



**Ascolta**

information and analytical centre



Final analytical report

**2023:  
THE WORLD  
AWAITS FOR THE  
«BLACK SWANS»**

Kyiv 2023



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THE WORLD  
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**Ascolta** is an independent information and analytical centre specialising in information collection, processing and systematisation. The centre's area of interest is political, economic, as well as social and humanitarian processes in the world, mainly in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. The key direction of our activity is studying Russia's internal and external political environment and its influence on Europe, Africa and Latin America.

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Kyiv 2023

## CONTENT:

FOREWORD.....	6
UKRAINE.....	11
RUSSIA.....	14
THE MIDDLE EAST.....	16
TÜRKIYE.....	18
SOUTH CAUCASUS.....	20
SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN.....	22
CHINA.....	24
THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.....	26
THE UNITED KINGDOM.....	28
FRANCE.....	30
VATICAN.....	32
CENTRAL EUROPE.....	34
AFRICA.....	37
LATIN AMERICA.....	39

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## FOREWORD

2023 will remain in history as the year of the final completion of dismantling the old architecture of the world order, formed as a result of the Second World War, the Cold War and the collapse of the socialist system. The year 2023 marked the final division of the world into two camps - the so-called "Global West" and "Global South". Notably, the term "Global South" itself, first coined in 1969 by Carl Oglesby, came into active use precisely in 2023. In addition, 2023 became the year of Henry Kissinger, one of the architects of the old world order, based on the unconditional monopoly of the United States: in the first half of the year, they celebrated the centenary of the great politician and thinker, in the second they mourned his death. His death became a kind of point in the system of the old world order.

The destruction of old traditions and the foundations of the old world always occurs with the release of a large amount of energy, which is transformed into wars, coups, conflicts, crises and other cataclysms. Recently, FBI Director Christopher Wray said: "These are unique times. "I have never in my career seen a situation where all or very many threats increased simultaneously." Several generations of politicians in

the West have become accustomed to living in fairly comfortable, conflict-free conditions in a demo-liberal world with smooth careers and a peaceful old age, with the understanding that the biggest disaster in their lives could be another economic crisis and that a nuclear threat is something from the category of “fairy tales for the uninitiated.” The world of procedures and institutions, speculation and hypocrisy, obviously impossible agreements, futures, indices, Bilderberg clubs, Davos, vanity fairs and idle talk about “the open society and its enemies” collapsed. Just as the world of Art Nouveau pretentiousness collapsed in 1914, forcing one to change tailcoats to a grey military uniform, and as the world collapsed in 1939, dividing the world into “before” and “after”, rewiring the brains and killing humanity the cult of a strong personality and the cult of will.

In 2023, several significant trends emerged that will dominate over the coming years and develop in the following years.

Firstly, **in 2023, war has become the new norm in people’s daily lives** – and not only in Ukraine. February 24, 2022, was perceived by us as some kind of tragedy, a misunderstanding, something that is beyond good and evil, beyond our awareness. The year 2023 has led to the fact that we have not only learned to live in war conditions. Some politicians have realised that war is a new *modus vivendi*, new opportunities. Someone understands that the war’s end will be the end of his career. Some perceive war as a means of enrichment (this applies not only to global arms manufacturers and sellers but also to a vast number of those who receive super-profits from processing deferments, crossing the border, smuggling, volunteering, filing fake reports on the front line, on organ transplantation, on recording the dead as missing, and so on). Some people see war as a way to strengthen their power, expand it beyond the boundaries defined by the Constitution, take over all the media, eliminate local self-government, and take control of financial flows. With the transformation of war into routine, a class of people is formed who are vitally interested in continuing the war at any cost, with a readiness to throw the entire repressive and punitive apparatus against the very concept of “peace” under noble

slogans. And this applies not only to Ukraine. This is a universal phenomenon, a pattern of any protracted war.

Since the beginning of 2023, Ukraine, as well as Europe and the whole world, have ceased to perceive war as something extraordinary. It has become an indispensable attribute of news feeds. “The death of one person is a tragedy; the death of thousands is a statistic.” “Arrivals” into residential areas and the death of civilians – especially children – no longer cause a wave of mourning avatars on social networks. The situation worsened in October when war broke out in the Middle East: it became clear that the number of “hot spots” would gradually grow, covering the planet. The Ukrainian case has ceased to be unique; it has ceased to be interesting; it has lost some exclusivity. War became not the “last argument of kings” but one of the instruments of a political dispute.

Secondly, **2023 has become the year of the global collision of modernity and postmodernity**, especially evident in the war in Ukraine. Russia is the bearer of modernist tendencies based on logic and rationality, with attempts to reorient the economy based on raw materials to a new technological level through war, breaking through sanctions and blockades. Ukraine is a postmodern with a conditional economy, with complete dependence on Western supplies, on the injection of funds into the economy, without visible plans, and without a structured management system. But at the same time, both concepts clashed to death. The development of humanity in the coming decades will largely depend on the victory of one side or the other, just as the paradigm of European development depended on the victory in the Spanish Civil War.

Moreover, in our eyes, the West is transforming from a society that has experienced modernisation into a postmodern society - in politics, economics, and culture. Or even a metamodern society. While the Global South is betting on new modernisation. That is why the war in Ukraine is the first open clash of two concepts for developing the future world.

Thirdly, **2023 became the year of massive rearmament of NATO countries and the**

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**year of active formation of blocs** within the Global South. Military assistance to Ukraine has also become a way to replace outdated equipment of European NATO members with new types of weapons produced in the USA, Germany, and France. At the same time, interaction is intensifying (including in the field of military-technical cooperation) between Russia, Belarus, China, Iran, and North Korea, which closely cooperate with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Today's rhetoric from the leaders of large states is no longer about the need to maintain peace. This is already speculation about when and to what extent a new war will break out. The era of the Big World is a thing of the past.

Fourthly, **in 2023 – as previously in 2015 – the issue of mass migration has become topical.** If eight years ago, tens and hundreds of thousands of Kurds, Syrians and Libyans poured into Europe, then in 2022, there will already be millions of Ukrainians, and in 2023, there will be a wave of new Arab refugees, primarily from Palestine. Europeans greeted the first wave of migrants warily but tolerantly - they said, "We have to pay for the sins of our colonial ancestors". The wave of Ukrainians was met with understanding - the war, Putin, but Ukrainians are Europeans. The third wave is causing serious debate in society. The issue of new migrants had already led to severe problems even before the arrival of the Palestinians from Gaza, shaking the foundations of conservative European societies. In Germany, the ruling Social Democratic Party is actively losing votes: in local elections in Hesse and Bavaria, it could only show third results. But at the same time, the popularity of the right-wing Alternative for Germany is increasing actively. In Austria, the mayoral elections in Graz and Salzburg were won by the communists, who were almost forgotten as a political force. Serious right-wing tendencies emerged in France, where in the spring and summer, there were mass riots, the driving force of which were emigrants from Africa and the Middle East. In many cities, the police were powerless against these protests. European politicians are forced to admit that there is no effective mechanism to counter "migrant freedom", at least in the demo-liberal coordinate system.

Either an "iron hand" and disregard for human rights or capitulation to the increasingly severe migration problem. That is why the next decade will not only shape but also actualise demands for a "strong hand" and dictatorship in European countries.

