test ban treaty. Four months later, he was successfully “abolished” himself in the streets of Dallas.

It appears clear now that, willingly or unwillingly, President Biden will accomplish little to limit the effects of climate change. Seeking to raise the stakes of the US rivalry with China and increasing the pressure on Russia over Ukraine in a spirit that sometimes resembles a new cold war, he has also made it abundantly clear that he has no intention of banishing nuclear weapons. In the first week of 2022, the White House affirmed the principle that “nuclear weapons—for as long as they continue to exist—should serve defensive purposes, deter aggression, and prevent war.”

The first Cold War ended in 1991 with the fall of the Soviet Union. The lesson of “Dr. Strangelove” no longer lives in any president’s memory. But can we suppose or perhaps even hope that a future president who happened to watch “Don’t Look Up” at the end of 2021 will, like Reagan, remember its message and dare, even decades later, to take some kind of serious

action to address it? That seems unlikely. As President Orlean pointed out, unless the end of the world is scheduled to take place before the next presidential or midterm election, there are more important things to attend to.

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Welcome to the Metaverse: The Peril and Potential of Governance

Benjamin Verdi
January 20, 2022

How will the metaverse shape the way we do business, the way we live our lives, the way we govern ourselves?

The final chapter of Don DeLillo’s epic 1997 novel “Underworld” has proven a prescient warning of the dangers of the digitized life and culture into which we’ve communally plunged headfirst. Yet no sentiment, no open question posed in his 800-page opus rings as ominously, or remains as unsettling today, as this: “Is cyberspace a thing within the world or is it the other way around? Which contains the other, and how can you tell for sure?”

Regrettably, people’s opinions on the metaverse currently depend on whether they view owning and operating a “digital self” through the lens of dystopia (“The Matrix”) or harmless fun (“Fortnite”). It is additionally unfortunate that an innovative space as dynamic and potentially revolutionary as the metaverse has become, in the public’s imagination, the intellectual property of one company.

But the fact that future users so readily associate the metaverse with Facebook is a temporary result of PR and a wave of talent migration, and will be replaced by firsthand

experiences gained through our exposure to the metaverse itself, and not a single firm's vision for it.

Meta Power

So, what does this all mean? How will the metaverse shape the way we do business, the way we live our lives, the way we govern ourselves? Who owns the metaverse? Why do we need it? Who will be in charge?

Taking a lead from this stellar primer, if we simply replace the word "metaverse" with the word "internet" wherever we see it, all of a sudden, its application and significance become easier to grasp. It also becomes clear that Facebook's rebranding as Meta is not as much a reference to the creation of the metaverse but more in line with the company's desire to become this new territory's most enthusiastic homesteaders. Facebook is not so much creating the metaverse as it is hoping — like every other firm and government should hope — that it won't be left behind in this new world.

As far as the metaverse's impact, its political implications might end up being its least transformative. In the United States, for instance, the digitization of political campaigning has carved a meandering path to the present that is too simplistically summed up thus: Howard Dean crawled so that Barack Obama could walk so that Donald Trump could run so that Joe Biden could drop us all off at No Malarkey Station.

Where this train goes next, both in the United States and globally, will be a function of individual candidates' goals, and the all-seeing eye of algorithm-driven voter outreach. But the bottom line is that there will be campaign advertisements in the metaverse because, well, there are campaign advertisements everywhere, all the time.

More interesting to consider is how leaders will engage the metaverse once in power. Encouragingly, from the governmental side, capabilities and opportunities abound to redefine the manner in which citizens reach their representatives and participate in their own

governance. Early public sector adopters of metaversal development have but scratched the surface of these possibilities.

For starters, the tiny island nation of Barbados has staked out the first metaversal embassy. This openness to embracing technology and a renewed focus on citizen interaction evidenced in this move are laudable and demonstrate the metaverse's democratic value as a means for increased transparency in government and truly borderless global engagement. Though novel, Barbados' digital embassy is no gimmick. You can be sure that additional diplomatic missions will soon follow suit in establishing their presence in the metaverse and will perhaps wish they had thought to do so earlier.

