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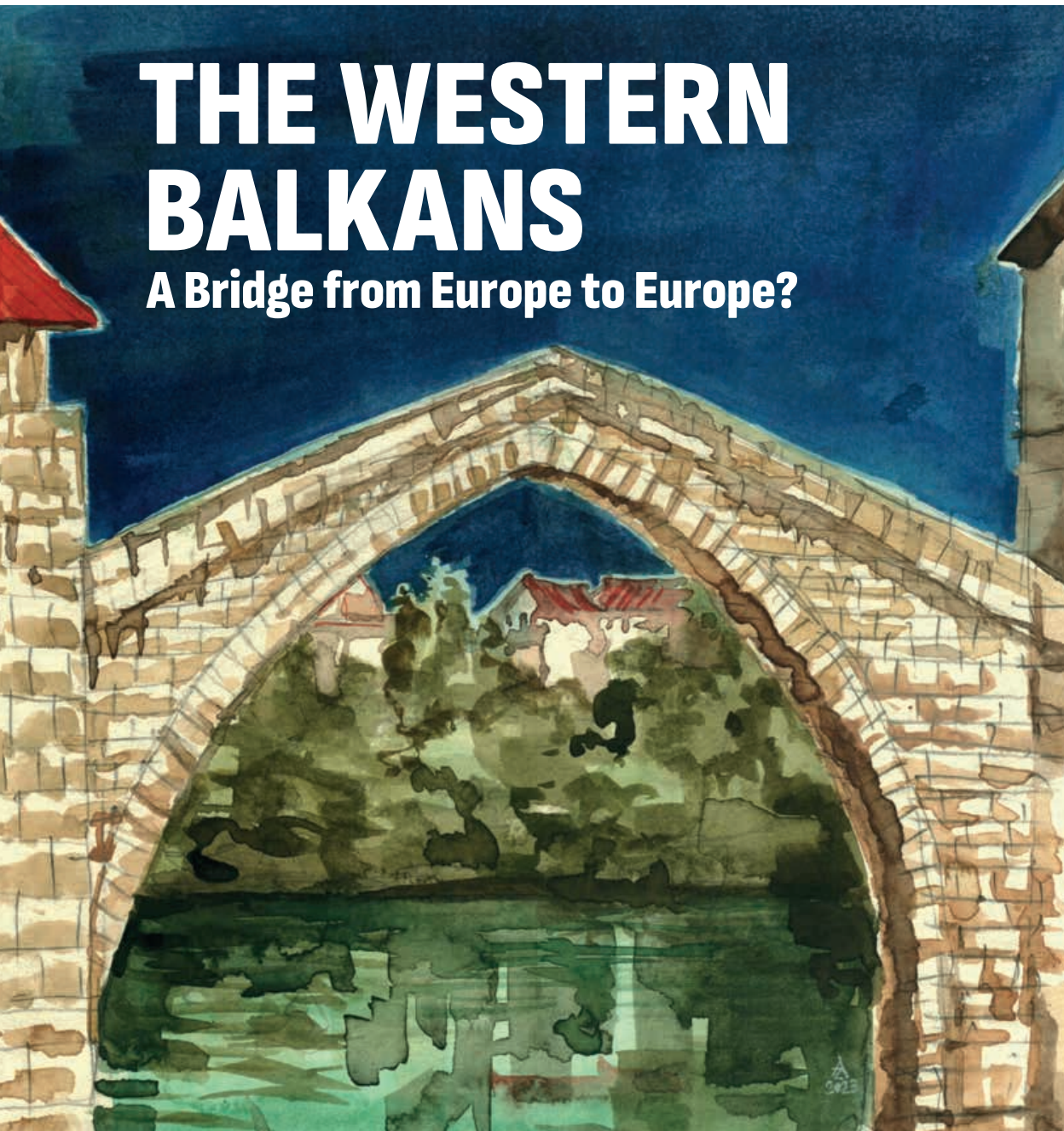
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THE WESTERN BALKANS

A Bridge from Europe to Europe?



