

2026 ISSUE

# Harriman

THE MAGAZINE OF THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY



## Democracy in Crisis

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REFLECTIONS ON U.S. SOFT POWER  
USAID SPENT MORE THAN \$1 BILLION  
TO BUILD DEMOCRACY IN MOLDOVA  
PULLING THE PLUG: AMERICA'S  
RETREAT FROM INTERNATIONAL  
BROADCASTING



**USAID**  
DIN PARTEA  
POPORULUI  
AMERICAN



**IREX**



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## Dear Reader

In the summer of 1988, I was one of three Moscow-based foreign correspondents permitted by the Soviet Foreign Ministry to visit Magnitogorsk, the Russian steel-making city that had been closed to foreigners for decades. I went there to cover “Information USA,” the first such American “soft power” exhibit allowed in the once-forbidden city. Life was changing; the Soviet Union was opening up.

Another American in Magnitogorsk that summer was Timothy Frye, a young guide for the exhibit. Nearly 40 years later, Frye, now a political scientist and former Harriman director, describes in this issue the daily crowds who lined up, eager to learn about life in America—and astounded at how freely the guides spoke.

“Our visitors were often staggered to learn that most guides in the exhibit voted in 1988 for Michael Dukakis rather than George Bush and that we were willing to criticize many aspects of U.S. politics rather than simply spout a party line,” Frye writes.

While Frye acknowledges it’s a stretch to say soft power exhibitions brought down Soviet Communism, he makes a strong case for their effectiveness in promoting democracy to those living in the Soviet dictatorship.

But soft power and democracy promotion are now mere relics of U.S. foreign policy, swept away when the Trump administration dismantled the U.S. Agency for International Development in early 2025, along with the international broadcasting programs that had long countered Soviet, and later Russian, propaganda. Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty struggled for survival throughout 2025, clearing the way for Russian disinformation efforts to grow across the region—and the world. “For the moment, Russia seems the clear winner from Trump’s moves,” Tom Kent, Harriman adjunct professor and former president of RFE/RL, concludes in an essay for this issue.

One place Russia’s efforts have faltered so far is Moldova, where voters chose to keep their pro-European Union president in office last September. As journalist Corina Cepoi reports, Moldova has received at least \$1 billion in USAID assistance since the early 1990s to support anti-corruption programs, independent media, and business development to reduce economic dependence on Russia. But Russian meddling is expected to continue, and the cutoff of U.S. foreign aid could weaken some of the institutions needed to protect Moldova’s democracy.

Democracy in the region was in crisis before Donald Trump returned to the White House, but there’s little doubt that the disappearance of U.S. foreign aid can deepen that crisis. What will people fighting for more freedom do? Our Reflections section looks at three countries—Georgia, Ukraine, and Serbia—where protest movements continue the fight for democracy. With or without U.S. support.

**Ann Cooper**  
Editor-in-Chief



A sign in Ciorescu, Moldova, announces USAID’s role in rehabilitating one of the village’s water towers. AP Photo/Aurel Obreja

# Contents

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**Cover image**  
Demonstrators remove a police barrier outside the parliament building in Tbilisi, Georgia. Thousands rallied in Georgia for weeks against a bill that critics compared to Russia's "foreign agent" law. AP Photo/Zurab Tsertsvadze. April 28, 2024

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## 22

### **Pulling the Plug**

The U.S. retreat from international broadcasting is a gift to Russia's disinformation efforts. By Thomas Kent



## 28

### **Georgians Are Watching Themselves**

A millennial reflects on her native country's long struggle with the ghost of Stalin. By Tinatin Japaridze



## 40

### **Scenes from the Field**

Harriman students criss-crossed the region on summer journeys, recording life in cities and in the countryside, as residents gathered for celebrations, performed their daily work, or endured life in a war zone.



**This lack of concern about democratic backsliding stands in stark contrast to nearly every conversation I now have with my friends in the United States."**

## 31

### **Grassroots Power: Ukraine's Local Democracy During War**

A political scientist reflects on the rise of participatory democracy in her homeland. By Anastasiia Vlasenko

8

**Reflections on U.S. Soft Power**

A former Harriman Director recalls his participation in U.S. soft power projects and considers the consequences of Trump’s America First policy. By Timothy Frye



16

**USAID Spent More Than \$1 Billion to Build Democracy in Moldova. What Happens Now?**

In the wake of the dismantling of the American agency, experts worry about how the absence of U.S. assistance will affect Moldova’s future. By Corina Cepoi

2026 ISSUE

**Harriman Talks**

- 4 “Trump Woke up Europe”: Margus Tsahkna, Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs, on the Current State of European Security
- 5 “We Want to Give Them the Best Shot to Survive This”: Rethinking Human Rights in Eurasia
- 6 “Misplaced Hopes and Misplaced Fear”: Alexander Vindman on U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Russia and Ukraine

**Features**

- 8 Reflections on U.S. Soft Power
- 16 USAID Spent More Than \$1 Billion to Build Democracy in Moldova. What Happens Now?
- 22 Pulling the Plug: The U.S. Retreat from International Broadcasting Is a Gift to Russia’s Disinformation Efforts

**Reflections**

- 28 Georgians Are Watching Themselves
- 31 Grassroots Power: Ukraine’s Local Democracy During War
- 35 Serbia’s Leaderless Protests

**Culture**

- 40 Scenes from the Field

**In Memoriam**

- 44 Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier
- 45 Alfred J. Rieber

**In Brief**

- 46 A Decade-long Program at Harriman Expands Research and Interest in Russian Studies
- 48 Faculty News
- 49 Prizes and Announcements
- 50 Faculty Books
- 52 Notable Harriman Events

**Alumni**

- 54 Where Are They Now?
- 56 Alumni Notes

Each academic year we host hundreds of interdisciplinary events with regional experts and members of the Harriman community on a range of issues concerning Eurasia and Eastern Europe. In Harriman Talks, we report on some of the ideas or experiences discussed at the Institute.

## “Trump Woke up Europe”

Margus Tsahkna, Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs, on the current state of European security.

BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

In September 2025, just days after three armed Russian MiG-31 fighter jets penetrated Estonian airspace, Margus Tsahkna, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Estonia, spoke at the Harriman Institute. Tsahkna told his Harriman audience he was gratified by the global response to Russia’s incursion, which was condemned by many world leaders during an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council.

In a follow-up conversation in October with Masha Udensiva-Brenner, Tsahkna took special note of comments by U.S. President Donald Trump, who told a reporter, during a meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, that NATO should consider shooting down Russian jets if they violated Estonian air space again.

“For the first time, Estonians witnessed that we are not alone,” Tsahkna told Udensiva-Brenner. “This kind of language Putin actually understands.”

Here’s more from that conversation.

**Udensiva-Brenner:** You said during your talk, “unfortunately Putin didn’t wake up Europe, it was President Trump.” What did you mean by that?

**Tsahkna:** Russia wants to dictate how the [European] security architecture or military architecture will look. And this is something we cannot accept. So why am I saying that Trump woke up Europe? We have this attitude since the Second World War that the U.S. is taking care of us on a military level and defense level. That we, as Europeans, have other problems to solve. But we are one of the richest parts of the world. And President Trump has been very clear that he’s not going to use the U.S. taxpayers’ money for military support for Ukraine anymore. Now, Europe is taking more responsibility. Because of President Trump’s very robust pressure to European partners we agreed to [spend] 5 percent of [national GDP] on defense

investments this summer. [That figure is an increase from 2 percent.]

**Udensiva-Brenner:** The U.S. has cut so much foreign aid. How does that affect Estonian security?

**Tsahkna:** If we’re talking about the Baltic Security Initiative [a U.S. program established in 2020 to increase the defense capabilities of the Baltic states in response to Russian aggression in the region], we saw the Senate decision to include that [in the 2026 fiscal year budget]. So, let’s see what the House will do.

With the last round [of U.S. assistance], we bought HIMARS systems [M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System developed for the U.S. Army in the 1990s] and they were put in place this year. U.S. troops trained us. So, this military cooperation is very useful for us. And as well the location of U.S. troops in our region — they are helping us to keep the peace. The situation has changed a lot, but I do hope that U.S. troops will remain in the region. ♦



Margus Tsahkna. Photo courtesy of the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs



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**We need to push for a Russia, an Azerbaijan, a Turkmenistan that will uphold its legal obligations. We need to always show how perverse these regimes are.”**

## “We Want to Give Them the Best Shot to Survive This”

Rethinking human rights in Eurasia.

BY ANN COOPER

In her 34 years at Human Rights Watch, Rachel Denber ('86) traveled throughout Eurasia, documenting rights abuses and making the group's research public, a step sometimes dubbed “naming and shaming.”

But in increasingly authoritarian Eurasian states such as Russia, Belarus, and Azerbaijan, the advocacy strategy of naming and shaming has no impact. And some governments in the region that formerly gave audience to advocates and Western governments demanding change now close their doors to human-rights-related discussions.

“I think the challenge that we're facing now is that many governments cannot be shamed. They're proud of their transgressions,” Denber said in an interview with *Harriman Magazine*.

Denber retired from Human Rights Watch last summer. In October, the Harriman Institute recognized her for years of advocacy in Human Rights Watch's Europe and Central Asia Division with a panel discussion: “When the Door Closes: Rethinking Human Rights Impact in Eurasia.” Denber, along with other human rights defenders, discussed how—in

the face of growing authoritarianism—practitioners can reenvision the meaning of impact in human rights work.

Going forward, said panel participant Nate Schenkkan (MARS-REERS '11), former senior director of research at Freedom House, human rights defenders must find ways to have an impact without the traditional backing of the United States and other Western governments. In the past, Western pressure on human rights abusers was one element that could help bring change. Now that U.S. foreign aid has been cut dramatically under President Trump, “there's no ready strategy to grab onto” that can replace it, said Schenkkan.

But even with external support eroding, grassroots protests in repressive countries continue.

“There are still people willing to go out on the street and take these risks,” said panelist Tatyana Margolin, a founder of Stroika, a non-governmental organization that connects people across the world working to resist authoritarian regimes. And, though it may be impossible to overturn abusive laws, supporting those persecuted by them can create impact, Margolin said. “A lot of success these days

[comes from] people not feeling alone,” she said. “Because what authoritarians do is they make everyone feel very isolated.”

To combat the sense of isolation, said Denber, human rights work needs to sharpen its focus on supporting persecuted individuals, such as political prisoners and their families, “so that people who are behind bars have a better shot at getting medical care ... food packages ... letters that might sustain their resilience.”

Finding legal aid for those under attack is also crucial. Lawyers “are on the front line, and they deserve all the support that donors and others can possibly give them,” said Denber. “We don't know how long this tyrannical moment is going to endure. It could be generations. But we want to give them the best shot to survive this.”

A renewed focus on individual victims shouldn't mean an end to the painstaking work of documenting and exposing patterns of human rights abuses, said Denber.

“We need to push for a Russia, an Azerbaijan, a Turkmenistan that will uphold its legal obligations,” she told the magazine. “We need to always show how perverse these regimes are.” ◆



Alexander Vindman flanked by Victoria Nuland (left) and Elise Giuliano (right) during Vindman's talk at the Harriman Institute on October 8, 2025.



## “Misplaced Hopes and Misplaced Fear”

Alexander Vindman on U.S. foreign policy toward Russia and Ukraine.

BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

Retired U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman is perhaps best known for blowing the whistle on Donald Trump's efforts to coerce Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky into investigating Joe Biden and Biden's son. That happened during Trump's first presidency, when Vindman served on the National Security Council; his revelations were key to Trump's first impeachment.

But when he spoke at the Harriman Institute in October, Vindman said that faults in U.S. policy toward Russia long predate Donald Trump's arrival in the White House.

“The practice that has been carried out over the course of the past 35 years, by and large, by both parties, has been a highly transactional, shortsighted approach,” he told the Harriman audience, in a talk that traced the policies of the six U.S. administrations in office since the Soviet collapse in 1991.

Vindman said that a major example of this was the U.S. government's pattern of “deferring to Moscow,” while consistently turning a blind eye toward Russia's

“**Policy problems started early on, with the United States allowing the denuclearization of Ukraine.**”

aggression in the region, from the war in Chechnya to Russia's war in Georgia in 2008 and its annexation of Crimea and invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2014. “We could have been a lot more condemnatory, a lot more conditional with regards to our engagement,” he said.

Vindman said policy problems started early on, with the United States allowing the denuclearization of Ukraine, which had inherited 4,000 nuclear weapons after the Soviet collapse only to give them up to Russia in 1994 in exchange for security guarantees from the United States, United Kingdom, and Russia.

Ambassador Victoria Nuland, chief of staff to the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State at the time of Ukraine's denuclearization, moderated the event. “The question I've asked myself a lot is, did we make a mistake?” Nuland said. “Was there a deal to be had where [Ukraine] could have retained at least a small nuclear arsenal for their own protection?”

Vindman didn't offer a specific answer to Nuland's questions, and he acknowledged that at the time, Ukraine lacked the financial capacity to maintain even a small nuclear arsenal.



Alexander Vindman speaking at a March 2024 press conference at the U.S. Capitol in support of funding for Ukraine. Photo by Michael Brochstein/Sipa USA via AP

But, he added: “I could say this with significant certainty. If Ukraine had even a small nuclear arsenal, almost certainly they wouldn’t be the victims of Russian war.”

Vindman’s critique of U.S. policies is covered in detail in his 2025 book, *The Folly of Realism: How the West Deceived Itself About Russia and Betrayed Ukraine*. Vindman retired from the U.S. Army in 2021 after suffering harassment from Trump and his followers. He pursued a doctorate at the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and *Folly of Realism* grew out of his dissertation research. It focuses on critical moments in history: the end of the Soviet Union, the denuclearization of Ukraine, Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, NATO expansion, and the Russia-Georgia war, through the Russian annexation of Crimea and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

“The reason that we seem to have been caught up in this moment,” he said, “is that we consistently succumb to misplaced hopes and misplaced fear.” ♦



**I could say this with significant certainty. If Ukraine had even a small nuclear arsenal, almost certainly they wouldn’t be the victims of Russian war.”**

# REFLEC

A former Harriman Director recalls his participation in U.S. soft power projects and considers the consequences of Trump's America First policy.



# TIONS

## ON U.S. SOFT POWER

by Timothy Frye

**E**ach day they arrived early: Uzbeks and Ukrainians, Georgians and Russians, lined up between temporary steel barricades to enter “Information USA,” a U.S. Department of State cultural exhibit that traveled across the Soviet Union from 1986 to 1988. Starved for accurate information due to vast censorship in the Soviet Union, they came to pepper me and the exhibit’s 23 other American guides with questions about Michael Jackson, Social Security, and U.S. policy in the Middle East.

“Why do people in the U.S. have to sleep on the streets?”

“Is Nancy Reagan really a Georgian?”

“How do you catch criminals if you have no internal passports?”

By the end of each day roughly 6,000 Soviets had seen their first copying machine, sparred with the American guides about the arms race, and left with a changed view of the United States. This was soft power in action, in the final years of the Cold War, when my Russian Studies training enabled me to become a first-hand witness to the unraveling of the Soviet Union. Over the years, I’ve had the good fortune to take part in several soft power efforts in the former Soviet space, and their effects have been transformative — on the world, and on me as well.

In international affairs, powerful countries use their military and economic might to get what they want. But for decades, the United States saw soft power — its ability to influence others by relying on culture, values, and persuasion — as its not-so-secret weapon. Successive U.S. governments sent musicians, ordinary citizens, and experts of all kinds on cultural exchanges and development programs to improve the U.S. image in ways that served broader policy goals. The Marshall Plan helped to rebuild Europe and create markets for the United States after the devastation of World War II. The Peace Corps sent 240,000 Americans to some of the poorest countries of the world to build goodwill and promote economic development. The President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), a program to end HIV globally, saved an estimated 26 million lives, mostly in Africa. For all their differences over policy, Republican and Democratic administrations believed in the power of U.S. values and culture as a force for good in the world.

But under the Trump administration, the weapon of soft power has not only been holstered; it has been dismantled. The White House has reduced the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. Institute of Peace, and Voice of America to empty shells and drastically cut funding for PEPFAR and the Peace Corps. The new Trump team at the U.S. Agency for Global Media even disconnected satellites carrying Radio Free Europe to Russia. Closer to our region, we see drastic cuts to funding for foreign language training, as well as cuts to academic research that benefited generations of scholars studying the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Rulers in Moscow and Beijing who for decades devoted vast

resources to undermining U.S. soft power can hardly believe their good luck.

Of course, political interests have always driven soft power. President John F. Kennedy created the Peace Corps in part to sway newly decolonized nations to side with the United States in its global battle against communism. President George W. Bush launched PEPFAR to burnish his image as a “compassionate conservative.”

But the Trump administration’s foreign aid policies are a stark departure. While prior administrations saw themselves as white-hatted heroes who ride in to save the day (albeit often with very mixed motives and results), the Trump team claims to be correcting perceived injustices and slights that supposedly have been heaped on America by enemies and allies alike. The current resident of the White House presents the United States as a victim that must be constantly on guard against a cruel, ungrateful world that only takes advantage of Washington’s supposed generosity and weakness.

To be sure, soft power has its limits, and it is often difficult to measure the impact of foreign aid and soft power projects. Culture, values, and ideas often work in subtle ways. But as Washington cancels its decades-long bipartisan promotion of soft power on a global scale, it is helpful to remind ourselves of the many and diverse benefits of U.S. soft power. Over the course of my career — from working for the State Department in the last days of the Soviet Union, to advising the Russian government during the excitement of the 1990s, to writing about Russia for more than 30 years in academia — I have seen the rise and fall of U.S. soft power.

### State Department Traveling Exhibits

From November 1987 until January 1989, I traveled to six Soviet cities, stopping for two months in each as part of “Information USA.” Often working in pavilions previously dedicated to the achievements of Soviet workers and scientists, we displayed fax machines, bar code readers, personal computers, and other forms of information technology to highlight how the free flow of information benefits daily life in the United States — and to draw a sharp contrast with the censorship of the Soviet Union.