Another happy marriage of innovation and democracy is underway in South Korea. Its capital city has taken the mission of digitizing democracy a step further by setting the ambitious goal of creating a Metaverse Seoul by 2023 for the express purpose of transforming its citizenry's access to municipal government. Things like virtual public hearings, a virtually accessible mayor's office, virtual tourism, virtual conventions, markets and events will all be on the table as one of the world's most economically and culturally rich metropolises opens its digital doors to all who wish to step inside.

Digital Twinning

Any time technology is employed in the service of empowering people and holding governments more accountable, such advancements should be celebrated. The metaverse can and must become a vehicle for freedom. It need not provide a tired, easy analog to Don DeLillo's ominous underworld.

But then there's China. While some of its cities and state-run firms are making plans to embrace what functionality is afforded via metaversal innovation, there can be no question that the government in Beijing will have a tremendous say in what development, access and behavior is and isn't permitted in any Chinese iterations of the metaverse. It is hard to imagine,

for instance, certain digital assets, products or symbols making their way past the same level of censorship beneath which China already blankets its corner of cyberspace.

Yet China's most intriguing metaverse-related trend involves the spike in interest in digital property ownership occurring while its real-world real estate market continues to sputter. Such a considerable reallocation of resources away from physical assets into digital ones mirrors the increasing popularity of cryptocurrency as a safe haven from the risk of inflation. Call it a technological inevitability or a societal symptom of COVID-fueled pessimism, but the digital world now appears (to some) to present fewer risks and more forward-looking stability than the physical.

China may be an extreme example, but the need to balance transparency, openness and prosperity with safety and control will exist for all governments in the metaverse just as it does in non-virtual reality. Real-world governmental issues will not find easy answers in the metaverse, but they might find useful twins. And as is the case in the industry, the digital twinning of democracy will give its willing practitioners the chance to experiment, to struggle, to build and rebuild, and to fail fast and often enough to eventually get some things right.

Championing commendable applications of this new technology in government and business will position the metaverse as a useful thing within the real world, something that enriches real lives, that serves real people — not the other way around.

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Creating Better Working Conditions in America

Colleen Wynn, Heidi Ewen & Karen Newman
January 24, 2022

Employers in the United States can create better working conditions by choice or by force.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, our capitalist system relied on a generous supply of American workers willing and able to put in full-time hours. But with a declining birth rate, increases in early retirement, millions of women still out of the workforce and the deaths of more than 862,000 people in America — a result of a population ravaged by COVID-19 — the United States needs to get creative to stay operational.

There are two solutions: attract more immigrants and institutionalize flexible work arrangements, especially for older Americans who aren't ready or able to leave their jobs.

Unfortunately, politicians and employers have shown reluctance to embrace these common-sense solutions. Despite promises to make sweeping changes to US immigration policy, President Joe Biden has been unwilling or unable to roll back most of the extreme anti-immigrant policies of the Trump administration. To be fair, in the cases where Biden and his team have tried to make some changes, they have been ordered by Republican-appointed judges to reimpose these policies, as in the case of the "Remain in Mexico" policy.

In the workplace, some employers have refused to institute flexible work policies, leading to employee pushback on calls to return to the office. Additionally, last summer, governors in 26 states — all but Louisiana led by Republicans — ended extra unemployment benefits from the American Rescue Plan two to three months earlier than federally required, with some

explicitly stating that the unemployed are “lazy” and wanting to collect government benefits. Governor Mike Parson of Missouri said in May 2021 that continuing these unemployment programs “only worsens the workforce issues we’re currently facing. It’s time that we end these programs that have incentivized people to stay out of the workforce.”

However, with the US averaging around 700,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 each day over the last week, the pandemic is far from over. American families are at their breaking point. Rather than relying on outdated racist and classist ideas about immigration and government support for families, politicians and employers wanting to stimulate the economy should focus on creative solutions to what is clearly an unprecedented crisis.]