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As the Western Balkans mark two decades since the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, an atmosphere of reflection, rather than celebration, envelops the region. Amidst the initial hopes ignited by the summit's commitment to EU enlargement, the journey towards integration has been mired in complexities and frustrations.

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PUBLISHER

The Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College
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office@kew.org.pl, www.kew.org.pl



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EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CENTRE

pl. Solidarności 1, 80-863 Gdańsk, Poland
<https://ecs.gda.pl/>, ecs@ecs.gda.pl

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COPYEDITING

Niall Gray

ILLUSTRATIONS AND COVER

Andrzej Zaręba

COVER LAYOUT

Do Lasu s.c.

SUBSCRIPTION:

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LAYOUT AND FORMATTING

Małgorzata Chyc | AT Wydawnictwo

EDITORIAL OFFICES

New Eastern Europe
ul. Szlak 26/12A, 31-153 Kraków
editors@neweasterneurope.eu



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The Kakhovka Dam explosion as Russia's scorched earth tactic

ZAKHAR TROPIN



The destruction of the Kakhovka Dam aligns with tactics employed by Russian forces in various contexts before. This strategy involves the **complete destruction of territories** in active combat to gain a military advantage and instil fear in opponents. Understanding the Russian scorched earth tactic, and drawing from Ukraine's experience encountering it, is now crucial when planning operations against Russian military forces.



Russian aggression against Ukraine has gained notoriety due to numerous violations of international law and human rights committed by Russian troops. Tragic incidents such as the events in Bucha, Izium and Mariupol have left an indelible mark on human history. The sheer quantity of crimes committed is staggering, leading to valid assertions of a planned genocide of the Ukrainian population orchestrated by high-ranking Russian officials. The atrocities reached a new level on June 6th 2023, when the Kakhovka Dam was deliberately destroyed in an attempt to impede the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the southern part of Ukraine.

The explosion at the Kakhovka Dam is considered the largest man-made disaster in Europe in recent decades. The devastating blast at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Station resulted in numerous civilian casualties and inflicted significant damage on the environment and economy of the entire region. The full extent of the catastrophe is still difficult to ascertain, as Russian authorities have denied access to international organisations seeking to provide assistance in mitigating the conse-

quences of the disaster in the flooded territories of the occupied left bank of the Dnipro. The estimated economic losses exceed two billion US dollars, which does not account for the long-term environmental damage, including the destruction of several national parks and the complete disruption of the water supply system in the southern regions of Ukraine and Crimea.

Who's to blame?

From the very beginning, there have been numerous direct and indirect pieces of evidence confirming that Russian troops were responsible for the explosion at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Station. One of the most clear pieces of evidence is that the station has been under Russian military occupation since the start of the full-scale invasion. Ukrainian officials repeatedly warned the international community about the mining of the facility and the occupying authorities' plans to detonate these mines. Many experts have analysed the level and nature of the destruction, concluding that it could only have resulted from an internal blast rather than an external strike. Infrastructure of this kind typically has multiple protective layers against external threats. Consequently, only Russia, with full access to the facility, could have carried out the explosion.

Moreover, the detonation at the Kakhovka Dam aligns with the military tactics employed by Russian forces in various contexts before. This strategy involves the complete destruction of territories in active combat to gain military advantages and to instil fear in opponents and civilians, thereby breaking their resistance.

Regardless of evidence that points to Russia being guilty of blowing up Kakhovka Dam, initially certain states and international organisations claimed ignorance regarding who was responsible for this tragedy. However, the international community is gradually shifting its position in light of the mounting evidence. International authorities have commenced an on-site examination of the evidence with the goal of providing a precise legal qualification for this tragedy. At present, however, it is evident that a war crime has been committed, considering that a civilian critical infrastructure object, protected under international humanitarian law, has been destroyed.

