DeCode

A RESEARCH QUARTERLY

WINTER 2026
VOLUME I No. 2



THE BLACK SEA

IMPERIIA





Fore-->ward



This issue of DeCode delivers the Black Sea to your doorstep. The issue is filled with the voices of scholars at conference tables, photographers narrating their process, writers composing lines, and designers integrating stories with space. Their voices express an astonishing range of opinions about the sea itself. It is (for Halyna Kruk) a thing that "beats and bets that we won't ever come back," (for Oles Honchar) a "whole shore sunk in dreams," and (for Gökçen Erkılıç) "a geopolitical energy geography."

The issue is also filled with powerful images spread across pages and tucked into digital galleries. These ship hulls, beaches, concrete stairways, terraced neighborhoods, fish, pipelines, trees, and sun-warmed bodies feel like necessary counterpoints to the accompanying discussions of socio-economic dynamics, infrastructural development, and geopolitical struggle. Things in the Black Sea are not as they have always been, and with that in mind this issue invites us to interact with genres that escape the boundaries of linear thinking. If you don't normally turn to graffiti or network visualizations for insight, this is your chance.

As always, we encourage you to explore the contents of each page. We promise you can't break anything.

Kelly O'Neill (REECA 2000)

Winter 2026
VOLUME I NO. 2
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Editor-in-Chief
Paul Vădan

Publications Assistant
Paweł Pieniążek

Advisor
Kelly O'Neill

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GEOGRAPHY MATTERS

The


Exploring the edges of research
Black Sea Lab

The Black Sea has once again captured the world's attention. . . . What now?

The "Inhospitable Sea" never lost its historical meaning. For researchers at the Davis Center, it's important to understand why.

The Black Sea is strange. Its large surface is not pierced by islands, its depths - the largest anoxic basin in the world - lack marine life, and its bottom is riddled with shipwrecks dating back to the 5th century BCE. For decades, academics and policymakers dismissed the region as culturally and politically marginal. Lately, however, news outlets around the world describe the Black Sea as a hot spot and a flashpoint; some have even resuscitated the "inhospitable" designation favored by ancient seafarers.

Cities like Odesa, Istanbul, Sevastopol, and Batumi are now routinely mentioned not only as sites of military conflict or geopolitical contestation but as nodes in powerful global economic networks. Russia's war against Ukraine has disrupted the global grain trade; Ukraine's response has redefined modern naval warfare; China's Belt and Road Initiative is remaking trans-continental energy corridors. Suddenly, everyone seems to agree there is value in controlling this strange sea.

There is value in studying it as well.

But where to start? Decades of neglect have stunted Black Sea studies. Even those of us who have been paying attention struggle with the fundamental task of defining the object of study. Where does the Black Sea region begin? Where does it end? Does it have a center of gravity? Does it have interests and dynamics of its own, or is it a place acted upon by more powerful regions across Western Eurasia and the Atlantic world?

The Black Sea Lab studies what it means to be a region in the globalized 21st century. Established by Dr. Kelly O'Neill as an exploratory collaboration across research initiatives at the Davis

Center, the goal of the Lab is to set aside academic conventions and identify new avenues of research.

In the past year, the core Lab team – Kelly O'Neill, Natia Chankvetadze, Mark Kramer, and Nargis Kassenova – has convened historians, geographers, architects, political scientists, writers, mathematicians, and literary scholars for a series of conversations. Working together, can we find common (interpretive) ground? Does interdisciplinarity improve our understanding of a region in which the only point of stability is its relentless terrestrial and maritime upheaval?

As we shift from talking to designing research agendas we have begun to see that the answer might in fact be "yes." The next few pages will give you a sense of the work getting underway in this early phase, assembling archives, building maps, and narrating the challenges faced by littoral communities. History provides a conceptual compass. Innovative methods bring energy and perspective. Little by little we are developing a framework for analyzing the ways in which risk – whether defined in political, social, economic, cultural, or environmental terms – transcends national boundaries, as well as the range of responses that shape life in a region defined by the sea.

Irina Busygina, Kelly O'Neill, Natia Chankvetadze, Mark Kramer, and Nargis Kassenova, being introduced by Allison Hart at the opening panel of the Black Sea Lab Symposium, May 12, 2025.



Natia Chankvetadze talks to DeCode about what the Black Sea Lab means for The Program on Georgian Studies, and for Georgians more broadly.

What does the Black Sea Lab mean for the Program on Georgian Studies?

Investing in and supporting an initiative like the Black Sea Lab came with clear motivations. We always strive to better understand the region's history—not only the Silk Road and the Middle Corridor, but also ancient Colchis, and the Black Sea coast of Georgia.

At the same time, the Black Sea region is central to contemporary politics: whether we are talking about the ongoing war in Ukraine, the tensions in the occupied Georgian territory of Abkhazia on the Black Sea, or the complex socio-economic dynamics in Adjara, which borders Turkey and is a major tourist area. There is also the large infrastructure project at the Anaklia Deep Sea Port—initially developed with an American company and now involves a Chinese consortium. All of these considerations highlight the sea's importance for Georgia's past and present.

What is the most important component of the Lab in your opinion?

One of the most important components of the Black Sea Lab is student engagement. The Black Sea Lab creates opportunities for students to study not only the Black Sea itself, but the wider post-Soviet or Eurasian region. I do believe that continue to engage students and give them opportunities to study the region from multiple perspectives is very important. A second important aspect is support for research projects. The Black Sea Lab is interdisciplinary: scholars from different fields come together to design and carry out research. Continuing ongoing projects and initiating new ones focused on the Black Sea region will be crucial moving forward.

> *It invites you to think about the sea not through a purely scholarly lens, but a human one...*

Where do you see the Lab heading?

Initially it was partnership between the Davis Center's research initiatives. Over time, we sought to involve scholars from other Harvard centers, including the Ukrainian Research Institute, the Center for European Studies, and the Center for Middle Eastern Studies. The network has expanded even further: we have added professors from Northeastern University and Bridgewater State University as collaborators, and are in touch with several D.C.-based initiatives that focus on the Black Sea region. In this sense, the Black Sea Lab has clearly moved beyond its initial core and has become a broader collaborative platform.

What's your favorite Lab activity?

I really like the end-of-year symposia. They provide an excellent space to bring together everyone who has been involved with the Black Sea Lab and to engage them in shared conversations. Both the first and the second symposia were very successful initiatives.

In terms of specific projects, I especially appreciate the Black Sea Frames. It began as a simple idea, but it has grown into something much more layered and sophisticated with real potential for further exploration. It captures the individual, everyday, human perspective of living in the Black Sea region—what people see, how they experience the shoreline, and how the sea becomes part of their daily

Has the Black Sea Lab changed your perspective on the Black Sea region?