Immigrant Workers

One solution is to build on the existing labor force by welcoming more immigrant workers and providing better benefits for their labor. While immigrants continue to be employed at a higher rate than those who are US-born, they make up just over one-sixth of the total US labor force. Immigrants have been on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic working as essential workers at all levels. But at the same time, many immigrants, particularly Asian, faced increased racism during the early days of the pandemic.

Politicians and the American public alike often invoke the idea that we are a “nation of immigrants.” While some might argue that we never have been, immigrants are an important part of American society and deserve better opportunities and benefits available to them.

Many immigrants in the US are not eligible for unemployment benefits, which makes them more vulnerable. The Migration Policy Institute estimates that at least 6 million immigrants work in industries hardest hit during the pandemic. Additionally, immigrant families have a higher risk of being food insecure. Thus, while immigrants take care of us, we do not return the favor.

Flexible Working

The early retirements of older workers are more likely tied to concerns about health and safety around COVID-19 and an increasing desire for remote work, yet many are not prepared financially for retirement. It would not be surprising if many returned to the workforce, at least part-time, at some point in the coming years.

Industries, corporations, foundations and employers would be wise to recruit retirees, even for part-time positions. The older population has a wealth of experience, knowledge and the aptitude to mentor younger workers and immigrants. For example, in one study of retired surgeons, more than half of participants were interested in serving as mentors to new surgeons and most were willing to do so even without compensation. Similarly, for teachers, mentoring is a valuable experience for both retirees and new teachers.

To be sure, attracting immigrant workers by offering competitive salaries and benefits, and meeting workers’ need for flexible work arrangements might require employers to temporarily cut back on profits. However, making these investments in workers would show that employers are forward-thinking and respect their contributions.

With slowing US population growth, employers will have a smaller pool of potential employees and will therefore need to offer better working conditions to attract workers. Additionally, 2021 saw American workers striking and unionizing with rates not seen in decades, with some attributing this, in part, to pandemic working conditions. In short, employers can create better working conditions by choice or by force.

Politicians could ease the burden on companies by incentivizing flexible working policies and making it easier for Americans to combine work and family. But — even better — they could ease the burden on workers by providing direct support through paid leave, housing support, universal health care and other programs that would allow for a better quality of

life for Americans. These supports would also make part-time work a more realistic option and empower families to make their own decisions about how best to combine work and family at any age.

Reimagine Society

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed us as individuals and as a society. We cannot simply “get back to normal” despite calls from politicians and CEOs to do so. After all, the US alone will likely reach 1 million COVID-19 deaths in the months to come.

If politicians and employers want to stay operational, we must take this chance to reimagine our society. This means putting people over profits and creating workplaces that are responsive to the needs of people and their whole selves.

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When Will Montenegro’s Dreams of Joining the EU Become Reality?

Djordje Radulovic
January 26, 2022

After two decades of promises of membership, Montenegro is ready to join the European Union.

Four students, rejoicing in the good news, partied in one of the numerous Irish pubs in Podgorica. Fed up with nationalism, populism and other breeds of pestilence engulfing the Western Balkan region, they reveled in a brighter future awaiting them in the European Union. It was summertime, the Thessaloniki

Summit had just ended, and the promise of EU membership had been conveyed to the region.

For the students, the EU was not a gold pot you could dip your hand in and harvest the low-hanging fruit. Quite the contrary, at their very core, they felt that the EU resonated with them in a peculiar but enchanting harmony. German punctuality, cars and the Scorpions’ “Wind of Change”; French “liberte, egalite, fraternite” and wine; Italian canzone and eternal Rome; Greek philosophy and the cradle of democracy; Spanish flamenco and the mesmerizing sound of guitars — all came together in a beautiful constellation, comprising the 12 stars on the blue flag.

Fast forward two decades and one of those four students has become the minister of foreign affairs of Montenegro. Without pretending to be Dr. Nicolaes Tulp from the famous Rembrandt painting, looking back at the lost time in between, I cannot help but ask whether both Montenegro and the EU could have done better. Are we where we wanted to be?

