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concerns...dangers



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Nikola Hendrickx





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## JABS, JOBS, AND JACKASSES

### *The few successes and many failures of the EU Covid vaccination programme*

Short of leading the entire population into a giant mixing machine run by demons, or accidentally setting off a thermo-nuclear device, it's hard to imagine how the European Commission could have made a bigger mess of the COVID-19 vaccination programme. It would almost be funny, if it wasn't so tragic. Just when nationalist sentiments are threatening to tear the European Union apart, the European Commission announces a whole series of ill-thought-out ideas that could hardly have been better designed to encourage others to think in a similar way.



© European Union

Jacques Delors

Jacques Delors must be weeping with frustration at the way the Commission over which he presided so successfully from 1985 to 1995 has mishandled the pandemic and the untidy way in which it has sought to vaccinate its citizens. Not only that, but it seems to have decided to prevent anyone

not in the EU from getting a dose of the vaccine. This must be an absolute gift to the anti-EU campaigners of the UK (the government, for instance) whose own vaccination programme has been so successful.



Sputnik V vaccine at the Gamaleya Research Institute

Meanwhile, the member states have fallen to squabbling over who gets what. The Austrian Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, for instance, has threatened to stop the Union from buying any extra doses of the Pfizer vaccine unless his country gets a bigger share of them, and has begun negotiations with Russia to buy their vaccine.

Certainly, the so-called Sputnik V vaccine seems to have cleared any regulatory hurdles. The covid-19 vaccine developed by the Gamaleya Research Institute, part of the Russian Ministry of Health, has an efficacy of 91.6%, according to interim results from a phase 3 trial. According to the UK's publication for doctors, the highly-respected British Medical Journal (BMJ), "The Gam-COVID-Vac, also known as Sputnik V,

was tested at 25 hospitals and polyclinics in Moscow between 7 September and 24 November 2020. Just under 15,000 volunteers received the vaccine (of whom 1,611 were aged 60 or over) and 4,902 received the placebo (vaccine buffer composition).” So Austria should be OK there, even if the EU isn’t.

But while Britain has emerged as the most successful in vaccination terms, which Brexit fans say is due to them being outside the EU, the UK faces the problem of its self-imposed isolation and the difficulty of having to rely on overseas production of more doses. Importing anything into Britain now is a bureaucratic nightmare, leaving both exporters and importers drowning in a sea of multi-lingual paper no-one has needed for more than 40 years. That’s why the UK has decided to produce the American Novavax NVX-CoV2373 Vaccine at a factory in the UK. It is said to be 83% effective, even against the highly-contagious UK variant. As the company says on its website: “Our vaccine candidates are genetically engineered using three-dimensional nanostructures of recombinant proteins critical to disease pathogenesis.”



Astra Zeneca vaccine manufacturing

All the vaccines in circulation are different in one way or another. I had the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine (British recipients were not given a choice), which seems to have proved less controversial than the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine.



© Patrick Siebert

Novavax Laboratory

In another sign of panicky decision making, the Commission even suspended use of the AstraZeneca vaccine out of a fear that it caused blood clots. It’s still unclear if the vaccine causes the clots, but in Britain, seven people died of blood clots following vaccination, although no-one knows if that’s cause and effect or coincidence. At the time of writing, eleven people have been reported to have developed blood clots out of the 30-million vaccinated. That’s a risk percentage of 0.00003666666 recurring. The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHPR), The World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) have said that the benefits outweigh the dangers. However, Germany suspended use of the AstraZeneca vaccine for people under 60. Different countries have imposed different rules but overall some dozen European countries introduced bans or restrictions, despite official EMA advice.

**MANY PATHS, NO MAP**

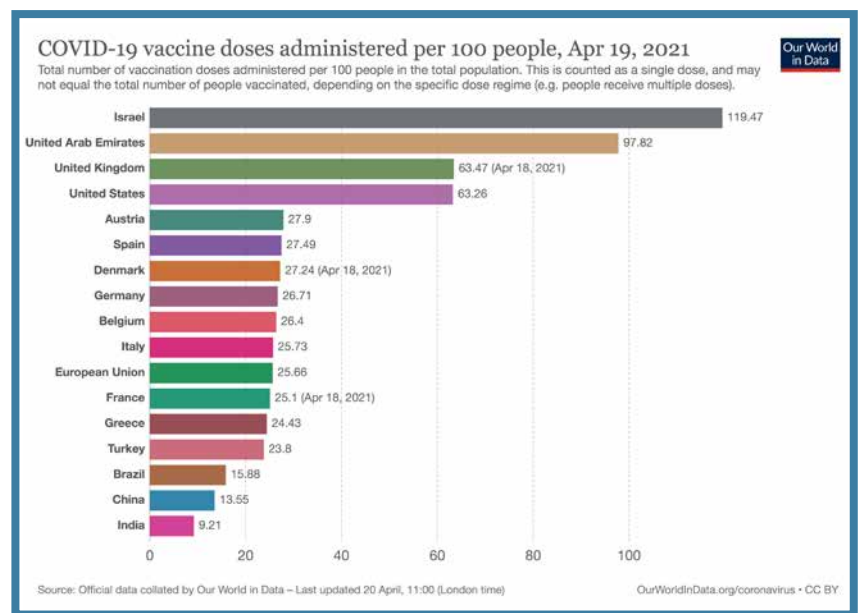
The European Union and its member states are rich, resourceful, scientifically advanced and blessed with generally good health care systems. How can that suave togetherness have been shattered by something that is only 60 to 200 nanometres in diameter? After all, a human hair is around 75,000 nanometres (nm) in diameter. Could it be that the EU is still jittery over other factors, not least the world economy and the frightening cost of the COVID-19



European Council President Charles Michel at a vaccination centre in Ukraine

virus pandemic? With nobody certain which way to jump and with some countries talking about leaving the Union anyway and following the UK out into the friendless wilderness, perhaps leaders less inclined to leave are tending towards being over-cautious. They shouldn’t be, because the nationalist politicians have been toning down their anti-EU rhetoric during the pandemic.

The SARS-CoV-2 virus, of course, is in no way hesitant. As soon as it enters the human lung, it latches onto an angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE2) receptor, at which point a protease enzyme cuts off the spike of the virus – it is surrounded by such spikes, which is what makes it look like a sea mine – and this releases the fusion machinery, which is somewhat spring-loaded within the spike. The virus and lung cell membranes then fuse so that the RNA of the virus can pour into the cell. Inside, it presents round about two dozen genes to the





ribosomes of the cell, which are what translates genes into proteins. Some of these create protective vesicles. Using its own polymerase copying machinery, the virus starts making copies of itself which break out of the host cell and spread. One cell can produce hundreds of copies before it dies, its resources exhausted. Some viruses go to infect other cells, some – many – are exhaled. That's why masks are so important. The virus, of course, has no brain but it seems to be surprisingly clever at evading the body's natural defences and some of the vaccines.



French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel

Vaccines do work, however, and it's worth noting that Britain's lead in vaccinating its population doesn't mean it leads in defeating the virus. As *The Economist* puts it in a leader column: "In the brutal and blunt league table of fatalities, the EU as a whole has done less badly than Britain or America, with 138 recorded deaths per 100,000, compared with 187 (UK) and (US) 166 respectively – although Hungary, the Czech Republic and Belgium have all fared worse than either." It's worth remembering that, successful vaccine roll-out notwithstanding, the UK has one of the worst death rates from COVID-19 in the world. A new and especially deadly variant that has emerged may, however, change all that. *The Economist* reports that 58% of British adults have now had the vaccine (at the time of writing), compared with 38% of Americans and just 14% of EU citizens. That poor result for the wealthy EU is widely seen as shameful. One of the architects of the European Coal and Steel Community, forerunner of the EU, was Jean Monnet, who once wrote that "Europe will be forged in

a crisis", meaning that it would come together more effectively when faced with an external threat. The idea has worked sometimes but certainly not always and clearly not at all over COVID-19. In this case, the member states have reacted more like the proverbial headless chicken, closing their borders, blocking the export of protective equipment and generally displaying no sensible policies at all.

It's really down to the 'communitaire' instincts of Germany's Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron that the EU has held together, with the European Commission given responsibility for acquiring and distributing sufficient vaccine doses to meet the needs of a population not far short of half a billion. The Commission got it seriously and surprisingly wrong.

Vaccine hesitancy, a major issue in the United States, is also a problem in some EU member states. For instance, the Roma community often mistrust vaccines, largely because they fear their community could be used to test drugs. The Roma are Europe's largest ethnic minority, numbering up to 12-million. Living mainly in southern and eastern Europe, they are disadvantaged in many ways, living in slum-like conditions lacking proper drainage and hygiene. I have been inside several Roma dwellings, some kept immaculately, despite the surroundings and lack of facilities, but some are virtually death-traps.

As this report by Oxford University's *European Journal of Public Health* shows: "Many live in settlements remote from health facilities,

health professionals often actively discriminate against them, interactions with health workers are frequently characterised by mutual mistrust and they are frequently excluded from health insurance schemes or have low enrolment rates, frequently lower than with their non-Roma compatriots. Factors that contribute to these health disparities include lack of documentation to establish citizenship, other entitlement to register for health insurance, expensive premiums with lower coverage and fragmented or poorly implemented health insurance schemes." I have spent time with Roma communities and have seen them being refused medical help, turned away by doctors with a sneer, mainly because they cannot afford to pay for it. It's easy to understand their mistrust and hesitancy, even if a vaccine is available close to where they live. In any case, it's a contributory factor to the EU's vaccine failure.

## THE SPECTRE OF WALL STREET

The vaccine problems were made worse by an unseemly row between the EU and the UK over vaccine availability. At one point the UK government was angered by reports that police raiding an Italian warehouse had uncovered 30-million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine allegedly labelled as bound for the UK. The company denied it, insisting they were bound either for developing countries or for the EU's own storerooms. There was even the suggestion that it was an attempt to cause public outrage against AstraZeneca.



First vaccination in the COVID-19 vaccination center of the Cologne Trade Fair, Cologne



UK's Health Secretary Matt Hancock



EU's Internal Market Commissioner, Thierry Breton

The UK was accused by the EU's Internal Market Commissioner, Thierry Breton, of "vaccine nationalism". The UK's Health Secretary, Matt Hancock dismissed it as a row over contract law, insisting the UK's contracts were better. However, Prime Minister Boris Johnson angered his backbenchers by proudly announcing that Britain's success at delivering the vaccines was down to "good old-fashioned greed": in other words, it was all due to profit-seeking capitalists. Even his supporters were not happy and showed their displeasure. It had been a little too close to the quote by Gordon Gekko, played by Michael Douglas in the 1987 film, Wall Street, when he said "Greed, for want of a better word, is good". "Greed is good" became a popular catchphrase at the time; everyone forgot to include "for want of a better word". Johnson withdrew the remarks but they had already showed where his allegiances lay and raised fears yet again that he would like to dismantle the National Health Service, legacy of Clement Attlee's post-war government, in favour of a privatised 'for-profit' system, which some of his supporters have professed to prefer. Even so, the crisis has caused raised eyebrows, even among those who fought to keep Britain in the EU, such as Labour peer Andrew Adonis. He said: "The vaccine crisis shows an alarming power vacuum & absence of leadership in Europe." Ursula von der Leyen, usually slick and confident at press conferences, now seems indecisive and weak.



Jean-Claude JUNCKER, former President of the European Commission

Her predecessor, Jean-Claude Juncker, it's been claimed, would have handled it better.

It's easy to forget that the EU has actually vaccinated a lot more people than Britain: around 70-million at the time of writing. It's just that the population of the entire EU is much larger than the UK's. Why has it gone wrong for the EU? There's no clear answer but it looks as if a fondness for grandstanding outweighed the urge for concerted and well-considered action. It's not the first time with the current Commission. Emmanuel Macron told a Greek TV programme that Europe had "lacked ambition". Concentrating more on Europe's economic woes than on the pandemic. Progress was also hampered, he noted, by the fact that health is not an EU competence. It's the responsibility of local and national agencies. It only gradually became clear that buying up vaccines in such enormous quantities could not be left to member state governments; the European Commission would have to step in. And with a rather too delicate and hesitant step, it did, eventually. It had already been shown that the big countries were buying up vaccines, leaving their smaller neighbours behind. But the EU is supposed to be a union: equal shares for all. That was what inspired Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman to create the High Authority, after Schuman's speech on the 9 May 1950, placing all of France's and Germany's coal and steel production under the control of a single organisation.

It was the level of vision needed for the vaccine roll-out but it was sadly missing, or at least nothing like as vigorous. The flame may not have gone out but it's hardly more than a barely glowing ember these days.

Pause for a moment to consider how the vaccines actually work. The Oxford/

AstraZeneca vaccine uses an unrelated harmless virus, modified to deliver SARS-CoV-2 genetic material in a special delivery virus, known as a viral vector. The cells in our bodies use this genetic material to make a specific SARS-CoV-2 protein which is recognised by our immune system, triggering a response which builds immune memory, encouraging our bodies to fight SARS-CoV-2 if it meets it in future. The Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna vaccines work in a slightly different way (although it may take a virologist to explain exactly what the difference is or does). The vaccine contains a segment of real SARS-CoV-2 genetic material that codes for a particular protein, which can be either RNA or DNA.



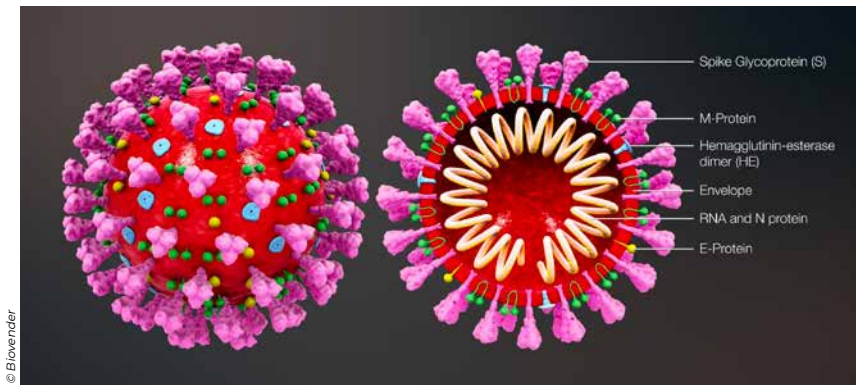
Jean Monnet



Robert Schuman

The cells in our bodies use the genetic material to make the full SARS-CoV-2 protein, which is immediately recognised by our immune systems to set off a response. That response builds immune memory so that our bodies can fight off a SARS-CoV-2 virus the next time it meets one. There are other types undergoing clinical trials. Two of them, for instance – Sinovac and Sinopharm – use SARS-CoV-2 viruses that have been killed. (Maybe 'killed' is not the right word, since many biologists do not believe a virus to be





SARS-CoV-2 structural protein

‘alive’ in the first place). Our immune system recognises the ‘corpse’ of the virus and triggers a response without causing illness, not only fighting off any future incursions but building memory for other occasions. Such a method is already being used in the influenza vaccine. In the case of Codagenix, also undergoing trials, a weakened SARS-CoV-2 virus is used, which is recognised by the immune system, triggering a response without causing illness. This type is already in use in the Oral Polio vaccine, for instance. Other varieties, such as Novavax and Sanofi/GSX, contain proteins from the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which can be whole proteins or fragments, packed into nanoparticles to build up your body’s memory so that it can fight off the real thing. It’s the system used in the current Hepatitis B vaccine. When it comes to getting vaccinated, however, we’re seldom offered a choice: I received the Pfizer vaccine, my wife got the AstraZeneca and suffered side-effects. She says she’s pleased that she was vaccinated at all. I like to think the medical staff administering both doses were just doing their jobs and not motivated purely by greed. The pandemic has been worse in countries whose leaders are convinced by their political leanings not to believe in COVID-19 or the need for precautions.

### DEATH DEFYING THE EASY AND PLEASANT WAY

On their website, McKinsey and Partners points out the problem of facing a completely unexpected crisis: “Once leaders recognize a crisis as such, they can begin to mount a response. But they cannot respond as they would in a routine emergency, by following plans that had been drawn up in advance. During a crisis, which is ruled by unfamiliarity and uncertainty, effective responses are largely improvised.”

Clearly that is true. Take the case of Turkey, for instance. The British Medical Journal writes that: “Doctors in Turkey who post information about local covid-19 cases on social media are facing harassment and criminal charges from authorities anxious to hide the extent of the pandemic’s spread in the country, the Turkish Medical Association has said.” Dealing with any health emergency becomes many times more difficult if the government is determined to hide the truth and harass those trying to help people.



Covid anti lockdown protest: “Fear is a deadly disease. Lockdown away”

Disbelief in the pandemic seems to be linked to far-right, far-left and dangerously militant groups. One example is cited by the .coda website: “In Austria one anti-lockdown campaigner and several of his supporters were recently arrested with a collection of handguns and revolvers, 34 bottles of LSD, 5kg of cannabis and a sword.” Even in the well-vaccinated UK, the BMJ mentions problems: “Our national pandemic health protection response in the UK has been undermined at every turn by misinformation and disinformation from self-styled ‘libertarians,’ ‘lockdown sceptics,’ ‘truth seekers,’ covid deniers, conspiracy theorists, and professional attention seekers—whether high-profile

media commentators, politicians, and lobbyists, or organised groups on social media.” Many of those involved are familiar from protests about other things they dislike.



John Keane

The British Medical Journal correctly labels them ‘attention-seekers’ anyway, political or otherwise: “More than a few politicians and millions of citizens still don’t believe [the coronavirus pandemic] is happening,’ University of Sydney politics professor John Keane wrote recently. ‘Dogged in their stupidity, thinking only of themselves, they are sure that it’s all a hoax, or a media-hyped exaggeration whose falsity will soon be exposed.’” To which most experts would retort “if only”. Meanwhile, though, the COVID-deniers, many of whom are also anti-vaxxers, see scientific experts as ‘the elite’ from which they themselves are excluded (by their lack of knowledge) and blame them for interfering in their lives.

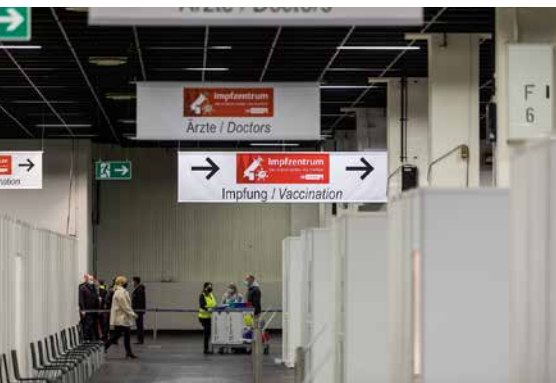


On 28 March 2021, Montenegro received a first batch of 24,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine through the COVAX mechanism. COVAX is the vaccines pillar of the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator, a global collaboration to accelerate the development, production, and equitable access to COVID-19 tests, treatments, and vaccines

All over Europe, groups have gathered, ignoring social distancing and refusing to wear masks to demonstrate their belief that COVID-19 is a hoax. “Daniel

Jolley, a senior lecturer in psychology at Northumbria University and an expert in conspiracy theories,” reports the New York Times, “said the emergence of a growing, vocal contingent of people who believed governments were not being truthful about the pandemic was unsurprising.

‘People are drawn to conspiracy theories in times of crisis,’ Mr. Jolley said. ‘When there is something happening — a virus outbreak, rapid political change, the death of a celebrity, a terrorist attack — it breeds conspiracy theories.’ The prolonged nature of the pandemic and the prospect of a new round of government restrictions, he believes, have only deepened that distrust and potentially spurred on the naysayers.” Basically the protesters are saying that they don’t like wearing masks (who does?), they don’t want to face lockdown (who would?) and that therefore the SARS-CoV-2 virus must be a hoax (it certainly isn’t). It doesn’t exist simply because they don’t like it, in other words.



A vaccination center in Cologne, Germany

And yet, as the Statista website declares: “As of March 31, 2021, there were almost 129 million global cases of COVID-19. Around 104 million people had recovered from the disease, while there had been 2.8-million deaths. The United States, India, and Brazil have been among the countries hardest hit by the pandemic.” That, at least, is not something that can be laid at the door of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

Nor, presumably, can the scandal gripping Paris. A report on the privately-owned TV channel M6 showed diners feasting luxuriously in very posh restaurants in breach of France’s strict lockdown laws. It is a secret luxury only for the super-rich

(and super-stupid, we must assume). The lockdown is supposed to mean that all restaurants are closed but the one shown in the report was not. The TV station Tweeted the secretly-shot pictures while mentioning “caviar, champagne, the menus of top chefs and no masks allowed”. On the day the story broke, the number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care in France had risen to 5,431. Paris Prosecutor Remy Heitz told the Irish TV channel Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) that he was launching a criminal probe into the restaurant and the allegations that its wealthy patrons on that occasion had included a few government ministers. Whether they were or not, he wants to know who they were so that he can prosecute them. The Tweet that first exposed the scandal had the tag #OnVeutLesNoms (we want the names) to encourage people to expose the guilty.



UN Secretary-General António Guterres gets Vaccinated against COVID-19 at High School in Bronx

Things are also bad in Italy, with a daily death rate of around 300. In total, 111,326 people in Italy have died from the pandemic. In Poland, around 40,000 cases were confirmed in each of the two weeks leading up to Easter, part of a surge of cases all across Central and Eastern Europe. Further afield, the SARS-CoV-2 virus is still spreading, with the highest number of deaths being recorded in the United States, closely followed by Brazil, Mexico, India, the UK, Italy, Russia, France, Germany and Spain. You might imagine that this knowledge that we’re all in it together might bring a sense of harmony and mutual aid. Of course, it doesn’t. In Italy’s case, it looks as if there have been aggravating factors. By far the worst effect has been in Lombardy, a heavily industrialized region and Italy’s

most intensely populated. Research conducted by Science Direct suggests that Lombardy’s severe air pollution, among the worst in Europe, may have played a rôle because of the victims’ long-term exposure to particulate matter (PM) and nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>). The researchers took data from 1,439 municipalities out of 1,507, in which a total of 61,377 COVID-19 cases were recorded, plus 40,401 deaths. Science Direct reported that exposure to PM was “significantly associated with the COVID-19 incidence and excess mortality during the first wave of the outbreak in Lombardy.” Then there’s Hungary, with a daily death rate in excess of 300, despite a seemingly successful vaccination programme, which included the Sinopharm vaccine from China and Russia’s Sputnik V.



Sinopharm's coronavirus vaccines being displayed at the China Service Fair, September 6, 2020

It’s hard to know for sure, however: journalists are barred from entering hospitals and medical facilities. Hungary’s autocratic Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, is also highly secretive. Hungary seems to get some things right but then implements them inefficiently. Take ventilators, for instance. Hungary bought no fewer than 16,000 of them last summer, but lacks the staff to operate them. According to the BBC, it has a 25% shortage of doctors and a 35% shortage of nurses because they have chosen to emigrate to a country with a different kind of government. Additionally, some 5,000 doctors resigned last month in a row over reforms to their remuneration package.

## WORKING WITH THE VIRUS

Further afield, Brazil is clearly a special case. An especially bad case, that is. “More than 3,780 COVID-19 deaths were recorded on 30 March,” writes



the BMJ, “six days after the country recorded its 300,000<sup>th</sup> life lost to the illness. At least 60,000 Brazilians died with COVID-19 in March as the more transmissible variant known as P.1 spread across the country.” Much of this has been blamed on the COVID scepticism of far-right President Jair Bolsonaro. “A flurry of high-profile resignations—including the foreign and defence ministers and the heads of the army, navy, and air force—have added to the woes of President Jair Bolsonaro,” reports the BMJ. “Critics hold Bolsonaro responsible for the country’s sobering covid-19 death tally, as he has played down the threat of the virus and refused to implement stricter measures to slow its spread.” Bolsonaro is opposed to lockdowns – indeed, opposed to doing anything at all about the pandemic – and has threatened to use the military against any regions that impose their own lockdowns. The armed forces, though, seem to be losing patience with him and a few days before the resignations, they had signed a manifesto demanding effective government action to control the worsening second wave of the pandemic that is now threatening Brazil’s economy with implosion.



