

EUROPE DIPLOMATIC

MAGAZINE

SCOTLAND'S NEW
FIRST MINISTER
HUMZA YOUSAF

On the road to
independence



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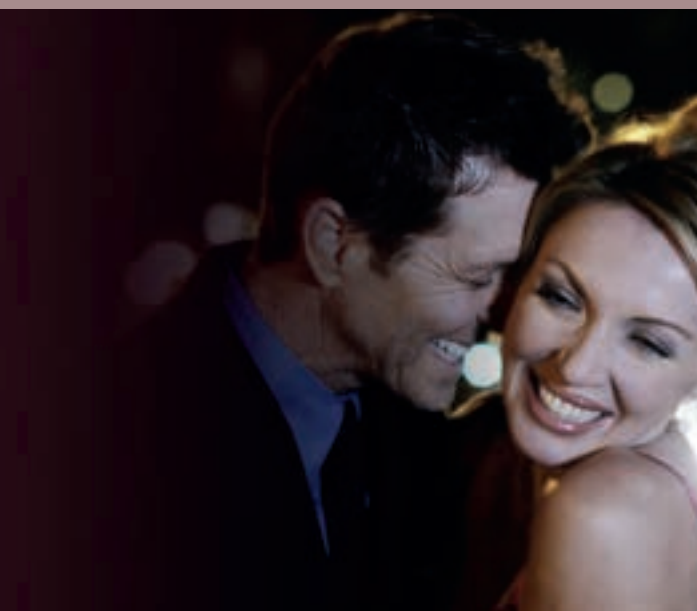


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EDITORIAL

ENSURING EUROPE'S NUCLEAR FUEL SUPPLY THROUGH DIVERSIFICATION

There are five EU countries whose nuclear energy programmes are entirely dependent on nuclear fuel supplied by the Russian state-owned company Rosatom to run their nuclear power plants. These countries are Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, Finland and the Czech Republic.

The dependence of these countries on Rosatom for nuclear fuel has raised concerns about energy security and geopolitical risks. Any disruption in Rosatom's fuel supply could affect these countries' electricity generation and energy security.

Bulgaria has two nuclear power plants, Kozloduy and Belene, both of which run on Rosatom fuel. The country generates about 35% of its electricity from nuclear power.

Hungary also has two nuclear power plants, Paks and Paks II, both of which run on Rosatom fuel. Nuclear power covers about 50 % of Hungary's electricity needs.

Slovakia has four nuclear power plants, Bohunice, Mochovce, Jaslovské Bohunice and Dukovany, all of which run on Rosatom fuel. Nuclear energy covers about 53% of Slovakia's electricity.

Finland has two nuclear power plants, Olkiluoto and Loviisa, both of which run on Rosatom fuel. Nuclear power generates about 30% of Finland's electricity.

The Czech Republic has also two nuclear power plants, Dukovany and Temelin, both powered by Rosatom fuel. Nuclear energy provides about 35% of the Czech Republic's electricity.

Some of these power plants generate up to 50% of each country's electricity. This gives Russia further leverage to restrict European energy supplies by slowing down the supply of nuclear fuel or cancelling the contracts altogether.

The EU institutions responsible for supplying Europe with nuclear fuel and regulating it, as well as EU leaders, are aware of the threat but are slow to address the problem.

The European Union has been actively working to reduce its dependence on Russian energy, including nuclear fuel. In 2014, the EU adopted the Energy Security Strategy to increase its energy security and reduce its dependence on imports from non-EU countries.

European policymakers need to encourage the EU institutions and member states to remove barriers more quickly to allow other foreign fuel suppliers to access the market.

EU leaders should be aware that Russia still has influence over Europe's energy supply and could use nuclear energy supply as a weapon. Among the decisions that need to be

taken to create a secure environment for nuclear energy supply before it is too late:

EU officials need to understand the urgency of this looming threat and the control Russia has over nuclear fuel supplies.

- The EU should speed up any bureaucratic procedures that might allow other suppliers into the market (e.g. permits to allow other suppliers to operate, etc.)

- The five EU Member States that have existing contracts to purchase fuel for commercial power reactors from Rosatom should prioritise diversification of fuel supply.

- Ignoring this looming threat to European energy supply is a reckless gamble. The EU must act now, before it is too late.

According to Nature journalists Kacper Szulecki and Indra Overland, Russia's portfolio of foreign contracts, including reactor construction, fuel provision and other services, spans 54 countries and is worth more than \$139 billion over a ten-year period, according to Rosatom, and has not yet been targeted by Western sanctions.

One reason why some European countries might oppose sanctions against Rosatom is that they have significant energy needs and Rosatom is a major supplier of nuclear fuel to many European countries

In an interview with Radio Svoboda (Radio Liberty), the head of Ukraine's mission to the European Union, Vsevolod Chentchov, said, *"The lack of restrictive measures imposed by the European Union against the Russian company Rosatom poses a challenge to the EU's nuclear security,"* adding, *"Ukraine is independent today. We also have experience in diversification of services, we can operate our stations quite comfortably without the Russians, and this experience is available on the territory of the European Union."*

In a recent official statement, the British government accused Rosatom of having deep ties to the Russian military-industrial complex, including through Alexander Novak, who is both a member of the supervisory board and deputy prime minister in Putin's government. The state-owned company is alleged to have supplied arms manufacturers with the technology and materials needed to supply the Russian front, including to defence companies subject to sanctions.

Trajan Dereville



Nikola Hendrickx

IN THIS ISSUE

"Europe Diplomatic Magazine" is characterized by a very open editorial line that allows it to capture all the themes that affect directly or indirectly the European political, economic, social and security issues. Whether piracy in the Gulf of Aden and its threats to the global economy, articles about political leaders, geostrategic situations or technological developments affecting our civilization, Europe Diplomatic Magazine strives to work in comparing opinions and providing an objective analysis based on extensive research. For a wide audience composed of both members of the diplomatic corps, lobbyists, international officials or academics, the magazine gives everyone the necessary and useful information about all topics that make up our daily lives. Covering sensitive issues such as nuclear, the rise of Islamism and energy dependence, the magazine opens its pages to recognized specialists who would like to express first order and exclusive information. But Europe Diplomatic Magazine is not only a source of information on recent topics. It is also addressing older facts with deep thought for further analysis. Whether it's news, security, diplomacy, technology, energy, terrorism, European affairs, no subject is treated superficially. Europe Diplomatic Magazine is an independent media, conveying balanced ideas of openness and analysis based on almost 30 years of experience in the journalistic world.

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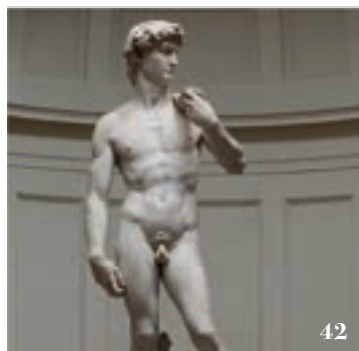
30



36



48



42



50

6 UNDER LOCH AND QUAY

A new man secures the top position as leader of Scotland

13 NEWS IN BRIEF

From around the World

20 NEW ACCUSATIONS, OLD PROTAGONISTS

Qatar: a small country that always seems to be in big trouble over corruption

25 HITTING FRAUD WHERE IT HURTS

Fraudsters are everywhere. If you can't beat them, don't join them. Hit them harder and more often

30 A PAPER TIGER GOES BANG?

Mao Tse-Tung's definition of the atom bomb – but does anyone have the will to use one for real?

36 HOW TWO UKRAINIAN TEENAGERS ESCAPED RUSSIAN CAPTIVITY

42 BECOMING BLIND TO THE OBVIOUS

How some British primary schools are trying to eradicate gender differences

48 TAKEDOWN OF NOTORIOUS HACKER MARKETPLACE SELLING YOUR IDENTITY TO CRIMINALS

50 THE CREDIT RATING CONTROVERSY

Rating agencies facing discrepancies

56 TIMELESS CHIC

58 BOOKS

Our selection



UNDER LOCH AND QUAY

**A new man secures
the top position
as leader of Scotland**

It's an old song, popular with drinkers and written by Scotland's most famous poet, Robert (Robbie) Burns; and it goes like this, normally set to music, of course:

***"O ye'll tak' the high road,
and I'll tak' the low road,
And I'll be in Scotland afore ye,
But me and my true love
will never meet again,
On the bonnie,
bonnie banks o' Loch Lomon"***

For "Lomon" we should read "Lomond"; folk songs change words, spelling and grammar. Scotland is not short of popular folk songs. Even people with no entitlement to wear the kilt or sport a particular tartan are often persuaded to claim some Scottish roots. I'm told that my name suggests I may have some Scottish ancestry deep in my past; that's according to my dentist, a dyed-in-the-wool Scot. If so, I apologise to my many Scottish friends. It's not a claim I make lightly. The Scots are a proud people; I spent my honeymoon there by the banks of St. Mary's Loch, not far from the English border, but the hotel my wife and I stayed in has gone now, having been turned into a private house. But Scotland's new First Minister has few ethnic origins among the lands of lochs, braes, sporrans and the Tam O'Shanter (the traditional tartan beret worn by some Scottish men, usually with a round woollen ball sewn into the centre). This strange headgear, part of the uniform for various regiments in Scotland (of course), and also some in Australia and Canada that have Scottish roots. The name comes from a poem by Robbie Burns, Scotland's "poet laureate":

*"This truth fand honest Tam o' Shanter,
As he frae Ayr ae night did canter:
(Auld Ayr, wham ne'er a town surpasses,
For honest men and bonie lasses)."*

I assume he meant "bonny" lasses, rather than "bony", which would just mean exceptionally thin. I can't swear to his claims personally; I don't think I've ever visited Ayr. Tam O'Shanter was Robbie Burns' own favourite among his many, many poetical works. But like many parts of Scotland Ayr produces whisky as well as fine people, so it must be alright. But where does that leave Scotland's new First Minister, Humza Yousaf? I am not and never could be a nationalist but it seems pretty clear that Humza Yousaf is not a name linked into the history of the clans. There is no Yousaf listed among the spear carriers or claymore-wielders, nor even the foot-soldiers, at either of the Battles of Alnwick, nor at Sterling Castle nor Culloden.

If you've never been to Scotland I urge you most sincerely to pay it a visit: it's stunningly beautiful, with hills and mountains, as well as the many lakes



A Wild Haggis



Haggis displayed for sale

(which the Scots call 'lochs') and friendly stone-walled villages and towns, plenty of pubs, all of it as sternly beautiful and heart-warming as anywhere you've ever seen. It's not only the whisky for which it's justly famous. It also claims to have given the world porridge (a disputed claim) and a variety of other foodstuffs, such as shortbread and for a number of foodstuffs, not least the mighty haggis, a savoury meat pudding, normally served with mashed potatoes and "neeps" (turnips) in a whisky sauce. It's served on special occasions, like Burns Night, the 25th January, when haggis is consumed with much ceremony and whisky is drunk. By the end of the party, most of the guests are, too. If you're feeling curious as to what exactly a haggis is, Scotland's world-famous national dish is made from a sheep's stomach, stuffed with a boiled mix of liver, heart, lungs, rolled oats and other bits and pieces. It is normally made with great care because it's so symbolic of Scottishness!

The event on each 25th January celebrates the poet, Robert (Robbie or even Rabbie) Burns, who even wrote a poem called "Address to a Haggis" in praise of this noteworthy dish. Of course, the dish must be eaten, accompanied by glasses of whisky (quite a lot of them, usually) and with a recital of Burns' famous poem. If you think you don't like whisky (which would be a sacrilege in Scotland) the Scots would say you just haven't tried the right one yet; there are more than a hundred distilleries in Scotland, as well as five distilling regions, each whisky and each region having its own distinctive flavour. I've yet to find one I don't like, but there are still a lot out there I've yet to try. Maybe I'll get through them all one day (although not ALL of them in one day...).

That was then, this is now

History is all very well, but right now, in 2023, Scotland has a new First Minister. His predecessor, Nicola Sturgeon, shocked the Scottish National Party and the country by her unanticipated

where I left it with friends and colleagues last summer,” she said, but added: “That’s always going to be a two-way street so it remains to be seen whether the hand of friendship that I offer is reciprocated.” At least that hand won’t be holding a claymore.

What do we know of Yousaf? “Not a lot and none of it good,” commented one cynical (but anonymous) party member. Certainly, his reputation is not unsullied. One article in *The Times* describes him as “a raging leftie, serial incompetent administrator, defender of every failed boilerplate statist nostrum.” (Boilerplate



First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon addresses journalists over Brexit at Bute House in 2018

resignation on 15th February after eight years at the helm and seven years before that as Deputy First Minister. Taking such a step triggered a vicious leadership battle, but with the Scottish parliament arranged as a hemicycle, instead of the face-to-face “ready for battle” set up in London, with the seats placed two sword-lengths apart, nobody drew an edged weapon or swung a battle axe. Politics must have been really interesting back in those far-off days!

But there was nothing like that in the choice of Humza Yousaf to occupy the top spot. Yousaf previously served under Sturgeon as justice secretary from 2018 to 2021 and then as health secretary from 2021 to 2023. It has been said that he did not distinguish himself in either rôle. He narrowly defeated Kate Forbes to gain the post but since then, when he’d become First Minister, she has turned down his offer of a junior place in his cabinet as Rural Affairs Secretary. As reported in *The Telegraph* after they both appeared on the *Holyrood Sources* podcast, Forbes said she was willing to draw a line under the acrimonious leadership contest. “I’m very happy to pick up



Humza Yousaf visiting Mughal Emperor Humayun’s tomb in New Delhi in 2013. The 16th century mausoleum is to be restored through a project of the Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative

in this context means “lacking any imagination”). He was educated at a private Scottish school – but then so were Michael Gove and Tony Blair.

Not a promising start, then, so what about his record? Well, he’s been accused of making it clear that he looks down on his opponents, considering them his inferiors. It’s not a useful or appealing attribute. For a time, he served as a parliamentary assistant to Scottish National Party (SNP) members of the Scottish parliament. He won a seat in the Scottish parliament in 2011 while only in his mid-20s but while showing a surprising level of self-confidence. He had been born to Pakistani immigrants in Glasgow and his first job in politics was as parliamentary assistant to the first Muslim elected to the Scottish parliament, Bashir Ahmad. Before his own election, Yousaf worked for both Nicola Sturgeon and her predecessor, Alex Salmond. He then served as a communications officer at SNP headquarters and once he’d been elected, he was appointed as a junior minister under Salmond, then in 2012 as Minister for External Affairs and International Development.

His first big mistake concerned something that is very important to Scotland: the ferry services that link the Scottish mainland with the country’s many islands. Yousaf had been chosen by Sturgeon to be Minister for Transport and the Islands. However, the shipyard building two of the vessels went bust and was nationalised. Sturgeon launched one of the hulls in 2017, but to make it look closer to completion than was, in fact, the case, fake windows had to be painted on the outside. It’s still awaiting completion. After that debacle, Yousaf was given the Justice portfolio, where he tried to introduce very draconian measures to crack down on hate crime. Indeed, the measures he proposed were so draconian that they drew savage criticism from churches, secularists, the Police Federation (or parts of it), lawyers and many others in Scotland who feared the loss of free speech across the board.



Humza Yousaf at the 2022 NHS Scotland Event setting out his priorities for pandemic recovery and reform

What could he mess up next? Sturgeon opted for the health service, letting Yousaf take over running NHS Scotland in 2021. It was a tricky brief to be given in the midst of a deadly pandemic, but he seems to have succeeded in making matters worse anyway. His performance attracted a lot of letters

of complaint and led, according to Iain Martin, writing in The Times, to him being given the nickname Humza Useless. No, I know: it’s not a very funny pun; in fact, it’s barely one at all, but even parts of the SNP itself have taken to using it. He’s not a universally admired figure, but then, neither was Sturgeon. She also made quite a few mistakes during her time in office.

However, no one gets chosen to stand above others without impressing a few people. “I remember meeting Humza at a Burns Supper at the British Ambassador’s residence,” former Scottish Labour MEP Catherine Stihler told me, for instance. “It was a great evening.” But the meeting clearly meant more than a serving of haggis and a glass of whisky, at least in terms of her encounter with Humza Yousaf. “From speaking to him, he was clearly ambitious,” she said, “and it was no surprise, seeing him in the contest. He certainly has many challenges from health to education, from island ferries to the economy. The task ahead as First Minister is not an easy one and will take all of Scotland’s political talent to solve.” Stihler is also CEO of Creative Commons, an American non-profit organization and international network devoted to educational access and expanding the range of creative works available for others to build upon legally and to share. As for Yousaf, the people of Scotland now hold their collective breath and keep their fingers crossed that Stihler’s more optimistic view is fulfilled.



Former Scottish Labour MEP Catherine Stihler

Yousaf’s family is well aware of racism. His mother, Shaaista Bhutta, was born in Nairobi, Kenya, to a Punjabi family, but they faced hate attacks from Kenyans who felt that all the jobs there should go to Africans. They had no room for Asians. I can’t imagine that it was ever Yousaf’s intention simply to say “mimi mkubwa” to his colleagues. It means: “I am great,” in Swahili. The Kenyans would have understood if he had. Huge differences of opinion remain between SNP supporters and, for instance, Conservatives, according to a poll conducted for The Economist by Savanta at the time of Sturgeon’s resignation. Even so, Yousaf will want the support of “watu wote” (all the people), surrounded by his supporters, and not to be “mtu peke yake” (the man by himself). There has to be unity, or “sisi sote” – we all together. My father, who learned Swahili when serving in Kenya during the war, would often greet us children with the question: “U hali gani?”, meaning “how are you”, to which I would reply “Njema” – good. I still have his 1934 book of Swahili exercises. According to The Economist, however, Yousaf lacks Sturgeon’s authority and her charisma. He only crept into the top slot with

52% of the votes cast. The SNP has been shrinking, too, with its 72,000-strong membership far down from its peak of 125,000. The woman he defeated to take over the party fears that “more of the same” would be an acceptance of mediocrity.

Popular or passable?

In a popularity poll of potential replacements for Sturgeon, Yousaf came last: the least popular choice, yet they chose him. The Economist points out how much more difficult Yousaf will find it in negotiating with Westminster. When Sturgeon held the post, the English ministers knew she spoke for a majority in Scotland. Now, with Yousaf in charge, it's by no means certain that he even speaks for the majority of the SNP. Kate Forbes, the one who turned down a junior cabinet post, has warned that Yousaf will have little influence in the corridors of power on either side of the border. If Yousaf could offer his people a meaningful referendum on independence from Britain he would probably be one of the most popular men in Scotland. But he can't: Westminster retains a veto, making independence less and less likely.