Montenegro Calling

Over those years since Thessaloniki, Montenegro has accomplished a lot. It opened up its economy and became a WTO member. It has no open issues with its neighbors. It joined NATO in 2017 and is ahead of others in the region in the EU accession process. It is also the only aspiring member country showing 100% alignment with EU foreign policy. Looking at these achievements, some may wonder why Montenegro still isn’t part of the European Union.

Well, things are never that simple. In contrast to the undeniable success of its foreign policy, the murky labyrinths of domestic politics are still blocking the country’s path to EU membership. Since negotiations with Brussels began, the ruling party has acted as if it were the sole custodian of the process. But to be successful, the course must involve the whole of society and political spectrum. Montenegro is joining the EU as a community, not as a ruling majority. Every success in this effort belongs to all political

stakeholders, NGOs and other participants. The same applies to all failures.

Of course, the main responsibility lies with the government that creates the framework for how the accession will evolve, but the sustainability of the process can only be attained if utmost inclusion is assured. There was a persistent lack of political will to tackle the most treacherous pestilence of any society — corruption and organized crime. For too long, political stakeholders turned a blind eye to these flaws blocking Montenegro's European path and deferred the attempts to eradicate them to better times.

Finally, the regional context of the Western Balkans further complicated Montenegro's course toward Brussels. No matter how much one excels in class, the performance of your classmates can hold you back. Montenegro has been a beacon of good neighborly relations. However, it exists in a region permeated with bilateral disputes that have detrimental spillover effects — an endless game of thrones.

But every cloud always has a silver lining. In August 2020, the Democratic Party of Socialists — the heir of the Communist Party — headed by President Milo Djukanovic, suffered defeat in elections, marking the first peaceful transition of power after nearly 30 years of one-party rule. The process has been smooth; the absence of riots, rallies or protests on the streets showed how mature the Montenegrin society has become.

The new political habitat brought to the surface new hopes, zeal and also stakeholders. There emerged a myriad of new, young politicians, with political roots in neither the Communist Party of old nor in the nationalist blocs. Young and prominent, they shine brightly, unburdened by the dark clouds of the wars of the 1990s and the legacy of clientelism. They are progressive, Western-orientated, and they truly walk the talk. They present a stark contrast to the ruling elites of the past, the indoctrinated ex-members of the Communist Party who, despite being able to subscribe to the messages coming

from our European partners, never genuinely understood them.

And how could they? A vast majority of these party cadres never lived abroad, never left the confines of former Yugoslavia and seldom spoke foreign languages. Unlike them, the new generations are fully in sync with the heartbeat of Europe. They have been raised on Western films, music and culture. They have studied or lived abroad and speak at least one foreign language. Most importantly, they detest corruption. Unlike their predecessors, these new Montenegrins are law-abiding not because the criminal code demands it, but because they find corruption to be a great social ignominy that mars the country's image. In their mindset, corruption is a red line that must not be crossed.

Against the backdrop of this mixed bag of legacies, the new government has maintained the same foreign policy and conducted, in parallel, an intrepid fight against corruption and organized crime, achieving outstanding results in a very short period of time. These results have been recognized by the EU and the international community at large.

Thanks to these accomplishments, the myth that only one political party could lead Montenegro toward EU membership has been debunked. Montenegro's EU and NATO partners have realized that other, young and genuinely progressive political forces are capable to reach the final destination of the country's EU journey and that they are sparing no effort to deliver. But again, this is a process that belongs to all Montenegrins. Membership in the EU is voluntary and requires dialogue and cooperation from all sides of the political spectrum, no matter how hard it may sometimes be.

Brussels Calling

Let us now look at the situation from the EU's perspective.