© Beto Oliveira / Câmara dos Deputados

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro

Bolsonaro has throughout the pandemic dismissed COVID-19 as “a little ‘flu’ and advised Brazilians to “take it like a man”. Vaccinations are now happening; by late March, just over 7% of the population had received a first dose. Obviously, far more Brazilians would now have been vaccinated, but for Bolsonaro. No wonder he is said to be ‘increasingly isolated’.

One effect of the pandemic has been the change in who is working and who is not. Many people have, of course,

lost their jobs, especially those unable to work from home. But you may not be surprised to learn that it has disproportionately affected women. Women are more likely to hold low-wage jobs and those have been among the first to go. On top of that, with school closures there has been the need to find affordable childcare. In an excellent but worrying report on the website of the accountancy giant Deloitte, it says: “Women, who have traditionally taken on primary caregiving duties, have been especially hard hit, with added daily responsibilities and a host of new challenges to their work/life arrangements. Our survey of nearly 400 working women across nine countries, at a variety of career levels of seniority and spanning various industries, reveals the pandemic is affecting their daily routines, physical and mental health, and careers. The survey unveils the pandemic’s impact on the work/life balance and well-being of countless working women, highlighting how the pandemic could threaten some of the progress made on gender equality in the workplace in recent years.... Nearly 70% of women who have experienced these disruptions are concerned their career growth may be limited.” The report was based on a survey carried out by Deloitte, which discovered that: “65% now have more responsibility for household chores. One third said their workloads have increased due to the pandemic. 58% of those with children reported added childcare responsibilities. 53% of those with children reported that they have increased home-schooling/education responsibilities”.



Anti Covid 19 school measures

Just when you hope countries of the world – or parts of it – are starting to get things right, along comes the SARS-CoV-2 virus to mess it all up again. Africa has reported 4,186,456 cases, mostly in South Africa, Morocco, Tunisia, Ethiopia and Egypt. Asia has had 24,072,463 cases, mostly from India, Iran, Indonesia, Iraq and Israel. The Americas, North and South together, have suffered 56,084,701 cases, led by the United States and Brazil. Europe has had 43,220,869 cases, with the highest numbers in France, Russia, the UK, Italy and Spain. Things have been better in Oceania: only 63,734 cases, majority in Australia. Tropical islands have come off best, especially Vanuatu, Samoa, Wallis and Futuna, the Marshall Islands and Anguila. The Western Sahara hasn’t done badly either: 10 cases overall and only one death.

The problem is that as soon as someone seems to have got on top of the COVID-19 virus a new variant evolves that either spreads more easily and quickly or proves to be more deadly. Sometimes both. British authorities say they’re most worried about a South African variant, which is currently accounting for up to 10% of the infections in European countries. The most dominant strain, however, is one first discovered in Kent, in the south-east of England, from where it has now spread to 27 European countries, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), including Denmark, Italy, Ireland, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Spain and Portugal. However, there is concern that the South African variant may be more resistant to any vaccine tested so far. Count Galeazzo Ciano, an Italian Fascist politician, wrote in his diary in 1946: “Victory has a hundred fathers, but defeat is an orphan”, meaning everyone wants to claim their part in a success, but deny their share of blame for failure. If today’s scientists fail to get to grips with SARS-CoV-2 and our politicians fail to act sensibly in gaining control of it, then there may be many orphans and too few victors.

*Jim Gibbons*



From left to right: Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, President of France Emmanuel Macron and President of the European Council Charles Michel

## STRANGER THAN (SCIENCE) FICTION

### *The unpredicted shrinking of Ursula von der Leyen*

Try Googling Ursula von der Leyen. As soon as you tap in the first name you get a choice of Ursula von der Leyen and the sci-fi writer, Ursula K. Le Guin. They top the list but they don't have a lot in common, apart from one quirky fact. We'll come back to that later. In terms of good luck, Ursula Gertrude von der Leyen has not had very much of it. She is a German politician and physician and, in spite of her nationality, she is a true child of Europe, having been born in the small leafy, rather posh Brussels municipality of Ixelles, known for its art deco buildings and expensive restaurants. She was elected President of the European Commission on 1 December 2019, and if ever anyone was passed a poisoned chalice, she was. Superstitious people might be looking around for the wax doll of her that some wicked witch has made and into which a large number of pins have been inserted, while her friends seek to withdraw some of them. She's had even less good luck than the ever-charming, ever-polite Jacques Santer did during his unfortunate

presidency. His problem was largely that he'd been lumbered with a handful of seriously awful commissioners. Von der Leyen has been largely fortunate in that respect; she has a fairly good team, in the main. However, she has faced some of the most intractable problems ever laid before any leader of the European Commission. I don't envy her.

She was not an uncontroversial choice. A polyglot medical doctor, born abroad, she was raised to be bilingual in German and French. She married fellow-physician Heiko von der Leyen and they have seven children, so women's issues and children's issues have been important to her. She is an anglophile which must have made all the wrangling over the UK's divorce rather painful for her. It presented an unprecedented problem, too. With Brexit delayed, she was obliged to ask the UK to nominate a temporary commissioner. There has to be a commissioner for every state, and with a 3 month delay in Brexit, it meant the UK was still a member when the time came to nominate a new Commission,

Britain had to field a candidate; just one more headache for the unfortunate von der Leyen.

As minister for family affairs in Angela Merkel's cabinet, she faced another set-back when she promoted the German government's controversial moves to block access to on-line child pornography, earning herself the nickname 'Zenursula', 'Zen' in this case being taken from the German word for censorship, zensur. She was quoted on Deutsche Welle as saying she was determined to tackle what she called: "a massive spread of child pornography on the Internet." She made her position very clear: "We are no longer going to tolerate the fact that pictures of children being raped are massively accessed and distributed on the Internet in Germany." It was an initially successful move, however, even if it didn't please those opposed to any forms of censorship. It eventually failed because of an election that saw the Social Democrats, who supported the move, replaced by the Free Democrats, who were against any form



of Internet control or restrictions on the web and had spoken against 'internet blocking' during their campaign.

Von der Leyen went on to serve as Germany's Minister of Defence but has been widely seen by the German media and public as a weak one. The Politico website pointed out her disadvantages at the time she was picked for the top job at the Commission, highlighting the weakness of Germany's defence capabilities, for which she was responsible.



© Wikimedia

Rupert Scholz

"The Bundeswehr's condition is catastrophic," it reported Rupert Scholz as saying. He had served as defence minister under Helmut Kohl. "The entire defence capability of the Federal Republic is suffering, which is totally irresponsible." So, hardly a glowing reference for someone about to take charge of the EU, which has been likened to being put in charge of a sack full of rats, and a sack with holes in it, too, while some of the rats are infected with the black death. It's really not a nice job for a well brought up lady!

Britain's The Spectator political magazine sees her as having the touch of death herself: whatever she gets involved with goes horribly wrong. It gave a few examples. "The German Army had to join a NATO exercise with broomsticks because they didn't have any rifles. Its special forces became a hotbed for right-wing extremism. Working mothers were meant to get federally-funded childcare, to help fix the country's demographic collapse, but it never arrived, and the birth rate carried on falling. Every child was supposed to get a hot lunch at school every day, but somehow or other it didn't quite happen. There is a common thread running through the career of Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission. A series

of catastrophic misjudgements, and a failure to deliver." For those familiar with von der Leyen's tendency to leave a trail of disaster behind her, the most recent events are being lumped together under the heading "here we go again".

The Spectator quoted Martin Schulz, a gifted former president of the European parliament, who described her as unsuitable when she was first nominated: "Von der Leyen is our weakest minister," he said. "That is apparently good enough to head the European Commission." Spiegel did mention, in an article, that she was good at avoiding the blame for her catastrophes, which speaks of talent of a sort. She has also acquired something of a reputation for grandstanding since her arrival at the Commission. She gives rather grandiose speeches to hail her newest announcements, but they're rather like Macbeth's desperate assessment of life in general in the Shakespeare play that bears his name: "It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing".



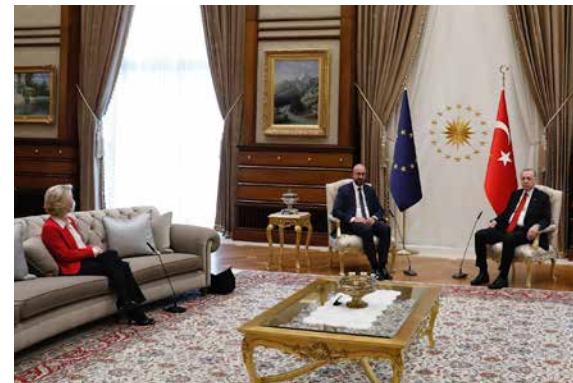
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Martin Schulz, former president of the European parliament

It is arguable that part of the problem stems from her being the first woman ever to head the European Commission. Despite fine words about equality and everyone having the same opportunities, in the days when I was a frequent visitor (which continued for several years), sexism wasn't hard to find, and not only in the press bar. Yes, there have been incidents but it's equally certain that she's too often been given the rough end of the stick. Look at her recent visit to Turkey, a country where sexism is almost a religion (Islam is not of itself sexist, or at least not necessarily so, but a great many Turks – especially the country's leader – are). VdL, as she's referred to in Germany, has a big problem with Turkey and its very bossy President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: Europe needs Turkey to ease its problems

with immigrants, but it doesn't like the way Erdoğan does business, especially now that he has withdrawn Turkey – somewhat ironically – from the Istanbul Convention, which is designed to protect women from violence.

When she arrived, together with Council President, Charles Michel, for a meeting with Erdoğan, they were led through to a room where there were only two chairs. She cleared her throat to draw their attention to her lack of a seat, but Michel had rushed to the only one unoccupied and he wasn't about to liberate it in her favour.



From left to right: Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission; Charles Michel, President of the European Council; Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkish President

It was a very deliberate snub by Erdoğan, who has little regard for women, and exceptionally, unforgivably rude of Michel, suggesting to Erdoğan that he, and by extension the EU, shares his dark-ages views about women being inferior. It matters especially because women's rights were among the items on the agenda. The incident drew widespread criticism of the two rude men, even from people politically opposed to von der Leyen. Socialist leader Iratxe Garcia Pérez said, "First they withdraw from the Istanbul Convention and now they leave the President of the European Commission without a seat in an official visit. Shameful." While a Spanish member of the far-left GUE group in the European Parliament, Idoia Villaneuva, went further: "It is intolerable that the EU and Charles Michel allow Erdoğan, who has just removed his country from the Istanbul Convention against sexist violence, to discriminate in this way against President von der Leyen." Not that Erdoğan will care; the comments come from women and he seems not to consider them important.



MEP Iratxe Garcia Perez



MEP Idoia Villaneuva

A spokesperson for von der Leyen later pointed out that the President should have had a seat of equal prominence to those used by Erdoğan and Michel, rather than having to find herself a place on a nearby sofa. Indeed she should, and if they'd been truly civilised both Michel and Erdoğan should have rushed to offer her theirs. As I said before, sexism isn't hard to find in the EU and Michel seems to have adopted it, winning the EU prize for cruel sexism. We already knew what Erdoğan thinks of women.

**BUT SHE'S A WOMAN...**

As if inherent and persistent sexism isn't a big enough obstacle, the EU already faced a financial crisis even before the SARS-CoV-2 virus came along to spoil the party by making it many times worse. The pandemic provided a financial shortfall that had to be made up, if Europe's economy was ever to recover. Von der Leyen was accused of concentrating too hard on financial issues and not enough on the medical. It's surprising, given that she herself is a doctor. As it is, by the time the Commission was authorised to acquire vaccines and actually got around to it, vaccines were in short supply. Was it von der Leyen's fault? It's fair to say she must accept a share of the blame. After all, she had described the arrival of the pandemic as "Europe's moment". It wasn't. "We see the economic, fiscal and social fall-out across our Member States," she said in a speech to the European Parliament in May 2020, just as the pandemic was beginning. "Divergences and disparities widen. Complex questions of sovereignty and burden-sharing have to be balanced. And so in front of us once again is that same binary choice. We either all go it alone; leaving countries, regions and people behind,

and accepting a Union of haves and have-nots, or we walk that road together. We take that leap forward." 'Great on sentiment, weak on delivery,' is likely to be the verdict of history.

The Politico website offers more censure than praise, too: "European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has come under intense criticism for the mishandled vaccine rollout," it writes. "To her credit, von der Leyen has acknowledged the EU's vaccine rollout failures. In February, she said: 'We were late to authorize. We were too optimistic when it came to mass production and perhaps too confident that what we ordered would actually be delivered on time.'" Her proposed €750-billion rescue plan for Europe's businesses, known as "NextGenerationEU" (the Commission seems to dislike punctuation for some reason), has not even met universal approval, nor has it yet proved possible to dole out, if for unrelated reasons.

This is how Politico reported it: "Von der Leyen presented her proposal as the best possible package — €500-billion in grants; €250-billion in loans — but admitted those amounts, and even the overall size of the recovery fund, will

be up for negotiation with the EU's 27 heads of state and government, no easy task. The entire EU would issue bonds, guaranteed by national commitments to the bloc's budget, and would repay the debt jointly, but this should not be viewed as 'debt mutualization.' This is a completely new concept and a new step forward,' von der Leyen said at one point, adding: "The crisis is so huge, we have to take unusual steps." One unusual aspect is that the sum now mentioned in the Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF), designed to help Europe when Covid has gone, has now reached €1.8-trillion. The impossibility of getting out of this mess unscathed reminds me of a speech in Shakespeare's Macbeth. "I am in blood stepped in so far," says the eponymous anti-hero, "that should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er." And even more costly, it seems.

There is the issue of going beyond talking to actually raising and distributing the money. Speaking in March 2021, the President of the European Central Bank, Christine Lagarde, warned against "procrastination" in getting money flowing from the fund.



Christine Lagarde, President of the European Central Bank (ECB), on the left, and Ursula von der Leyen

**Next Generation EU**

#NextGenerationEU #EUBudget

European Commission



Poland and Hungary had threatened it by objecting to the wording, which linked distribution rights to countries obeying EU law. Hungary and Poland do not, of course, but they did not want their reluctance to abide by EU law to affect how much they receive from the MFF or when. The compromise negotiated by Germany leaves the text unchanged but with a promise that it will not be used until the two allegedly law-breaking countries have had a chance to challenge it in the EU's highest court. Not untypically for the EU, it's a fairly clumsy compromise but at least it means the money can be disbursed.

In an interview on the European Union's own website von der Leyen was upbeat, despite all that has gone wrong. "All 27 Member States, large or small, have access to a safe vaccine," she said. "Just imagine the alternative, if some Member States had vaccines and many others none. That would have been a disaster for Europe. We bet on the right vaccines and invested massively in them. Three of these vaccines have already been approved worldwide, and two others should soon be added to the list." Well yes, but the Commission took too long to start the vaccination ball rolling.

Von der Leyen is unshaken. "We were very thorough when it came to approval of the vaccines, which cost us time" she told the interviewer. "In that regard, the UK is four weeks ahead of us, that's true. The reason is that the UK Government relied on emergency approval for completely new vaccines. That's a faster way of doing things, but also a lot riskier." Boris Johnson, it seems, is blessed with more good luck than von der Leyen. After all, if it could have all gone horribly wrong for him. Von der Leyen admits that by January 2021, she could see that not everything was going well. "Most EU countries were simply glad to be receiving the vaccine," she said, "however, in Germany and Denmark the issue quickly became about there not being enough vaccines and that everything had been a failure - which is by no means true. Furthermore, we reacted rapidly by increasing our BioNTech order from 300 million to 600 million doses."



Ursula Von de Leyen and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson

## OUTER SPACE FOR ALL! – OR ANY SPACE...

'Vaccine nationalism', the unseemly every-man-for-himself scramble for jabs that kicked in almost as soon as the first vaccines became available, has hampered the fair distribution of whatever vaccines were on the table. The Commission's problem, argues the CapX website, was a penny-pinching attitude to the process about the prices being charged. CapX blames it on von der Leyen, although she has advisors and a small army of civil servants. "It should have already dawned on her that negotiating endlessly to get a lower purchasing price from BioNTech would mean that those who agreed to contracts earlier would get vaccines earlier. It should have been obvious too that 'best effort' contracts with AstraZeneca might cause problems when in conflict with other, more stringent contracts the firm has concluded with the likes of the UK. Instead, she talked about 'global action' and fighting a war of words against 'vaccine nationalism'. The website is exceptionally hard on von der Leyen, arguably unfairly so: "There is little doubt that Ursula von der Leyen's first year as the Commission President has been a massive failure that will cost many lives, many euros, and many livelihoods, with much of Europe likely stuck in lockdown for much longer than necessary."

I recall from conversations I have had in the past with previous European Commission presidents that it's never quite as simple as that. So, the circus performance goes wrong, the tent falls down, the clowns go on strike (hooray!) and the trapeze artists end up head-down in the clowns' buckets of whitewash. Is it all the ringmaster's

fault? Not if the tent erectors went off for a drink halfway through, the clowns want to be paid extra for the trauma of having custard poured down their trousers and the trapeze artists got drunk before the show. How could the ringmaster have saved the day? Running the Commission and trying to get all 27 countries to work together is a bit like trying to herd cats. It's a thankless task, even an impossible one, and if von der Leyen's performance has sometimes seemed to be rooted more in appearance than in concrete achievement, no-one can say they weren't warned. Remember those military broomsticks?

As I said at the start of this article, Googling Ursula von der Leyen, immediately throws up two candidates upon entering the first word: they are the subject of this article and the brilliant American fantasy and science fiction writer, Ursula K. Le Guin. Le Guin's clever but controversial 1969 sci-fi novel, *Left Hand of Darkness* was the first of book by her that I read (and not the last, although it remains my favourite).



Ursula K. Le Guin in the 1970s

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I was 21 at the time. In a strange sort of way, the book's theme makes it pertinent to the problems our present-day Ursula is facing. In the book, an Earth-born man called Genly Ai is sent to a strange planet to try to persuade its divided leaders into joining a sort of planetary union called the Ekumen. Of course, it is science fiction: we have no way now or in any imaginable future of travelling the vast distances between solar systems, and looking at the state of our present Earth, I'm not sure that we could offer aliens anything that might conceivably appeal to them. We're a pretty shameful example of supposedly sapient creatures. During his time on the planet Gethen, Ai is befriended by a politician called Therem Harth re ir Estraven, who helps him to escape across the icy planet's even colder polar region. Many saw the book as a plea for and defence of feminism, which was really only starting to find its voice in the late 1960s. It was a wonderful time to be alive; I count myself very lucky to have spent my youth in the sixties and early seventies. It was a fun time. Despite the vast technological advances we've seen since then, this age in which we're now living, especially in the COVID-19 pandemic, is not a wonderful time. Fun is scarce and elicits feelings of guilt. Genly Ai and Therem Harth re ir Estraven managed to cross the polar ice, however, both in extreme discomfort.



President Recep Erdoğan and First Lady Emine Erdoğan

Despite the chair incident, which could not be blamed on her, von der Leyen's assessment of the meeting with Erdoğan is positive, even if she

may have said so through gritted teeth. "Turkey shows interest in re-engaging with the European Union in a constructive way" she told the media. "We have come to Turkey to give our relationship a new momentum. And in this respect, we had an interesting first meeting with President Erdoğan. And indeed, we discussed four areas in-depth in which the European Union and Turkey would both benefit from enhanced cooperation." And all that despite the bad manners of Erdoğan and Charles Michel. It must have stuck in her throat somewhat to talk about the EU's respect for equality and the need for Turkey to subscribe to it, too. "We are aiming for an honest partnership. And that means that a partnership between the EU and Turkey enables us to strengthen what brings us closer but also to be very frank and to address what divides us." Obviously, an extra chair would have helped, too. "Today Charles Michel and I clearly underlined that respect for fundamental rights and the rule of law are crucial for the European Union," she said. "This must be an integral part of our relationship. Turkey must respect international human rights rules and standards, to which by the way the country has committed itself – as a founding member of the Council of Europe." Sadly, the Council has precious few means at its disposal to enforce compliance with its rules; Turkey isn't the only country to ignore them totally.

The EU is upset and angry over Turkey's decision – or rather Erdoğan's decision – to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, of which Turkey was the architect and which the country pushed hard on reluctant members of the Council of Europe (the UK was one of the reluctant ones). The reason he gave was that it allegedly 'normalised' homosexual relationships, but Erdoğan has an odd attitude to human rights generally, although the EU is loath to raise the issue while Ankara is helping to solve its migrant problem. "We expect Turkey to stand by its commitments and deliver on them," von der Leyen said, "this includes preventing irregular departures and it also included resuming return operations from the Greek islands to Turkey without any delay." Turkey looks after almost 10-million Syrian refugees and Turkey's recent hint that

they need more money to do so is likely to result in extra cash. The EU can't afford not to keep them on side. Again, their existence is not von der Leyen's fault; I sometimes wonder how former Commission Presidents, such as Delors, Santer or Juncker would have handled the issue. Since the European Commission is involved, however, it's inevitable that some of the blame will be heaped on it. The media, by and large, have an aversion to the Commission.



Ursula Von de Leyen and Charles Michel

Compared with trying to preside over the European Commission, occupying the chair once filled by the remarkable Jean Monnet, herding cats sounds easy. Whatever the outcome, there were so many fingers in this particular pie that it's impossible to say for sure who was at fault for any particular failing (there are quite a few to choose from). The British novelist Anita Brookner wrote in her 1984 book, *Hôtel du Lac*, "Good women always think it is their fault when someone else is being offensive. Bad women never take the blame for anything." Ursula von der Leyen is not a bad woman. I think her record shows that she is an extraordinarily unfortunate one, however, who has made more promises than she's been able to keep. She needs to remember the old adage "actions speak louder than words", however eloquently spoken.

*Anthony James*





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Ali Khamenei Supreme Leader of Iran

# IRANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

## *Looming uncertainties...concerns...dangers*

Iran's presidential election is set for June 18, 2021, but the debate over possible candidates began as early as May 2019, when Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei drew lines indicating the direction these elections should take. Addressing a group of university students, he said, *"If you, young people, prepare the ground for the formation of a young and pious government, your worries will end, and these worries are not yours alone."*

And so, the tone was set. The alliance of Iranian 'reformists and moderates' may find it extremely difficult to have a chance of winning the upcoming contest. But whatever its outcome, the 2021 presidential election will undoubtedly have a direct and unprecedented political impact on the United States, Europe and the world at large.

In recent weeks, Iran has implemented a policy of 'maximum resistance' which has, in several areas, transformed itself into 'maximum pressure' on the US and on the international community.

This policy is aimed at getting US President Biden to lift all sanctions on Iran and compensate it for the damage caused; to accept that Iran has crossed the nuclear threshold and has henceforth the capacity to produce a nuclear bomb in a short period of time, in order to rebalance the forces in the Middle East; to block European initiatives that aim to include the subject of ballistic missile development and Iranian regional expansion in a new agreement, and lastly, to guarantee the Iranian regime's continuity.



Arak's Khondab nuclear research site



Iran's Arak heavy water reactor

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Some of the more important and possibly worrying measures taken by the Iranian regime in order to further these aims are :

### IN THE NUCLEAR FIELD

Forging ahead with nuclear development in violation of the 2015 JCPOA Treaty (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) reached between Iran and the P5+1 countries : the US, the UK, China, France and Russia plus Germany.

These actions include uranium enrichment to levels of 20% or above, including a small quantity of uranium metal at a nuclear plant in Natanz, Central Iran. Uranium metal can be used to build the core of a nuclear weapon. Iran has also used latest generation centrifuges, and ratified legislation calling for non-cooperation with the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) and expulsion of its inspectors.