Yes and no. No, in the sense that I come from Georgia, and we are a Black Sea country. I often notice that Georgians feel quite comfortable identifying with the Black Sea. And again "no" because the sea already plays a significant role in our collective memory and in the experiences of many communities, especially given my work on conflicts. In that sense, the sea has always been present as an important reference point. But yes as well, because although I am from Georgia, I come from a specific locality that is not on the coast. So in my everyday, embodied experience, the sea is absent. I don't see it daily; it's not part of my physical environment. I even only recently learned how to swim—poorly.

In this sense as well, the Black Sea Frames project is eye-opening. It invites you to think about the sea not through a purely scholarly lens, but a human one: how people relate to it. The sea feeds them. For others, it offers a view, a landscape, a place they live with or explore. For some, it is a space for swimming - it does mean you are using it. And for others it is a site of war. The sea brings together many different layers of meaning, and the project made me think more deeply about all these dimensions.



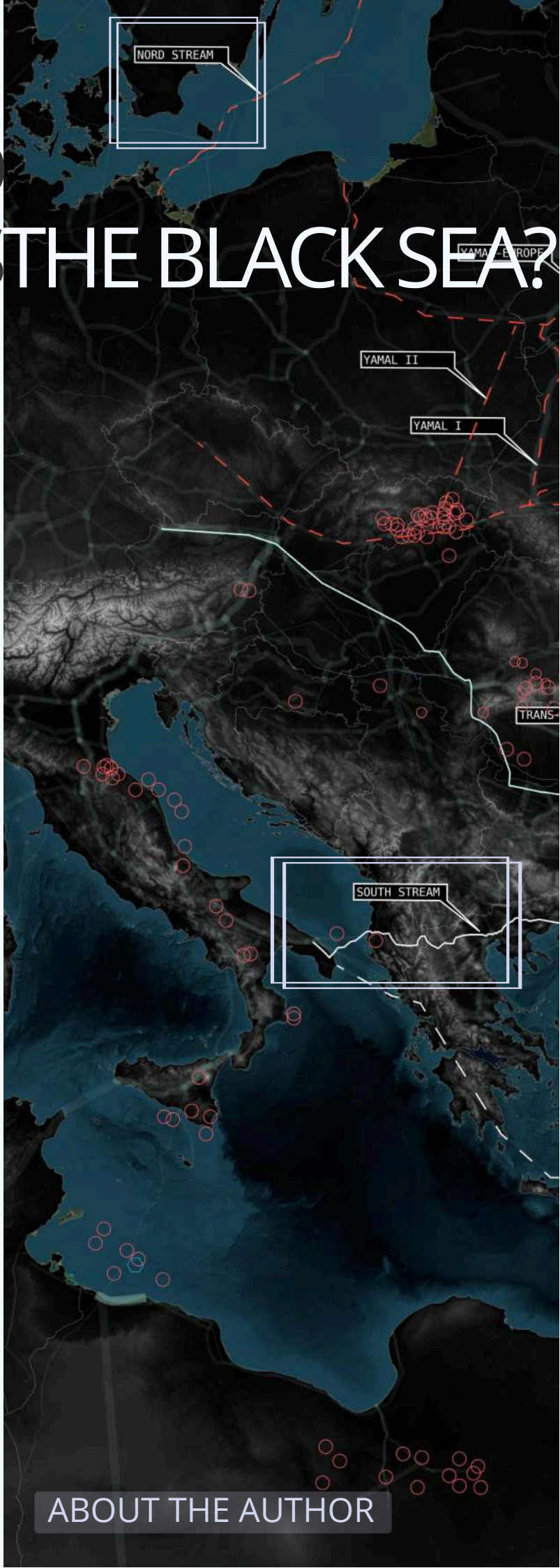
Natia Chanvetadze (left) with Allison Hart (right), the Program on Georgian Studies coordinator, posing in front of Narikala Fortress and Old Tbilisi.

HOW FRAGMENTED IS THE BLACK SEA?

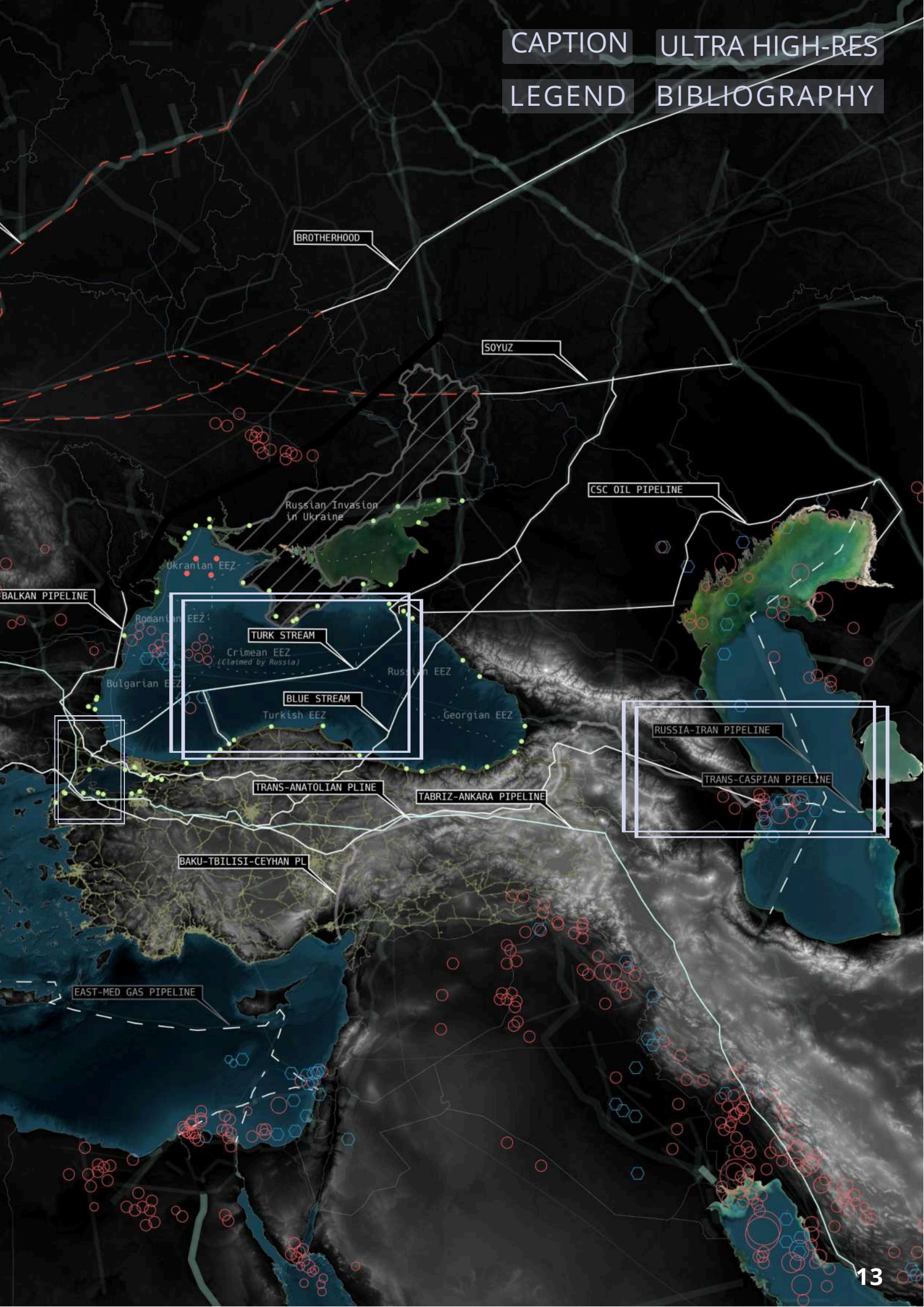
In her ongoing project, Dr. Gökçen Erkılıç, director of the Coastliner Lab (CLLab), explores the degree to which infra-structures, legal regimes, and political boundaries divide, overlap, or reconfigure the region.