Fifth, **2023 gave uprise to the "cancellation"** practice related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Suppose last year, the Russian invasion was directed against Putin and his inner circle, against Russian companies that made money from the war. In that case, it will be more so next year. Refusal of the Russian language and Russian culture, massive renaming of streets and squares, destruction of Russian-language literature (only on linguistic grounds), closure of departments, disputes regarding the names of outstanding figures of Russian culture who contributed to the development of Ukrainian culture, but "were not sufficiently aware of the Ukrainian national question"... After the "cancellation" of Russian culture, the "cancellation" of Belarusian culture began, then the question of the abolition of Persian culture was raised, and so on. And this applies not only to Ukraine: Eastern Europe has taken up this initiative. The world split into the "Global West" and the "Global South" is rapidly leading to the construction of a cultural and information wall: we are already talking about a total ban on a single Internet space and a "sovereign Internet" with firewalls tested in China is gradually becoming a reality. The two parts of the world are trying to "cancel" each other and present their opponents in the most unfavourable light; many fake information products will follow this cancellation. A factory of fakes that South Korea has been creating against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea for a long time is an example: how Kim Jong-un killed his mistress, how he shot his uncle with a mortar, and how he fed his relative. The world believed and continues to believe, although all those "killed," thank God, are alive. The practice of "cancellation" will be followed by an era of shortage of objective information, simulacra, and post-truth triumph. Access to factual information has already become the privilege of a select few. Unfortunately, Ukraine is one of the leaders in this process.



Sixth, **2023 was the year of breakthroughs in research and development in artificial intelligence.** “AI Apostle” Ray Kurzweil can triumph: his predictions are being realised even ahead of schedule. He predicted that the parameters that artificial intelligence developers have come close to achieving will only become possible by 2030. Last year, the whole world had fun playing with ChatGPT. Exhibitions have opened in many capitals worldwide, demonstrating the new capabilities of artificial intelligence. Meanwhile, Geoffrey Hinton, a leading systems developer for Google, voluntarily resigned on May 3. Before leaving, he made an important statement, admitting that all his activities were mistakes. In his opinion, the danger of neural networks is that the Internet can be flooded with fake photos, videos and texts created by artificial intelligence, and people will not be able to understand what is true. Hinton says it’s hard to figure out how to stop attackers from using neural networks for destructive purposes.

On November 3, Elon Musk said that the likelihood that artificial intelligence will become a “force of evil” is not zero. Musk compared AI to a magical genie from fairy tales that instantly fulfils all a person’s desires. “Usually, such fairy tales end badly,” Musk concluded. Musk estimated the probability that artificial intelligence will rebel against humans at 20 per cent. And this is a very high level!

On November 16, China’s Ministry of State Security released an article about the dangers of AI. It stated that the widespread use of artificial intelligence, such as ChatGPT, will create problems that “could fundamentally change the current national security landscape shortly.” Among the main threats to the use of artificial intelligence, the ministry named information leaks, cyber-attacks and data manipulation, and the impact of technology on the economy and the armed forces.

In early December, Google announced the creation of “Gemini” AI, which promises to be far superior to ChatGPT. The most powerful version, Ultra, has already beaten the human mind in the MMLU multi-task test, covering 57 subjects, including math, physics, law, medicine and ethics. Ultra will be used to write code in a new tool that can

outperform 85% of human programmers in tests. Experts argue that Gemini is already an artificial intelligence that understands our world and does not simply interpret it like familiar language models.

That is, humanity created the Golem and now wonders how it is possible (and whether it is possible?) to keep it under control.

Seventh. **2023 was the year of victory over coronavirus.** Finally, the World Health Organization issued an order to exclude the COVID-19 coronavirus from the list of dangerous diseases and cancel mandatory testing and vaccination. It has been said for a long time that the danger of coronavirus was artificially exaggerated in the interests of pharmaceutical corporations, and the WHO acted as an instrument to ensure their interests on a planetary scale. But this idea was considered “dissident.” The solemn but quiet victory over the coronavirus has only confirmed old guesses. But there is no need to rejoice: by the end of 2023, they are again talking about a new deadly virus, which has supposedly already engulfed China and is rapidly taking over the world. And there are talks about a deadly strain called “Kraken” in Europe. Therefore, according to a previously worked-out program, they may be preparing a new surprise for us.

Eighth, **2023, was the hottest year in the history of meteorological observations.** This year has given proponents of the global warming theory a chance to remind sceptics that they are right. This means demanding new programs, new subsidies for research, and new financial investments in developing technologies to counter dangerous trends. The year of the superactive Sun led to summer in temperate latitudes lasting until the end of October, and auroras were visible even in the Black Sea region, frightening superstitious people with omens and signs.

However, overall, the year passed without any major shocks or accomplishments. In planetary terms (if we do not consider the theme of war, which is close to us), it was rather ordinary, “unhistorical”. This year is unlikely to be noted in the history books. Humanity seemed to freeze, waiting for something. It froze, missing essential dates from the calendar, be it the centenary of the

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Beer Hall Putsch in Germany, the eightieth anniversary of the Revolution in World War II and the sixtieth anniversary of the assassination of John Kennedy. There is no time for dates and calendars when a feeling of something extraordinary is in the air. Taleb's "black swans" are about to arrive, and the world is peering in trepidation through the aurora, trying to see their silhouettes.

Moreover, in at least 74 countries, next year will be an election year in which 4.5 billion people will be involved. And often, elections are not only the expression of the people's will but also the start of severe political processes. Please fasten your seat belts. Our planet is entering a zone of maximum turbulence.



## UKRAINE

2023 has become a year of dramatic and even tragic events for Ukraine. The war with Russia dragged on. The economy is destroyed by war and inept management. Record depopulation of the population. A cult of intolerance towards dissent and persecution of any manifestations of disagreement. Elimination of political competition. Complete dependence on external injections - military and financial. Loss of territories. The initial optimism at the beginning of the war and the military successes of 2022 ended: the advertised counter-offensive did not produce results, attempts to hold Bakhmut failed, as well as attempts to create a reliable bridgehead on the left bank of the Dnieper in the Krynok region. Mobilization becomes extremely unpopular and damages the ratings and image of the authorities.

President Vladimir Zelensky came under a barrage of severe criticism from a significant part of Ukrainians. His ratings are falling catastrophically. Already in October, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology noted that the trust rating in the president had dropped from 91% to 76%, and the government's rating had fallen to 21%. In November, polls by the Sociological Group "Rating" showed that 72% of Ukrainians trust Zelensky

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(39% trust entirely and 33% rather trust). A similar indicator for the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Valery Zaluzhny, is much higher: 82% of respondents trust him (63% completely trust him, 19% rather trust him). If presidential elections in Ukraine took place today, Zelensky and Zaluzhny would have approximately equal chances in the second round (42% and 40%, respectively).

Zaluzhny himself has never declared his readiness to go into politics. Still, high ratings push Zelensky to see Zaluzhny as a dangerous competitor.

With this data, Vladimir Zelensky is doing everything to refuse to hold elections in 2024, as Western governments insist on this, pointing out the need to observe democratic procedures even during war (in this case, the South Korean example of Syngman Rhee is constantly cited, who in August 1952, despite the war and the lack of control over almost half of the territories, held elections).



The attitude towards Zelensky in the West has changed in the same way. If in 2022 he was an undisputed hero and a welcome guest at all international forums, starting in July 2023, with the NATO summit in Vilnius, the President of Ukraine has to face a constant “cold shower.” The West does not like Zelensky’s demanding tone, his urgent requests for help in the current conditions. Moreover, Zelensky understands that by constantly provoking a conflict with Russia and using Ukraine as a battering ram in its confrontation with the Russian Federation, the West is partially responsible for inciting war. But simultaneously, the United

States and NATO refused to transfer the required weapons to Ukraine, especially their modern models. Tanks, artillery, and missiles arrived late. Aviation, without which the offensive would be unthinkable, did not arrive at all but remained among the promises given to Ukraine. There was a catastrophic shortage of shells. Ukrainian soldiers and officers demonstrated miracles of heroism and self-sacrifice, but it is unrealistic to resist modern Russian weapons with manpower alone.

Is this why, by the end of 2023, the world began to mention Zelensky’s “Peace Formula” less and less and began to talk about the need for more realistic proposals?