President Hassan Rouhani visiting the installation of a chain of 20 advanced IR6 centrifuges started in the Natanz enrichment facility in central Iran

A statement has also been issued claiming that a supposed 'fatwa' allegedly written by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei which bans the development of nuclear technology for military purposes can be modified under certain circumstances, thereby lifting any prohibition on the use of nuclear weapons.

### IN THE FIELD OF BALLISTIC MISSILES

Launching civilian and scientific satellites into space, in order to prove Iran's ability to manufacture long-range missiles.

### IN THE CONVENTIONAL MILITARY FIELD

Large scale demonstrations of conventional forces, conduct of extensive military exercises including the use of technologically advanced drones and suicide operations.

### IN THE FIELD OF REGIONAL ACTIVITY

Iraq: attacks on US targets by means of Shiite militias.

Persian Gulf: attacks on Saudi and other targets in the Gulf by Yemeni Houthi militias.

Afghanistan: pressure on the Taliban to renege on the peace agreement reached with the Trump administration.

### IN THE POLITICAL SPHERE

Maximum diplomatic pressure and seizure of Western oil tankers and arrest of foreign nationals, especially Iranians holding dual nationality, in order to use them as bargaining chips and to put pressure on the US and European countries.

It is worth emphasising the fact that Iran's nuclear programme is a national project of the regime and that all political currents, ideologues, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the government of President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif adhere to it completely.



Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif

The 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA) concluded with the Obama administration had been carried out in coordination and with the full consent of the entire Iranian government elite

under the personal supervision of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, with the aim of advancing the strategic position of revolutionary Iran.

However, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in his first press conference in February 2021, stressed that any return of the United States to the nuclear agreement was conditional on a first step by the Iranians. But Blinken also mentioned the possible opening of new negotiations on the Iranian ballistic programme.

As a result, it would seem that the Americans do not want to lift all the sanctions, and prefer to keep them in place as a means of leverage.



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken

The Iranians in turn recall that it was the United States that walked away from the agreement. Therefore, they consider that it is not up to them to make the first move. Similarly, the reason Iran reactivated its nuclear programme in June 2019 is because the Americans and Europeans had not kept their commitments. That is their logic.

From their point of view, it is up to the Americans to return to the agreement and lift all sanctions; this is a sine qua non condition for Tehran to halt all measures concerning the resumption of its nuclear programme. For the Iranians, it is therefore out of the question to discuss a new agreement or regional policy or ballistic programme. It is a question of returning to the text of the 2015 deal in the presence of all the parties concerned.

They are, on the one hand, launching the idea of coordination which will probably not be seen as problematic for the moderate faction, and on the other, they are saying to the Europeans: you are not only there to defend the interests of the Americans, you are also there to maintain the agreement.



© Dragan Tatic

Iran nuclear agreement in Vienna in 2015

Moreover, this proposal also takes into account a concrete diplomatic and geopolitical reality. Today, it is the Europeans who are best placed to make progress on this issue.

**RETURN TO THE DEAL OR CONTINUATION OF ENMITY ?**

The deteriorated state of relations between the United States on the one hand, and China and Russia on the other, prevent the latter two countries from playing such a role. Moreover, the Europeans are the ones who know the Iranian dossier best. They have been negotiating with Iran since 2002-2003 and they have always defended the agreement.

It should be emphasised that they signed it in 2015 because they saw it as a guarantee of stability in the Middle East, and that the issue of stability in that region is of great concern to EU countries.

So now that President Biden is returning the United States to the status of a traditional ally of Europe, the Europeans are ideally placed to actively play the role of intermediary and to consolidate the agreement.

However, through various declarations made at the end of 2020 and beginning of 2021 by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron, Berlin and Paris reiterated remarks that a return to the nuclear agreement should be followed by wide-ranging negotiations on ballistic missiles and regional issues

and that these should necessarily involve other regional powers.

But these declarations served to harden Iran's stance towards the project as a whole.

Sensing this unwelcome reaction, as well as Tehran's irritation, the Europeans have again emphasised the priorities in their undertaking : that of returning Iran and the US to full compliance of the JCPOA.

The coordinator of the JCPOA Commission is none other than the EU High Representative for Foreign Policy, Josep Borrell, who not only traveled to Tehran in February 2021 to hold talks with President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif among other top officials, but also met with US Secretary of State Blinken in March 2021 during a NATO meeting in Brussels. They discussed, among other important issues of foreign policy and security, the return by the US and Iran to the JCPOA.

However, since then, a number of political analysts have warned that Iran's hardline factions such as the Revolutionary Guards Corps and politicians close to supreme leader Khamenei may prefer that sanctions not be lifted before the June election.

This is obviously aimed at preventing any advantage or credit going to the moderate and reformist candidates.

But there is also a much darker side to this. Iran is experiencing the same phenomena that other countries under severe sanctions have experienced in the past. The governments and key institutions within these countries very often manage to find ways to not only work around the sanctions but to actually benefit from them. They end up having what is known as a 'sanctions economy'.

The Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the military are in control of Iran's borders and as a



© Office of the Iranian Presidency

EU High Representative for Foreign Policy, Josep Borrell and Iranian President Rouhani



result, it is they who control the highly lucrative smuggling activities that always emerge when a country comes under economic sanctions.

Much of the benefits and rewards of that activity end up in the pockets of the IRGC or at least elements of the IRGC and other key government structures. This is part of the reason why there are powerful elements inside Iran, on the conservative and hardline side that prefer the economy to remain under sanctions.

On the one hand it enriches them and on the other, it prevents political evolution inside the country that would undermine their power base and their standing within the Iranian political system.



The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (I.R.G.C.) Ground Force saluting Ali Khamenei, The Supreme Leader of Iran

That is why many of those who want to see Iran move in a more open and democratic direction see it as a necessary first step that the economy is opened up.

As long as it remains closed, it is practically impossible for the population to put real pressure on the government, simply because so much of the power of the country is concentrated in the hands of the IRGC, the military, the clergy and other elements who are benefiting from these sanctions.

In fact, President Rouhani has already accused his opponents of exacerbating the stand-off with the US in order to strengthen their hand in the upcoming electoral contest.

President Biden himself is not immune from hostility either : negative attitudes towards dialogue with Iran by many in Congress, including members of his own party risk severely constraining his room for manoeuvre.

## RESURGENCE OF NUCLEAR AMBITIONS

Lately, some factions of the Iranian regime have voiced the opinion that they are in a position to force the Biden administration into accepting an upgrade in the country's nuclear status.

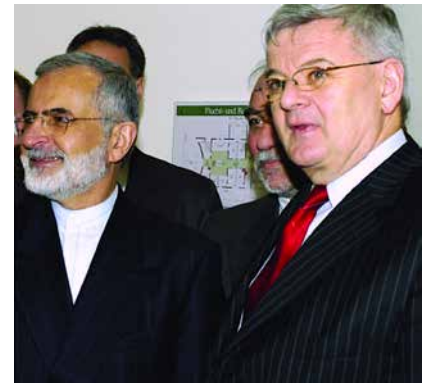


IAEA Safeguards inspectors at work

The Obama administration had recognised Iran's right to enrich uranium as part of a full nuclear fuel cycle, and now the Biden administration may be asked to approve a balance of power.

It should be noted that Iran had already requested nuclear power status along the lines of the German-Japanese model from the EU3 (the United Kingdom, France and Germany, the group with which it was conducting nuclear negotiations until 2006) and from the Obama administration.

Technically, both Germany and Japan have the capability of producing a nuclear bomb, but they remain at the threshold of this possibility, as explicitly required by their constitutions.



Dr. Kamal Kharazi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran (I.), and Joschka Fischer, German Federal Foreign Minister in 2005

At a meeting in Berlin on 17 February 2005 with his German counterpart Joschka Fischer, then Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi proposed the German-Japanese model as a basis for Iran-EU negotiations. Kharrazi presented the Iranian perspective for resolving the dispute with the EU3 group and added: *"peaceful nuclear plants in Germany and Japan can serve as a model for Iranian nuclear projects, and for any round of talks on the subject."*

And in 2009, during a press conference with his Japanese counterpart Hirofumi Nakasone, Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki called for the Japanese model to be applied to other countries, including Iran. He reiterated that Iranian nuclear activity was 'legal and peaceful', before concluding : *"Japan has spent many years building confidence in its nuclear activities. Iran is moving in the same direction... In all the years that Japan has been building confidence, it has never been asked to stop its nuclear activities"*.

The first indications that the Iranian regime is once more seeking to acquire the legitimacy of a nuclear power as part of a rebalancing of



Hirofumi Nakasone, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan and Manuchehr Mottaki Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran

forces in the Middle East come from statements by members of the regime's Expediency Discernment Council, an administrative assembly appointed by the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei which was originally set up to resolve differences or conflicts between the Parliament and various religious criteria.

They openly mention the fact that the regime needs a nuclear weapon and that, if the circumstances require it, Khamenei could modify the fatwa (which in fact does not exist) that prohibits the use of nuclear weapons.

Among these officials is Mostafa Najafi, political analyst and Secretary of the Discernment Council's working group for foreign and international relations. In an article published in December 2020 in IRDiplomacy, the online mouthpiece of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he justifies Iran's future request to possess nuclear weapons. He has also said :

*"In times of crisis, Iran has shown that it is prone to change tactics, instead of strategies," before adding: "Iran changes its tactics to avoid retreating from its strategies. This is an inseparable part of Iran's strategy in the region".*

Another Iranian official, Amir Mousavi, former Iranian ambassador to France and head of the Centre for Strategic Research and International Studies which is an offshoot of the Expediency Discernment Council, has twice mentioned in interviews with Arab and Russian media, the possibility of changing the nuclear fatwa so as to be able to acquire nuclear weapons.

He also believes that statements from President Biden and his administration regarding Iran's missiles, Iran's regional relations and its support of resistance movements in the region are aimed at relieving internal and external pressure on the United States.

He adds : *"The Iranian leadership is not in a hurry. So long as the Americans delay carrying out their obligations and lifting the sanctions, Iran will further develop its nuclear and defensive capabilities. I believe that the international community is the one that stands to lose and not Iran. Iran is calm, taking its time and putting things together. Iran does not concern itself with what Macron or others are saying".*



Major General Sayyed Abdolrahim Mousavi, Commander-in-Chief of the Army (first left) Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Pourdastan, Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Army (first right) Brigadier General Amir Hatami, Minister of Defence (third from left)

With strong rhetoric such as this, which is endorsed by the Supreme Leader himself, by the Revolutionary Guards and the military establishment, the task appears extremely difficult for candidates from the reformist and moderate camps in the upcoming election.

And the situation is aggravated by the general disappointment of Hassan Rouhani's presidency, as well as the ultra-conservative stranglehold on the Guardian Council and other key decision-making bodies.

## ECONOMIC CATASTROPHE

The reformist-backed incumbent president Hassan Rouhani has almost completely failed to implement the economic and social reforms he promised, which were central to his election campaigns in 2013 and 2017. Inflation is rampant, unemployment is high and the national currency, the rial, is in free fall.

According to the International Monetary Fund, the inflation rate is 34.2% and unemployment is 16.3 per cent. But there is a catch here : Iran's methodology for estimating the number of people working is to count one hour of work per week as equivalent to one job !

In 2013, the year Rouhani took office, one U.S. dollar could be exchanged for 30,000 rials. In 2020, this figure had shot up to 300,000 rials, a record.

Exactly who or what is responsible for Iran's poor economic situation is open to debate.

It is fair to say however that a combination of factors has contributed,

including the ineffectiveness of the Rouhani administration, the government's unwillingness to address social and economic injustices and inequalities, widespread corruption, the theocratic model of government that involves the supreme leader in all aspects of life, undermining the authority of the government, the U.S. sanctions regime and the COVID-19 pandemic.



Members of the Security Council unanimously adopt a resolution imposing sanction on the Islamic Republic of Iran, at UN Headquarters in New York on March 24 2007

In the eyes of the voters however, it is the alliance of reformists and moderates that has failed to live up to its promises.

In this context, prominent political analyst and reformist academic, Sadegh Zibakalam has acknowledged that people don't vote for the reformists anymore. In his view, given Rouhani's record, irrespective of who the reformist candidate may be, this faction has no chance in the upcoming elections :

In a recent interview published by Persian language online news site [www.alef.ir](http://www.alef.ir), he said : *"In my opinion, the reform front must find a way out of this situation. That is, reformists*



*must accept that they have no choice but to criticise themselves in order to understand why people have turned away from them and why reformists are no longer popular figures. In fact, there is only one way left for this spectrum, and that is to return to the people”.*

## **RADICALS CONSOLIDATING THEIR POWER**

Another factor in this downturn in the reformists' fortunes could well be the fact that Rouhani's brother and adviser received a five year prison sentence for corruption in 2020, and Mohammad Ali Najafi, a leading reformist figure, was convicted of murdering his wife.

Both incidents have severely damaged the credibility of reformists and moderates, who were perceived as good and trustworthy people by millions of middle-class urbanites who are strongly opposed to conservatives and radicals.

Also, a moderate/reformist candidate may have little chance of becoming Iran's next president because the Guardian Council, an ultra-conservative body charged with vetting potential candidates, will most likely disqualify the most prominent candidates from that camp, as it did before the February 2021 parliamentary elections. This decision was partly responsible for the country's lowest voter turnout since the 1979 revolution.

Although voter turnout has traditionally been seen as a way for the Iranian system to prove its legitimacy both domestically and internationally, recent elections have shown that radicals are prioritising their consolidation of power over voter participation.

Interestingly, since becoming supreme leader, Ali Khamenei has witnessed the reign of four presidents in succession, none of them aligned with his positions.

Even Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), who in his first term appeared to follow the supreme leader, publicly broke with him on a number of issues during his second term - to the point that he was disqualified in the 2017 presidential election.



Former Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani



Former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

Of these four presidents, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Hassan Rouhani, both from the moderate camp, and Mohammad Khatami, the de facto leader of the reformist movement, believed that interaction with the U.S. was not only possible, but in the best interest of the nation.

Yet at every opportunity, the hard line faction led by Khamenei torpedoed the U.S.-Iran rapprochement and labelled those who supported direct talks with the United States as 'ignorant' or 'traitors'.

Against this backdrop, President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018, providing Khamenei and his supporters with a powerful justification for their radicalism.

There are a number of reformist candidates considered to be well placed for the 2021 presidential election. Among these figures are politicians such as Eshaq Jahangiri, Hassan Rouhani's current first vice president and Mohammad Reza Khatami, a former deputy speaker of parliament and brother of reformist former president Mohammad Khatami.

But while most are likely to be rejected by the Guardian Council, the reformist camp argues that the disqualification of their candidates calls into question the legitimacy of the elections, further discrediting their rivals. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif is also rumoured to be entering the race, although he has indicated otherwise.

Be that as it may, this camp could support a conservative heavyweight turned moderate, who seems to be moving closer and closer to them, and with whom the reformists do not have strained relations: former parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani.

According to some reports, Larijani has made it a condition of running that he also be supported by the conservatives or, as some put it, by the 'good traditionalists'. Without Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's nod however, it is unlikely that a consensus among conservatives - also known as principalists - would come into force regarding their representation by Larijani.

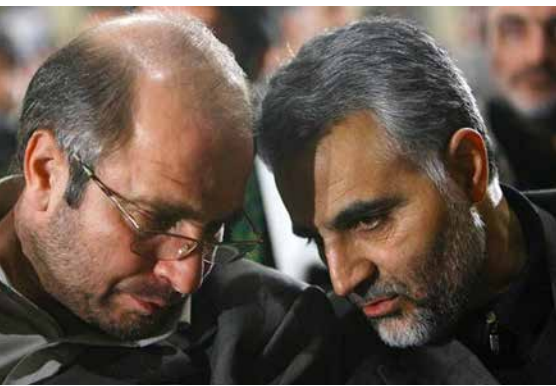


President Donald J. Trump signing an Executive Order, entitled "Reimposing Certain Sanctions with Respect to Iran." in 2018

**POTENTIAL CONSERVATIVE CANDIDATES**

According to a senior conservative official, a list of 15 potential candidates has been established that includes five military figures.

It had been argued that the outcome of the U.S. election would have had a significant impact on the decisions about who these candidates would be. If Donald Trump had been re-elected, they would most likely have turned to a military figure who would have been in phase with their ideas as well as those of the Supreme Leader.



Deceased Major General Qassem Soleimani (right) and Mohammad-Baqer Qualibaf

Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, a former commander of the Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC or Pasdaran), former mayor of Tehran and current speaker of parliament, who faces a host of allegations of financial corruption, is one of the potential candidates of this faction. He is known to be obedient and has the unwavering support of Ali Khamenei. He has run for president in three previous elections.

The most prominent figures among the other potential candidates from this faction include far-right politician Said Jalili, former secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and former nuclear negotiator and Ebrahim Raissi, current supreme court judge and potential successor to Ali Khamenei as supreme leader of Iran.

**UP-AND-COMING CANDIDATES**

Lately, two military-related figures have attracted particular attention : Hossein Dehghan, 63, is a former Revolutionary Guard Air Force officer



Said Jalili, former secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and former nuclear negotiator



Ebrahim Raissi Supreme Court judge

and former defence minister, and Said Mohammad, commander of Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters, a giant conglomerate active in mechanical engineering, energy, mining and defence, controlled by the Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).

Saeed Mohammad, 52, who successfully runs Khatam al-Anbiya, clearly meets supreme leader Khamenei's definition of a dedicated revolutionary who is capable of taking over the presidency.

There had been speculation in high political spheres that had Donald Trump been reelected, Said Mohammad would have been among the favourites to win the presidency.

**POTENTIAL EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN GAME PLANS**

In recent weeks, the Europeans have tended to move much closer to the American camp. This is in part illustrated by the intervention of the German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas who took up word for word the position of American diplomacy on the Iranian nuclear issue.

French President Emmanuel Macron also made a statement recently calling for not only greater firmness in the negotiations with Iran, but also for Saudi Arabia to be included.

So there was a sense that the Europeans were slightly moving away from their role which, at least according to their statements, was to defend the 2015 agreement.

Now, if the Europeans accept the role that Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif is asking them to play, it

will be not only to defend this treaty by reminding the Iranian leaders of their obligations, but also to make the Americans understand that Tehran, if not allowed to increase oil exports due to the present sanctions, will not play the game.

However, if the Europeans are ready to play along with both sides of the fence, a positive scenario may well emerge.



Iranian Qiam-1 SRBM



Here, one must not forget that ever since 2017, France and Germany have called for a widening of the negotiations so as to include Iran's ballistic missile programme as well as initiate discussions on its political and military role in the region. Understandably, this has irritated Tehran to a high degree.

Some European leaders think that the American strategy is the right one, and that Europe should take advantage of this period and move quickly to negotiate a new agreement, because they think that a Europe-America alliance could be the ideal spearhead for this strategy. But the Iranians categorically refuse this scenario and have made it known for a long time.

Others across the European Union seem to feel that this would be a mistake, for two main reasons : first, the Iranians, especially the hardline factions, have still not accepted the exit from the agreement by the US in May 2018.

After all, it is the 'hardliners' who hold the upper hand in Iran. One only has to read the country's newspapers to understand this; there is a very high level of distrust of the new American administration.

So, at the very least, the Iranians are waiting for the US to prove its good will by returning to the agreement and remove the sanctions. Until that happens, the Iranians will probably not agree to negotiate.

Secondly, it's all a question of timing : one cannot do everything at once. The game needs to be calmed down first before restoring some confidence.

There are elements that seem to indicate Tehran may be ready to negotiate on its regional policy. But it would probably be best not to force the issue.

In a recent interview, Foreign Minister Zarif clearly stated that the Islamic Republic was aware that its power was a concern for neighbouring countries. He added that Iran was ready to take initiatives to establish a regional security pact. There are also initiatives by American and Saudi diplomats that seem to indicate that the Biden administration is working on a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia.



US President Joe Biden

So, if the Americans play a facilitating role, it can circumvent the problem of tensions in the region and give the conflicting countries time to establish a regional security pact. It is the same thing with the ballistic programme; it is hard to see the Iranians negotiating right away when they feel they are under threat of American and Israeli attacks.

Iran's fears in this respect were starkly justified on April 11, 2021 when the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) announced a large-scale power failure – described by Tehran as an act of "cyber- terrorism" - in its uranium enrichment plant at the Shahid Ahmadi-Rochan complex in Natanz, one of the key centres of the Islamic Republic's nuclear programme.

Not long after this announcement, Israel appeared to confirm claims it was behind this online attack.

Lieutenant-General Aviv Kochavi, the Israeli defence chief said : *"the country's operations in the Middle East are not hidden from the eyes of the enemy"*.

Israeli public radio even took the unusual step of claiming that the Mossad had played a central role.



Lieutenant-General Aviv Kochavi, Minister of Defence of Israel

Natanz has long been a focal point of Israeli fears and has already suffered an explosion in July 2020 that damaged a centrifuge assembly plant. In 2010, the site was subject of a combined CIA and Mossad cyber-attack using the computer virus 'Stuxnet' that disrupted and delayed Iran's nuclear programme for several years.

It was no coincidence that this incident took place only one day after a series of new, highly advanced centrifuges that can greatly speed up the production of enriched uranium, as well as uranium metal went into operation on April 10, 2021.

Be that as it may, many countries across the European Union seem to be of the opinion that the game plan should be for a relatively rapid return to the JCPOA to ensure that it is in place and safe. Therefore, whatever the outcome of the Iranian election, it will not affect any decision regarding whether or not to go back to the deal.

From the US and EU points of view, this should also be done with a safe perspective in mind. Because if it so turns out that the US is back in the deal and Iranians end up electing a president who pulls Iran out of the deal, then the default will be that of the Iranians...the US is back in the deal but now it's Iran that is causing a problem !

If the JCPOA has not been returned to and the Iranians elect a president who walks out of the deal, then it will be an Iranian walk-out of the deal three years after the US did the same. But it will still be the fault of the US for having done this in the first place.

So, the Biden team as well as the European negotiators should have a strong sense that timing is actually more important for them to get this done quickly than for the Iranian side.

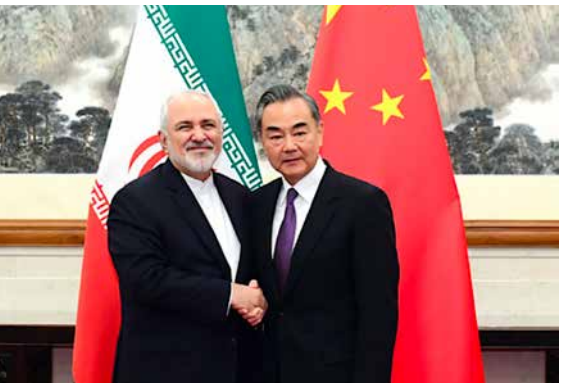
There is a significant likelihood that a hardline Iranian president is elected. Much like his conservative American counterpart in 2016, he will run on a platform opposing not only the JCPOA but also possibly engagement with the US altogether.

If that were to be the case, it will complicate matters tremendously, and even more so if the JCPOA has not been returned to by then.

For instance, if Iran's hostility with the United States were to continue and its relations with the Europeans remain strained, the country may be forced to give up its historic aim of dependence on 'neither East nor West' and instead move towards even more dependence on Russia for its security and China for its economy.

Ample evidence that this is no longer just a hypothesis came to light on 27 March 2021 when Iran and China concluded a strategic cooperation and trade agreement over 25 years, with somewhat mysterious contours, after several years of discussions.

All that is known about the document signed by Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, is that it is, according to Tehran, a "complete roadmap", including "political, strategic and economic clauses for 25 years of cooperation".



Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif of Iran

## ABUSE OF 'HOSTAGE DIPLOMACY'

Regarding Europe-Iran relations, another sore topic and persistent matter of discord is the case of a number of Iranian dual nationals who are rotting in Iranian prisons.

The European Parliament, the Council of Europe as well as other official bodies in Europe have intervened regularly and persistently with Iranian authorities on the plight of these hostages.

There is little doubt that in its relations with states it considers hostile, the Islamic Republic of Iran has readily resorted to a sordid strategy known as 'hostage diplomacy'.

The principle is devilishly simple. Often, but not always, Iranian citizens holding dual nationality who come to Iran for work, to do business or to visit their family are arbitrarily arrested and tried on trumped up charges, usually for 'espionage' or 'collusion to undermine national security'.

Once the regime sentences them to long prison terms, they then make it clear to the authorities of the Western state concerned that the convicted person could be the subject of a barter, to be exchanged for an agent of the regime for example, convicted and imprisoned in the country concerned. And this method has already borne fruit on a number of occasions.

The latest example concerns Kylie Moore-Gilbert who was released in November 2020, after spending two years in an Iranian prison.

Aged 33, the Australian-British researcher who is a specialist in the Middle East, had been arrested in 2018 at Tehran airport and sentenced to ten years in prison for 'espionage' for Israel. Her release was obtained in exchange for that of three Iranians convicted of an attempted bombing of Israeli diplomats in 2012 in Thailand. Bangkok agreed to release them, presumably at Australia's request.



Kylie Moore-Gilbert

At least twenty people, many of them dual nationals are being detained under highly dubious pretexts in order to serve as 'bargaining chips'.

This is the case of Franco-Iranian researcher Fariba Adelhah, sentenced to five years for undermining national security.

The 61-year-old anthropologist and a specialist of Shia Islam, was arrested in Tehran in July 2019 along with her

companion. Roland Marchal, also a researcher, was released in March 2020 in exchange for an Iranian engineer arrested in Nice, France and whose extradition was requested by the United States, for trafficking in sensitive materials.

Regarding Fariba Adelhah's eventual release, things look much more complicated. First of all, she holds dual nationality which is not recognised under Iranian law and secondly, it is thought that the counterpart to her release would be Assadollah Assadi, an Iranian intelligence agent posing as a diplomat. He was tried and convicted in Belgium in February 2021 for an attempted attack on Iranian opponents in Paris in 2018. And Belgian justice is not at the disposal of Paris...



Assadollah Assadi

Probably, the most high profile case is that of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, an Iranian-British charity worker who was detained at Tehran airport in April 2016 as she and her daughter were about to board their flight back to London. In September of the same year, she was sentenced to five years' imprisonment for allegedly 'plotting to topple the Iranian government'.

Following a high-profile campaign launched by her husband Richard Ratcliffe in 2017, the then British Prime Minister Theresa May intervened vigorously with Iranian authorities. These efforts were followed up by current Prime Minister Boris Johnson, as well as countless other European political figures.

There have been repeated calls for Zaghari-Ratcliffe's release by the European Parliament, the US Congress and the Canadian Parliament among many other European governments, as well as international organisations.





Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe with her husband Richard Ratcliffe and daughter Gabriella before her arrest



Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe pictured shortly after she was allowed to leave prison on furlough in March 2020. "Nazanin may become 'bargaining chip' in Iran nuclear deal, says her husband"

## HARD CHOICES

Many believe the fate of these detained dual nationals may probably be linked in some way to the actions of the United States and the European nations concerned, in the run up to the June 2021 election, and of course, the outcome of that contest.

In a recent telephone conversation between British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the Iranian president, the utterance of a few words by Hassan Rouhani during an otherwise routine call, clearly pointed to this possibility.

At one point during the call, Rouhani said he found it "strange" that the UK had "not yet made progress in paying this forty-year-old debt".

According to a statement from the Iranian presidency, Rouhani then added :

*"Accelerating the payment of this debt to Iran would undoubtedly be helpful in resolving other problems in bilateral relations".*



Iranian President Hassan Rohani (R) meets with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on the sidelines of the 74<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly in New York, September 24, 2019

For Richard Ratcliffe as well as many political analysts, she is a hostage in a

sinister political game concerning an old debt contracted by the United Kingdom when the Shah of Iran purchased £400m (467 million euros) worth of Chieftain battle tanks from Britain between 1971 and 1976. Out of the 1,500 tanks and 250 repair vehicles ordered, only 185 were delivered to Tehran.

But then in 1979 the Shah was ousted following the Islamic Revolution. London refused to deliver the rest of the order and kept the money. In fact, this sum is to be added to £976m of Iranian assets already frozen in Britain.

On 10 March 2021, Boris Johnson in another conversation with Hassan Rouhani again called for the "immediate release" of all detained British-Iranian dual nationals and the return of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, according to a Downing Street statement.

The British leader considered "totally unacceptable" the current situation of Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who "must be allowed to return to her family in the UK".

While the Biden administration wishes to resume nuclear negotiations with the Islamic Republic by extending them to include precision ballistic missiles, Iran has so far refused to do so, setting up its defence as an uncrossable red line. The mandate of the current president Hassan Rouhani is limited to the resumption of talks within the framework of the Vienna nuclear agreement, with the Supreme Leader - himself a hardliner - wanting to ensure that the conservatives are in a position to control any extension of the agreement.

The upcoming presidential election should probably be seen as an attempt between rival factions, particularly

the IRGC on the one hand and the technocrats represented by Rouhani and Zarif on the other, to prepare for the post-Khamenei era.

While neither the United States nor the European Union can decide on the outcome of this election, they can, should they wish to, affect the climate in which they take place.

And that climate can in turn impinge upon voters' intentions and attitudes come election day.

To convince voters to renew their trust, the alliance of reformists and moderates needs to send a strong signal to the country's economy. An economy on its last legs and a suffering population, disappointed with Hassan Rouhani's promises to "see the money from the nuclear deal on their dinner table."



Iranians voting

Low voter turnout in Iranian elections has always been favourable to conservatives. If the reformists want to have a chance to win the presidential election, it is essential for them that Iranian voters turn out in large numbers despite the deep discontent among the population due to the economic and health crisis.

In this context, the European Union can also play an active and decisive role during the very short time that remains. A rapid resumption of negotiations and a partial lifting of sanctions before the presidential election will have a positive impact on its outcome.

An election of strategic importance for Iran and the Middle East, but also for Europe and its allies, as well as the rest of the world.

Hossein Sadre

# COCAINE AND CASTANETS

## *Spain's rôle in the international drugs trade*

“I would sooner be a foreigner in Spain than in most countries,” wrote George Orwell, writer of 1984 and *Homage to Catalonia*, among many other famous books. “How easy it is to make friends in Spain.” It has been, traditionally, very easy to smuggle drugs there, too, at least until recently. Things have been changing, however, although not as much as the law enforcement agencies would like. It seems a lot of people have taken Orwell at his word and moved to Spain, but not to make friends; they have gone there to conduct their illicit businesses, among them a number of Italian gangsters who, it’s alleged, now call the Costa del Sol the “Costa Nostra”, a joke about the very unfunny Mafia and especially its Sicilian part, the Cosa Nostra (literally “our thing”). It’s hard to be amused at jokes about an organisation that ruthlessly seeks to enslave people to narcotics, makes a fortune from shipping the stuff so as to maintain their addiction and supply their need, and murders anyone who stands in their way. They are not nice people; the only time to laugh is when they are caught and put away behind bars.



Spanish Guardia Civil's Organised Crime Unit arresting Yannick M.W.

That’s what happened earlier this year to a Belgian, wanted by the police for running a drug smuggling operation. Known as Yannick M.W., he was living in a luxury villa in Estepona, on the Costa del Sol, together with his wife, his 12-year-old daughter, his parents

and even his in-laws, according to the Organised Crime Unit (UCO) of the Spanish Civil Guard. He topped Belgium’s ‘most wanted’ list, having run a massive smuggling operation, shipping cocaine in huge quantities from South America to Antwerp.



Polish Police's Centralne Biuro Śledcze Policji (Central Investigation Bureau, or CBSP)

He was also linked to arms trafficking and had virtual control of the illicit trade through Belgium’s main port. Ports like Antwerp are often called the ‘arteries’ of trade, but like other arteries carrying blood around our bodies, they are liable to attack by viruses, parasites and disease.

European Police forces have had some success in thwarting the drug gangs’ efforts. In August 2020, they seized more than €8-million of criminal assets and arrested 75 people in a massive crackdown on marijuana growing and marketing. The operation, codenamed ‘Vangelis’ was led by Spain’s Guardia Civil, working closely with the Polish Police’s Centralne Biuro Śledcze Policji (Central Investigation Bureau, or CBSP) and Europol. In it Spanish investigators carried out 24 search warrants, and in the course of that they uncovered 2,690 cannabis plants with a street value in excess of €3-million. Altogether, 36 properties were searched, along with 50 vehicles, resulting in the seizure of goods valued at more than €8-million as well as €200,000 in cash. Police also

froze €370,000 in the bank accounts of the criminals. In the end, 69 Spanish nationals and 6 Poles were charged with drugs trafficking and money laundering charges.

More recently, in January of this year, the Guardia Civil, working with the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), succeeded in bringing down an organised gang of criminals engaged in laundering money for major South American drugs cartels. The crooks were involved in debt collection and laundering the proceeds of drug trafficking, providing hitmen and undertaking contract killings targeting rival criminal groups. The gang, according to Europol, the EU’s policing agency, used its killers to collect payments all over Spain by using threats in order to gather money. It was mainly from other criminal gangs that had been buying drugs from South American cartels to redistribute locally. Some of the gang’s leaders had acquired luxurious goods to accompany their lifestyles.



Seized cocaine in Madrid Spain

They traded high-end cars and used what are called ‘smurfing’ techniques to place their ill-gotten gains into the mainstream financial system. The online Investopedia site explains it like this: “Smurfing is a money-laundering technique involving the structuring of large amounts of cash into multiple small transactions. These smaller transactions are often spread out over many



different accounts, to keep them under regulatory reporting limits and avoid detection.” In this case, it didn’t help the criminals. Four people were arrested, of Colombian, Spanish and Venezuelan nationality, seven suspects were charged with criminal offences, one company was charged with criminal activity, three Spanish homes were searched and a number of luxury items seized, including high-end vehicles, firearms and ammunition. The investigation was backed by Europol, which provided an exchange of information and analytical support.

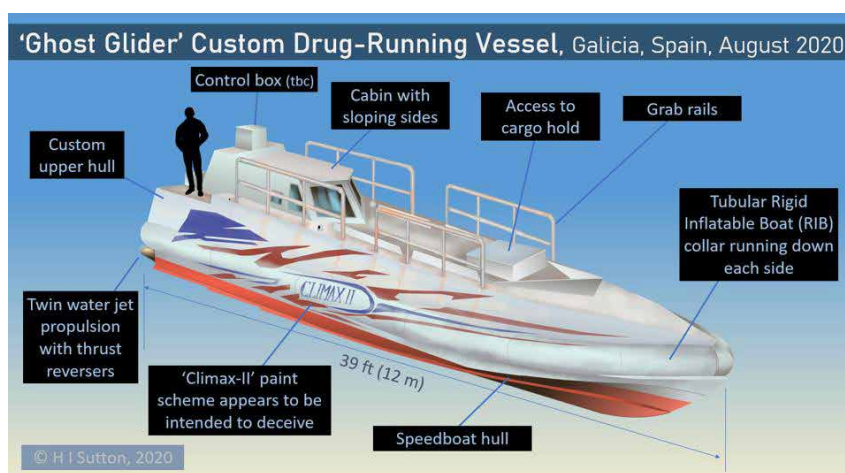
## RUN SILENT, RUN DEEP, RUN PROFITABLY

The criminal gangs involved in drugs trafficking see it merely as a means to make money; for them the only downside is the risk of apprehension by law enforcement agencies, and it’s a risk worth taking. With that end in mind, they clearly believe that a little investment in their project is worthwhile. That’s where submarines enter the picture. The first one to be spotted was seized in 2019.



U.S. Coast Guard intercepting a submarine carrying cocaine in the Pacific Ocean

The sub in this case, said to have been built in Guyana at a cost of some €2.5-million, had operated for years as a transport vessel for narcotics. When it was discovered by Guardia Civil officers using night goggles, its crew were in the process of attempting to scuttle it. The officers saw some of the crew fleeing the scene but two Ecuadorian crew members were arrested. The criminals had been trying to unload the 20-metre vessel which contained some 3-tonnes of cocaine with a value of millions of euros. Bad weather had prevented the crew from transferring the load to a surface craft nearby, which is why they decided to sink it instead. But police now know the submarine had been making two



trips a year, ferrying its illicit cargo to users in Europe.

The same technique is used to take drugs to the United States: the previous year, the US Coastguard discovered a submarine carrying more than \$165-million (€141-million) worth of cocaine off the coast of Columbia. It’s believed by Britain’s National Crime Agency that the drugs on the submarine found off Spain had been destined for the UK.

But the narco-criminals have not rested on their laurels. Experience shows that submarines are a viable way of transporting drugs without being detected by watchful coastguards. In March, 2021, the Spanish Policía Nacional (National Police), working with Europol and with law enforcement agents from five other countries tracked down and seized what’s called a “half submersible” that was being built in Europe. It was found in the city of Málaga in a joint operation involving more than 300 police officers from a number of countries: Spain’s Policía Nacional, but also from Columbia’s Policía, the Dutch National Police (Politie), the Portuguese Judicial Police (Policía Judiciária), The UK’s National Crime Agency and the US Customs and Border Protection agency, the international element of it being co-ordinated by Europol. It was quite an operation.

First of all, investigators identified an organised crime group made up of Spanish, Columbian and Dominican criminals, operating out of Cataluña. During the second half of 2020, there were a number of seizures of cocaine made in Columbia, all linked to the identified gang. In total, 2,900 kilos of cocaine were seized. Then, in November

2020, Spanish Police arrested the gang’s leader in Tarragona, together with thirteen of his accomplices. In February, members of another branch of the gang were targeted: this time four individuals were arrested in Tarragona and officers seized 583 kilos of hashish that had been bound for France and Italy. Several houses were searched in Málaga and it was during these that the half-submersible vessel was found in a warehouse. It was nearing completion and was the first such craft ever seized on European soil. It was nine metres long and could have carried up to two tonnes of drugs if brought into service.



A 30,000 square meters illegal plantation in Pozo Cañada, Albacete, Spain

Next, one of the main suspects was arrested at El Prat airport in Barcelona as he was attempting to flee to the Netherlands. A resulting search of a warehouse led to the seizure of 300 kilos of cocaine. A clandestine drug laboratory was then uncovered in Barcelona, close to a cannabis plantation where more than a thousand plants were growing. Furthermore, a 15-metre speedboat belonging to the gang was also seized in the Murcia region. It was carrying around 7,000 litres of gasoline. At the end of February, the remaining members of the network were arrested and some 6,000 litres of drug precursors,

that had been destined for a Murcia laboratory, were seized. Europol had liaised among the various police forces involved to help identify the targets.



© Policía Nacional

25 tonnes of hashish seized by the authorities in Spain

## FRIENDLY, SAFE, TRADITIONAL?

The advice for ex-pats moving to Spain is that it is a relatively safe country, just as George Orwell suggested all those years ago, and with a fairly low crime rate. The Expatca website gives this advice to new residents and tourists: "People are advised to avoid traveling with large amounts of money and to be careful when using ATMs or paying for goods on the street. Busy locations such as markets, outdoor performances, and cafes are prime target areas and you should be extra vigilant. Be mindful that criminals often work in gangs with one member distracting the intended victim, perhaps by pointing at something, while another uses the opportunity to steal their belongings." Just like anywhere else, really. Indeed, people living in Spain can enjoy its low murder rate and the relative rarity of crimes against the person. According to the OECD Better Life index: "Spain has a homicide rate of 0.6 murders per 100,000 inhabitants which is much lower than the OECD average of 3.6 per 100,000. OECD figures also show that 83% of Spanish residents say they feel safe walking alone at night, compared to the OECD average of 69%." But the picture changes when you view Spain as part of the corridor along which drugs are smuggled, mainly from South America, to the rest of Europe. The people doing the trafficking are extremely dangerous, with a cavalier attitude to killing. That's why police forces in different countries are obliged to work together. Criminality knows no borders so neither must the police.

It's a technique that paid off in 2019. Then, a joint investigation by law enforcement authorities from seven countries, led by Spain and with Europol's support, dismantled the largest organized crime group in Spain's Levante area. The gang had been engaged in major drug trafficking and money laundering. Altogether, 81 people were arrested while officers seized 4,000 kilos of cocaine, €2-million in cash and three firearms, as well as jewellery, gemstones, luxury watches, 42 vehicles and a 25-metre yacht. In addition, properties worth €20-million were seized and 800 bank accounts frozen. The final part of the operation involved more than 200 police officers, who carried out 13 house searches and arrested 42 people. They called it 'Operation Beautiful'. The gang had been especially violent and the Spanish police were aided by law enforcement agencies from Colombia, France, Portugal, Romania, Sweden and the UK. Despite the prevalence of drug seizures and arrests, it would be wrong to blame Spain. The origins of a large proportion of the crimes uncovered there actually involve Italy's notorious criminal gangs, the Camorra from Naples, the 'Ndrangueta from Calabria and Sicily's Cosa Nostra. They have long been a problem for law enforcement in Italy; they are now operating in Spain where they have access to the Atlantic, across which their precious illegal cargoes are shipped. They have years of experience, they are completely ruthless, they lack any kind of scruples and they are very good at what they do. Perhaps it's time to look at these traditional Italian gangs more closely.



Famous Spanish cocaine smuggler Sito Miñanco. His arrest came after a ship containing 3.8 tonnes of cocaine worth an estimated €240 million was intercepted as it sailed towards the Canary Islands from Colombia in 2018. His trafficking accomplishments were turned into the Netflix tv show *Fariña*



The Spanish Civil Guard arresting one of the most dangerous fugitives from the Italian 'Ndrangheta in Barcelona in March 2021

The Camorra is one of the largest and oldest criminal organisations in Italy, dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The structure of the Camorra is somewhat special, with individual 'clans', each led by a 'capo', or boss, some with hundreds of affiliates and inclined to act individually to maximise the individual clan's profits. As a result they often feud among themselves and these disagreements tend to be deadly. The old saying "there is no honour among thieves" would seem to apply. Interestingly, the Camorra seems to have evolved from a Spanish secret society, the Garduña, founded in 1417. The Camorra, in their current form, apparently emerged during a chaotic power vacuum between 1799 and 1815, when the Parthenopean Republic was proclaimed, following the French Revolution and the Bourbon Restoration. It was first mentioned officially in 1820, when police records note what was supposedly a 'disciplinary meeting' of the group. They grew into something more organised than the disparate gangs of their birth, and following the defeat of the 1848 revolution, the liberal politicians asked the Camorra, who were recognised as leaders of the poor, to help them to overthrow the monarchy. The head of the police, Liborio Romano, asked the man leading the Camorra, Salvatore De Crescenzo, to help keep order, appointing him as head of the municipal guard and turning the Camorra into power brokers. It was like President Herbert Hoover responding to the St. Valentine's Day Massacre by appointing Al Capone as head of the FBI. There is always a price to pay for outright stupidity by politicians.

The 'Ndrangueta is another Mafia-type organised crime organisation, every bit as dangerous and deadly as Italy's other contenders. It's a strange word



and it is pronounced with the first 'n' almost silent and the emphasis on the 'dran' part. The word comes from Greek and means 'heroism' or 'virtue'. The 'Ndrangueta lack both. In fact, it's hard to think of a less appropriate name. The organisation was already known about by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, although it grew to prominence in its Calabria home region during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mainly through the amount of the crime its adherents committed and the number of innocent people they murdered. They remain extremely active: in 2010 a US diplomat estimated that their turnover from drugs trafficking, extortion and money laundering accounted for at least 3% of Italy's GDP that year. That's almost exactly the same as Fiat's share of the country's GDP that year (3.09%). Whoever said crime doesn't pay? However, I'm very glad Fiat continues to produce rather good vehicles, rather than getting into the drugs, money laundering and murder business. I have very fond memories of a little blue Fiat 500 I had in the 1960s.

The 'Ndrangueta, however, has not got better. Since the 1950s in particular, it has expanded its activities and in a 2013 threat assessment of Italian organised crime for Europol and Italy's Guardia Finanza, the "Ndrangheta is one of the most powerful and dangerous organized crime groups in the world." According to the Demoskopika Research Institute, they made €53-billion in 2013. According to the Quartz website, the 'Ndrangueta, if it was a legitimate company, would be the fifth largest in Italy. The only firms that can boast a bigger turnover are Eni (a multinational oil and gas company), EXOR (a holding company owned by the Agnelli family that has fingers in a great many pies and whose recorded revenues of \$144-billion, which is €122.59-billion, make it the 28<sup>th</sup> largest group in the world in revenue terms), Enel (a multinational



Wreckage of Giovanni Falcone's escort car



The trial follows one of the largest anti-mafia operations carried out in Sicily of January 15, 2020 called "Nebrodi" with 94 arrests and the seizure of 151 farms

energy provider) and Generali (a giant insurance company). If the 'Ndrangueta's home region of Calabria was a country, its annual sales volume would rank it, in terms of GDP, just below Sri Lanka and above Luxembourg. Incidentally, EXOR also owns the Juventus FC football team, Ferrari and The Economist magazine. I met and interviewed Gianni Agnelli once in Brussels many years ago and I liked him. Unlike some industrial giants I could name he wasn't too full of himself and his own importance to talk to me. Bill Gates was equally modest.

But all is not well for the 'Ndrangueta right now. In a bunker-style courthouse in Messina, 97 members of the gang are on trial, accused of defrauding the EU out of millions of euros, including a share of the €55-billion the EU pays out every year in farm subsidies. It has always been the EU's weakness: it doles out cash where it is needed but the pots are large, the supervision sometimes weak and wherever there is a large bowl of honey it won't be just the bees who come along to enjoy it but also the swarms of flies and wasps. The 'Ndrangueta count as wasps because they sting. But it was not an armed robbery this time. The gang used white-collar accountants, politicians and government employees to help themselves to at least €10-million from the subsidy. Some 90 lawyers are involved in the trial and up to a thousand witnesses may be called. On the Politico website, the start of the trial was reported rather dramatically: "A colossal fraud," the investigating judge proclaimed in a pre-trial charge sheet, 'exploiting the EU funding on a huge scale and to perfection.' It was, the document declared, 'a devastating phenomenon. A mafia ready to take on Europe using illegal methods, and an [Italian] state that is already behind and playing in defence.'" In the past, fraud

against EU funding has been seen as a minor crime in Italy and largely ignored. A concerted attempt by a criminal gang, however, runs up against Italy's anti-Mafia laws; some defendants could face up to 25 years in prison.

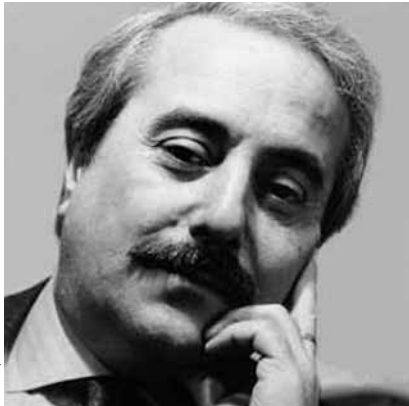
The trial will not be an easy experience for the witnesses either, given the 'Ndrangueta's reputation for violent revenge. As Politico reports, Piera Aiello, who married into the gang before turning state witness, remarked to Politico on the intimidating prospects of facing the accused as they are held in cages in the court room. Informers know that their testimony may bring death to their doors. "It is one thing to go against one mafioso," she told Politico, "but to go against 100? It is such a hard moment to look into their eyes and point the finger at the mafia. Your heart tremors." The irony is that, given their enormous organisational skills, it's possible that the 'Ndrangueta could make as much money from legitimate businesses, without all the murder and mayhem. They choose otherwise.



Piera Aiello Italian police informant and politician known for her stand against the Mafia. She was elected to the Italian Chamber of Deputies in 2018

Which brings us to the third crime gang, Sicily's Cosa Nostra, active not only in Europe but in the United States, too. They used 500 kilos of explosive to kill the

anti-mafia magistrate Giovanni Falcone. A few weeks later, they murdered Falcone's colleague, Paolo Borsellino. On each occasion, they murdered those accompanying them, too. It's said that Cosa Nostra's leaders celebrated with champagne but it had been not only a cruel and brutal thing to do. It was also suicidal for a gang convinced – wrongly – of its invincibility. They had declared war against the state and the state responded by putting armed soldiers on the street. In 2009, an anti-Mafia MEP was elected to the European Parliament. Rosario Crocetta had to be guarded at all times and had police protection even while I was interviewing him on the footbridge known as the Passerelle inside the Parliament's Brussels headquarters.



Giovanni Falcone

He persuaded his fellow MEPs to create a special committee, the Organised Crime Committee, or CRIM, to use its official nickname. According to the Parliament's press office, it's estimated that organised crime costs the EU economy billions of euros annually. But despite efforts by the courts and the police, less than 1% of the proceeds of human trafficking, counterfeiting and money laundering is ever recovered, with criminal gangs adopting increasingly sophisticated methods and Europe's open borders allowing for the easy movement of goods and people.

## CELLULOID MISPRISION

However, the massive operation against the gang, led by the Italian Special Operation Department (ROS Caltanissetta) and co-ordinated by Europol, has led to the arrest of 46 members of Cosa Nostra. The suspects are accused of drug trafficking, firearms offences, extortion and corruption in public tenders. In the action, police searched 60 properties and seized



Rosario Crocetta has been a forthright proponent of the fight against organized crime in Sicily. Consequently, he has been several times subject to assassination attempts by the Mafia

€1.5-million in cash. One suspect arrested in Germany was taking advantage of his residence in another country to reorganise the gang's assets in Sicily and the drug trafficking routes. Many of those, of course, come through Spain, with the Cosa Nostra's American affiliates involved on the other side of the Atlantic. The activities of the Italian mob in the United States have been glamorised in a number of Hollywood movies, such as *The Godfather* in 1972 and its sequels. There is nothing glamorous about their murderous activities in reality, however. Even so, the notion of becoming a gangster can appeal, especially to young men who want the money it can bring and the chance to carry a firearm. It's a sort of grown-up way of playing cowboys with real guns.

There was a vast migration of poor Italians to the US and it was in the impoverished areas where they gathered that Italian gangsterism thrived. Now, they remain highly active and, according to the FBI, very hard to eradicate. "Transnational organized crime (TOC) groups are self-perpetuating associations of individuals who operate,

wholly or in part, by illegal means and irrespective of geography," says the FBI website. "They constantly seek to obtain power, influence, and monetary gains. There is no single structure under which TOC groups function—they vary from hierarchies to clans, networks, and cells, and may evolve into other structures. These groups are typically insular and protect their activities through corruption, violence, international commerce, complex communication mechanisms, and an organizational structure exploiting national boundaries."

Rather like the SARS-CoV-2 virus that has been plaguing the world, for the various Mafia gangs there is no easy cure; the virus can mutate very quickly, just as the gangsters can rearrange their operations to suit changed circumstances. The Spanish newspaper *El País* recently reported on how the drugs trade is developing. "Drug trafficking in Spain is evolving rapidly. While recently released 2020 data lists the seizure in 2019 of a staggering 1.5 million marijuana plants, almost 38 tons of cocaine and nearly 350 tons of hashish along with 20,437 arrests (that's an increase of 12.3%), drug traffickers are becoming masters at adapting to new circumstances, including those of the pandemic." *El País* quotes the narcotics prosecutor José Ramón Noreña, who has spent 14 years dealing with drug crime, "this is an area that has no boundaries and is only going to grow, not just in Spain but across the world, and the solution, if there is one, is complex."

It also quotes a Guardia Civil police chief who has been involved in the fight against gangsterism. "The system is as follows," he says, "due to its geographical position, Spain is a receiver – hashish from Morocco and



Seized drugs by Spanish National Police



cocaine from Latin America – and it’s also a big marijuana producer. It has perfect, fluid distribution channels, mainly road transportation, with trucks carrying all kinds of fruit and vegetables across Europe.” It’s easy to hide narcotics, of course, in a truckload of melons. “We can dismantle stronger or weaker groups,” the paper quotes a senior police chief of Spain’s National Police Drugs and Organised Crime unit as saying, “but others will come behind and they will also try to impose themselves and fill the vacuum, as can be seen with the violent clashes between rival organizations on the Costa del Sol. The only thing we can do is prevent this system from replacing and competing with the state itself, as happens in some countries, such as Mexico.”



Spanish Prosecutor José Ramón Noreña

Meanwhile, rival gangs on the Costa del Sol have been trying to resolve their differences with guns. In 2020 in the Málaga province, one gang tried to kidnap the son of a rival gang leader. They failed but shot him in the arm and leg as a warning anyway. In another incident in Marbella, a group of British men, supposedly out for a friendly drink, got into a bar fight in which one shot another in the face.



Spanish Police storming a villa in order to arrest some gang members

The gunman had a police record for trafficking marijuana. The victim survived, but between 2018 and the start of this year inter-gang feuding in the area had cost 20 lives. The use of explosive devices and machine guns have been recorded. Málaga has proved exceptionally attractive to the big-time drug traffickers. Firstly, it offers sunshine and luxurious accommodation that appeals to gangsters, just as it does to other people. What’s more, it is an easy journey from Morocco, where much of the marijuana is grown while its climate makes it suitable for growing Cannabis, too. And, of course, it is on Spain’s Atlantic coast, where shipments of cocaine arrive from South America. It’s an ideal location, as El País notes: “there are groups whose field of expertise is smuggling drugs ashore; others are adept at car theft, and yet others at fuelling the speedboats used to carry the goods. There is also dedicated storage space for keeping drugs, and a wide selection of hitmen who can get rid of problems for a fee.” One police officer explained that “these people solve everything with guns.”

## KILLING THE MONSTER

The Spanish interior Ministry estimates that there are some 100 criminal gangs operating along the coast; more than twice the number that were there in 2013. The gangsterism blighting Spain is not going away. Local people say they feel safe, although they are clearly not. Back in 2004, a clumsy attempt to eliminate a member of a rival gang resulted in the fatal shooting at a hair salon of a 7-year-old child and a 36-year-old man. The killers had missed their target and left fifty spent shell cases on the floor of the salon. The police say that hitmen are normally very professional, which clearly wasn’t the case here: “They come, they shoot, they get their victim and they disappear,” one veteran officer told the paper. To fire so many rounds and yet miss their target whilst accidentally killing a child smacks of rank amateurism and carelessness. Even Jesse James never did anything so unprofessional. The cause of the feuds remains a mystery. The Police have tried to find out the reasons but, just like the Italian gangs, those caught observe the principle of Omertà.

No-one will speak, even about their rivals. Nor are all the gangs linked to Italy. Baltic gangs are also committing murder on the Costa del Sol. Last year, one man was shot by a hitman using an Uzi sub-machine gun. Milos Perunic had been living under a false identity and his killer escaped on a motorcycle. His killing was an act of revenge in a turf war between two rival Montenegrin gangs. Three people have been arrested for the hit. The Uzi, designed in Israel in 1948 and named after its designer, Uziel Gal, is a reliable weapon and when using 9mm ammunition, has a low recoil.



The 9 mm Uzi sold for around € 8,000 used by the gang members

Many, though, are in other calibres, such as .41, and the recoil when used in rapid-fire mode can affect the accuracy, as the hair salon incident proved. One regular user noted that “they should not be used by newbies”. But in the streets of the Costa del Sol, they should not be used at all. Even in the gun-loving United States, civilian manufacture of the Uzi as well as the sale and the possession of select-fire Uzis produced after 1986, is prohibited.

The tentacles of the Mafia along that desirable stretch of coast seem to be getting longer. In fact, the gangs are more like the hydra of Greek mythology. According to those stories, it had a hundred heads (although only 50, in some accounts). My 1827 edition of Lemprière’s Classical Dictionary explains that “as soon as one of these heads was cut off, two immediately grew up if the wound was not stopped by fire”. And indeed, that was how Hercules, aided by Iolaus with a hot iron, destroyed the monster as one of his ten labours. Sadly, we no longer have a Hercules to call upon, although we may need one to defeat such a dangerous, deadly and multi-headed foe.

Kingsley Brooks

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Narco submarine seized by the Spanish National Police

## 20,000 TONNES UNDER THE SEA

### *The growing use of submarines in drugs trafficking*

“I am not what you call a civilised man!” cries Captain Nemo in Jules Verne’s ‘20,000 Leagues Under the Sea’. “I have done with society entirely, for reasons which I alone have the right of appreciating. I do not, therefore, obey its laws, and I desire you never to allude to them before me again!” He was referring to his strange and lonely life aboard his self-constructed submarine, the Nautilus, and explaining it to French marine biologist Professor Pierre Aronnax, who, along with a Canadian harpoonist, Ned Land, he had just taken on board, somewhat against their will. They had been hunting the alleged ‘monster’ in a ship the Nautilus had attacked and sunk. Taking his ideas from scientific devices shown at the Paris Exhibition of 1867, long before undersea voyages were considered feasible, Verne describes his vessel, which is also effectively his bachelor pad, as long and cylindrical with a double hull and interior watertight compartments. It is supposed to be both impenetrable and unsinkable and tapered like a cigar at each end. Verne got the idea of electric propulsion from the exhibition, too.

Nemo uses it to sink other vessels, earning a reputation as a sea monster and deterring local shipping. Some witnesses described it as being like a giant narwal, although real narwals rather lack portholes.



An illustration from Jules Verne's novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* - a portrait of professor Pierre Aronnax which is at the same time a portrait of Jules Verne himself

The book, classified as science fiction, was basically anti-imperialist. Nemo had been driven to his solitary but deadly existence by the invasion of his home country and the slaughter of his wife and family at the hands of an imperialist nation bent on plundering resources to which they had no right by means of conquest. The book is set in 1866 and in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century there were several imperial powers vying to plunder the world's riches at the time, to the everlasting detriment of poor peoples, so it's hard to know which one Verne, a Frenchman, meant. Britain seems his most likely target but it may have been his own country he was getting at. The criminals using submarines today have no such excuse for their activities. Nobody has deprived them of anything, except their liberty when they're caught by the law enforcement authorities. It is purely for personal gain, and they are becoming increasingly inventive, not to mention murderous. The surface vessels they often used to transport drugs across the oceans were being spotted and intercepted by coastguards rather too often for comfort, so they took the Nemo route and went beneath

the waves. The drugs traffickers have been using submarines or 'semi-submersibles' for several years, possibly as many as 15, but the vessels are getting more and more sophisticated.



*The first ever half-submersible vessel being built on European territory seized by the Spanish Police in Malaga in March 2021. Similar vessels captured in the past have always been of Latin American manufacture*

One discovered by Spain's National Police in March 2021, was 9 metres long, 3 metres wide and designed to carry 2 metric tonnes of illicit cargo. It was found by officers in a warehouse in Málaga, on Spain's glamorous and popular Costa del Sol. The sub is made of fibreglass and plywood panels, attached to a rigid structural frame. It has three portholes on one side and is painted light blue, making it hard to spot in a wide expanse of ocean. It was designed to be powered by two 200-horsepower engines, operated from inside the vessel, so it would have been quite fast. At a press conference in San Roque, in southeast Spain, National Police Chief Rafael Perez said the vessel had never been used but he believed it was designed to ferry drugs to a mother ship and return to port. Perez thought its most probable cargo would have been cocaine, because marijuana is more often smuggled in trucks. Submarines have been used by smugglers before, but this was the first one to be found under construction in Spain, or, indeed, anywhere in Europe.



*Six tonnes of cocaine seized in Spain October 2020*

The police operation resulting from the find succeeded in seizing hundreds of kilos of cocaine, but also hashish and marijuana being produced in various parts of Spain. 52 people were arrested. The whole operation involved not only Spanish police but also law enforcement officers from Colombia, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Portugal; up to 300 officers in total.

## GOING DOWN

According to the Moroccan Arabic-language newspaper Assabah, it's believed the vessel was designed to carry various loads of narcotics across the Strait of Gibraltar. For the law enforcement authorities involved, capturing the sub was the icing on the cake. During the operation, 47 homes were raided and a very sophisticated drug laboratory was found in Barcelona, together with a 15-metre fibreglass speedboat, 400 kilos of cocaine, 700 kilos of hashish and more than €100,000 in cash. The drug trafficking gangs are not short of money and seem to be copying the drug traffickers that target the United States. The submarines they build follow a similar pattern.

Take as an example the fully-submersible vessel discovered by the Colombian Navy, aided by the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), in an artisan boatyard on Colombia's Cucurupi River, in the Chocó area. This submarine was more than 12 metres long and it was powered by

an electric motor, making it hard to detect with underwater listening devices when it's underway, while its low surface profile would make it hard to spot with radar, sonar or with binoculars. It would not have been cheap, which goes to show the wealth of the traffickers. The vessel would have been capable of carrying 6 tonnes of cocaine with a street value of \$120-million (€102-million).

The vessel was far larger than other previously discovered 'narcosubs', as the DEA has dubbed them; other examples have only had the capacity carry a quarter as much.

In December, an American warship intercepted one of the smaller, more common subs in the Eastern Pacific. Rather than a fully submersible vessel, the one intercepted by USS Gabrielle Giffords last December, operating with a detachment of US Coast Guards aboard, was what's called a 'low-profile vessel' (LPV). Its low freeboard (the distance between the waterline and the main deck or weather deck of a ship or between the water level and the upper edge of the side of a small boat) means that its profile above the water is small enough to escape notice by law enforcement officers, although not on this occasion, of course. According to US Naval Institute News on 14 December 2020, "This is a mass-produced design which has been seen many times before. In fact, it is at least the 19<sup>th</sup> of this exact model reported since 2017.



*Seizure of the first electric narco submarine by the Colombian Police*





© Navy

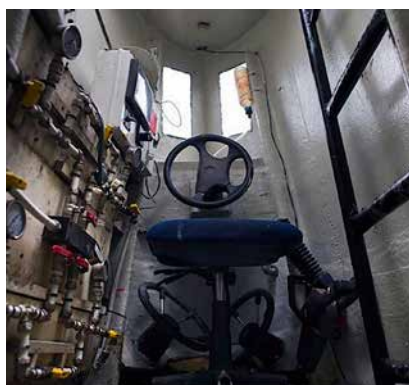
LCS USS Gabrielle Giffords and the intercepted low-profile vessel

It was built from roughly crafted fibreglass and is powered by three of the ubiquitous Yamaha Enduro 2-stroke outboard motors.” Not so sophisticated, then, nor anything like as quiet, but clearly being pumped out in great numbers in clandestine boat-building yards to service the narcotics gangs. The crew sleep in the cargo hold, lying on the cocaine bales. Halfway towards the bow, the central tunnel that serves as access, as well as providing an additional place to stash cargo, then leads into the main cargo hold, in front of which are more fuel tanks. According to the US Navy, the interior of the subs is usually cramped, smelly, unhygienic and claustrophobic, but despite this the drugs cartels never have difficulty recruiting crews. In this particular incident, the 3-man crew was arrested and the cargo – 2,810 kilos of cocaine – was seized. The cocaine, in one kilo bricks, was wrapped in plastic sacks to make the bales. It had a street value of more than \$100-million (€85-million).

## GOING UP

The US Navy and Coastguard believe that the size of the cargo, which was much larger than usual, shows that the drug trafficking gangs are trusting the submarines with larger cargoes. The massive sub found in Colombia by the Colombian Navy was, after all, powered by an electric engine and carrying 10 tonnes of batteries to give it a considerable range in virtual silence. It’s been hypothesized that the reason for the larger loads is not just greed (although that undoubtedly plays a part) but is the result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is seriously disrupting other traditional routes, such as commercial flights and shipping. For those of a nautical mind, the subs feature a fully enclosed cylindrical hull with a hexagonally-shaped viewing port to

aid navigation and four dive planes to allow it to submerge when threatened with discovery. Almost all of the subs also have satellite navigation capacity and long-range HF-SSB radio communication equipment. The very informative Blue Seas website for dedicated mariners describes the facility like this: “The Marine MF/HF-SSB radio is a combined transmitter and receiver much like your VHF. The primary difference between the two is the frequency ranges that they operate in. Typically Marine MF/HF-SSB radios operate in the frequency range of 1.6 MHz to 30 MHz. Probably, the most important concept here is that: ‘They allow the operator to select a frequency based on atmospheric conditions to establish communications over varying distances.’” For the curious, HF-SSB stands for ‘high frequency – single side band’.



© Aftacrow

Inside a narco sub

Now that they have become almost the only fairly reliable means of transporting narcotics from their origins to their markets, the subs are carrying more and more. They must be worth paying for, from the traffickers’ point of view: the one captured in Colombia had enough battery power to let its silent electric engines run for 12 hours at up to 3 knots, enough to travel up to 36 nautical miles, depending on conditions, so it was more likely to be seen as a link between a larger cargo vessel and the shore. Its building cost has been estimated at \$1.5-million (€1.27-million), but the largest load of cocaine found by the crew of a US Coast Guard cutter on board a semi-submersible was 7.7 tonnes, which would be worth around €131-million on the streets, making the cost of construction look insignificant. The United States authorities believe that

most of the subs cost anything up to \$2-million (€1.7-million) to build, but a single trip carrying cocaine can generate more than \$100-million (€85-million) in profits if it gets through. Most of them do.



© National Police of Colombia

Members of the Colombian Navy stand guard on top of a seized submarine built by drug smugglers in a makeshift shipyard in Timbiqui, department of Cauca

In the summer of 2017, the Colombian military captured a drug sub with smaller, quieter electric engines and more than 100 batteries. In the Colombian rainforest, under its canopy of trees, the drug traffickers’ boat builders have been creating vessels for a quarter of a century. That’s where the narco subs are made. In one raid on such an operation, the authorities found thousands of euros of materials, a paid labour force and – sometimes – Russian submarine designers. It would seem that Vladimir Putin’s desire to undermine the democracy of the United States extends to providing military experts to aid the drug gangs. This from a country that severely penalises drug dealing at home. It smacks of rank hypocrisy on Putin’s part. According to the DEA, as reported in US Naval Institute News, Colombia produced up to 910 metric tonnes of cocaine in 2016, a 32% increase on the previous year, and a third of that travels in illicit home-made submarines to users and addicts in the United States. It’s believed that some of the larger subs can reach speeds of 9.7 knots (18 kilometres per hour) and carry up to 10 tonnes of

narcotics for a distance of more than 3,000 kilometres. In 2019, Spanish authorities apprehended a 20-metre semi-submersible containing more than 3,000 kilos of cocaine. The semi-sub had made the journey all the way across the Atlantic. As for the comfort of the crew, it's worth noting that none of the subs so far discovered contained a toilet. Captain Nemo would be horrified.



Colombian authorities arrested a number of suspects when they confiscated a narco sub

Most of these stories relate to drugs being trafficked to markets in the United States, but the submarines are increasingly being used in trafficking to markets in Europe, with Spain a prime destination. European law enforcement agents are doing their best to shut them down, despite the difficulty of finding them, let alone intercepting them. However, when the crews of the submarines see the approach of law enforcement vessels, they are under instruction to scuttle their subs, together with their cargo. They can then bob about in the water in the knowledge that the laws of the sea will oblige the navy or coastguard officials to rescue them. With no actual evidence of their criminality in sight, the officers have no choice but to set them free. As for the subs, it would appear that some of the larger and more expensive ones are intended for multiple trips, with what are called "sacrificial zinc anode bars" fitted to their hulls to reduce the effects of seawater corrosion of the metal parts. It's clearly big business for the drug gangs; it's been estimated that some 1,000 submarines are now in use for transporting narcotics. Often, they make the return trip carrying guns for South America's many gangs and terrorists.

However, there are differences between the submarines favoured on either side of the Atlantic. On the American side, the subs have been getting smaller and, in some cases, appear to have been home-made. In August 2020, however, the Colombian Navy discovered the largest narco-sub yet seen. It was destroyed on the spot but officers reported it to have been about 30 metres long with a beam of 3 metres and capable of carrying 6 to 8 tonnes of narcotics. Technically, it was a low-profile vessel (LPV), rather than a fully submersible type and it would have ridden sufficiently low in the water to escape notice. The authorities have given them the classification SPSS, short for self-propelled semi-submersibles. The location of its discovery, off the Pacific coast of Colombia, suggests it was to be used to ferry drugs to Mexico for onward transportation to the United States, but its size could hint at an intention to use it further afield, perhaps even as far as Australia. Alternatively the same boat builder, whose handiwork has been recognised in other more advanced submersibles and semi-submersibles, could be sailing his products along the Amazon and across the Atlantic to Spain. The large sub intercepted in Spain in November 2019 bears the signs of the same boat-maker's handiwork. Even when the authorities spot one of the subs at sea, only about one in ten has been successfully intercepted. The scuttling, followed by calls for help, means many crews get away with it. With so many bales of narcotics being committed to the depths of the ocean, one can only imagine the number of spaced-out, fuzzy-brained fish and lobsters there are out there: the doped-up denizens of the deep.

## UNDERSEA, UNDERHAND

To date, narco-subs, as the DEA calls them, have been more common in the Eastern Pacific and the Caribbean, and it's known that one attempt by traffickers to build one in Europe was a failure. With greater expertise, it would seem the skill has migrated, helped perhaps by successful sailings of Colombia-built submarines across the Atlantic. The crew members arrested escaping from the vessel off Spain had been at sea, they admitted, for 20 days, although they would not name their point of departure, nor if they had made the entire journey in the sub or stopped along the way, but it seems likely the vessel left from somewhere in Brazil to make its 5,800-kilometre journey. That is a very long way for a cramped and uncomfortable submarine. According to H.I.Sutton, the well-informed writer on maritime defence issues who has made a study of narcotics submarines, the journey may have been broken at the Cape Verde Islands or the Azores, where the Brazilian crews would have been able to communicate in their native Portuguese. Sutton has even published a book about the narco-sub issue. He thinks it's more likely that subs from South America then go near to the Azores to meet a cargo ship known to have set off from somewhere the authorities consider a 'safe' port. There, they transfer the cargo to the large vessel, only for it to be switched to another sub when it gets near to Spain. Or, perhaps, the UK or Ireland?

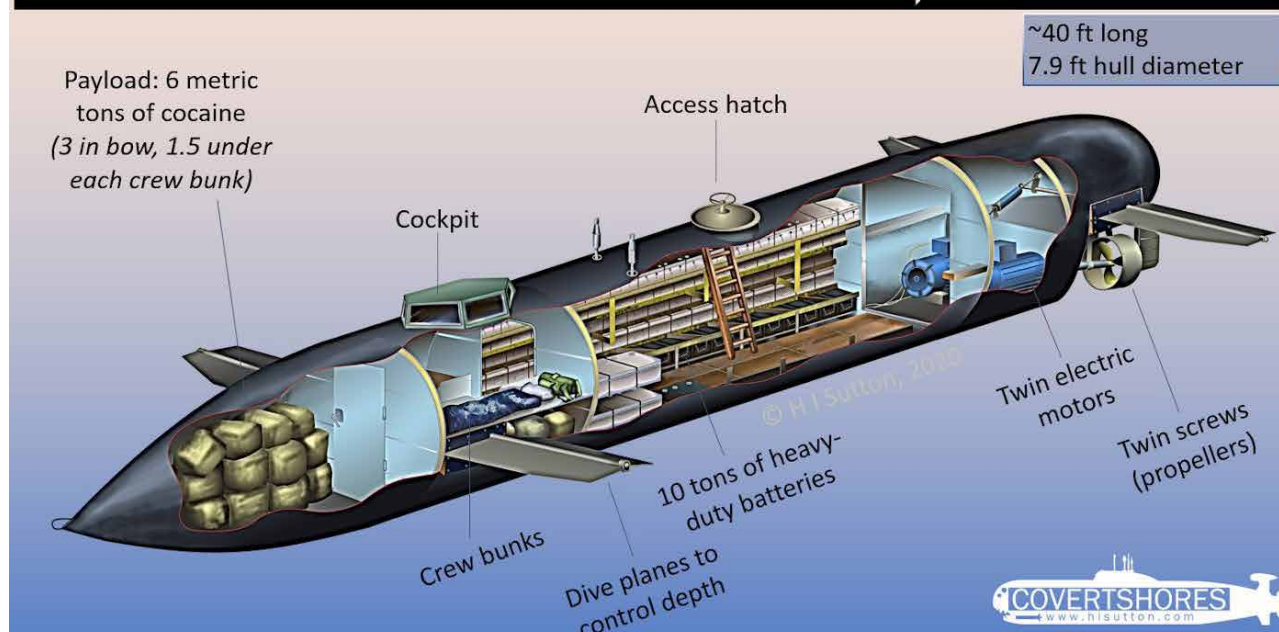
Business Insider reports that in November 2020, 11 members of a gang that specialised in building boats for drug traffickers were



The sinking of a semi-submersible with 3,050 kilos of cocaine in the Aldán estuary in Spain confirmed the origin of the vessel from a South American clandestine drug laboratory



## Electric Narco-Submarine Found in Colombia, November 2020



arrested. Their operation was allegedly under the protection of the Colombian terrorist group, the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, or ELN). The boat builders had apparently achieved so much fame in the criminal underworld that other groups were contacting them to employ their skills. The website quotes Admiral Hernando Mattos, commander of the Colombian Navy's anti-narcotics Poseidon Task Force, as telling the newspaper *El Tiempo* that "it is not uncommon to find that drugs from two or three networks are transported in one ... submarine so that they can jointly cover the shipping and costs of these vessels, which can reach up to \$1million (€0.85-million)." That is a Conservative estimate; the cost is often double that figure. Even so, submarines have become a mainstay for Colombian organized crime groups. "In 2019," reports *Business Insider*, "23 such vessels were confiscated. And between January and August 2020, 27 were seized between the Colombian coast and international waters."

Submarines travelling from South America all the way to Europe are a new concept and a worrying one for law enforcement agencies. The low-profile semi-submersibles known as the LPV-IM type – in other words 'low profile vessel – inboard motor' – are

very hard to detect, travelling with a vast load of cocaine, plenty of fuel and at slow speed. They can either travel directly to Europe or Africa or else unload their cargo onto yachts and merchant vessels, including tugboats. In transporting drugs across Africa, the gangs sometimes have the help of terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, Al Qaida and others, just as in Latin America the boat builders benefit from their association with the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), the Sinaloa Cartel and other terrorist groups, happy to provide armed assistance in return for cash.



Seized Narco submarine in Colombia

Europe is starting to copy the United States in its response to the threat: in 2007 it set up the Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre – Narcotics

(MAOC (N)) in Lisbon, yet so far it only has the support of France, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Netherlands, Portugal and the UK. The UK's long-term involvement may be doubtful, too, now that it is outside the EU. It does have the support of the European Commission, EUROPOL, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the European Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), The European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Defence Agency (EDA), EUROJUST and FRONTEX, all of which have observer status. Europe will need that, and more: it would make sense for other countries with drugs problems to get involved, such as Belgium and Germany, one would think. The narcotics smugglers have proved themselves very clever; the authorities need to be cleverer still. It would be best of all, perhaps, if the craving for illicit drugs could be curbed, but that seems unlikely. I leave the final words to Jules Verne's immortal anti-hero, Captain Nemo: "However, everything has an end, everything passes away, even the hunger of people who have not eaten." Or, perhaps, snorted cocaine?

Robin Crow

# NEWS IN BRIEF

## DEFINING CABINS FOR CUSTOMERS - BUILDING A DREAM FROM A DISTANCE



“Testing cabin comfort, ambience functionality and lighting design is typically an emotional experience we offer our customers in the Cabin Definition Centre. Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, the challenge we have faced is to re-invent the ways we interact with customers, providing the highest level of cabin definition in a fully digital way”, explains Alexander Jürs, Customer Service and Communication Manager at the CDC in Hamburg.

### A virtual cabin definition experience

In close cooperation with Airbus' subsidiary Testia and Information Management teams, the CDC was able to run customer definitions for the cabin, using a combination of virtual remote assistance, video conferences and live 3D Digital Mock-Up (DMU), when attendance in person was not possible. The combined solution offered by this partnership is available on smartphones and supporting digital devices enabling customers, suppliers and Airbus to perform many aspects of the cabin definition process on time, quality and without incurring additional costs.

In 2020, around a third of all CDC definition meetings have been managed virtually, with an overall customer satisfaction rate of 96%. Air New Zealand was one of the many airlines to benefit from the newly developed capability in the CDC. “Due to the pandemic and the need to continue development work remotely on cabin interiors. It is great to see Airbus thinking ahead on how the CDC can service the needs of the airlines. The remote live lighting session was excellent and very beneficial for us,” says Ed Collett the new Aircraft Programme Manager for Air New Zealand.

“In these difficult times, our customers are increasingly aware that our virtual live definition sessions are an efficient solution to reconnect all relevant stakeholders in one single digital place - even if they are looking forward to coming back physically in the CDC as soon as they can,” says Alexander.

2021 seems to confirm this trend and the remote solution developed by Airbus and Testia continues to smooth the customers' cabin definition journey.

## TRIPSET: THE COMPANION APP THAT HELPS AIR TRAVELLERS NAVIGATE DURING COVID

**This mobile app gives the flying public real-time information for safe, healthy and smooth end-to-end journeys.**

Air travel has become ever more challenging for passengers. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, any attempt to reconnect to air-travel is countered by a myriad of varied – and often rapidly-changing – restrictions, making planning for any potential air-traveller difficult.

To help simplify the situation, Airbus developed the Tripset application as its contribution to rebuilding clarity and trust when travelling. The app provides the latest and most relevant up-to-date information covering all aspects of flight, from planning, booking, check-in to conditions while onboard and at the destination.

This new digital experience is based on the award-winning iflyA380 travel app, with everything at the user's fingertips in a single application that is updated twice daily.



*Tripset app*

### Hassle-free access to the latest travel information

The Tripset app aggregates information from multiple sources, including guidelines from government websites and embassies on in-country conditions, region-by-region restrictions or requirements, along with health measures implemented by airlines and airports.

Another important feature is the border status of destinations around the globe: whether they are open, restricted or closed. Also included are suggestions for ground transportation at the points of departure and arrival, such as commuting options to and from airports.



All this information is provided in an agnostic manner; no matter the airport, airline, flight number or aircraft type... the app will take into account the full range of available inputs.

### How to fly again soon

Once a flight is booked, the passenger can import the trip specifics into Tripset, which then builds a personal timeline using all available data on the end-to-end travel conditions.

The app continues to provide information – even prompting the passenger when it is time to go to the gate, based on information from the boarding pass.

The free-of-charge Tripset app for Android and iOS devices is downloadable from Google Play and the AppStore.

### "ASTER X 2021": FIRST SPACE EXERCISE IN EUROPE

Last month marked the launch of the first space exercise in Europe: "AsterX 2021". Led by the Space Command (CDE) of the French Air and Space Army (AAE), this tactical and operational training exercise for military space operations took place over several days at the National Centre for Space Studies (CNES) in Toulouse.

*"You are space fighters."* Thus Colonel Christophe Michel, director of the "AsterX 2021" exercise, ended his speech for the launch of this first edition. In front of him were some 60 participants made up of space operators, ready to begin their training, and the exercise facilitation, planning and support team.



All CDE operational units participated in the exercise: the Space Operations Command and Control Center (C3OS) in Paris, the Military Satellite Observation Center (CMOS) in Creil, and the Operational Center for Military Surveillance of Space Objects (COSMOS) in Lyon. They all worked closely together with the CNES, industry players and German and American partners.

On the occasion of "AsterX", a new simulation architecture was designed to reproduce the operational systems used by operators on a daily basis. This simulator combines a database made up of 10,000 space objects, 5 operational applications, the generation of 18 space events and an original time management approach allowing to condense 4 actual weeks into 4 days of training.

Gathered in the same operations room, the participants were confronted with complex but realistic situations. About 60 participants consisting of space operators and teams dedicated to the planning and support of the exercise were present.



French President Emmanuel Macron at the AsterX 2021 Operational Center

During these exercises, a scenario specially devised for "Aster X" imagined a situation where, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean on a fictitious continent, a geopolitical crisis gradually escalates between two regions. One of them is supported by France and its allies. Space Command units are mobilising with their partners to monitor activity and respond to potential space attacks. *"During this crisis between two regions, explains the director of 'AsterX', the objective was to cover all types of space events. Operators had to deal with – for example – anti-satellite weapons fire, space rendezvous or even solar weather phenomena."*

The name "AsterX" was not chosen at random. First of all, it refers to the first French satellite launched by a Diamant rocket. It is also a nod to the famous Gaul depicted in the comics.

### 'REASONABLE GROUNDS' TO BELIEVE SYRIAN MILITARY HELICOPTER DEPLOYED CHEMICAL WEAPON: OPCW

A report released by the body dedicated to freeing the world of chemical weapons, concludes that there are "reasonable grounds" to believe that a Syrian military helicopter carried out a chemical attack on the town of Saraqib, in 2018.



OPCW inspectors, in full protective gear, collecting samples during a mock exercise

The UN-backed international Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) released the findings of the second report by its Investigation and Identification Team (IIT), saying that "at least one cylinder" of deadly chlorine gas had been dropped on the night of 4 February, spreading "over a large area" and affecting at least 12 Syrians on the ground.

### 'Intolerable'

Questioned by reporters at UN Headquarters in New York about the report, the UN Spokesperson said that Secretary-General António Guterres had received the report, "and is deeply concerned by its findings.

“The Secretary-General strongly condemns the use of chemical weapons and reiterates his position that the use of chemical weapons anywhere, by anyone, and under any circumstances, is intolerable, and impunity for their use is equally unacceptable”, said Stéphane Dujarric.

“It is imperative to identify and hold accountable all those who have used chemical weapons.”

The report states that although nobody was killed, a dozen people had been treated for symptoms of chemical poisoning, after the Syrian air force helicopter “under the control of Tiger Forces” had dropped a cylinder, which “ruptured and released” the chlorine.

### Syria uncooperative

In its general conclusion, the IIT states that although it is aware of general information related to Syrian government investigations that “could be relevant to the use of chemical weapons”, it had not obtained or received information from the Syrian authorities “though it requested it”, which is a breach of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Neither did the IIT uncover any information indicating that “rogue units or individuals” could have been responsible for chemical weapons use in the 2018 Saraqib attack.

The OPCW investigation team is responsible for examining all evidence that can be gathered on alleged attacks in Syria, including interviews with witnesses, once the body’s Fact-Finding Mission has determined that chemical weapons have been used or likely used.

The IIT released its first report a year ago, asserting that the Syrian military had used the nerve agent Sarin and chlorine gas, in two attacks on the village of Ltamenah, in March 2017.



The OPCW Headquarters in The Hague, Netherlands

### OPCW background

As the implementing body for the Chemical Weapons Convention, the OPCW, with its 193 Member States, oversees the global endeavour to permanently eliminate chemical weapons. Since the Convention’s entry into force in 1997, it is the most successful disarmament treaty eliminating an entire class of weapons of mass destruction.

More than 98% of all declared chemical weapon stockpiles have been destroyed under OPCW verification.

### Investigation and Identification Team (IIT)

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons’ (OPCW) Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) is responsible for identifying the perpetrators of the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic. The IIT identifies and reports on all information potentially relevant to the origin of those chemical weapons in those instances in which the OPCW’s Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) determines or has determined that use or likely use occurred, and cases for which the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) has not identified the perpetrators of chemical weapons use in Syria.

The IIT is comprised of a multi-disciplinary team of staff, which includes experienced investigators, analysts and a legal adviser who are led by a Coordinator. The team conducts its activities in an impartial and objective manner. The IIT is part of the OPCW Technical Secretariat and functions under the authority of the OPCW Director-General. The Technical Secretariat provides regular reports on its investigations to the OPCW’s Executive Council and to the United Nations Secretary-General for their consideration.

### OPCW by the Numbers

193 States committed to the Chemical Weapons Convention  
 • 98% of the global population live under the protection of the Convention  
 • 98% of the chemical weapons stockpiles declared by possessor States have been verifiably destroyed.

### EXOSONIC AWARDED CONTRACT TO DEVELOP LOW-BOOM SUPERSONIC EXECUTIVE TRANSPORT AIRCRAFT CONCEPT FOR THE US



Artist’s concept of Exosonic’s low boom supersonic airliner converted into an executive transport aircraft. Note: the above image does not represent Exosonic’s current configuration for proprietary concerns

Exosonic, a low-boom supersonic aircraft manufacturer, has partnered with the U.S. Air Force’s Presidential and Executive Airlift Directorate (PE) to develop a supersonic executive transport. Exosonic’s aircraft can provide top US leaders and diplomats rapid transportation around the world to meet with world leaders or react to developing situations on the ground. By utilising Exosonic’s boom softening techniques, the passengers can travel overland and overwater at supersonic speeds, pending regulations, to roughly reduce their cruise times in half compared to existing aircraft.

In response to Exosonic’s award, Brig. Gen. Britton, Program Executive Officer of PE stated, “The Presidential and Executive Airlift Directorate is extremely excited to team with Exosonic on our quest to transform the future of executive airlift.





© Wikicommons

As always, we are proud to be leading the charge to deliver cutting-edge technology to the world. Transporting key decision makers and teams around the world in half the time can be the difference between success and failure. Exosonic is a key player in getting us there. By teaming with industry, we are proving the United States Air Force can deliver technology leaps while maximizing return on taxpayer investment.”

PE’s contract, sponsored by the Air Force Research Lab, will support Exosonic’s efforts to develop and modify the company’s commercial supersonic airliner to serve as an executive transport vehicle. These modifications will include reconfiguring the aircraft cabin to include the required accommodations, communications equipment, and security measures that allow US leaders and their guests to work and rest onboard the aircraft.

“The future for global rapid passenger travel is low-boom supersonic flight. Low boom allows travelers to fly at supersonic speeds without generating disruptive booms for those on the ground,” said Norris Tie, CEO of Exosonic. “Exosonic is excited to win this contract as it represents not only commercial but government promise for low-boom supersonic travel.”

### About Exosonic

Exosonic is an early-stage company developing a Mach 1.8, 5000 nmi range, 70 passenger supersonic airliner to fly overland with a muted boom. Exosonic believes that low-boom supersonic flight will be the next inflection point in commercial aviation, allowing people to fly around the world in roughly half the time.

### THE NORTH KOREAN “HOTEL OF DOOM” IS STILL WAITING TO OPEN SINCE MORE THAN 30 YEARS

Located in the capital Pyongyang, the 105-floor Ryugyong Hotel over 330 meters (1083 feet) high with 3.000 rooms has been described by The Guinness Book of Records as the world’s tallest empty building.

The hotel which was due to open in 1989 was to have a bowling alley, a nightclub and five revolving restaurants on the top floor. It soon became obvious that the 1989 target would not be met and it was decided that the hotel was only going to open in 1992, to celebrate the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of Kim Il-Sung. By then the construction had cost around \$750 million, the equivalent of 2 percent of North Korea’s GDP.

From 1992 to 2008, construction works were suspended and to the embarrassment of the Korean leaders the building looked abandoned.

With the help of an Egyptian company, some construction resumed during the following years with the Korean Government entering in negotiations with the Kempinski Group, hoping to open it in 2013 for business. The deal never concretised.

Since then the “Hotel of doom” is being used as a propaganda tool for the North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un showing animations and movie scenes on a giant Led screen.

### THE ROYAL BELGIAN INSTITUTE OF NATURAL SCIENCES NOW OPEN FOR VISITORS



© Edm

In order to welcome visitors in the safest way possible, the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences (RBINS) has created a modular, one-way route through the Museum. Visitors can choose between a long route that includes all the exhibitions (Gallery of Evolution, Living Planet, 250 Years of Natural Sciences, BiodiverCITY, Gallery of Humankind, Dinosaur Gallery and Mosasaur Hall) or shorter routes that can be combined according to their wishes and the length of their visit. For people with reduced mobility and pushchair users: all routes lead through several staircases.

Tickets, priced at the 'permanent exhibitions' rate (€0-7), are available online only. A capacity tracker is in place in order to spread visits safely throughout the day.

The Museum has placed hand sanitiser dispensers throughout the visiting route and staff members are equipped with masks. The automatic lockers situated on either side of the (closed) cloakroom are available and are disinfected after each use.

Wearing a face mask (disposable breathing mask, fabric mask or scarf) when inside the Museum is mandatory from the age of 12.

The Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences is a world-class research institute with more than 250 scientists and scientific collaborators covering a wide range of disciplines from biology to geology, oceanography to taxonomy and palaeontology to ecology. For their research, scientists and researchers often make use of our vast collections which contain almost 38 million specimens. They support national and international decision-makers with their scientific expertise and regularly publish scientific articles and reports.

The scientific staff are divided into three operational directorates and one scientific service: the OD Earth and History of Life, the OD Natural Environment, the OD Taxonomy and Phylogeny, and the Scientific Heritage Service, which is also responsible for the library.



© Stéphane Van Isaele, RBINS

The Royal Museum Iguanodon with its own mask

**Vautier Street, 29**  
**1000 Brussels**  
**+32 (0)2 627 42 11**  
**info@naturalsciences.be**

### **OFFICIAL RANGE OF CHINA TO CELEBRATE THE 95<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY OF HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN GOES ON SALE**

A range of official chinaware produced by Royal Collection Trust has gone on sale to celebrate the 95<sup>th</sup> birthday of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on 21 April 2021. Each item is made by hand in Stoke-on-Trent using methods and

techniques that have remained unchanged for 250 years. From the development of initial designs and creation of individual moulds, to the hand-finishing with 22-carat gold and manufacture of the special packaging, the production process encompasses the skills of over 50 individuals from several factories at the heart of the English Potteries.



© ERM

The central feature of the design is the Royal coat of arms above a garland of roses, shamrocks and thistles, the National Emblems of the United Kingdom, surrounded by pink roses. The design was inspired by the pink roses growing in the East Terrace Garden at Windsor Castle which bloom in June, the month of The Queen's official birthday. The delicate border designs follow a l'oeil-de-perdrix or partridge-eye pattern, inspired by the decoration of Sèvres porcelain in the Royal Collection.

The official commemorative range includes a mug (£25.00), pillbox (£35.00), tankard (£40.00), side plate (£40.00) and teacup and saucer (£65.00). A range of limited-edition commemorative pieces will be introduced in the coming months.

A complementary range of traditional commemorative items has also gone on sale, including a corgi hanging decoration (£18.95), a tea caddy (£9.95) and cotton tea towels (£9.95 each) that are printed in Northern Ireland. Shortbread (£10.95) is made in Scotland, while rose and almond biscuits (£9.95) are made in Lancashire and sweets (£5.95) are made in Sheffield.

All profits from sales of the official chinaware range and commemorative items go to The Royal Collection Trust, a registered charity, for the care and conservation of the Royal Collection, and the promotion of access and enjoyment through exhibitions, publications, loans and educational programmes.

The china can be purchased online from [www.rct.uk/shop](http://www.rct.uk/shop), and will be sold in Royal Collection Trust shops at The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace and on Buckingham Palace Road, and at Royal Collection Trust shops at Windsor Castle and the Palace of Holyroodhouse, when non-essential shops reopen in England and Scotland.





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Macbeth



Lady Macbeth at the bedside of King Duncan

## POISONED ENTRAILS

### *How Russian mischief interferes in European affairs*

“Round about the cauldron go: In the poisoned entrails throw,”

So says the First Witch in Act 4 of William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, in which the troubled but courageous clansman is persuaded by the predictions of three witches to turn murderous traitor and make himself king, killing anyone who gets in his way. The spell, of course, was much longer than its opening lines; after all, who would leave out the “toad that under cold stone days and nights has thirty-one”? Or the “eye of newt”, “toe of frog”, and surely no-one would omit the “filet of a fenny snake”, whatever one of those is. The 11<sup>th</sup> century Scottish king is depicted in the play as brave in action but indecisive in other ways and easily led into wickedness. The play is, in theatrical superstition, notoriously unlucky: the version my school was taken to see (at the Sunderland Empire, if memory serves) certainly was. It had a problem with a smoke machine that rendered the stalls too full of impenetrable mist for the stage to be visible plus a Macduff who fell through an unbolted trapdoor in the middle of his concluding duel with Macbeth.

Highly amusing, but not for the poor actors. The historical Macbeth wasn’t at all like the figure portrayed on the stage: he won the crown fairly in battle, had a reputation for being just and gave generously to the poor during a pilgrimage to Rome with his loving wife, Gruoch. His was a mainly peaceful reign lasting for 14 years, which was unusual back then, although it ended with his defeat and overthrow. No witches came to disturb him, no-one who was “not of woman born” threatened his throne and Burnham Wood never did come to Dunsinane. Tourists should note that only one oak and one sycamore survive from the original Birnham

Wood (to spell it correctly), and they are no doubt descendants of the forest giants from which Siward’s men hewed their branches to hide their numbers. Perhaps, however, those same witches, or others like them, have been active in Russia. Many Russian folk tales concern witches and wicked spells.

Remember Baba Yaga? She is the most famous witch in Russian legend, described as a bony and occasionally cannibalistic old woman who lives in a house that moves about on its own chicken-like legs. It’s also covered in human bones. Perhaps she could have decided to do a Macbeth-type trick with Russia’s current leader. After all,



Baba Yaga



Vladimir Putin is a man without a notable background; he had been a low-grade KGB agent, yet he seems now to want to rule the world. To do it, he is not stirring a cauldron (as far as we know) but he is stirring up the politics of Europe and the United States. The poisoned entrails are the lies and misinformation his agents feed to the people living in the countries of his self-imagined enemies, most of whom would far rather be friends. “Double, double, toil and trouble”; rumour spread and mischief bubble.

The clearly detected interference by Russia in Donald Trump’s 2016 election and in the UK’s Brexit referendum forced European politicians to sit up and take notice. Here was a new kind of enemy with a new kind of weapon, the sort that cannot easily be limited by treaty. Putin seems happy to play with fire: Scientific American reports that attempts to restrain the spread of nuclear weapons by treaty have been seriously jeopardised by Moscow. “More broadly, extending the treaty should be part of a much-needed attempt to improve the perilous state of US-Russia relations – exemplified by Russia’s recent massive cyberattack on US institutions, including the federal agencies charged with maintaining the national nuclear stockpile.” It matters, because of the estimated 9,500 nuclear warheads currently in military service around the world’s nine nuclear-armed states, more than 90% are in the hands of Russia or the United States. As to Russia’s influence during the Brexit campaign in the UK, the rôle of Johnson’s personal adviser Dominic Cummings, a prime leader of the “Vote Leave” campaign, has been questioned. He learned Russian and moved to Russia after university, living there for a few years and forming close relationships with some of Putin’s closest allies.



© Nrf

British MP Ben Bradshaw



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Vladislav Surkov



Dominic Cummings

One British MP, Ben Bradshaw, told the Sydney Morning Herald, an Australian newspaper, that he was concerned about Cummings’ access to top secret defence papers and his influence: “Boris Johnson’s chief of staff, whose account of his time in Russia is apparently full of gaps and inaccuracies, is granted inexplicably the highest level of security clearance yet is not given full access to secret intelligence.” Cummings became friendly with Vladislav Surkov, a close Putin ally, and the newspaper expresses Australian concern: “Surkov, personal advisor to Putin, is widely regarded as the creator of post-truth politics where facts are relative,” reports the paper. “He recently said that the Putinist system of government would be the ‘ideology of the future’ and said that Russia was ‘playing with the West’s minds.’

He is more recently seen as the point-man for Russia’s operations in eastern Ukraine.” If he’s right, we can all look forward to life under a dictatorship where critics are murdered with military nerve agents or locked up on trumped-up charges. Meanwhile, fears that Cummings might be a little too close to the Kremlin were dismissed by the British government as “paranoid fantasies”. Cummings was finally removed from power (supposedly) after crossing swords with Johnson’s fiancée, Carrie Symonds, whose word is law, it seems, at No. 10, Downing Street.

During Donald Trump’s time in the White House, Putin seems to have had an ally, at least as far as Europe is

concerned. Trump once said he hated the European Union, although he failed to explain adequately why individual countries banding together to take collective decisions and to co-operate on trade so horrified him. It certainly seems as if Putin shares Trump’s distaste. He would love to break the Union apart and there have been many instances of him trying to achieve that.

When the EU’s foreign affairs chief, Josep Borrell, went to Moscow on a mission to secure peace, he was deliberately and publicly insulted by the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov who alleged that the EU couldn’t be trusted. It’s strange, therefore, that Russia chooses to trade so much with the EU. Three diplomats from EU countries were expelled during Borrell’s visit for joining protests against the jailing of Russian opposition campaigner Alexei Navalny. It’s not the first time Borrell has been publicly humiliated, although on this occasion it was almost blatant enough to count as an act of war.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (L) and High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell

## DIRTY TRICKS

Navalny himself is not getting the best treatment. According to a worrying report in the Washington Post: “Jailed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, on a hunger strike after being denied medical care, has been hoping for a visit from a doctor. Instead he got a less welcome visitor (on) Thursday: Maria Butina, the Russian agent convicted and jailed for conspiring to infiltrate political organizations in the United States without registering with authorities.”

Butina turned up at the prison camp with a camera crew from Russia Today, the pro-Putin propaganda TV station,



© Alexandria Sheriff's Office/Handout

Maria Butina



© Our American Revival

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker (R) with former American Conservative Union and NRA President David Keene, Russian gun lobby agent Maria Butina and Deputy Russian Central Banker Alexander Torshin in 2015 at a Presidential campaign

then interviewed the ‘trustees’ who help impose discipline, who told her that the prison is ‘very comfortable’. Navalny claims the same trustees and guards wake him eight times a night whilst denying him pain relief for his legs. Putin’s Russia is a very uncomfortable place for anyone who doesn’t support him, and he seems to be trying to expand that regime to encompass the rest of the world. At least Macbeth had fought bravely and successfully, according to Shakespeare, against “the merciless Macdonald” and his Norwegian allies in defence of King Duncan before being lured onto the dark side by the three witches. Putin can make no such boast. Navalny claims he is losing the feeling in his legs but the prison authorities will not allow him any medical help or pain killers.

The Butina incident, though, is a clear illustration of the sort of underhand tricks the Kremlin is now employing. As reported in the Washington Post, “she was arrested in 2018 and sentenced to 18 months in prison in the United States in April 2019. She pleaded guilty to conspiring with a senior Russian official to infiltrate the National Rifle Association and other groups without registering with the Justice Department as a foreign agent. She was released and deported in October 2019.” At her trial, the judge commented on Russian attempts to infiltrate far right and conservative organisations on Putin’s behalf in order to gain influence. She complained that the prison had contained transgender people, which she found “unspeakable”. Just as Putin would expect, she was pushing the ultra-conservative line he favours where LGBTI people are concerned: cleaner-than-clean at home, as dirty as possible everywhere else. Butina

admitted working under the direction of a former Russian official, Alexander Torshin, a former Russian government official, in a bid to establish lines of communication with influential and reactionary Americans. She admitted to working under the Torshin’s direction in an attempt, ordered by the Kremlin, to establish unofficial lines of communications with Americans who could influence U.S. politics. Butina later claimed she admitted to the crime “under pressure from authorities”. Since she was a secret agent, illicitly pushing Kremlin policies under cover, that can hardly come as a surprise.

Putin’s attempts to interfere everywhere surfaced in a question to the European Commission, tabled as a priority in the European Parliament by Jordi Cañas, an MEP from Catalonia. He was complaining about Russian interference in Spain’s democracy: “The Spanish National Court has launched an investigation into possible interference in Spanish internal politics by Unit 29155, a Russian military intelligence organisation, which is suspected of encouraging the Catalan separatist movement,” runs the question.



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MEP Jordi Cañas

“According to the intelligence services of a number of countries, it has been involved in various attempts to destabilise Europe.” He added: “This is not the first time that the hand of Russia has been detected behind attempts to destabilise European countries.”

France has also been targeted. The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) describes it as “an open battle between liberal universalism and authoritarian statism; the liberal international order and realpolitik”.



© Kremlin.ru

Vladimir Putin and Emmanuel Macron

It mentions how, during the 2017 French election, Putin welcomed French presidential candidate and far right leader Marine Le Pen, declaring that she “represented a range of political forces gaining momentum across Europe.” Two months later, Putin was obliged to stand in the Palace of Versailles, looking uncomfortable while congratulating



the pro-European winner, Emmanuel Macron. Macron stated bluntly that “Russian propaganda channels had spread false information during the election,” but he did so calmly, which must have annoyed Putin even more. The ECFR, in its ‘EU-Russia Power Audit’ says that “Russia supports anti-establishment forces in Europe because it lacks friends among establishments. Its use of unconventional methods is not a demonstration of creative strategy but an attempt to compensate for deficiencies. Russia and Europe differ widely on a range of topics, such as Russia’s seizure of Crimea from Ukraine. They disagree on such issues as human rights and democracy, and on any country’s right to choose its own alliances.”

## FRIENDS FROM LOW PLACES IN HIGH PLACES

France had been expecting Moscow’s interference and deliberately played it down, although at least once the Foreign Ministry, based at the Quai d’Orsay in Paris, telephoned the Russian ambassador to remind him of the rules. The message clearly wasn’t passed to Moscow, or if it was it was ignored. Russia continues to nominate known crooks to senior positions in international organisations it wants to undermine. It has, for instance, re-nominated the convicted money launderer Vladimir Kuznetsov to serve on the UN’s Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organisation’s (CTBTO) Advisory Group on administrative and financial matters.



Vladimir Kuznetsov in 2020 at the UN Information Center in Moscow

Kuznetsov, (who is already serving on the CTBTO), is an employee of the Russian Foreign Ministry and a former employee of the United Nations, who was convicted in the Southern District of New York in 2007 of conspiracy to commit money laundering related to

the UN’s Oil for Food programme, sentenced to 51 months in prison and fined \$73,000 (€60,400). It is reminiscent of saying “Hello, Mr Fox, and welcome to your new job in charge of the hen house”.



Vladimir Kuznetsov in 2007 during the court proceeding for his sentencing in the USA

It has been suggested that Russia also played an influential part in the UK’s referendum on leaving the EU. It’s quite possible, but publication of a report by the British Parliament’s own Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) into Russian meddling was deliberately held back until after the election of November 2020, so that it would not affect the outcome. It was ready for publication in the autumn, long before the poll. Prime Minister (and keen Brexit supporter) Boris Johnson insisted that publication should await the election and the subsequent selection of a new ISC. A government attempt to elect an easily controllable candidate to chair it was thwarted by an independent-minded Conservative MP who sacrificed his own future career to do so, putting himself forward and getting elected to the post himself.



United Kingdom Houses of Parliament

The text of the report, according to the ECFR, had been heavily redacted, with the most interesting parts blanked out, although it does point out that Russia is, in the ECFR’s words, “an aggressive mafia state, with state organs and organised crime working together in a ‘symbiotic relationship.’” It also states that UK systems are subject to repeated cyber-attack by Russia, while Russian disinformation efforts “persistently seek to confuse, divide, and foster extremism.”

Before 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall, Russian attempts to influence the West were aimed at spreading Communism, although Soviet-style Communism was not the sort that Marx, Lenin or Trotsky would have recognised. Putin’s actions seem designed to help foster Communism’s exact opposite: Fascism, or rule by dictator. Does the report show whether or not Russia interfered in the Brexit vote? Apparently, it’s a question the ISC never asked. It does show, however, that over the last quarter century, dirty Russian money has been deployed “at the heart of the British system”, whether through donations to political parties, through a range of charitable and cultural ‘donations’ or through the straight-forward purchase of Members of the House of Lords. It turns out – and it’s hard to believe but none-the-less true – that under current legislation it is not a criminal offence to be the covert agent of a foreign intelligence service. As the The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) puts it: “So successfully has Russia ‘invested in extending patronage and building influence across a wide sphere of the British ‘establishment’, according to the report, that ‘Russian influence in the UK is ‘the ‘new normal.’”



© Wikipedia

UK Defence Secretary Dominic Raab

In today's Britain, money talks much more loudly than democracy or human rights: Defence Secretary Dominic Raab was telephoning Saudi Arabia to reassure his opposite number there of Britain's continued friendship immediately after some Saudi nationals had been sanctioned by the UK for their involvement in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

## SPREADING ILLIBERALISM

Russia still seems attached to the 1990s concept of 'managed democracy', based on the idea that the elites (however they are composed) need to control the electoral choices of the 'masses'. The Kremlin goes further by wanting to limit the list of elites who are 'eligible to steer the masses'. The belief is that only the Kremlin should be entitled to decide the future of Russia; 'all foreign elites and alternative domestic ones had to be kept at bay'. Russia clearly wants to be not just a global power but to be in a

position to dictate terms to others in any disagreement. This is obviously a belief that is and will long remain anathema to the West. Some experts say that Russia's actions are the result of its perception that it was defeated in the Cold War, but that was an idealistic clash: a supposedly Marxist-Leninist philosophy (although it wasn't really) against capitalism. Now it seems to be uber-capitalism against traditional capitalism, although traditional capitalism appears to be moving ever-closer to the 'uber' type.

Russia believes in elites but really doesn't understand the idea of 'people-power'. "There are not many countries in the world that enjoy the privilege of sovereignty," said Putin in 2017, adding that "Russia treasures sovereignty." His vision of sovereignty, though, is very different from what most people in Western democracies would imagine. His version is state sovereignty: the right of the state to do whatever it likes. There is no room in there for human rights or the freedom of choice. It is what lies behind Russian intervention in Syria, according to the ECFR, the defence of a strongman against a popular rebellion. He considered it the right course of action which would demonstrate his beliefs to the West. "I'll show them how this is done," he is alleged to have said.

Russia clearly believes that the west has been interfering in Russia's affairs, although what the allegation means may surprise people in the West. Indeed, Putin is reported to have complained that America is "constantly interfering

in our political life". He sees support through documentaries and dramas on Western television of anti-establishment groups – such as sympathy for, say, Black Lives Matter or the MeToo campaign, as the equivalent to supporting anti-government groups in Russia. For that reason, Moscow sees nothing wrong in the creation of a "troll factory" near St. Petersburg to spread deliberate lies and misinformation, however dangerous and even deadly. Set up by one of Putin's friends, the businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, it is part of Russia's on-going war with the West and with liberal democracy.



© Wikipedia

Vladimir Putin and Yevgeny Prigozhin (Right)

The Russian propaganda TV station, RT, is also pumping out lies and falsehoods to back up Russia's view of the world. Serious Russian diplomats fear that all the interference has harmed Russia's diplomatic core and weakened its influence with other diplomats.

It is, however, extremely dangerous. Take this case, known as the "Lisa case" in Germany, as reported by NATO: "The media storm surrounding a fake story about a Russian-German girl, who had reportedly been raped by Arab migrants, was a wake-up call for German political elites earlier this year," ran the story in 2016. "For the first time, they clearly saw the links between Russian domestic and foreign media campaigns against Germany and Russian politics at the highest level.

The German government promptly advised the Federal Intelligence Service (BND) in coordination with the Foreign Office to check Russian sources of manipulation of German public opinion." Germany had been



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Russian Communist rally in front of the Lenin Mausoleum, Red Square, Moscow



vocal over Russian action in Ukraine and Angela Merkel had been supportive of sanctions against Russia. “The “Lisa case” also shows not only the failure of Germany’s partnership for modernisation with Russia but also the dysfunctionality of Russia’s attempts to use personal ties and informal networks to influence German decision-making and policy when it comes to the current crisis and, in particular, the person of Chancellor Merkel.” The “Lisa case” also demonstrates Moscow’s support for far-right parties. It spins untrue stories that deliberately and falsely stir up nationalism and racism. NATO noted that the Russian fiction served nationalist, anti-immigrant interests. “We observe three areas of Russian influence: first, Russian foreign media like RT and Sputnik; second, growing links with German populist parties on the right and left margins of the political spectrum; third, the use of its network of former politicians and institutions for dialogue to try to shape German decision-making on Russia in the current discussion on sanctions.”



Maria Ionova



Dmytro Kuleba

its place, and even if they did, would lack the skills to build it. According to the ECFR, most Russian analysts agree that their country’s meddling is neither well-co-ordinated, nor designed or ever likely to bring down a Western government. “Rather it is an improvised collection of activities engaged in by various actors who are linked together by an ideology that labels the West as an adversary.” Again, it is made up of people who are “against” rather than those who are “for” anything.

Russian parliamentarians at the Council of Europe’s Parliamentary Assembly had their voting rights suspended after the annexation of Ukraine but five years later they were restored, much to the anger of Ukrainian members. Shortly before the vote, Dmytro Kuleba, Ukraine’s ambassador to the Council (who is now Minister of Foreign Affairs), said “a green light to Moscow’s return would be the unilateral surrender of the Council of Europe to Russian demands.” Maria Ionova, the acting chairperson of Ukraine’s parliamentary committee for European integration, told Interfax-Ukraine: “In principle, we do not see ourselves in the same room with the Russians. We will simply suspend Ukraine’s participation in the summer session ... I do not know whether it will be possible to return there.” The assembly voted 118 in favour of readmitting Russia with 62 against and 10 abstentions. Even those who question Russia’s suitability for membership don’t want to see Russian citizens losing access to the Court of Human Rights (even if Russia not only ignores its judgements but has adopted a law making it illegal to respond to them). No-one must question or criticise what Putin does, however monstrous and illegal under international law.

## FOLLOW THE LEADER

Russia’s constant attacks on Europe belie its dependence on EU trade. In a decade or so, Russia’s global trade nearly quadrupled from \$210-billion (€178.6-billion) in 2003 to \$802-billion (€682-billion) in 2013. Last year, Russia’s trade with the EU represented 48.5 percent of its total.



Heather A. Conley, CSIS Senior Vice President for Europe, Eurasia, and the Arctic; and Director, Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program

Heather A. Conley, writing for the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), notes how relations with Russia have changed: “Over time, Russia’s economic integration with Europe—and specifically with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe—has gradually devolved from a positive source of growth into a negative and corrosive force,” she writes, “serving only to widen economic and political rifts within Europe. Europe’s reliance on Russian energy and financial resources and its accompanied political influence has hindered its ability to formulate a swift, unified, and robust response to Moscow’s violation of Ukraine’s territorial integrity.” Her conclusions are

1 ПРЯМОЙ ЭФИР НОВОСТИ ТЕЛЕПРОЕКТЫ ФИЛЬМЫ И СЕРИАЛЫ ДОКЖИНО ТЕЛЕ1  
**В Берлине русскоязычная диаспора требует расследования преступлений, совершенных мигрантами**



Headline on the Russian state television during the “Lisa case” : “In Berlin the Russian-speaking diaspora demands an investigation into crimes committed by migrants”

It doesn’t always work, however. As the ECFR reports, “Eurosceptic and traditionalist movements have an influence on the overall atmosphere in Europe, but they lack the potential, primarily the intellectual one, needed for devising a strategy that would engage not only protest voters but also those who are looking for an alternative political and economic model.” In other words, the propaganda is mainly reaching those who are “against” things, rather those with any sort of strategy they could be said to favour. They want to tear things down but have no idea what to put up in

chilling. “This contestation is between liberal versus illiberal, transparency and good governance versus corruption and ‘managed democracy.’ The unqualified success of Central Europe’s transformation from Communism to liberal democracies and market economies is not immutable, and we should not trick ourselves into believing it is so.”

And yet the EU is still stumbling to make friends with Russia, with France and Germany apparently eager to become dependent on Russian energy. There is certainly a lot of gas, whatever way you put it. It’s somewhat reminiscent of a frail, weakly schoolboy giving all his sweets to the playground bully in the hope that he’ll avoid a beating. The current state of play is summed up on the Nature.com website: “The population is mainly reached through media and social media, exploiting divisive issues. Minorities, refugees, and extremists are used to further this divide and rule approach. Human intelligence and cyber operations are important covert tools of influence. Russia also uses the energy sector, business, and corruption as venues for influence. It has an extensive network of allies and front organisations and reconstructs reality and rewrites history to legitimize itself and undermine others. Finally, military force is Russia’s ultimate tool of influence.”

One-time US President Theodore Roosevelt would have understood the Putin approach. “Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far,” he said, allegedly taking the policy from an old African proverb. It’s interesting to look at where in Europe Russia is most keenly seeking influence. The Rand Corporation offers this summary: “The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are often cited as being among the members of the EU and NATO that are most vulnerable to Russian influence. Possible motivations for Russian activities in the region include undermining and addressing the potential threat from the EU and NATO.” The website says that Russia is also very active in South Eastern Europe, where Slavic languages give it an advantage.

Moscow is not keen on letting NATO strengthen its defences in places like Romania, Moldova and the Western Balkans. The Rand Corporation warns the United States to take notice of



NATO Headquarters in Brussels, Belgium



The Kerch Bridge, linking Crimea to Russia

aggressive and subversive Russian measures in Europe and to prepare itself to counter them. “Whatever the U.S. response, preparation for involvement in a wide range of conflicts can help reduce the risk of mismanagement, miscalculation, and escalation.”

Meanwhile, the European Parliament’s website reveals EU policy following its imposition of sanctions over Russia’s annexation of Ukraine, the first such action in Europe since Adolf Hitler annexed Austria. “The EU significantly expanded its own sanctions after the shooting down of flight MH17 in June 2015 over territory controlled by Russian-supported rebels in eastern Ukraine. The sanctions are regularly updated and prolonged. Despite the sanctions, the EU remains Russia’s biggest trading partner and Russia is the EU’s fourth biggest.” Macbeth should have been grateful that no trade issues existed between him and his nemesis, Siward, King of neighbouring Northumbria. The EU doesn’t want to damage trade, even so, says the European Parliament, “As of December

2020, EU individual restrictive measures apply to 177 individuals and 48 entities, which are subject to an asset freeze and a travel ban because their actions undermined Ukraine’s territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence.

In October 2020 two persons and four entities involved in the construction of the Kerch Bridge, linking Crimea to Russia, were added to the list. Also in October 2020, but based on a different EU legal basis — the chemical weapons sanctions regime — six Russian individuals and one entity were added to the relevant travel ban and asset freeze list as a result of the August 2020 assassination attempt on Alexei Navalny using a military-grade toxic nerve agent. This is the same legal instrument as was used to sanction those responsible for the Skripal case in Salisbury (UK) in March 2018.” Will it make a difference? Of course not. Putin sees his way as the future for all. We just have to hope he’s wrong.

*Bowman-Grant*





## WOMEN IN EUROPE

*Europe still has a long way to go before reaching gender equality*

“Women are the largest untapped reservoir of talent in the world” is a famous quote by Hillary Clinton, former United States Secretary of State, former First Lady, senator and a former presidential candidate.

Indeed, billions of women worldwide (the world sex ratio is currently 1.018 men to women) are performing every day, affirming and proving their talents and capabilities. But sadly, a great many of them live in highly patriarchal societies where human rights, independence and equality are practically non-existent and where they are subject to abuse. Millions of women fear for their safety worldwide each day. And contrary to general belief, women in economically advanced societies are not exempt from public and private harassment either. Although we are now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women still have a hard time enjoying the same rights as men, as stress and inequality continue to have a negative impact on their health and well-being.

For centuries women were constantly persecuted and excluded from basic citizens' rights for their supposed

inferiority. They were burned at the stake for witchcraft, seen as mere tools of procreation and unable to lead or make relevant decisions.



Marie Curie

But history has given us enough examples of remarkable women. Brave and intelligent women whose immense potentials could be realised only through great perseverance and self-confidence. Queen Elisabeth I, Marie Curie or Joan of Arc are just a few examples that quickly come to my mind now.

Participation in the political life of the society was also a major desideratum

which took many years of struggle and lobbying to come to fruition. Although human history stretches for thousands of years, women's right to vote was only granted in the 20<sup>th</sup> century... not so very long ago. Emmeline Pankhurst was a key figure in the fight for women's suffrage movement, while even great minds like Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Immanuel Kant attributed qualities of citizenship only to men, confining women to the limited domestic environment.



Emmeline Pankhurst

This gender division of European democratic societies was a reality for a long time. Women were represented by men in their families (husband, father or brother), with anti-suffragists arguing that by allowing women to get involved in public life, they would lose other specific qualities and thus would endanger the proper functioning of the families. Sounds familiar? Some of these themes are still heard today, albeit on a different topic.

Finland was the first European country to take a step forward; through a 1906 reform, it established a parliament elected by universal suffrage. Norway followed in 1907, then Denmark, Iceland, Germany and Austria a few years later. Progress came slowly but surely. Women became increasingly involved in different aspects of public life as their voices began to be heard and taken into account.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or Global Goals are a collection of 17 interlinked global goals designed to be a 'blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all'. The SDGs were set in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly and are intended to be achieved by the year 2030. Sustainable development is a core principle of the Treaty on European Union and a priority objective for the Union's internal and external policies. The European Union has committed publicly to implement the SDG of promoting gender equality and women's rights.



Vigdís Finnbogadóttir



Margaret Thatcher

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) monitors the progress in this field across the EU, with its measurement tool known as the Gender Equality Index. This covers a wide range of indicators such as work, money and pay gap, maternity leave, equal access to power, health, violence, inequalities, indicators linked to EU targets and international commitments. It also analyses how digitalization is shaping the future of work for women and the risks and challenges brought by it to the modern society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It collects data on intimate partner violence, rape and femicide in the EU.

The Gender Equality Index in 2020 ranked Sweden first (with 15.9 points above the European Union's average score). Sweden has remarkably maintained its leading position since 2010. Denmark and France are ranked second and third. In fact, a survey from 2020 found that generally, the European Nordic countries were rated as the best places to be a woman (YouGov Survey), with Danish women being the happiest within the EU. Other states have made significant progress in recent years with Spain, Italy and Luxembourg among them.

Europe still has a long way to go before reaching gender equality. Sadly, at the current pace of progress, it is estimated that it would take about sixty years to achieve gender equality with the elimination of the pay gap by 2059 (Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research). Women still struggle in some countries to accede to leading positions and to be fully respected and recognized for their contribution to society.

I recently read an analysis conducted by the New York Times on the first 1500 S&P companies, in which it is said that 'there are fewer female CEOs than CEOs named John'. It seems that the 'TO DO'

list remains longer. Cultural attitudes about traditional gender roles further subjugate women and limit their access to a more prominent public role.

Undoubtedly, Europe has made remarkable progress at a very rapid pace, especially in the last hundred years. This progress is not only seen in statistics but also in everyday life.

Ever since the UK started a 'revolution' by electing the first female Prime Minister of a European government in the person of Margaret Thatcher, a significant number of women have led the destinies of European nations. The first female president in Europe, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, was elected in Iceland in 1980. By 2019, the global participation rate of women in national parliaments was around 24,5%. Europe has now some of the most prominent women leaders in high and key positions.

Margaret Thatcher's trend of strong female leadership is continued today by Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor who is one of the most respected political authorities of the last decades (she has been in office since 2005 and was the first female German Chancellor ever to be elected). Ursula von der Leyen was elected as president of the European Commission and is in office since 2019.

2020 witnessed the election of Greece's first female president, Katerina Sakellaropoulou, as well as Maia Sandu who was elected president of the Republic of Moldova.

In total, Europe has now ten top female leaders; an unimaginable number, one hundred or even fifty years ago.

But there is still a lot to be done in terms of gender equality. Throughout Europe, there are numerous organizations which monitor women's rights and push for gender equality reforms.



Fighting female genital mutilation



Europe Women's Lobby was created in response to a growing awareness of the need to defend women's interests in Europe. It is the largest European umbrella network of women's associations, representing 200 organizations from all EU member states and the UK. The European Commission granted its support for the foundation in 1990. It has a secretariat in Brussels and founding members from Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Greece, the Netherlands and the UK. This structure aims to influence and exert pressure on European institutions to ensure better defence of women's rights and representation of women's interests.

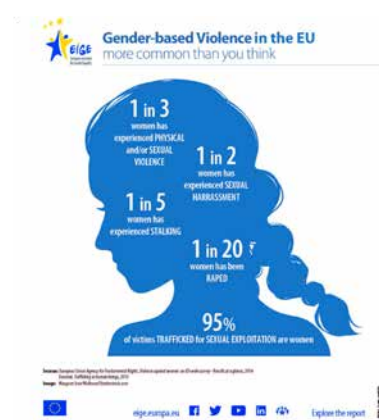
Recently, the tragic case of Sarah Everard, the 33 year old British woman who was kidnapped on her way home and murdered, reignited the debate on women's safety in the UK and Europe. The OSCE led a survey (2015-2019) on the well-being and safety of women. Violence against women and girls is a persistent human rights violation, threatening the security of victims and also preventing them from complete development and reaching their full potential and contribution to society. The conclusion of the study showed the need to enhance efforts to implement further legislation and improve the action plans regarding all forms of violence against women. It is officially recognized that the highest risk groups are young women, economically dependent women or mothers. Violence has an extreme psychological effect, long after the aggression has taken place.



Sarah Everard

It is estimated that one in three women in Europe has experienced violence in some form, at least once in her lifetime. Most aggressions take place within the families' close circle and studies show that

a majority of women don't know what to do if they experience any type of violence. There seems to be a general and deeply-rooted instinct to avoid reaching out to others for help. People's indifference, a society that condemns outright, guilt, fear of rejection or the lack of decisive actions from the authorities and the law oblige the majority of these assaulted women to keep quiet and to live their daily drama far away from the public eye. It is now estimated that only about 30% of assaults and abuses are reported and properly investigated by the police. (Source: European Commission). During the current pandemic with strict lockdowns everywhere, the situation has worsened dramatically.



*The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*, better known as 'The Istanbul Convention', is a human rights treaty which was signed on 11 May 2011 in Istanbul, Turkey, by 45 countries as well as by the European Union as an entity.

The convention was drafted by the Council of Europe, an international organization founded after World War II aimed at safeguarding human rights and setting common standards regarding protection against violence. The treaty contains obligations and regulations committing the governments of the signatory countries to protect victims, invest in education and gender equality as well as ensure a free life and equal access opportunities in society. The treaty also addresses the reality of the disproportionate violence against women and the historical inequality between men and women. It urges governments to adopt necessary legislation for prosecuting acts of domestic violence and similar abuse as well as marital rape and female genital mutilation.



The recent withdrawal of Turkey (in 2021) from the 2011 Istanbul Convention has politicized the treaty, with those for and those against intent on gaining political capital from the dispute. Turkey is the first country ever to have decided to leave a Council of Europe treaty that it had already ratified. So far, Turkey has not officially offered grounds for its decision, but extremists throughout Europe are already using this as a political tool. Through intense, online disinformation campaigns, these entities are spreading a series of myths and false accusations related to the treaty, which unfortunately, many believe.

Among these is the idea that the treaty supports a destructive gender ideology and that it legitimates illegal migration by ensuring women's unconditional right to seek asylum. Others pretend that it forces 'third gender' recognition; this is in fact entirely false, as the term 'third sex' doesn't even appear in the treaty. Some voices say that the national legislation of some countries is strong enough and already provides all the necessary tools in the fight against violence, and do not need the additional legislation demanded by the Istanbul Convention.

The idea that the treaty threatens traditional family values and its proper functioning, while promoting same sex marriages is also widely circulated among those who oppose the convention and seek withdrawal.

The treaty only states that the abused have the right to receive protection and support.

Council of Europe officials have tried to assure everybody that 'the treaty has no other agenda' (Daniel Hölftgen, Director of Communications at the Council of Europe).

The EU has denounced Turkey's actions, especially at a time when femicide (usually defined as the murder of a woman by a partner, an ex-partner or family member) has surged in the country in recent years.

Although Turkey doesn't keep an official record, the World Health Organization estimates that the phenomenon has tripled in the last ten years and that approximately 38% of women in Turkey are subject to violence of some sort. Last year alone, more than 300 women were murdered in Turkey, according to the same organization.

Marija Pejcinovic Buric, Secretary General of the 47-nation Council of Europe, called Turkey's decision to leave the Convention "devastating...a huge setback".

I remember a few years ago, I helped organize a UNICEF movie night. We were screening *'Mustang'*, a multi-award winning and internationally praised drama which won four César Awards, including one for 'Best First Feature Film' as well as many other prizes. The film follows the tragic story of five orphaned Turkish sisters facing constant emotional and physical abuse in a conservative and patriarchal rural community. Although fictional, the producers of the movie have said that the story is similar to many true ones, of women constantly and brutally abused in the name of old traditions and customs.

Heiko Maas, the German Minister of Foreign Affairs in the fourth cabinet of Angela Merkel (since March 2018) has said: "neither culture, nor religious nor other national traditions can serve as an excuse for ignoring violence against women".



German Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas

**TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTS WOMEN AND GIRLS**

**14,145** victims of trafficking in human beings were registered in 2017 and 2018.

Three quarters of the registered victims were women and girls.

Sexual exploitation is the most common reason behind trafficking in the EU.

#EUagainstTHB

All approaches to tackle trafficking should focus on the victim and take gender into account

UNICEF has launched its own campaign against domestic violence. Known as *#endviolence*, it aims to raise awareness about this delicate and still persistent issue. November 25<sup>th</sup> is now officially the International day of the Elimination of Violence against Women.

Recently, there have been actions suggesting that Poland is also planning to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention and seeking to replace it with a law which will prevent same-sex marriages and abortions. Hungary and Bulgaria have distanced themselves from the treaty, which they have previously signed but never ratified.

European officials stress the importance of remaining engaged with the treaty, even though immediate tangible results are not evident. Its implementation needs further work and constant commitment.

Domestic violence is still on the rise. Violence against women is an issue that transcends borders, class or socioeconomic status. It affects women and girls in all societies. Eurostat is developing an EU-wide survey to obtain updated prevalence figures on violence against women in the EU. The survey will be implemented in Member States from 2020 onwards.

Eurostat data show that Finland, Northern Ireland or the Baltic Republics have among the highest rates of domestic violence in Europe. (Northern Ireland does not have a law criminalizing the use of "coercive control" on a partner.)

The European Commission regularly co-funds European national and local projects to prevent violence against women and children and to support

victims. So far, it has provided funding for 173 projects such as training doctors and nurses in Finland to recognize signs of domestic violence, a big campaign at major football stadiums in Italy, designed to reach out to men and boys with the message that violence against women is unacceptable, and training judges in Croatia to address barriers to the legal protection of women.

Charles Malik, former President of the Commission on Human Rights at the United Nations General Assembly, once said that "the fastest way to change society is to mobilize the women". They are an important part of every society today. Continuous research has already proven the importance of women's involvement in peace and security issues. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 says that 'peace and security efforts are more sustainable when women are equal partners in the prevention of violent conflict'. It also acknowledges the fact that often women and girls are disproportionately impacted by violent acts and wars.

Women bring balance, sensitivity and must actively contribute to the definition of any modern society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the same time, barbaric and outdated practices and conduct that threaten the integrity and safety of women must be banned. Equal opportunities are the only reliable and long-term solution.

"What would men be without women? Scarce, sir... mighty scarce" (Mark Twain)

Alexandra Paucescu



# UK SPACE AGENCY

## *Launches multi-million pound drive to design hospital of the future*

The UK government has invited the UK's world-leading innovators to help design a new 'space age' hospital that could use technologies and techniques pioneered on missions to Mars or the International Space Station to help treat patients and make life easier for hard-working NHS staff.



© Gov.uk

Space agency Hospital

Up to £5 million of UK Space Agency funding is available to support a joint initiative with the Hampshire Together: Modernising our Hospitals and Health Services programme. The programme is part of the government's Health Infrastructure Plan, which includes the provision of 40 new hospitals across England by 2030.

The space-enabled services could be inspired by a whole range of activities and technologies pioneered by the UK's growing space sector, which currently contributes nearly £15 billion to GDP and supports 42,000 jobs. They might include new diagnostic tools, improved logistics by tracing goods or using drones, improving hospital parking or better patient reach using tele-rehabilitation or care.

Science Minister Amanda Solloway said: "The UK is a world leader in using space technology and data to tackle the challenges we face on Earth, and this initiative is another example of how one of our most thriving sectors is driving improvements in everyday life.



Amanda Solloway

"As we build back better from the pandemic, I am confident that UK businesses large and small will come forward to produce some truly awe-inspiring ideas to help design this space-age hospital, support our heroic NHS staff and ultimately save lives."

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said: "This trailblazing collaboration – bringing together exceptional scientists from the UK Space Agency and Hampshire Together – will help us apply space age innovations to building hospitals of the future.

"The UK is unashamedly pro-tech and these government-backed medical advancements will give our amazing NHS access to some of the most innovative technologies."

Space is already playing an important role in supporting healthcare. The UK Space Agency has provided funding for projects to help the NHS tackle the Coronavirus pandemic, including electric drones that navigate via satellite-enabled GPS, carrying COVID-19 samples, test-kits and PPE to improve delivery times and free up transport infrastructure.

Health technologies inspired by space technologies have helped provide real-time diagnosis of bowel cancer, developed more compact 3D X-ray machines and improved healthcare in the community through both remote diagnostics and an app targeting people at risk of social isolation and mental health issues.

The Hampshire Together programme is a partnership between a wide range of bodies responsible for the health and wellbeing of the people of north and mid Hampshire, focused on ensuring that any investment is made not just in hospital buildings – but in local people.



Matt Hancock

© Wikimedia



© ESA



© UK Space Agency

Up to £5 million of UK Space Agency funding is available to support a joint initiative with the Hampshire Together: Modernising our Hospitals and Health Services programme. The programme is part of the government's Health Infrastructure Plan, which includes the provision of 40 new hospitals across England by 2030

Tony Mears, Associate Director of Innovation for the Hampshire Together programme, said: "We are delighted to be working with the UK Space Agency as part of our programme. It opens up new opportunities for us in terms of innovation and technology and shows our commitment to incorporating new ideas into our plans for the future.

"The UK Space Agency has really helped the NHS to overcome the challenges posed by COVID-19 and we are excited to see how we can use this innovation-by-nature sector to help provide the best health and care services for people across Hampshire in the future."

The call for space-inspired ideas is supported by the European Space Agency's Space Solutions, through their Business Applications programme, in which the UK is the leading investor. The UK continues to be a leading member of ESA, which is independent of the EU, having committed a record

investment of £374 million per year in November 2019.

A panel of experts, including representatives from the UK Space Agency, Hampshire Together and ESA, will assess the proposals for how space-derived technologies can contribute to the design, development and utilisation of services for any new hospital and its surrounding community.

The successful projects, which could be new ideas, or using technology that already exists in a different way to support healthcare, will then be incorporated in any new facility, as well as the wider health system. Where appropriate, these ideas will also be used to improve services across the area before the construction of any new buildings.

Arnaud Runge, Medical Engineer at ESA's European Space Research and Technology Centre, said: "In the past

but also more recently throughout the COVID-19 crisis, the use of space technologies and satellite data has proven to be an essential driver for innovation in the healthcare sector to address existing and new challenges.

"We are delighted to extend our fruitful collaboration with the UK Space Agency and NHS in this exciting initiative and demonstrate how space can contribute today to shape the hospital of tomorrow."



Arnaud Runge

© ESA





## ONLINE VACCINE SCAMS

*Interpol and homeland security investigations issue public warning - 'be vigilant, be skeptical, be safe'*

**I**NTERPOL and the United States's Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) have joined forces to warn the public against purchasing alleged COVID-19 vaccines and treatments online.

With criminal groups producing, distributing and selling fake vaccines, the risks to the public are clear: these can include buying a product which not only does not protect against COVID-19, but poses a serious health hazard if ingested or injected. Such products are not tested, regulated or safety-checked.

Legitimate vaccines are not for sale. They are strictly administered and distributed by national healthcare regulators.

Anyone buying these products online also runs the risk of potentially giving their money to organized criminals.

### CRIME WAVE

"From the very beginning of the pandemic, criminals have preyed on

people's fears in order to make fast cash. Fake vaccines are the latest in these scams, which is why INTERPOL and HSI are warning the public to be extra vigilant," said INTERPOL Secretary General Jürgen Stock.

*« Anyone ordering a vaccine online rather than obtaining it from their national provider, will be buying a fake product.»*

"The networks behind these crimes have global ambitions. No country or region can fight this type of crime alone. INTERPOL is assisting law enforcement around the world to both identify criminal networks and to dismantle them," added Secretary General Stock.

Following a global alert issued by INTERPOL in late 2020 the world police body recently announced the first internationally linked arrests and seizures in connection with fake vaccines after criminal networks were disrupted in China and South Africa.

INTERPOL has also been receiving

additional information on fake vaccine distribution and scam attempts targeting health bodies, including nursing homes.

"Counterfeit vaccines threaten the health of consumers who are duped by nefarious actors seeking to exploit the pandemic situation for financial gain. HSI and its law enforcement partners will vigorously investigate and seek prosecution for criminals taking advantage of the public's quest for COVID-19 vaccinations and those who endanger the lives of the very people the vaccines are intended to protect," said HSI Assistant Director, and Director of the National Intellectual Property Rights Coordination Center, Steve Francis.

"HSI will continue to work with INTERPOL to coordinate investigations targeting every level of the transnational criminal organizations trafficking in counterfeit COVID-19 vaccines," added Mr Francis.

## ONLINE SCAMS

An emerging trend has seen cybercriminals set up illicit websites claiming to be legitimate national and/or world organizations offering pre-orders for vaccines against the COVID-19 virus. These websites offer payments in Bitcoins and other payment processing methods.

Using trademark logos of major pharmaceutical companies producing approved COVID-19 vaccines, the fake websites are suspected of being used to conduct phishing attacks and/or dupe victims into giving charitable donations.

In addition to opening up their computer to cyberattacks when attempting to purchase alleged COVID-19 vaccines online, people also run the risk of having their identity stolen.

In December 2020, HSI seized two websites purporting to be those of biotechnology companies developing treatments for the COVID-19 virus. Instead they appeared to have been



used to collect the personal information of individuals visiting the sites, in order to use the information for criminal purposes, including fraud, phishing attacks, and/or deployment of malware.

Ransomware attacks have also been conducted against hospitals, laboratories, local governments and other targets, remotely blocking computer systems and demanding a

payment to release them.

Given the need for a global response against these types of cyber-enabled fraud and financial crime, INTERPOL created the Global Financial Crime Task Force (IGFCTF) in 2020 with member countries in order to enhance international cooperation and innovation with public and private sector partners.

## FAKE COVID VACCINE DISTRIBUTION NETWORK DISMANTLED AFTER INTERPOL ALERT

*Hundreds of illicit vaccines seized  
with arrests made across two continents*

**L**YON, France – South African authorities have seized hundreds of fake COVID-19 vaccines following a global alert issued by INTERPOL warning vaccines would be a prime target for criminal networks.

Some 400 ampoules - equivalent to around 2,400 doses - containing the fake vaccine were found at a warehouse in Germiston, Gauteng, where officers also recovered a large quantity of fake 3M masks and arrested three Chinese nationals and a Zambian national.

In China, police successfully identified a network selling counterfeit COVID-19 vaccines, raided the manufacturing

premises, resulting in the arrest of some 80 suspects, and seized more than 3,000 fake vaccines on the scene.

The investigation was supported and facilitated by INTERPOL's Illicit Goods and Global Health (IGGH) Program.

### ARRESTS FOLLOW GLOBAL ALERT

The arrests came just weeks after INTERPOL issued an Orange Notice warning law enforcement to prepare for organized crime networks targeting COVID-19 vaccines, both physically and online.



Fake vaccine vials



The alert also included details and images of genuine vaccines and authorized shipping methods provided by pharmaceutical companies to assist in the identification of fake vials.

It again underlined the unique role played by INTERPOL in ensuring law enforcement across its 194 member countries are updated on crime trends and can swiftly and securely exchange information.

### TIP OF THE ICEBERG

“Whilst we welcome this result, this is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to COVID-19 vaccine related crime,” said INTERPOL Secretary General Jürgen Stock

“Following our warning that criminals would target the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, both on and offline, INTERPOL continues to provide its full support to national authorities working to protect the health and safety of their citizens.

According to Jürgen Stock, INTERPOL Secretary General : “These arrests, underline the unique role of INTERPOL in bringing together key players from both the public and private sectors to protect public safety.”

“Since COVID-19 reached the shores of South Africa, the government has adopted an integrated multi-disciplinary law enforcement approach. This, together with our



Interpol Secretary General Jürgen Stock

association with counterparts from all INTERPOL member countries, is proving to be very effective as we have seen in the arrests for foreign nationals attempting to peddle fake

vaccines to unsuspecting people within South Africa,” said Brigadier Vish Naidoo, South African Police National Spokesperson.

A spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Public Security said, “The Chinese government attaches great importance to vaccine security. Chinese police are conducting a targeted campaign to prevent and crack down on crimes related to vaccines, proactively investigating and combating crimes related to vaccines in accordance with law. We will further strengthen the constructive cooperation with INTERPOL and law enforcement agencies of other countries to effectively prevent such crimes.”

### INVESTIGATIONS CONTINUING

Investigations are continuing, and in addition to the arrests in South Africa and China, INTERPOL is also receiving additional reports of fake vaccine distribution and scam attempts targeting health bodies, such as nursing homes.

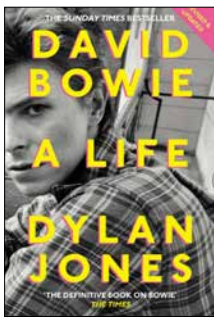
INTERPOL is again warning the public that no approved vaccines are currently available for sale online. Any vaccine being advertised on websites or the dark web, will not be legitimate, will not have been tested and may be dangerous.

Anyone who buys these drugs is putting themselves at risk and giving their money to organised criminals



Arrested fake vaccine smuggler

# BOOKS



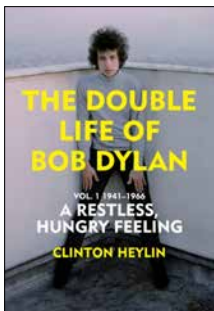
## DAVID BOWIE - A LIFE

By Dylan Jones

Drawn from a series of conversations between David Bowie and Dylan Jones across three decades, together with over 180 interviews with friends, rivals, lovers, and collaborators - some of whom have never before spoken about their relationship with Bowie - this oral history is an intimate portrait of a remarkable rise to stardom and one of the most fascinating lives of our time.

Profoundly shaped by his relationship with his schizophrenic half-brother Terry, Bowie was a man of intense relationships that often came to abrupt ends. He was a social creature, equally comfortable partying with John Lennon and dining with Frank Sinatra, and in Dylan Jones's telling - by turns insightful and salacious - we see as intimate a portrait as could possibly be drawn.

Including illuminating, never-before-seen material from Bowie himself, drawn from a series of Jones's interviews with him across three decades, DAVID BOWIE is an epic, unforgettable cocktail-party conversation about a man whose enigmatic shapeshifting and irrepressible creativity produced one of the most sprawling, fascinating lives of our time.



## A RESTLESS HUNGRY FEELING

By Clinton Heylin

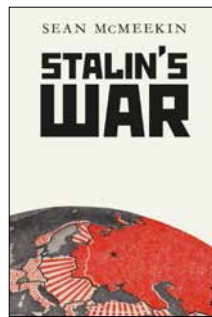
THE DOUBLE LIFE OF BOB DYLAN VOL. 1: 1941-1966

In 2016 it was announced that Bob Dylan had sold his personal archive to the George Kaiser Foundation in Tulsa, Oklahoma, reportedly for \$22 million. As the boxes started to arrive, the Foundation asked Clinton Heylin - author of the acclaimed *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades* and 'perhaps the world's authority on all things Dylan' (*Rolling Stone*) - to assess the material they had been given.

What he found in Tulsa - as well as what he gleaned from other papers he had recently been given access to by Sony and the Dylan office - so changed his understanding of the artist, especially of his creative process, that he became convinced that a whole new biography was needed. It turns out that much of what previous biographers - Dylan himself included - have said is wrong; often as not, a case of, Print the Legend.

With fresh and revealing information on every page *A Restless, Hungry Feeling* tells the story of Dylan's meteoric rise to fame: his arrival in early 1961 in New York, where he is embraced by the folk scene; his elevation to spokesman of a generation whose protest songs provide the soundtrack for the burgeoning Civil Rights movement; his alleged betrayal when he 'goes electric' at Newport in 1965; his subsequent controversial world tour with a rock 'n' roll band; and the recording of his three undisputed electric masterpieces: *Bringing it All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde*. At the peak of his fame in July 1966 he reportedly crashes his motorbike in Woodstock, upstate New York, and disappears from public view. When he re-emerges, he looks different, his voice sounds different, his songs are different. That other story will be told in Volume 2, to be published in autumn 2022.

Clinton Heylin's meticulously researched, all-encompassing and consistently revelatory account of these fascinating early years is the closest we will ever get to a definitive life of an artist who has been the lodestar of popular culture for six decades.



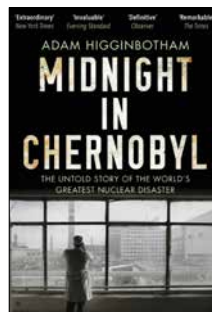
## STALIN'S WAR

By Sean McMeekin

In this remarkable, ground-breaking new book Sean McMeekin marks a generational shift in our view of Stalin as an ally in the Second World War. Stalin's only difference from Hitler, he argues, was that he was a *successful* murderous predator. With Hitler dead and the Third Reich in ruins, Stalin created an immense new Communist empire. Among his holdings were Czechoslovakia and Poland, the fates of

which had first set the West against the Nazis and, of course, China and North Korea, the ramifications of which we still live with today.

Until Barbarossa wrought a public relations miracle, turning him into a plucky ally of the West, Stalin had murdered millions, subverted every norm of international behaviour, invaded as many countries as Hitler had, and taken great swathes of territory he would continue to keep. In the larger sense the global conflict grew out of not only German and Japanese aggression but Stalin's manoeuvrings, orchestrated to provoke wars of attrition between the capitalist powers in Europe and in Asia. Throughout the war Stalin chose to do only what would benefit his own regime, not even aiding in the effort against Japan until the conflict's last weeks. Above all, *Stalin's War* uncovers the shocking details of how the US government (to the detriment of itself and its other allies) fuelled Stalin's war machine, blindly agreeing to every Soviet demand, right down to agents supplying details of the atomic bomb.



## MIDNIGHT IN CHERNOBYL

By Adam Higginbotham

THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST NUCLEAR DISASTER

The story of Chernobyl is more complex, more human, and more terrifying than the Soviet myth. Adam Higginbotham has written a harrowing and compelling narrative which brings the 1986 disaster to life through the eyes of the men and women who witnessed it first-hand.

Drawing on hundreds of hours of interviews conducted over the course of more than ten years, as well as letters, unpublished memoirs, and documents from recently-declassified archives, this book makes for a masterful non-fiction thriller.

Chernobyl has become lodged in the collective nightmares of the world: shorthand for the spectral horrors of radiation poisoning, for a dangerous technology slipping its leash, for ecological fragility, and for what can happen when a dishonest and careless state endangers not only its own citizens, but all of humanity. It is a story that has long remained in dispute, clouded from the beginning in secrecy, propaganda, and misinformation.

*Midnight In Chernobyl* is an indelible portrait of history's worst nuclear disaster, of human resilience and ingenuity and the lessons learned when mankind seeks to bend the natural world to his will - lessons which, in the face of climate change and other threats - remain not just vital but necessary.

Now, Higginbotham brings us closer to the truth behind this colossal tragedy.



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