Former Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond told a BBC television programme that Humza faces three immediate challenges: “One, he's got to unite his party; second, he's got to unite the national movement if he seriously wants to take on Westminster; and thirdly, he's going to have to re-establish the SNP's reputation, which was hard-won for political competence in running Scotland.” As for advice on how to take the project forward, Salmond admitted that Yousaf is unlikely to listen much to his views, but said: “He should remember that Ash Regan and Kate Forbes got more votes than he did in the leadership election. He needs to get them into his cabinet, whatever else he does. He's got to reunite his party.” That won't be easy, and it wouldn't be even if Yousaf was more popular than he is. Salmond, of course,



Alex Salmond delivering his resignation speech as First Minister following the defeat of the Yes Scotland campaign in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum

formed a rival pro-independence party, Alba, and has been at loggerheads with Sturgeon since 2018, with Sturgeon making accusations against of sexual harassment against Salmond which he firmly denies. There's very clearly no love lost between the two. Salmond has made it clear that Yousaf must concentrate, in his view, on the issues that matter to the Scottish people. “Scotland is an energy rich nation but our people can't afford to heat their homes,” he said on an election poster, “That's the sort of issue that Humza Yousaf should be facing down Westminster over, not unpopular policies grafted onto the independence movement by the Green Party.”

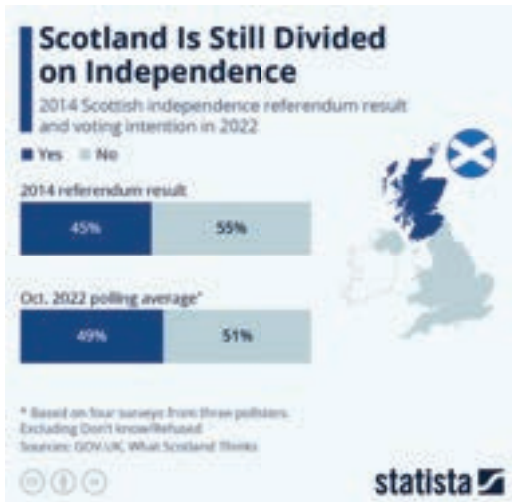


Scotland's capital city, Edinburgh

It was the British government's veto on another independence referendum that pulled the rug from under Sturgeon and the SNP, and that stopped people from opting for independence at the ballot box. But things can change, even if it's going to be harder for Yousaf to claim he speaks for most of Scotland in negotiations. What's more, the SNP (and Salmond's “Alba”) lack a credible policy for stepping around this seemingly insurmountable obstacle to the independence dream. Yousaf has said he will step up a gear in his battle to persuade UK prime minister Rishi Sunak to permit a meaningful plebiscite on letting Scotland go its own way. It was the American humourist Josh Billings who suggested how best to win a test of public opinion: “Vote early and vote often,” he said. Another American, the financier and presidential adviser Bernard Baruch of New York who suggested the best way to avoid disappointment: “Vote for the man who promises least,” he wrote, “he'll be the least disappointing.”

So what does all this mean – actually and potentially – for Scotland's neighbour to the south? If Britain was still in the EU, it wouldn't have mattered much, with free movement and open borders, but the way things are now, nothing is quite as certain. I have a cousin who, in a recent phone conversation, told me that he and his wife

had voted for Brexit so that “we won’t be told what to do by foreigners”, which shows an amazing ignorance of how the EU works and what it means, and I’m afraid the same unassailable ignorance would creep into any vote on Scotland’s independence. People, by and large, don’t want the facts on any major issue upon which they’re called to vote. All you have to do is listen to whichever politician is shouting the loudest and give his or her campaign your support. Yes, of course that’s ridiculous, but most people couldn’t tell you the difference between a plebiscite and a



referendum, but there is one. A referendum is a vote to change the constitution, while a plebiscite is a vote by the common people – the “plebs” of ancient Rome, hence the name – is a vote for or against a proposal that doesn’t actually change the constitution, so is of slightly (but only slightly) less significance. Maybe if the vote about Scotland’s self-determination could be *defined* as a “plebiscite” instead of a “referendum” it would matter less and cause a smaller stir. That’s just an idea, which I throw in for free. In any case, I am and always shall be a “pleb” – a plebian.

As the American Democrat politician Henry Wallace (1888-1965) famously put it in a speech in 1942, “the century that will come out of this war – can be and must be the century of the common man.” Hear, hear to that! And I don’t care if the speaker has a Scottish accent, a Pakistani accent, a Kenyan accent or whatever you like. Or you can sing what used to be Scotland’s national anthem, written by Robert Bruce and in its original dialect:

“Scots, wha hae wi Wallace bled, (Sots, we have with Wallace bled)

Scots, wham Bruce has aften led, (Scots who Bruce has often led)

Welcome tae yer gory bed, (welcome to your gory bed)

Or tae victorie (or to victory)

I’ve no idea what it sounds like in Swahili, but anything Burns wrote would be great. Kwaheri (Goodbye).

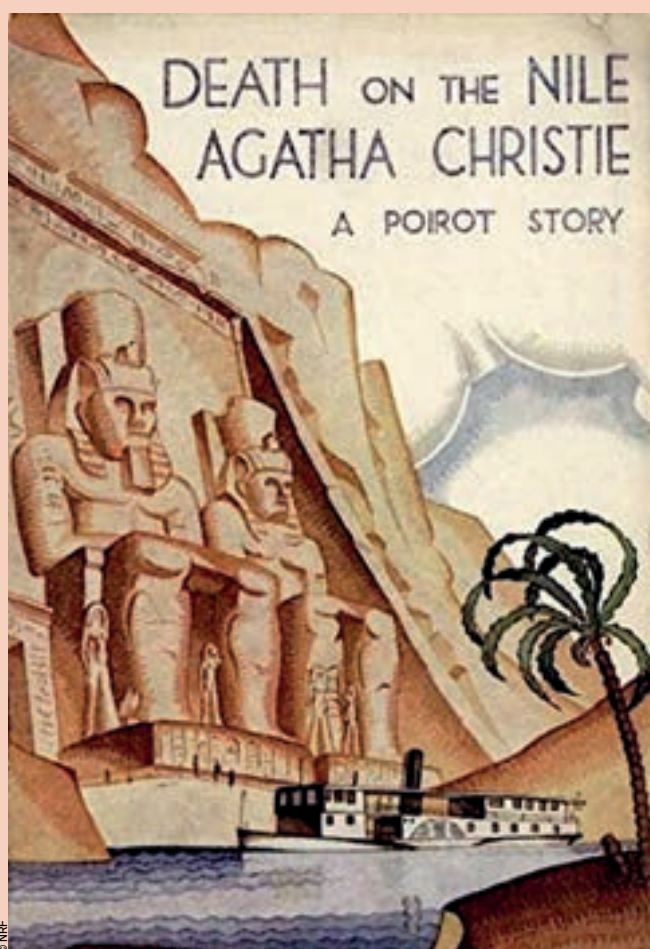
Anthony James



Scottish Independence Rally, George Square, Glasgow, 2019

NEWS IN BRIEF

AGATHA CHRISTIE'S BOOKS REWRITTEN (AGAIN)



Agatha Christie's timeless classics are being reimagined to better resonate with today's socially-conscious audiences.

Agatha Christie's novels, penned in the early 20th century, occasionally contain references to race and ethnicity that may be considered dated or insensitive by today's standards.

Instances of racial slurs or stereotyping found in the original texts are being replaced with more appropriate language or removed entirely.

Some publishers and screenwriters are revising problematic passages or depictions and are changing section of dialogues.

Christie's books have been amended to in new editions published by HarperCollins to make them more suitable for modern audiences.

Some passages from the original texts have been altered or even completely scrapped to remove descriptions, insults or references to ethnicity, particularly for characters in the books not from the UK, the Telegraph reports.

Some of the works' vocabulary has been changed. For example, the term "oriental" has been removed along with other racial descriptors.

In the 1937 Poirot novel *Death on the Nile*, a passage describes a Black servant as grinning because he understands the need to stay silent about an incident. The new editions no longer point out that he is Black or smiling and instead state that he is simply "nodding".

The inner monologues of characters such as Miss Jane Marple or Hercule Poirot have also been edited.

In a new edition of the Miss Marple novel *A Caribbean Mystery* (1964), the narrator praises a West Indian hotel worker's "lovely white teeth". This has now been removed, along with similar references to "beautiful teeth".

Agatha Christie's works were written in the early 20th century, a time when societal norms and attitudes towards race and ethnicity were different from today. Some major changes were already done in the past :

In the original version of "Ten Little Niggers" (1939), later renamed "Ten Little Indians" in 1940 and finally "And Then There Were None," the title and the nursery rhyme within the story contained a racial slur. The revised versions of the book replaced the offensive term with more neutral language.

EMSA DEPLOYS REMOTELY PILOTED AIRCRAFT SERVICES OVER THE GULF OF GENOA

EMSA has started the deployment of its remotely piloted aircraft services in support of the Italian Coast Guard to gain increased maritime awareness over the Gulf of Genova until the summer. Leveraging on the successful campaign of last year, EMSA services will continue to enhance general maritime safety and security in the area, as well as to assist in search and rescue missions. Protection of the marine environment is another important aspect of the operation and flights will be used to monitor whale migration within



AR-5 aircraft

the Pelagos Sanctuary, a protected area for marine mammals.

This multipurpose operation continues to support the Italian Coast Guard in further integrating these innovative services as part of their standard operating procedures to give enhanced situational awareness. The flights can be followed remotely from four locations including the Sarzana base from where the aircraft is deployed, Imperia, Genova and Rome.

The aircraft being used is an AR-5 Evo unmanned fixed wing aircraft and it is under contract to EMSA from the REACT consortium, comprising CLS (maritime analytics) and Tekever (RPAS). It has several features making it suitable for this service including optical and infrared cameras, a maritime radar, an AIS receiver and an emergency position-indicating radio beacon (EPIRB) antenna. Using satellite communications, the aircraft also has the capability of performing both day and night operations.

About RPAS

Remotely Piloted Aircraft System (RPAS) services are offered free to all EU member states by EMSA. They have been developed to assist in maritime surveillance operations and ship emission monitoring and can operate in all seas surrounding the European Union. RPAS services can provide support to traditional coast guard functions, including search and rescue and pollution prevention and response. The services are offered to member states individually and as part of EMSA's regional RPAS strategy, which allows multiple coast guard functions in several EU member states to be supported by one or more RPAS services. Further expansion of RPAS regionally is planned during 2023.

About EMSA

The European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) is a decentralised agency of the EU, based in Lisbon, Portugal. EMSA serves the EU's maritime interests for a safe, secure, green and competitive maritime sector, delivering value for member states through support for pollution prevention and response, maritime surveillance, safety and security, digitalisation and the provision of integrated maritime services, and technical assistance.

DIAGNOSE YOUR SME'S CYBERSECURITY AND SCAN FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

The European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) releases a tool to help Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) assess the level of their cybersecurity maturity.

Standing as a major driver for innovation and growth in the EU and as key actors of our economy, SMEs are constantly facing cybersecurity challenges. This is why it is essential to support them in addressing these challenges and in identifying improvements.

The cybersecurity maturity assessment tool designed by ENISA supports those small and medium-size businesses who seek to understand their current cybersecurity maturity level.

Thanks to this tool, they will be able to define the risks they face. They will also be given a re-mediation plan to mitigate them and improve their maturity.

The tool includes the following features:

- **Cybersecurity evaluation:** Based on several questions, this online tool assesses whether your organisation is at a foundation, advanced or expert maturity level adapted to the size of your business, available budget, sector of activity, generic asset identification, etc. in order to compare it with other similar businesses;

- **Top cybersecurity and a personalised action plan:** the tool also provides an action plan to help organisations benefit from tailor made follow-up actions and increase their cybersecurity level based on recommendations adapted to current best cybersecurity practices.

Configured around 3 key areas, the tool allows for the assessment of:

- **People:** to assess whether staff or employees are prepared to face cyber threats;
- **Technology:** to understand the technology used and how to select and implement best cybersecurity practices;
- **Processes:** to ensure the organisation has the right processes in place to deal with cyber-security risks.

Background

ENISA supports SMEs and the EU Member States in order to:

- Elevate the understanding of cybersecurity risks and cybersecurity threats, e.g. phishing, ransomware (based on ETL, sectorial threats, etc).
- Raise awareness and promote best cybersecurity practices across the EU and globally.
- Promote closer coordination and exchange of best practices among MS regarding cyber-security topics related to small and medium size businesses (SMEs).
- Enlarge the community of multipliers through the EU national authorities, national associations, chambers of commerce, organisations, etc.

This work contributes to the implementation of then updated Network and Information Security (NIS2) Directive by helping Member States with the required policies they need to adopt in order to strengthen the cyber resilience and the cyber hygiene baseline of small and medium-size enterprises. The majority of SMEs are excluded from the scope of the Directive due to their size and this work provides easily accessible guidance and assistance for their specific needs.

EVALUATE AND ENHANCE YOUR ENTERPRISE'S CYBERSECURITY



BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF PETS IN THE WORKPLACE



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The workplace is undergoing rapid, and sometimes surprising change worldwide. One of the most significant developments is the increasing emphasis on employee well-being.

In this respect, the European Commission - the executive arm of the European Union - is reportedly considering a proposal to allow pets in the workplace. If adopted, the proposal would allow staff in the EU to bring their pets to work, provided they follow certain guidelines and rules.

The proposal, which is still in its early stages, is based on the idea that pets in the workplace can have a positive impact on workers' well-being and productivity. Proponents of the proposal argue that bringing pets into the workplace can reduce stress, promote social interaction and create a more relaxed and creative work environment.

However, the proposal is not without controversy. Some argue that allowing pets in the workplace could cause disruption and distraction, especially for people who are allergic or afraid of pets. Others fear that the presence of pets could lead to hygiene problems and even safety concerns, especially in workplaces where food is prepared or machinery is operated.

Despite these concerns, the idea of allowing pets in the workplace is not new. In fact, more and more companies around the world are allowing employees to bring their pets into the workplace. Google, Amazon and Etsy are just a few of the companies that have introduced pet-friendly policies in recent years.

Proponents of pet-friendly workplaces point to the many benefits that pets can bring to the workplace. Studies have shown that pets in the workplace can lead to less stress and greater job satisfaction among employees. Pets can also be a source of comfort and companionship, especially for those who work long hours or in stressful environments.

Reduced stress

A study conducted by Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia, investigated the effect of nature and living things in the workplace. The results show that contact with nature is an effective means of preventing mental illness.

Petting a cat or dog, or even just watching a fish swim for ten minutes, can have a calming effect, lower blood pressure, reduce stress and make employees friendlier.

When cuddling or petting a furry friend, our bodies release oxytocin, a feel-good hormone that reduces the stress hormone cortisol.

Reducing stress in workers means fewer stress-related illnesses and associated medical costs.

Increased teamwork and morale

Another study by Central Michigan University found that teammates in a group where a furry friend is present are more communicative, feel more comfortable, work better together and trust each other more.

Cute pets lift spirits in any situation and bring a smile to the lips, which can have a positive impact on morale in the workplace.

In addition, the presence of a pet in the workplace can act as an icebreaker, encouraging interaction between employees and improving teamwork.

Better communication leads to more trust, which is a key component to a successful work environment.

Improved productivity

If employees have pets in the office, they are more likely to take regular breaks to play with the animal. Although it may seem counterproductive and distracting, regular breaks are necessary for optimal performance. Robert Pozen, senior lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management, recommends taking a 15-minute break every 75 to 90 minutes.

The reason is that the human brain works in two modes and frequent breaks help it to better understand and retain information.

Studies have also shown that spending too much time on one project can reduce productivity and cause unnecessary stress.

Therefore, when people take short breaks, they come back refreshed and ready to tackle the project again, as mental breaks prevent overwork and exhaustion.

If the European Commission's proposal is adopted, it would be a significant step forward for pet-friendly workplaces in the EU. The proposal would likely include guidelines and rules for pet owners, such as the requirement that pets be well behaved, vaccinated and kept under control at all times.

Overall, the proposal to allow pets in the workplace is an interesting development in the ongoing debate about work-life balance and worker well-being. While there are certainly legitimate concerns, it seems that the potential benefits of pet-friendly workplaces should not be overlooked.

As more and more companies embrace this idea, it will be interesting to see how it evolves and impacts the modern workplace.

NATO ALLIES HELP TO TRAIN UKRAINIAN RECRUITS IN THE UK

The British Army has been training Ukrainian recruits on AS-90 self-propelled artillery guns, which are being donated to Ukraine. The AS-90 is a 155mm mobile artillery system capable of firing up to six rounds per minute. The United Kingdom has also been running a 35-day training course for



Ukrainian volunteer fighters, which teaches them skills to survive in a hostile environment such as weapons handling, marksmanship and the law of armed conflict.

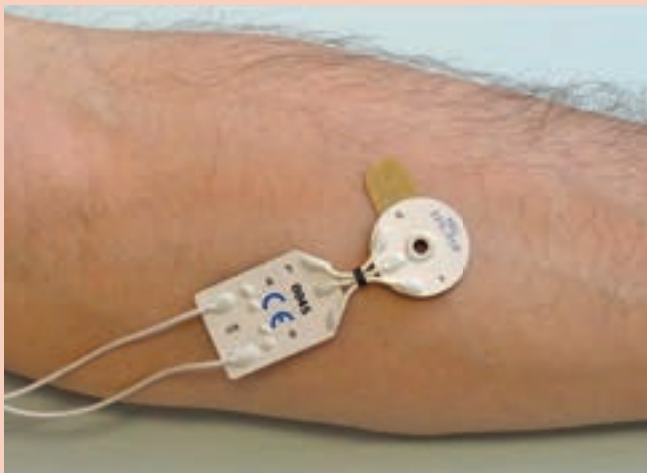
The instructors were from NATO Allies including Canada, Denmark, Finland, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Norway, as well as NATO invitee Sweden, and partner countries Australia and New Zealand.

The programme is part of the UK's commitment to help Ukraine uphold its right to self-defence against Russia's unprovoked war of aggression.

NEW ELECTRODE IMPROVES PAIN PERCEPTION RESEARCH

The IMI-PainCare project has developed a new electrode to investigate pain perception in a clinical recreation of chronic pain, a condition which affects 1 in 5 Europeans.