“Information USA” was part of a long-standing cultural exchange organized by the U.S. Department of State and the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Soviet officials agreed to host the traveling exhibits only grudgingly, in hopes of getting concessions from the United States in other areas such as trade. From 1959 to 1979, and again from 1986 to 1991, the U.S. and Soviet governments exchanged traveling exhibits in hopes of improving their images among their rival populations. Soviet exhibits in the United States were not well funded and often sparsely attended, but the U.S. exhibits in the Soviet Union were a hit from day one. The first exhibit took place in Moscow in 1959 and featured the “Kitchen

Debate,” in which Nikita Khrushchev and Richard Nixon sparred in good humor over the affordability of dishwashers, access to housing, and whether the Soviet Union ultimately would surpass the United States.

Nineteen U.S. exhibits on design, photography, hand tools, and other topics rotated through Soviet cities, with themes changing every few years. The “American Exhibits,” as they were known, aimed to reach a cross-section of Soviet society with an emphasis on citizens beyond Moscow and St. Petersburg; think Rostov and Irkutsk, Tashkent and Tbilisi. The exhibits often displayed new technologies in accessible ways, allowing non-specialists to understand their use and importance. And the exhibits prioritized contact between ordinary U.S. and Soviet citizens. The American guides who staffed them and met with the Soviet public were chosen via written application and oral interviews, conducted in Russian. They came from all walks of life, including students, teachers, businesspeople, artists, and physicians. They were typical Americans, albeit Russian-speaking ones. The job came at just the right time for me, as I had recently finished my undergraduate degree and was looking for an adventure.

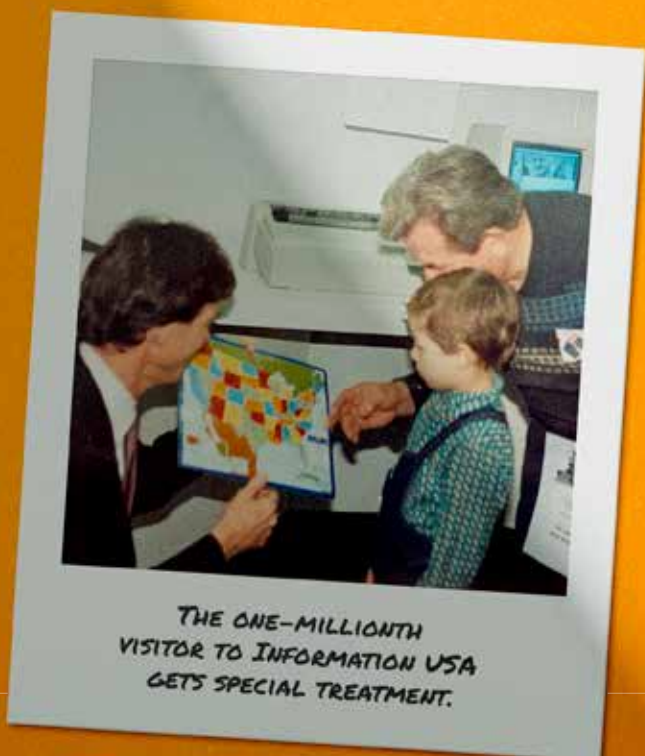
The cliché goes that diplomats are sent abroad to tell lies for their country, but the exhibit guides had different marching orders. We were told to describe U.S. policy as accurately as possible, but we were also encouraged to express our personal views on whether we agreed or disagreed with the policy. Many of the most powerful

moments during the exhibit were debates and disagreements among the guides themselves about U.S. foreign policy; I remember the surprise of our Soviet visitors when I argued with a fellow guide over U.S. policy in Central America.

The exhibits also offered a space for Soviets to discuss these issues among themselves, which they were much freer to do in the late Soviet era. In 1988 in Magnitogorsk, a Russian city that had been closed to foreigners for decades, I was reduced to the role of spectator as our guests debated the merits of conservative Politburo member Yegor Ligachev’s criticism of perestroika at the All-Union Communist Party Conference that year. In Leningrad a few months later, several guests almost came to blows over the effectiveness of public protests for greater freedom of speech.

The exhibits in general, and “Information USA” in particular, painted the United States as forward-looking, open, and tolerant. Our visitors were often staggered to learn that most guides in the exhibit voted in 1988 for Michael Dukakis rather than George Bush and that we were willing to criticize many aspects of U.S. politics rather than simply spout a party line.

It is hard to measure precisely the impact of soft power efforts like the exhibits on American foreign policy goals, but for decades U.S. government leaders clearly felt that they were important. Internal memos from the National Security Council argued that no broader exchange



**FOR ALL THEIR DIFFERENCES  
OVER POLICY, REPUBLICAN  
AND DEMOCRATIC  
ADMINISTRATIONS BELIEVED  
IN THE POWER OF U.S.  
VALUES AND CULTURE AS  
A FORCE FOR GOOD IN  
THE WORLD.**



NOT ALL SOVIET VISITORS TO THE EXHIBITS BECAME DISSIDENTS, OF COURSE, BUT THEY CAME IN LARGE NUMBERS AND OFTEN MORE THAN ONCE.

agreement with the Soviets could be concluded without the exhibits.

They also had an impact on Soviet society. Famed Soviet human rights activist Viktor Bukovsky claimed that he became a dissident after witnessing the first traveling exhibit in Moscow in 1959. Not all Soviet visitors to the exhibits became dissidents, of course, but they came in large numbers and often more than once. Our guests occasionally brought *znachki* (badges) and plastic bags with emblems, saved as souvenirs from past exhibits, to discuss with us. From time to time, I was asked about guides from past exhibits who had come through their city years earlier.

A less obvious impact: the exhibits produced a cadre of U.S. experts with deep knowledge of the Soviet Union and strong language skills who then went on to staff embassies, run businesses across Eurasia, and report for major news outlets. Former U.S. Ambassador to Russia (2008–2012) John Beyrle is part of the “Exhibit Guide Mafia,” as were Harriman Institute luminaries like Elizabeth Valkenier, a guide at the famed “Kitchen Debate” in Moscow, and former Harriman director Richard Ericson, a veteran of “Research and Development U.S.” in 1972. As for me, the exhibits not only improved my Russian language and public speaking skills, they provided a special window onto Soviet society and politics at a critical moment in world history and convinced me to apply to graduate school to study political science.

The traveling exhibits ended in 1991, and it is a stretch to say that they brought down the Soviet Union that same year. But really, how can we ever know? As Joseph Nye, the political scientist who coined the term “soft power,” observed in 2019: “The Berlin Wall collapsed not under an artillery barrage, but from hammers and bulldozers wielded by people whose minds had been affected by ideas that had penetrated the Iron Curtain over the preceding decades.” Surely the traveling exhibits were one of the most effective vehicles for promoting those ideas.

### International Broadcasting

Government funded broadcasts like Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) have long been key to U.S. soft power efforts. Founded during World War II, Voice of America broadcast news about the United States to a global audience, while Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty came on line in 1950 and broadcast more politically pointed news toward Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, respectively.

While the traveling exhibits operated in a black-and-white world of communism versus capitalism, U.S. efforts to win hearts and minds in the Soviet Union became more complicated following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Soviet television and press were attracting large audiences by discussing previously forbidden topics, like

Stalin-era purges, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, and corruption in the Communist Party. For the first time, U.S. soft power efforts faced competition from Soviet media for listeners seeking an alternative to Communist propaganda, and RFE/RL had to adapt.

In the summer of 1990, I had just finished my first year at the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) and the Harriman Institute and was looking for ways to put my academic training and experience as an exhibit guide to good use. With a little luck, I found the perfect summer job at RFE/RL in Munich: writing articles for a weekly magazine that reported on events in the Soviet Union. I shared an office with the legendary expert on Russian labor, Elizabeth Teague, and worked just down the hall from the spot where in 1981 a team of Basque terrorists—financed by the Romanian government and led by the Venezuelan terrorist Ilyich Ramirez Sanchez, aka “Carlos the Jackal”—detonated a bomb that injured four RFE/RL staffers. My ten weeks at “the Radios” in Munich, though, were peaceful.

This was an especially interesting moment for the Radios. Many RFE/RL researchers and radio personalities were political dissidents who had left the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe in the 1970s and felt increasingly out of touch due to the rapid changes underway in their home countries. Their expertise on the “ins and outs” of the Politburo and their aging contacts in their homelands were becoming less useful as political change swept the region.

I had just spent 15 months in the Soviet Union, and they questioned me like an explorer freshly returned from a newly discovered territory. “Can you really travel freely outside of Moscow?” “What was Irkutsk like?” they wondered.

Rather than writing about ideology or the Communist Party, longtime staples of RFE/RL reports, the other summer interns and I focused on burgeoning movements for autonomy in the Baltics, efforts to create media programs to challenge the Soviet press, and attempts to conduct economic reforms that took power from state planners and gave them to new entrepreneurs—topics we knew from our recent travels were under intense discussion within the services’ audience.

I was especially interested in the creation of new political institutions, such as the Moscow and Leningrad City Soviets. For the first time, voters (rather than the Communist Party) chose the members of the local Soviets, and I explored the electoral strategies that brought anti-communist politicians to power. I published profiles of politicians like Leningrad Mayor Anatolii Sobchak and analyzed reforms to local and regional government. Events compelled us to take on novel topics, and we all recognized the importance of the moment. We felt like we were writing not only for our contemporaries but for future historians as well.

Did our work have an impact? Did the Radios foster political change in the region? The Kremlin’s longstanding, overheated rhetoric attacking these broadcasts is one measure of the success of U.S. international broadcasting efforts. Kremlin propagandists referred to the Voice of America as the “Voice of Lies,” (*Golos Lzhi*), while Soviet cartoonists depicted broadcasters in the form of a hideous snake in an Uncle Sam hat. Extensive Soviet jamming efforts gave further evidence of the importance of international broadcasting to U.S. goals.

Despite the jamming, the Soviet public tuned in. Estimates suggest that RFE/RL had 35 million listeners across the globe during the Cold War, with a large portion of them in the Soviet Union. During the Solidarity strikes of 1981 in Poland, one report noted that roughly two-thirds of Poles tuned in to Radio Free Europe. Even today, in an era marked by a tsunami of information from a range of sources, RFE/RL reports that in 2025 around 9 percent of adult Russians and one quarter of Ukrainians tuned in to their broadcasts.

Russian President Boris Yeltsin clearly thought foreign broadcasts helped drive political change. On Radio Liberty’s fortieth anniversary in 1993, he proclaimed: “It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of Radio Liberty’s contribution to the destruction of the totalitarian Soviet regime.” Similarly, Lech Wałęsa, who was elected as Poland’s first post-communism president in 1990, said at the time that “the degree [of RFE’s influence] cannot even be described. Would there be an Earth without the sun?”

The impact of Radio Liberty was also felt at the ballot box. One academic study from 2015 found that because atmospheric conditions often made Soviet jamming efforts ineffective, access to Radio Liberty varied a great deal across Russia. The researcher, Javier Garcia-Arenas, found that electoral districts where Russians had better access to Radio Liberty were much less likely to vote for communist candidates in the presidential elections in 1991 and 1996.

The Radios also changed my course. Given the excitement around the topics I was covering, I lobbied to stay on in Munich as an analyst and to put off finishing graduate school, but my boss, Paul Goble, discouraged me. He said that to understand the changes underway in the Soviet Union I would have to develop new skills. I would have to learn about democracy and markets. I would have to become competent in statistics and research methods. And graduate school, he said, was the best way to do that. He was right. Shortly thereafter, I returned to Columbia to start the Ph.D. program in Political Science.

### Rule of Law and Democracy Promotion in the 1990s

U.S. soft power projects in Eurasia peaked in the 1990s with efforts to promote rule of law, civil society, and democracy. Without an ideological rival to orient its ef-

forts, the U.S. government took on tasks that far exceeded past programs. The goals were much larger than the Cold War-era efforts that focused primarily on improving the image of the United States among Soviet citizens. Now, U.S. foreign policy's ambition was nothing less than to help build a democratic Russia, with a strong rule of law, that would be amenable to better relations with the United States. The scale and complexity of these efforts were staggering. As one longtime rule-of-law reform expert told the Carnegie Foundation's Tom Carothers: "We know how to do a lot of things, but deep down we don't really know what we are doing."

In the 1990s Moscow was awash with consultants ("advizery") and what one friend called "Arturchiki," accountants for Arthur Anderson—all working on various USAID-supported projects. At the time, I had begun research for a dissertation on the emerging commodities, equities, and futures markets in Russia and landed a short-term position at the Russian Federal Securities and Exchange Commission in 1995–1996. We worked in a cavernous auditorium that shared space with the Gaidar Institute on Economic Policy, just down the street from Moscow's first McDonald's and the Main Telegraph Station on Gazetny Pereulok in central Moscow. In those offices, a large number of Russian accountants, economists, and legal experts, along with a small number of foreign advisers, designed plans to build a market infrastructure so that brokers could trade shares in Russia's recently privatized companies.

We were especially interested in understanding how brokers traded with each other when the state was too weak to enforce contracts. Indeed, brokers worked with the understanding that all trades raised the possibility of disputes and the involvement of big men with big guns. At the time, mafia-like organizations and private security agencies hired by powerful new owners were a potential threat in any major economic deal. To help increase trust on the equities market, USAID and the Russian brokers association, known as NAUFOR, installed an electronic trading platform that allowed brokers to share information about their past trades with other brokers, so that everyone could identify who was a trustworthy counterpart and who was not. By allowing brokers to create a reputation for fulfilling their contracts that others could see, the system was supposed to spur trading on the market.

To see whether this project worked as predicted, I traveled across Moscow to conduct surveys of brokers. In long interviews, fueled by tea for me and cigarettes for my subjects, I asked about how they identified trustworthy partners, how they resolved disputes that inevitably arose, and whether they had experienced physical threats on the job. Some brokers were from prominent firms, like Merrill Lynch and Credit Suisse-First Boston, but it was more fun to speak with the home-grown Russian upstarts, like Grant, Olma, and Rinako-Plus. As I documented in my

book *Brokers and Bureaucrats: Building Market Institutions in Russia*, brokers on this market rarely violated contracts with each other, even if they were not always as forthcoming as they should have been with their clients. NAUFOR survived the financial crashes of 1998 and became a building block for Russia's small capital market; the association exists to this day.

Ultimately, most efforts at promoting democracy and the rule of law in Russia failed. These overly ambitious projects collapsed under the weight of vested interests, the communist legacy, a lack of technical expertise, and the simple complexity of rebuilding a society after seventy years of Soviet rule. The failure of rule-of-law programs hit home to me when I interviewed a banker at Incombank who wore a thinly disguised bulletproof vest covered in wool to look like a normal sweater vest.

The creation of a small but functioning Russian securities market was a rare example of a successful reform effort that lasted over time. This program not only helped to promote the market, it also trained a new generation of Russian economists, accountants, and regulators who ended up taking positions not only within the Russian state, but also in Russian and U.S. businesses. It was a rare bright spot, but bright nonetheless. It also had a direct benefit for me: the broker surveys I conducted for this project became a chapter in my Ph.D. dissertation and first book.

### The End of Soft Power

However one judges the successes and failures of U.S. reform programs in the 1990s, efforts to promote democracy and the rule of law overseas have come to an end. In July 2025, just months after dismantling USAID, the State Department terminated nearly all programs of its Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. Andrew Roth, writing in the *Guardian*, succinctly noted that this move "effectively ends the department's role in funding pro-democracy programming in some of the world's most hostile totalitarian nations."

Of course, it would be wrong to romanticize soft power. On its own, its impact may be limited. Nye, the soft-power guru, summed up the concept when writing in 2023 about the age-old debate over whether it is better to be feared or loved. "In today's world," Nye wrote, "it is best to be both."

The impact of soft-power programs also depends on how well they are designed. Some are more effective than others; some fail because they do not take into account financial realities or the difficulty of building strong democratic institutions in a place with powerful vested interests that have other agendas. Attempts to introduce jury trials, retrain judges, and create more independent courts in Russia all went awry. Efforts to promote free media in Russia—at least partially successful in the

## THE EXHIBITS PRODUCED A CADRE OF U.S. EXPERTS WITH DEEP KNOWLEDGE OF THE SOVIET UNION AND STRONG LANGUAGE SKILLS WHO THEN WENT ON TO STAFF EMBASSIES, RUN BUSINESSES ACROSS EURASIA, AND REPORT FOR MAJOR NEWS OUTLETS.



FRYE MAKING TRAVEL PLANS WITH  
FELLOW TRAVEL GUIDE ELIZABETH KAIN.  
(PHOTO COURTESY OF KAIN)

1990s—were eventually strangled by a hostile Kremlin under Vladimir Putin (though many of the hundreds of independent journalists who have fled Putin’s Russia continue their reporting from exile).

In addition, soft power can be abused. The recent documentary *Soundtrack to a Coup*, depicts how Washington enlisted American cultural icons like Louis Armstrong to improve the image of the United States in the Congo even as the American government was plotting to overthrow Congo’s leaders.

Yet for decades soft power and foreign aid were successful and cheap tools for U.S. foreign policy. According to the Brookings Institution, while many Americans estimate that up to 25 percent of the federal budget is spent on foreign aid, the actual figure is less than 1 percent. The Trump administration has successfully exploited the ignorance of the public about foreign aid to its advantage.

### Are Cuts in Funding Really the Problem?

Upon deeper reflection, soft power efforts by America may no longer work under current circumstances, even with generous funding. Soft power requires having a good story to tell. For decades, U.S. soft power advocates could tell a compelling tale of a country with a powerful economy and a flawed but robust democracy. They could point to programs

to promote human rights abroad and strong legal institutions at home, even if these efforts often came up short.

But the United States is hardly a model of democratic success in the eyes of the world today. The assault on the U.S. Capitol in January 2021, sharp and increasingly violent partisan political conflict, and erosion of democratic institutions all weigh heavily in assessments of the United States around the world. Pew Global surveys from 2025 reveal sharp declines in the favorability of the United States, with the steepest drops in countries that had close relationships with the United States in the recent past. Pew reports that “across 24 countries, a median of 34% of adults have a lot or some confidence in U.S. President Donald Trump to do the right thing regarding world affairs. Around six-in-ten (62%) have little or no confidence in Trump.”

In the current moment, the best way to promote U.S. interests and democracy abroad over the long term may not be to deploy soft power, but to get our own house in order. With a U.S. government that is ostensibly putting America First—and the rest of the world a very distant last—soft power and foreign aid are much harder sells. The United States will be worse for it, and so will the world.

**Timothy Frye** is Marshall D. Shulman Professor of Post-Soviet Foreign Policy, a former director of the Harriman Institute (2009-2015), and an alumnus (Ph.D., GSAS, 1997). ♦



# USAID SPENT MORE THAN \$1 BILLION TO BUILD DEMOCRACY IN MOLDOVA

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In the wake of the American agency's dismantling, experts worry about how the absence of U.S. assistance will affect Moldova's future.

BY CORINA CEPOI

# WHAT HAPPENS NOW?

Then-U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken joined Moldovan President Maia Sandu for a joint press conference in Chisinau in May 2024. Blinken visited Moldova to show strong U.S. support for the country's Western aspirations. Photo by Vadim Shirda/POOL/AFP



When the Trump administration targeted U.S. foreign aid programs for oblivion in early 2025, aid defenders predicted alarming consequences. Among them: Millions of people, in places ranging from Vietnam, to Uganda, to Haiti, would be at risk if America ended programs to vaccinate children and fight HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, and other infectious diseases.

But in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, the predictions were different: Most likely at risk were the democratic institutions that Western aid has sought to foster in the region since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Now that the administration has made its sweeping cuts, Moldova, the small, landlocked former Soviet republic sandwiched between Romania and Ukraine, is one barometer to watch for the impact. There, a pro-European Union government won a vital election victory in September 2025 despite Russia's vigorous efforts to spread political disinformation and interfere in the balloting. While pro-democracy forces could celebrate that victory, no one expects Russia to abandon efforts to bring Moldova into its sphere of influence, and the U.S. foreign aid cuts create an opening for Russia's operations to have more impact in the future.

Since the end of the Cold War, U.S. assistance to Moldova (as well as the region at large) has focused to a large degree on democracy promotion and the building of institutions needed to sustain it: free and fair election processes, independent media, judicial reform, anti-corruption enforcement, and protections for human rights. Among the leading American agencies supporting these programs were the now largely defunct U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the State Department, the U.S. Agency for Global Media (the parent agency for the embattled Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty), and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

A balance sheet for the decades of work and billions of dollars of aid sent to Eastern Europe and Eurasia would show mixed results, to say the least, in spreading democracy. At one end, U.S. and other Western support has helped the small Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia become solid members of NATO and the European Union. At the other end is giant Russia, where optimistic pro-democracy programs of the 1990s have all crumbled under the increasingly autocratic rule of Vladimir Putin.

Somewhere in between lies Moldova, where for years after independence, voters kept swinging their allegiance between pro-EU leaders and corrupt oligarchs, the latter often aligned with Russia. Though voters had twice elected pro-EU President Maia Sandu and had narrowly approved a referendum in 2024 endorsing Moldova's bid to join the EU, the parliamentary elections of September 2025 were predicted to be extremely close—and vulnerable to Russian interference.

"A Defining Vote in a Fragile Democracy," is how the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change described the ballot, where "Moscow's intensifying hybrid interference" could "determine whether the country stays on course to join the European Union or veers down a different path."

European concerns about the elections may have been fed by President Donald Trump's early 2025 decision to kill most of America's soft power aid programs aimed at countering Russian influence. In his 2025 State of the Union address, Trump cited "\$32 million for a left-wing propaganda operation in Moldova" as an example of "appalling waste" in U.S. foreign aid. Although the president didn't specify what he was referring to, it's likely the so-called "propaganda operation" was a USAID program to help Moldova conduct free and fair elections. Over the years, U.S. funding has trained monitors and supported the institutions that oversee Moldova's elections; Trump's abrupt aid cuts eliminated that support just months before the September 2025 ballot, sending election overseers scrambling for other resources to monitor the vote. The need for election vigilance was apparent as Russia bombarded the country with disinformation, such as unsubstantiated claims that President Sandu was schizophrenic. And less than a week before the polls opened, Moldovan officials arrested 74 people, charging they were part of a Russian plot to incite "mass riots" and disrupt the balloting.

In spite of the risks to democracy in Moldova and many other countries, Trump made his move to cut foreign aid shortly after naming Elon Musk head of an unofficial Department of Government Efficiency. Musk quickly took aim at USAID, calling it a "criminal organization." Trump chimed in that it was "run by a bunch of radical lunatics."

But many Moldovans who believe the country belongs in the European Union (as many as 63 percent in one 2025 survey) value the aid received from the United States.

“It’s no exaggeration to say that we have democracy in Moldova, in part thanks to American financial support,” Valeriu Pasa, the chairman of the Chisinau-based think-tank WatchDog, said in late January 2025. The United States, Pasa said, benefits “from us being more democratic and developed, ensuring we don’t turn into a Russian or Chinese colony.”

Such arguments did nothing to stop the dismantling of USAID and other aid programs—a process carried out without “considering the risks and damages to countries like Moldova,” said Igor Botan, executive director of the Association for Participatory Democracy in Chisinau, and “even though Moldova had a special relationship with the U.S. benefitting from economic and other types of support.”

The pro-EU win in the 2025 elections has created a temporary sense of relief among European leaders and pro-EU Moldovans. Analysts credit the victory in part to the coverage of Moldovan and foreign investigative media—which worked to expose Russia’s interference efforts and domestic corruption—and also to European leaders, who, after the Trump administration rolled back U.S. foreign aid, stepped in to fill much of the financial gap for the election protection efforts in Moldova. But even with the pro-EU Maia Sandu in power, it remains to be seen how Moldova’s democratic institutions will be affected by the loss of U.S. aid. And it’s a given that Russia will keep trying to pull Moldova into its orbit.

**V**oice of America, RFE/RL and the various language services of America’s international broadcasting were long viewed as among America’s most potent soft power tools in its battle against Soviet Communism. Then, at the end of the Cold War, some argued that these programs had served their purpose and could be eliminated. But Eastern European leaders such as Lech Wałęsa and Vaclav Havel urged America to keep them in place. Communism may have fallen, but new institutions had to be built, and there were no guarantees they would follow examples of Western democracy.

Independence also did not resolve thorny regional conflicts left over from the Soviet era, like the status of Transnistria, a sliver of territory between Moldova and Ukraine where a Russian military base and a Soviet-era ammunition depot remained after independence. Though Transnistria is multiethnic, Russian language dominates, and the region has established its own currency, education system, and other structures inspired by Russia (though neither Russia nor any other country has ever recognized it as a state officially independent from Moldova).

As the Transnistrian conflict continued to simmer, Moldovans in the 1990s had to come to grips with the reality of independence. With a population of just 2.9 million at the time (currently closer to 2.4 million, due to the “brain drain” of Moldovans leaving for other more prosperous European countries) and an economy that put it near the bottom of Europe in terms of wealth, indepen-



Promo-LEX short-term election observers on the day of Parliamentary elections held in the town of Cahul, Moldova in September 2025. Photo courtesy of Promo-LEX

dence euphoria was fleeting. Many were nostalgic for the Soviet, pre-planned past of their youth, when jobs and housing—however inadequate they might have been—were guaranteed by the state. There was little patience for promised reforms that were slow to deliver on privatizing state property, land reform, and political change. Demands for free school lunches, heat assistance in winter, and health programs to combat diseases such as tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS competed for money and attention.

In the early years of independence, the United States stepped in with aid meant to address some of these issues. A USAID timeline of its work in Moldova lists 130 projects it funded over 30 years. (According to Moldovan Prime Minister Dorin Recean, USAID had allocated more than \$1 billion in Moldova before most aid ended in 2025.)

The first USAID projects in Moldova began just two years after independence in 1993, and their focus reflected some of the most pressing needs of that time: helping the country privatize property and enterprises; restructuring the collective farms of the Soviet era; and teaching entrepreneurship to farmers. Other programs promised assistance in reforming accounting and commercial law or offered social support in the form of food aid, health insurance, or reproductive health programs for women.

By the early 2000s, the USAID timeline shows some significant shifts, with more programs focused on economic development and better governance—

reform of telecommunications, strengthening digital security of government records, and developing resources that would make Moldova less dependent on Russian energy. But Moldovans still struggled economically, and many who sought to leave to seek better opportunities fell prey to human traffickers; USAID was among the global agencies whose efforts eventually eased the trafficking crisis.

Along the way, USAID funded a variety of programs aimed at promoting civic engagement in politics, ensuring free and fair elections, and reforming the judicial system by vetting judges (some of whom were pressured to leave the bench after investigations exposed corrupt behavior). USAID also started prioritizing the development of some of Moldova's most important economic sectors—wine, information technology, and fashion. The wine industry is a great example of a successful U.S. soft power effort. As recently as 30 years ago, Moldova's wine exports went mostly to Russia. After USAID programs promoted the production of better-quality wines and effective ways to market them, the bulk of Moldova's wine exports now go to western countries. Shifts like these were designed to reduce Russia's economic and political influence in Moldova, and they were ushered along with programs sponsored by USAID.

In the wake of the 2025 parliamentary elections, Moldovan officials expressed gratitude to the European Union and individual European countries that had denounced Russian interference and offered assistance to help ensure free and fair balloting. There was also praise for Moldovan investigative journalists, a small community fostered with financial support from the United States and other foreign governments that has played a key role in building a democratic foundation in Moldova.

One of the most ambitious journalistic investigations came in 2024, when President Maia Sandu ran for reelection to a second term, and voters cast ballots in a referendum on whether the country should continue efforts to join the European Union. As usual in recent Moldovan elections, competition was fierce between Sandu's pro-EU Party of Action and Solidarity and other parties whose platforms shun the EU in favor of strengthening Moldova's ties to Russia.

Ultimately, Sandu and the campaign for EU membership won narrowly in the balloting. But in the wake of those victories, police launched an investigation into some bombshell allegations: that Russian-backed forces paid tens of thousands of Moldovans in an unsuccessful campaign to defeat Sandu. Eventually some 25,000 voters were fined for accepting bribes for their votes—though the accused mastermind of the scheme, oligarch Ilan Shor, avoided punishment because he lives in exile in Russia. (Shor fled Moldova to avoid a prison sentence for his role in a scheme that stole a stunning \$1 billion from Moldovan banks in 2014.)

The vote-buying scandal was revealed by undercover investigative journalists for *Ziarul de Garda* (ZdG) one of several independent media outlets supported over the years by grants from the American embassy in Chisinau, USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy, and European funders. To the extent that watchdog and investigative journalism exists in Moldova, exposing corruption and monitoring the performance of elected officials, it is largely thanks to ZdG, Agora, NewsMaker, RISE Moldova, CU SENS, and others in the limited sphere of independent media. But their resources, and the size of their audiences, are overshadowed by the more than 50 percent of Moldovan media controlled by wealthy politicians or businessmen.

The independents are long on enthusiasm but always short on funding. To address that issue, in 2017 USAID initiated a new program, MEDIA-M, aimed at helping them learn new business and management skills. Internews, a U.S.-based NGO created to work globally on media development, won the



USAID contract for MEDIA-M. The journalists, legal experts, and others—some local, some brought in from Romania, Ukraine, and other European countries—focused on how to establish human resources policies, develop strategic planning, and build systems for digital and physical security. Oligarchs held political sway at that time, and legal training for the independent journalists was also crucial, as they faced lawsuits from officials and others for exposing corruption.

A frequent target was the indefatigable journalist Alina Radu, who had previously reported for state and private media outlets, leaving those jobs when politicians intervened to dictate how the news should be covered. In 2004, with a small grant from the Romanian government and not much else in the way of resources, she and a friend founded *Ziarul de Garda* as an investigative newspaper. Somehow, with support from various western embassies and other donors in Europe, it survived to 2017, when MEDIA-M started.

ZdG began covering more breaking news and using video as part of its storytelling, which helped build its audience—and reduce, to some degree, reliance on foreign funding. Then, in 2024, came its bombshell story, based on undercover reporting by a ZdG staffer who worked in the Russia-backed network that paid people to attend anti-Sandu rallies and to vote against



One-pager of the USAID funded project Comunitatea Mea (My Community) implemented by IREX in Moldova.



Children walk by a banner for a USAID-supported project extending the fire hydrant network in the village of Sireti, Moldova, in January 2025. AP Photo/Aurel Obreja

the president and her drive for EU membership. The news was so sensational that it couldn't be ignored by other media; videos made by the ZdG site were played on broadcast media throughout Moldova, and the site's coverage of the vote-buying scandal won awards in Europe for investigative journalism.

Radu says ZdG is able to carry out such investigations in part because of what she learned "from American organizations: management skills, proper planning, and transparency." But now, she said, "the same American organizations canceled the funding with no warning."

The abrupt manner in which funding ended, and the hostile rhetoric from Elon Musk and President Trump, had a fallout effect for Radu. While her site won praise in 2024, including from Moldovan police and the speaker of parliament, pro-Russian parliamentarians launched a vocal attack campaign in 2025, denouncing ZdG as a criminal organization — because it was funded by USAID, another "criminal" organization (as characterized by Musk).

In the months following the Trump soft power cuts, ZdG and other independents remained in business, but the sea change in U.S. policy and funding sent a chilling signal. "It felt like the Russian and the U.S. governments allied over attacking the independent press," said Radu.

The cuts in USAID and other funding had wide-ranging immediate effects in Moldova. Several infrastructure projects lost funding, including \$300 million in USAID money to reduce Moldova's energy dependence on Russia (though the United States later said it would restore \$130 million of the USAID program to build a high voltage power line to Romania that would connect Moldova to the European electricity grid).

**"WE'RE GRATEFUL TO THE U.S. FOR ITS PAST GENEROUS SUPPORT. IT'S U.S. MONEY, SO IT'S THEIR DECISION TO CONTINUE GIVING IT OR NOT. SOME ADVANCE NOTICE WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER, THOUGH."**

Some cuts, made just months before the crucial parliamentary elections, had the potential to affect the campaign. Promo-LEX, a nonpartisan NGO that has monitored Moldovan elections for more than 20 years, lost the U.S. funding that was its main revenue source. The monitors were still functioning for the September ballot, though, thanks to emergency funding provided by European governments (and some from the United Nations). But how it will be funded going forward is unknown, said Promo-LEX founder Ion Manole.

"We're grateful to the U.S. for its past generous support. It's U.S. money, so it's their decision to continue giving it or not," said Manole. "Some advance notice would have been better, though."

The Moldovan parliamentary elections results have proven that investments supporting democratic processes, including in media literacy, countering disinformation campaigns, and supporting independent content providers, have a real impact. The EU and individual European countries understood that when Promo-LEX and others sought their support to make up for the U.S. cuts. The 2025 parliamentary elections gave special urgency to those requests. But the impact of U.S. cuts continues well beyond last year's election emergency, and Moldova's long-term political future remains very unclear.

**Corina Cepoi** has over 25 years of experience in media development and strategic leadership, including managing the Internews MEDIA-M project in Moldova. She founded the School of Journalism in Moldova and served as director of the country's Independent Journalism Centre for 12 years. ♦

# PULLING THE PLUG

BY  
THOMAS  
KENT

THE U.S. RETREAT FROM INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING IS A GIFT TO RUSSIA'S DISINFORMATION EFFORTS.

**R**ussian officials rejoiced when the Trump administration took a wrecking ball to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) in early 2025. The two institutions were fundamental elements of America's soft power, symbols of American generosity on the ground and commitment to the ideals of democracy.

What's more, the Trump administration gave Russian President Vladimir Putin a gift. It asked nothing in return for kneecapping U.S. foreign aid and shutting off American communication to vast parts of the world. The United States didn't ask Russia to rein in the state media outlets RT or the Sputnik news agency, which spread Russian propaganda across the globe, while Russia was left to continue its influence operations at scale, just with far less counter-messaging from the United States.



**R**ussia even leveraged the fact that the U.S. institutions had been shut down for propaganda purposes. It declared that President Donald Trump's actions validated what the Kremlin had claimed all along: that the real agenda of U.S. broadcasters and aid programs was to force liberal values on other nations and turn them against Russia.

"Even the Americans" now view USAID as "undesirable, indecent, and corrupt," said Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova. Margarita Simonyan of RT praised Trump's "awesome decision" on U.S. broadcasting and said her staff was celebrating.

Russia could also celebrate the shutdown in April 2025 of the Global Engagement Center, the State Department unit devoted to working with allies to counter foreign disinformation.

Trump's rout of U.S. soft power was devastating but not complete, at least not yet. The State Department took over some of USAID's humanitarian programs. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the U.S. broadcaster focusing on Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, remained on the air with funds ordered by a court, but had to cut back staff and programming. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED),

which funds pro-democracy activity worldwide, continued to stagger along after severe cuts to its budget.

However, damage to U.S. broadcasting overall and to America's main foreign aid agency was shattering. In Moldova, where U.S. information outlets competed intensively with Russian media, the visibility of the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty content on Romanian- and Russian-language search engines fell significantly. The United Kingdom, France, Germany, and other Western nations have international broadcasting services, but they fall well short of the 60-plus language services the United States offered. If the administration's efforts to close RFE/RL succeed, there will be no Western broadcasting in several Eurasian and Eastern European languages.

What opportunities does this create for Russia?

First, the Kremlin will face less competition in the global information war. The U.S. broadcasters — which in fact did much of their work through websites, social networks and video clips — pushed back daily on Russian narratives. As president of RFE/RL from 2016 to 2018, my job was to keep our reporting reliable and honest. But we were committed to reporting on corruption and human rights — coverage that outraged authoritarian rulers in the countries we served.



Steve Lodge, son of the late Voice of America Capitol Hill correspondent Robert Lodge, protests budget cuts outside VOA headquarters in Washington, D.C., March 17, 2025  
Photo by Andrew Leyden/NurPhoto via AP

Russia and its allies will also benefit from the likely disappearance of dozens of pro-democracy NGOs and news outlets that had been supported by USAID, NED, and U.S. embassies. USAID committed \$16.8 billion to Eastern Europe and Eurasia in 2023, the vast majority of it for Ukraine but with significant amounts for Moldova, Georgia, and other countries heavily targeted by Russian propaganda.

The NGOs promoted good governance and civil society, battled corruption, and encouraged positive sentiments toward the United States. The news outlets held local politicians to account, exposed Russian influence operations, and monitored the integrity of elections—sometimes with important political impact. In late 2024, for example, an undercover investigation by the newspaper *Ziarul de Garda*, a USAID grantee, exposed vote-buying by pro-Russian interests in Moldova (see story on p. 16 for context). Its exposé, widely shared on social media, led to headlines across the country and a police investigation.

U.S. international broadcasters sometimes provided political cover for such investigative reporting. When local outlets feared an exposé could bring retaliation against them by government officials or corrupt businessmen, they sometimes shared their reporting with the U.S. networks and let them break the story first. This enabled local media to subsequently “back into” the story more safely. They might lead with the targets’ denial of wrongdoing, but then add additional information that further exposed the malfeasance.

But now, with the pro-democracy media ecosystem weakened, Russia and other authoritarian states in the region will likely seek to hijack its audience. They will expand their own media offerings to capture citizens looking for new outlets to follow. And they will seek to rewire the independent journalism funded and fostered for more than three decades by U.S. soft power.

Western programs, many supported by USAID, had been the gold standard in journalism training. They emphasized Western traditions of journalistic neutrality and objectivity, and they tutored reporters in investigative techniques that helped them uncover government corruption and other malfeasance. Now Russia will seek to take charge and impart its own idea of journalism. A new RT Academy opened in February 2024, offering seven free online courses for journalists with more than 100 how-to videos. The academy also has held on-site seminars in Indonesia, Mali, China, India, and Ethiopia.

RT describes Western training as aimed at imposing Western values and concerns on Global South media. A video promo for RT’s Africa course portrayed Western media as fixated on the “same narrative” of climate change, sanctions against Russia, and LGBTQ+ issues. In contrast, RT says its training shows more respect for local interests and sensibilities, offering an “alternative perspective” by concentrating on day-to-day African news and Russia’s role in the region. The

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curriculum at a pilot training session included showing how “famous news agencies like CNN, the BBC, and Deutsche Welle use fake news and spread this information worldwide.”

The Sputnik news agency runs its own training program, SputnikPro, that it says has reached more than 10,000 participants from 80 countries.

Russia has also begun to penetrate the Western world of journalistic fact-checking. In 2024 three Russian organizations created the Global Fact-Checking Network, an unabashed effort to copy the long-established International Fact-Checking Network based in Florida. The goal: to unite fact-checkers “who share our views and values.” The Russian organization’s website highlights what it says are fake stories by Western news organizations.

As of November 2025 the Russian network claimed to consist of nearly 100 individuals and organizations from 50 countries, compared to the U.S.-based organization’s accreditation of more than 140 organizations from 65 countries.

This year Facebook cut back its financial support to fact-checking organizations, and Google decided not to feature fact checks with its search results. The two events had dealt a blow to fact-checkers even before the creation of the Russian competitor, which presumably will be supported with Kremlin money.



News anchor Eunan O'Neill at Russia Today's Moscow office.  
Photo by Iliya Pitalev/Sputnik via AP, November 2017

As for the destruction of USAID, Russia will try to fill some of the void with its own assistance programs, though it faces a steep climb. Russia's foreign aid, doled out by a variety of agencies, is estimated at about \$1 billion a year—a far cry from USAID's budget of \$23 billion in 2024. However, Yevgeny Primakov, the head of one of the agencies, said in a July interview that Russia was designing “the next iteration” of Russian foreign aid with “a format analogous to USAID”—perhaps a single, larger agency with a higher international profile.

Russian aid does face obstacles. Russia has never been much inclined to the well-digging, seed-distributing work of development aid. Considering the substantial cost of aid programs, officials in Moscow might well ask what result more aid would bring that can't be accomplished by propaganda, arms sales, and suborning foreign politicians.

It is early to judge the full effect of the Trump administration's actions against USAID and the international broadcasters. Britain, France, Germany, the Nordic nations, and others have long contributed to pro-democracy NGOs and media outlets. The European Union and its member countries provide close to \$100 billion in foreign aid annually, more than USAID did. But the loss of U.S. contributions will hurt, especially since some other Western countries have been reducing their foreign aid.

However, foreign funding of pro-democracy NGOs and media always had drawbacks for the recipients. They lived at constant risk of grants not being renewed. They were vulnerable to accusations by Putin, Hungary's Victor Orbán, and others that they were carrying out the agendas of foreign nations. And the foreign funding made them targets of laws like those in Russia and Georgia, and threatened in Hungary, that severely restrict the activities of so-called “foreign agents.”

“The worldwide USAID scandal ... has made it obvious that we should fully reclaim our country,” Mamuka Mdinardze, chair of the ruling Georgian Dream party, said in February 2025, trying to justify the party's own crackdown by citing Trump administration actions. Three months later, Georgia passed its “foreign agent” law, which foreign-supported NGOs and media saw as a threat to their existence.

Even when USAID, NED, and U.S. international broadcasting were running at full throttle, liberal democracy was precarious at best in many Eurasian countries. Think tank reports talked constantly of “democratic backsliding,” the successes of pro-Russia populists, and nostalgia for Soviet days. Millions of dollars were poured into economic aid and international broadcasting aimed at promoting Western-style freedoms and wariness of Russia.

Despite all that spending to promote democracy, the West held its breath repeatedly as voters went to the polls in Poland, Slovakia, Romania, Moldova, Bulgaria, Czechia, Georgia, and elsewhere. Sometimes they chose pro-Western leaders, sometimes politicians with sympathies to Moscow. In its 2025 annual report, the Washington-based human rights monitor Freedom House listed only five former members of the Soviet bloc as fully free: Romania, Bulgaria, and the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

Perhaps the problem was not too little spending on aid or pro-democracy efforts, but rather that Russia and the West were playing two entirely different games. U.S. and European communicators advanced positive narratives: the benefits a given country had already reaped from its ties to the West, and the prospect of much more progress if the country ended corruption, adopted liberal ideals, and maintained a strong front against Russia.

Pro-Russian actors built their messages on grievance and cynicism, fueled by the persistent economic gulf between countries in the region and wealthy developed nations. They argued that further largesse from the West depended on giving visibility to LGBTQ+ communities and welcoming ever more impoverished migrants—moves many citizens strongly opposed. Pro-Russian personalities and Russia-friendly governments such as Georgia's, also fanned fears that strong stances against Russia could lead to violent confrontation, perhaps making them into new Ukraines.

The West long prided itself on responding to Russian propaganda with “the facts.” In contrast, Russia's messaging was highly emotional—not always on topic, but stiletto-like in its sarcasm and highly shareable on social media. Russia adapted its narratives to play on the long-standing prejudices and insecurities of the country at issue. Many felt Russian communication authentically reflected their sense of anger and injustice, while Western messages sounded like preaching from somewhere outside their reality.

Going forward, however, Russia faces a United States that is changing its game. Under Trump, Washington has spoken little about spreading democracy and liberal values. It has replaced these aims with an America First agenda that emphasizes trade, self-help, and conservative values. It sees populist parties in Europe as potential allies rather than a danger.

This course betrays decades of U.S. policy but also means Russia no longer will be able to pilory Washington for encouraging migrant rights or LGBTQ+ communities. The Trump administration's attitudes open the way for the United States to build strength in the former Soviet world the same way Russia has done it: not with foreign aid, but by joining with local populists, questioning the worth of the EU, and building relationships on business rather than ideology.

“ **F**OR THE MOMENT, RUSSIA SEEMS THE CLEAR WINNER FROM TRUMP'S MOVES AGAINST USAID AND U.S. INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING.”

Trump's policies on aid and democracy deeply endanger America's traditional allies in the post-Soviet world such as pro-democracy NGOs and independent news media. They have not lost faith that their countries can be both prosperous and liberally democratic. And they are led by people who have spent whole careers, and sometimes risked their lives, for such ideals—believing the United States had their back. The State Department is continuing some grants, but they are likely to be a small fraction of what USAID provided.

Smaller grants from European nations and new fundraising strategies might keep some of these organizations afloat. But given the stress from the sudden shutoff of U.S. assistance, they will struggle. For the moment, Russia seems the clear winner from Trump's moves against USAID and U.S. international broadcasting.

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Japaridze in Stalin's personal armored train carriage in Gori, used to transport the Soviet leader to the Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam conferences. All photographs by Zaqaria Chelidze

## Georgians Are Watching Themselves

BY TINATIN JAPARIDZE

A millennial reflects on her native country's long struggle with the ghost of Stalin.

In November 2024, I was in Florida celebrating Thanksgiving when images from my hometown, Tbilisi, Georgia, flooded my phone: grainy live footage of riot police storming opposition offices, dragging politicians out in handcuffs, beating young protesters with batons. Thousands of miles away, I froze, eyes locked on the screen, dreading the moment I might recognize a familiar face—a school friend, a cousin, an old neighbor—brutalized for daring to speak out against the government. It was the third day of large-scale demonstrations in Georgia, protesting the government's decision to stall the country's long-standing bid for European Union membership.

What none of us fully grasped at the time was that, while this renewed wave of demonstrations would surge and recede, the resistance movement led by a new generation of Georgians—Gen Z—would endure months later.

As a geopolitical risk analyst focused on the South Caucasus, and a former U.S. State Department project implementer in the Eurasian region, I've spent years tracing the emerging trends and aftershocks of authoritarianism across the post-Soviet space. I reflected on the trauma among my generation of Georgians in my debut monograph, *Stalin's Millennials*, which I began working on as a graduate student at the Harriman Institute and published just before Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It was meant as a closing chapter on the legacy of the Georgian-born dictator for those of us who came of age in the ruins and ashes of a failed Soviet experiment. But, unfortunately, the legacies I believed I was analyzing in retrospect have since returned as contemporary issues, and with renewed force. Now, once again, the authoritarian tendencies of the Stalin era are playing out in real time—all over my homeland.

Georgia is a country of deep contradictions: layered, proud, weary, defiant. Our landscapes are breathtaking, our poetry ancient, our resilience, by many accounts, legendary. But today, that pride contends with a deeper fear: that we are slipping backward. Or worse, that we may no longer deserve the democratic promise we once pursued with such conviction. And yet, even in that fear, I see something rekindled. I hear it in the chants that still echo through

## REFLECTIONS

Tbilisi's streets. I see it in the faces of Gen Z protestors who are neither burdened by the compromises of the past nor beholden to its silences. This new generation, in many ways braver than my own, is rising. They are louder. They are clearer. And, thankfully, their faith is not broken.

While the immediate catalyst for the winter 2024 protests was the government's decision to stall EU membership—a move that felt like betrayal to many Georgians, more than 80 per cent of whom support the country's European integration, according to recent polls—the truth is that Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze's announcement was merely the spark that relit a long-smoldering fire. The ruling Georgian Dream party had adopted an increasingly pro-Kremlin narrative several years earlier, and Georgia's democracy continued a steady backslide into autocracy. In late 2024, many independent international observers concluded that the October parliamentary elections failed to meet international standards, casting serious doubt on the legitimacy of the results. Numerous ballots had been cast under pressure and even direct threat, some allegedly bought. In a nationwide stand-off, opposition parties boycotted the new parliament. Georgian Dream, however, moved swiftly to consolidate power, passing a suite of laws that looked far less European and increasingly authoritarian.

One of the most consequential was the so-called “foreign agent law”—modeled after contentious legislation Russia had passed more than a decade earlier to discredit and dismantle civil society. The Georgian government

first introduced the draft bill in March 2023, sparking major protests in Tbilisi, alongside sharp warnings from Washington and Brussels that its passage would strain ties with Western allies and derail Georgia's EU aspirations. Although the Georgian Dream-led parliament briefly withdrew the bill, it was re-introduced a year later and officially implemented on August 1, 2024, just months before the October parliamentary elections. This triggered a fresh wave of demonstrations, initially led by students and soon joined by parents, teachers, doctors, pensioners, and artists—many of whom had lived through Georgia's painful transitions and recognized exactly what was at stake. They were not simply opposing a law; they were rejecting what was widely viewed as a dangerous pivot: “Never Back to the USSR,” they chanted. Public outrage only intensified after November 28 of the same year, when the Georgian prime minister announced the suspension of EU accession negotiations, prompting nationwide demonstrations.

Watching from my hotel room in Florida, the contrast felt surreal: palm trees swayed outside my window, while tear gas drifted across Rustaveli Avenue on my screen. Georgians had similar experiences even before the Soviet Union's collapse, when they began taking to the streets to assert the country's independence from Russian domination—most notably on April 9, 1989, when Soviet troops crushed a peaceful pro-independence demonstration. But this time, it was not a struggle of us versus them—it was Georgians against Georgians. Our country was beginning

to resemble what it had spent decades striving to avoid: a nation polarized, divided at its core.

To understand how the country reached this point, we must look back. My generation still remembers the promise of Georgia's Rose Revolution in November 2003—one of the most dramatic and hopeful chapters of the post-Cold War period. The Revolution was a peaceful uprising that toppled Eduard Shevardnadze, Georgia's second president and former Soviet foreign minister, in response to widespread corruption, economic stagnation, and alleged election fraud. It felt like a moment of collective awakening: streets filled with citizens demanding change, a nation daring to believe in the possibility of democratic renewal. These peaceful protests succeeded, leading to Shevardnadze's resignation and the arrival of young, energetic Mikheil Saakashvili, whom many of us trusted to guide the country into a new era of reform.

In 2004, while Western leaders lauded Georgia as a democratic trailblazer of the Eurasian region—a poster child for post-Soviet transformation—I had just moved to New York from Moscow,

where I had lived with my parents for nearly a decade after the civil war erupted in Georgia in the early 1990s.

When I told new American friends that I was originally from Georgia, this was usually met with one of two reactions: “Isn't that where Stalin was from?” or “Didn't your country just have a color revolution?” Both were delivered with genuine curiosity about, sometimes even admiration for, Georgia's bold pivot toward the West and away from the long shadow of its Soviet past. Yet that sense of hope, so vivid in our memory, would prove fleeting.

Several years later, in August 2008, Russia invaded Georgia. I was barely in my twenties, working as a journalist covering the United Nations for *Novoye Russkoye Slovo* (The New Russian Word), a Russian-American newspaper headquartered in the Empire State Building. The two countries that shaped me were suddenly at war, and I was expected to report, filing daily and sometimes even hourly dispatches from the United Nations. But how do you remain neutral when Russian bombs are falling minutes from your childhood home?



**Watching from my hotel room in Florida, the contrast felt surreal: palm trees swayed outside my window, while tear gas drifted across Rustaveli Avenue on my screen.”**

## REFLECTIONS

Georgia's political unraveling has been gradual. And it has a lot to do with disinformation. First from the Kremlin, which honed its tactics during Soviet times and ramped them up after the Soviet collapse. And then from Georgia's own leaders. Even Saakashvili, after losing popularity in the later years of his rule, used disinformation tactics to frame narratives and sway public opinion.

And then Georgian Dream came to power in October 2012. The party's founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili—who had reportedly made his fortune in 1990s Russia—wanted to consolidate power and drew from Moscow's rhetorical arsenal, weaving key elements of the Kremlin playbook into Georgian Dream's political strategy.

The disinformation only intensified after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Echoing the Krem-

lin's talking points, Georgian Dream officials portrayed the war not as Russian aggression, but as a cautionary tale—a warning to small nations of the perils of moving too close to Europe, of compromising sovereignty and cultural identity, and of becoming little more than cogs in the EU's machine. Against this backdrop, Georgian Dream presented itself as the pragmatic guarantor of peace, and it reframed Russia—the country that invaded Georgia in 2008 and still occupies 20 per cent of its territory—not as the threat, but as a “complicated neighbor” that shouldn't be provoked.

It was a shrewd, chilling inversion that tilted Georgia's political compass and sowed discord among the population. Fear of war, even when abstract or carefully manufactured, has a way of sinking deep in a nation that still

remembers the sound of bombardment, the dislocation of exile, the quiet permanence of occupation. And so, dissent came to be defined as subversion, and protest turned into a source of menace.

Western media coverage often reduces Georgia's polarization to a simple binary: pro-West versus pro-Kremlin, liberal versus conservative. But in reality, the fractures run deeper, cutting across families, friendships, and entire communities. At the heart of the divide lies a very personal debate over Georgia's cultural and historical identity, rooted in a long tradition of resisting foreign domination—should Georgia join Europe, try to mend ties with Russia, or remain a nation independent from the influence of any major power? How can Georgia's traditional Orthodox Christian values coexist with the EU's accession requirements on LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality? I have watched people who regularly broke bread together unfollow or outright block each other on social media over the question of whether Georgia's future lies within Europe, alongside Russia, or as an independent, sovereign nation free from reliance on any major power in order to preserve its cultural values and traditions. By 2024, personal rifts had converged with a national crisis, shaping not just how Georgians lived with one another but also how the world tried to make sense of our politics.

As a student at the Harriman Institute, I had tried to make sense of Stalin's legacy not only as a scholar, but as someone indelibly shaped by it. My graduate research took me repeatedly to Stalin's

hometown of Gori, but the “Stalin question” wasn't just academic. It had begun much earlier, around my family's dinner table, in the silences of daily life. Even in the late Soviet years, the stories of Stalin's purges were told in whispers behind locked doors. Later, while working on *Stalin's Millennials*, I understood that what kept those memories hidden was not just fear, but also the dread some Georgians felt of having been complicit in these atrocities as mere bystanders, because many had chosen silence over change. The terror was never just personal, but collective, and it lingered.

And that's why the current moment matters. Not just because the West is watching, but because finally, Georgians are watching themselves, unflinchingly. Georgia's Gen Z is writing a new chapter—not just of politics, but of memory. Of reclamation. And this fight, as ever, is ours. International support matters—diplomatic pressure, financial aid, visibility—but lasting change must come from within, from Georgians rejecting the very silence and fear that has kept the ghost of Stalin alive.

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Japaridze's reflection in the glass frame of the oil painting *Stalin and a Girl* at the Joseph Stalin Museum in Gori.

## REFLECTIONS



Young man holding a paddle board with a “hands off SUP” sign (SUP refers to both paddle board and the acronym for Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor’s Office) during an anti-corruption protest in Kyiv in July 2025. All photos by Khrystyna Vlasenko

## Grassroots Power: Ukraine’s Local Democracy During War

BY ANASTASIIA VLASENKO

A political scientist reflects on the rise of participatory democracy in her homeland.

“I’ll be here all day, don’t call me!” my 30-year-old sister texted me casually from an anti-government protest in Kyiv, one of many sparked by the Ukrainian parliament’s July 2025 decision to strip key anti-corruption bodies of their independence. Large crowds, predominantly young people, were protesting all over Ukraine against the passing of a highly controversial bill (No. 12414) designed to significantly limit the powers of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine and the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor’s Office. Pro-democratic reforms were at stake, and millennials did not like it.

My sister was in the center of Kyiv, surrounded by thousands of like-minded people holding witty cardboard signs, ranging from moderate slogans like “Democracy? Haven’t heard of it” and “I don’t need a system that works against me” to “Don’t touch my sup” (a pun referring to the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor’s Office) and “You are out of your mind.” Some of the messages resorted to just straight-up cursing. One sign even featured a caricature depicting the life cycle of a corrupt politician, who oddly resembled a head louse. Despite the very real possibility of a Russian air strike on such a massive crowd—and the potential, though unlikely, risk of the Ukrainian government turning against the protesters—I somehow knew she was going to be fine.

Still, I decided to text back: “Wait, what exactly are you doing?”

“Just chanting ‘Shame!’ as usual.”

As usual, it was. While shouting “*Shame!*” in a historic downtown might resemble a scene from *Game of Thrones*, for most Ukrainians “*Han’ba!*” (the Ukrainian word for “shame”) had long been a favorite way to express opposition to those in power. What was unusual was that, for the first time in Ukrainian history, it seemed to be working quickly and effectively. Just nine days after the protests began, a major Ukrainian online news site, *Ukrainska Pravda*, reported that the demonstrations had “won and ended.” The president had deleted from his website the bill he had previously signed and was now pretending the whole thing never happened. The

## REFLECTIONS

parliament passed a bill canceling the latest amendments. The “cardboard revolution,” as the series of protests came to be known, was over.

The success of the July protests was duly attributed to the long history (and experience that comes from it) of mass mobilization in Ukraine. This summer reminded many Ukrainians of the Orange Revolution, a much longer, yet peaceful protest that brought along the wave of democratization in the early 2000s. But the non-partisan nature of the protests, the grassroots character, and the overall youth of the protesters resembled the structure of the Euromaidan demonstrations in 2014, when after four months and 108 deaths protesters managed to oust Ukraine’s pro-Russian leader Viktor Yanukovich.

A couple of weeks after the protests I attended a conference in Europe and had the chance to see my sister in person. The scope of problems we discussed had returned to wartime “normal.” We talked about all our male relatives currently serving in the military and, thankfully, in good health; about our childhood neighborhood in Kyiv, which

survived a massive airstrike; and about our parents’ *dacha* (summer house), which was now uncomfortably close to the frontline, so our family would have to wait to fix that leaking roof. The topic of democracy, however, wasn’t on our agenda. Unlike everything else at our kitchen table, it didn’t feel to be under imminent threat. The protests ended with success, and the ever-present concern about corruption was pushed to the background.

This lack of concern about democratic backsliding stands in stark contrast to nearly every conversation I now have with my friends in the United States. In many parts of the world, the erosion of democracy has become a painful reality, the most salient agenda item with very tangible political consequences. In theory, war-torn Ukraine should be a perfect breeding ground for authoritarian consolidation: canceled (or rather, never scheduled) elections, lack of civilian control over the military, and restrictions on civil liberties form a textbook list of preconditions for democratic decline. And yet, the recent protests, democratic



**This lack of concern about democratic backsliding stands in stark contrast to nearly every conversation I now have with my friends in the United States.”**

reforms, and government efforts to stay transparent and accountable suggest that democratic institutions in Ukraine stand tall and resilient.

This counterintuitive puzzle raises a simple question: What are we missing here?

Scrolling through my news feed in search of answers, I stumbled across project updates from e-dem.ua, Ukraine’s online platform for electronic democracy, run by the Eastern Europe Foundation in partnership with the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine and funded by Switzerland. Amid the endless stream of local petitions and participatory budget projects, a few titles stood out: “Ban on feeding pigeons” in Kropyvnytski, “Mowing ragweed” in Lutsk, “Sand on sidewalks” in Drohobych. Why did people care about such minor infrastructure problems when there’s a full-scale war raging in the country? Why did it matter, if pigeons, ragweed, and even freshly built sidewalks could be destroyed by the next Russian missile?

And then it hit me: the places where these local petitioners were from were the very same places that hosted the “cardboard” protests in

July—cities like Kropyvnytski, Lutsk, and Drohobych. The people who cared about animal welfare, environmental protection, and public safety were the same citizens who cared about the survival of democracy. Their activism suggested that people refused to let the war swallow local concerns. It wasn’t that communities were “thriving” in the usual sense, but that they were holding onto the habits and practices that would make thriving possible once the war ended: staying organized, finding common ground combined with creative solutions, and refusing to give up on civic life.

That’s the message in a solid body of recent studies on comparative politics—an area of scholarship I am trying to contribute to as a political scientist—suggesting that places where residents actively participate in democratic initiatives also tend to be more resilient during wartime. In 2022, videos spread across the internet of Ukrainian farmers towing away Russian tanks. But the events preceding the full-scale invasion—such as the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan, which empowered the tractor drivers to feel that they could



Anti-corruption protest in Kyiv, July 2025.

## REFLECTIONS

(and must!) change the course of war—stayed outside the camera frame.

After signing the Association Agreement with the European Union (EU) in 2014, Ukrainian leaders started a series of reforms, designed to facilitate further EU integration of Ukraine. One of the key reforms, implemented from 2015 to 2020, focused on decentralizing local governance. Until then, Ukraine had maintained the topdown Soviet-style system of highly centralized oversight of the local decision-making process. This discouraged grassroots organization and made it difficult for local communities invaded by Russia in 2014 to react coherently to the invasion. The decentralization reforms gave *hromadas* (amalgamated communities that consist of several villages and towns) new authority over tax collection, budget planning, public goods

provision, and more, marking a radical break from Ukraine's Soviet past. By the time Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, many communities already knew how to solve local issues without awaiting directives from Kyiv. This experience contributed greatly to Ukraine's unexpected resilience in the face of Russia's invading forces in 2022; resistance, resilience, and even rebuilding quickly came to be treated as just another set of "local issues" to be managed collectively.

The case of Sofiivska *hromada*, an area consisting of nine villages located in the Zaporizhzhia region, is a good example of this. It was one of the first places occupied by the Russian army on February 26, 2022. Its 29-year-old mayor, Stanislav Zakharevych—elected right before the full-scale invasion—decided to resist. Before the war, Zakharevych

had focused on small-scale infrastructure projects, such as renovating a local school and building a new medical center. After the invasion, he rejected every offer to collaborate with Russian forces and instead organized food and medicine deliveries while securing evacuation routes for residents. These activities led to his imprisonment in unnamed torture basements in the occupied cities of Prymorsk and Berdiansk, where he was held for 34 days. Meanwhile, Zakharevych's former constituents evacuated to the city of Zaporizhzhia (still under Ukrainian control) and continued self-organizing, volunteering, and maintaining community ties despite the loss of their homes. Zakharevych escaped by pretending to agree to the occupiers' demand to collect data on residents eligible to participate in a staged referendum on joining the

Russian Federation. He joined his constituents in evacuation and continued helping internally displaced residents of Sofiivska *hromada*.

What fascinates me in this story is the unanimous dedication of residents and elites toward resistance. Even after Sofiivska *hromada* lost its territory, it did not cease to exist, demonstrating that, once representative democracy takes root, the loss of territory does not necessarily erase local representation. In Ukraine's experience, at least, democracy can endure even when war threatens territorial integrity.

Other Ukrainian communities, such as Byshiv, near Kyiv, have demonstrated their resilience through their ability to think of creative solutions in the face of massive destruction. Byshiv became the last line of defense as Russian forces advanced toward the capital in March 2022. By the time the frontline shifted eastward, the Russians had destroyed many of Byshiv's vital facilities, including a daycare facility, needing reconstruction. For local authorities, the daycare was last on the list. But that changed after mounting pressure from distraught parents. The authorities, who lacked the funds to do it on their own, turned to an unlikely sponsor: the Surkis brothers, notorious Ukrainian oligarchs known for their criminal records and corruption scandals. The daycare was promptly rebuilt. While it remains unclear what motivated the mayor to ask the oligarchs for help, representative democracy once again prevailed by ensuring the delivery of public goods during crisis. Interestingly, since the oligarchs contrib-



Locations of the anti-corruption protests in Ukraine, also known as Cardboard Mайдан, from July 22 to July 31, 2025. Map created by the author

## REFLECTIONS

uted to the provision of public goods rather than offering private perks to local authorities, they were unable to undermine democratic processes in the community. At least, this has been the case so far.

Byshiv is not the only place using innovative methods to rebuild during wartime. And the money for reconstruction doesn't only come from oligarchs—local communities have turned to foreign donors, both public and private, for help. As of now, the official Ukrainian decentralization website, run by the state, [decentralization.gov.ua](http://decentralization.gov.ua), lists 2,094 partnerships between Ukrainian territorial communities and foreign regions, cities, towns, and even small villages. This subnational sup-

port plays an essential role not only in ensuring that schools and hospitals are rebuilt in a timely manner but also in enabling foreign partners to help safeguard Ukraine's democratic institutions.

These partnerships do not come without cost. *Hromadas* must compete for the most lucrative deals. And the number of partnerships each community secures varies greatly. That's because competing for foreign partners requires substantial upfront investment—hiring PR and fundraising professionals, English lessons for administrative staff, networking—and many Ukrainian communities cannot afford it. Ironically, this means that only the wealthiest and most motivated can earn the title of “most dem-

ocratic.” As elsewhere in the world, democracy is closely tied to the level of local economic development.

This is precisely why, for democracy in Ukraine to survive the war, the active involvement of zealous citizens is not enough. The danger to democracy may not have seemed pressing enough for my sister and me to ponder when we met last summer, yet its endurance depends on more than the zeal of its defenders. As global interest in Ukraine gradually fades, democracy risks becoming underfunded. While Ukrainians are doing everything they can to keep the world's attention, international donors, from large organizations to private individuals, might ask themselves what risk they run if democracy in

Ukraine fails. Fortunately, for now, Ukrainians themselves remain undeterred.

In wartime, resilience and rebuilding go hand in hand. Both require immense mobilization. Both depend on close interaction between residents and elites. Both help democracy survive and thrive, even when it seems pushed to the back burner. Our task as an international community is to make sure we keep watching it closely and promoting the Ukrainian cause, even when democracy seems safe, unlike everything else.

While procrastinating instead of finishing this article, I stumbled upon an Instagram post from my sister: “It would be the best summer of my life if no one tried to kill me.” The post was accompanied by a mix of pictures—scenes of a massive drone attack on Kyiv, her birthday, anti-corruption protests, and picnics with friends. Just like Yossarian in *Catch-22*, my sister is caught in a limbo where the people shooting at everyone are, by definition, shooting at her too. What is different is that unlike Yossarian, my sister is not trying to escape. Like many Ukrainians before her, she is ready to fight back, if not on the battlefield, then on public squares and by participating in grassroots efforts and creative local solutions that ensure the resilience of Ukrainian democratic institutions. This is how democracy can stay strong: through people willing to fight for it, against all odds.

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Young people arriving to an anti-corruption protest in Kyiv, July 2025.

## REFLECTIONS



Drone image of a protest at Slavija Square in Belgrade. December 22, 2024. Photo courtesy of the Public Assemblies Archive

## Serbia's Leaderless Protests

BY VESNA KUIKEN

How a national tragedy spawned a non-aligned movement.

On December 22, 2024, a hundred thousand people flooded a central square in Serbia's capital Belgrade. They stood in silence for 15 minutes before breaking into deafening noise with whistles, vuvuzelas, shouts, and drums. Then they dispersed, as calm and orderly as when they had assembled. This public demonstration likely would have seemed strange to an outsider. The people who attended had only heard about it a couple of days earlier, when Belgrade University students announced it through their social media platforms, yet the turnout was massive. There was neither elaborate organization nor intricate logistics. And although this was a political protest, accompanied

by posters displaying bloody hands and banners about corruption ("Corruption kills!" "We are all under the same canopy"), no one made a speech, no anthems were sung, and there was no stage, no microphone, no speakers to amplify any message. In fact, the only official words spoken came through a bullhorn to announce the start of the 15-minute silent vigil.

The vigil commemorated the 15 people killed on November 1, after the canopy of a newly renovated train station in Novi Sad, a city in northern Serbia, collapsed and crushed them. (A sixteenth victim passed away four months later.) The noise that followed it was an expression of rage at the fact that this tragedy was entirely avoidable. The canopy

## REFLECTIONS

collapsed because of shoddy construction enabled by massive, deep-seated, government-facilitated corruption on all levels—from the Chinese consortium chosen as the chief contractor over an EU-based company with stricter regulations, to the many local subcontractors hired without public tenders, all the way to the country’s president, Aleksandar Vučić, who had reportedly urged that the newly renovated train station be ceremoniously opened, red ribbon and all, several months prematurely. These people died, strictly speaking, on a construction site.

Since Vučić’s advent as the country’s prime minister in 2014, institutionalized corruption routinely goes unpunished in Serbia, often involving organized crime and yielding casualties. Over the years, Vučić, now the country’s president, has fortified his grip on power largely by illegal means: by rigging elections that secured his party’s majority on all levels, enabling it to seat loyalists in every

position of power; by establishing a widespread system of bribes and favoritism in the business sector; by relentlessly weakening the political opposition; and by extinguishing all but a few independent print and electronic media outlets. On the diplomatic front, Vučić’s government has been giving ample incentives to foreign direct investment, including subsidies and tax benefits, which bring capital into the country and enable the government to offer contracts and subcontracts to loyal domestic partners, some of whom are involved in organized crime. (Robert W. Worth’s 2023 *New York Times* excellent expose, “The President, the Soccer Hooligans and an Underworld ‘House of Horrors,’” details the dense interdependence of Vučić’s government and criminal groups.) In the context of this vicious circle of domestic corruption, foreign inflow, and organized crime, bodies buried under the rubble of a shoddily built train station canopy are far from shocking. But in its brutality and bra-

zenness, the canopy collapse was the last straw. It crystallized the regime’s negligence and criminality, rendering it impossible to ignore. When no government official took responsibility, anger that had simmered for years exploded into a movement.

For the first eight months this movement was student-led. In late June of 2025, during another mass gathering in Belgrade, students gave citizens a “green light” to enter the fight more robustly, urging them to make the struggle their own, to demand snap elections, and to self-organize. Students did this because they felt that the fight must become a wholesale social uprising. The green light marked a turning point: Since July 2025, when thousands of citizens began protesting by blocking highways and intersections, the government’s response, until then largely restrained, became openly hostile and excessively violent. The crackdown was so fierce that even some mainstream Western media and a few European Union parliamentarians, who had been glaringly silent, began voicing their concerns.

The Serbian protests began as small student-led vigils, fueled by collective mourning, eventually growing into a nationwide uprising, one that shares many features with other recent popular movements (in Georgia and Greece, for example, or more recently in Indonesia or Nepal). Yet the Serbian example is unusual in its having managed, so far, to avoid one of the common pitfalls that plagues most long-lasting mass protests—fragmentation that leads to internal strife and the eventual dissolution of a movement. This movement’s strength lies

in the tactics that frame it: in these protests, students are a leaderless collective without a command center or identifiable political ideology, unified only by mourning for the 16 victims and a demand for justice. Because the core of this approach is the students’ insistence on justice and their refusal to take any ideological side, one could call their strategy “non-aligned” and understand that as the key to the protest’s endurance: non-alignment as the canopy under which disparate orientations coexist. Given Serbia’s historical involvement in the Non-Aligned Movement of the Cold War era, the crux of which was precisely the rejection of its member states’ ideological alignment, it is notable that the current student movement in Serbia draws its power, even if inadvertently, from this repressed political tradition.



In the immediate aftermath of the canopy collapse, Serbian authorities began to spin various excuses for the tragedy, while opposition parties and non-governmental organizations called on citizens to demand justice for the dead. They gathered in large groups in front of ministries, courts, and the ruling party’s offices where they threw red paint and hoisted banners with red handprints. And they assembled at crosswalks and major intersections to stand in silence as a sign of respect for the victims of the train station tragedy. University students soon joined in, and by the last week of November, following a violent incident when officials from Vučić’s ruling party attempted to break up a student



**In the context of this vicious circle of domestic corruption, foreign inflow, and organized crime, bodies buried under the rubble of a shoddily built train station canopy are far from shocking.”**

## REFLECTIONS



Drone image of a protest at Slavija Square in Belgrade. December 22, 2024. Photo courtesy of the Public Assemblies Archive

traffic blockade, the students moved the protest to the next phase. They blockaded and occupied their university buildings, moving into the university premises and banning anyone without a valid student ID from entering (Serbian universities have strong autonomy: police can enter the campus only in an emergency or at the dean's explicit invitation). Then they called on professors to join them in suspending classes, exams, and all curricular and extracurricular activities, which most professors did. Within weeks all state universities followed suit: they began a general strike and put forth four demands to the government. The first called for making public full documentation of the railway station's renovation, with the aim of forcing the Prosecutor's Office to file criminal charges in the canopy case against the responsible government officials.

From this point on, the protests became student led. Students organized work-

ing groups and volunteers to communicate with university administrations, maintain order at large gatherings, and collect non-monetary donations from citizens. They appropriated the red hand as their symbol and put in place a well-coordinated network of social media accounts (#studentiublokadi / #studentsinblockade) where they posted statements and announced activities. The posts were catchy, timely, short, and shareable. They aimed to ridicule the authorities while keeping the focus on the canopy tragedy and its victims. The combination was effective: humor eroded citizens' fear of the government while grief mobilized them to join the protests. Students also staged surprise events, planned in secret and announced just prior to their commencement, a strategy that kept the authorities in a reactive mode. One such action was the surprise "occupation" of the state-controlled national tele-

vision building in March 2025. Students and other protestors camped at the building's entrance for several days; at 7:30 each night, during the live daily news broadcast, which routinely ignored the protests, the campers made a deafening noise that could be heard by those watching the news at home.

Collective marches were also effective. In Serbia, the ruling party controls most media and denies national coverage to opposition-leaning broadcasters. To overcome this censorship, groups of dozens to several hundred students walked from one university city to another, stopping along the way in rural areas where they met with residents and talked with them about the protests and their demands. In addition to bypassing media control, marches and face-to-face communication were a way to reach people who don't typically use social media—particularly older generations and

rural dwellers. The marches took on international form in April and May when students cycled more than 700 miles, from Belgrade to Strasbourg, France (they called it the "Tour de Strasbourg"), and ran a 1,000-mile relay marathon to Brussels, Belgium to disseminate information about their protests and demands to European institutions.