In addition, in Ukraine, 2023 was the year of a series of corruption scandals. The detention of the head of the Supreme Court of Ukraine, Vsevolod Knyazev, for a bribe of \$3 million, the fight against bribe-takers-military commissars and doctors who wrote out documents about unfitness for military service, accusations of corruption against representatives of local governments, as well as several people’s deputies - all this has become the norm of life for Ukraine. The “cherry on the cake” was the accusation of corruption against officials of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, which led to the resignation of Minister Alexey Reznikov and his replacement with Rustem Umerov. With the departure of Reznikov and his deputy Denis Sharapov, the all-powerful Andrei Ermak was removed from influence on the Ministry of Defense. In fact, a team fully coordinated with Washington took over the ministry’s leadership.

At the end of December, Politico named the head of the Office of the President of Ukraine, Andriy Yermak, one of the most influential politicians in Europe (fourth position in the overall ranking). This was a recognition of the obvious fact: by 2023, Andrei Ermak had concentrated almost unlimited power in his hands and got rid of the person with whom he had to share powers - his former first deputy, Kirill Tymoshenko. True, at the same time, he had several knots of contradictions with other groups that had less influence, but at the same time had direct access to the president. According to some experts, claims that Yermak completely “privatised” Zelensky are exaggerated.

In fact, Zelensky uses Ermak as the main lightning rod and skillfully manipulates him, creating several counterweights, each of which is inferior to Ermak in influence but which, at the same time, together can neutralise his excessive apparatus appetites.

Notably, by the end of the year, Ermak began to act as an independent figure, an informal negotiator, making two trips to the United States in November and December, negotiating the provision of funds to Ukraine.

2023 became a year of intensifying internal confrontation between the Office of the President and representatives of big business. The introduction of sanctions against Vadim Novinsky, a criminal case against Konstantin Zhevago and the arrest of Igor Kolomoisky. Zelensky has strained relations with Rinat Akhmetov. Zelensky and Ermak have an ambiguous situation with Viktor Pinchuk, Tomas Fiala, Andrei Verevsky and Yuri Kosyuk. Almost all of them are at risk: sooner or later, the comprador nature of Ukraine's current leadership will conflict with any significant representative of the national capital.

By October-November, it became apparent that the United States would not give money. Washington has its own drama and its own processes, the logic of which does not fit Ukraine. Washington's attempts to shift responsibility onto European countries had minimal effect:

the European Union has a vast number of problems, even before the elections to the European Parliament.

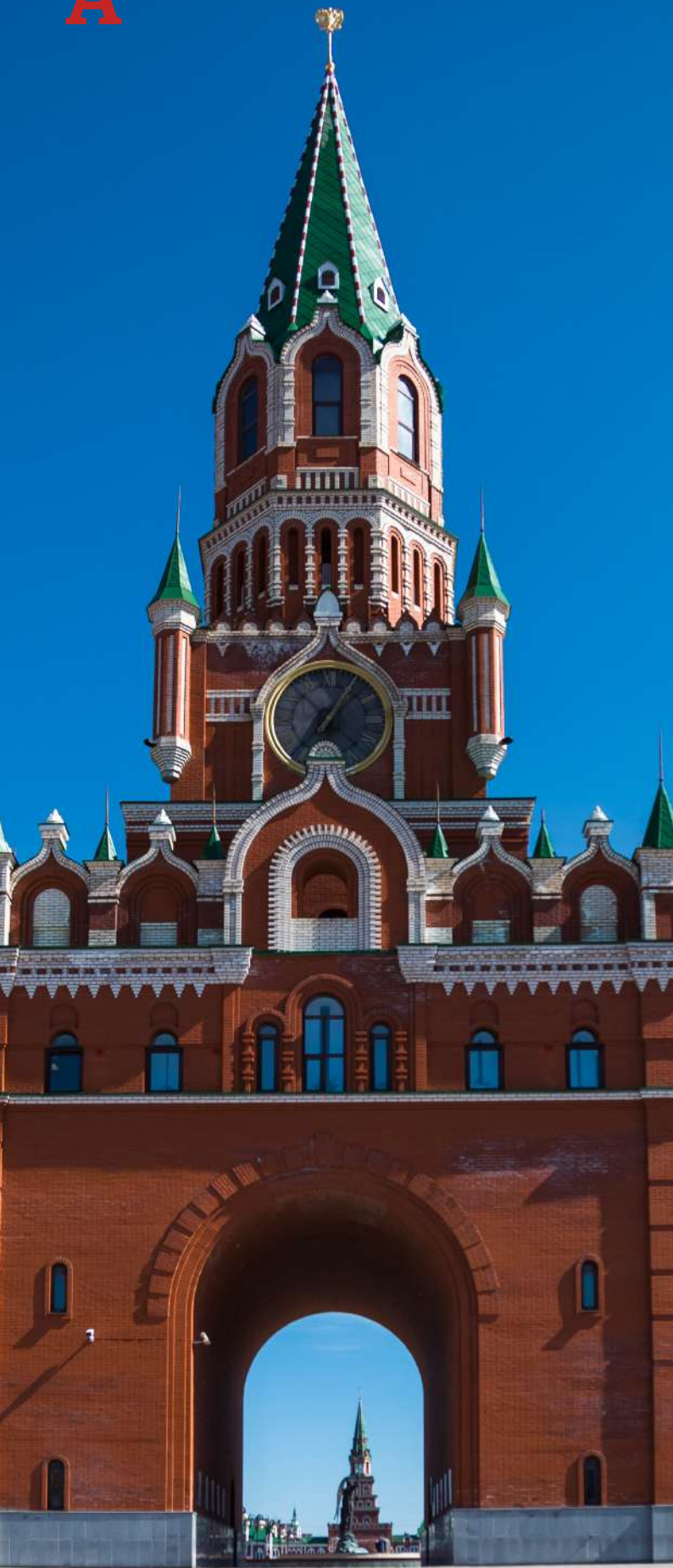
The world media first accused Ukraine of total corruption, then began to accuse Ukraine of inability to fight and of failure to follow the recommendations of foreign military advisers, and then wholly switched their focus to the Middle East, moving the issue of the Ukrainian-Russian war to the second or third plan.

The Ukrainian leadership began to be gradually persuaded and pushed towards peaceful negotiations with Russia. Zelensky is a categorical opponent of the negotiation process, which would include the surrender of territories and interests; otherwise, it would be a capitulation – not only of Ukraine but also of the West. The West is ready to put a good face on a bad game and freeze the conflict: signals about this are constantly heard from various Western platforms. It seems that if Ukraine finds itself in a situation where it is necessary to sign a peace (truce) with Russia, then Zelensky would rather resign his presidential powers than agree to sign the document. Moreover, the Ukrainian position in the big game will be secondary: Ukraine will simply be forced to agree to the option Russia and the United States will discuss in advance.

Ukraine ends 2023 in a circumstance where it has been only twice in modern times – in 1919 and 1942.



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## RUSSIA

In 2023, Russia put the country on a war base. The so-called “special military operation” did not become an easy ride; Russia had to get bogged down in the Donetsk steppes seriously while suffering massive losses.

In 2023, Russia was faced with the fact that Ukraine pushed the war on the territory of the Russian Federation: not only Crimea, which both sides consider their part, but also the Bryansk, Voronezh, Belgorod, Kursk, and Rostov regions became vulnerable. Several appearances of Ukrainian drones were registered in Moscow, including in the area of the “Moscow City” business centre. UAVs reached the Pskov region and the Urals. Sabotage acts happened in all of Russia right up to Siberia (an explosion on the Baikal-Amur Mainline), and groups of saboteurs made forays into the interior of the country. It was felt that a war of a totally different nature began.