Across the Black Sea and its surrounding regions, pipelines, grain corridors, submarine cables, and military activity intersect within shared maritime and territorial spaces. Energy production sites, transit routes, and choke-points link the Black Sea to the Caspian Basin, the Eastern Mediterranean, and European markets.

This map is one response to the question of which scales to use for initiating a biopsy to understand the Black Sea as a geopolitical energy geography. Mapping these infrastructures situates the Black Sea within a much broader region shaped by extraction, transport, regulation, negotiation, and conflict.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR


BROTHERHOOD
SOYUZ
CSC OIL PIPELINE
Russian Invasion in Ukraine
Ukranian EEZ
BALKAN PIPELINE
Romanian EEZ
TURK STREAM
Crimean EEZ
(Claimed by Russia)
Bulgarian EEZ
Russian EEZ
BLUE STREAM
Turkish EEZ
Georgian EEZ
RUSSIA-IRAN PIPELINE
TRANS-CASPIAN PIPELINE
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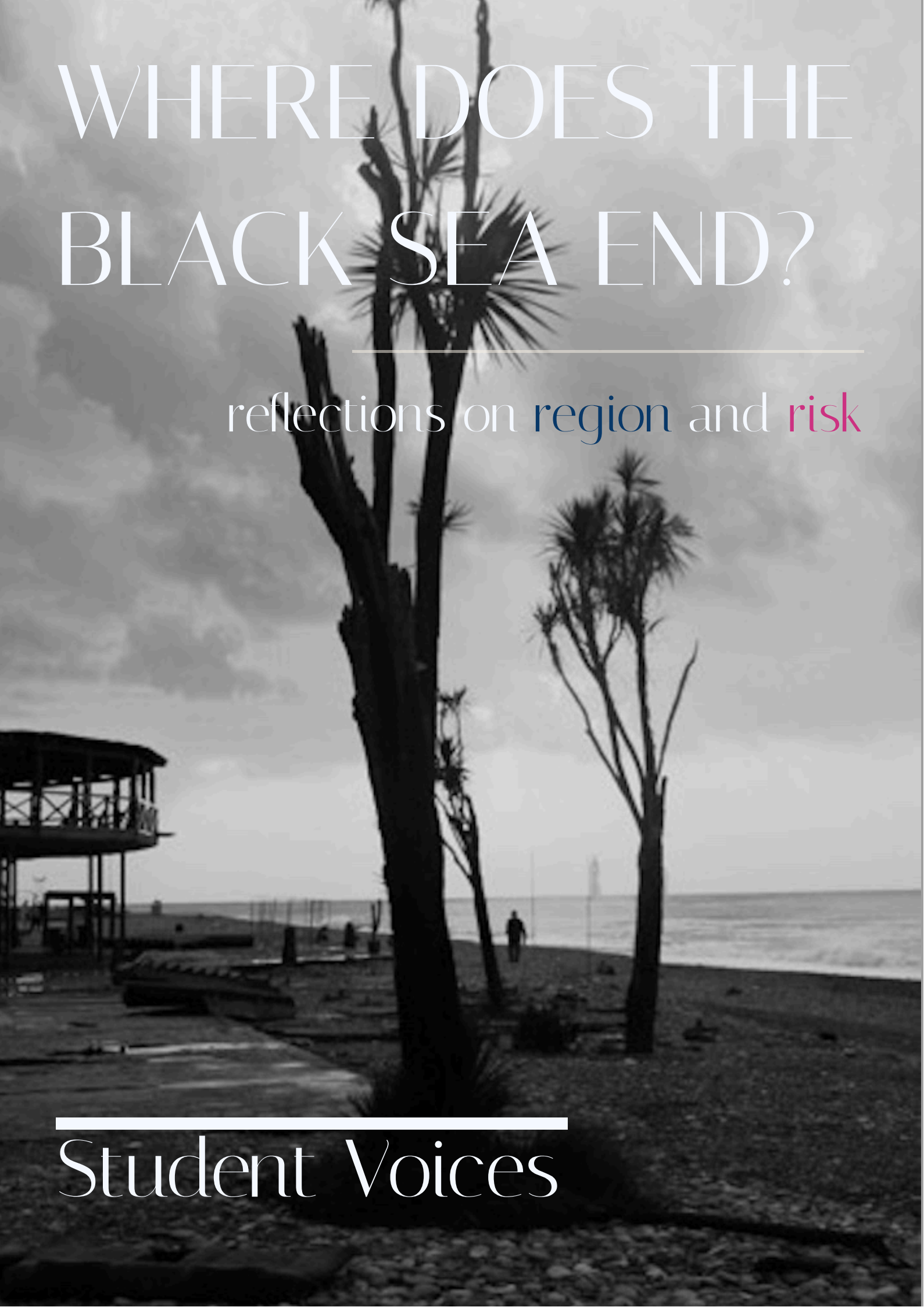

WHERE DOES THE BLACK SEA END?

reflections on region and risk

Student Voices

We asked alum Julian Gonzales-Poirier (REECA '25) to reflect on the Black Sea Lab's exploratory conversations on studying the region through the concept of risk.

How should we, as scholars, conceptualize the Black Sea region? Is it a "macro-region," and thus the broad swath of land and water stretching from the Caspian Sea to the Eastern Mediterranean? Or should we think of it as the coastal regions of the six littoral states and the sea itself? Is it a region defined by land or by water? Or perhaps the term "region" is too restrictive? Perhaps the most productive way to think of the Black Sea is as a collection of people, ideas, and cultures?

These were some of the questions that lay at the heart of the inaugural Black Sea Lab seminar. Bringing together scholars from Harvard and the wider Boston community, the day-long "Conversations About Risk" event was an attempt at facilitating collaboration based on geography, not discipline. Three different panels covered separate, yet interconnected, approaches: populations at risk, culture at risk, and sovereignty at risk. Thanks to the wide variety of disciplinary expertise around the table, it became clear that the risks present in the Black Sea region are plentiful and anything but abstract. The agents of risk are human and non-human.

Left: Batumi relics. Immediately abandoned tourist-infrastructure due to war.

They deliver their impact through various media: warfare, destructive policies, man-made environmental catastrophes, earthquakes, coastal erosion, and floods. As the symposium went on it became clear that nothing is truly safe from risk and while this is true everywhere in the world in one way or another, "Conversations About Risk" converted this idea from an abstraction to a phenomenon that can and should be studied across the Black Sea region.

The fundamental threats all countries, populations, cultures, and environments face are similar...

In my eyes, centering risk was central to the success of the first Black Sea Lab discussion. It helped me remove intellectual barriers and encouraged me to think along different lines. The event challenged panelists and participants to find common threads across diverse research projects. Those threads weren't always obvious at first glance.

What do maps of Istanbul and the Georgian-Abkhazian border have in common? How do we connect the ruin of

an Armenian church to the defense of cultural institutions in war-torn Ukraine? But the common threads were there. When one realizes that the fundamental threats all countries, populations, cultures, and environments face are similar and interconnected, it becomes easier to draw comparisons and situate one's work within a wider context.

It was through this framing that I found my personal answer to the question of how we should think about the Black Sea region: we should think of it as expansively as possible, from the Caspian to the Mediterranean.

Breaking down intellectual barriers is conceptual work. On the one hand, discussing an individual region is common practice at the Davis Center. Panels covering the entirety of the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Balkans are regular occurrences at both universities and conferences. On the other hand, this well-established practice is somewhat limiting.When we talk about a given geography, such as the South Caucasus or Central Asia, we usually do so with stable geographic boundaries in our minds. On the rare occasions when we manage to break out of this isolation, we usually work to construct discussions familiar in other ways.

This is why the "Conversations About Risk" event felt refreshing to me. Because it broke out of both disciplinary boundaries and traditional regional restrictions, I came away with a new perspective on topics I have long been thinking about. This was similar to how I felt after a 2024 talk on Turkish and Iranian presence in the South Caucasus, which fundamentally changed the way I think about Eurasia. Challenging prior convictions allows me, and all of us, to stay fresh.

Last summer, I was fortunate enough to attend the Program on Georgian Studies' conference at Tbilisi State University, which amongst other things covered the "Middle Corridor." Through these discussions, I became increasingly aware of the work that the Program on Central Asia was doing on the topic.

In a similar vein, "Conversations about Risk" provided a framework for incorporating into my work yet another one of the Davis Center's research initiatives: the Imperiia Project. While I had been aware of both initiatives before these events, I hadn't seen their applicability to my own work, which focuses on the Caucasus, Russia, and Turkey. It was only through challenging my thinking, both geographically and conceptually, that I was able to recognize that they both have large impacts on what I research. I would argue that I am now more prepared to engage in productive discussions as a result.

I am looking forward to further discussions facilitated by the Black Sea Lab, especially those that involve perspectives and disciplines less familiar to me. It is my personal hope that through events like this, more people will come to imagine the region in macro terms and push the limits of how they think about geography.



Black Sea Meets Botanical Garden. "When you tell Georgians that you are traveling to Batumi, most, if not all, recommend that you spend at least a day at the Batumi Botanical Garden. On my last day in the city in summer 2024, I made sure to do so. This was the view of the Black Sea afforded to me." Julian Gonzales-Poirier, June 2024.

AT THE [CUTTING]



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EDGE

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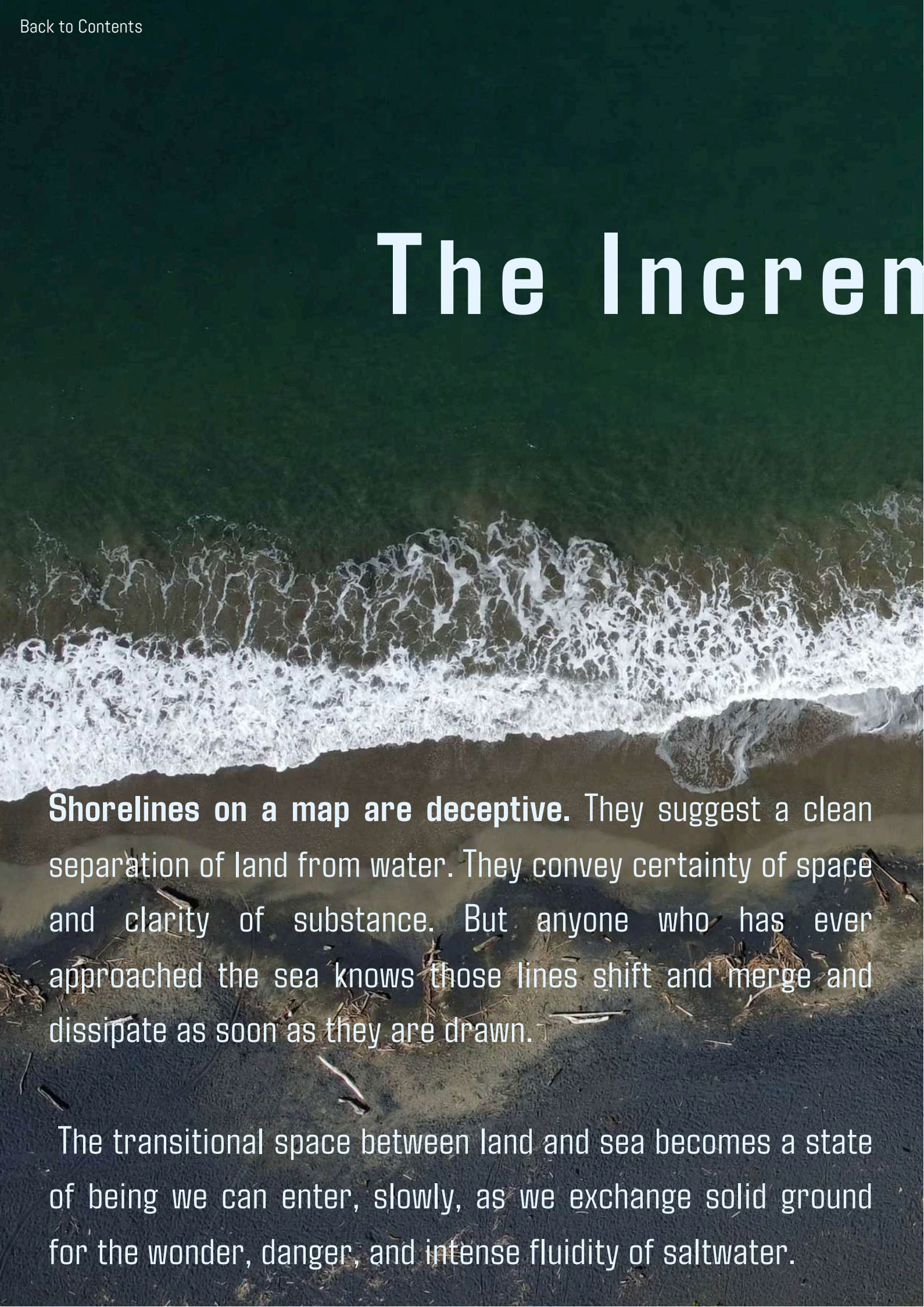
The Increm



Shorelines on a map are deceptive. They suggest a clean separation of land from water. They convey certainty of space and clarity of substance. But anyone who has ever approached the sea knows those lines shift and merge and dissipate as soon as they are drawn.