According to international humanitarian law, it is absolutely forbidden to launch attacks on infrastructure and facilities that contain dangerous elements, with particular emphasis on providing maximum protection to structures like dams, dykes

Ukrainian officials repeatedly **warned** about the mining of the Kakhovka dam and the occupying authorities' plans to detonate those mines.

and nuclear power stations. This prohibition remains in effect even if these facilities are being used for military purposes. However, in the event that such an attack does occur, every precaution must be taken to prevent the release of dangerous forces. It is evident that Russia took no measures to prevent this catastrophe, mitigate its consequences or rescue civilians residing in the affected flooded areas. These actions directly contravene the obligations of the Russian Federation as an occupying state, which is responsible for managing dangerous installations, as outlined in the Geneva Conventions. There have been allegations in the media suggesting that Russian authorities are denying access to international organisations in order to conceal the true number of victims and the extent of the damage in the occupied territories. Moscow is also potentially engaging in clandestine transfers of bodies to unknown destinations for further disposal.

Pattern of destruction

From an expert point of view, the blowing up of the Kakhovka Dam was not an unexpected move, as it aligns with the main patterns observed in Russian military operations. In offensive operations, one of the primary tactics employed by Russian forces is the complete destruction of cities and towns. The objective is to eliminate anything that should be protected or could potentially serve as a defensive measure for the opponent, thereby forcing them to withdraw. Conversely, when Russian forces are in retreat, they intentionally destroy civilian infrastructure with the aim of hindering its future use by the opposing side and impeding the restoration of normal civilian life in those areas. These patterns of conduct involve the excessive and nonselective use of military force and can be considered as separate war crimes committed by high-ranking Russian political and military officials.

This tactic has its roots in the practices of the Soviet Union, which resorted to the destruction of its own cities and infrastructure during the Second World War to prevent them from falling into the hands of Nazi forces. Examples of this include the blowing up of Kyiv in 1941 and the destruction of the Dnipro Hydroelectric Station in the same year, among others.

Recent examples of this pattern can be observed in the First and Second Chechen Wars. One notable occurrence took place when Russia attacked Grozny, the capital of Chechnya. The consequences were devastating. Experts and witnesses assert that as a result of Russian actions, Grozny was nearly completely destroyed. Aside from disregarding the principle of selectively deploying military forces, these attacks on Grozny violated the principles of military necessity and proportionality, considering the comparative human and military resources of Russia and the Chechen rebels.



In Georgia, Russia also targeted civilian infrastructure with the intention of intimidating and displacing Georgian military forces and the population from specific territories. However, due to the swift nature of this conflict, these actions did not become as widespread as they were during the Chechen campaigns.

Russia reached a new “level” of employing the scorched earth tactic in Syria, where Russian forces systematically destroyed cities and towns in order to compel rebels to halt their resistance. Aleppo serves as a prime example of such intentional destruction carried out by Russia over several months.

The Russian Federation introduced a new “chapter” in the destruction of civilian infrastructure during the war against Ukraine. It is important to highlight the missile terror campaign launched against Ukraine on February 24th 2022. Throughout Ukraine civilian objects, particularly of critical infrastructure, came under relentless Russian attacks aimed at forcing Ukraine into capitulation. It is not surprising that Russian forces made several attempts to destroy dams in the Kyiv, Dnipro and Kharkiv regions.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning the complete annihilation of towns and cities such as Mariupol, Sievierodonetsk, Kramatorsk, Bakhmut, Marinka, Popasna and others, as Russia attempted to occupy them. For instance, in Mariupol, Russian troops resorted to a nonselective shelling and bombardment of the city in an

excessive use of military force to overcome Ukrainian resistance. Consequently, the defenders were forced to retreat to Azovstal, while the Russian Federation took control of the remaining parts of the decimated city.

Additionally, Russian retreat tactics can also be observed in Ukraine, characterised by widespread artillery, missile and aerial bombardment of cities, towns and critical infrastructure. The objective is to impede the counteroffensive of the Ukrainian forces and inflict harm upon the civilian population within the liberated territories. Examples of this tactic could be witnessed during the lifting of the blockade of Chernihiv, and the liberation of Kharkiv and Kherson among others. In Ukraine, there is even a sombre joke that if Russian forces begin destroying infrastructure in occupied territories, it signifies their impending retreat.

Why blow up the dam?