More people suffer from chronic pain than you may think. According to Pain Alliance Europe, 1 in 5 Europeans suffer from some form of chronic pain. Researchers wanting to test new ways to alleviate this pain must first find a way to safely reproduce it.



The HFS electrode "EPS-P-10" attached to the arm of a subject (non-physiological location, for illustration only). The upper right is the rear side of the multi-pin ring-shaped cathode. It is connected to the anode via three wires. The entire device can be connected to a current stimulator which is not shown in the photo

One way is to attach a small electrode to an area of skin and apply a small current; this increases a person's sensitivity to 'pinprick' tests for pain. This 'high frequency stimulation' (HFS) tech-nique is useful when developing pain medication, as the increased sensitivity is thought to be a key part that leads to chronic pain in patients, such as persistent post-surgical pain.

Researchers and engineers from Germany and Belgium have now developed a device that can recreate this sensitivity (known as hyperalgesia) more accurately and consistently.

Medical researchers and clinicians at the University of Heidelberg in Germany and the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium shared their ideas with medical technology firm MRC Sys-tems GmbH based in Heidelberg in Germany, which then developed the prototype. The proper-ties and effects of the electrode were then evaluated by other collaborators in Denmark, Italy, France and the UK. The group are part of the Innovative Medicines Initiative (IMI) project IMI-PainCare, which aims to improve ways to detect indicators of pain in healthy subjects and ani-mals.

The electrode consists of a cathode with 10 thin tungsten pins arranged in a circle, and an anode with a flat surface. Its special design means the electrode can apply low currents with a high current density within a small region of the skin. The electrode can be placed at different parts of the body while avoiding any critical nerves and blood-vessels.

When the electrode is fixed to the skin, five bursts of electrical pulses are delivered through the electrode contacts. The entire procedure lasts less than one minute, and was shown to induce a consistent increase in pinprick sensitivity beyond the electrode. The sensitive area gradually decreases in size over four hours, providing enough time for assessing treatment effects.

The researchers say the electrode requires minimal mechanical pre-conditioning. It also avoids common ways a test may be spoiled, for example sweating under the electrode when fixing it against the human skin for several hours.

The pilot testing resulted in a small electrode that can be used with other instruments to investi-gate hyperalgesia due to central sensitisation, mainly with 'PinPrick' stimulators. MRC Sys-tems GmbH has also developed a model of the electrode which can be used during magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).

The HFS electrode is now on the market with the brand name "EPS-P10" (P10 denotes the 10 pins which carry the current). The researchers expect that they can use the electrode to complete four clinical trials focusing on different biomarkers as part of the IMI-PainCare project. Mean-while MRC Systems GmbH has already started to market the electrode and is awaiting the out-comes of the clinical trials and the proof of the high-frequency electrode as a new standard to produce a well-defined hyperalgesia.

IMI-PainCare is supported by the Innovative Medicines Initiative, a partnership between the European Union and the European pharmaceutical industry.

FORMER ETIHAD CEO TONY DOUGLAS TO HEAD UP SAUDI ARABIA'S NEW NATIONAL AIRLINE RIYADH AIR

His Royal Highness Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, Prime Minister and Chairman of the Public

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© JAN NICLAS HOENK MRC SYSTEMS GMBH

Investment Fund (“PIF”), has announced the establishment of “Riyadh Air,” the second flag carrier of Saudi Arabia. The new national carrier will leverage Saudi Arabia’s strategic geographic location between the three continents of Asia, Africa and Europe, enabling Riyadh to become a gateway to the world and a global destination for transportation, trade, and tourism.

The airline’s main operational base will be at King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh. The airline is planning to be the largest in the Middle East in terms of revenue. It will operate domestic and international scheduled flights to over 243 destinations in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe, South America and North America. Riyadh Air said it will purchase 39 highly efficient 787-9s, with options for an additional 33 787-9s for a total estimated cost of US\$17.28 billion.

Riyadh Air will be a company owned by the country’s Public Investment Fund (PIF), with Yasir Al-Rumayyan, the governor of PIF, serving as its chairman. Tony Douglas has been appointed as the CEO. He previously served as the CEO of UAE-based airline Etihad from January 2018 until October 2022.



“Riyadh Air will be a digitally native airline, driven by a pioneering spirit with an obsessive focus on attention to detail and innovation at its heart. We aim to permanently transcend our guests’ perceptions and experiences of flying in the modern world.” says Tony Douglas.

The new airline comes at a pivotal moment for Saudi Arabia, as it realizes the ambitious goals of Vision 2030. We are privileged to play an active role in showcasing Saudi Arabia’s rich cultural heritage and stunning natural attractions to tourists from around the world.”

The airline is expected to add USD20 billion to non-oil GDP growth, and create more than 200,000 direct and indirect jobs.

Tony Douglas also previously served as chief executive of Abu Dhabi Airports Company (2013–2015), and as chief executive of Defence Equipment and Support department in the United Kingdom’s Ministry of Defence.

SINGAPORE CHANGI AIRPORT IS VOTED THE WORLD’S BEST AIRPORT AT THE 2023 WORLD AIRPORT AWARDS

Singapore Changi Airport has been named as the World’s Best Airport 2023 at the World Airport Awards that were held at Passenger Terminal EXPO in Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Singapore Changi Airport also received the 2023 awards for the World’s Best Airport Dining, the Best Airport for Leisure Amenities and the Best Airport in Asia.



Mr Lee Seow Hiang, Chief Executive Officer of Changi Airport Group said: “Changi Airport is honoured to be named World’s Best Airport for the 12th time. This recognition is great encouragement to our airport community, who stood firmly together to battle the challenges of Covid-19 over the past two years. We thank them for their dedication to serve Changi’s passengers and the perseverance to keep Singapore connected to the world. To our passengers, we are deeply grateful for your vote of confidence. Your continued support encourages us to keep pursuing service excellence as we expand our offerings to redefine the Changi Experience. We look forward to welcoming everyone to Changi Airport as we rediscover the magic of travel again.”

Edward Plaisted of Skytrax said: “We congratulate Singapore Changi Airport on being named the World’s Best Airport for 2023. After being severely hit during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is pleasing to note that passenger numbers at Changi Airport are now at about 80 per cent of pre-Covid-19 levels, and expected to return to pre-pandemic



Yam Kum Weng, EVP, Airport Development, Changi Airport Group (left) and Lee Seow Hiang, CEO of Changi Airport Group (centre) receiving the Skytrax World’s Best Airport Award from Edward Plaisted, CEO of Skytrax (right)

levels by 2024. This recognition for Changi Airport is from the airport customers and serves to underline the airport's popularity with international air travellers. Winning this award as the World's Best Airport is a very clear recognition of the team effort amongst all staff at the airport who contribute to Changi Airport's success".

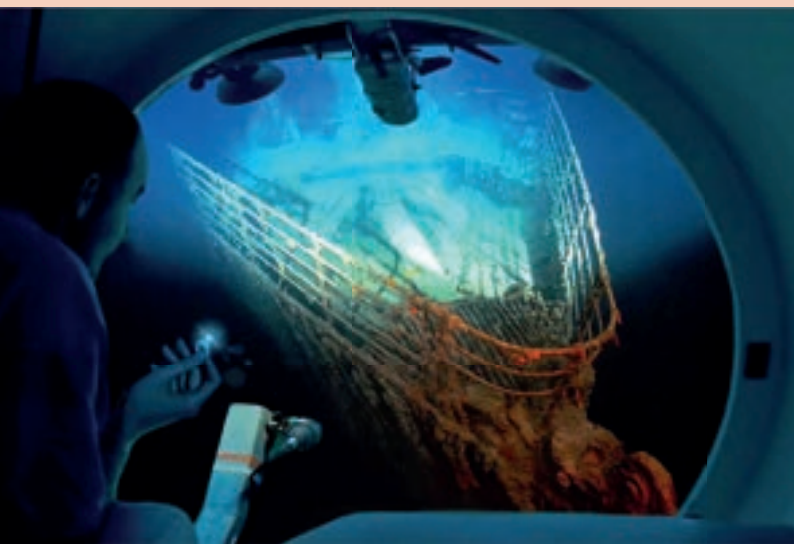
The world airport awards

The World Airport Awards are the most prestigious accolades for the airport industry, voted by customers in the largest, annual global airport customer satisfaction survey.

Operating since 2000, the World Airport Awards are independent and impartial, and provide a customer satisfaction study that is truly global in scope and coverage. They are regarded as the quality benchmark for the world airport industry, assessing customer service and facilities across over 550 airports. The survey and awards process is provided to airports at no cost, to ensure true credibility of results.

The Awards are based on the World Airport Survey questionnaires completed by over 60 nationalities of airport customers during the survey period, which operated from August 2022 to February 2023. The survey evaluated the customer experience across airport service and product key performance indicators - from check in, arrivals, transfers, shopping, security / immigration through to departure at the gate.

MARRIAGE PROPOSAL ON THE WRECK OF THE TITANIC



ApoteoSurprise, a French company, is promoting a unique marriage proposal on the wreck of the Titanic for 1.000.000 euros.

In the seaside town of St. John's, located in the Canadian province of Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador, a expedition crew will take the couple two days later to the sinking site of the RMS Titanic.

After traveling 400 nautical miles in the North Atlantic Ocean, accompanied by an expedition leader and two scientists, they will then board a high-tech submersible designed for deep-sea exploration.

After two hours of descent, they will reach the seabed at 3800 meters deep and start to see, among the bioluminescent creatures, corroded debris and some personal items that belonged to the passengers of the Titanic.

Then the long-awaited moment will arrive: the wreck of the RMS Titanic, dormant for more than a century in darkness, will arise.

The passengers will rise along the monumental wall of steel and rivets, glide along the portholes, and for nearly two hours, explore the smallest corners of the most famous transatlantic steamship in history: promenade deck, officers' cabins, radio room, Captain's bridge, hall of the Grand Staircase, etc.

All of a sudden, to the sound of My Heart Will Go On by Céline Dion, the bow of the RMS Titanic and its famous balustrade will appear. At this precise moment, the proposer will take the ring box out his pocket and make his proposal, to the applause of the other crew members. A bouquet of roses will be given to future bride the memorable event will be celebrated with champagne.

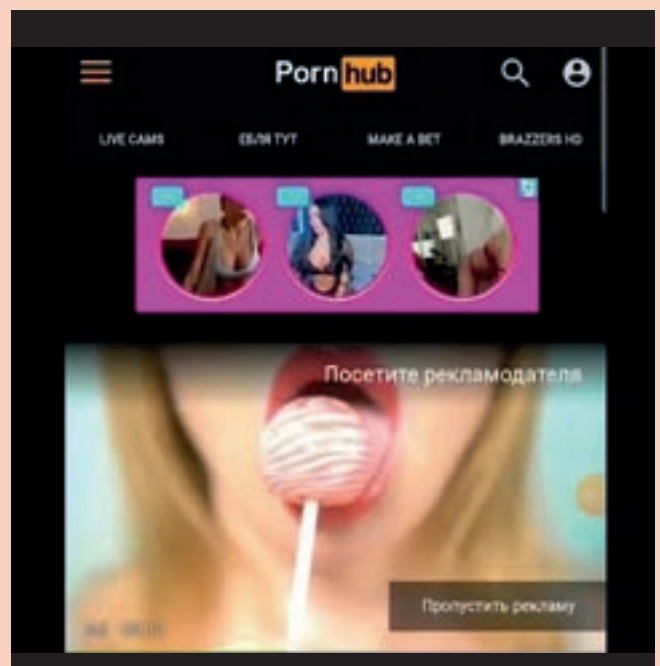
RUSSIAN MERCENARIES WAGNER'S RECRUITING CAMPAIGN REMOVED FROM PORNHUB

"Don't whack off, go work for PMC Wagner," said the advert, which has now been removed by Pornhub.

"We are the f**king coolest private army in the world. We are recruiting fighters from all regions of Russia. Don't w***k off - go work for PMC Wagner," the Russian-language ad said, before a phone number appeared on screen.

Wagner Group's head Evgeny Prigozhin later confirmed that the ad was genuine.

"...advertising PMC Wagner on porn sites is a very good idea of our marketers," he said as cited by his press service. "I absolutely completely agree with them, and this advertisement says: 'Go to fight in the Wagner PMC, stop j**king off.' Who disagrees with this argument?"





Going for a coffee? ... Lock your desktop first!



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NEW ACCUSATIONS, OLD PROTAGONISTS

**Qatar: a small country
that always seems to
be in big trouble over
corruption**



Henrik Hololei, Director-General for Mobility and Transport, European Commission

I am happy to apply for and to receive my old person's bus pass each year, allowing me to travel free of charge by bus close to my home. It's very handy for getting to the local shops. Some people expect much more in terms of free travel, services and gifts they shouldn't get. I don't demand, however, a free jet, first class, to anywhere in the Middle East. I'm nowhere near being important enough to merit such treatment and if anyone offered it to me I should be deeply suspicious. However, if somebody decided to probe my legal entitlement to an old person's bus pass, I'd have nothing to fear, because I am old. The same level of entitlement cannot be true for Henrik Hololei, director general of the European Commission's transport department. He managed to wangle himself a free flight or two (or several) to the Middle East at the behest of Qatar, a country whose name, by now, must strike fear into the hearts of politicians and senior EU officials, whilst causing a speeding of the pulse rate among law enforcement and anti-corruption officials. Fairly or unfairly, the name "Qatar" seems to have become synonymous with corruption and graft. I certainly don't feel corrupt, riding a bus into town. I do it because it's not power that corrupts but the passage of the years, while the corruption is physical (and all too noticeable). As my mother used to say: "It's a terrible thing to grow old, but it's better than the alternative."

There is a fine line to be drawn between a trade in goods and legitimate services and a trade in influence. It would seem to be a line that Qatar finds very hard to see and even harder to abide by. In this latest case, Belgian law enforcement agencies say there is evidence that politicians at the European Parliament have accepted cash for writing unmerited encomia about Qatar while downplaying the tiny country's labour rights abuses, particularly during the run-up to last year's World Cup, and it succeeded in turning the International Labor Organisation, which is a United Nations body, from one of the country's most strident critics into an ally, according to The New York Times.

The campaign was generously funded with a massive lobbying operation to prevent an investigation into its practices. Apart from generous free travel being facilitated for a senior figure, officials from Qatar's labour ministry asked the UN agency not to comment on what it had seen there in case it overshadowed the competition itself. That would have been unfortunate for a country determined to appear to the world as 'squeaky-clean', although Qatar, it would seem, may be squeaky but not especially clean.

Henrik Hololei, meanwhile, the Director-General of the European Commission's DG MOVE, the EU's Directorate General for movement and transport, faced an internal investigation in the light of the fact that he had travelled several times at the Qatar government's invitation and expense between Qatar and the EU during the period 2015 to 2021, a time during which his department was supposed to be involved in negotiating an EU-Qatar air transport deal. He has not been sacked, however, although there are plenty of people who say he should have been. It seems that: "At his request, the College [of Commissioners] has decided to appoint Henrik Hololei, who is the general director for mobility and transport, to the position of hors-classe (unclassifiable) advisor in the DG for international partnership from the 1st of April," according to the Commission's chief spokesperson, Eric Mamer. We should remember that the 1st April is known in some circles as "All Fools' Day". In fact, it would appear that Hololei, clearly no fool, acted within the rules anyway: his missions had all been official and they followed the rules of the time. The concern is simply over the fact that Hololei approved his own flights, having carried out his own conflict of interests analysis, apparently without the intervention of advisors. Some MEPs feel Hololei should face tougher penalties. The argument goes that if you leave possible culprits to decide their guilt or otherwise you can say goodbye to justice.

Try again, but harder



Members and parliamentarians from around 30 countries gathered in Doha, Qatar in March 2023, to discuss the important role of parliamentarians in effectively implementing the United Nations Convention against Corruption

Corruption is a global phenomenon but the fact that it's so common doesn't mean it should be ignored. Now the United Nations (UN) has signed an agreement to tackle corruption world-wide, although the decision was not widely reported. It was last November in Geneva that UN Assistant Secretary-General Nikhil Seth signed a partnership agreement with the Global Organisation of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (GOPAC), chaired by a former attorney general of Qatar, Ali Bin Fetais al-Marri.

The aim, in theory, is to toughen up the fight against corrupt practices in politics, including through the development and publication of a training manual by the Observatoire Géostratégique de Genève (OGG). This year and next, training workshops and round-table discussions will be held to put the problem under the microscope and, as officials examine the scourge of corruption, look in detail at the damage it can do. The agreement was signed by the OGG and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), although questions have been raised about the involvement of al-Marri, a 58-year-old magistrate who has served as Public Prosecutor for Qatar from 2002 to 2021, and whose probity has been questioned on many occasions during his term of office. There have been various legal complaints about him, especially in Switzerland, France, the US and the UK. Furthermore, there is precious little data on GOPAC's activities over the past two decades. Even the style and wording of the organisation's Website have been questioned and seem to be out of date.

What's it all about? It would seem we have to wait to find out. Like most sensible people, I'm all in favour of politicians from various countries collaborating across frontiers to eradicate self-serving dishonesty, if that's what they're really doing. But there are just a few too many queries to set it all aside as "100% good news". One member



Ali Bin Fetais al-Marri



Ali Sherif al-Emadi

of the ruling family in Qatar, for instance, Sheikh Ahmed Khalid Bin Mahammad Bin Ali At-Thani, of the House of Thani, brought a legal complaint against Al-Marri in both France and Switzerland for alleged money laundering in late 2021, drawing public attention to "signs of corruption, influence peddling, misappropriation of public funds and money laundering abroad". It's a fairly comprehensive list of alleged wrong-doings for personal pecuniary advantage. It must be mentioned that quite a lot of people and organisations don't really like Al-Marri very much. One complaint, for instance, was filed against him in France by businessman Jean-Pierre Marongiu, who accuses Al-Marri of being responsible for his arrest and conviction on spurious grounds that led to his imprisonment in Qatar from 2013 until 2018, accused of issuing dud cheques and also of violating a rule banning him from leaving the country. He denies both charges. In any case, a 5-year jail term seems on the face of it to be rather severe for minor financial crime.

The story is that a system of "guardianship", known as "kafala", and which is unique to the Arab Gulf nations, allowed a member of the Qatari royal family (there seem to be hundreds of such people; crowns must be ten-a-penny there) to hold a 51% share in his company without investing a single cent in it. Marongiu was allegedly swindled by the royal in question, leading to his – Marongiu's – incarceration with al-Marri's complicity. More recently, a member of the French parliament, Philippe Latombe, referred some of Al-Marri's financial transactions to the Public Prosecutor in Paris, alleging some very suspicious financial transactions. Latombe alleges that al-Marri was awarded a job as prosecutor with a monthly salary of €12,000, but he quickly amassed enough to buy a private hotel in Paris for €9.6-million. Not a bad investment, I think you'll agree, especially as in the same year he acquired various other properties, all of them expensive. It's claimed that he also intervened to obtain freedom for two members of his own family, imprisoned by the United States at Guantanamo for fighting on the side of Al-Qaeda. Al-Marri's French lawyers claim he's a victim of a smear campaign with very little evidence to support the various claims. In the extremely murky waters of Middle Eastern politics, that could even be true. The big question is: "does it matter?" I suppose if no-one outside that "gilded inner circle" comes to any harm, then the answer is "no". I'm just certain that it's not a place in which I'd like to do business or invest money.

Towards the end of last year, the European Parliament banned Qatari representatives from entering the building, as well as suspending legislation connected to Qatar, such as visa liberalisation, because of allegations that Qatar had tried to influence MEPs and officials, which it denies. A Qatari diplomat warned that it could damage cooperation on global energy and security issues. The statement claimed that MEPs had clearly been misled. I think misleading people lies at the heart of all the controversy, although it's not clear exactly who is misleading whom. And underneath it all is fear over energy supplies as Russia continues its unjustified war with the West and the fear that by upsetting Qatar Europe could be cutting off a possible gas supply. It's worth remembering that in 2021 Doha supplied around a quarter of the liquid natural gas (LNG) the EU consumed.

The probity of the ongoing investigation has been threatened by leaks to the media, but not sufficiently to put the inquiry at risk. As if Qatar wasn't in enough hot water over various corruption allegations, it has now charged its former finance minister, Ali Sherif al-Emadi, with embezzlement. In fact, al-Emadi was arrested in 2021 but very little information about the case has been released. According to the Qatar news agency he and several associates will now face trial. The report goes on to say that in view of the fact that evidence found among the case documents proves al-Emadi's guilt in a variety of crimes – bribery, the appropriation of public money, abuse of office, abuse of power, damage to public money and money laundering – the Attorney General issued an order to refer the accused to the Criminal Court to decide on punishment. al-Emadi has made no comment about the accusation or about his arrest and detention, despite having been one of the country's most capable officials and having held a number of senior posts. The accusations relate to his time as finance minister.

I A Tangled Web

"O what a tangled web we weave," wrote Sir Walter Scott in his lengthy 1808 poem "Marmion" about the battle of Flodden Field, fought between England and Scotland, "when first we practise to deceive!" It was true at the time of the battle, in 1513, when Scott wrote his poem in 1808, and, of course, it still is. But there is no



OLAF's Deputy Director General, Andreas Schwarz



Eva Kaili



Antonio Panzeri

shortage of accusations of fraud and malfeasance involving Qatar. Sorting out the accusations from the certainties is no easy task.

Even reporting on the progress of the investigation is a challenge. The whole Qatar issue overshadows other work being carried out to prevent fraud and corruption. The 32nd annual meeting of the OLAF Anti-Fraud Communicators' Network (OLAFAFCN) was held in Brussels in March 2023, attracting some sixty participants from throughout the EU's anti-fraud community, to discuss the best communication practices and to share recent experiences in tackling the issue. Much of the conference's time was taken up with discussing the best ways to protect the funds needed by Ukraine to ensure its economic and military resilience. In fact, Ukraine rather dominated the conference. The rôle of Qatar clearly is not connected with the war, nor with Russia's military and territorial aspirations. The conference also discussed ways of enforcing EU sanctions against Russia, and again, this did not concern Qatar. Keeping all parties informed is important, as OLAF's Deputy Director General, Andreas Schwarz, told delegates. "Communication and cooperation are vital components in the fight against fraud," he said, "and it is important that they take place at every level." Of course, if there are so many varied things going on it becomes extremely hard for people to follow.

The most recent scandal began in 2019, when Qatar started to channel money to Antonio Panzeri, a former member of the European Parliament, and to Eva Kaili, a Parliament vice-president.

The payments were to get them to help influence MEPs to vote through various measures favourable to Qatar. The money, which came from both Qatar itself and from the government of Mauritania, was sent via the Brussels-based entity, ironically called "Fight Impunity". It was co-created by Panzeri. The aim of OAFN is to deter and even prevent fraud by creating a continuous, permanent dialogue with



© WIKICOMMONS

European Parliament hemicycle, Strasbourg

strengthened cooperation and joint communication initiatives. If something is constantly brought to the public's attention and talked about it becomes harder to hide wrongdoing effectively. Tangled webs – however tangled and despite the presence of their many-legged weavers – can still fall victim to the feather duster of justice, if it is wielded skilfully enough. OLAF seems determined to do exactly that.

I Any more to play?

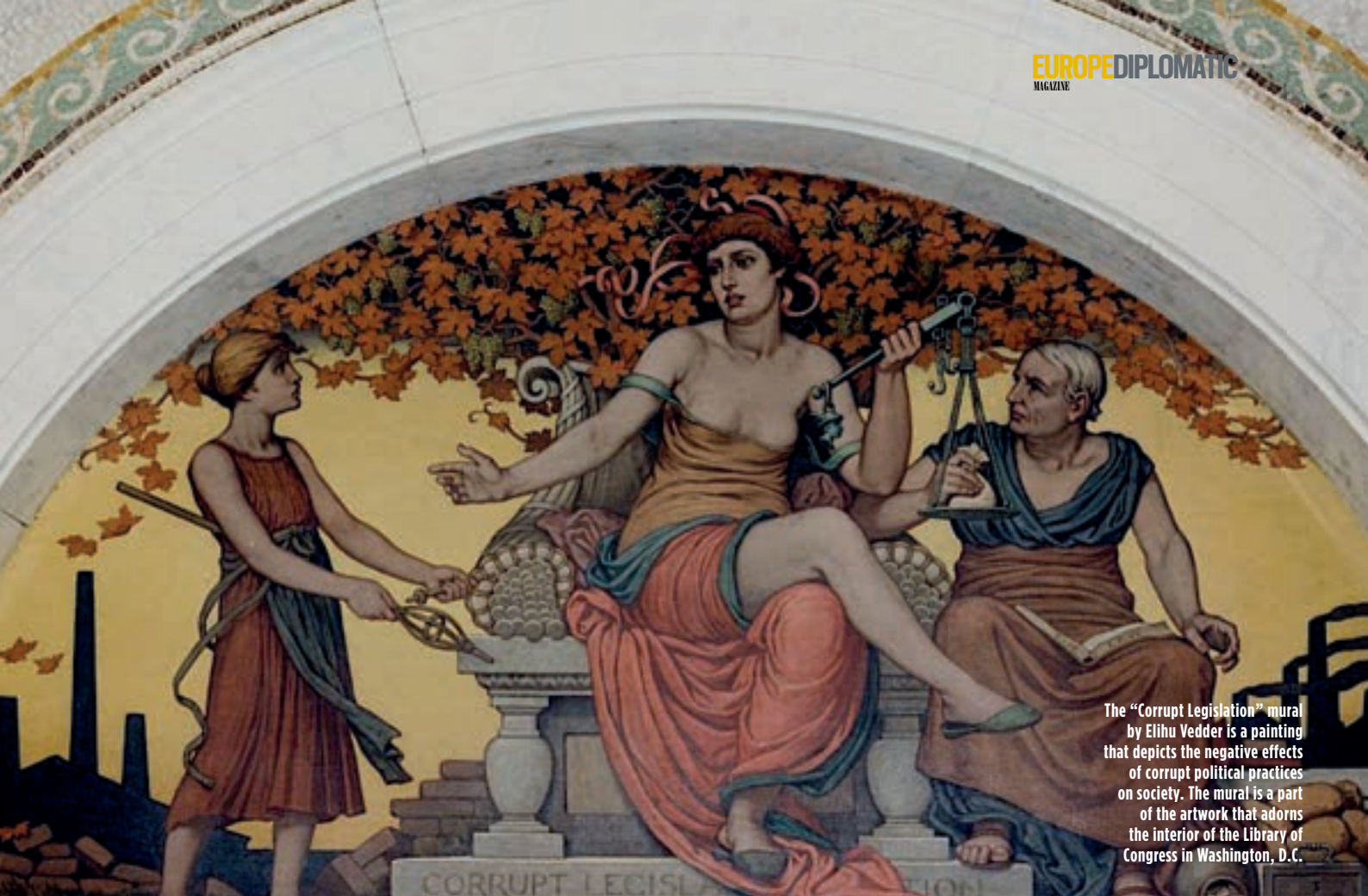
It's not only Qatar that has come under the investigators' spotlight. There is also concern about tiny Morocco, which, according to Belgian Justice Minister Vincent Van Quickenborne, has long been known to be interfering in EU affairs, when it can. Investigations have so far focussed on various aspects of relations, including agreements on both fisheries and trade. According to Britain's Financial Times, Panzeri, among others, received bribes, gifts and luxury hotel stays from the Moroccan government and he had various links with Moroccan politicians and officials. "Like Webster's Dictionary we're Morocco bound," sang Bing Crosby and Bob Hope in 1942, but now the expression could just mean having the handcuffs applied there for committing fraud. If you're still in doubt, remember that various people accused of corruption have admitted wrongdoing: Francesco Giorgi, the partner of another of the accused, Parliament Vice-President Eva Kaili, has confessed to accepting money for not being critical of Qatar in a debate. Panzeri, too, took gifts and luxurious hotel accommodation in return for (among other things) asking the European Commission to provide additional funds for Morocco. One can somehow imagine a conversation in the Hemicycle Bar: "Which way are you going to vote in that

debate on Qatar and Morocco?" "How much are you offering?" All work on and with Qatar was suspended in December 2022, pending a formal investigation, which is still under way.

Now the European Parliament has made plain its intention to "increase the EU's defences against dirty money", which has to be a good thing, although some might say the move is somewhat overdue. It aims to achieve this, says Transparency International in a press release, by "bolstering the powers of the forthcoming anti-money laundering authority to fixing risky investment migration schemes, the Parliament is tightening the screws on the corrupt". MEPs seem to have taken onboard the concerns previously expressed and has included "strong measures for ensuring that civil society, the media and academia are able to find out who's behind anonymous companies created across the EU." Their continuing existence has been a long-term concern for the Union. It's a big step forward: it was only last year that the EU's highest court struck down the anti-money laundering provision that would have resolved the issue. At last, the EU will get the corporate, economic, and fiscal transparency most of us probably hoped it had already. Two-and-a-half cheers for the European Parliament! It has taken too long to do this to merit the full three cheers, I'm afraid.

What all this will mean for entities like Qatar and Morocco, who like to be the ones pulling the strings for their own advantage, we'll have to wait and see. Two things seem certain. Firstly, the new laws will make this sort of plaudit-seeking corruption harder to set up and harder keep safely below the radar, too. Secondly – and this is very definite, sadly – it won't stop them from trying. Stories about corruption and graft will still be filling our newspapers a hundred years from now. We just have to hope that rather more of the crooks and influence-seekers will be resting behind bars for their efforts. There will be plenty of others, though, of course, just outside and eagerly carrying on their work and pocketing the profits. In the General Prologue to Geoffrey Chaucer's great 14th century epic poem, *The Canterbury Tales*, the speaker gives money to a rough-sleeping pauper, "And thus, with feyned flatterye and japes, [with false flattery and jokes] He made the person and the people his apes."

T. Kingsley Brooks
T.Kingsley.Brooks@europe-diplomatic.eu



The "Corrupt Legislation" mural by Elihu Vedder is a painting that depicts the negative effects of corrupt political practices on society. The mural is a part of the artwork that adorns the interior of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

**HITTING
FRAUD
WHERE IT
HURTS**

**Fraudsters are
everywhere.
If you can't beat them,
don't join them.
Hit them harder
and more often.**



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The 32nd annual meeting of the OLAF Anti-Fraud Communicators' Network

"Corruption, embezzlement, fraud, these are all characteristics which exist everywhere," said Alan Greenspan, the American economist and former chair of the Federal Reserve. "It is regrettably the way human nature functions, whether we like it or not. What successful economies do is keep it to a minimum. No one has ever eliminated any of that stuff." That does not mean, of course, that we should give up trying, because the fraudsters certainly won't and the damage they do affects all of us, but Greenspan was right: fraud is so all-pervading that getting rid of it would be harder than eradicating the common cold. The continuing problem with fraud and its perpetrators has led Europe to set up two separate bodies, both with the inevitable acronyms as names. In this case, the letters stand for Office de Lutte Anti-Fraude. The EU (and the rest of Europe) seems very fond of acronyms. The EU has its own public prosecutor's office, too. You will not be surprised to note that it's called EPPO: the European Public Prosecutor's Office.

You may think these two quite separate bodies are joined at the hip, but they're not. They are quite separate organisations, both pledged to fighting fairly similar types of crime, and they work in accordance with an arrangement agreed between them in 2021. What this means in reality is that OLAF conducts administrative investigations, while EPPO handles criminal investigations. The two organisations co-operate a lot, as you can imagine. Their joint purpose is set out in a press release: "The common aim is to increase fraud detection at EU level, to avoid duplication, to protect the integrity and efficiency of criminal investigations and maximize the recovery of damages."

In late March, OLAF organised its 32nd Anti-Fraud Communicators' Network annual conference in Brussels, which brought together some 60 or so participants from around the

anti-fraud community so that they could discuss best practices and talk about recent events. You will not be surprised to discover that some of the time was taken up with discussing ways to ensure the effectiveness of sanctions against Russia, as well as ensuring that Russia is not facilitating that kind of criminality. "Communication and cooperation are vital components in the fight against fraud and it is important that they take place at every level," said Deputy Director General of OLAF Andreas Schwarz. The meeting was also a chance for participants to learn from each other which they hope will lead to more effective exchanges of messages from and among anti-fraud organisations and institutions within the EU. That may not sound very important but it is.

Meanwhile, EPPO now has its first ever public prosecutor. The former Romanian anti-corruption official Laura Codruta Koevesi has accepted the job and looks like being a tough cookie. She will now be in charge of the new European Public Prosecutor's Office for the next seven years. It won't be an easy job and not one that's likely to make her popular in some quarters (albeit fairly shady quarters). She sees a close relationship between OLAF and EPPO as vital in her fight against criminality and corruption. Ville Itälä, who is Director-General of Europe's Anti-Fraud Office told delegates: "The working arrangement between OLAF and EPPO is an important milestone in our future relationship. It sets out in concrete terms how we will work together, based on trust and transparency." She pointed out that speed of operation would also be essential if the criminals were to be prevented from carrying out their criminal acts and brought to book if they succeeded in their criminal endeavours. "Focusing on rapid, effective and reciprocal exchanges of information, it should ensure that no case goes undetected," said Itälä. "It is a major part of ensuring that together we can step up the fight against fraud and corruption affecting the financial interests of the EU." To be perfectly honest, the combined expertise of Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot and Jules Maigret would be unlikely to achieve such an astounding breakthrough, but as long as the intention is there it's a start.

For one thing, the ground rules have been set out for the two offices to exchange information, and report and transfer potential cases in each other's investigations, with OLAF carrying out complementary investigations when required and with the two offices having regular exchanges of information so



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EPPO European Chief Prosecutor Laura Codruta Koevesi



Director-General of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) Ville Itälä



Crimes within the mandate of the EPPO

that the latest information can be passed on. There will also now be regular joint training exercises and staff exchange programmes. It's a promising start, although it will not put an end to criminality, of course. It may make it more difficult to undertake certain crimes, with more of the participants facing the prospect of arrest, the confiscation of their assets and a spell behind bars for their trouble.

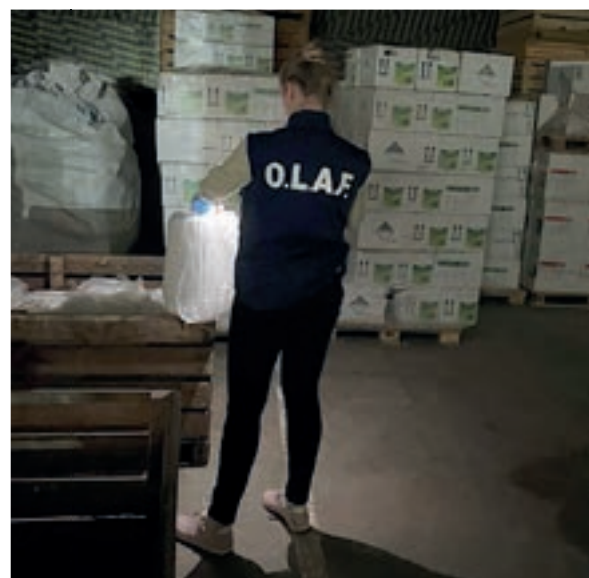
Who's doing what?

It's worth recalling the bodies' underlying purpose: the EPPO is an independent body set up by the European Union to investigate, prosecute, and bring to judgment crimes involving the bloc's budget. That sounds straightforward enough. These crimes can include fraud, corruption, and cross-border VAT fraud involving sums greater than 10 million euros.

The European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) recently, carried out ten searches in several locations in Belgium, including at Liège Airport, and arrested four suspects, during an operation against a customs fraud ring believed to have caused damages of up to €310 million in evaded tax and custom duties.

Previously, only national prosecutors in the 27 EU member states could do this, but they were hampered in their efforts because they lacked jurisdiction beyond their borders. Other institutions, such as Europol or the EU's anti-fraud office OLAF, had no legal ability to act. That is changing now. As Ville Itälä pointed out, the recent (and still not fully resolved) scandal over corruption involving Qatar and the European Parliament presents an open door at which EPPO can push to gain traction and influence with little serious obstruction. MEPs, parliament officials and others want the whole mess brought out into the open and thoroughly cleaned up. EPPO has just the tools needed to do that.

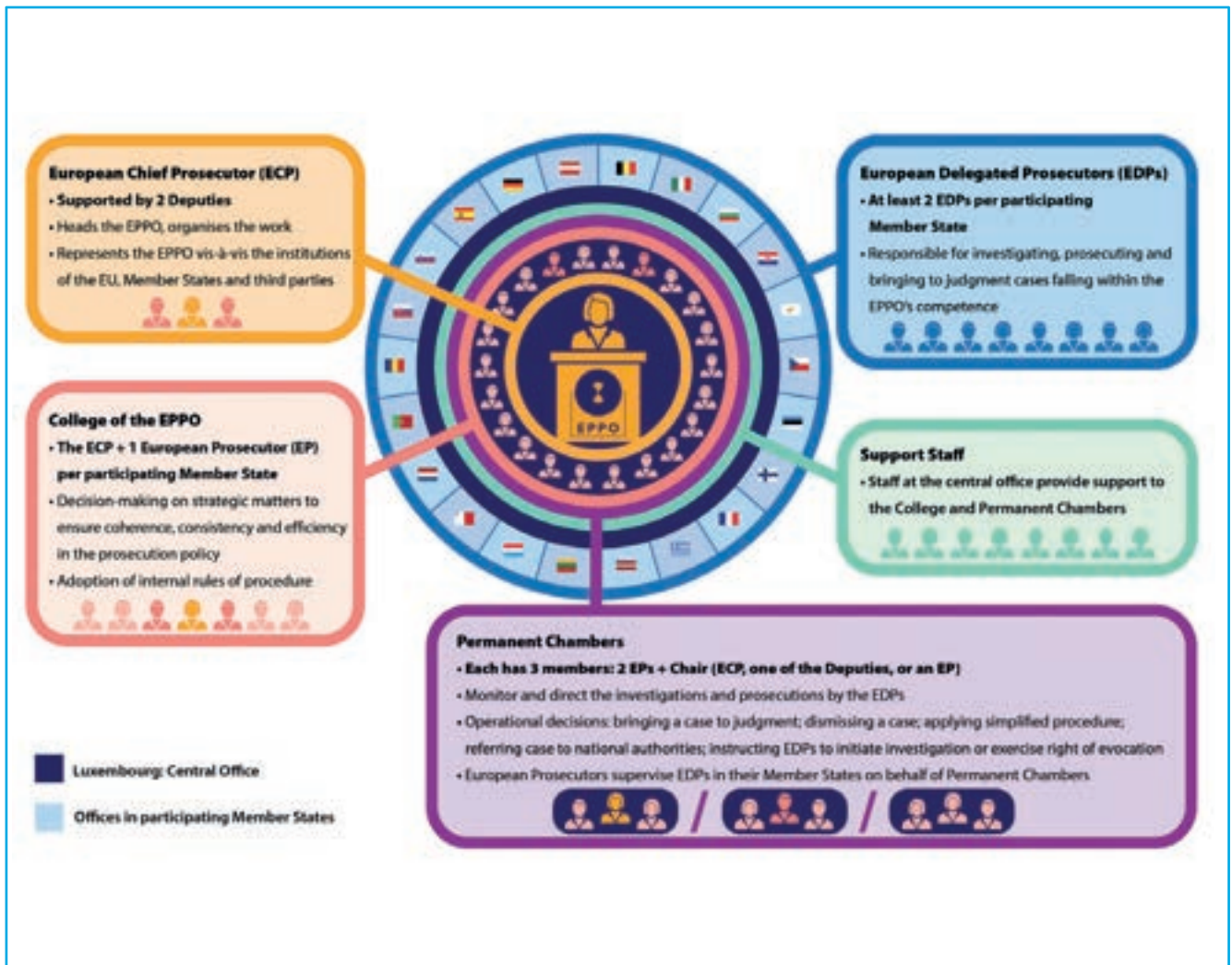
Itälä wants full access to the European Parliament so that he can attend meetings set up to discuss graft and corruption. He thinks he can turn the spotlight onto improper activities. Currently, OLAF can look but not touch. He told the Politico newspaper: "We have the access to the Commission president's office and IT but not to MEPs. The Parliament doesn't let us have this access." Itälä wants that to change –



In cooperation with Bulgarian authorities, OLAF helped seize 11 tonnes of illicit pesticides in March 2023

and quickly. His more muscular approach to tackling the misuse of EU funds may scare some MEPs and officials but it may well be the only way to restore public confidence.

EPPO and OLAF, though similar in purpose, are not the same. For instance, OLAF has a lot of tools with which to investigate financial wrongdoing, but it cannot prosecute perpetrators; that's the task of prosecutors appointed by participating member states. EPPO and OLAF, however, are under instruction to co-operate, with EPPO instructed to "establish and maintain a close relationship with OLAF based on mutual cooperation within their respective mandates and 'on the exchange of information', while OLAF is instructed to work with EPPO "to ensure the highest level of protection of the financial interests of the Union through synergies between [the EPPO and OLAF] while ensuring close cooperation, information exchange, complementarity and



EPPO's Structure and characteristics

the avoidance of duplication.” Bearing in mind how organisations tend to guard their own turf to ensure that they and they alone have power there, that could prove the most difficult part, although awareness of that danger should go some way towards fending off the greatest risks. The rules are also fastidiously well-worded to minimise risks. Both bodies must carefully inform the relevant national authorities of any wrong-doing they uncover.

Get out of that, if you can!

The drafters of the new legislation were clearly well aware of the pitfalls and potential risks and they seem to have tried to make the rules as waterproof as possible. Their aim was to make this kind of malfeasance as difficult as possible, even if nothing will ever stop determined crooks from going after the family silver. As it

is, in parallel with EPPO’s criminal prosecutions, OLAF’s financial, administrative and disciplinary recommendations will continue to promote, if possible, the recovery of EU funds that have been misappropriated through dishonest means, as well as investigating conduct that could, theoretically, adversely affect the financial interests of the five EU member states not signed up to EPPO. In other words, EPPO will nevertheless look for evidence it can place before a court in a non-participating country in order to facilitate a prosecution and the recovery of funds. It would clearly be bad for those that are participating in EPPO and OLAF if criminals could easily access dishonest funds from neighbouring EU member states. As the explanatory press release puts it: “Effective cooperation and collaboration between the EPPO and OLAF will strengthen fight against fraud affecting the EU’s financial interests. Given the early stage of the EPPO’s operations, it remains to be seen how effectively and efficiently the offices will coordinate and cooperate in practice.”

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Chinese nuclear
missile DF-41

**A PAPER
TIGER GOES
BANG?**

**Mao Tse-Tung's
definition of the atom
bomb – but does
anyone have the will
to use one for real?**

“The atom bomb is a paper tiger,” said Mao Tse-Tung in an interview in 1946, “which the United States reactionaries use to scare people.” Mao then dismissed all reactionaries as “paper tigers” because nobody in their right mind would ever choose to fire an atom bomb for real, just in case your chosen enemy fires one back. However, the threat of a nuclear weapon heading their way has certainly scared a lot of people. I remember being taught what to do if an air raid siren sounded when I was attending primary school. The advice mainly consisted of saying “get under the desks”. Given that these were primary school desks and very small, it would have been rather difficult. It would also have been a pretty feeble – indeed, completely pointless – defence, too, so a better idea might have been to have fun and gorge yourself on sweets in whatever little time you had left. If you’re a tiny bit older, there might be other things you’d rather squeeze into your remaining few moments. Neither of these ideas would have provided any sort of protection, of course, but nor would hiding under an elderly wooden desk that was too small to conceal you.

It would almost certainly have been a case of “Goodnight, Vienna”, which in English usually means “that’s it, no more, there’s nothing left”, a sort of “end of the world” expression whose actual origins are somewhat shrouded in mist. It first appeared in 1932, before atomic or nuclear weapons existed anyway. Let’s just agree that if the East or the West were to unleash such horrors on their enemies that would almost certainly put an end to whatever conflict was involved, as



Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping

well as putting an end to you, your home and family, the man next door, your dog or cat, your local supermarket, and your political leaders. Everything and everyone, in other words. In real terms, I suppose, that means there’s not much point in trying to survive; who wants to be the last person left alive and in isolation, like Daniel Defoe’s “Robinson Crusoe”, stranded on a tropical island all alone? Better in any case



than being eaten by the bear that he and his friend Friday meet, but which turns out to be ticklish.

Now, of course, China is a very important and technologically well-advanced nation. China will not join the sanctions war the West is applying to Russia, but neither can it seriously choose to join with Russia in baiting the West. Chinese President Xi Jinping decided to defy Western sanctions by making an official and rather formal visit to Moscow. It seems to have been a fact-finding mission underneath all the pomp and ceremony: an opportunity to find out how a once-mighty and extremely large country is getting by, despite western sanctions. Both Russia and China are facing Western hostility, if for totally different reasons. Even so, the sanctions against them have a unifying effect. China is keen to find out what effect the sanctions regime is having on Russia, without experiencing it. Xi wants to gauge Moscow's stability under its enforced isolation, cut off from the world's industrial, cultural, and financial sectors. It almost mirrors what Washington has been trying to do to Beijing, turning away Chinese companies and denying them access to Western technologies, as well as markets. Finding new ways to help each other would seem to be a much more productive way to move forward (unless you're into tickling bears, that is).

China is still under United States embargo, albeit not as all-embracing as the one imposed on Russia. In China's case, it involved new export controls on microelectronics to China, whilst also adding an additional 110 Chinese companies to its list of those facing at least partial sanctions.

Ambition and disinterest



Robert Payne (bottom right) having dinner with Mao Zedong (first left). The third person from the left is Chu Teh, Commander in Chief of the Red Army. The photo was taken in Yenan just after the Long March in 1935

Where does one find true neutrality in a war? Well, clearly not in the capitals of globally important powers, such as the United States, Russia or China. China was deeply concerned to discover that American documents list both Russia and China as “key strategic adversaries” of the United States. The EU's wording is slightly more emollient than Washington's, but only slightly, classing China as a “systemic rival”, rather than an adversary. Such things matter in the lexicon of words about ‘enemies’, ‘friends’, ‘rivals’ and ‘adversaries’. But if anyone was hoping for a more conciliatory approach when Xi Jinping took over the leader's desk from Mao Zedong, they were doomed to disappointment. Just as things were back in the good (?) old days, as Tania Branigan puts it in her excellent book about the history of the cultural revolution, in which the death toll reached to between 500,000 and 2-million: [they didn't mess about in post-war China] these days Mao's country is “more educated, sophisticated and cynical. History does not repeat itself. But they say it rhymes.” China was driven, Branigan writes, in the truest sense: “propelled into the future by the forces at its back – and by one above all. Hundreds of millions lived out its consequences (Broken families and broken minds; an individualistic urge for survival; the rush to cut-throat capitalism; deep cynicism) without ever discussing it.” Branigan lived there as a western journalist and was able to watch its many horrors up close. And terrible it really was. There was even talk of cannibalism. In Inner Mongolia there were also allegations of mass torture.

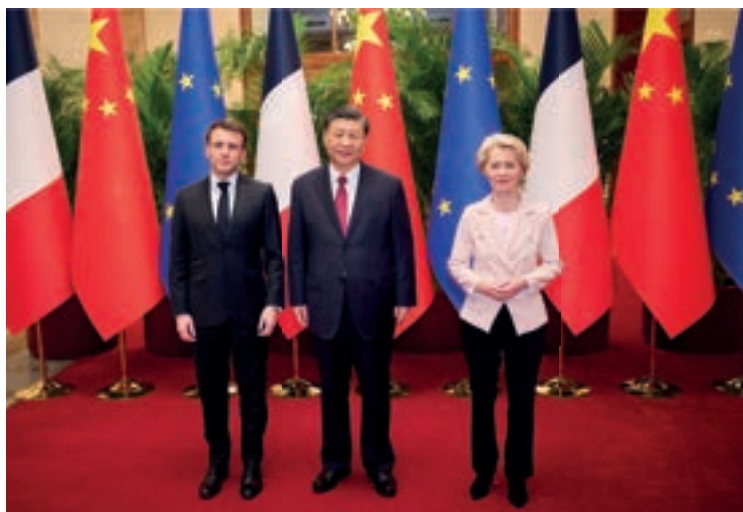
Under Mao, it was not unknown for history to be re-written to suit the leader. As Branigan says: “Back in 2012, observers understood his talk of history to magnify his vision of the ‘Chinese dream’, bringing the nation wealth and power worthy of the annals. We should have taken it more literally.”

It's how things had been done for a great many years. The British writer Robert Payne wrote about how rival generals and political leaders were pushing their own (very different) visions of the future. Payne attended a small private dinner at Yenan in July 1946 with Mao and his wife of that time, who entered, greeting everyone with the words “Nin hao”., which means “How are you?”. Payne was not certain he'd be allowed to meet Mao, who was known to be the intellectual leader of China's Communists. He was also a notable poet and Payne quotes one of his works, “The Snow”, in full in his book *Eyewitness*. I think it's a good poem, but I'm not a literary critic, so who am I to judge? Mao hated his poetry, according to Payne, and told him he had written “The Snow” in an aeroplane, on his way to Chungking to meet with Chiang Kai-shek. I especially like the last four lines:

“The Emperors Shih Huang and Wu Ti were barely cultured,
The Emperors Tai Tsung and Tai Tsu were lacking in feeling.
Genghis Khan knew only how to bend his bow at eagles.
These all belong to the past – only today are there men of feeling.”

When the dinner was over, Mao walked each of his guests individually to the door to see them out and say “goodbye”.

It's worth remembering that not very long after writing this thoughtful and slightly melancholy poem, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution, in which hundreds of thousand would die. It did, however, progress towards a much more modern future, as she reported to her newspaper, *The Guardian*, once she'd arrived in Beijing in 2008: “Ordinary lives were crammed with incident, jostled into action. Week by week my notebooks filled with flamboyant tycoons and dogged activists, factory girls and farmers; with explosions, corruption scandals and China's first gay beauty pageant.” The industrial revolution that hit Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries must have brought similar shocks, but



Emmanuel Macron, Xi Jinping, Ursula von der Leyen

in this case it was happening with lightning speed. Objections to the pace of change were few and far between. Nobody seriously raised objections to the fulfilment of Mao's great dream.

In a sense, history is repeating itself. Now world leaders are beating a path to Xi Jinping's door, trying to establish friendship even if they don't all know what that means. The list of recent visitors reads like a guest list at an EU summit: Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission; Charles Michel, President of the European Council; Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of Germany; Pedro Sanchez, Spain's Prime Minister; French President Emmanuel Macron; the list goes on and on, leaving the clear impression that there is some very heavy lobbying going on.

The French press mainly concludes that Macron wants to engage with Xi because of differences over the war in Ukraine and because Sino-European relations in general have been deteriorating, which helps nobody (although Russian leader Vladimir Putin may secretly cheer about it; he likes to see confusion spreading). The West, including the European Union, of course, wants very much for China to take its side in any disagreement with Putin. As an Élysée Palace spokesperson put it to a press conference, just before Macron's departure: "China is the only country in the world capable of having an immediate and radical impact on the conflict, in one direction or the other." Striking the right balance between trade and geopolitics is never easy either. But up to now, at least, Putin has shown no sign of halting his invasion or showing mercy to the Ukrainians, and nor has Xi Jinping given any really clear sign that he's on anyone's side in Russia's war there. Stay on the outside and stir the pot from time to time seems to be his policy.

friendly enemies or prickly friends?

Meanwhile, tensions between China and the United States seem to be getting ever-more tense.

China accuses America of being a bully and there is serious talk of the risk of a war. Xi believes the West is in decline and doesn't like the United States, nor its friends. Xi is certainly very unhappy about the ban on exporting American-designed microchips to China. Things have changed in

Beijing's corridors of power. Xi is unlikely to step aside for anyone or anything, which means he's likely to remain in power indefinitely. His visit to Moscow for talks with Putin is proof of his intent: a world order that favours his type of unrestricted personal one-man governance without any form of restraint. The world has seen a few such leaders down the years and they are not good, using their limitless powers merely to cement further their personal power. The Economist suggested of Xi that "his goal is to build an alternative world order that is friendlier to autocrats."

The West is not in the habit of putting itself on a war footing with a view to taking out those it sees as its enemies. It can, however, impose sanctions or simply stop permitting exports to its rivals of goods that they and their industries need. China views this as unfair bullying by a much richer country. It's vitally important, however, that trade in less sensitive goods continues to flourish and grow. That keeps both sides sitting around a table and enjoying the financial benefits that such a relationship brings. But the rivalry continues and the protagonists will inevitably seize whatever looks like offering an advantage. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has accused China of seeking to exploit Putin's current weakness to increase its own geopolitical influence. "Far from being put off by the atrocious and illegal invasion of Ukraine," she said, "President Xi is maintaining his 'no-limits friendship' with Putin's Russia." Looked at critically, however, it would seem we're all at war. It's a war of words, however, so let's hope we can keep it that way. As the old children's playground saying goes: "Sticks and stone may break my bones but words can never hurt me". They can, of course, but they don't knock down buildings or wipe out entire communities.





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Chinese Premier, Li Qiang Russian Prime Minister, Mikhail Mishustin

The South China Morning Post has pointed out, though, that in a recent telephone conversation, China's premier, Li Qiang called on Russia's Prime Minister, Mikhail Mishustin to help him to "deepen practical cooperation" between the two countries, whilst acknowledging that the West is watching closely Beijing's "tilt towards Moscow" as the newspaper put it. Washington has kept relatively quiet about China and Russia becoming more pally, but this is unlikely to last; Washington cannot tolerate Beijing and Moscow becoming too close in a friendship that is inevitably hostile towards Western thinking.

The Chinese are very well aware of the dangers of conflict. Take the case of Chinese Communist



© NPG

Chu Teh in 1937

General Chu Teh, who in the late 1940s invited Robert Payne to take tea with him. Payne talked about the enormous scale of a battle at Shihpingchieh, which had newly ended after much indiscriminate bloodshed. He wrote that Chu Teh was clearly adored by his soldiers, unlike the Kuomintang generals, despised for their uncaring cruelty. Chu Teh was not like that at all. The battle had been fought because the Kuomintang considered their forces unbeatable by their scruffily dressed enemy. They could not imagine losing to the Communists. The Kuomintang were very cruel and killed all Communists who fell into their hands. "As for us, we have no need to kill prisoners," Chu Teh told Payne. "We don't want a war, but when their troops attack us, what else can we do except fight back? There can be no peace with this fascist dictatorship." He told Payne that the Chinese people were helpless in the face of a new civil war. "Then there is no hope," Payne said to him in the form of a question, "the war will go on for ten more years?"

"There will be war unless there is a coalition government," Chu Teh responded. "We must have democracy, and democracy doesn't mean secret police, dictatorships, tortures, murders and the disappearance of people everywhere." Today's China – and Russia – could do with people like Chu Teh in charge. Are there any like him still about?

As it is, von der Leyen and Macron travelled to China with different agendas. Lots of different agendas. Von der Leyen, being an Atlanticist, had a slightly differing agenda from Macron. For one thing, she was representing the different views of 27 EU member states that by and large don't agree with each other. Additionally, committed Atlanticist though she is, she's under pressure from Washington to present a united front. Macron brought a range of French business leaders with him in a bid to sell France and its multifarious skills to the Chinese. In today's Europe, she can't afford to display any disparity in Europe's approach (or should that be 'approaches') to China. By comparison, Macron faced an easier task: one simple pro-French message and a background hope that his charm can win over Xi into a more pro-Western stance where Russia is concerned. A fair amount of flattery and flannel may be required. Of course, it's a skill Macron possesses in droves. His message to Xi, perhaps should be: "let them eat croissants".

The world is poised closer to the edge than its leaders would like, with only the French President and the President of the European Commission standing between careful diplomacy and bloody war. In their favour is the fact that nobody wants (and nor can they afford) a large-scale war. The villain in this particular piece, of course, is Putin: a despot who actually seems to want a war, mainly because nobody else does. A reluctance to stand against him would suit him well. We've been here before, of course, with different protagonists arguing over different issue, but the end result could still be enough to turn much of Europe and Russia into a blood-soaked battlefield. It would benefit nobody, of course, but Putin has not so far demonstrated an awareness of that, nor the perception to prevent it.

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HOW TWO UKRAINIAN TEENAGERS ESCAPED RUSSIAN CAPTIVITY



Nastia Mitrofanova and Masha Senchuk were held against their will in occupied territory



© SUSP LINE

A house shelled by the Russian army in the Kherson region

Two girls from occupied Kherson were taken far from home and held in prison-like conditions for months - until journalists helped them escape. Hundreds or perhaps thousands more Ukrainian children are still in Russian hands.

“Well, some other girls and I didn’t stand up for the anthem. So they held us there and started calling us names.” The 17-year-old from the Ukrainian city of Kherson describes what was initially supposed to be nothing more than a holiday arranged by the Russian authorities: a two-week trip from her then occupied hometown to a resort in Crimea.

But what she and her best friend thought would be a sunny break from the dreariness of wartime life turned into a months-long ordeal after they were held against their will, pressured into accepting Russian citizenship and housed in deplorable conditions under the strict supervision of Russian wardens.

Journalists from the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project’s (OCCRP) Ukrainian member centre, Slidstvo.Info, contacted the two Ukrainian girls last autumn after learning of their plight through their posts on social media. They communicated in secret and reported that they were being held as virtual prisoners far from home after being tricked into going to Crimea.



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Commissioner of the President of Ukraine for Children’s Rights and Rehabilitation, Daria Herasymchuk



© SUSP LINE

A house shelled by the Russian army in the Kherson region



The Henichesk road bridge was blown up by the Ukrainian military in order to stop the advance of Russian tanks

They and hundreds of other Ukrainian children were pressured to give up their mother tongue and become Russian citizens. Over the weeks, the two friends reported verbal abuse and horrific threats as they took photos and videos of their spartan living conditions.

The pressure seemed to increase day by day, and the journalists knew that publishing the material they had received could put the girls in grave danger. As they received little help from the Ukrainian authorities, they decided to help Nastia and Masha escape from the Russians and return to Ukraine.

On 17 March, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, his representative for children's rights. They are accused of being personally responsible for the mass illegal deportation of Ukrainian children to Russian-controlled areas, which is a war crime under international law.

The Ukrainian government states that several hundred thousand children have been deported to Russia and that over 19,000 specific cases have been identified.

Only a few hundred have made it back home, says Daria Gerasymchuk, the Ukrainian president's commissioner for children's rights.

"Behind each of these numbers is the fate of a rescued child," she says. "And behind each of these numbers is the fate of a rescued child," she says. "And a complex operation specifically designed to bring the children home."

Before Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Nastia and Masha were studying culinary arts in Kherson, a thriving port city of nearly 300,000 people.

But Kherson was occupied in the first days of the war as the Russian army swept through the region, and any prospect of staying in school was quickly gone. In the first months of the occupation, the Russians tore down Ukrainian symbols, hung Russian flags and installed a puppet administration. Some educational institutions fled the city; those that remained were confiscated and subjugated.

After six months, however, Masha applied to study at a university in Kherson that had been taken over by the Russians. Although there were no classes, she was rewarded with an offer of a free beach holiday in Crimea.

Although the girls lived only a few hours' drive from the peninsula, once a popular summer holiday destination for

Ukrainians, they had never been there. Russia had conquered Crimea in 2014 when they were 7 and 8 years old.

"I told Nastia we could go together," says Masha. "She also signed up quickly and we went."

Masha and Nastia say they left without their parents' consent and that teachers "helped" them with the permit paperwork. In Masha's case, they accepted a document signed by her cousin, even though it should have been filled out by her parents. In Nastia's case, she says, a woman signed in place of her mother and gave her age as 17 instead of 18 because the Crimean resort wouldn't accept a person of legal age.

"We were told we were going there for a fortnight, just kids on holiday," Nastia says. "We thought, 'Oh, great, we'll see Crimea and have a rest'."

On 8 October 2022, Nastia and Masha embarked on their journey. Along with hundreds of other children, they were taken in more than a dozen buses to resorts in Crimea. The two friends ended up in a resort called Zdravnytsia in the town of Evpatoriya.

There, their "re-education" began: Russian hymns, Russian lessons, Russian rules.

Still, Nastia recalls, those first days weren't so bad. "On the whole, it was more or less normal," she says, "if we had really been there for a fortnight and been brought back."

But as the deadline approached, the girls realised they'd not be taken home. When they asked the director of the resort if they could return to Kherson, he said no.

He justified this by saying that the return journey was uncertain; the Russian position in the region had become precarious under Ukrainian fire.

Then, on 11 November - over a month after Masha and Nastia arrived in Crimea - the Ukrainian army liberated their home town. The



Ukrainian children forced to board a minibus, under the supervision of a Russian soldier



Russian military personnel transporting Moldovan and Ukrainian citizens from the Kherson region to the territory of the Russian Federation

children of Kherson rejoiced at the news, Nastia recalls, and one girl ran through the corridors shouting, “Kherson is free! Glory to Ukraine!” But they also realised that the news meant they’d probably never go home again.

“The occupying state knew what it was doing,” says Kateryna Rashevskaya, a lawyer with the Ukrainian human rights organisation Regional Centre for Human Rights. “The girls were misled ... They were informed that [their trip] would be to Crimea for a certain period of time for a holiday. In reality, these are aspects of child abduction.”

In late December, Masha and Nastia were suddenly taken to a nearby Russian-occupied Ukrainian town, Henichesk, and placed in a local school.

“They took us to a dormitory and gave us the most horrible room,” Masha says. “We went in and I started crying. It was very cold.”

At this point, Slidstvo.Info journalists found the girls through their posts on social media. At the reporters’ request, they filmed their meagre living conditions. It was the height of the freezing Ukrainian winter, but the rooms were not heated, they said, and the administrators refused their requests for more blankets and electric heaters.

“Nastia and I slept in the same bed to keep warm,” Masha recalls. In the showers, which were shared by the whole floor, there was hot water only once a day for fifteen minutes at a time.

“We were under special scrutiny there, they checked us often,” says Nastia. “The ‘normal kids’ [local students] were allowed to go for a walk, but when we went out, for example, they asked us where we were going. I’d say, ‘to the shop.’ And they’d ask, ‘why?’”

Although the two girls prefer to speak Syryzhuk, a mixture of Russian and Ukrainian, they were forced to switch to Russian.

“At school we were forced to write in Russian.

I understood what they were saying, but I still wrote in Ukrainian. I do not know how to write in Russian. I thought if I learned Russian, I would get used to writing in Ukrainian.”

“We did not want to study at this university at all,” adds Masha.

Once, Nastia recounts, a man said to her, “Let me give you a Russian book and you’ll learn it little by little.”

“I said, ‘No, thank you,’” she recalls. “I am going back to Ukraine.’ Then he started saying something about naivety. They tried to convince me that I was either going to Russia or nowhere.”

The girls report that the school administration told all Ukrainian children to apply for Russian passports because they would have exams in the summer that they would not be able to pass without Russian documents.

The Ukrainian authorities consider such treatment a sign of genocide - an attempt to wipe out an entire people and their culture. Gerasymchuk, the children’s rights commissioner, says that when the government interviewed children who had managed to return to Ukraine, they told how they had been completely cut off from their families and pushed to assimilate.

“The Russians immediately confiscated mobile phones from almost all the children who were taken away. Which means that they did everything to prevent the children from reuniting with their families,” she says.

“The Russians are forcing Ukrainian children to learn Russian language, culture and history, to love Putin and thank him for saving them. By placing the children in the care of Russian citizens, they ‘devalue’ them as much as possible and erase their identity as part of the Ukrainian nation. They want to raise fighters who will then take action against Ukraine.”

Masha and Nastia’s situation became increasingly tense. Their treatment was getting worse: one day they begged a journalist to “get them out by Monday”

“We were told that on Monday people from the [Russian] military command would come,” Nastia told reporters.

The soldiers were known for their aggression against children who shouted Ukrainian patriotic slogans, she said, and threatened to “sew their mouths shut with black thread” She heard that two boys had been taken to a so-called “pit”

Desperate to free the girls, the journalists contacted several



Russian soldiers in Ukraine



Masha Senchuk with her father, Vitaliy

hotlines, including the Ministry of Reintegration, the Ukrainian Ombudsman for Human Rights and an NGO called Save Ukraine. None wanted to take responsibility for the abduction of minors without the official permission of their parents.

Masha's mother definitely did not want her to return to Ukraine and urged her to get a Russian passport and stay in the occupied territories. Her father - to whom Masha wanted to return - did not support the Russians, but was afraid that she would be injured or killed if she tried to escape.

The reporters decided that the only option was to organise the girls' escape themselves. Nastia and Masha used a weekend holiday to visit one of their mothers and left the hostel.

But although the university administration expected them back on Monday, the girls were already on their way home.

The details of the journey cannot be revealed here for fear that other Ukrainian children may not have the same means of escape. But their journey towards Ukraine first took Nastia and Masha much deeper into Russia. Using a series of buses and private cars organised by reporters, the girls travelled detours through several countries for four days - even though their home town was only 200 kilometres from the starting point.

In order to pass through a series of borders and checkpoints, they invented the story that they were going to attend a wedding in St. Petersburg. They entered a reporter into their phone as "Aunt Yuliya" and communicated with her as if she were a relative.

The reporters knew that once the girls went missing, the Russian authorities could issue a search warrant for them. If the message reached the border authorities in time, the girls could be prevented from leaving the country when their passports were checked.

Whenever they could, the girls kept the reporters informed of their progress, although there was a frightening time when they could not be reached.

The worst, they say, was the last Russian border crossing before entering the European Union.

"We stood outside for five hours, our documents were checked several times. It was snowing heavily and it was very cold," Nastia recalls. They were particularly worried about Masha, who could

be refused entry because she is a minor.

"I went up first, Nastia was behind me," says Masha. "I gave the border guard my papers. He called somewhere and asked if I could pass. They said yes, he stamped the papers and gave them back."

Finally, after 11 months under Russian occupation, the girls were back in Kiev. They were amazed when they heard Ukrainian spoken on the streets and prices in shops were in hryvnias instead of roubles.

Nastia stayed in the Ukrainian capital while journalists took Masha, the younger girl, back to her father Vitaliy, who now lives in a small town in central Ukraine.

"I did not know Masha had left," said Vitaliy, "if I had known, I would not have let her go."

He also said that he had spoken on the phone to one of his daughter's teachers at the school in Henichesk.

The teacher complained that Masha had dropped out of her studies. I told her: "She is studying in Kherson. She studied and is still studying," Vitaliy recalls. She said, "Let us not go into politics".

"They kill our children, pregnant women, and say, let us not talk about politics".

Anna Babinets and Yuliya Khymeryk
(Slidstvo.Info) - *Translation OCCRP*

Watch Slidstvo.info's documentary about Masha and Nastia, "Escape from the Russians."
With reporting by Yanina Korniienko.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPyWA9ZK4Qs>



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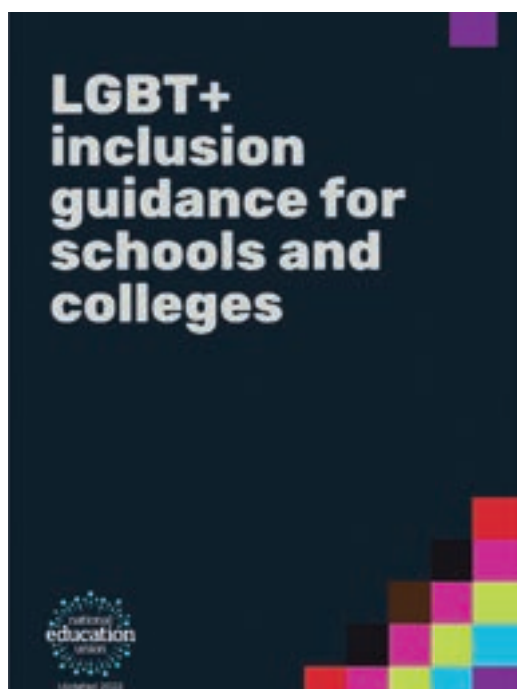
Children at the 2022 Manchester Pride Festival's programme of events especially for LGBTQ+ families and children

BECOMING
BLIND TO THE
OBVIOUS

**How some British
primary schools are
trying to eradicate
gender differences.**

At my primary school, in a scruffy industrial town on England's industrial Tyneside, references were made to "boys and girls" without – as far as I can tell – any ill effects. We all knew what we were and at that age didn't much care. The boys played together with other boys who shared their interests (usually football or cowboys and Indians or some similar rough-and-tumble) while the girls played amongst themselves, whatever games they liked and enjoyed. I never knew what those games were and nor was I interested in finding out. A serious interest in girls only came along when I reached my teens. I had two older sisters, and I never really understood their games, either. They never played with my train set with me, nor with my toy cowboys. I was convinced at an early age that boys and girls are different and have different tastes in terms of amusing themselves. It would now seem that in some schools an attempt is being made to eradicate those differences.

It's been reported (mainly in Britain's more right-wing newspapers) that in some schools the expression "girls and boys" has been banned (which would make it impossible to sing such nursery songs as "Boys and Girls Come Out to Play"), while the present government is allegedly seeking to ban teachers from attempting to "indoctrinate" pupils with political attitudes towards gender issues. I don't think it would have worked at my school; we all knew we were either girls or boys and even at the age of 8 or 9 I can recall boys in my class pointing to girls sitting cross-legged behind us on the floor



The NEU Guidance on LGBT+ inclusion for members; union reps and officers; heads, senior heads, PHSE and safeguarding leads; school governors/trustees; councillors, local authorities and community leaders



Miriam Cates

because it meant we could see their underwear. At that age, I wasn't very interested, although some of my friends clearly were. They were certainly aware that they shouldn't have been looking, even if some of the girls didn't seem to mind. Both knew it was "naughty" but didn't really understand how or why.

According to the UK's National Education Union (NEU), sexist behaviour remains a major issue in British schools, with some 37% of female students reporting incidents of sexual harassment, while 24% have reported incidents of unwelcome "touching". Furthermore, 66% of female students and 37% of male students in mixed-sex sixth forms have experienced or witnessed the use of sexist language in school, according to an NEU report. If true, it's a damning indictment of the way in which youngsters in Britain are raised at home. The teachers at my primary school would have been outraged if such incidents had been reported and punishment would have involved the use of the cane. I expect that some incidents of sexual behaviour that should not have happened nevertheless did but it's something that simply wasn't talked about. The NEU report is more concerned with secondary schools where bad behaviour motivated by sexual issues is more prevalent for obvious biological reasons. Sexual harassment in school is a gender issue, with the majority of cases involving boys targeting girls. "37% of girls report experiencing sexual harassment," says the NEU, "compared to 6% of boys." Female students are also significantly more likely to describe multiple incidents and more severe cases of sexual assault. They are also less likely to dismiss their experience as 'a joke'.

The solution is not, of course, to simply pretend that gender isn't an issue and that boys and girls are just the same. They're not. But "gender fluidity" – the changing of the gender in which a person identifies themselves – is not the same thing and it has been said that school children are being taught about it when they're too young to comprehend what it all means. In one case reported by Britain's Daily Mail, a group of 11-year-olds at a school in the Isle of Man were told by a guest speaker that there are 73 genders (other reports say it was 72 genders or even 74). A boy who stood up and pointed out that there are only two was allegedly told to leave the

room. If there really were so many different genders, it would have made visits to the local youth club dances unbearable (and very confusing). Instead of chatting up somebody of the clearly opposite gender, the participants would have had to spend the time desperately trying to work out who (and what) they were talking to. I can't help wondering about the context of the lecture and whether or not it was the tone of the boy's response that led to his removal. Reading that story makes me glad to be old.

Too much knowledge, too little understanding?

It's certainly true to say that not all of Britain's elected representatives are happy with what is currently being taught. One Conservative member of parliament, Miriam Cates, a member of the House of Commons Education Committee, has described the current education on sexual matters as "extreme and inappropriate". She admitted that the intentions were sound, but she alleged that the new framework for sex education had "opened the floodgates to a whole host of external providers who offer sex education materials to schools". She is quoted in *The Independent* newspaper as saying that: "children are being exposed across the country to a plethora of deeply inappropriate, wildly inaccurate, sexually explicit and damaging materials in the name of sex education." Cates said that the lessons currently contribute to confusion while reinforcing the pornography culture to which children are too often exposed. Cates told MPs that one parent had approached her, distraught because her 6-year-old had been receiving lessons about masturbation whilst the same teacher was also encouraging pupils to engage in conversations with adults about their private feelings and intimate behaviour, thus making them more vulnerable to those with predatory intentions. Additionally, Human Rights Watch (HRW) points out that a child's activities on-line can be studied through the app she (or he, presumably) uses to do her homework. Children log on, using an app assigned for the task in hand, but the data then goes to AdTech companies, specialising in

information analysis and the end user can then tell who the student is, where they live, how much the parents can afford to spend on a laptop and so on, merrily selling the data – without the student knowing – to data brokers, law enforcement agencies, government departments and so on. Welcome to the Brave New World. Aldous Huxley would have a fit. HRW wants to make it easier for students or their parents to block this flow of information. According to the *VICE World News Digest* (unfortunate name), there are more than 20,000 state-run schools in England (more in the UK as a whole, of course) but training modules on consent and internet safety have only been downloaded a few thousand times. By and large they seem to be being ignored.

Getting back to the gender issue, there has been much talk about the Tavistock Clinic, the UK's only gender identity clinic specifically for children and young people. It was supposed to help those who found themselves confused about their gender identity. The Clinic used puberty blockers to "help" those unsure about their genders, but that would have to be when the patients were very young and just entering or about to enter puberty; invariably under the age of 18. The National Health Service announced in July 2022 that it would close the facility, replacing it with a set of new regional centres with the aim, it said, of "ensuring the holistic needs" of its patients. One of the clinic's former patients, Keira Bell, brought a successful High Court case against it and has expressed her delight at its closure. "Many children will be saved from going down the path that I went down," she said. She claimed that her decision at the age of just 16 to undergo drugs treatment that turned her from female to male (at least physically) had not been challenged sufficiently. She later regretted her decision, while an internal report drew attention to a clinical decision for which there had been insufficient supporting evidence. By the time she changed her mind about the process she had been taking puberty blockers for around nine years and, at the age of 20, had undergone a double mastectomy. She said later that those patients clearly needed more mental health support and therapy before taking irreversible steps towards changing their gender.

The review examined the single specialist service which provided gender identity advice for children and young people: the Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust. One of the early findings was that the rapid increase in the number of children requiring support and the complex resulting case-mix meant that the extant clinical model, with a single national provider, was simply not sustainable in the longer term, leaving the service struggling to cope with its spiralling



Illustration on the Tavistock Centre's internet home page



A UK Department of Education internet advert

waiting lists. Staff found themselves coming under increasing pressure, with the numbers of people seeking the clinic's help having risen to twenty times its level a decade earlier.

The closure has also been welcomed by, among others, the LGBT rights group, Stonewall. Its spokesperson said that it was pleased to see the NHS addressing its "unacceptable" waiting times, which invariably faced young trans people trying to access gender-identity health care. I may be guilty of misjudgement here, at least in some cases, but I get the impression of young medical practitioners willing to try out experimental ideas on their young patients in the hope of making a name for themselves. And, of course, making lots of money, too, although I'm sure they meant well. Even so, it's reckoned that the UK government is failing on its promise to give the lessons about sex and inter-personal relationships that it promised.

According to data released under Freedom of Information laws, only a tiny proportion of English primary and secondary schools have downloaded the available teacher training modules on things like consent and internet safety, covering such issues as relationships, sex education, pornography and sexual health, although the new curriculum has been mandatory for all schools since September 2020. It made education about relationships compulsory in primary schools,

with students ranging in age from 5 to 11, and education on relationships and sexual matters at secondary schools, teaching students aged 11 to 18. It's the first time such education has been compulsory, but experts say that the modules have only been downloaded in a minority of schools. It's reckoned that fewer than one in five schools have teachers who have studied the modules.

What is your child learning?

As animals (albeit human ones) that rely on sex as a way of continuing the survival of our species, we are remarkably ignorant about it. According to Jacqueline Gold, who built up the Ann Summers empire and who recently died of breast cancer, she had a tough job convincing the (all-male, all-middle-aged) board of the company that women would buy the products at all. In 1981, she said, the board remained unconvinced that women could be encouraged to buy racy underwear and sex toys, with one board member stating that "women aren't even interested in sex". Strange that our species continues, then, really. Perhaps it just goes to prove that most of us men just aren't much good at it.

A group of parents in Wales lost a legal challenge they brought against the teaching of gender identity and sex in primary schools. Campaigners had described the policy, known as Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) as "woke" and "dangerous", mainly because they seem to have wanted there to be no mention of the matter at all in schools. The parents complained that it involved mandatory teaching of various aspects of the subject from the age of seven, but without mentioning traditional things such as family life. They said it gave too much prominence to LGBTQ+ themes. The judge, however, Mrs. Justice Steyn, rejected the challenge, pointing out that: "There is nothing in the code or the guidance that authorises or positively approves teaching that advocates or promotes any particular identity or sexual lifestyle over another, or that encourages children to self-identify in a particular way."

The judge said that the curriculum aimed to "encourage tolerance between human beings irrespective of their sexual orientation and identity, and to enable children to deal critically with influences from society, so that they develop into responsible and emancipated citizens capable of participating in the democratic processes of a pluralistic society." The judge's decision was welcomed by the education minister in the Welsh government, Jeremy Miles. He said he had been appalled by



Jacqueline Gold (center) at a photo shoot on 9 June 2008, outside the Ann Summers shop on New Oxford Street, London, England



© GOW WALES

Minister for Education and Welsh Language Jeremy Miles

“the misinformation that has been purposefully spread by some campaigners, and the additional pressure this has brought upon some schools and workforce.” The campaigners seemed to believe that young people would never consider gender issues if they didn’t know such opinions were held by anyone. I’m not so sure.

There is no doubt, however, that the new British sex education curriculum has its opponents, and we must concede that they have a point. Do children need to know about the possibility of gender change or the “choice” of homosexuality? They may become interested in such possibilities anyway if they find themselves that way inclined, but is there not a risk that the knowledge itself may encourage them to develop further interest? I don’t know the answer to that; I’m not a psychologist. A number of the parents can be seen shown protesting with banners bearing such slogans as: “Let kids be kids” and “My child, my choice.” A number of the parents are East Asians, objecting to the lessons on religious grounds, which is understandable (although I am not religious).

Back when I was at school, of course, nobody thought about sex education (or even about sex), and it was something that nobody at home would ever talk about, either.

The new guidance on LGBTIQ+ insists that even primary school students must learn something about it. Under its rules, the existence of LGBTIQ families must be explained and schools must increase the amount of time they spend teaching about such issues as menstrual health and informed consent, as well as introducing new guidance on the risks involved in social media and the Internet, such as “sexting” and “revenge porn”, described in a British court as: “sharing private sexual pictures and videos with intent to cause distress”. It’s a very unpleasant offence and can be extremely

damaging to the victim. Thinking back to how ill-informed we were when I was young it’s amazing we grew up to produce families at all.

There are large numbers of parents in the UK, especially those of a religious inclination, who totally oppose sex education. They’re especially keen to get teaching about LGBTQ relationships removed from the curriculum, as if ignoring the subject totally will make it go away. Under the new RSE strategy, parents can withdraw their children from sex education lessons, but only if the head teacher agrees. Furthermore, the children themselves can choose to opt back into the sex education curriculum, beginning three terms before their 16th birthday. Is ignorance the best solution? Not to avoiding an unwanted pregnancy. A number of young women told researchers that they could not see how a woman could have an orgasm, never having had one themselves. One young British Indian woman told Open Democracy that her first experience of sex was with an Uncle; she had been too traumatised to say “no” and her mother was out of the country. Ignorance is no defence, unfortunately, leaving the way open for people with strongly held views to tell lies.

Relationships and sex education have been compulsory subjects in British schools since 2020, but not everyone is happy about that. Now the government is to look into how sex education is administered to check that it does not expose children to ‘inappropriate content’. The review will be carried out by the Department of Education. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak wants to ensure that children will not have ‘contested content’ in their lessons. Teaching unions fear the review is politically motivated, inspired by the claims of one MP that children are being taught about oral sex.

An internet advertising from Split Banana, a group based in London, who charges schools for its courses. “Our workshops are age-differentiated for all secondary school year groups 7-13” says Split Banana on the website. Some schools pay as much as € 7,000 for a 50 hour workshop that includes six hours of teacher training, which incorporates a session on ‘how to talk about porn’

The need for lessons about sex and relationships is brought into focus by the hate mail frequently targeted, it seems, at female television news journalists. If young men (most of the senders seem to be young men) have such strange ideas about women, then some might argue that they have not



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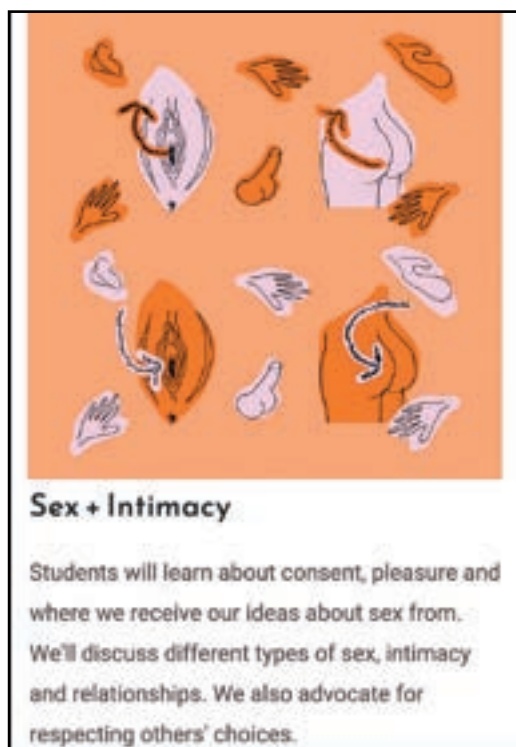


Illustration from advisory group Split Banana, for the promotion of the 'Reshaping Relations, Sex & Health Education (RSHE)' programme

been taught enough about them. I have never understood people who hate others for no real reason. Attacks on gay people, for instance, make no sense since homosexuality is not a lifestyle choice but a condition the person concerned has been born with. Beatings by people who would describe themselves as "normal" won't change a thing. In my view it's not "normal" to want to beat anyone, for whatever reason, especially for sexual tastes that are an accident of birth and over which the victim has no control. Wanting to inflict violence on strangers is far more "deviant" than being gay, which isn't "deviant" at all; just a fact of life.

Cates posed a question to Sunak over what she claimed were "graphic lessons in oral sex and how to choke your partner safely" (really?), as well as that claim about there being 72 (or 73 or



Edward N. Trifonov

74) genders. "Across the country, children are being subjected to lessons that are age-inappropriate, extreme, sexualising and inaccurate," she alleged, "often using resources from unregulated organisations that are actively campaigning to undermine parents. This is not a victory for equality – it is a catastrophe for childhood." It strikes me as very odd; why would these "unregulated organisations" to do this? What advantage could they gain from undermining "normal" parents in such a way? It reads suspiciously like the sort of headline horror story often printed in Britain's more right-wing newspapers to scare what the publishers consider to be "we of the majority".

You will not be surprised to discover that an Internet search for "sex education" throws up a great many suggestions, whose titles will give you a clear guide to what the underlying theme may be. Some will try to persuade you that sex education is unnecessary while others will flag it up as essential. Some will entangle it with religious instruction, others will propose total abstinence as the only safe way. Well, it's certainly the most reliable way of preventing an unwanted pregnancy, but probably not the best way to ensure that the partners in any sex act know how to go about it in a way that the other person taking part will be likely to enjoy. For a start, we want to ensure that life continues, but there's no clear definition of what life is. The geneticist Edward Trifonov distilled the various definitions down to "self-reproduction with variations". NASA went further as its staff started the hunt for life based on a single set of formulae, settling on "a self-sustaining chemical system capable of Darwinian evolution". Not, perhaps, the most romantic way to put it, but NASA scientists were not looking for romance (at least, not in their work).

On Earth, life relies on deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), made of two strands twisted together: adenine, guanine, cytosine and thymine. These bases and sugar phosphates together form nucleotides that carry the instructions for making more. Remember this the next time you are engaged in the act of reproduction. What's more, we don't know if life on other worlds (if it exists at all) follows the same blueprint. Still, if the human race is to carry on then today's practitioners of reproductive acts have to know how to go about it, although we could perhaps discover that other methods are feasible, producing what astrobiologists refer to as LAWDKI – **Life As We Don't Know It**. Unless it depends on parthenogenesis, of course: a type of asexual reproduction in which a female gamete or egg cell develops into an individual without fertilization.

Certain animals, including most kinds of wasps, bees, and ants, that lack sex chromosomes reproduce this way. Even some reptiles and fish can do it, as can a number of plants. Sex education would be lost on them. I cannot say I envy them.

Meanwhile, the argument rages on, with parents at one school accusing teaching staff of indulging in pornography for showing the pupils Michelangelo's 16th century sculpture of David. When mankind's intellectual endeavours have sunk to that sort of depth one can begin to see that humankind's extinction might not be such a bad thing after all.

Martin Gardiner

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THIS WEBSITE HAS BEEN SEIZED



OPERATION COOKIE MONSTER

Genesis Market's domains have been seized by the FBI pursuant to a seizure warrant issued by the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Wisconsin. These seizures were possible because of international law enforcement and private sector coordination involving the partners listed below.

To determine if you have been victimized, visit:
haveibeenpwned.com or politie.nl/checkyourhack

Been active on Genesis Market? In contact with Genesis Market administrators?
Email us, we're interested: FBIMW-Genesis@fbi.gov

FBI

Logos of participating law enforcement agencies: POLITI, AFP, Guardia Civil, NCA, Europol, Eurojust, POLIISI, POLITIE, Polisen, and others.

**TAKEDOWN OF
NOTORIOUS HACKER
MARKETPLACE
SELLING YOUR
IDENTITY TO
CRIMINALS**

**Genesis
Market listed
for sale the
identities of
over 2 million
people when
it was shut
down**

An unprecedented law enforcement operation involving 17 countries has resulted in the takedown of Genesis Market, one of the most dangerous marketplaces selling stolen account credentials to hackers worldwide. As a result of an action day on 4 April, this illegal service was shut down and its infrastructure seized.

Simultaneous actions were also carried out across the globe against the users of this platform, resulting in 119 arrests, 208 property searches and 97 knock and talk measures.

This international sweep was led by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Dutch National Police (Politie), with a command post set up at Europol's headquarters on the action day to coordinate the different enforcement measures being carried out across the globe.

Genesis Market was considered one of the biggest criminal facilitators, with over 1.5 million bot listings totalling over 2 million identities at the time of its takedown.

Why was Genesis Market so dangerous?

Genesis Market's main criminal commodity was digital identities. This marketplace would offer for sale what the market owners referred to as 'bots' that had infected victims' devices through malware or account takeovers attacks.

Upon purchase of such a bot, criminals would get access to all the data harvested by it such as fingerprints, cookies, saved logins and autofill form data. This information was collected in real time – the buyers would be notified of any change of passwords, etc.

The price per bot would range from as little as USD 0.70 up to several hundreds of dollars depending on the amount and nature of the stolen data. The most expensive would contain financial information which would allow access to online banking accounts.

The criminals buying these special bots were not only provided with stolen data, but also with the means of using it. Buyers were provided with a custom browser which would mimic the one of their victim. This allowed the criminals to access their victim's account without triggering any of the security measures from the platform the account was on. These security measures include recognising a different log-in location, a different browser fingerprint or a different operating system.

In addition, unlike other criminal marketplaces, Genesis Market was accessible on the open web, although obscured from law enforcement behind an invitation-only veil. Its accessibility and cheap prices greatly lowered the barrier of entry for buyers, making it a popular resource among hackers.

The law enforcement response

The takedown of Genesis Market was a priority for law enforcement given the platform's ability to facilitate all types of cybercrime.

Europol's European Cybercrime Centre (EC3) has been supporting this investigation since 2019 by coordinating the international activity with the help of the Joint Cybercrime Action Taskforce (J-CAT) hosted at Europol. EC3's support included data analysis, the organisation of operational meetings and the facilitation of the information exchange. A command post was also set-up at Europol's headquarters in The Hague, the Netherlands to ensure the smooth running of the action day across the world.

Eurojust actively facilitated the cross-border judicial cooperation

between the national authorities involved. The Agency hosted a coordination meeting in March 2023 to prepare for this week's operation and hosted a command center on 4 April to resolve any legal issues arising during the parallel operations in 13 countries.

Commenting on this operation, the Head of Europol's European Cybercrime Centre, Edvardas Šileris, said:

Through the combined efforts of all the law enforcement authorities involved, we have severely disrupted the criminal cyber ecosystem by removing one of its key enablers. With victims located across the globe, the strong relationships with our international partners were critical in the success of this case.

How to tell whether your data was stolen

With over 1.5 million bots listed on Genesis Market, chances are that your credentials have already ended up for sale on this criminal marketplace.

The Dutch Police has developed a portal to check whether your information has been compromised. Visit <https://www.politie.nl/checkyourhack> and fill in your email address to control whether it is part of a Genesis Market leak.

If your digital identity has been stolen, here are the steps you should take:

1. Run your antivirus programme. In most cases, your antivirus will catch the malware and remove it. Only then should you change all your passwords – not before if you do not want the cybercriminals getting their hands on them.

2. Notify relevant stakeholders. Your bank, insurance company and any other important third party should be made aware of your identify theft.

Remember that cybercriminals are quick at adapting their techniques to benefit from any opportunity. There are simple preventive actions you can take to make it more difficult for them to access your devices and data:

- If available, use antivirus software on all your electronic devices.
- Keep your software updated, including your browser, antivirus and operating system.
- Browse and download only official versions of software and always from trusted websites.
- Be wary while browsing the internet and do not click on suspicious links, pop-ups or dialog boxes.
- Think twice before clicking on links or attachments within unexpected emails.
- Set up unique passwords. Generate strong passwords or passphrases for each individual website and service. This is where the use of a password manager comes in handy.
- Activate multifactor authentication functionality whenever possible for all of your accounts.

Source : Europol



THE CREDIT RATING CONTROVERSY

**Rating agencies facing
discrepancies**



The headquarters of Silicon Valley Bank at 3003 West Tasman Drive, Santa Clara, California

The rating industry, dominated by the three main auditors - Standard & Poor's (S&P), Moody's, Fitch Ratings and KPMG - has come under fire for inconsistencies in its rating methods. As gatekeepers of the financial world, these agencies have an immense impact on global markets as their ratings dictate investment decisions and influence the cost of borrowing.

Despite their importance, these rating agencies face discrepancies in their ratings that sometimes have drastic consequences for investors and markets. The discrepancies can be attributed to several factors, including the agencies' reliance on subjective assessments, possible conflicts of interest and different methodologies.

One of the most notable cases of inconsistency occurred during the 2008 financial crisis, when mortgage-backed securities were assigned inflated credit ratings that ultimately contributed to the collapse of the market. This catastrophic event highlighted the limitations of credit rating agencies' methodologies and called into question the reliability of their credit ratings.

Another problem is the potential conflict of interest, as these auditors derive their income from the companies they evaluate. This creates a situation where credit rating agencies (CRAs) may have an incentive to give higher ratings in order to obtain more business, which undermines the objectivity and credibility of their ratings.