The transitional space between land and sea becomes a state of being we can enter, slowly, as we exchange solid ground for the wonder, danger, and intense fluidity of saltwater.

nental Sea



The project is a set of meditations on the Black Sea. It draws on centuries of mapwork and artwork. Its visual components are complemented by the voices of authors entranced by the sea's power to inspire. Across generations, and genres, their writings cast a collective gaze out to sea.

We invite you to imagine yourself at the shoreline. Spend a moment in the transitional space between land and water, and ponder who we are, what we feel, and what we share.

It started with an art installation...

The Imperiia Project's Innovation Fellow Olive Coles ('26), collaborated with director Kelly O'Neill to design a wall display that spotlights the materiality of historical maps. The result was a mosaic diptych that brings out the beautiful and distinct cartographic visions used to depict the Black Sea over time.

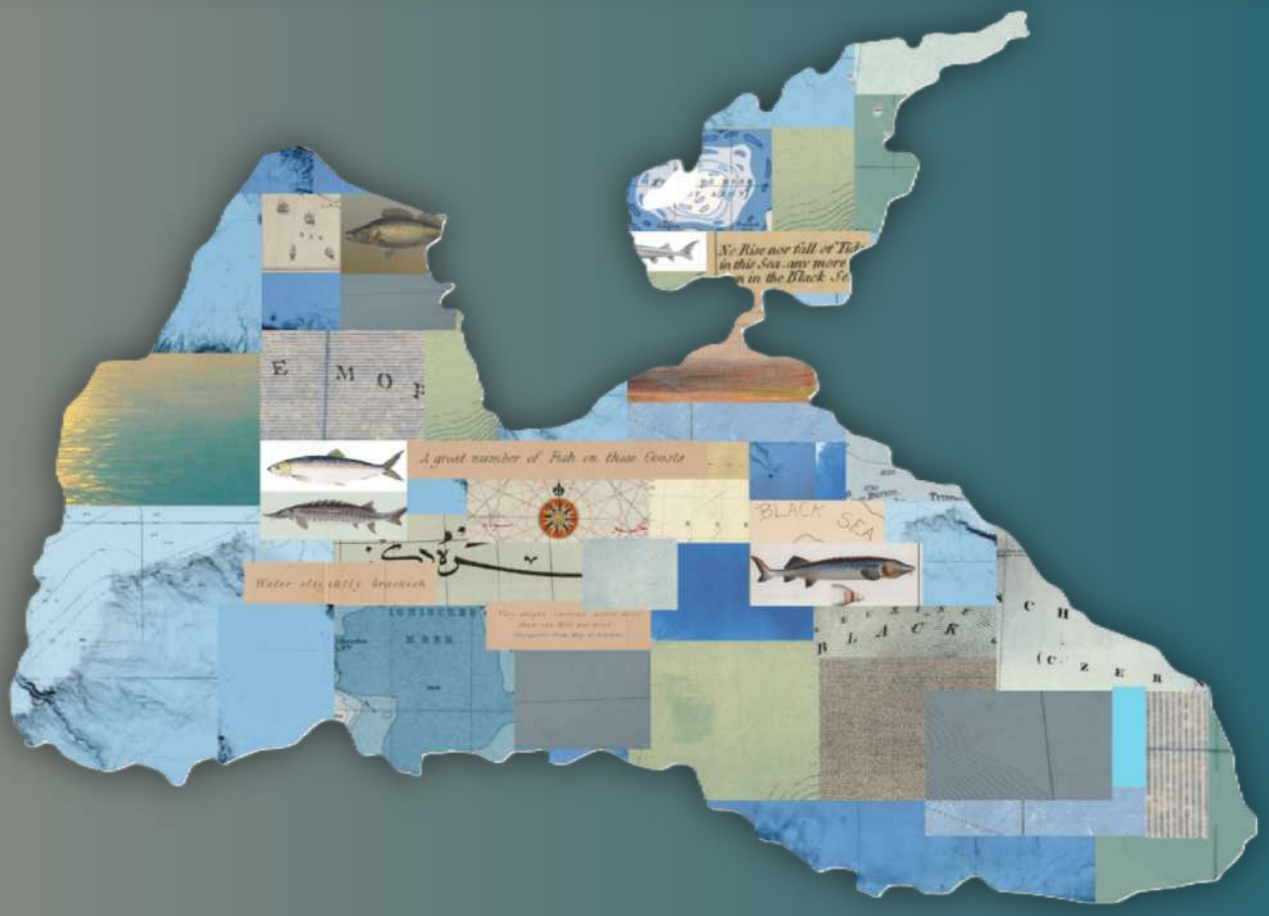
Come visit the Davis Center to explore the mapped contrast between land and sea, contemplating the liminal shore that binds the two together. Or, let us bring the art installation to you: click on the mosaic below.



...it grew into an exploration of water...

Olive and Kelly discovered that many cartographers promise the sea but deliver the coast. Working through a selection of historical maps, they tasked themselves with finding a way to represent the water as an abundant and unpredictable space, full of movement, life, and depth. They assembled a mosaic composed of intricate details from 34 maps: it is a composite view that draws on half a century of navigation and visualization.

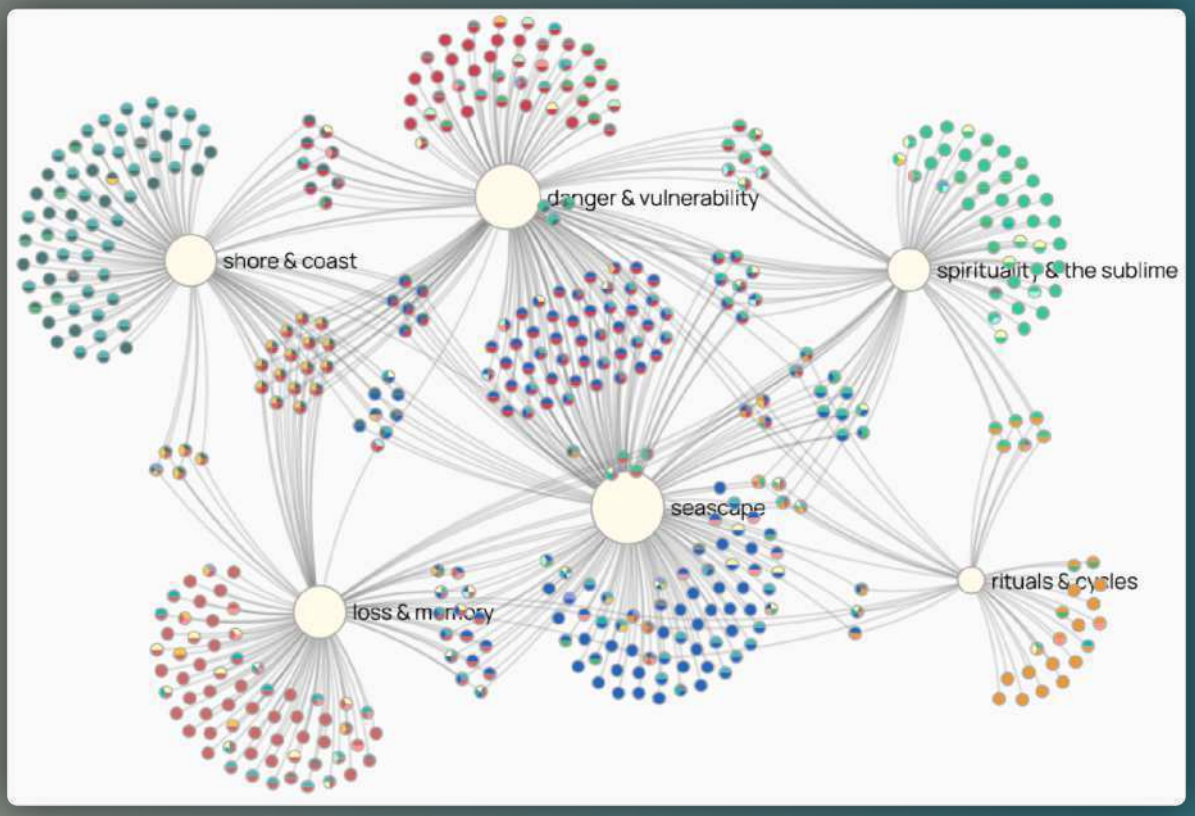
Bring the mosaic alive by clicking below.



...and became a sea of metaphors.

But in this case, maps were not enough. To represent the experience of being subject to the power and influence of the sea, Olive and Kelly turned to literature. Olive combed through prose and poetry, fiction and memoir, to find a series of texts that spoke to one another (as well as bearing the imprint of the Black Sea). Together with Kelly she experimented with breaking texts into sentences and using those sentences – those "increments" – to create a web of insights into the thoughts, emotions, and identities embodied by generations of authors.

Access a piece of that web below. Familiarize yourself with the concept hubs, and explore the sentences that emerge from them. They are a testament to the social, cultural, and philosophical connections that the Black Sea has generated since the first humans reached its shores.



Want to get to know the cartographers, artists, and writers that have inspired the project? Just turn the page...





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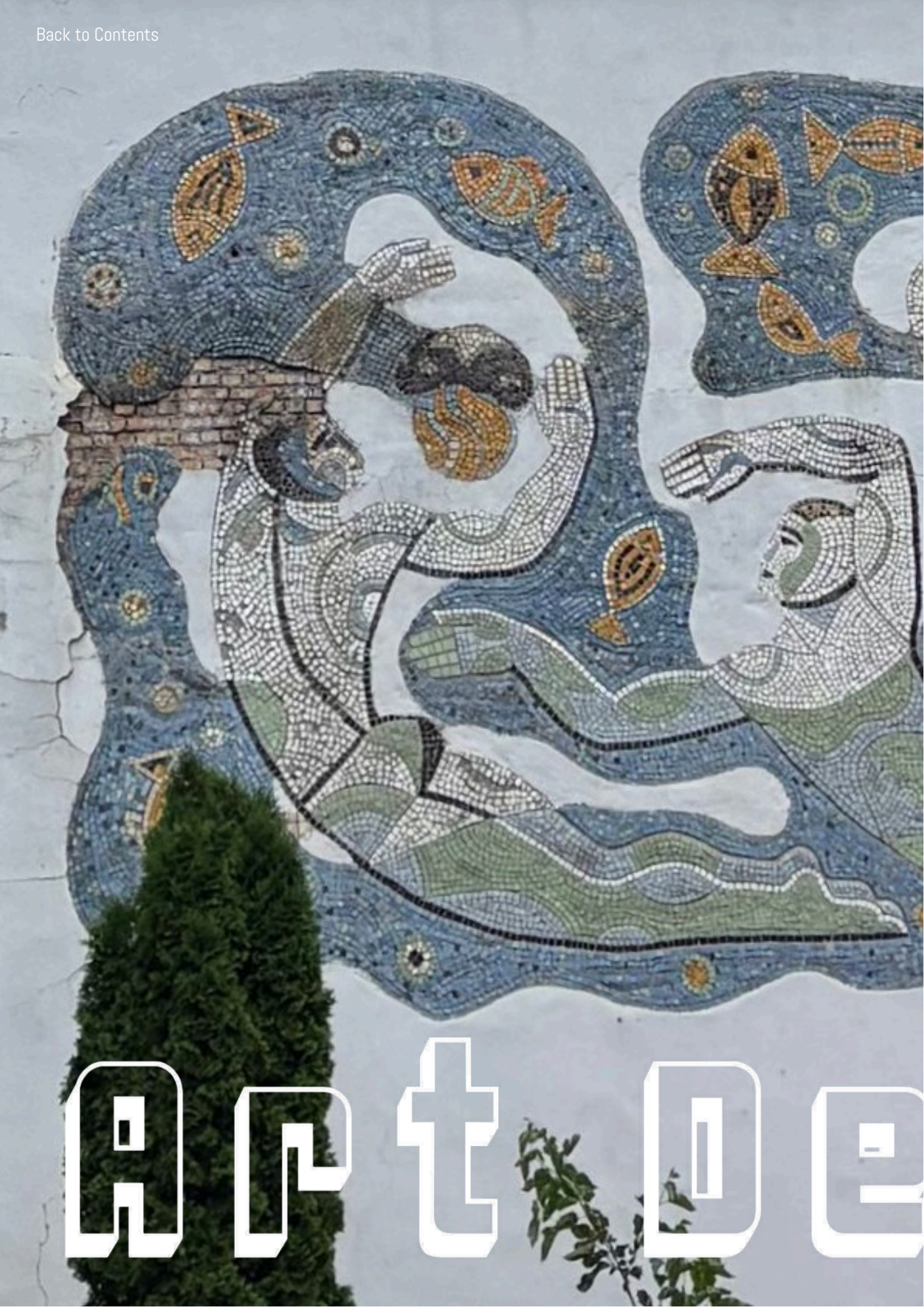
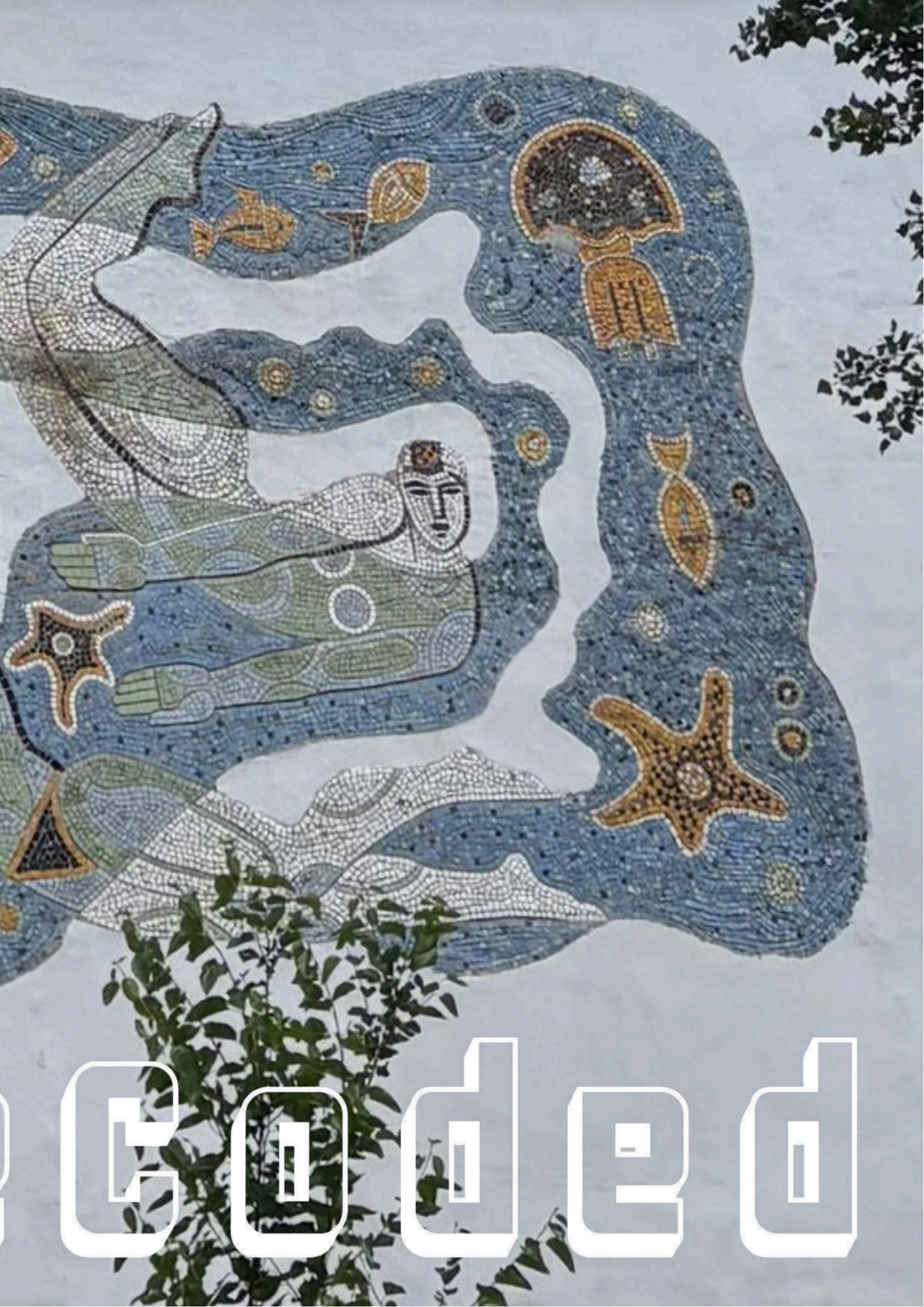