By examining the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam through the lens of the Russian scorched earth tactic, the advantages gained by Russia from this crime become apparent. In this regard, the words of Timothy Snyder, Professor at Yale University, are worth noting: "Military history offers an elemental point. Armies that are attacking do not blow dams to block their own path of advance. Armies that are retreating do blow dams to slow the advance of the other side. At the relevant moment, Ukraine

Alongside this logical conclusion, there exists a wealth of direct and indirect evidence that implicates Russia in the **destruction** of the Kakhovka dam.

was advancing, and Russia was retreating." Alongside this logical conclusion, there exists a wealth of direct and indirect evidence that implicates Russia in the destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Station.

This evidence includes the Russian Federation's exercise of control over the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Station since spring 2022, coupled with the fact, as supported by various testimonies, that the explosion resulted from an internal blast rather than a shelling or rocket attack. Ukrainian authorities have also stated that Russia engaged in mining activities targeting the dam. Additionally, Russian soldiers have made statements confessing to their participation in the detonation at the Kakhovka Dam. At the same time, the military carried out an evacuation of personnel prior to the explosion. Furthermore, Russian troops deliberately blew up the dam on the Mokri Yaly river in the Zaporizhzhia region, aiming to impede the Ukrainian counteroffensive. When considering all this evidence collectively, there is no room for doubt that Russia bears responsibility for the Kakhovka Dam explosion.

The blowing up of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Station and the overall use of the Russian scorched earth tactic cannot be justified by military necessity, as alternative military facilities could have achieved the same advantages. The examples mentioned earlier demonstrate that excessive force was employed in these instances of warfare. The Russian application of the scorched earth tactic serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it aims to gain military advantage at any cost. Secondly, within the context of mounting internal criticism regarding the heavy toll of the ongoing “special military operation”, this tactic can also serve to mask weaknesses and shortcomings while in retreat. Thirdly, it is a classic form of terrorism and intimidation, meant to threaten both opponents and civilians. This tactic sends a clear message to Ukraine and the world at large. Given Russia's comparatively weak conventional army, particularly after the significant losses suffered in Ukraine, their primary goal is to cultivate an image of a brutal and merciless adversary that disregards the fundamental principles of conventional warfare and humanity. The purpose of this image is to instil fear within the international community, dissuading them from engaging in direct conflict with Russia due to potential consequences.

The Ukrainian experience serves as a testament to the fallacy of the last notion. While it is true that Russian forces show no remorse in destroying entire cities to achieve their objectives, which may not always have a purely military rationale, the only response capable of deterring Russia from employing this tactic is a military one. When faced with a strong and decisive military counterstrike, Russian forces have been known to retreat, shedding their merciless image and revealing soldiers and commanders who are fearful of their superiors.

A notable example of this is the missile terror campaign that Russia launched against Ukrainian energy infrastructure during the winter of 2022-23. When attempts to destroy Ukrainian energy infrastructure were thwarted by Ukrainian resistance and assistance from international allies, Russian forces eventually ceased their attacks. Furthermore, when these Russian actions resulted in an increase in military support for Ukraine, such as the provision of modern surface-to-air missile systems and precision-guided munitions, Russia began to complain about the escalation of the military conflict, conveniently omitting the fact that their attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure had provoked this response.

Patterns of conduct or systematic actions in certain cases can be considered as evidence of committing a crime. The examples mentioned above demonstrate that the explosion at the Kakhovka Dam cannot be viewed in isolation from Russia's military tactic of targeting civilian objects and critical infrastructure. When considering these collective Russian actions, an undeniable pattern of criminal conduct by the Russian Federation emerges. Russia carries out these actions with a clear and excessive use of force, without military necessity, and in violation of the principle of selectivity.

Not a random occurrence

Indeed, the Kakhovka explosion fits perfectly within this pattern of conduct. The abundance of direct and indirect evidence leaves little room for doubt that Russian military forces were responsible for the blast. The primary objective was to hinder the progress of the Ukrainian counteroffensive. Additionally, the act aimed to reinforce the ruthless image of the Russian Federation and serve as a warning of what they can potentially do to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.