Everything the students did—and, as of this writing in October 2025, were still doing—was impersonal. They never targeted specific government officials, nor did their movement revolve around a specific leader. Starting from their first demand—to make the renovation details public—students focused on the law, impersonal by design, as the primary instrument of accountability. To that end, they have declined repeated invitations from Vučić to meet and negotiate with the government: the president and his ministers, the students argued, were "unauthorized" to resolve the crisis. In their view, if Serbia were truly governed by the rule of law, as the government insists, negotiations about legal accountability would not only be unnecessary but also unconstitutional. By articulating the first demand in strictly legalistic and impersonal terms, the students revealed the government's supposed devotion to fundamental democratic values, such as transparency and accountability, to be purely demagogic. They have also fashioned *themselves* as the impersonal bullhorn of the law. They have no leaders, spokespersons, or representatives; their announcements are anonymous, signed only "Students in the Blockade," and every time they talk to

## REFLECTIONS

the media a new person does the talking. Apart from the red handprint, they have no signs or slogans that would associate them with any political camp. Except for Serbian and university flags, no other flags are allowed at their gatherings: They accept all ideologies but refuse any identifiable markers and alignments. The effect of this insistence on legalism, impersonality, and non-alignment is disorienting for a system like Serbia's, where the government maintains power and defends itself from dissenters by defaming and intimidating them personally, or by labeling them as pro-Western agents paid by outside powers to destroy the country. When faced with an anonymous, diffuse mass, the government can't mount focused retaliation.

At the root of students' insistence on non-alignment and nonpartisanship lie plenums—meetings where students discuss strategies and plan actions agreed to by majority vote. Every school within the university holds its own plenums, open only to students enrolled in it. Deliberations about major actions, such as one in January 2025, where students blocked Belgrade's major traffic artery for 24 hours and brought the city to a standstill, can go on for days as students need the majority vote of nearly 50 schools and their plenums. (A few months into the protests, citizens took plenums as the model for their own self-organizing and began holding municipal civic assemblies where they gathered to consider a local issue and vote on it. The

effectiveness of these public assemblies lies in their capacity to further mobilize citizens for political action.)

Structurally, plenums are modeled on the decision-making platforms of workers' councils in socialist Yugoslavia, which Serbia was part of until the 1990s. The councils promoted self-governance and decentralization. The plenums' intellectual lineage can be traced to a tradition that developed around the same time—namely, the Marxist philosophical school known as the Praxis Group, which in the former Yugoslavia of the 1960s–70s advocated for worker self-management to administer and oversee all institutions of the state, cultural as well as political (and, as Marx had projected, after the dictatorship of the proletariat

to dissolve the state itself). For Serbian students today, much like for the workers in socialist Yugoslavia, representative democracy appears susceptible to the same kind of systemic corruption that caused the canopy collapse. To preempt it, they have recovered the suppressed participatory format of decentralized self-governance—direct democracy—where non-alignment, through the vote and participation of everyone regardless of their ideological allegiance, is the defining framework.

This framework is inseparable from the political phenomenon of the Non-Aligned Movement, an organization founded by socialist Yugoslavia, a rare European communist country that didn't belong to the Eastern bloc. Established in 1961 in Serbia's



Silent vigil at one of the large intersections in downtown Belgrade, following which vigil-blockades were held every day at 11:52 am. December 6, 2024. Photo courtesy of the Public Assemblies Archive

## REFLECTIONS



**Most protesters see the lifeline that the West has given to the current Serbian regime as a crude colonial stance that tolerates autocracy in exchange for resources and capital.”**

(then Yugoslavia’s) capital Belgrade, the movement aimed to sidestep the global East/West divide of the Cold War. Within the Movement’s paradigm, being non-aligned doesn’t mean being ideologically neutral but rather *not being aligned* along the usual fault lines: progressive/conservative, liberal/authoritarian, etc. The fact that in 2025 Serbian students, who have been raised on ideas of national division and religious intolerance inherited from the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, have found a framework for their struggle in a forgotten and historically vilified political tradition, may very well explain the protest’s endurance. It has enabled the movement to attract diverse demographics: citizens across all social, political, and cultural divides—workers, farmers, and professionals; leftists, greens, antifascists, and anarchists; as well as nationalists, conservatives, constitutionalists, and monarchists brought together to support the same set of demands.

The three pillars of Serbia’s uprising—the impersonality of the student body, the legal-

istic nature of their demands, and the protest’s ideological non-alignment—stem from a common source: collective grief. This is why the public vigils are the protests’ primary format. Until June 2025, when the students transferred the protest leadership to society at large and the protest became more aggressive, peaceful public vigils took place every day at 11:52 a.m., the time the canopy had collapsed the previous November. Crosswalks and intersections in towns across the country were occupied, blocking traffic for 16 minutes and bringing whole neighborhoods to a stand-still. These blockades can feel oppressive because of the silent sadness that envelops them, yet liberating because each participant shares this burden with many others. For 16 minutes—a long time to stay still with a single thought—grief lingers, amplified by the silence through which, even in a bustling capital like Belgrade, one can hear birds, wind, and distant shouts. In this stillness attention turns from the bodies under the canopy rubble to one’s own losses—then back to the canopy, back to anger, and

back once again to grief. The circle of sadness and anger feeds on itself as impersonal losses become one’s own, and one’s own losses—everyone else’s. There is no room for ideological alignment.

And yet, if the non-aligned approach is internally unifying, it is also confusing to an international audience and may explain why both the European Union and most Western media have been silent about the situation in Serbia. To remain non-aligned, students have refrained from taking a position on any domestic or foreign policy issue. It is therefore unclear whether, if the protests topple the current government in Serbia and students manage to win future elections, the new government will be pro-Western or pro-Kremlin. And because Serbia is historically close to Russia yet remains an official and viable candidate for EU membership, its geographic position (it borders several EU members) makes the question of its political alignment especially urgent in the context of the war in Ukraine, the EU’s sanctions against Russia, and the United States’ distancing from NATO and European defense alliance. The EU does not want a potential Russian outpost in its midst, and so it tends to favor what is often referred to as “stabilocracy”—stability over democracy. In addition to these geopolitical reasons, the West is reluctant to criticize Vučić’s government because some Western governments as well as their countries have active and lucrative infrastructure deals, long-term investments, and weapons sales contracts with it. But above all, the West wants a guarantee that Serbia’s large lithium

reserves (the metal used to produce batteries in electric vehicles) will be made available to European countries for extraction. Most protesters see the lifeline that the West has given to the current Serbian regime as a crude colonial stance that tolerates autocracy in exchange for resources and capital.



Analyzing an on-going popular uprising is as difficult as attempting to understand trauma while it is still unfolding. But however they end, the protests in Serbia have foregrounded some of the key aspects of the idea of non-alignment and offered them as a possible (and, in a deeply divided society, likely the only viable) strategy for engendering a massive rebellion to replace autocracy with a civil society grounded in the rule of law. By emphasizing legalism; by turning citizenry into an anonymous multiplicity that cannot be easily broken; by reverting to rudimentary forms of information dissemination; and by deploying mass blockades to paralyze corrupt institutions, Serbia’s student movement has laid a foundation for meaningful change on all levels. It is up to the citizens now to build on it.

*I am grateful to Branka Arsić, Aleksandar Bošković, Marija Džambić, Aleksandar Gubaš, Kir Kuiken, and Obrad Savić for their comments, suggestions, and fact-checking.*

**Vesna Kuiken** is a Lecturer at the University at Albany, SUNY. She specializes in nineteenth-century American literature and ecocriticism. ◆

## Scenes from the Field

Harriman students criss-crossed the region on summer journeys, recording life in cities and in the countryside, as residents gathered for celebrations, performed their daily work, or endured life in a war zone.

Each year, Harriman students travel abroad to conduct research, study languages, and immerse themselves in the cultures of East-Central Europe and Eurasia. These photographs, taken by students from the classes of 2025 and 2026, reflect the diversity of their destinations and their experiences.

### 1. Janat Kalmakova (MARS-REERS '26)

Few vehicles can make the steep two-hour ascent from the rural Kyrgyz village of Ak-Suu, where Janat Kalmakova (MARS-REERS '26) grew up, to the Altin Arashan valley. She returned there in the summer of 2025, traveling with her father in this Soviet-era Buhanka van.



### 2. & 5. Elias Allen (MARS-REERS '25)

In the nationalist narrative promoted by Belgrade, the Serbian minority in Kosovo faces constant persecution aimed at driving Serbs out of the country. But photos taken by Elias Allen (MARS-REERS '25) in 2019 capture a different reality: a Serb community at work and leisure in their Kosovar home. Top row (2), Kosovo Serbs dance at a wedding reception in Gračanica/Gračanice. Bottom row (5), a Kosovo Serb farmer collects bales of wheat at sunset.

### 3. Maxim Visnovsky (SIPA '26)

In the summer of 2025, Maxim Visnovsky (SIPA '26) boarded a plane from the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek to the small town of Kerben, but the pilot turned back midflight due to weather warnings. Because the next Kerben flight would not take place for another three days, Visnovsky hired a local taxi instead. The ten-hour ride through the mountains cost him about \$10 and took him past the beautiful yurt homes of rural Kyrgyzstan.

### 4. Emma Larson (MARS-REERS '25)

The 17th century Tilya-Kori Madrasa is one of the architectural wonders in Samarkand's Registan Square. In 2024, Emma Larson (MARS-REERS '25) photographed one of the many intricate mosaics that cover the madrasa, inside and out.









#### 6. Boyang Liu (MARS-REERS '25)

Mitrovica, in northern Kosovo, is a city divided ethnically into Serbian and Albanian neighborhoods; UN peacekeeping forces patrol the pedestrian bridge that connects the two. Graffiti abounds, most of it with references to the ethnic divide and the war that led to the city's division. But in southern Mitrovica, the city's Albanian stronghold, Boyang Liu (MARS-REERS '25) found a rare example of non-political street art: an arresting mural of a cat's startled face, peering at passersby.

#### 7. Alena Struzh (MARS-REERS '25)

Alena Struzh (MARS-REERS '25) captured some of the culinary contributions at a backyard party in Tbilisi in the summer of 2024. Migrants, most of whom fled Russia after its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, had gathered to celebrate the birthday of a fellow émigré. Since Russian arrivals often get a chilly reception in Georgia, the newcomers have formed a tight-knit émigré bubble for support—and for socializing.



#### 8. & 9. Nick Dore (MARS-REERS '26)

More than three years after Russia's full-scale invasion, Nick Dore (MARS-REERS '26) traveled around Ukraine's contested Donetsk oblast. Bottom row (8), a priest from the Sviatohirsk Lavra Monastery showed Dore an archeological site outside the small village of Sydorove. On the right (9), Dore visited the town of Bohorodychne, where a local church had been shot up and burned by Russian troops. The lone icon that survived intact, save for a single bullet hole, was quickly embraced by local residents as a metaphor for Ukrainian resilience. ♦

# Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier

1926–2024

BY COLLEAGUES FROM THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

Our beloved colleague, mentor, teacher, and friend, **ELIZABETH KRIDL VALKENIER (RI, 1951; P.H.D., GSAS, 1973)**, passed away peacefully at the Cape Cod home of her daughter, Lisa Valkenier, on November 13, 2024. It was her 98th birthday.

Valkenier, daughter of Manfred Kridl, renowned scholar and professor of Polish Literature at Wilno University, came to the United States in 1941 with her mother and brother to join her father who was already teaching at Smith College. Valkenier graduated from Smith College in 1948 and earned her M.A. in history at Yale (1949), where she discovered her love for Russian history and met her future husband, Robert Valkenier. They moved to New York City, where Elizabeth started a doctoral program at Columbia. She earned the Certificate of the Russian Institute in 1951, and received her Ph.D. in History at Columbia in 1973, focusing on Russian art history.

Valkenier's three seminal books on Russian art history were all published under the aegis of Studies of the Russian/Harriman Institute. In the first, *Russian Realist Art. The State and Society: The Peredvizhniki and Their Tradition* (Ardis, 1977), Valkenier traced the influence of the Peredvizhniki—a cooperative of 19th century realist artists formed in resistance to academic restrictions—into the twentieth century as a model for socialist realism.

Valkenier's initial experiences in the USSR date back to a 10-day Intourist trip to Moscow in 1958. The following year she returned as a guide for the American Exhibit, which she wrote about for *Harriman Magazine's* Fall 2021 issue. Valkenier returned to Moscow in 1967 as a research assistant to her mentor, Philip Mosely, director of the European Institute. With Mosely's introductions she met highly placed Soviet experts with whom she maintained contact for decades, which ultimately yielded her book, *The Soviet Union and the Third World: An Economic Bind* (Praeger, 1983).

Her next book, *Ilya Repin and the World of Russian Art* (Columbia University Press, 1990), is a biography of the foremost Peredvizhnik and also an insightful look at the distorting lens of Soviet historiography. *Valentin Serov: Portraits of Russia's Silver Age* (Northwestern University Press, 2001), a study of Repin's best-known pupil, completes the cycle. Elizabeth Valkenier made extensive contributions to the field of Russian art history, which were celebrated by her colleagues with *From Realism to the Silver Age: New Studies in Russian Artistic Culture: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2014). Edited by Rosalind Blakesley and Margaret Samu, the volume collects 13 essays by Western and Russian scholars, who develop major themes inspired by Valkenier's work. ◆



Read the full obituary  
on our website

## IN MEMORIAM

# Alfred J. Rieber

1931–2025

BY MICHAEL DAVID-FOX

The great historian **ALFRED J. RIEBER (RI, 1954; PH.D., GSAS, 1959)** passed away on September 9, 2025, at the age of 94. At the time of his death Rieber was perhaps the world's most productive, wide-ranging, and influential historian of the Russian empire and the USSR. Born in Mount Vernon, New York, in 1931, Rieber earned his bachelor's degree at Colgate University in 1953 and attended graduate school at Columbia University's Russian Institute, obtaining his M.A. in 1954 and his Ph.D. in 1959. Rieber was on the first academic exchange between the United States and the USSR in 1958–59, where he met pianists Sviatoslav Richter and Vladimir Ashkenazy, among others. As mentor to generations of graduate students and as author of a long series of classic books and seminal articles for almost seven decades, Rieber became a legend in the field.

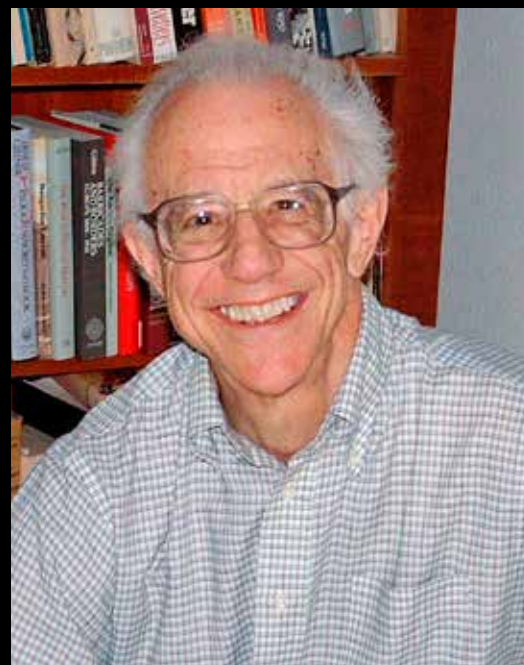
Rieber had two successive careers. First, he taught from 1965 to 1995 at the University of Pennsylvania and helped transform the modern study of Russia and the USSR. Then, he moved to the Central European University in Budapest and, interacting with faculty and students from all across the former Soviet bloc, became a leading scholar of comparative empires in Eurasia. At both places, Rieber was hugely influential as a Ph.D. mentor to several generations of U.S., Russian, and East European scholars who have continued his legacy.

In the first half of his career, Rieber published a series of important books on the USSR and imperial Russia. His first monograph, *Stalin and the French Communist Party, 1941–1947* (Columbia University Press, 1962), was followed by *The Politics of Autocracy: Letters of Alexander II to Prince A. I. Bariatskii, 1857–1864* (De Gruyter, 1966). He then wrote one of his most influential works, his 1982 *Merchants and Entrepreneurs in Imperial Russia* (University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

In the second half of his career, Rieber analyzed the distinctive features and characteristic evolution of Eurasian land empires, paying special attention to borderlands and complex frontiers. He published *The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands: From the Rise of Early Modern Empires to the End of the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2014) and its sequel, *Stalin's Struggle for Supremacy in Eurasia* (Cambridge University Press, 2015). Yanni Kotsonis collected Rieber's essays in *The Imperial Russian Project: Autocratic Politics, Economic Development, and Social Fragmentation* (University of Toronto Press, 2017).

Despite his legendary stature and strong convictions, Al was modest, tolerant, and thoughtful, and the outpouring of recollections has demonstrated just how much he was beloved by his students. ♦

*Editor's note: this is an edited and condensed version of an obituary that originally appeared in H-Diplo.*



[Read the full obituary on our website](#)



Left to right: Alexander Cooley, Michael McFaul, Stephen Cohen and Joshua Tucker during the public debate between Cohen and McFaul in 2018. All photographs in the piece are from the same event

## A Decade-long Program at Harriman Expands Research and Interest in Russian Studies

BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

After Russia invaded and occupied Crimea and parts of Eastern Ukraine in 2014, sending U.S.-Russia relations plummeting to a low point not seen since the Cold War era, policymakers in U.S. government wondered whether a decline in U.S. academic expertise on Russia had contributed to the crisis. But there was no existing data on the health of Russian studies in the United States. That prompted Carnegie Corporation of New

York to commission a study on the state of research and graduate training on Russia in U.S.-based academic institutions.

The resulting report by the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies surveyed 36 U.S. universities and 660 Russia-focused researchers, U.S. government officials, think tanks, and more. Its conclusion: While Russian studies remained strong overall, “Russian studies within the social sciences [in this case meaning anthropology,

economics, political science, and sociology] are facing a crisis: an unmistakable decline in interest and numbers, in terms of both graduate students and faculty.”

To address that shortcoming, Carnegie awarded three competitive \$1 million grants to U.S. academic institutions working on Russia, including the Harriman Institute. A 2016 press release announcing the grants said they would “encourage the universities to build up Russia-relevant train-

ing, research, and outreach programs” and increase their engagement with Russian academic communities.

Alexander Cooley, Claire Tow Professor of Political Science at Barnard College and director of the Harriman Institute when the grant was announced, became Harriman’s lead principal investigator on the project. An early initiative by Cooley was the monthly New York Russia Public Policy Seminar with Joshua Tucker, director of New York University’s Jordan Center for the Study of Russia. The seminars brought together scholars and policymakers to discuss issues of critical importance in U.S.-Russia relations. Topics ranged from Russian influence in the 2024 Georgian elections to wartime emigration and the Russian diaspora, and developments in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine.

One early series highlight was a 2017 public debate between former U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul and the late Russia historian and public intellectual Stephen Cohen. “The two differed on the root causes of Russia’s annexation of Crimea,” said Cooley, “but the debate was respectful, fact-based, and encouraged foreign policy experts and commentators to prioritize formulating a strategic policy toward Russia.”

Elise Giuliano, another Carnegie principal investigator and the director of the Harriman Institute’s MARS-REERS Master’s program, ran a separate speaker series called the Program on U.S.-Russia Relations (PURR). PURR was founded earlier, in 2015, by Kimberly Marten, Professor of Political Science at Barnard College, who con-

## IN BRIEF

tinued expanding the series for several years. While Cooley's seminars focused on current events, PURR talks invited scholars and policy makers to reflect on longer-term issues—such as the state of Russian domestic politics and Russia's relations with China, Turkey, the Koreans, Latin America, and Africa.

"We invited not just American policy specialists but also people with local knowledge" from regions around the world, said Giuliano.

A third program enabled by the Carnegie grant provided grant money to graduate students across the United States for dissertation research on Russia-related topics and for conference travel to Russia. Timothy Frye, who directed the Harriman Institute before Cooley, oversaw the grant program.

"The big picture was to create a cohort across universities of graduate students working on Russia," Frye said.

"Funding for studying the region has been going down, so this was a lifeline for many students, some of whom were at state universities where getting travel funds is really difficult."

Unfortunately, research trips to Russia, as well as academic exchanges led by Cooley to bring together Russian and U.S. doctoral students from Columbia and the Institute of World Economy and International Relations in Moscow (widely known as IMEMO), were cut short by the COVID pandemic in 2020. Then, after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, all such travel was brought to an official close. "We can't do exchanges anymore, we can't really engage with Russian academics and scholars and there are also sanctions that prevent us from paying Russian nationals," said Cooley. "Those were really challenging inflection points."

But Frye said the institute



**We can't do exchanges anymore, we can't really engage with Russian academics and scholars, and there are also sanctions that prevent us from paying Russian nationals."**

was able to get creative with the funding, "Often projects evolved and took on an international character," he said. "Students applied to study topics using archives in the Baltics or Bulgaria, or other places outside of Russia and Ukraine, to study Russia and the former Soviet Union." And the Harriman Institute continued to invite graduate students from across the nation to Columbia for conferences.

"The grants built a sense of community among graduate students at different universities," said Frye, with many papers and even books growing out of the conferences. Among them are: *State Building as Lawfare: Custom, Sharia, and State Law in Postwar Chechnya* (Cambridge University Press, 2023) by Egor Lazarev (GSAS 2018), and *Post-Soviet Graffiti: Free Speech in Authoritarian States* (University of Toronto Press, 2025) by former Visiting Scholar Alexis Lerner.

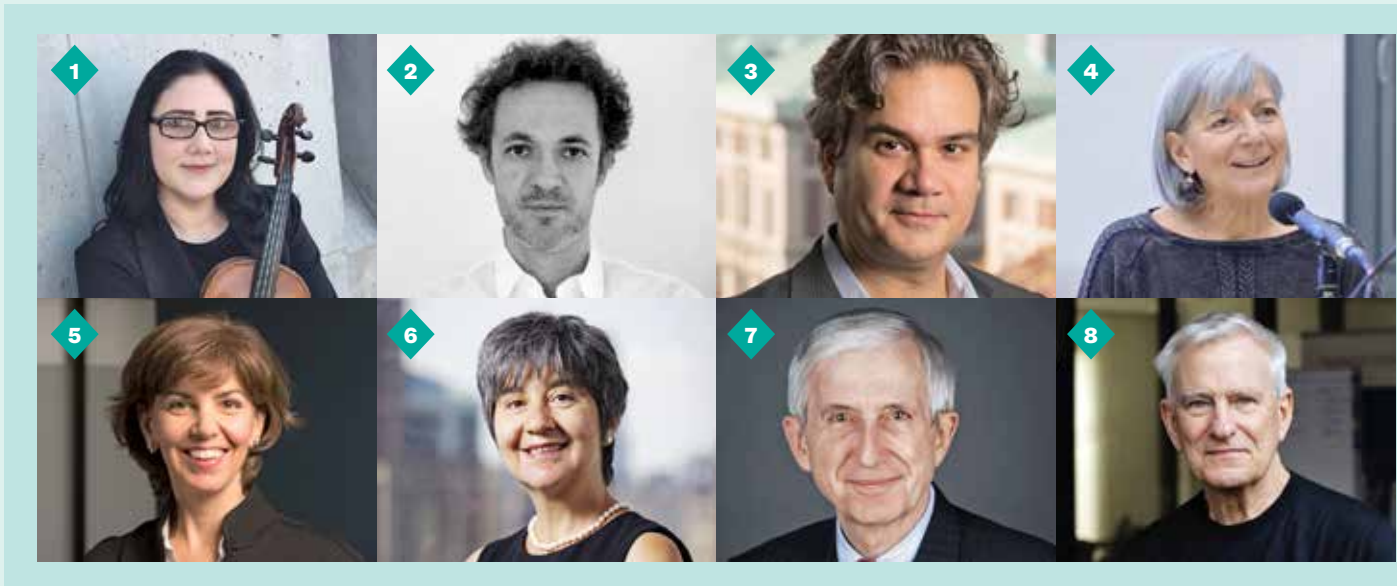
Cooley is particularly proud of two accomplishments achieved with the Carnegie grant. One is the Harriman Institute's work on transnational repression, which started with a Carnegie-funded workshop in 2018, "Political Exiles, Transnational Repression and Global Authoritarianism in

Eurasia and Beyond." That work helped lead to the inclusion of transnational repression as one of the issues analyzed in the U.S. State Department's 2022 annual Human Rights Report. From 2019–21, Freedom House's work on transnational repression was led by workshop attendee Nate Schenkkan (MARS-REERS '11), and then taken over by Harriman's 2017–20 Carnegie-funded postdoctoral research scholar in Russian Politics, Yana Gorokhovskaia (see her profile on p. 54).

The Harriman Institute's anti-kleptocracy initiative was another innovation, which "convened a lot of meetings in understanding anti-corruption tools even before the war started," Cooley said. In collaboration with Matthew Murray, an anti-corruption expert at Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs, Harriman helped bring together academics, practitioners, and activists "in the anti-corruption space," said Cooley. Ultimately, he said, the Carnegie grant not only "provided a nice infrastructure for a number of Harriman scholars to explore Russian-related topics," but also "expanded the Harriman's network in New York and beyond." ♦



# Faculty News



## 1 Alexandra Birch Won the Jordan Schnitzer First Book Publication Award

Alexandra Birch (Mellon Teaching Fellow; Lecturer in History) won the award from the Association for Jewish Studies for her book, *Hitler's Twilight of the Gods: Music and the Orchestration of War and Genocide in Europe* (University of Toronto Press, 2025).

## 2 Aleksandar Bošković Awarded NIAS Fellowship

Aleksandar Bošković (Senior Lecturer in Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian) was awarded a fellowship from the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences in Amsterdam. His project, titled “Nothing (:) Made in Yugoslavia,” focuses on experimental art practices from the former Yugoslavia.

## 3 Alexander Cooley Appointed Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs

Alexander Cooley (Claire Tow Professor of Political Science, Barnard College) was among four experts selected by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs “to convene research and high-level discussions on the role of U.S. partners and allies in North America, Europe, and Asia in shaping the future international order.”

## 4 *Newshawks in Berlin: The Associated Press and Nazi Germany*, Co-authored by Ann Cooper, Runner Up for American Journalism Historians Association Book Award

*Newshawks in Berlin: The Associated Press and Nazi Germany* (Columbia University Press, 2024), co-authored by Ann Cooper (Professor Emerita, Columbia Journalism School; Editor-in-Chief, Harriman Magazine) with Larry Heinzerling and Randy Herschaft, was a runner up for the American Journalism Historians Association Book Award and a finalist for the Ann M. Sperber Book Prize.

## 5 Elise Giuliano Awarded RIMA Semester Senior Fellowship

Elise Giuliano (Senior Lecturer in Political Science; Director of the MARS-REERS Program; Director of the Program on U.S.-Russia Relations) was selected by the Russian Independent Media Archive (RIMA) for a Semester Senior Fellowship. As one of three inaugural recipients of the fellowship, she pursued research on how Russia's ethnic minorities perceive developments related to Russia's war on Ukraine.

## 6 Valentina Izmirlieva Named 2025-26 Fellow at Institute for Ideas & Imagination

Valentina Izmirlieva (Director, Harriman Institute; Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures) is part of the 2025–26 fellowship cohort at Columbia's Institute for Ideas & Imagination in Paris. During the fellowship, Izmirlieva will be completing a monograph about the Christian hajjis of the Ottoman Empire—a distinct group of Eastern Orthodox pilgrims to Jerusalem who took as their model the Muslim Hajj to Mecca.

## IN BRIEF

## Prizes and Announcements



Select updates about our faculty. Please visit our website for the full listing.

### 7 Jenik Radon Joined e-Governance Academy's Supervisory Board

Jenik Radon (Adjunct Professor of International and Public Affairs) has joined the supervisory board of the e-Governance Academy in Estonia. Radon previously served as an advisor during the country's independence movement and helped co-author several economic laws.

### 8 David Stark Named 2025–26 Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences

David Stark (Arthur Lehman Professor of Sociology; Director of Columbia's Center on Organizational Innovation) is part of the 2025–26 fellowship cohort at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University. Members of the 2025–26 cohort conduct research in a variety of fields in the social and behavioral sciences. This is Stark's second CASBS Fellowship.

### 2014 Writer in Residence László Krasznahorkai Awarded Nobel Prize in Literature

Hungarian writer László Krasznahorkai has won the 2025 Nobel Prize in Literature. The Swedish Academy in Stockholm praised the writer “for his compelling and visionary oeuvre that, in the midst of apocalyptic terror, reaffirms the power of art.”

Krasznahorkai was the Spring 2014 Harriman Writer in Residence. He taught the seminar “Artistic Collaboration in East Central Europe,” centered on his work with famed Hungarian film director Béla Tarr (*Satantango*, *Werckmeister Harmonies*) and German painter Max Neumann (*Animalinside*). Congratulations, László Krasznahorkai!

### Robert Legvold Receives Distinguished Scholar Award and Named Fellowship

Congratulations to Marshall D. Shulman Professor Emeritus Robert Legvold, to whom the Harriman Institute awarded the Distinguished Scholar Award for extraordinary contributions to Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies. Legvold, who served as Director of the Harriman Institute during the pivotal years of 1986–1992, received the award at the Harriman Carnegie Corporation Russia Studies Capstone Conference, where he delivered keynote remarks. A fellowship honoring Legvold's scholarship and the lasting effects his mentorship have had on his students was also announced at the conference. We are grateful to the Carnegie Corporation of New York for providing the seed funds for this fellowship.

Read more about Legvold and his career in his interview for the Harriman Institute's oral history project: *Cold Wars and the Academy: An Oral History of Russian and Eurasian Studies*.



### Harriman Institute Joins Global Coalition of Ukrainian Studies

We're proud to join the Global Coalition of Ukrainian Studies. On September 24, 2025, Harriman Institute Acting Director Jack Snyder, along with leaders of other institutions, signed a Memorandum of Understanding at the Ukrainian Institute of America with coalition founder Ukrainian First Lady Olena Zelenska present.

The Global Coalition of Ukrainian Studies is an international initiative to create a united network of universities and research institutions focused on the advancement of Ukrainian studies. Columbia scholars have studied Ukraine since the first half of the 20th century. The Harriman Institute's Ukrainian Studies program dates back to the late 1980s and has been an international leader in the field. By joining the Global Coalition of Ukrainian Studies, the institute can deepen its relationship with emerging international scholars and programs focused on Ukraine.

“We hope to meet new international scholars working on Ukraine with whom we can share our experience in this field,” says Mark Andryczyk, who leads the Harriman Institute's Ukrainian Studies Program. ◆





## Faculty Books

Our faculty members have published a wide-ranging selection of books.

### ***Earth Gods: Writings from Before the War***

translated by Mark Andryczyk (Associate Research Scholar, Ukrainian Studies Program), Ali Kinsella (MARS-REERS '14), and Uilleam Blacker. Introduced by Mark Andryczyk

This book presents the early writings of Taras Prokhasko, one of Ukraine's most prominent contemporary writers. Collected for the first time in one book, these works span various genres yet form a single chronicle.

*Harvard University Press, 2025*  
ISBN: 9780674291164

### ***Hitler's Twilight of the Gods: Music and the Orchestration of War and Genocide in Europe***

by Alexandra Birch (Mellon Teaching Fellow at the Harriman Institute; Lecturer in History)

This book, as described by the publisher, “demonstrates the integral role music played in Nazi statecraft and ideology, from the personal obsessions of the Nazi leadership to the harrowing use of musical sadism in the Holocaust.”

*University of Toronto Press, 2025*  
ISBN: 9781487549190

### ***Nothing (:) Made in Yugoslavia***

by Aleksandar Bošković (Senior Lecturer in Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian)

As described by the publisher, “this text deals specifically with Yugoslav experimental art practices. It investigates the relationship between negation practices across different art forms and media — literature, film, visual arts, radio — in Yugoslavia (1918–2006), as well as the notion of artistic, economic, and symbolic values.”

*Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade; Regional Center for Advanced Studies of Humanities, Rijeka, 2024*  
ISBN: 978-86-82324-74-4

### ***Dictating the Agenda: The Authoritarian Resurgence in World Politics***

by Alexander Cooley (Claire Tow Professor of Political Science, Barnard College) and Alexander Dukalskis

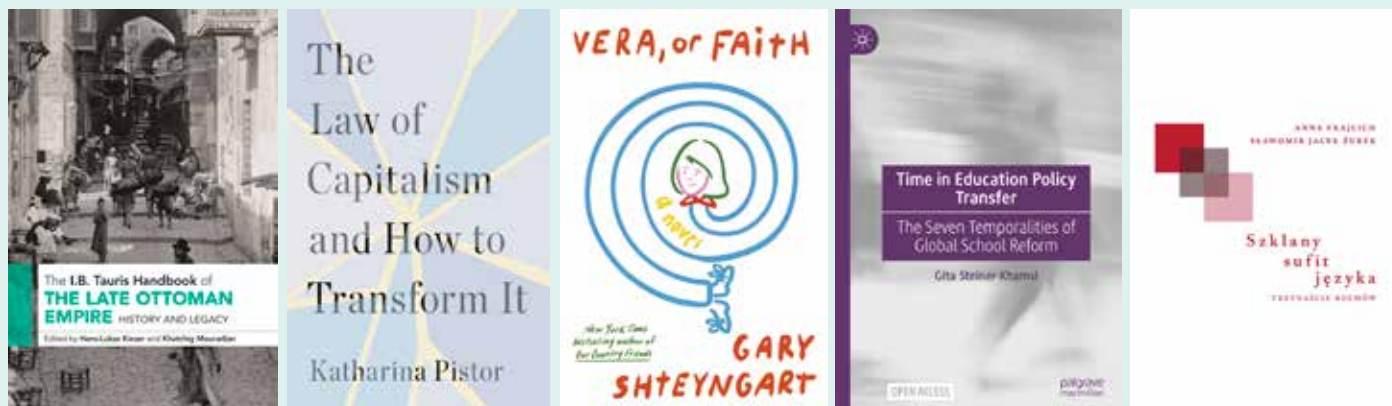
This book, as described by the publisher, “is a story not just of the limits of liberal influence across the world, but of how authoritarian governments came to dictate the global agenda by repurposing the very actors, tools, and norms that once afforded US-backed liberalism such global prominence.”  
*Oxford University Press, 2025*  
ISBN: 9780197776360

### ***Workplace Politics: How Politicians and Employers Subvert Elections***

by Timothy M. Frye (Marshall D. Shulman Professor of Post-Soviet Foreign Policy), Ora John Reuter (Harriman Institute Postdoctoral Fellow, 2010–11) and David Szakonyi (Ph.D., Political Science, GSAS, 2016)

This book, as described by the publisher, “draws on unique surveys of firm managers and employees in eight countries, as well as a wealth of fine-grained observational data and qualitative interviews from Russia to demonstrate that workplace mobilization is common, often coercive, and unpopular with many voters.”  
*Oxford University Press, 2025*  
ISBN: 9780197802007

## IN BRIEF



***All the World on a Page: A Critical Anthology of Modern Russian Poetry***

by Mark Lipovetsky (Professor and Chair, Department of Slavic Languages) and Andrew Kahn

This volume traces the rich and ongoing development of Russian lyric poetry, explored through close readings of 34 poems by poets ranging from Alexander Blok to Maria Stepanova. Princeton University Press, 2025  
ISBN: 9780691207162

***The I.B. Tauris Handbook of the Late Ottoman Empire: History and Legacy***

edited by Khatchig Mouradian (Lecturer in Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies) and Hans-Lukas Kieser

This comprehensive 768-page volume provides an interdisciplinary examination of the late Ottoman Empire and its legacies. London: Bloomsbury, 2025  
ISBN: 9780755644506

***The Law of Capitalism and How to Transform It***

by Katharina Pistor (Edwin B. Parker Professor of Comparative Law at Columbia Law School)

This book is described by the publisher as “a fascinating study of the legal underpinnings of capitalism, reasons why the system must be transformed, and actions we can take.” Yale University Press, 2025  
ISBN: 9780300282801

***Vera, or Faith***

by Gary Shteyngart (Professor of Writing, Columbia School of the Arts)

This novel follows the story of the Bradford-Shmulkin family, with young daughter Vera at the center. Random House, 2025  
ISBN: 9780593595091

***Time in Education Policy Transfer: The Seven Temporalities of Global School Reform***

by Gita Steiner-Khamsi (Professor of Comparative and International Education, Teachers College)

As described by the publisher, “this open access book investigates a topic underexplored in policy transfer: time. Drawing on well-known theories from comparative education, public policy studies, political science, and sociology, the author discusses seven temporalities of policy transfer: historical period, future, sequence, timing, lifespan, age, and tempo.” Springer Nature, 2025  
ISBN: 9783031825262

***Szklany sufit języka. Trzynaście rozmów (The Glass Ceiling of Language: 13 Conversations)***

by Anna Frajlich Zajac (Senior Lecturer Emerita, Department of Slavic Languages) and Sławomir Jacek Żurek

This book is comprised of 13 dialogues between Frajlich and Professor Sławomir Jacek Żurek (The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin), which provide a detailed and richly-illustrated chronicle of Frajlich’s life and work. Wydawnictwo Austeria, 2025  
ISBN: 9788378666622 ◆

IN BRIEF



# Notable Harriman Events

## 1 80 Years since Auschwitz: An Evening of Musical Commemoration of the Holocaust

On January 27, 2025, the Harriman Institute and the Barnard Music Program hosted an event with Alexandra Birch (Mellon Teaching Fellow, Harriman Institute; Lecturer in History) and Jui-Ling Hsu, who presented a musical commemoration of the Holocaust. In addition to a fragment of a lost prewar violin sonata by composer Viktor Ullmann, who was murdered at Auschwitz, this program included the first sonata of Sergei Prokofiev, reconceived as a musical memorial for murdered Soviet World War II POWs; sound recordings from Auschwitz-Birkenau taken in 2024; a sonically vivid piece by the Ukrainian-Jewish violinist Emil Leyvand; and the first violin sonata of the Polish-Jewish composer Mieczyslaw Weinberg, who fled to the Soviet Union

in 1939. The program remembered the murdered and persecuted artists of the Holocaust as artists, rather than as victims. It also provided a more complete picture of the Holocaust, aiming to tell the story of a handful of individuals facing incomprehensible violence.



Scan to learn more

## 2 Nuclear Colonialism in Kazakhstan: Domestic and Regional Implications

On March 6, 2025, the Harriman Institute and the Weatherhead East Asian Institute hosted a panel discussion examining the long-term consequences of Soviet nuclear

weapons tests at the Semipalatinsk test site in Kazakhstan. The speakers were part of a research group from Karaganda Buketov University (Kazakhstan), whose research addressed such issues as the impact of these tests on the health and well-being of local communities, a comparative analysis of nuclear test sites worldwide, and the contributions of domestic scientists to understanding and mitigating the consequences of nuclear tests.



Scan to learn more

## 3 Harriman Carnegie Corporation Russian Studies Capstone Conference

In the fall of 2016, the Harriman Institute launched a Russian Studies and Policy Program with a generous grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The program was designed to expand the study of Russia across the social sciences and in the greater New York area. On September

## IN BRIEF



Revolutionary Yugoslavia symposium participants gathered around a poster advertising the conference.

5

18, the institute celebrated completion of the program with a conference that gathered top experts on topics that included the future of Russian and Eurasian studies, reflections on the political economy of Russia, new research agendas and topics, and how Russia's war on Ukraine impacts institutions in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Robert Legvold (Marshall D. Shulman Professor Emeritus in the Department of Political Science) delivered keynote remarks and received a Distinguished Scholar Award and Named Fellowship from the Harriman Institute (see p. 46 for details).



Scan to  
learn more

#### 4 Through Protest to Reform: Euromaidan and Decentralization in Ukraine

Anastasiia Vlasenko (Petro Jacyk Post-doctoral Research Scholar in Ukrainian Studies, Harriman Institute) appeared at

a Director's Seminar on October 3, 2025 to discuss her research on how the Euromaidan movement reshaped power dynamics in Ukraine and led to sweeping decentralization reform. Drawing on rich local-level data, Vlasenko's study uncovered a fascinating paradox: communities touched by protest often moved more slowly to adopt decentralization than did other communities. However, once they did, they used it more effectively. The talk offered fresh insight into how collective action can rewrite the rules of governance from the bottom up. (See p. 31 for Vlasenko's essay on participatory democracy in Ukraine).



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learn more

#### 5 Revolutionary Yugoslavia: Partisan Art, Archives and Film

On October 11, 2025 the Njegoš Endowment for Serbian Language and Culture and the East Central European

Center at the Harriman Institute held a symposium exploring the cultural and political legacies of the revolutionary Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia through the lenses of art, archives, and film. Commemorating the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II and the defeat of fascism in 1945, the symposium examined how creative practices that fused art and activism, both official and grassroots, shaped partisan antifascist struggle, socialist revolution, and reconstruction, as well as their contested afterlives. The event was organized by Columbia's Aleksandar Bošković (Senior Lecturer in Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian), Amir Husak (Assistant Professor of Media Studies, The New School), Dijana Jelača (Lecturer in Cinema Studies in the Department of Film, Brooklyn College), and Nace Zavrl (doctoral candidate in the Department of Art, Film, and Visual Studies, Harvard University). ♦



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learn more



Outside United Nations offices in Geneva. Photo courtesy of Yana Gorokhovskaia

#### WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

## “The Rare Problem that Crosses Human Rights and National Security”

A Harriman postdoctoral alumna on how the Trump administration’s budget cuts impede the democracy-building efforts at Freedom House.

BY ANN COOPER

**YANA GOROKHOVSKAIA** (Postdoctoral Research Scholar in Russian Studies 2016–19) joined Freedom House in 2021 just as the independent watchdog organization had released a groundbreaking report on transnational repression. Three years earlier, the Saudi government had brutally murdered dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Cases like that were on the rise across the globe and this was the first-ever global study examining how governments used violence and intimidation to silence critics in exile. The issue, part of Gorokhovskaia’s portfolio in her new job, quickly went “from an academic niche to a topic of conversation at the UN, U.S.

Congress, European Parliament, and G7,” she said. Now, when those bodies call for expert testimony, Gorokhovskaia is often a main witness, laying out details from her Freedom House reports and from the organization’s database documenting over 1,200 acts of transnational repression since 2014 in 48 countries—including major offenders China, Turkey, and Russia.

“The issue has a lot of resonance,” said Gorokhovskaia. “Because the space for activism inside authoritarian countries is closing, dissidents are fleeing abroad where they continue to be targeted.” That endangers both the dissidents “and the sovereignty of the democratic country where they have settled ... It’s the rare

problem that crosses human rights and national security,” she said.

Now, since the Trump administration’s drastic cuts to programs supporting human rights and democracy building, it also is a problem that organizations like Freedom House have fewer resources to fight. Freedom House was hit particularly hard—the research department, where Gorokhovskaia is director of strategy and design, lost 16 of its 24 staff members. And a new program aimed at building more awareness and protections for targeted exiles had to be canceled after just four months.

Gorokhovskaia, who immigrated from Russia to Canada as a child in 1995, focused her doctoral studies on Russian electoral politics. She came to the Harriman Institute as a postdoctoral research fellow in 2016, as Russia was growing increasingly repressive. Yet opposition efforts there—and in other authoritarian states—continued.

“Even today, when I interview dissidents working from exile or those still in their home countries, I’m always surprised by how open they are about their activities and also how aware they are of the risks,” she said.

In addition to her work on transnational repression, Gorokhovskaia oversees *Freedom in the World*, the Freedom House flagship report issued annually since 1973. The report identifies each of the world’s 195 countries as “free,” “partly free,” or “not free.” Those shorthand ratings are based on detailed analysis of each country, with previous editions giving a detailed narrative explaining each rating.

But when the next edition of *Freedom in the World* appears in March 2026, it will be much shorter. “We had to scale [it] down,” said Gorokhovskaia, due to budget and staffing cuts. Instead of the traditional narrative, some country reports will be reduced to ratings only. An end result, she believes, is “that there will simply be less information available on what authoritarian governments are doing to their people.”

*Gorokhovskaia’s postdoctoral position was sponsored by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. Read more about the program on p. 46 of this issue. ♦*

## ALUMNI

## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

## In Search of New Approaches to Human Rights

A Harriman alumna who has worked for decades on human rights and democracy promotion says there is an urgent need to transform the field.

BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

**SARAH E. MENDELSON** (HI 1991; GSAS, Ph.D., 1993) a political scientist and human rights scholar and practitioner, had not intended to work in the U.S. government. But when Barack Obama ran for president in 2007, she was so enthusiastic about the candidate that she volunteered with his campaign's multilateral and human rights policy team. That, in part, led to her joining his administration in 2010 as deputy assistant administrator in the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

Mendelson was the lead on the agency's work on democracy, human rights, and

governance, and what she observed was disturbing. "I witnessed an epidemic of closing space around civil society," she said in a September 2025 interview with *Harriman Magazine*.

By then, Mendelson had been working on democracy promotion and human rights for more than fifteen years. At the National Democratic Institute in Moscow in the mid-1990s, she worked with political parties "on the role of focus groups and surveys and listening to citizens." It was an exciting period, but there was little organization and much competition among the liberal candidates in Russia. "I remember thinking, uh oh, this might not go well," she said.

In 2001, Mendelson joined the Center for Strategic and International Studies as a senior fellow in the Russia and Eurasia Program, working closely with Russian human rights organizations like Memorial. By the time she started at USAID, Mendelson was well aware of the diminishing space for civil society in Russia, but she couldn't have foreseen what happened in 2012, when President Vladimir Putin expelled USAID.

"I almost quit over that," Mendelson said, recalling how many viewed it as an isolated incident, while she worried "that if Russia can do this, then it's going to happen in other places, which of course it did."

In 2015, Mendelson was confirmed as the U.S. Ambassador to the Economic and Social Council at the United Nations. There, she sat on the NGO committee, which acted more like the "anti-NGO committee" because of members like Russia, Iran, and China. Even in countries with friendlier attitudes, she noticed another alarming trend: "NGOs in many places were more clearly aligned with donors in Geneva, New York, or Washington than their local populations."

Then came the first Trump Administration and the pandemic, making clear "that democracy in the United States had a lot of problems and that we could not continue walking around the world doing democracy promotion the same way we had for decades," she said.

In 2018, Mendelson joined Carnegie Mellon University where she has focused on reframing approaches to human rights. She directs a program called "Sustainable Futures," which draws on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as a framework to address global and local human rights issues.

With the second Trump administration eviscerating USAID, the need to reframe approaches to human rights and development is all the more urgent, said Mendelson. "There's a lot of reimagining that needs to happen," she said. "As one colleague put it, we didn't ask to be handed a blank piece of paper, but we've been given a blank piece of paper, and we need to rethink how we do this work." ♦



Ambassador Mendelson addresses the United Nations General Assembly on October 19, 2016, to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the adoption of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Photo courtesy of the United States Mission to the United Nations

## Alumni Notes



**Filip J. Scherf**  
(née Tucek)  
M.I.A. 2015

A decade ago, the Harriman Institute — its brilliant scholars, inspiring people, and passionate professionals — set me on a path that still shapes my work today. Along this path, I have sought to deepen our understanding of contemporary Russia: how its political system functions, where its strengths and weaknesses lie, and what its intentions are. My years at Harriman equipped me with the knowledge and tools to explore these questions, first at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, later during my years in Russia, and now in inter-governmental work and academia. While advising European policymakers on the fine details of Russian politics, I also aim to enrich public debate, not least through my book *The Lost Land: A Story of Modern Russia* (Host Publishing, 2024), longlisted for Czech Book of the Year and now being translated into English. It all began on the 12th floor of the International Affairs Building, a place I will always treasure.



**Hope Harrison**  
Harriman Certificate  
1991; GSAS 1996

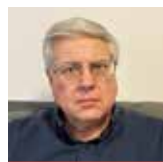
I was lucky to work with Robert Legvold, Jack Snyder, and Mark von Hagen at the Harriman Institute as I explored the newly-opened archives in Moscow and Berlin for my dissertation on the communist decision to build the Berlin Wall. The resulting book, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953–1961* (Princeton 2003) won the Marshall D. Shulman Book Prize in 2004 and was released in a German edition in 2011. I went on to publish another book, *After the Berlin Wall: Memory and the Making of the New Germany, 1989–Present*, (Cambridge,

2019) and a Great Courses/Audible book, *The Berlin Wall: A World Divided* (2021). For my engagement with German history and transatlantic relations through my publications, media appearances, board service, and work with students, I am happy to report that I was honored by the German government this year with the Cross of the Federal Order of Merit. German President Frank Walter Steinmeier made the decision to award the honor in November 2024, and the then-German Ambassador to the United States, Andreas Michaelis, hosted a beautiful ceremony and dinner with my family, friends, and colleagues at his residence in March 2025.



**Monica Angelena Johnson**  
M.I.A 2017; Harriman  
Certificate 2017

I received my Harriman Certificate in 2017, specializing in Romania because of my Peace Corps service in Târgu Ocna from 2008–11. In 2021, I found out about women's professional tackle football while moving back to my hometown, El Cajon, CA, to help my family take care of my grandmother. I had never played a team sport in my life prior to joining the Women's National Football Conference's San Diego team, the Rebellion, in 2022. After my second season, my teammates voted me Most Improved Player in 2023. I continue to play for the Rebellion as defensive end and to be part of a diverse group of women who are working toward one day being paid to play football. I would love the support of Harriman students, alumni, and administration interested in tuning into games during the season, which runs from April to June, and following my team on Instagram @SanDiegoRebellion.



**John Lis**  
M.I.A. 1996,  
EOE Certificate 1996

I had been working as a democracy and governance consultant for USAID for

If you would like to be included in a future issue, please submit a note (100–150 words) and a photograph (1MB +) to Masha Udensiva-Brenner at [mu2159@columbia.edu](mailto:mu2159@columbia.edu).

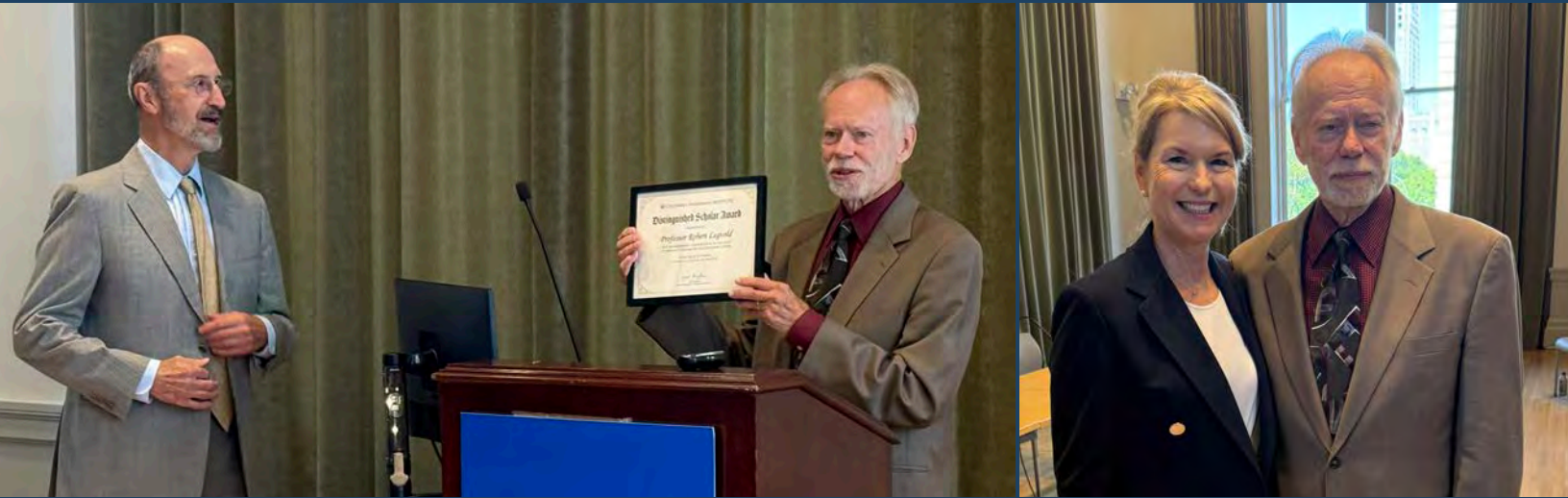
12 years when the stop-work order was issued in January 2025. I have not worked since then and hold out little hope of future USAID contracts, though I am pursuing projects with other donors. The democracy, human rights, and governance (DRG) field has been decimated by the dismantling of USAID.

As a consultant, my projects have included: evaluations of several legislative strengthening and decentralization projects in Ukraine; a DRG assessment in Poland; an evaluation of a grants program in nine countries of the Black Sea region; and a half-dozen projects in Kyrgyzstan. Previously, I have worked as a Javits Fellow on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; an international affairs analyst at the Congressional Budget Office; director of the Defense and Security Committee of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Brussels; and professional staff member on the House Foreign Affairs Committee. My time at the latter committee included eight years as staff director of the House Democracy Partnership, a congressional peer-to-peer legislative strengthening initiative, where I managed programs in 17 countries, including North Macedonia, Kosovo, Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan.



**Fred Abrahams**  
M.I.A. 1995; Harriman  
Certificate 1995

I recently released an audiobook of my monograph, *Modern Albania: From Dictatorship to Democracy* (New York University Press, 2015), and I am working on an update to cover the past ten years. I recall fondly my studies of Eastern Europe at SIPA starting in 1993 — a time of optimism and enthusiasm — and the year I took from studies to work in Albania with fellow students Stacy Sullivan, Marianne Sullivan, and Gazmend Haxhia. I live in Berlin now and am teaching and helping develop the human rights program at Bard College Berlin. ♦




(Left) Robert Legvold receiving a Distinguished Scholar Award from Harriman Acting Director Jack Snyder at the Carnegie Capstone Conference in September 2025; (Right) Robert Legvold with his former student Julie Newton (MIA '85)

## Training the next generation of regional specialists is more crucial than ever.



Please consider donating to our Robert Legvold Fellowship Fund for Graduate Studies, which enables us to support MARS-REERS graduate students who share Professor Legvold's scholarly interest in foreign policy and U.S.-Russia relations.



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