On March 17, Putin’s image suffered a severe reputational blow as the International Criminal Court in The Hague issued an arrest warrant for the Russian president. Putin was forbidden from

entering the 124 countries that ratified the Rome Statute. So, for this reason, Putin could not arrive in the Republic of South Africa for the BRICS summit.

An exceptional event occurred in June - a Wagner PMC's riot led by Yevgeny Prigozhin. The rebels were preparing to march on Moscow, and the world was watching the Russian rebellion, expecting it, according to the classical technique, to be senseless and merciless. But the riot ended as quickly as it began. Two days later, Prigozhin, declared a criminal, was allowed to leave Russia. He got back a few days later, and the confiscated money and weapons were returned to him. The rioters met with the president. They were allowed to travel to Belarus. The case was hushed up. And a month later, Prigozhin died in a plane crash over Valdai.

Historians will argue for a long time about what it was and how largely federal authorities oversaw this process. At least, the myth that Putin had lost in this situation remained a myth. He strengthened the unity of the army command, kept his ratings, and by his gesture - "to let a criminal go notwithstanding with the law" - he demonstrated that he is above the law. That is, he is a "king" and not just a president.



For Russia, 2023 was a year without much battlefield success. Regardless, Russia demonstrated it could resist Western

sanctions by skillfully exploiting the growing conflict between the West and the Global South. The bet that there would be a revolt of the elites in the country did not materialise. Attempts to stimulate the rebellion of regions and national minorities remained a utopia. Attempts to initiate rumours about Putin's death and his staying in a refrigerator in Valdai were perceived as a joke.

Putin managed to keep the national currency stable, stimulate the domestic market (by redirecting the interests of oligarchs and big business to the interior of the country), and strengthen agriculture and defence. GDP grew by 3.5% (although in April, the growth was forecasted at 1.2%). Oil and gas were redirected to larger markets in China and India. "Nuclear diplomacy" is developing - Russia's building of nuclear power plants in different parts of the world (in October, an NPP built by Rosatom was opened in Bangladesh; there are agreements on constructing NPPs in Africa). Two meetings with Xi Jinping, visits to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, regular contact with the presidents of Iran and Turkey, and holding a summit of African countries' leaders are only the visible part of the diplomatic iceberg. Maintaining world oil prices at a consistently high level, a series of coups in Africa followed by the seizure of the initiative from France and strengthening the Assad regime in Syria are its underwater parts.

With this, Putin came to the nomination for a new presidential term, which he announced on December 8 during the presentation of awards to military personnel. A symbolic gesture and a symbolic occasion for announcing participation in the presidential elections.

Putin can hardly be called the winner in the current war, but he has more preferable positions. He knows what a "game of nerves" is, and this is the game he plays with Western countries, understanding that he wins his elections (March 17, 2024) in any weather, but this is how the fate of the Western (USA, EU) players will turn out - no one is sure of this.



## THE MIDDLE EAST

In October 2023, the Middle East went up in flames. The Palestinian HAMAS movement, which has held control of Gaza for decades, has invaded Israeli territory, shelling several populated areas. One of the bloodiest pages in the history of Israeli-Palestinian relations began.

Initially, there was too much mystery in the story itself: how could the Mossad miss the impending operation as it was believed that Gaza was simply filled with Israeli agents? Why did HAMAS, a force controlled by Qatar and partially by the UK, become the driving force of the conflict? An attack by the pro-Iranian force Hezbollah from the territory of Lebanon and Syria would look more logical. Why did many Israeli politicians behave so strangely: it seemed that many of them were just waiting for this invasion.

It became apparent that the Oslo agreements (September 1993) were buried, and there could be no return to them. Just as it is evident that the Oslo agreements never began to work, and the current situation is the result of broken agreements.





The situation around Gaza and the situation in Ukraine have a lot in common. Ineffective peace agreements (the signatories refused to implement them). The maximum level of conflict in the condition in which a collision could happen at any moment. A leader (Netanyahu and Zelensky) who, if peace comes, will most likely leave the political theatre. The absence of a unified political opinion of what is happening, the division of the world into two camps in assessing the situation. Acute irreconcilability in the perception of the enemy, the desire to fight for total annihilation while ignoring the opinion of the world community.

The situation continues to escalate. Israel intends to eliminate Gaza's self-government. The United States and some European countries sent their warships to the conflict area. Twelve Chinese warships have also been sent there. Hezbollah is threatening to enter the war. The Yemeni Houthis are firing rockets at Israel from the southeast. Iran is threatening to join to war. Putin has met with a HAMAS delegation. Erdogan criticised Netanyahu. A wave of anti-Israeli and even anti-Semitic actions emerged across Europe, and even the "style icon" of modern Western public life, Greta Thunberg, came out in support of Palestine - and it is very unlikely that she (as in other cases) is expressing only her personal belief.

It seems that the old prophecies about Armageddon are beginning to come true. Moreover, the hill of Megiddo, near which the final battle is to take place, is located on Israeli territory.

With the beginning of the bloody Gaza events, a notable part of the world elites have lost interest in Ukraine, while the topics of assisting it are invariably tied into a single program with the provision of military and financial assistance to Israel (like in the United States).



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## TÜRKIYE

The Republic of Turkey, which last year officially changed its name to the Republic of Türkiye, continues to be one of the most influential states in the region, extending its influence throughout the Turkic world, as well as the Middle East, the Caucasus, Moldova and, partly, Ukraine. And this is despite the economic difficulties, which could not be overcome in 2023 (the inflation rate of the Turkish lira in 2023 was 65%, and the key interest rate increased from 30% to 35%).

But at the same time, Recep Tayyip Erdogan continues to hold power in the country with a firm hand. In May 2023, he confidently won the presidential elections, obtaining 52.18% of the vote and entering his third presidential term (in the history of Türkiye, only two presidents were in power for four consecutive terms and one - for three terms). Despite the problems in the economy, Erdogan remains a popular politician within the country. He forced the power players that the interests of Türkiye should be taken into account (Erdogan's position on Finland and especially Sweden, which wanted to join NATO, expresses the significance of his words and his position). It was Erdogan who played an essential role in the Caucasus, leading Azerbaijan's

actions in the Karabakh war and putting Russian President Vladimir Putin in a



very uncomfortable position, making him choosing favour of Azerbaijan (more exactly, of Türkiye).

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An important fact is that in 2023, the political star of Hakan Fidan, who led the National Intelligence Organization for a long time, rose in Türkiye. After Erdogan's victory, Fidan became a minister of foreign affairs. At the same time, he has many qualities that allows expecting great potential for his future. In political circles, he is already being called a possible successor to Erdogan (since the health of the current head of Türkiye raises many concerns).

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## **SOUTH CAUCASUS**

Throughout the year, the Caucasus region evoked keen interest among political observers. During the Munich Security Conference in February, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken brought Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to the negotiating table. After this meeting, Blinken said that the parties agreed on the stable peace formula proposed by the United States, and now it is needed to agree on the status and rights of the Armenian population of Karabakh.

Though already in March 2023, new clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia started. In July, the United States made additional attempts to arrange peacekeeping efforts and return the leaders of the two warring countries to the negotiating table.

At the same time, Russia was painfully deciding on its choice. The interests of two strong lobby groups – pro-Armenian and pro-Turkish – collided in President Putin's circle. Even though Armenia is a CSTO member and in 2020, Russian peacekeepers assumed particular obligations in the region, Putin relied on maintaining the interests of Azerbaijan and Turkey. In addition, he decided to deliberately “punish” Pashinyan, who

holds an ambivalent position regarding Moscow and openly teases the West - in May 2023, Pashinyan announced the possibility of leaving the CSTO, and on September 13, in defiance of Putin, he made a statement that Armenia would ratify the Rome Statute on the establishing the International Criminal Court (and after the ICC issued an arrest warrant for Putin this equalled to a political provocation).

On September 19-20, 2023, despite the presence of Russian troops as peacekeepers, the Azerbaijani armed forces held a military operation against the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic forces. Within 24 hours, Azerbaijan gained total control over the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Representatives of Nagorno-Karabakh announced a ceasefire under conditions which essentially constituted an act of the republic's surrender. On September 28, 2023, President Samvel Shahramanyan signed a decree on the termination of the existence of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh from January 1, 2024.

After the cessation of hostilities, the exodus of the Armenian population from the territory of the republic began: according to some sources, up to 100 thousand ethnic Armenians left Karabakh (Artsakh). The entire territory of the republic came under the control of Azerbaijan. On October 15, 2023, President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev raised the state flag of Azerbaijan on the central square of Khankendi.





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## SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN

The reconciliation of two old enemies - Saudi Arabia and Iran, who had been teetering on the brink of war for a long time, was the event of the year. Economic and geopolitical differences superimposed thousands of years of religious disputes (Sunni and Shia). Saudi Arabia believed that Iran supported the Yemeni Houthis, who posed a danger to Riyadh and other countries in the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf region. To a large extent, the Cold War between Iran and Saudi Arabia was fueled by the oil factor, as in some areas, the countries were competitors in supplying oil and petroleum products.

Keeping the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia benefited the West in many ways, which saw this confrontation as the key to the region (according to the principle of divide et impera). However, China acted as a peacemaker. Chinese diplomats have done outstanding work in bringing irreconcilable foes to the negotiating table. By early 2023, this process was successful.

Following negotiations in Beijing, on March 10, 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran signed an agreement on resuming diplomatic relations and opening embassies within two months. At the same time, the crown prince of the kingdom, Mohammed, stated

that if Iran receives nuclear weapons, then Saudi Arabia will have to take a similar step “for security reasons to balance forces.”

On November 12, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited Saudi Arabia for the first time. He attended a joint summit of the Organization of the Islamic Commonwealth and the Arab League, jointly initiated by Tehran and Riyadh, to discuss the critical situation in the Gaza Strip.



Interestingly, the events in Gaza set, if not an end to, an ellipsis in the United States' attempts to push Saudi Arabia towards a new warming of relations. It was assumed that by the end of 2023, Saudi Arabia would sign an agreement that would provide recognition of the

State of Israel and increase oil production (leading to a decrease in oil prices on the world market). The outbreak of confrontation between Israel and Hamas disrupted these agreements. On December 3, Prince Mohammed cancelled his visit to London.

Russian President Putin's visit to Riyadh on December 6, 2023, cemented the emerging alliances in the Middle East. It seems that Saudi Arabia has finally turned its back on the West. In turn, this could result in a severe increase in prices for oil and petroleum products worldwide, which residents of the United States and Europe will critically feel. Until now, oil prices were regulated through exchange quotation systems, thanks to which Americans could artificially lower or regulate prices, bypassing actual market pricing.

Interestingly, according to media reports, Putin and Crown Prince Mohammed agreed to conduct trading within national exchanges and completely abandon the dollar's use for mutual transactions. Previously, a similar decision was reached in negotiations between China and Saudi Arabia. Still, the implementation of this decision has so far stalled.

If Saudi Arabia, China and Russia could move from threats to the actual implementation of the project, this could cause a severe crisis in the United States and undermine the power of the dollar.



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## CHINA

Throughout this year, Chinese leader Xi Jinping has enjoyed the full authority he has gained since the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party and the elimination of any form of internal party opposition. All year long, odd, but due to the hermetic processes, little-understood events of some key players' "disappearance" happened in China. Hence, in May 2023, Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang vanished from the media field, having accepted his duties only on December 30, 2022. His resignation was announced in July with no reasons given. The entire foreign policy of China was again concentrated in the hands of Wang Yi, one of the most skilful diplomats of our time. Defense Minister Li Shangfu, appointed to this post in March 2023, delivered his last public report in August. In October, it became known that he was accused of corruption: he left posts of a minister and state councillor. On October 27, a former Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, Li Keqiang, died of a sudden heart attack while on vacation,

Today, China is resting on its laurels. World processes spin around it. China is challenging the United States and



expanding its influence to Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America, the post-Soviet space, and the Middle East. The Global South countries are grouped around China. The USA and Great Britain are forced to create a "Pacific NATO" (AUKUS) to counterbalance China, which expresses its claims not only to Taiwan but also to the Philippines' sovereign territories. Additionally, China plays a critical role in the Asia-Pacific region, creating a line of tension in relations with the United States and its allies.



Throughout 2023, Xi Jinping met with almost all allies in the Global South and the "Community of Common Destiny" and "Belt and Road" projects. He visited Moscow and six months later welcomed Russian leader Vladimir Putin. He attended the BRICS summit in South Africa. On August 23, 2023, Xi met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, inviting him to settle controversial issues of the border demarcation between the two huge countries. 2023 has become a year of hyperactive diplomacy for China.

In mid-November 2023, Xi Jinping met with US President Joe Biden in San Francisco. Their four-hour meeting raised a lot of questions (especially since after the meeting, Biden called Xi a "dictator," which did not fit in with the general mood that existed before the meeting). Yet, only in 2024 will we be able to answer the question: were the two leaders of the world's largest countries able to reach an agreement among themselves? And what did they agree on?

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## THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The United States has gradually entered a new election race. Once again, the leading contenders for the presidency are Joe Biden and Donald Trump. All year, American information consumers (aka voters) have been following the high-profile scandals surrounding the “mighty grandfathers” - 77-year-old Trump and 81-year-old Biden. One side opened a criminal case and tried to imprison the opponent; the other accused the counterpart of corruption and sought impeachment.

The situation around Biden and Trump indicates a severe crisis of the elites in the United States: neither among the Democrats nor among the Republicans are alternative authoritative personalities ready to enter the fight for the presidency today. The function of elite reproduction, which is the main task of any party aspiring to power, has atrophied in the United States. Next to Biden, there are many gloomy and inexpressive personalities and people functions: Kamala Harris, Antony Blinken, and Jake Sullivan. Not one of them is an electorally significant person. The Republicans have more colourful faces (Ron DeSantis, Nicky Haley, Tim Scott), but they all fade in the shadow of the charismatic Trump. That is, almost for the first time in its history, the United States is faced with the fact that the bench is virtually empty in both parties.

By the end of the year, the crisis of the elites also collided with the inability of Congress to consider strategically essential issues. For the first time in history, American congressmen dismissed the lower house speaker. Later, consideration of the problem of allocating funds to Ukraine and Israel was blocked, which could result in severe foreign policy losses for the United States.



The lack of flexibility in foreign policy has already led to several failures of American diplomacy: in 2023, we can talk about the fiasco of American policy in the South Caucasus, the loss of negotiations with Saudi Arabia, and tensions in relations with some European partners.

The USA is a country that continues to be great by inertia; rather, not because of Biden's policies, but despite them. This is the tragedy of the current US president: a great politician with a brilliant career and once progressive views became one of the weakest presidents in US history. And the drama of the Democratic Party is that, in its 195th year of existence, it is plunged into a severe personnel crisis. Biden's victory in 2020 seems to have become "Pyrrhic" for the Democrats: if Trump had won the election, then the Democrats would have had enormous chances not only of winning but also the resource basis for a new political life.

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## THE UNITED KINGDOM

On May 6, 2023, the United Kingdom celebrated the coronation of a new king who had finally waited for his crown - Charles III. In an attempt to settle the many disputes that had arisen between London and Paris in recent years, the new monarch made his first post-coronation trip to France. Before his coronation in March 2023, he visited Germany. Later, in October 2023, the king visited Kenya.

What was especially actively discussed in Europe was not the visit to France itself but what remained behind the scenes of the process. Amid the clamour of the visit, a reconciliation was reported between the British and French branches of the House of Rothschild (the quarrel took place after the death of banker Benjamin de Rothschild in January 2021). Obviously, this factor will become the main one in the process of rapprochement between France and the UK, and not at all the decorative visit of the king.

The United Kingdom continues preparation for parliamentary elections, which will be held next spring. The Conservatives are not approaching them in the best political shape: there have been too many scandals associated with the Conservative Party. The adventurism of Boris Johnson, the frank emptiness of Liz Truss, and the naked pragmatism and alienation of British traditions of Rishi Sunak played their role. We should not forget

about several seemingly minor scandals. A demonstrative internecine war between ministers (“spiders in a jar”). Attempts to play “Churchillism”. The economic situation is not the best (a financial crisis is predicted for the UK shortly - it is second in line after Germany). In 2023, GDP growth was only 0.6%. Economists expect Britain's economic recovery to take the longest of all G7 countries.

Attempts to attract the half-forgotten ex-Prime Minister David Cameron to work in the government as Minister of Foreign Affairs should have, according to the idea of the party's sponsors, led to some kind of information shake-up to positive connotations. But this is unlikely to help: the British do not have the most rosy memories associated with Cameron. Lord Cameron has already visited the United States, demanding they maintain military aid for Ukraine.



In early December 2023, Cameron used his two-day visit to the US to call the response to the standoff “the great test of our generation”. The Foreign Secretary warned that if Putin wins, “this will not be the end.” He also stated: “We must give this money to the Ukrainians; we must support them and make sure that Putin loses because if this money does not pass the vote, then only two people will smile. One of them is Vladimir Putin in Russia. The other is Xi Jinping in Beijing. I don't know about you, but I don't want to give any of these people a Christmas present.” Thus, Cameron positioned himself as the leading “hawk” of Western politics, seising this title from Boris Johnson.

Another thing is that no prominent political figures in the Labour Party could become antipodes to the conservatives. The era of Jeremy Corbyn is over. New Labor differs little in its political views or geopolitical aspirations from the Conservatives. Therefore, a possible “changing of the guard” is unlikely to lead to profound changes in the politics and geopolitics of Britain. One thing can be predicted: most likely, with the departure of conservatives from MI6 intelligence, the “eminence grise” of today's Britain, Richard Moore, will leave.

Politics will become different in terms of tactics. But certainly not strategies.

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## FRANCE

Throughout 2023, France suffered from severe rage. The country is not going through the best of times. But it is gradually emerging from its economic doldrums — France's quarterly GDP growth was 0.5%. And this is a good indicator - especially against the backdrop of failures in the economic indicators of neighbouring Germany. Unlike its neighbour, France has cheaper energy resources (the French were smart enough not to fall for the demands of the "greens" and abandon nuclear energy). France also has a different economic structure.

But still, France in 2023 was gripped by several waves of protests. In January, there were protests against pension reform. In the summer, France was gripped by unrest after 17-year-old Arab teenager Nael Merzouk was shot dead by police in Nanterre, a suburb of Paris. After this, radical youth, mainly migrants, took to the streets. A wave of unrest grips France: according to police estimates, the worst in the last 20 years. There were riots and clashes with the police not only in Paris but also in Lyon, Dijon, Toulouse, Marseille, Reims, Strasbourg and Bordeaux. In their form, these actions were reminiscent of American protests by BLM activists but without a pronounced ideological

aspect. France, accustomed under Macron to the fact that demonstrations were predominantly from the white population (the Yellow Vest movement), was again faced with protests from blacks and Arabs. In many sites, the police were powerless against the riots. But, as often happens, the rebellion petered out on its own without finding ideological support and receiving an organising core.

Another shock for France was its virtual expulsion from Africa. On July 26, the military in Niger overthrew the legally elected President Mohamed Bazoum. A junta led by General Abdurahman Tchiani, the former commander of the presidential guard, came to power. On August 30, a military coup took place in Gabon. Considering that in 2020, there was a coup in Mali (and in 2022, the country's leader, Assimi Goita, suppressed an attempted pro-French rebellion), the picture that emerges for France is not the most rosy. Most importantly, French interests in these countries are being replaced by Russian military and political presence.

to Central Asia. Emmanuel Macron not only visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in early November but also called these countries an example of democracy. True, these gestures have not yet added to the understanding of how relations between France and the states of Central Asia will develop. Obviously, they will depend on how Macron manages to find a common language with another influential player - China. Macron's visit to Beijing in April 2023 was highly unsuccessful: the audience with Xi Jinping lasted just over an hour (for example, Xi Jinping received Alexander Lukashenko for four hours). The Chinese leader showed greater disdain only for Ursula von der Leyen, whose meeting lasted only 30 minutes. In addition, the package of documents signed during the meeting between the President of the People's Republic of China and the President of France was negligible for meetings of this level.

In a problematic situation, France understands that today, it bears the burden of being the leader of the European Union. Germany cannot cope with this role. The natural Gaullism underlying the Fifth Republic does not allow one to rush into the arms of the United States and dissolve in it. A conflict with Russia is unlikely to be overcome in the foreseeable future. Influence on the external arena - in Africa, the Middle East and even India (Narendra Modi is a close friend of Macron) - is gradually disappearing. However, it is necessary to revive France's role in Europe. It is possible that flirting with the UK (which is by no means interested in strengthening the European Union) will fade into the background, and in the foreseeable future, Macron will try once again to turn towards China. Moreover, he wonderfully understands: without China's consent, Russia would never have undertaken adventures in Mali, Niger and Gabon. And if so, then the key to new French foreign policy successes may lie in Beijing.



Since France's nuclear energy industry was extremely dependent on uranium mined in Niger, the question of finding new deposits arose urgently. Thus, French foreign policy decided to turn its attention



## VATICAN

Over the past year, the world community has often discussed the eccentricities of Pope Francis. The pontiff, with pronounced leftist sentiments, addressed young Catholics in Russia in August 2023 with the words: "Never forget about the heritage. You are the descendants of great Russia: the great Russia of saints and rulers, the great Russia of Peter the Great, Catherine the Second, that empire - great, enlightened, great culture and great humanity. Never give up this legacy. You are the descendants of the great Mother Russia; go ahead with this." This caused a sharp reaction among a significant part of Catholics, in particular among Ukrainian Greek Catholics.

In September, Francis made it clear that he does not condemn homosexual acts. Addressing journalists, he said the phrase: "Who am I to judge homosexuals?" And after a bit of time, he said: "Homosexuals have the right to live in a family. They are children of God and have the right to a family."

In November, the Vatican issued a new clarification: "A transsexual who has also undergone hormonal treatment and sex reassignment surgery may be baptised under the same conditions as other



believers unless there is a situation in which there is a risk of public scandal or disorientation of the faithful. In the case of children or adolescents with transsexual problems, if they are well prepared and willing, they too can be baptised.”

But behind the external deceptiveness of the figure of the revolutionary pope, in fact, lies a representative of a powerful political machine, which was created precisely thanks to Francis. Maybe for the first time since the time of John Paul II, the Vatican began to pursue its international policy more actively.

Today, the de facto head of the Vatican is the Secretary of State of the Holy See, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, and the Secretary for External Relations with States, Archbishop Paul Gallagher. Today, the Vatican has very close ties with Great Britain. Belarus considers the Vatican the main “window” into the Western world:



through the mediation of the Vatican, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry maintains secret relations with several European states. The Vatican is coming forward with its peace initiatives and has tried to create a mission that has decided to act as a mediator in ending the Russian-Ukrainian war.

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## CENTRAL EUROPE

Several changes have occurred in Central Europe in 2023, which shortly will have a significant impact on the balance of power not only in the region, but throughout Europe.

The election of General Petr Pavel as President of the Czech Republic in March 2023 was still entirely consistent with the logic of the times the world is experiencing. The general, former Chief of the General Staff of the Army of the Czech Republic, and former Chairman of the NATO Military Committee easily won the election against billionaire and former Prime Minister Andrej Babis. In April 2023, Pavel became the first president of European states to visit not only Kyiv but also Eastern Ukraine, put forward an initiative to support the Dnepropetrovsk region in restoring its economy, and also called for establishing surveillance in Europe of all citizens of the Russian Federation (similar to, how the United States established control over all Japanese Americans during World War II). Compared to his predecessor, Milos Zeman, with his tolerant and positive notes towards Russia, Pavel looked like an outspoken "NATO hawk".

However, already in the summer of 2023, President Pavel began to express some scepticism regarding the success of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the planned counter-offensive. The symbolism of the figure of the president (in the Czech political hierarchy, this is not the strongest position) was compensated by the experience and authority of a career military man. In November, he said, “the situation at the front does not indicate that Ukraine can gain an advantage.” “Negotiations could begin next year as developments do not indicate that the Ukrainian side will gain a military advantage. Time is now in favour of Russia, which has a stronger mobilisation base for manpower. By gaining time, she can also replenish the material base that she has long lacked. We see massive deliveries from North Korea; we see attempts to circumvent sanctions,” said the Czech President. But at the same time, being a realist in assessing the situation, President Pavel stated: “The situation is not clearly positive. The positive for Ukraine should be that we are on their side and should support them in achieving their goals. For our part, we have no choice but to continue to provide support.” Today, the position of the Czech Republic and its president is the most sober and constructive, without unnecessary advances and without pessimism.

Neighboring Slovakia also went through elections. On September 30, elections to the parliament of Slovakia were held, in which the left-populist party of ex-Prime Minister Robert Fico, “Course – Social Democracy”, received the majority of votes (22.94%). This caused a severe reaction in the European Union and the United States: Fico is known for his anti-American statements and outright Euroscepticism; he is considered a friend of the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and a person who respects Vladimir Putin. Tiny Slovakia has become a big troublemaker in Europe.

Hopes that Fico would not be able to form a parliament and that Slovakia would have to hold repeat elections did not occur. Attempts by neighbouring states to pressure the country by establishing temporary control on its borders also did not lead to the desired success. By mid-October, negotiations between Fico and

representatives of two other parties ended with an agreement: Peter Pelegrini’s “Voice – Social Democracy” and Andrej Danko’s Slovak National Party. On October 25, Fico’s new government began work.

Robert Fico took an extremely unfavourable position towards Ukraine. He called the withdrawal of Russian troops from new regions and Crimea unrealistic. In his opinion, the idea that someone will be able to “corner Russia” as a nuclear power with the help of conventional weapons is naive. He emphasised that he would support “zero military aid to Ukraine.” “My government’s position is that an immediate cessation of hostilities is our best solution for Ukraine. The European Union must turn from a weapons supplier into a peacemaker,” said the new prime minister. After this, Slovakia stopped military assistance to Ukraine.

Neighboring Hungary continued its policy of pressure on Ukraine, demanding changes in legislation on national minorities and preferences for the Hungarian population of Transcarpathia. Throughout the year, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has taken a clear position on Ukraine: no military aid, no EU or NATO membership. It is important to note that Orbán, whom Ukrainian propaganda certainly ranked as a pro-Russian politician, very actively developed relations with both the UK and Republicans in the USA (in particular, he took part in the traditional Conservative Political Action Conference, organised at the initiative of Trump). “If President Trump were president, there would be no war in Ukraine or Europe. Mr. President, Mr. Trump, come back, give America back its former greatness, give us back peace!” Orbán said in early May 2023. “We need an agreement with Russia on the future architecture of European security,” Orbán said at the end of May at the Qatar Economic Forum in Doha. At the same time, during his speech on October 24, 2023, Trump himself, without hesitation, called Orbán “the leader of Turkey,” which showed his genuine attitude towards the efforts of the Hungarian prime minister to take the path of European Trumpism.

Finally, another country in the region, Poland, 2023 entered a period of predicted turmoil caused by a new system of power that could emerge due to the elections to

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the Sejm. According to the results of the elections held on October 15, the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) received significantly fewer votes than in 2019 (35.38% versus 43.5%), losing 41 seats and the opportunity to form a majority. Following the procedure, President Andrzej Duda gave the chance to form a government to Mateusz Morawiecki, as the representative of the party with the majority of votes, while understanding the futility and symbolism of this step: PiS does not have sufficient support in the new parliament. Obviously, the next step is to grant the right to form a government to the leader of the Civic Platform (PO) Donald Tusk, not just an opponent but a sworn enemy of the PiS leaders.



Now Poland faces difficult times. According to the Constitution, the management vertical in Poland can work effectively if the same political force represents the president and the government and there is a majority in parliament that supports the president and the government. Otherwise, the country will begin to feel feverish. The same model is the basis of the Ukrainian system. Many remember the confrontation between President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich or between Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko: the country witnessed the total instability of

the public administration system. Poland will have to live in this regime until the summer of 2025. These one-and-a-half years can provide an example of political confrontation, which Polish politicians themselves have already called the “Polish-Polish war.”

In the shadow of the confrontation between PiS and PO, “young people” are already bursting into active Polish life - people born in the 80s and 90s: 42-year-old leader of the Polish People’s Party Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysh, 37-year-old leader of the Confederation Slawomir Mentzen and his colleague, 41-year-old Krzysztof Bosak (also representing the Confederation). Just recently, the “promising” Szymon Gołownia, Rafal Trzaskowski, and Robert Biedron seem to be “mastodons”, not to mention Duda, Tusk, Ciaszy, Szchetyn or Kaczynski. It appears that a generational change is happening quite quickly in Polish politics. Considering the activities of the “Confederation” (a party that preaches the ideals of conservative libertarianism and fusionism), this generational change is unlikely to take place smoothly and consider the interests of its closest neighbours. We should not forget that it was the “Confederation” that took a sharply negative position towards Ukraine, including arranging a blockade for Ukrainian transport workers.

It seems that even if Donald Tusk, a politician traditionally considered a friend of Ukraine and focusing on pan-European institutions, was given the authority, he would not be able to change the situation in Ukrainian-Polish relations radically. This is because they have lost their previous economic ground that existed before 2014.

Thus, Eastern Europe today demonstrates a kind of cauldron in which important trends are emerging that may manifest themselves in the next decade. And, from the point of view of the European Union or Ukraine, it is not entirely pleasant to show it.



## AFRICA

In 2023, the African continent often made people talk about it. It was in 2023 that Africa, for almost the first time in history, applied for the role of a factor in global politics, trying to offer a coordinated joint position on the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict. Africa (especially the Sahel region) has attracted close attention from Russia and the United States: in the first half of 2023, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited more than fifteen African countries. Later, on the initiative of the Russian side, a Russia-Africa summit was held, and then US Secretary of State Antony Blinken made a tour of African countries. An interesting point was the fostering of Zimbabwe-Belarus relations: in January - February 2023, Alexander Lukashenko visited Zimbabwe and met with President Emmerson Mnangagwa; respectively, Lukashenko's special commissioner Viktor Sheiman visited Harare four times during this year. It is important to emphasise that both Belarus and Zimbabwe are under the political patronage of China, which encourages horizontal relations between its wards.

Several coups that took place in Africa in 2023 (Niger, Gabon, attempted military coup in Sudan) demonstrate that the West is losing control over Africa. As a

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continent, Africa has firmly taken its place among the Global South countries. In most countries in the region, a natural change of power is expected shortly due to the ageing of the current leaders - and those politicians who are at a "crouch start" while waiting for the moment of transition to a new quality are by no means oriented toward the West. These are more likely to be Chinese corporations graduates than European universities. At some point, the West underestimated Africa.

The very active role in the region of China and Russia, which came to the Africans not with beads but with technology (China) and offers for constructing nuclear power plants (Russia), has borne fruit. In addition, in the context of the renewed grain blockade on the Black Sea and the instability of world grain markets, Russia tried to "buy" some African continent countries by promising cheap (and sometimes free) grain. In fact, Russia set its sights on creating an alternative to the Chicago Grain Exchange within the framework of the "Global South," which would be able to set its grain prices.

We can undoubtedly say that Africa's role in planetary processes will increase shortly;



the African factor must be taken seriously in world politics since, in the coming years, the main markets for IT technologies, industrial production, and large scientific centres may move there. By coming to Africa, China is slowly but surely eradicating corruption (which the United States and Western countries have traditionally tolerated, seeing corrupt systems as the key to managing raw material appendage countries). Obviously, in the process of growing African influence in the world and minimising Western influence, a real fight against corruption will begin here.



## LATIN AMERICA

Latin America in 2023 is a series of bright events and no less optimistic people.

On January 1, 2023, the left-wing politician and leader of the Workers' Party, Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva, became President of Brazil for the third time. Lula da Silva previously headed Brazil from 2003 to 2011. This time, he defeated the right-wing conservative incumbent President Jair Bolsonaro. Lula da Silva intensified Brazil's work in BRICS and became one of the most active implementers of the idea of the "Global South". His February meeting with Joe Biden did not bring any specifics: apart from a series of protocol photos, relations between Brazil and the United States remained distant.

At the same time, under the "leftist" president, Brazil is demonstrating good rates of economic development. It ranked fourth in the world regarding GDP growth in 2023 (3.4%). The inflation rate was about 5% per annum. The unemployment rate was around 7%.

Immediately after his election, Lula da Silva spoke out to support the peace process in the war between Russia and Ukraine. "I have never equated these two countries because I know what an invasion is and what the integrity of a territory is. We all believe that

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Russia made a mistake and has already been condemned in all UN decisions. But I believe that the war has already begun and needs to be stopped. And to stop the war, there must be someone ready to talk,” Lula said in Lisbon in April 2023. In May, during the G7 meeting in Hiroshima, Lula da Silva questioned the need for a meeting with Vladimir Zelensky. When the meeting was finally agreed upon, the President of Ukraine did not attend. “Maybe he had a more important meeting. I don’t know, but the fact is: at 15:15, we had an appointment with him in this very hall,” the President of Brazil restrainedly answered journalists’ questions on this matter.

In August, the Brazilian president criticised the United Nations for failing to take seriously the possibility of full-scale fighting in Ukraine.

In September, during a meeting with Vladimir Zelensky on the sidelines of the 78th session of the UN General Assembly, Lula da Silva clearly stated that there was no military solution to the conflict with Russia and suggested looking for ways to peaceful dialogue. Before this, he made a statement that the world community was beginning to get tired of the war in Ukraine while noting the importance of the efforts of all countries to end it.



On October 15, the presidential election in Ecuador was unexpectedly won by a 35-year-old businessman in the banana industry, a representative of the left-liberal National Democratic Action party, Daniel Noboa. The new president has promised reforms to reduce violence and create job opportunities in the country, although he has not appointed a minister of finance.

He also ordered the Home Office to scrap a drugs table, which he said encouraged “micro-trafficking”. He also promised to improve the country’s justice system amid rising violence. His running mate for the position of vice president, Veronica Abad, advocated the privatisation of education and the abolition of social assistance for single women, as well as a ban on abortion. To a large extent, Noboa’s election was made possible by social networks, in which he was most active. He managed to mobilise the youth electorate, who had their say in the elections. Also, not least of all, Noboa’s popularity was given by the support of his wife, the famous Ecuadorian blogger Lavinia Valbonesi.

At the same time, Noboa will confront solid opposition from the left, whose leader, Luisa Gonzalez, received 48.17% of the votes, and her Civil Revolution party received 40% of the seats in parliament. By the way, the level of support for the elected president’s party in the legislative body is only 14.77%. This could lead to serious resistance on the part of the left to the reforms announced by Noboa, as well as provoke instability in the country.

On November 19, 2023, an extravagant libertarian, anarcho-capitalist and minarchist, an opponent of the country’s entry into BRICS, an “enemy of China”, a “friend of Israel”, and a supporter of the pro-American course, Javier Milei, was elected president in Argentina. After winning the election, Milei slightly softened his rhetoric towards China. However, many were wary of his positive passages addressed to the late President Carlos Menem, whose “reforms” in the early 90s brought the country to default and the most severe financial crisis in the history of Argentina.

Milei’s arrival became possible against the backdrop of significant problems in the Argentine economy and the population’s frustration. In 2022-2023, Argentines faced rapidly accelerating inflation: prices more than doubled over the year. Already, 40% of the population lives below the poverty line, the value of the national currency is constantly falling, and the gap between the official and parallel unofficial exchange rates reaches colossal proportions. At the end of April, consumer prices in Argentina at the annual level increased by 109%, the highest level in several decades. The same trend continued throughout the year. High



inflation is hardly new to the country: the rate has remained consistently in double digits for over a decade and fell below 50 per cent in the spring of 2021. However, over the past year, the problem has worsened even by Argentine standards, and since February 2023, the rate of price growth has not fallen below 100 per cent.



That is why Milei is not so much a mindful choice of the Argentines as a reaction to the inability of the left-wing Peronists Alberto Fernandez (the country's previous president) and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (the former president who had enormous influence on Alberto Fernandez's policies in recent years) to stabilise the situation in the country.

Venezuela again became a "troublemaker" in Latin America, where in December a referendum was held regarding claims to the Guayana-Esequiba region, now controlled by Guyana. About 95% of the population who took part in the referendum said "Yes" to annexing the territory, an important oil-bearing area. Interestingly,

even opposition leader Juan Guaido, who recently settled in the United States and received American citizenship, spoke in support of the annexation of the region. It is also essential that the referendum took place against the backdrop of gradually improving relations between Venezuela and the United States. In October, in response to an agreement on the 2024 elections reached between the Venezuelan government and the opposition, the United States eased sanctions on the country's oil and gas sector. The US Treasury has issued licenses allowing transactions involving the Venezuelan oil and gas sector. At the same time, relations between Venezuela and the Russian Rosneft cooled slightly. Obviously, the referendum did not take place without the consent of the United States.

Interestingly, Guyana is a UK-oriented country, and British oil entrepreneurs felt most comfortable here. Now, they are ordered to stop oil production in the region for up to three months.

Solving the problem by military means is practically impossible: Venezuela's armed forces number 120 thousand people, and Guyana's has about 3 thousand. Today, Venezuela has the largest proven oil reserves in the world - about 297 billion barrels. It is obvious: soon, we will understand the essence of the US game around Venezuelan oil, especially against the backdrop of a possible attempt by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Russia to play a game by artificially increasing oil prices. Thus, either the United States is preparing for the transition of the once-hated Maduro to the camp of friends, or we will soon be able to witness a new "colour revolution" in Latin America.

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**2023** has come to an end. We are entering 2024: a very eventful, worrying, but potentially prosperous about its results. A year of extensive election campaigns. A year of significant negotiations. A year of great upheaval. Year of the Dragon...

The ugly ducklings, hatched in 2023, are preparing to become beautiful black swans. Everything indicates that there will be a lot of them.

The analytical report in December 2024 will be very voluminous...

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# Ascolta

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Ascolta is an independent information and analytical centre specialising in information collection, processing and systematisation. The centre's area of interest is political, economic, as well as social and humanitarian processes in the world, mainly in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. The key direction of our activity is studying Russia's internal and external political environment and its influence on Europe, Africa and Latin America.

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