Different methodologies among the three major auditors also contribute to discrepancies in credit ratings. Although they all assess credit risk based on similar factors, their procedures and weightings differ, leading to inconsistencies. For example, S&P places more emphasis on quantitative factors, while Moody's focuses on qualitative aspects and Fitch Ratings takes a more balanced approach.

These inconsistencies can lead to rating shopping, where companies seek the most favourable rating from one of the agencies, further undermining the credibility of the rating system. This practice undermines confidence in the rating process and can contribute to market instability as investors struggle to determine the true creditworthiness of securities.

The ongoing debate about the role and reliability of credit rating agencies has led to calls for reform, with regulators and industry stakeholders pushing for greater transparency and

standardisation of methodologies. Initiatives such as the European Union Regulation on Credit Rating Agencies and the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act in the United States are steps in this direction.

But despite these efforts, inconsistencies in ratings remain a pressing problem. Addressing these discrepancies and ensuring that ratings provide an accurate, reliable and unbiased assessment of credit risk is critical for the global financial system to thrive. Only then can investors and market participants make informed decisions that ultimately promote financial stability and growth.

The recent collapses of Silicon Valley Bank and FTX, as well as the subsequent financial problems of First Republic Bank and Credit Suisse, have put the spotlight on the role of US auditors in monitoring the financial health of companies. Auditors are tasked with reviewing companies' financial records and providing an independent assessment of their financial health. In the case of these two companies, however, auditors failed to spot the warning signs of financial distress.

In the case of Silicon Valley Bank, examiners failed to identify the company's substantial exposure to the insolvent energy company Greensill Capital. The bank's heavy dependence on Greensill's business made it vulnerable to its collapse, which eventually led to the bank's insolvency.

Similarly, FTX, a cryptocurrency exchange, collapsed due to the lack of oversight by its auditors. The exchange's auditors failed to identify the exchange's significant exposure to risky derivatives trading and lack of internal controls.

In the case of First Republic Bank, the Bloomberg tax platform says: "KPMG Gave First



FTX former CEO Samuel Benjamin Bankman-Fried



First Republic Bank 111 Pine Street, San Francisco, California

Republic a Clean Audit Weeks Before Bailout. KPMG signed off on the institution's 2022 financial statements on 28 February, but gave no indication that the bank's survival was at risk.

The Big Four accounting firm declined to comment on the bank's bailout. KPMG has previously stated that auditors cannot predict "unforeseen events or management actions" that occur after the report to investors"

The errors committed by the auditors in these cases raise questions about the adequacy of their control procedures. Many have criticised auditors for not being vigilant enough in identifying financial risks and for not holding companies accountable for their actions.



Lehman Brothers Rockefeller Centre. The Manhattan headquarters of Lehman Brothers before their bankruptcy in 2008

This financial mess has also highlighted the need for stronger regulatory oversight of financial institutions. Regulators have been called upon to take a more active role in monitoring the financial health of companies and holding auditors accountable for their mistakes.

The failure of auditors in these cases also shows the importance of transparency in financial reporting. Companies need to be more transparent in disclosing their financial risks and vulnerabilities, and auditors need to be more rigorous in scrutinising their financial records.

During the 2008 financial crisis, US auditors came under fire for their role in the collapse of the subprime mortgage market. Securities backed by subprime mortgages, which were marketed as low-risk investments, turned out to be far riskier than originally thought.

The auditors who were responsible for assessing the risks associated with these securities failed to recognise the warning signs of impending collapse. Many of them had given the subprime mortgage securities a high rating, leading investors to believe that these investments were safe.

The examiners' ratings were based on faulty assumptions about the stability of the housing market and the ability of borrowers to repay their loans. They did not take into account the impact of rising interest rates, falling property prices or the high number of arrears and defaults.

As a result of these mistakes, investors lost billions of dollars and the global financial system was thrown into chaos. The collapse of the subprime mortgage market led to a wave of foreclosures, bankruptcies and job losses affecting millions of people.

In response to the crisis, regulators introduced a series of measures to improve the transparency and accountability of the accounting industry. They also introduced stricter regulations for the financial sector, including stricter disclosure and reporting requirements.

Despite these reforms, there are still concerns that auditors are not doing enough to identify and address potential financial risks. Critics argue that auditors are too dependent on management and do not always act in the best interests of investors.

In summary, US auditors' mistakes in valuing the subprime mortgage market were a key factor in the 2008 financial crisis. The collapse of the subprime mortgage market led to significant losses for investors and had a profound impact on the global economy. The crisis highlighted the need for greater transparency and accountability in the accounting industry and led to significant regulatory reforms.

Watchdogs' crucial role in navigating banking crisis

The banking crisis has highlighted the crucial role of banking supervisors in maintaining financial stability and avoiding systemic risk in the global financial system.

As regulators and supervisors of financial institutions, banking regulators such as the Federal Reserve and the Financial Conduct Authority are tasked with identifying and mitigating potential risks in the banking sector.



Credit Suisse, Paradeplatz in Zürich, Switzerland

In the midst of a crisis, these regulators are tasked with closely monitoring the health of individual banks and the financial system as a whole, ensuring adequate liquidity and maintaining depositor and investor confidence.

Early detection of irregularities and vulnerabilities is crucial, as banking supervisors can then take corrective action to prevent financial turmoil from escalating.

During a crisis, supervisors must act decisively by enforcing strict prudential standards such as capital requirements and stress tests to ensure that banks have sufficient buffers to absorb losses and continue operations.

An essential part of the role of banking supervisors is to promote transparency and accountability within financial

institutions by enforcing strict reporting and disclosure requirements.

In addition to supervising banks, banking supervisors are also responsible for safeguarding consumer interests and ensuring that financial products and services are offered in a fair and transparent manner.

Banking supervisors also have the power to impose sanctions or penalties on financial institutions that fail to comply with prudential regulations, thereby protecting the financial system from misconduct.

Recent events have exposed the failures of these regulators, raising concerns about the safety and stability of the US banking system.

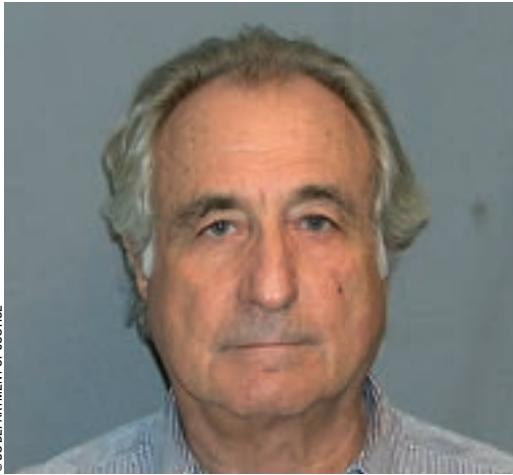
One of the most notable examples of this failure was the Wells Fargo scandal, in which the bank set up millions of fake accounts to achieve its sales goals. Despite warnings from employees and customers, banking regulators did not act until years later, when the damage had already been done.

Other banks were also caught engaging in illegal or unethical behaviour, such as money laundering or discriminatory lending practices. In many cases, regulators were slow to react or imposed weak penalties that did not deter future misconduct.

Another example of regulatory failure is the Madoff scandal involving the largest Ponzi scheme in history. This financial fraud shed light on significant shortcomings in regulatory oversight and the role of financial regulators in detecting and preventing fraud.



U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission headquarters in Washington



© US DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Bernard Madoff's mugshot in 2009

Bernard Madoff, a respected figure in the financial world, managed to deceive investors for decades, eventually swindling them out of an estimated \$65 billion before his scheme collapsed in 2008. Regulators, including the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), were criticised for failing to recognise and respond to the warning signals triggered by Madoff's investment activities.

Critics argue that the failures of bank regulators are due to a lack of resources, political pressure or a revolving door between regulators and the banks they supervise. Some have called for greater transparency and accountability in the regulatory process, while others have suggested that the government should take a more active role in supervising the banking sector.

In response to the Madoff scandal, financial regulators have since tightened their regulatory frameworks by introducing stricter reporting requirements and increasing transparency in the financial sector.

The Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, passed in 2010, was a



President Barack Obama meets with Rep. Barney Frank, (D-Mass), Sen. Dick Durbin, (D-Ill), and Sen. Chris Dodd, (D-Conn), in the Green Room of the White House prior to a financial regulatory reform announcement June 17, 2009

direct result of the Madoff scandal. It expanded the regulatory powers of SEC and increased its resources to better detect and prevent financial fraud.

Unfortunately, over the years, other financial scandals and market turmoil have revealed some weaknesses and failures in the implementation of this regulation:

- complexity and cost leading to increased compliance burdens, especially for smaller banks
- inability to fully address the "too big to fail" problem
- limitations of the Volcker Rule
- controversies surrounding the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau
- incomplete implementation of some provisions
- regulatory fragmentation
- insufficient international coordination in addressing global financial risks.



© GAGE SKIDMORE

US Congressman Jeb Hensarling sharply criticised the Dodd-Frank Act. He called it an "Orwellian law" that Washington is hurting consumers and calling it consumer protection, and providing subsidies to Wall Street firms while calling it Wall Street reform

There were discussions and proposals to amend, replace or repeal the legislation. One notable proposal was the Financial CHOICE (Creating Hope and Opportunity for Investors, Consumers, and Entrepreneurs) Act, introduced in 2016 by then-Republican congressman, Jeb Hensarling.

The Financial CHOICE Act aimed to:

1. Replace the Dodd-Frank Act's "orderly liquidation" with a new bankruptcy process for large financial institutions.
2. Modify the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) by changing its structure, funding and scope of authority.
3. Repeal of the Volcker Rule, which prohibited banks from proprietary trading and certain investment activities.
4. Simplify and adjust financial regulations to reduce the compliance burden on smaller financial institutions.
5. Strengthen penalties for financial fraud and insider trading to increase accountability in the financial industry.

The Financial CHOICE Act was passed by the House of Representatives in 2017 but was not taken up by the Senate. Although there is currently no direct replacement for the Dodd-Frank Act, ongoing discussions on financial regulation and legislative proposals in response to perceived shortcomings and the evolving nature of the financial system are likely to continue.

James Lookwood

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TIMELESS CHIC

STANDOUT FASHION AND BEAUTY TRENDS

MEET THE 'VANILLA GIRL'

She loves a cream colour palette, her makeup is simple and natural, her home decor is inspired by minimalism and serenity...Here's a complete guide to the #vanillagirl aesthetic that's so hot on social media.

The Vanilla Girl wardrobe

The 'Vanilla Girl' style ranges from white blouses to cream-coloured trousers and dresses. It's minimalist but trendy and includes all the basic elements you need for your 'capsule wardrobe', only in a very muted colour palette.

Materials are also important, and you should opt for soft, comfortable loungewear and outfits with flowing lines.



© INSTAGRAM @COCOBEAUTEA



© INSTAGRAM @ROSIEHW



© CHLOÉ

- 1 Virgin wool blazer
(Chloé spotted on mytheresa.com)



© VOZ

- 2 High waist and wide legs silk trousers
(Voz spotted on farfetch.com)



© FILIPPA K

- 3 Fine ribbed tank top
(Filippa K. spotted on farfetch.com)



© STEVEMADDE

- 4 Leather high-heeled pumps
(stevemadden.eu)



© INSTAGRAM

The Vanilla Girl makeup

This trend is all about enhancing the radiance of the skin and the natural features of the face and looking natural and healthy with minimal makeup.

How do you achieve the Vanilla Girl look? With a light, dewy foundation, soft pink blush applied to the upper part of the cheekbones and a nude-coloured lipstick or, even better, a lip gloss that is slightly tinted but also moisturising to create a natural plumpness.



© CHARLOTTE TILBURY

- 1 Hollywood Flawless Filter: get your glow on with this award-winning foundation (charlottetilbury.com)



© NARS

- 2 Liquid blush: a highly pigmented liquid blush that brings a flush of natural-looking colour to all skin tones (narscosmetics.com)



© SEPHORA

- 3 Outrageous Plumping Lip Gloss: this high-shine lip gloss makes lips look fuller and plumper. (sephora.com)



© H&M

The Vanilla Girl home decor

The Vanilla Girl aesthetic is all about neutrally shaded bouclé or fluffy fabrics, and monochrome decorations (candles, mugs, cushions) that combine luxury and simplicity. This trend also helps to satisfy the desire for a cosy and serene home.

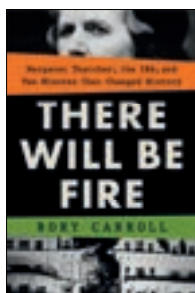


© CHARLIE KAT

- Snuggle fleece cushion with a deep pile, zip off, washable cover (habitat.co.uk)



BOOKS



There Will Be Fire

Margaret Thatcher, the IRA, and Two Minutes That Changed History

By Rory Carroll

A race-against-the-clock narrative that finally illuminates a history-changing event: the IRA's attempt to assassinate Margaret Thatcher and the epic manhunt that followed.

A bomb planted by the Irish Republican Army exploded at 2:54 a.m. on October 12, 1984. It was the last day of the Conservative Party Conference at the Grand Hotel in the coastal town of Brighton, England. Rooms were obliterated, dozens of people wounded, five killed. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was in her suite when the explosion occurred; had she been just a few feet in another direction, flying tiles and masonry would have sliced her to ribbons. As it was, she survived—and history changed.

There Will Be Fire is the gripping story of how the IRA came astonishingly close to killing Thatcher, in the most spectacular attack ever linked to the Northern Ireland Troubles. Journalist Rory Carroll reveals the long road to Brighton, the hide-and-seek between the IRA and British security services, the planting of the bomb itself, and the painstaking search for clues and suspects afterward.

In *There Will Be Fire*, Carroll draws on his own interviews and original reporting, reveals new information, and weaves together previously unconnected threads. *There Will Be Fire* is journalistic nonfiction that reads like a thriller, propelled by a countdown to detonation.



How Smart Machines Think

By Sean Gerrish
Foreword by Kevin Scott

Everything you've always wanted to know about self-driving cars, Netflix recommendations, IBM's Watson, and video game-playing computer programs.

The future is here: Self-driving cars are on the streets, an algorithm gives you movie and TV recommendations, IBM's Watson triumphed on *Jeopardy!* over puny human brains, computer programs can be trained to play Atari games. But how do all these things work? In this book, Sean Gerrish offers an engaging and accessible overview of the breakthroughs in artificial intelligence and machine learning that have made today's machines so smart.

Gerrish outlines some of the key ideas that enable intelligent machines to perceive and interact with the world. He describes the software architecture that allows self-driving cars to stay on the road and to navigate crowded urban environments; the million-dollar Netflix competition for a better recommendation engine (which had an unexpected ending); and how programmers trained computers to perform certain behaviors by offering them treats, as if they were training a dog. He explains how artificial neural networks enable computers to perceive the world—and to play Atari video games better than humans. He explains Watson's famous victory on *Jeopardy!*, and he looks at how computers play games, describing AlphaGo and Deep Blue, which beat reigning world champions at the strategy games of Go and chess. Computers have not yet mastered everything, however; Gerrish outlines the difficulties in creating intelligent agents that can successfully play video games like *StarCraft* that have evaded solution—at least for now. Gerrish weaves the stories behind these breakthroughs into the narrative, introducing readers to many of the researchers involved, and keeping technical details to a minimum. Science and technology buffs will find this book an essential guide to a future in which machines can outsmart people.



George VI and Elizabeth

The Marriage That Saved the Monarchy

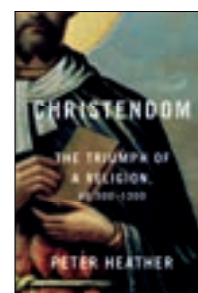
By Sally Bedell Smith

A revelatory account of how the loving marriage of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth saved the monarchy during World War II, and how they raised their daughter to become Queen Elizabeth II, based on exclusive access to the Royal Archives— from the bestselling author of *Elizabeth the Queen and Prince Charles*.

Granted special access by Queen Elizabeth II to her parents' letters and diaries and to the papers of their close friends and family, Sally Bedell Smith brings the love story of this iconic royal couple to vibrant life. This deeply researched and revealing book shows how a loving and devoted marriage helped the King and Queen meet the challenges of World War II, lead a nation, solidify the public's faith in the monarchy, and raise their daughters, Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret.

When King Edward VIII abdicated the throne in 1936, shattering the Crown's reputation, his younger brother, known as Bertie, assumed his father's name and became King George VI. Shy, sensitive, and afflicted with a stutter, George VI had never imagined that he would become King. His wife, Elizabeth, a pretty, confident, and outgoing woman who became known later in life as "the Queen Mum," strengthened and advised her husband. With his wife's support, guidance, and love, George VI was able to overcome his insecurities and become an exceptional leader, navigating the country through World War II, establishing a relationship with Winston Churchill, visiting Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt in Washington and in Hyde Park, and inspiring the British people with his courage and compassion during the Blitz. Simultaneously, George VI and Elizabeth trained their daughter Princess Elizabeth from an early age to be a highly successful monarch, and she would reign for an unprecedented seventy years.

Sally Bedell Smith gives us an inside view of the lives, struggles, hopes, and triumphs of King George VI and Elizabeth during a dramatic time in history.



Christendom

The Triumph of a Religion, AD 300-1300

By Peter Heather

A major reinterpretation of the religious superstate that came to define both Europe and Christianity itself, by one of our foremost medieval historians.

In the fourth century AD, a new faith grew out of Palestine, overwhelming the paganism of Rome and resoundingly defeating a host of other rival belief systems. Almost a thousand years later, all of Europe was controlled by Christian rulers, and the religion, ingrained within culture and society, exercised a monolithic hold over its population. But how did a small sect of isolated and intensely committed congregations become a mass movement centrally directed from Rome? As Peter Heather shows in this illuminating new history, there was nothing inevitable about Christendom's rise and eventual dominance.

From Constantine the Great's pivotal conversion to Christianity to the crisis that followed the collapse of the Roman empire—which left the religion teetering on the edge of extinction—to the astonishing revolution of the eleventh century and beyond, out of which the Papacy emerged as the head of a vast international corporation, Heather traces Christendom's chameleonlike capacity for self-reinvention, as it not only defined a fledgling religion but transformed it into an institution that wielded effective authority across virtually all of the disparate peoples of medieval Europe.

Authoritative, vivid, and filled with new insights, this is an unparalleled history of early Christianity.

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