It is widely known that every structure has, among others, a *raison d'être*, one where others look up to it and find it worth emulating. Without this interaction, its allure would be in vain,

creating an inwardly-oriented edifice. This approach is embedded in the EU Global Strategy 2016, meaning that the union must become a more globally-present and assertive international actor. Its enlargement policy, which compels countries to conduct reforms to better align with the EU, is its most appealing stratagem. We in the Western Balkans understand that most clearly.

Societies in the former communist countries, from “Szczecin in the Baltics to Trieste in the Adriatic,” hold this to be a self-evident truth. Enlargement policy has had a hugely transformative effect on all its beneficiary countries and represents the best of Europe to date — its attested power to unite in diversity. This is even more remarkable given the fact that the past decade has not been the easiest ride for the EU. Many crises befell the bloc one after another, including the 2008 global financial crisis, the Arab Spring, the 2015 migrant crisis, Brexit and now COVID-19.

I don’t think it would be wrong to suggest that some states might not have survived these great ordeals if the union, the *spiritus movens* of European nations and values, had not been there to support them. This structure has proved time and time again that democracies might be shaken, but, when united, they will, at the end of the day, always prevail.

There is no doubt that the EU needs to enter calmer waters in order to recuperate from a decade of crises before it can continue to expand. Nonetheless, the dream of European might is still vivid and alive among those who have been dreaming about such a European future for almost two decades.

For all our sakes, we should keep sharing this approach together. Enlargement is a question of credibility, something that the US realized in the wake of the Cold War and manifested in the motto “the US promises — the US delivers.” The EU, if it wishes to have a truly global status, should act along the same principle.

In the case of the EU, credibility is twofold. First, neither Brussels nor the member states

should permit themselves to leave a geostrategic blackhole in the heart of the continent. It would be a blunder, as it would lead to the penetration of other global opponents in the union’s backyard. If the EU fails to secure the very heart of the continent, it will become its Achilles’ heel that would prevent the union from expanding, consolidating and deepening.

On the other hand, it is also an issue of credibility for the aspiring countries. Since 2003, only two candidates have become member states, so if enlargement becomes too much of a moving target, at the end of the day, the aspiring countries might start looking to other centers of power that are more credible, reliable and able to deliver on promises.

The Western Balkans is the only region where enlargement coincides with reconciliation among nations. And if incentives for good behavior disappear, bad behavior might prevail.

For all these reasons, the EU has to be prudent, astute and bold enough to realize that it is much better to have the aspiring countries at the table for the sake of its future, stability and *raison d’être*.

The Last Mile

The case of Montenegro should be an easy one. A country of 620,000 inhabitants, with 75% in support for EU and NATO membership, as well as being fully committed to EU foreign policy, is something that the union could easily digest. A country this size could not, by any means, hamper the EU decision-making process.

The benefits of this easy enlargement would be manifold. It would demonstrate that, in spite of some setbacks along the way, the EU is still delivering. That would, beyond any doubt, reinvigorate mutual trust. Furthermore, the power of the Montenegrin example would encourage other Western Balkan countries to show real interest in becoming the next member states.

At the same time, it would be a strong signal to third parties that the region has not been forgotten, that the EU has just made a short break and now, again, claims its full right to it. That

would make life easier for NATO as well by providing stability and security on its southern flank.

The best journeys are never easy or short. But one old European state, too small to have enemies, too smart to create them and too proud to be talked down to by anyone has been on the road for almost two decades, is hurrying toward the European family of nations where it has always belonged. It is high time for Montenegro to get there and for the story of those distant student dreams and hopes, music and harmony to have a happy ending.

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From the Maghreb to the East, Poking the EU Has an MO

Roberto Ayala & Glenn Ojeda Vega
January 27, 2022

In the Maghreb region, one of the best solutions would be a pragmatic and flexible bipartisan agreement between Spain and Morocco.

Contemporary diplomatic relations between Morocco and Spain saw their genesis after the Spanish departed from Western Sahara and the tripartite agreement was reached in 1975. Signed in Madrid, this agreement between Morocco, Mauritania, and Spain tried to normalize the future of the region's borders and of the people of Western Sahara.

However, after signing the deal, the government in Madrid never formalized its political and diplomatic position regarding Moroccan sovereignty over Spain's former colony in Western Sahara. A geopolitical matter of vital importance for Morocco, the question of

Western Sahara remains an unhealed wound in the relationship between Madrid and Rabat.

In 2021, this wound was reopened after Spain, in a somewhat secret and irregular move, welcomed Brahim Ghali, secretary-general of the Polisario Front, a nationalist movement seeking independence for Western Sahara vis-à-vis Morocco. On top of the fact that Ghali is wanted in Spain for crimes against humanity, rape and torture, among others, he is also a staunch enemy of the government in Rabat.

This politically embarrassing situation, a product of a diplomatic miscalculation by the Spanish government, created a feeling of betrayal in Rabat. Morocco quickly conveyed its discomfort, considering Spain's harboring of Ghali a challenge to the kingdom's sovereignty and interference in an internal state matter. Thus, Morocco issued a warning that continuing to host Ghali would have consequences.

Spain in North Africa

Despite these warnings, the government in Madrid decided not to make any political or diplomatic overtures to Morocco, declining to resolve the misunderstanding in a consensual manner. Therefore, in a way, the Spanish government forwent its diplomatic relationship with Morocco and disregarded the important role that Rabat has always played as a critical partner in the fight against illegal trafficking and terrorism stemming from the Maghreb and the Sahel.

Though the relationship between Morocco and Spain has lived through ups and downs, the tensions last year felt much different. Through relaxation of its military controls, Rabat's threat became a reality in May 2021 when Morocco effectively opened its border with Ceuta, a Spanish enclave and autonomous city located on the African continent, which made it easier for waves of irregular migrants to reach Tarajal beach. Around 8,000 people, including more than 1,500 estimated minors, tried to cross the Spanish-Moroccan border on foot and by swimming to enter Spanish soil illegally.

As crude as it may seem, this political move by the government in Rabat, using Moroccans and Africans in general as a weapon against Spain, is not new. For years, Morocco has used this modus operandi as a diplomatic weapon to pressure and obtain concessions from its European neighbor. However, there has not been such a mass arrival of people, especially such a high percentage of minors, to the Spanish border in recent history.

The diplomatic crisis last May led to authentic moments of chaos and siege along Ceuta's border, making the passage of many of these immigrants to the European territory possible. Through its actions, Rabat sent a message without palliatives and implored the Spanish government to back down from political moves, such as open invitations to regional nationalist leaders.

The Existential Issue of Territorial Integrity

Morocco's red lines related to Western Sahara have been drawn, and the kingdom has reiterated that interferences with its national sovereignty will not be tolerated. The crude political response at the Spanish border of Ceuta represents the harshness of Rabat's diplomatic relations, choosing, yet again, to weaponize its population.

Spain needs Morocco; indeed, Europe needs Morocco. Rabat is a crucial partner in Africa, especially given the many challenges in the region. However, Spain and the European Union should not allow the pressure and blackmail from their North African neighbor to stand because they embolden others. Spain and the EU should impose strict red lines on Morocco as well as clear and intelligent economic sanctions concerning development, education and health funds.

Political, and diplomatic issues can be resolved with class and delicacy without cheap blows and without trivializing despair and compassion. For this, Spain needs to reach a rapprochement with Morocco regarding the status and future of Western Sahara.

Energy and Copycats

In tandem with Morocco's migrant valve vis-à-vis Spain, Algeria started leveraging its gas valve to counter France's escalation on matters like issuing visas to Algerian citizens. In this latter issue, Spain and Morocco, neither of whom are particularly close with Algeria, are collateral damage to the Paris-Algiers feud whether in the form of declining pipeline revenues or a higher power bill.

Since these episodes toward the middle of last year, the same playbook has been used by Moscow's client in Minsk, who has fostered a migrant cul-de-sac along the EU's Polish border. In doing so, Russia and Belarus are feeding the euroskeptic spirits within the Visegrad countries and beyond, which are particularly sensitive to migration and border sovereignty issues. Moreover, Alexander Lukashenko and Vladimir Putin are playing good cop, bad cop on the issue of Europe's gas supply by offering both threats and assurances that further highlight the EU's vulnerable dependency on external providers when it comes to energy.

On the migration front, the European Union needs to reinforce its external borders and FRONTEX agency, particularly within the Schengen area, and formulate a common framework to tackle both migration quotas and allocation throughout Schengen member countries.

Not only is the migrant reality in places like Spain, Greece, and Poland a human tragedy, but it is also increasingly a geopolitical lever weaponized by Morocco, Turkey, Belarus and other adversaries to destabilize the EU and bolster internal chaos to the benefit of figures such as Viktor Orban, Geert Wilders, Santiago Abascal, Marine Le Pen, and Eric Zemmour.

Whether nuclear, solar or wind, a common and comprehensive European defense framework urgently requires a holistic approach that tackles the issue of energy independence, in addition to that of border security, particularly in an increasingly hostile and multipolar neighborhood.

Building Solutions Where Possible

Along the Maghreb, one of the best solutions would be a new pragmatic and flexible bipartisan agreement between Spain and Morocco. An agreement that commemorates the golden jubilee of the Tripartite Agreement provides a firm solution to the Western Sahara dispute in a framework that benefits coexistence in the region and maintains collaboration in critical matters such as the fight against terrorism, illegal immigration and human trafficking.

In the same way, Spain and the EU must encourage the good behavior of Morocco with humanitarian aid and fruitful commercial relations to definitively close the post-colonial wound that sometimes reopens between the two countries.

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In Ukraine, More Than European Peace Is at Stake

Jack Gill & Sebastian Schäffer
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It is now up to the West to come together and show Russia that aggression no longer pays.

“**E**verything has already been said, but not yet by everybody.” This quote by the Bavarian comedian Karl Valentin applies also to the ongoing Russian threat to Ukraine, which has brought a new level of tension to Europe. Yet it provides no comic relief as the situation is far too dangerous for everyone, but especially for the people of Ukraine who have been widely excluded from the ongoing discussions about their future.

The diplomatic failures of the Russian and American negotiators and the steady escalation in rhetoric indicate an unwillingness to compromise on both sides. Russia wants guarantees that neither Ukraine nor Georgia will accede to NATO, which NATO categorically refuses to do. But Russia’s excessive list of demands shows that it doesn’t expect the West to agree. It would, conversely, mean that Russia would have to remove its own missiles from the Kaliningrad Oblast that borders Poland and Lithuania.

The failure of the Russian Federation to respect the sovereign will of its neighboring states demonstrates well its 19th-century view of geopolitics that if it doesn’t belong to us now, it will soon belong to our enemies. By raising the stakes, Russia has shown that there are now only three options for Ukraine — siding with Russia, aligning with the West, or permanent neutrality — and it is testing to see just how much the West really wants Ukraine. But time is running out. Maintaining a large standing army on such a long border requires significant resources. They’ll have to be moved eventually. The question is, in which direction?

Geopolitical Chess

Like pieces on a chessboard, Ukraine acceding to NATO would, from the alliance’s perspective, be like the West gaining a pawn. From the view of the Kremlin, however, Russia would be losing its queen. The movement of NATO’s eastern flank into Ukraine would increase the length of the NATO-Russian land border nearly fourfold, from 703 kilometers to 2,677 kilometers — an unpleasant prospect for security-obsessed Moscow.

As such, we believe that there are several scenarios regarding how the situation could develop, with a multitude of compounding factors. Three of them have been described here, which we still believe could prove most likely.

While it is impossible to know what will actually happen, one thing seems to be perfectly clear: There is no peaceful solution for Ukraine. Regardless of what outcome the negotiations

have, Crimea is still occupied and the war in Donbas is ongoing. The Kremlin wants security guarantees, but so does Ukraine. Kyiv sees its best option in NATO membership, which is mutually exclusive to Moscow's objective.

It's at this point that the debate about Ukrainian neutrality gains momentum. Such a declaration of neutrality could also be welcome in Western capitals. Although this currently disregards the stated sovereign will of those Ukrainians who support a Western path, one could nonetheless imagine a tripartite (NATO/US–Ukraine–Russian Federation) treaty on Ukrainian neutrality would ease security fears, while also not excluding the prospect of future EU membership for the country, like neutral Austria, Sweden and Finland. Indeed, the stability provided by a neutrality treaty would afford Ukraine the necessary conditions for significant economic growth and democratization.

Nevertheless, the Kremlin's security concerns regarding NATO are, to our understanding, not the dominant factor in this situation. Apart from the fact that there is also a sort of collective security provision in Article 42 (7) of the Treaty of the European Union, the main concern for the Russian regime is a democratic and prosperous Ukraine. Because if a "brotherly" nation, as Putin has referred to it on numerous occasions, could thrive in a climate of social freedom, the Russian population could demand this as well, which would ultimately lead to the collapse of the current administration.

Neutrality, moreover, doesn't also necessarily prevent a Russian military presence. In Moldova — a neutral country — around 2,000 Russian soldiers are present, 500 of them as "peacekeepers," following the war in Transnistria in 1992. Andreas Umland, an analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies, the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, asked (during a conference both authors attended) whether these and other Russian troops stationed in the former Soviet republics should not rather be referred to as "piece keepers" — pun intended.

Umland is also the initiator of an open letter to the German government signed by 73 German experts on Eastern Europe and international security, among them one of the authors of this article. The aim here is to call for a German reaction to the threat the Russian Federation poses to the European security order.

Europe's Energy Leverage

The new German government hasn't changed its predecessor's position regarding the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which would provide leverage in the negotiations but is constantly depoliticized by officials. Moreover, drastic sanctions, like excluding Russia from the SWIFT global payment system or even delivering defensive weapons to Ukraine, have been ruled out. The latter is based on what Berlin perceives as its historic responsibility toward Russia for Germany's role in the Second World War, ironically ignoring that this should also include Ukraine as both were part of the Soviet Union.

But a time is coming when Berlin must weigh up whether it is willing to stand in solidarity with its allies, Ukraine and the principles of international law and self-determination, or if its responsibilities for the past mean it would rather stay in the Kremlin's good books. In any case, this German factor has long provided the Kremlin with the opportunity to pursue its divide-and-conquer strategy in the European Union.

Perhaps the greatest leverage the EU would have over Russia (and currently vice versa) is the control over the supply of natural gas. Moscow has for far too long fostered Europe's reliance on Russian natural resources. Dependence works both ways, and if the EU, and especially Germany, were to take control and shut off Russian pipelines into Europe, the consequences would be far worse for Russia.

Painful though it may be at first, it is entirely possible, and such a preemptive tactic — showing Russia that the EU is no longer dependent on its supplies — would have a powerful taming effect on Moscow. It would also spur on the increased diversification of European

energy supplies, costing Europe less in the long run. This energy card is currently in German hands.

Negotiations aside, one of the most striking things about this current escalation has been the sidelining of Ukraine's position. If we've learned anything from history, it is that smaller countries should not be overlooked as their voices are silenced. We've seen this situation before: excessive demands, promises of being satisfied if conditions are met, protecting citizens, peaceful intentions but ready for war. All this sounds too familiar. Yet again, the wishes of the main country involved — in this case, Ukraine — are not being respected.

We should not repeat the same mistakes from 100, 80 or even just eight years ago. Ukraine has made its move, and so has Russia. It is now up to the West to come together and show Russia that aggression no longer pays.

There is so much more at stake here than just peace in Europe. We need to understand that this is a direct attack on Europe's collective achievements over the past decades. Ukrainians contributed to these achievements with the Maidan Revolution in 2014. The EU failed them then, so we must not fail Ukraine again. Otherwise, the hopes for democratic development in the east of the European continent will just be a piece of history, never to return.

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