Furthermore, the systematic nature of these acts confirms that the scorched earth tactic is not a random occurrence, but rather an adopted policy by high-ranking political and military officials within the Russian forces. The decision to employ this tactic on a daily basis is made at the highest governmental level, implicating the highest political and military command. Consequently, these individuals, including Vladimir Putin himself, bear personal responsibility for its implementation.

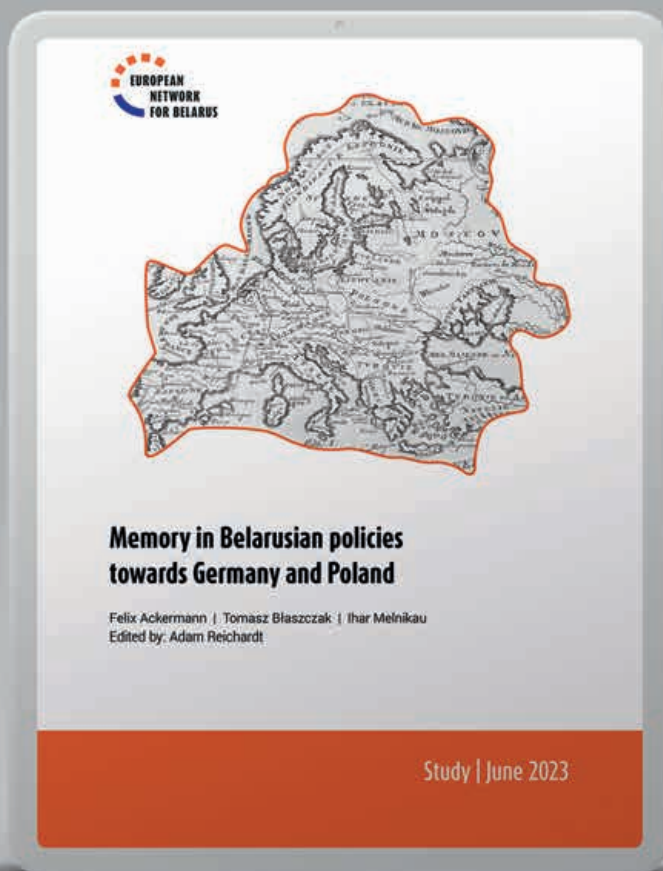
Understanding Russian scorched earth tactics of warfare and drawing from Ukraine's experience encountering it is now crucial when planning operations against Russian military forces. This becomes especially important when considering recent reports of mining threats to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. While it is essential to acknowledge this threat, it should not become the sole determining factor in the liberation of Ukrainian territories or the provision of military support to Ukraine.

It is important to recognise that Russian officials are anticipating such a reaction. They hope that under the threat of a potential Zaporizhzhia NPP explosion, the international community will agree to peace conditions favourable to Russia and force Ukraine to accept them. This follows a standard terrorist tactic, and it is widely known that negotiations with terrorists are not viable.

In light of these circumstances, the international community should align with Ukraine's approach: to remain resolute and continue to exert pressure on Russia, unequivocally rejecting any consideration of such tactics. By standing firm and united, the international community can effectively counter Russian aggression and support Ukraine's quest for peace and security. ~~EE~~

Zakhar Tropin is a non-resident fellow at the Centre for Defence Strategies, an independent Ukrainian think tank which focuses on defence and security. He is also a licenced attorney and holds a PhD in international law from the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv's International Relations Institute.

NEW REPORT ON BELARUSIAN MEMORY POLICIES



The Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe, together with its partners in the European Network for Belarus, have recently released a new report titled: “Memory in Belarusian policies towards Germany and Poland”.

The report is co-authored by Felix Ackermann, Ihar Melnikau and Tomasz Błaszczak.

The editor of the report is Adam Reichardt (editor

in chief of New Eastern Europe).

In this paper, our authors explore the current state of Belarusian historical and memory policies and the role that they play especially in the last several years, including in Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The research finds that the current Belarusian historical memory policy is fragmented, incoherent

and aimed at supporting the regime. At the same time, Russian influence on Belarusian historical policy has gained significant momentum since 2020 and especially since 2022 – imposing its imperial view of history on Belarus.

Download the full report here:

