THE ATLAS

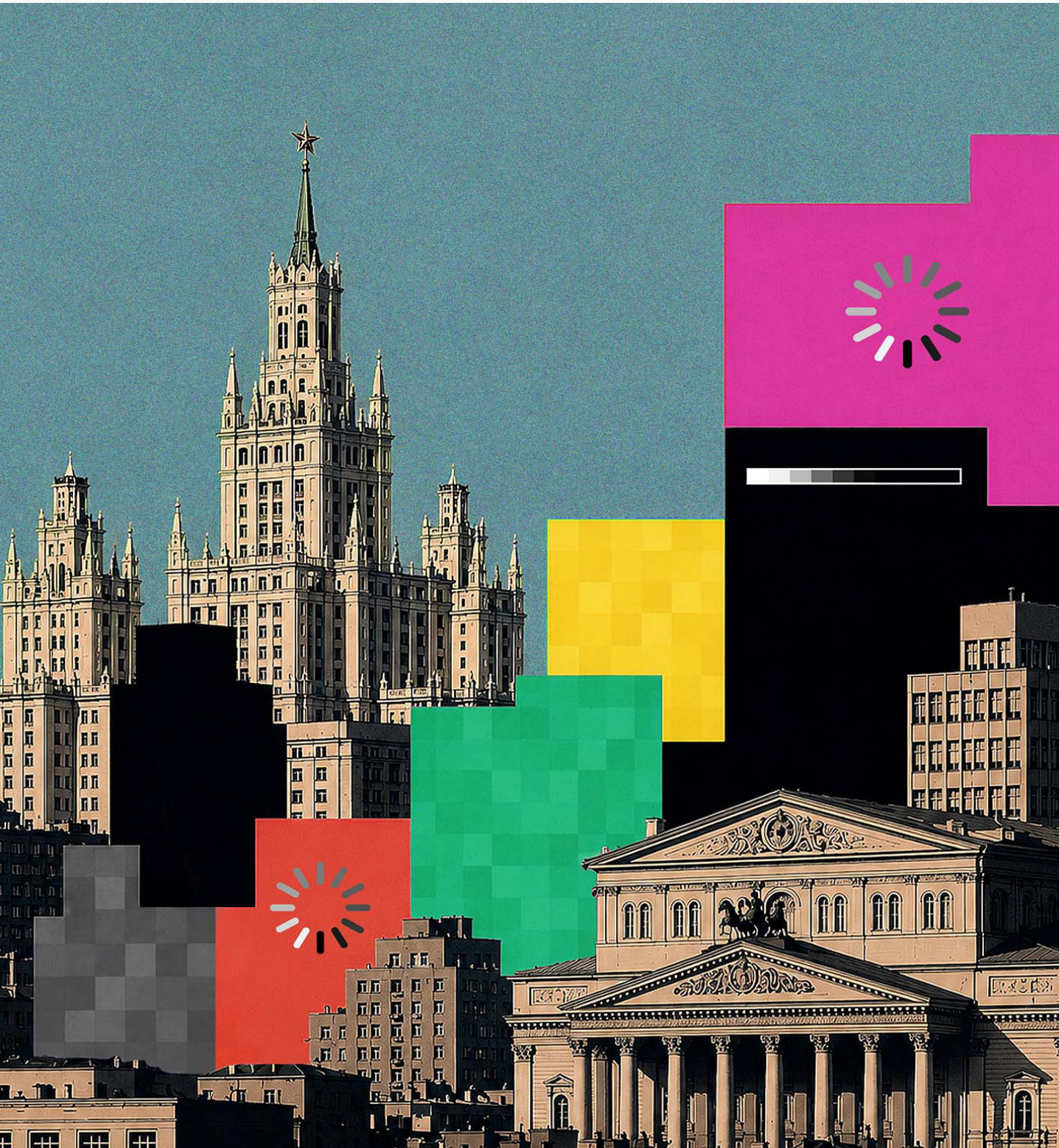
A NEWSPAPER

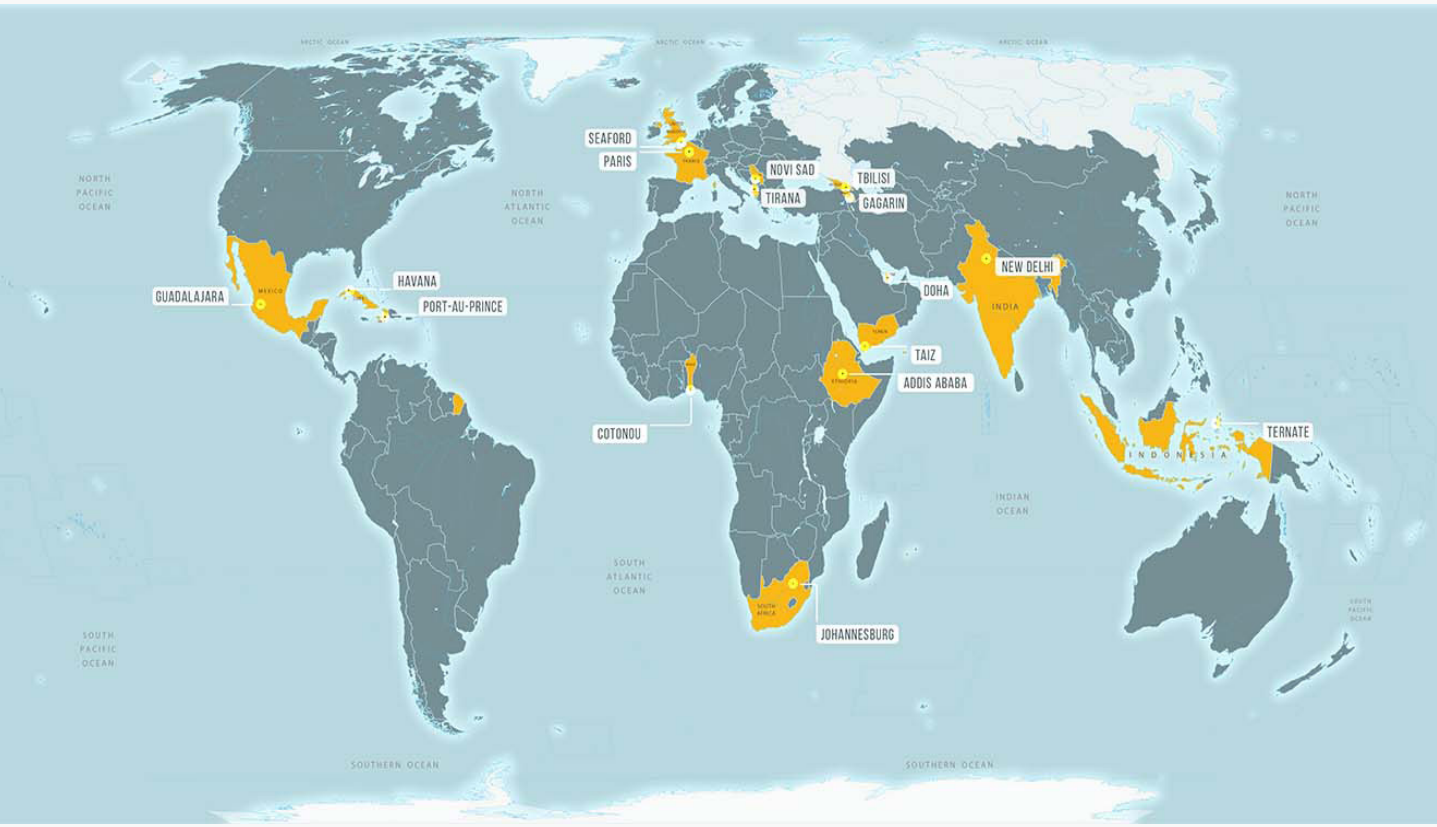
RUSSIA IS BREAKING THE INTERNET

The World Wide Web is getting less worldly

P16

30 JUNE 2026 | ISSUE 2





WELCOME TO THE ATLAS.

Authoritarian governments, and those leaning in that direction, like to project an air of invincibility, of unchallenged might. Except there is nothing inevitable about their dominance. If there is a theme that runs through the stories in this edition – from the fight for flamingoes in Albania to the "cockroaches" gathering in Delhi – it is that resistance is possible. And even joyful: just ask the young radicals engaging in the simple, subversive pleasure of watching movies in besieged Taiz. In some countries, even the act of reading and sharing this newspaper – independent, curated journalism, designed to bypass algorithmic interference – could be considered an act of resistance. That's a revolution we can get behind.

▲ **WORLD MAP:** Reporting in this edition from these locations. Illustrated by Yemsrach Yetneberk, based on the Equal Earth Projection.

▼ **BAD SIGNAL:** Russia has spent a decade trying to shut down the open web. It has been much harder than the Kremlin anticipated. (Cover illustration: Teona Tsintsadze)

Published by *Coda Story* and *The Continent*.

.coda The Continent

CURRENTS

South Korea gambles a trillion dollars on A.I.

By the end of the Korean War in 1953, South Korea was one of the world's poorest countries. Its transformation into one of the richest is called the 'Miracle on the Han River' – and is studied by governments who want to copy its export-led industrialisation strategy. This week, it said it would invest $1-trillion in A.I. data centres and semiconductor factories. According to President Lee Jae Myung, it's a race: "We must secure the core elements of A.I. faster than any other country." – *Simon Allison*

▼ **The 290,000m² Naver data centre in Sejong City, South Korea. (Photo: Junglim Architecture)**

Island unprepared for Great British heatwave

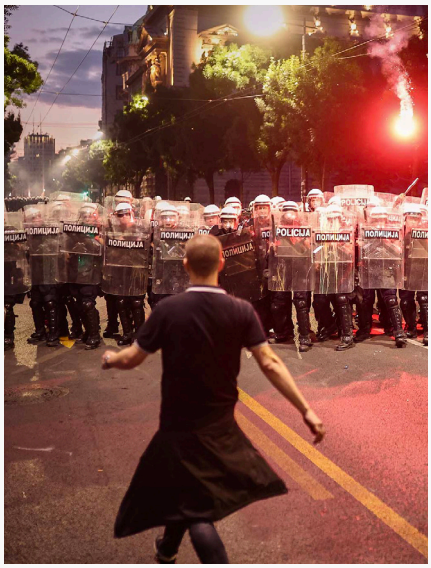
The British excel at complaining, and over the past week, we've had good reason. A heat wave, with temperatures peaking at a record 37.7°C, swept an island mostly familiar with sheets of rain and, in recent years, waves of prime minister resignations. Schools closed, roads melted, hospital infrastructure stopped working. Airwaves were filled with people phoning in to inform radio hosts about TV sets that had packed in, or handy tips to stay cool. Salting the wound, an event on extreme heat was cancelled in London because of ... extreme heat. Much of western Europe is experiencing similarly extreme temperatures. – *Nadia Beard in Seaford*

▲ **Children cool down in an inflatable splash pool in Leeds in the UK. (Photo: Oli Scarff/AFP)**

Serbian strongman's resignation game

Eighteen months ago, President Aleksandar Vučić's grip on Serbian politics seemed unbreakable. Then came a sunny November morning in 2024, when the canopy of a recently renovated train station in Novi Sad collapsed, killing 16 people. Critics blamed systemic corruption. Students agreed, and initiated the largest protests in the Balkans in decades, larger even than those that overthrew Serbia's previous dictator, Slobodan Milošević. Arrests, beatings, threats – the regime tried it all, and nothing worked. And now the pressure has forced Vučić to announce his resignation this week, and call for early elections. Few believe that he will really relinquish power, however, and may instead rotate himself into the prime minister's office. Should he do so, he may well be hearing from Serbia's indefatigable youth movement again. – *Božidar Milovac in Novi Sad*

▶ **A protester taunts riot policemen as they prepare to disperse a student rally. (Photo: Armin Durgat/AP)**



A dark day in the rainbow nation

Anti-foreigner marches rock major South African cities as a xenophobic group's unofficial ultimatum stirs fear and loathing.

Simon Allison in Johannesburg

▲ South Africans march against foreigners in Johannesburg on 30 June, the 'deadline' for migrants to leave. (Photo: Paul Botes)

The ultimatum was issued weeks in advance. Tuesday, 30 June. Get out – or go home in a coffin. It was issued specifically to "illegal immigrants" in South Africa, although it was generally understood to encompass all poor, black foreigners living and working within the porous borders of the Rainbow Nation.

The threat was issued by a new, amorphous vigilante group who call themselves March and March. They are thought to have links to former, disgraced president Jacob Zuma – forced from office after revelations of nation state-scale corruption under his watch – and other, more established vigilante groups like Operation Dudula, who have been mobilising against foreigners for several years.

As the deadline approached, the country held its breath. Various African embassies evacuated some of their nationals. Anyone who could escape across the border did so: thousands of people abandoning their lives, perhaps temporarily, perhaps not. No one quite knew what to expect – Kristallnacht or, in the best-case scenario, a national repudiation of the politics of hate and division.

On Tuesday morning, much of Johannesburg was silent. Shops

were shuttered. Streets deserted. There were similar scenes in parts of Durban and Pretoria. Everyone who could stayed at home, foreign or otherwise.

In Mayfair, a suburb that hosts large Somali and Ethiopian diasporas, community elders conferred in the back room of a pizza restaurant, nervously watching videos of virulent anti-foreigner rhetoric on their phones. They are trying to navigate their existence in a country that has become increasingly hostile to their presence.

For Abdalla, a businessman who has lived in Mayfair for 30 years, it's too late to move anywhere else. But he's telling his kids – South African citizens, born and bred – to go elsewhere, anywhere. "We Somalis are nomads. We'll always find greener pastures," he says, although he's not sure where those pastures may be. Not Europe, not America any more. Maybe the Gulf.

In Yeoville, a very diverse, densely populated suburb in the centre of town, marchers are gathering. They carry South African flags and sjamboks – long whips – and golf clubs with the head snapped off. South Africans are very good at protesting. Amandla! Awethu! Decades of sustained protests toppled a white supremacist regime. Years of protests helped to force Zuma's exit.

The marchers, several thousand of them, are disciplined: they sing together and chant together and move together, marshalled by leaders who set a cracking pace, pausing only to shake their clubs and shout vitriol – Get out! We're coming for you! – to anyone watching from the balconies along the route. Police escort them all the way, and helicopters hover above.

The marchers' litany of complaints is familiar: foreigners deal drugs, foreigners undercut their businesses, foreigners are criminals, foreigners steal their healthcare and their jobs.

They are not Afrophobic, they insist – it's just that the rich, white foreigners are much harder to reach. As are the rich, white South Africans who still control most of the country's wealth and own most of its land, and who live – by careful design of a white supremacist government that used geographic separation to reinforce its legal discriminations – in genteel, tree-lined suburbs, as far away as possible from the people that were being oppressed.

"They don't live among us," said Simon Simenye, from Limpopo, himself a migrant to Johannesburg, a city that was built on the backs of people from somewhere else. "The foreigners do."

As the march moves on – becoming progressively less disciplined and more violent – officials from March and March, Operation Dudula and Zuma's MK Party congregate in front of the Hillbrow Police Station, the city's iconic Hillbrow Tower looming above them.

From behind the window of a third-floor apartment, their faces obscured by the afternoon glare, a young woman and two children – one just a baby – watch on. How does she talk about this to her children?

It wasn't Kristallnacht.

But the marches were large enough and widespread enough to suggest that the expiration of the ultimatum was not an end, but a beginning. March and March's leader, Jacinta Ngobese-Zuma, said that this was just "round one".

South Africa cannot exhale yet.

With additional reporting by Athandiwe Saba

▲ **Undocumented migrants line up near a bus at the Durban Drive-In on June 29, preparing to leave before the camp is moved to the Zimbabwe border. (Photo: Marco Longari/AFP)**

How Bafana Bafana lost SA last bit of goodwill it had left

Traveling to the World Cup on an ICE deportation plane certainly didn't help.

Olatunji Olaigbe in Cotonou

In Benin's capital Cotonou, the World Cup is broadcast on thousands of street-facing televisions where random strangers gather to watch games together.

At one of those TVs, connected to a beer parlour near Menontin market, the streetside crowd was thinner than usual on Thursday, 11 June, when South Africa played the opening game against Mexico.

Even for the few who were watching, their displeasure with the Bafana Bafana team was evident, and there was muted celebration when the final whistle confirmed South Africa's defeat.

Usually, on the global stage, pan-African solidarity trumps regional rivalries. Not this time.

Many sub-Saharan Africans have ignored or openly rooted against South Africa in this World Cup, which coincides with deadly anti-migrant protests in the country.

Looming over proceedings has beens the unofficial 30 June deadline for undocumented migrants to leave South Africa, imposed by anti-migrant groups with alleged links to senior politicians.

At least five countries have repatriated some of their citizens, including Ghana, Nigeria, Mozambique, Malawi, and Zimbabwe.

Since 1994, the year of South Africa's first democratic election after apartheid ended, 128,858 people have been displaced and 698 killed in 1,321 xenophobic incidents, according to monitoring group Xenowatch.

The violence has largely been targeted at other Africans – despite the crucial support that African nations like Nigeria, Tanzania and Zambia gave resistance movements – especially the African National Congress in exile (and now South Africa's ruling party) – during the struggle against apartheid.

The anti-immigration rhetoric in South Africa echoes that of far-right and, increasingly, centrist parties in Europe and the United States. There are other connections too.

The Atlas can reveal that the plane chartered by the South African Football Association (Safa) to take the national team to Mexico is also used by US authorities to deport migrants and asylum seekers.

The plane – tail number N207AX, operated by Omni Air International – has performed at least 10 deportation flights for US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in the last year.

That's according to Gillian Brockell, a journalist and host of the *Worst Airline Ever* podcast, which documents ICE deportation flights.

These included the transport of 14 third-country nationals to Ghana in October 2025; nine third-country nationals to Cameroon in January 2026; and dozens of Russians to Egypt in December 2025, some of whom held court orders that were supposed to prevent their removal.

Safa did not respond to requests for comment. Bafana Bafana was knocked out of the World Cup by Canada on Sunday. ●

▼ South African footballers disembark in Mexico on 2 June from a plane also used by the US to deport migrants (Photo: Safa)

GUADALAJARA

Superfan Michel Kuka Mboladinga pays tribute to assassinated Congolese prime minister Patrice Lumumba ahead of the country's World Cup group K football match against Colombia at the Guadalajara Stadium on 23 June. (Photo: Ulises Ruiz/AFP)

CURRENTS

Telegram founder Pavel Durov paints Tbilisi red

An unusual guest popped up at Mtatsminda, an amusement park perched above old Tbilisi. On a hot Wednesday in mid-June, multibillionaire Pavel Durov, the founder of the Telegram messaging app, joined park-goers for a stroll, black-clad bodyguards in tow. After dining at some of Tbilisi's priciest restaurants, Durov was filmed doing pull-ups on a Black Sea beach. Parliamentarian Vakhtang Turnava – a tech enthusiast from Georgia's ruling party, which is considered friendly towards Russia – is behind Durov's surprise visit. Durov was reportedly set to attend a closed-door crypto conference in Tbilisi. Telegram is the most popular messaging app in Russia. Moscow has been trying to force Russians to use the state-operated Max app instead, with limited success. – *Irina Machavariani in Tbilisi*

▲ Vakhtang Turnava (R) of the Georgia Dream party takes a selfie with Pavel Durov

Far right hijacks German lake's language barrier

Germany, with its extensive network of public swimming pools and lakes, is one of the best countries in Europe to go swimming – especially in a heatwave. But not for everyone. Last week, Heidesee lake, in the eastern city of Halle, barred non-German speakers from entering the water, saying staff struggled to communicate safety instructions to some visitors. City authorities swiftly reversed the policy. But not before Germany's far-right AfD party shared a fake swimming pool sign on social media reading: "Those who don't understand German, stay out." – *Victoria Jensen*

▶ A fake poster warns those who can't speak German to stay away from a swimming lake in Halle.

▲ British demagogue Nigel Farage (Photo: Kirsty Wigglesworth/AP)

Shy UK fascist shares his racist populism with India

For weeks, Nigel Farage has been hiding from the UK press. Something to do with five million pounds as an undeclared, no-strings-attached gift from a crypto billionaire. So why did the far-right leader turn up last week on the Indian news channel CNN-IBN for a cozy interview? Farage's openly racist message – that "Pakistani Muslim" men are responsible for the sexual exploitation of white children – aligns with the Indian government's own propaganda. The channel lapped it up – even though it meant giving a sympathetic hearing to anti-migration hardliners in a country where the export of labour is a key economic and diplomatic policy. – *Shougat Dasgupta in Delhi*

Armenia's data-centre dream: cold comfort for the climate

Cultivating a Caucasian 'garden of A.I. factories'

Sandra Sadek in Gagarin, Armenia

It is an hour's drive from Yerevan up into the mountains of the South Caucasus, to a small village named after the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the first person to journey to outer space.

Apart from its statue of Gagarin, the village is famous for its proximity to a glorious alpine lake, the largest waterbody in the landlocked country, and scenery so picturesque that a famous Dutch architectural firm has been contracted to turn it into an Edenic ecotourist idyll.

But Mkhitar Hayrapetyan, Armenia's minister for high-tech industry, wants to build a different kind of garden. "Our concept of becoming a garden of A.I. factories is very real," he said, speaking in Gagarin at the opening of a brand new data centre in early June. Data centres would be "one of the cornerstones of Armenia's future economy".

Armenia has been burnishing its reputation as the Silicon Valley of the Caucasus, a status enhanced by an influx of Russian tech workers following Putin's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Armenia is also basking in the glow of Washington's approval, recently signing bilateral agreements on trade corridors and gaining favourable access to cutting edge technology. In return, American companies will be the primary beneficiaries of the new data centre: only 20% of its current computing capacity is reserved for Armenian universities and research.

Armenia has been burnishing its reputation as the Silicon Valley of the Caucasus, a status enhanced by an influx of Russian tech workers

Protests against data centres in the United States – with their need for vast amounts of electricity and water – have led several jurisdictions to declare moratoriums on their construction. Armenian officials insist the high altitude climate in Gagarin means less energy is required to keep the servers cool, and the environment won't be affected.

TOP: Solar panels power the new data centre in Gagarin, Armenia. (Photo: Sandra Sadek/The Atlas)
ABOVE: An architect's rendering of what the Gagarin Valley could look like – data centres not included. (Image: MVRDV Architects)

PORT-AU-PRINCE

A football fan with the flag of Haiti painted on his chest watches the 2026 Fifa World Cup group C match between Haiti and Scotland, in Petion-ville, Port-au-Prince on 13 June. Scotland won 1-0. (Photo: Clarens Siffroy/AFP)

Pretty in pink

They tried to pave paradise and put up a luxury lodge – but Albanian protesters won't let them.

Phineas Rueckert in Tirana

The life-sized cardboard cutouts of the pink birds bob up and down to the rhythm of the global anti-fascist anthem *Bella Ciao*.

Young Albanians, sporting qeleshes, the traditional white wool skull cap, hoist their flags and flamingoes in the air and sing: "Rama ciao, Rama ciao, Rama ciao, ciao, ciao". Or, to the tune of Queen's *We Will Rock You*, they sing: "Rama, Rama, Resign."

Edi Rama, an artist and former professional basketball player, and Albania's prime minister since 2013, blames the protests on "hybrid" warfare: a cocktail of digital manipulation and foreign interference that is inflaming the so-called "flamingo revolution".

But for the thousands of protesters gathered in front of Rama's office on Thursday, 25 June, the target of their anger is clear.

They are unhappy with the Rama government's decision to give foreign developers, including Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner and some deep-pocketed Qatari and Saudi investors, carte blanche to build a luxury resort on a swathe of Adriatic coastline – disrupting a fragile ecosystem, at the heart of which are wetlands inhabited by flamingoes.

The Kushner-linked developments – which would cost around $6-billion to build – are now subject to an anti-corruption investigation. European Union legislators have warned Albania that it is risking its bid to join the EU if it allows the project to proceed without an environmental impact assessment.

Standing in the middle of the crowd, Matilda Hoxha carries a red Albanian flag, with its striking double-headed eagle, and a lunchbox. She's come with her aging mother, who recently had a heart attack and received substandard medical care.

Like many protesters, they said they were here for a new Albania, one less geared to the whims and fancies of oligarchs (and their children).

Another couple, standing nearby, had taped a banner onto their flamingo cut-out: "Protect our mountains, too," it reads. "We're rock climbers," they say later, grinning sheepishly. ●

TOP: Protesters demonstrate against the luxury resort development near a protected natural area, in Tirana. LEFT: Several thousand Albanians have joined the protests, held daily for the past month, to demand transparency around the project linked to US President Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner. (Photos: Adnan Beci/AFP)

Kafka on Indian shores

No matter what the government might think, these 'cockroaches' say they're here to stay.

News analysis and photo by Ishan Tankha in New Delhi

"What is this, the prime minister's office?", bellowed a photographer, as a policewoman confiscated his lighter. We were being put through a makeshift security station, like one at an airport, the first time in two decades that I'd seen such a contraption at Jantar Mantar.

All the thousands of protesters at the site had to go through the same security check. Jantar Mantar is a tourist attraction, an 18th-century open-air observatory.

The adjacent street is also a site for peaceful protest in the Indian capital Delhi, usually politely contained between 10am and 5pm.

This protest is anything but polite. It's youthful, it's full of energy, it's mocking, and it wants answers.

It all started as a joke.

Last month, the chief justice of India remarked in court that there are "youngsters like cockroaches, who don't get any employment or have any place in the profession."

Some of them, he added, go on social media, or become activists, "and they start attacking everyone".

He later said he was misquoted and misinterpreted, that he was referring to people who faked their degrees.

But by then, a 30-year-old graduate student in Boston, Abhijeet Dipke, had called on all the cockroaches, the lazy, the chronically online and the ranters, to come together.

And they did.

The "Cockroach Janta Party" (a riff on prime minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party) now has 23 million followers on Instagram, about the same number as both of India's leading political parties combined. Except the CJP isn't a real party.

It has now become a youth movement, a clarion call for young people fed up with leaked test papers, allegations of corruption and the scandals around the administration of national exams – tests so consequential that the pressure has led to students taking their own lives.

In Jantar Mantar last week, the "cockroach'" people called for the education minister to resign. They say they won't leave until their demands are met.

In the manner of beleaguered politicians everywhere, the government has dismissed the movement as both trivial and a foreign plot.

But why then were the thousands of young people holding cockroach masks and dog-eared copies of the constitution being photographed by the police?

Why were police cameras everywhere, logging faces, archiving messages on placards, ensuring every moment of peaceful dissent was captured in high resolution?

It must be that these cockroaches are making someone's skin crawl.

▼ **Protesters under the banner of the 'Cockroach Janta Party' rally in New Delhi against corruption and scandal in India's education system.**

TERNATE

Football fans celebrate Argentina's goal against Algeria as they watch the Fifa World Cup 2026 group J match at Fort Oranje in Ternate, North Maluku in Indonesia on 16 June. Argentina won 3-0. (Photo: Azzam Rizqullah/AFP)

Welcome to the Wednesday Cinema Club

Movies are a great escape – even when your city is under siege.

Osama Farhan in Taiz

Yasmin Al-Ma'mari had heard about cinemas her whole life. Her parents talked about going in the 1970s and 80s, pointing at old buildings: "That's where we used to watch movies."

Earlier this month, at age 27, she finally watched her first.

Taiz, Yemen's historic cultural hub and its third most populous city, once had five cinema halls. Since the conflicts of the 1990s, the city has been in terminal decline, finished off by the civil war that began in 2014. With Houthi rebels circling the city, controlling its outskirts, Taiz remains largely rubble, its buildings abandoned shells.

Wednesday Cinema, where Yasmin watched her first film, is located in Beit al Sahafa (Press House), one of the handful of remaining cultural hubs. The film club was founded last year, built by a group of young people from scraps: a projector, an 80-inch screen, speakers, and a room that holds 35 people. It has now held 67 consecutive weeks of screenings.

For Mohamed Al-Asbahi, 26, Wednesday has become something close to sacred, "the way Friday is connected to prayer".

It's the kind of thing, he says, that people who grew up with cinemas, in places like Cairo or Cape Town, can't understand. Mohamed, who has attended dozens of screenings, still recalls the first film he ever saw at the Wednesday Cinema: an Italian musical about a genius pianist born on a cruise ship who never sets foot on land but bests Jelly Roll Morton in a piano duel so hot the winner lit a cigarette off the strings.

The success of the Wednesday Cinema has been noted by city officials, who see the club as a way to restore public spaces and cultural conversation in a city still under siege. And in Aden, Yemen's port city capital, the Arwa Cinema, a celebrated venue from its mid-century glory days until the 1990s, is also being revived.

A sign perhaps that pop-up cinemas and film clubs might lead to something more permanent.

For now, every Wednesday evening in Taiz, a screen lights up and moviegoers like Yasmin and Mohamed will be there, transfixed. ●

This story was produced in collaboration with Egab.

▲ **Audience members watch a film projected onto an 80-inch screen at Beit Al-Sahafa Foundation in Taiz. The weekly screenings have run for 67 consecutive weeks. (Photo: Osama Farhan)**

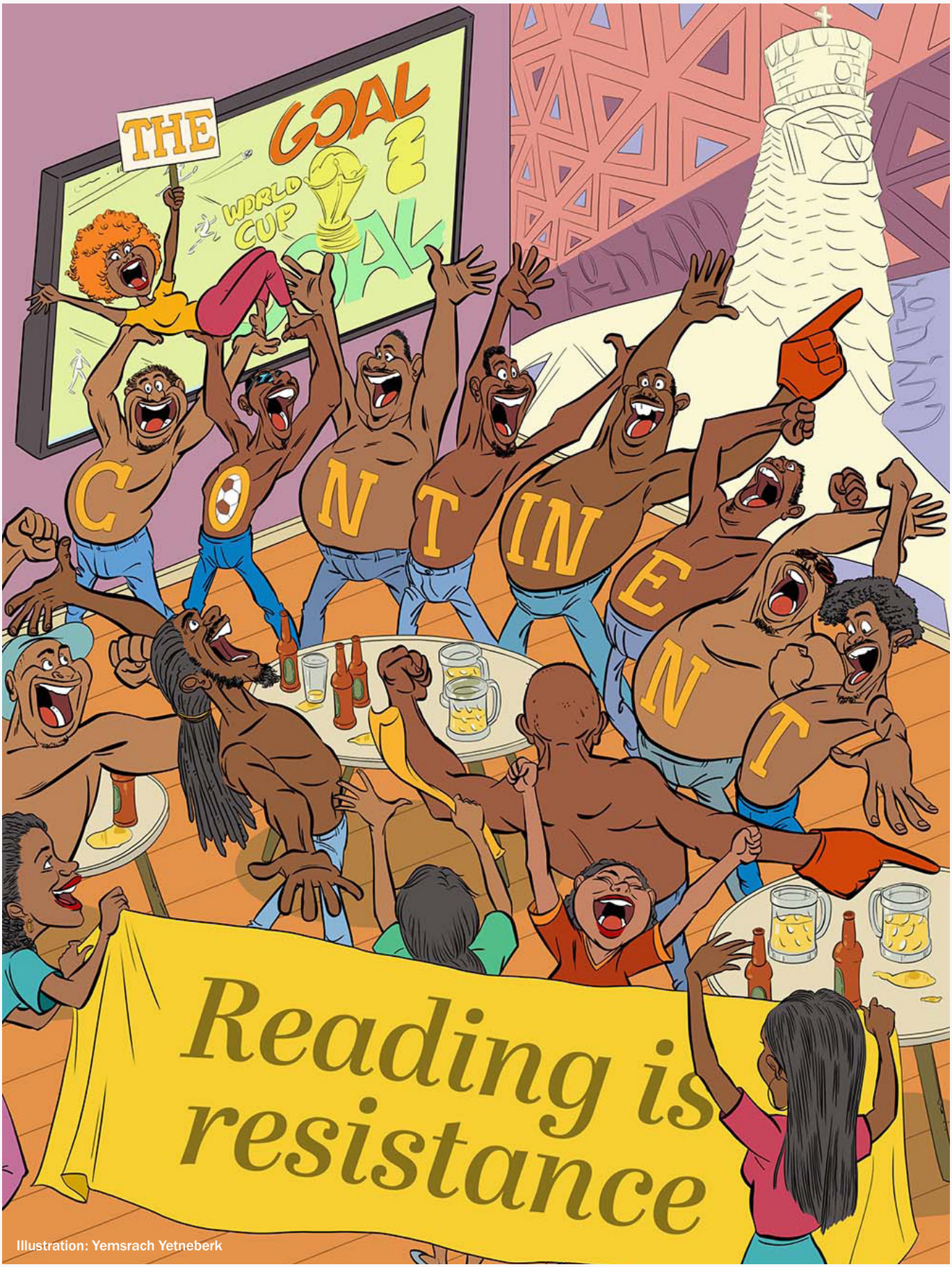


Illustration: Yemsrach Yetneberk

Russia wants its own Great Firewall

The Kremlin has spent a decade trying to control how ordinary Russians access the internet. It has not yet succeeded. But the government's tactics are evolving dangerously fast – and may yet define the future of the open web for all of us.

Masho Lomashvili

"You have to cook the frog very slowly. And they have been cooking this frog for more than 10 years now," says Mikhail Klimarev, the director of the Internet Protection Society – formerly based in Russia, and now exiled.

He is referring to the Kremlin's attempt to establish a "whitelist internet" in Russia, an online infrastructure thoroughly vetted and controlled by the government. And for months, in sporadic bursts, Russians have been getting insights into what that might look like.

This plan goes far beyond censorship. The Kremlin is pursuing what officials increasingly describe as "digital sovereignty": an internet that can function independently of the global web and, crucially, under the complete control of the state. Similar debates about technological sovereignty are emerging elsewhere – including in Europe – but Russia's version goes much further. It aims not merely to reduce dependence on foreign technology, but to determine which parts of the internet its citizens are allowed to see.

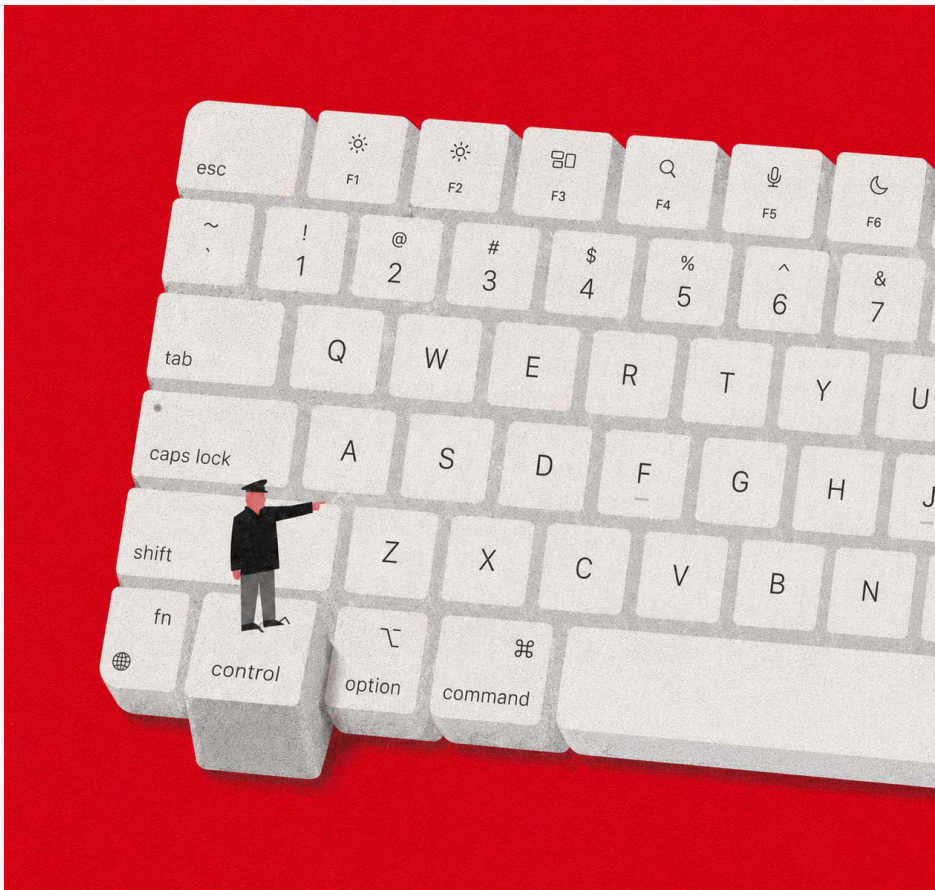
Picture this. It's a spring morning in Moscow. You leave your flat and open a taxi app. The screen hangs. You try another one. Nothing loads.

You decide to walk, but your map will not load either. The mobile internet is gone. At first, it feels like a minor inconvenience. But the disruptions keep coming. At a small neighbourhood shop, the cashier apologises: the card terminal is down. Outside, a queue starts forming at an ATM. People cluster around cafés, trying to connect to wi-fi. Across the city, couriers are delayed, as they pull over to study paper maps.

In Moscow, the mobile internet shutdown in March lasted three weeks. The official explanation was "security", the need to counter Ukrainian drones. But sources say the shutdown seemed more like a test of Russia's plan to build a state-approved internet.

For the past decade, Roskomnadzor, Russia's state regulator responsible for monitoring, controlling and censoring Russian mass media, has been on a quest to tame the world wide web.

Klimarev remembers 2012 being the turning point. Protesters filled Moscow's streets in the largest anti-government demonstrations of the Putin era, organised mostly online and livestreamed on YouTube. In response, the government, which had spent the previous decade destroying television and independent media,



▶ **Russia's censors are on a quest to bring the world wide web to heel. (All illustrations: Teona Tsintsadze)**

rolled out Russia's first national website blacklist – and started developing its digital surveillance infrastructure.

WHITELIST RUSSIA

By the time Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, most independent media websites were blocked, Facebook and Instagram were banned, Twitter was restricted, and foreign platforms became harder to reach. It was a shock to Russians still used to a relatively free internet, but they adapted. The use of virtual private networks (VPNs) to mask user locations rocketed by over 1000%, and millions of Russians flocked to Telegram and WhatsApp.

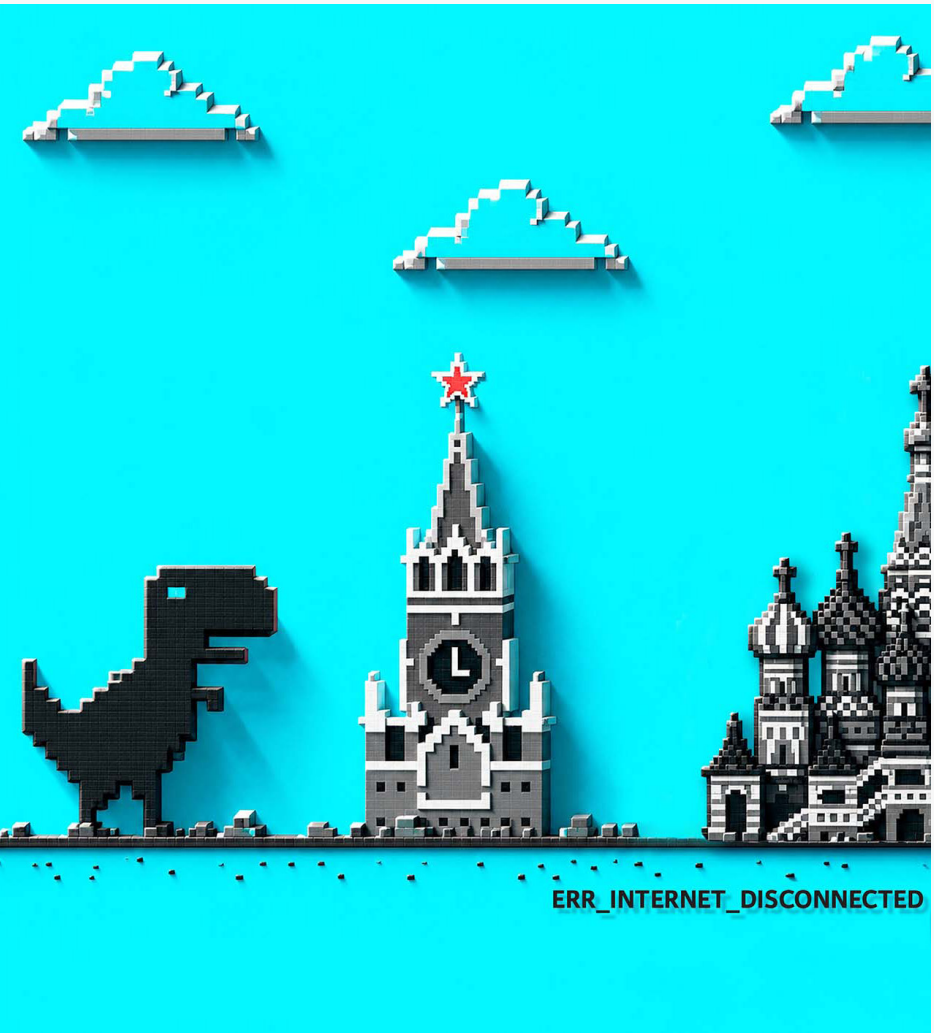
Things escalated this year. On February 12, Russia officially banned WhatsApp.

It began to slow Telegram down, frustrating the many millions of metropolitan Russians who rely on the messaging service for news and conversation – even some pro-Kremlin politicians were moved to express their opposition.

Already, in March 2025, the Kremlin had launched its Max app, ordering smartphone companies to install it on all new devices sold in Russia.

Max has struggled to win public trust. It is so insecure, so blatantly a surveillance and spyware tool that Russian authorities themselves have warned soldiers on the front line not to use it for sensitive information.

▼ **The Kremlin-backed Max app is meant to replace Whatsapp and Telegram, but Russians aren't biting.**



Few Russians have embraced Max, though the government forces people to access basic services through the app, and mandates that it be used for communications across the public sector.

The next phase, according to sources who spoke to *The Atlas*, is to move away from a "blacklist" approach – where the internet is mostly open, except for blacklisted sites – to a much more draconian "whitelist" approach. In this strategy, which is currently being trialled in Iran, the internet is entirely closed, except for selected "whitelist" sites that have been Kremlin-approved.

The distinction matters. Under today's blacklist model, VPN providers only have to stay one step ahead of the sites the government blocks. A whitelist reverses that logic: only pre-approved services are allowed to work, making VPNs far less effective because they are trying to pass through a system designed to reject everything else by default.

REROUTING RESISTANCE

Having already pushed millions of Russians toward VPNs, the Kremlin is trying to solve a problem it created for itself. Bypassing state controls has become normal, a way of life for Russians online.

Roskomnadzor's current task is to make this habit harder to sustain.

The authorities are targeting VPN traffic more aggressively, pressuring app stores to remove VPN services, restricting the protocols used to disguise traffic, and pushing Russian companies to detect and block users connecting through VPNs. For Russian citizens, this means that it's getting more and more expensive to stay connected with the global network. And more personally risky.

"I estimate that the Russian Federation spends at least $300-million a year on blocking the

internet," says Klimarev, from the Internet Protection Society. He has spent more than a decade tracking the Kremlin's efforts to control the web. Designated a "foreign agent" in 2022, he now lives in exile and has since been added to Russia's list of terrorists and extremists. "If you compare resources, we're not even mice to them, we're literally ants. Of course they'll crush us." Still, this month, he scored a win, as part of a group of activists and opposition figures that persuaded Apple to remove the Max app from its app store. Their next goal is to get Google to do the same.

TOTAL BLACKOUT

When it comes to exerting control over the internet, Russia is playing catch-up to China. "Generally China was the gold standard of internet censorship surveillance," says Doug Madory, an American Internet routing infrastructure expert. "Everybody else was a distant second."

China began developing its Great Firewall in the late 1990s, meaning that most Chinese users formed their online habits inside a domestic ecosystem of state-regulated platforms. But in Russia the first major internet restrictions came much later, in 2012, when around two-thirds of Russians were already online.

Until only a few years ago, Russians could still use Western platforms relatively freely — to consume content, communicate, run businesses, and maintain relationships across borders.

That is what makes the Russian project so significant. If the Kremlin succeeds in forcing a heavily connected society back behind state-approved digital walls, authoritarian governments will line up to buy the template. Russia has already exported censorship and surveillance technologies, including to Iran and Egypt, and Klimarev believes similar software is also being used in Myanmar.

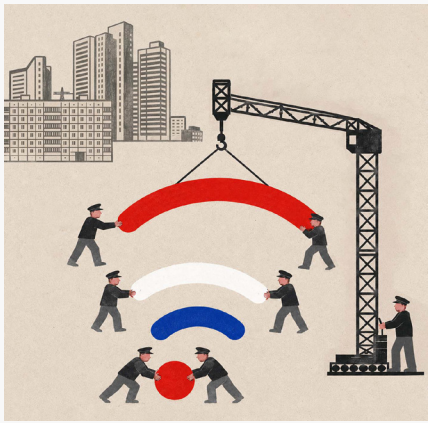
"China has hardware – computers, all these servers, and powerful production facilities," says Klimarev. "Russia has an engineering school that deals specifically with traffic analysis. Russian software is better than Chinese software, and Chinese hardware is better than Russian."

Around the world, governments are asserting greater control over digital infrastructure and online platforms: India temporarily restricted access to Telegram, while across Europe policymakers are debating how to achieve greater digital sovereignty by reducing dependence on foreign technology. The goals are very different, but the assumption that states should play a greater role in shaping how the internet functions is no longer confined to authoritarian regimes.

Madory worries that the distinction could blur over time. Governments pursuing legitimate goals such as security or technological sovereignty may increasingly look to Russian methods and try to build "a nicer version" of them in the name of security, child protection or fighting extremism.

"It's going to get dark," he says – for Russians trying to reach the outside world, but also for people everywhere who may soon find that the open internet has become a privilege, not a default.

That is what makes the Russian project so significant. If the Kremlin succeeds in forcing society back behind state-approved digital walls, authoritarian governments will line up to buy the template.



▲ **The Kremlin wants VPN products removed from app stores, and is pushing Russian firms to detect and block those who use them.**

One possible route to a freer internet comes from space. Satellite internet, provided by companies such as Elon Musk's Starlink, can in theory bypass the infrastructure controlled by governments on the ground and connect users directly to the global web.

Starlink terminals helped some Iranians to get online during periods of severe internet restriction. But satellite internet still relies on specialised ground equipment, such as terminals, that must physically exist inside the country. And even when governments can't switch it off, its billionaire owner can: Starlink access was shut off during the Ugandan election in January, at the request of the government that sought to impose a total internet blackout.

Russia is taking a different path. According to state broadcaster RT, it plans to spend $7 billion to launch 156 satellites as part of its drive for digital sovereignty.

The real export may not be Russia's technology, but its vision of what the internet should become.

Illustration: Anna Jibladze

Havana after dark

Life in a city under siege

All photos: Daniel Desormais/Panos

▲ An old Amercian car which has had the rear tyres removed stands on a street in Havana.

It's hard to sleep. "The worst thing is not the heat, or the mosquitoes, or the anxiety, or tossing and turning in bed at three, at four, at five," said one teacher in Havana. She had spent the past 15 hours without electricity. "The worst thing is opening your eyes and seeing everything dark, feeling that the night is swallowing you."

Since January, the United States has been preventing oil from reaching Cuba – the latest, and most severe, in a long line of sanctions and embargoes against the island's communist government that stretches back to 1962. Only one shipment has arrived since then: 700,000 barrels of Russian crude, enough for ten days.

The Cuban state electric company struggles to provide even a few hours of power a day. Blackouts can last for 30 hours at a time. Petrol stations have been empty for months. Families are cooking with charcoal and wood.

Shop shelves stand empty, and pharmacies struggle to supply even basic painkillers like paracetamol; syringes and surgical gloves are sterilised and shared by families living in the same block. In one pharmacy, the only item on sale is herbal tea.

The economy is in freefall. Anything that can be recycled is used. Plastic carrier bags are cleaned and hung out to dry with the washing.

At night, the only homes with light are those of people with family living abroad: remittances help to buy power packs to keep the lights on and fans spinning. With temperatures above 25°C at night, and humidity at 75%, sleeping without a fan is unbearable.

"When the power comes on, whatever time it is, there is a mad rush: to charge everything, to cook, to put the washing machine on, always with the fear that it will not last long," said the teacher from Havana.

▲

A government warehouse in a community 40km outside Havana, with a picture of Che Guevara on the wall.

▲

With little else to do during the lengthy power power cuts people hang out on the street, talking and drinking.

A young man hugs his girlfriend in the entrance to a vegetable market.

▼

A tangle of wires converge on electricity meters in an apartment block.

A street cigarette stall at night, lit by a single bulb.

▲
A staircase in a residential block in Havana during a power cut.

People play dominoes in the street at night during a power cut using their phones to light the game.
▼

The light from a bicycle rickhaw lends a green sheen to the streets of Havana at night.
▼

▲

A ceiling painting of Christ surrounded by putti in the Iglesia de la Merced in old Havana.

▲

A bust of José Marti, liberator of Cuba from Spanish rule, on a pedestal painted with Cuba's flag.

A woman and a man with a bicycle rickshaw drinking and talking on the street during a blackout.

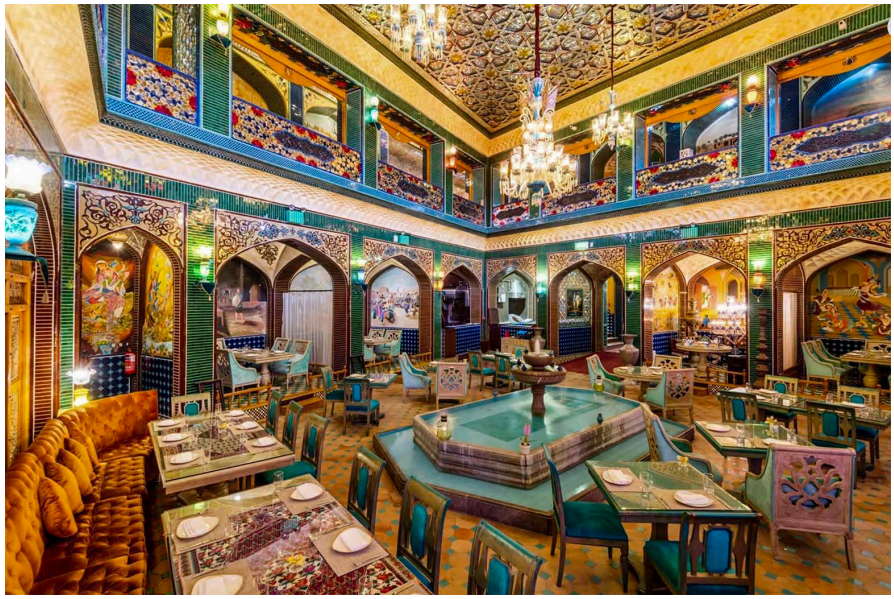
▼

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Qatar's Parisa: Deliverance in Doha

The Atlas ordered:

Mast va Mousir (a yoghurt dip with Persian shallots)
Kashko Bademjan (eggplant with yoghurt, onion, walnut and mint)
Parisa Shahane Kebab (duo of lamb fillet and ground lamb)
Lavash bread
Saffron and Rose Sharbat
BILL: 227 Qatari Riyals ($62)



It feels a little subversive to be dining at a Persian restaurant in Doha, just days after the United States and Iran announced a ceasefire, and just a few months since Iranian missiles targeted several sites in Qatar's capital. Only a few stranded tankers have yet to pass through the Strait of Hormuz, and Qatar Airways is still flying wide circles around Iranian air space – each plane surveilled, no doubt, by several different national militaries.

Iran and Qatar's fates are intertwined. The two countries are separated by the Arabian Gulf – it's the Persian Gulf in Tehran – and both economies are powered by the vast reserves of natural gas that lie beneath those waters, which they share.

There are other similarities. Both are family-led autocracies (the Al Thanis in Qatar and the Khameneis in Iran). Both operate legal systems predicated on Islamic law. Both discriminate, as a matter of constitutional principle, against women.

But where Iran relies on brutality and oppression to keep its 93-million people in check, Qatar manufactures consent through extreme wealth.

This is possible because there are so few Qatari citizens: fewer than 300,000 at last count, with a supporting cast of 2.7-million foreign workers – ranging from lavishly-paid courtiers to indentured labourers – employed to keep the country going.

In Souq Waqif, the thoughtfully-restored historic centre of the capital Doha, the influence of these foreign workers is evident in the multitude of cuisines on offer: Syrian, Afghan, Filipino, Thai, Nigerian, Yemeni, Turkish, Iraqi and more.

Of all these restaurants, Parisa is perhaps the most famous – and certainly the most 'grammable. Its interior is a dizzying riot of colourful geometric patterns and full-length murals of iconic scenes from Persian literature, like someone took an acid trip through the pages of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. The ceiling glitters with inlaid gold and silver. A water fountain, gently trickling into a shallow rectangular pool, brings some calm. It's all in stark contrast to the austere, monochrome beauty that characterizes the rest of the city.

The smell of saffron, rosewater and lamb fat dripping onto hot coals pledges to reconcile this contradiction.

As for the food, the smell of saffron, rosewater and lamb fat dripping onto hot coals pledges to reconcile this contradiction.

The kebabs, charred and tender, are served on gleaming silver platters. The eggplant dip is dusted with ground walnuts and laced with mint, to be scooped up with freshly-baked, paper-thin lavash.

And the sharbat, delicately flavoured with saffron and rosewater and served with ice in a tall glass, is the only appropriate response to the suffocating 43°C heat outside.

If this is the taste of subversion, then we'll have another helping. If it's just decadence we'll have two.

If you missed the ZEG Storytelling Festival in Tbilisi this month, don't worry: ZEG is hitting the road.

NEXT STOPS:

Amsterdam! November 7, 2026

New York City! May 1, 2027

zegfest.com

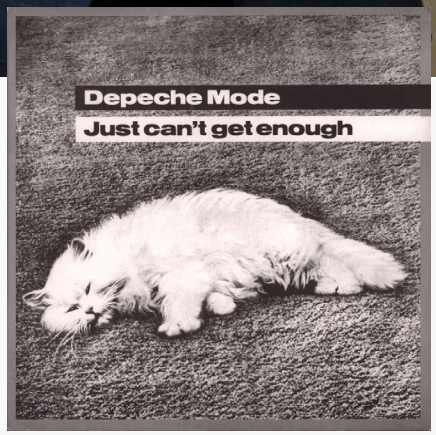
The Historical Record

with **VIET THANH NGUYEN**

Illustration: Wynona Mutisi

If history is written by the victors, what artefacts of the world today have already won their own B-side on the record? *The Atlas* asks Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen what fragments of history – a song, a building, a place, a meal – he would preserve for posterity. Historians of the far distant future, human or otherwise, you'll just have to thank us later.

I grew up in San Jose in California as a refugee in the 1970s and 1980s. We did not have a single book in the house, and so my place of salvation was the San Jose public library, which was named after Martin Luther King Jr. And to someone who's a small boy, it was a gigantic building of four storeys. There were no boundaries in there. I could go from the children's section to the young adults section to science fiction to adult fiction. I



TOP: Viet Thanh Nguyen. Photo: Roman Cho John D and Catherine T MacArthur Foundation
ABOVE: *Just Can't Get Enough* Depeche Mode (1981)
LEFT: San Jose Public Library

was shaped and saved in the San Jose public library, which no longer exists. That building is gone. But in my mind, it still exists … sometimes, the archive is what's in our imagination as well.

My song is *Just Can't Get Enough* by Depeche Mode, from their 1981 album *Speak & Spell*. That was when I was ten years old. I associate it with youth and love and desire and fun. There's lots of other reasons why you can choose songs, but if we're looking a thousand years into the future, I want people to think there was love and joy that was a part of our lives as well.

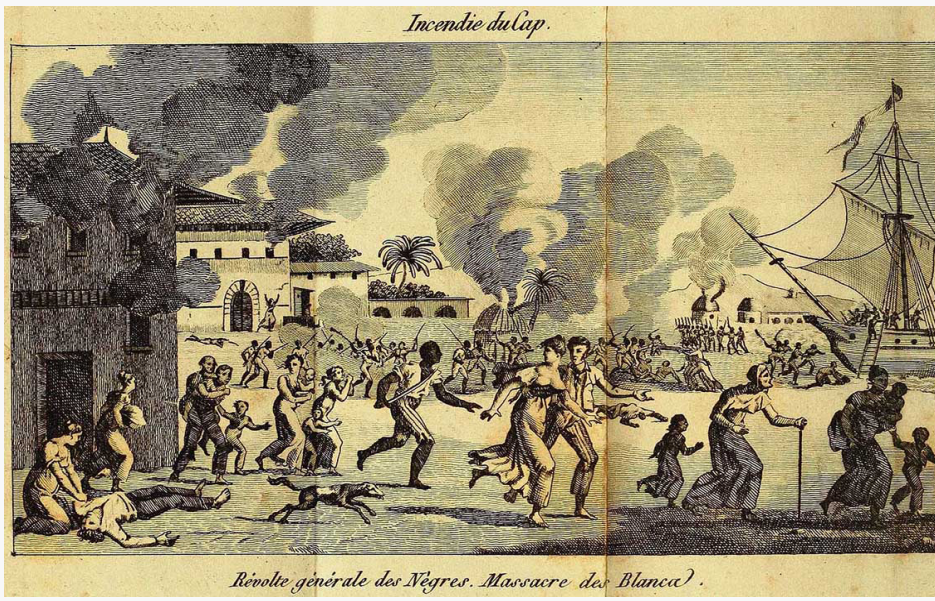
The meal I want to talk about is the meal I would cook for my father in his last years, in his 70s and 80s. I would come home and make him a steak, and serve it with red wine. It gave me such pleasure to watch him eat it. He really enjoyed the steak, and the red wine, and it brought back all these memories. When I was growing up, that was how he would express his love for me, he would make sure that I ate constantly, all the time. He was not an expressive man, but that was how he expressed himself.

I've lived in Los Angeles for more than 30 years and it has grown on me, it has transformed me. Los Angeles can be a difficult place, but it's also an entire region, a state of mind, and I really think Los Angeles is a place where the entire world lives. It's a Pacific Rim city, a Latin-American city, an American city, and in it you can find some of the largest diasporas in the world. The largest Vietnamese diaspora is only an hour away, the largest Korean diaspora is in Los Angeles. You could live your entire life in Los Angeles and hear almost every language in the world, sample some of the best food in the world, and confront some of the greatest difficulties in the world. It is a city that is inexhaustible and a place that I could live forever.

One crucial turning point [in history] was the Haitian revolution against France [from 1791-1804]. The enslaved peoples of Haiti successfully throwing off their chains, then France coming in to punish them, and to impose this gigantic burden upon them to pay back the debts to their own slaveholders. That transformed the future. It obviously devastated Haiti up until the present, but it also transformed the possibilities of revolution and liberation. The French betrayed their own revolution. ●

Viet Thanh Nguyen is the author of The Sympathiser, The Committed and A Man of Two Faces. He was speaking on the sidelines of the ZEG Storytelling Festival 2026 in Tbilisi, Georgia. 'The Historical Record' is produced by Masho Lomashvili and Simon Allison.

You could live your entire life in Los Angeles and hear almost every language in the world, sample some of the best food in the world, and confront some of the greatest difficulties in the world.



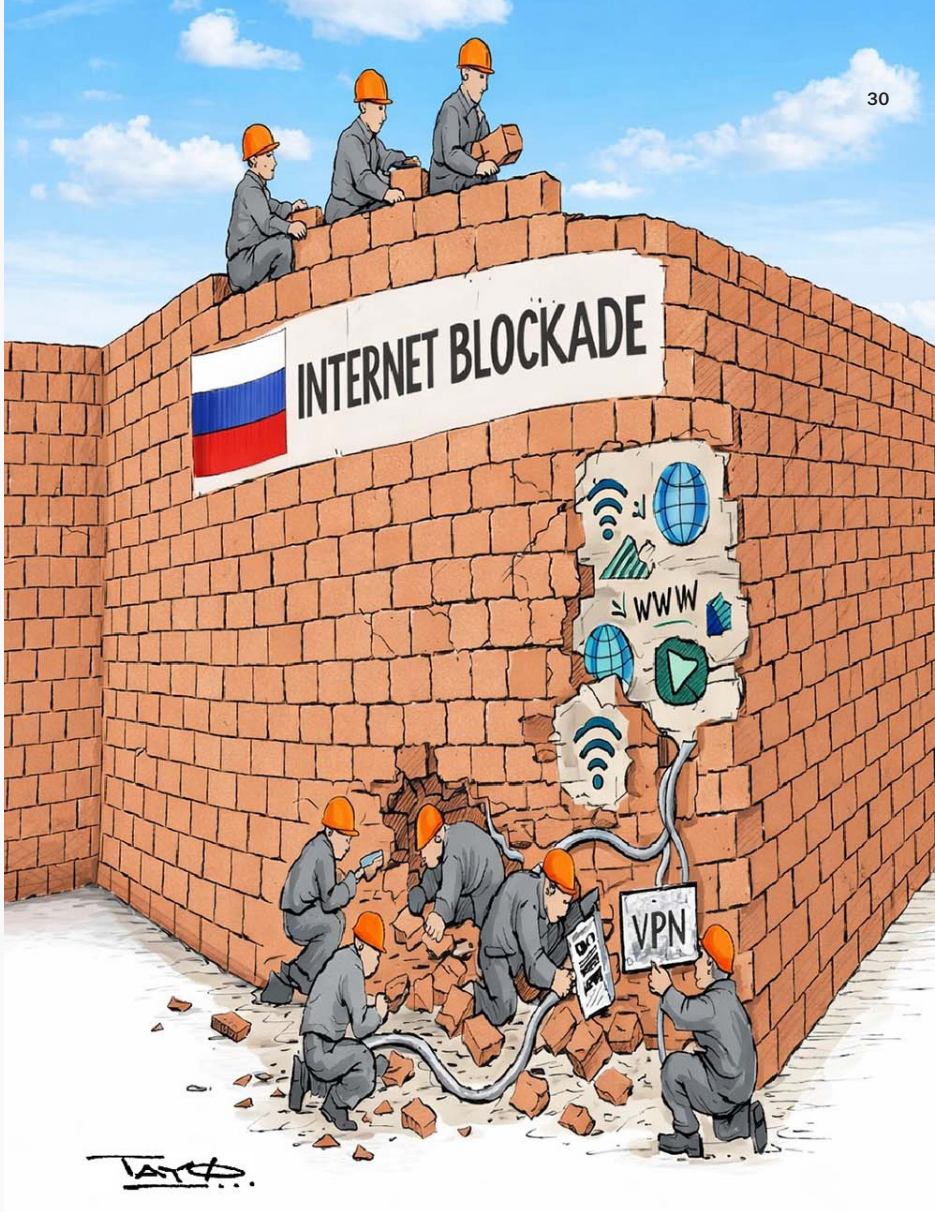
▼ **The Haitian Revolution: Slave rebellion on the night of 21 August 1791, c. 1815. Private Collection. Illustration: Heritage Images**

Credits & Corrections

Issue 2 is published by *Coda Story* and *The Continent*, and reported from: Seaford, Tbilisi, Novi Sad, Guadalajara, Gagarin, Johannesburg, Cotonou, Tirana, Taiz, Havana, Doha, Paris, Addis Ababa, Port-au-Prince, Ternate.

Errata from Issue 1 of *The Atlas*:
On page 2, the outline of Ukraine on the world map excluded Crimea. This was an error. The peninsula has been occupied by Russian forces since 2014, but it remains a part of Ukraine under international law.

On page 7, the photograph of the data centre in Pando, Uruguay should have been credited to Matilde Campodónico/Amenaza Roboto. And Amenaza Roboto, a newsroom, is based in Montevideo, not Pando.



▸ **Russia's crackdown on VPN use is making unrestricted access to the internet expensive – and risky.**

About *Coda Story*

Coda Story is an award-winning journalism studio that investigates the forces shaping the world. Through deep reporting, pattern-recognition journalism and storytelling innovation, Coda connects stories across borders and over time, revealing the systems beneath the headlines.

About *The Continent*

The Continent is an award-winning pan-African newspaper that began publishing in April 2020. Distributed as a PDF on encrypted messaging platforms, it is Africa's most widely read newspaper, with subscribers in more than 140 countries.

For *Coda Story*:
Anastasia Gviniashvili
Becky Lipscombe
Elene Jvania
Emily Patton
Ines Vilares
Irina Matchavariani
Isobel Cockerell
Jennifer Healy Johnson
Kaizar Campwala
Ketevan Ebanoidze
Kristina Skupien
Masho Lomashvili
Nadia Beard
Natalia Antelava
Olatunji Olaigbe
Shougat Dasgupta
Sophiko Vasadze
Teona Tsintsadze
Victoria Jensen

For *The Continent*:
Ashleigh Swaile
Athandiwe Saba
Christine Mungai
Dumi Sithole
Evania Chiza
Gado
Kiri Rupiah
Lisa Muchangi
Lydia Namubiru
Matthew du Plessis
Paul Botes
Refiloe Seiboko
Simon Allison
Sipho Kings
Theresa Mallinson
Wynona Mutisi
Yemsrach Yetneberk
Yusuf Omotayo

.coda
The Continent

The Coda

Natalia Antelava in Paris

I arrived in Paris just as the city was reorganising itself around the heat. Schools shortened their days, people slept in basements and lingered in cooled public spaces like libraries, museums and shopping centres. The Louvre announced it would close early. Its historic building, the museum explained, was "not sufficiently adapted to climate change."

That word – adapted – seems to be everywhere. We are adapting not only to a warming planet, but to artificial intelligence, enduring wars, shrinking freedoms and a million other ways of living with uncertainty.

Adaptation is, of course, how we cope. But for the past month I have found myself wondering whether the pace of change leaves us so busy catching up that we rarely stop to ask whether the future we're adapting to is the only one available to us.

Earlier this month, nearly a thousand journalists, artists, scientists, musicians, technologists and novelists gathered in Tbilisi for ZEG, our annual storytelling festival, where this newspaper was officially launched. In Georgian, zeg means the day after tomorrow. We chose the name because tomorrow belongs to schedules, plans and the pressure to solve whatever is immediately in front of us. The day after is different.

▲ Nearly a thousand journalists, artists, scientists, and technologists gathered in Tbilisi for ZEG in June. (Illustration: Teona Tsintsadze)

It gives us permission to slow down, embrace contradiction and imagine that there may be more than one way forward.

This issue of *The Atlas* is animated by that same instinct. None of these stories offers easy answers or pretends there is a single solution waiting for us. Instead, they create just enough space to ask what, exactly, we are adapting for. ●