ecoded



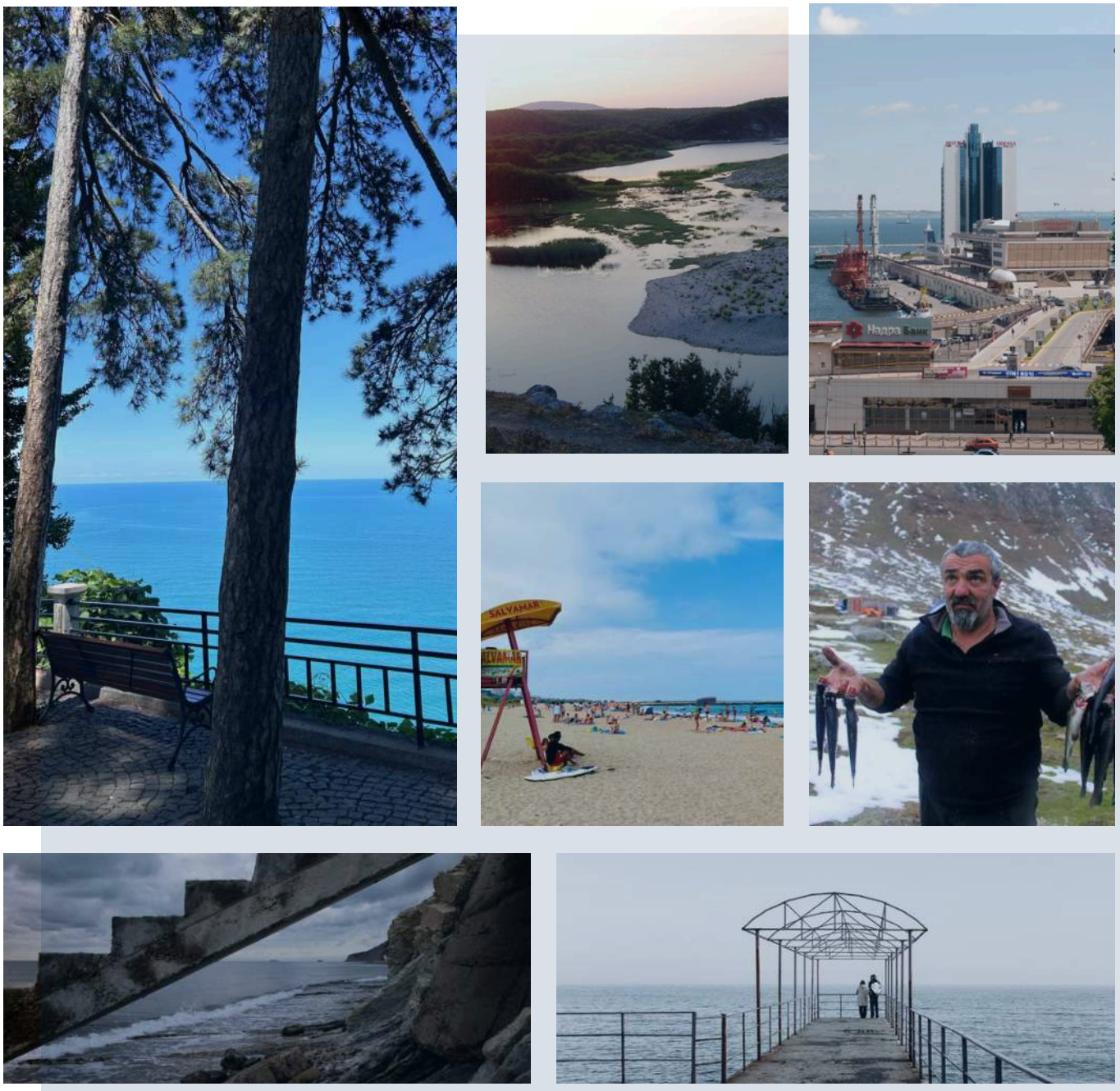
Black Sea Frames

The 21st century has brought a series of dramatic changes to the Black Sea. Alongside the slow, cumulative effects of climate change, heavy industrialization, and maritime traffic, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has effectively turned the Black Sea into a polluted, dislodged, and deadly war zone that has scarred human and marine life in the region.

It was with a sense of care and preservation that Olive Coles ('26) and Julian Gonzales-Poirier ('25) set out to create a bank of curated images that portray the intimate connection that people develop with the sea itself, which they take with them wherever they go. In February 2025 the student curators asked the Davis Center's community of students, scholars, alums, and supporters to share original photographs - still frames of their travels to, or residence in, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova.

The resulting gallery is "a collection on the move, and one that reveals more every time you take a closer look," Olive Coles explains. To be sure, the photographs evoke a sense of melancholy: it is difficult to think about what has been lost in the recent maddening violence. Yet Olive invites readers to take their time exploring the photographs. "Whilst independently these are beautiful images in their own right – and we did spend many hours looking at them one by one," she notes, "the real magic of this collection emerges when we think about them together."

Click the mosaic to see the region through the eyes (and lens) of the Davis Center community.



Project Team:

Kelly O'Neill

Olive Coles

Julian Gonzales-Poirier

Two photographers explain what their workstill means to them years after pressing the shutter.



Snapshot of a Lost World

by Charles Crabtree, "Echoes of Greece"

At the time that I took the photograph, I had recently graduated with a bachelor's in medieval history. Though I'd decided that I would be better suited to a career in the social sciences, I was still very interested in how people lived amongst the ruins of a collapsing empire. And one thing that struck me whenever I was reading about Russian history, during the Russian Empire and during Soviet times, was the constant attempts to look back to Rome, but also to Greece as well. And

the statue that's at the forefront of the image struck me as such an obvious attempt. Clearly, this was built during the Soviet Union, and there was this gesturing that "we are rightful inheritors of the West" and all that this means.

But over time the image takes on a bit of a different read, I think. Viewing it as you do now, when you have Yevpatoriia flying a very different flag, a flag that maybe is less associated with the West at the moment, the image becomes pregnant, I think, with a slightly different geopolitical meaning. And this is, I think, broadly suggestive of the struggle all around the Black Sea - this tension between defining itself as part of the West while emphasizing some Asian attributes. Yes, all these notions regarding place and space are inherently vague and hard to measure.

But it's interesting to think about what this means culturally and what it means to try to gesture toward and connect yourself to the West. So that was the main thing that caught my eye when I took the photograph. And there was also this dichotomy between the grace and composition of the statue and the slightly chaotic scene on the beach that was constantly unfolding during my stay there.

I was staying in Yevpatoriia off season, during the months of February and March. Yevpatoria historically has been a site where people would go and spend time - weeks or months - in health facilities, in sanatoria, during the Soviet Union. A lot of those facilities were closed by the time of my visit; many parts of Yevpatoriia had effectively been abandoned, and that's more noticeable during off season when people are crowding the place a little bit less.

But the beach was a constant site of activity and you had your normal assortment of people trying to make a small living selling things, fishermen constantly out there at the edges of the sea, youths running around, babushkas making all sorts of noises and loud conversations. It was an active, energetic place, but it also seemed a place that was not sustainable in its current form; a place poised for some sort of change.

Looking back now, many of the things I saw in Crimea during my season there felt a little bit archaic. You'd walk around and you would see all these old Ladas and everything. Taking a step back and looking at the whole scene through the lens of historical memory, I kept thinking about how weird it must have been for people, say, Gauls, to walk through the Italian countryside and just see remnants of empire, of things that had been so constant for so long and had completely fallen into disarray - to have these visible reminders of a prior life, a prior way of existence all around them. And I couldn't help but think, when I was living in Eastern Europe from 2007 to 2010 off and on, that it must have been a very similar experience after the fall of the Soviet Union. You have all these things surrounding you. They're clearly

from something that is dead, something from a prior time, something that will be unlike anything you'll experience in the future, but they're informing your daily experience aesthetically, organizationally and otherwise.

I actually remember that day fairly clearly because it was a surprisingly warm day. It was the first one in a while. And I remember going out for a long walk and being struck by how Yevpatoriia was uniquely frozen in time. There was this huge Lenin statue in one of the public gardens, and there was also a movie theater that had been constructed during the Soviet Union but had not been modernized since 1991 in any appreciable way. There are all these old vehicles out there, all the old huge gas trucks being used for every which thing, and there was this sense of the Soviet Union all around. And then there were also all these allusions back to Rome and to Greece. And I was thinking about how, from a Western perspective, how un-Western the Soviet Union was in many ways.

And now when I look back at the photograph, I think less about compositional things, even though before I entered grad school, I was a photo-journalist. Instead, I have been thinking a lot about the lost opportunities politically since that point in time to try to capture people's imagination or appreciation of the West. And I think that that's been a real loss that we're suffering from today, being able to articulate Western values and their usefulness to people. And it's sad to see.



Still Life

by Evan Woodnorth, "Trouty Fingers"

I was living and studying in Istanbul at the time. It was the sociology department at Boğaziçi University. I decided to take a trip out to Trabzon. The Black Sea region was always interesting to me. It's one of these specific subcultures and subregions in Turkey. Rugged landscapes with stunning hinterlands, thick forests and peaks. It's known for tea and hazelnut production and also boasts a specific food culture with dishes like muhlama, a hearty breakfast made from cornmeal, butter, and cheese.

While in Trabzon, I visited Uzungöl Lake where I met with a group of people on Fulbright ETAs who had worked with a friend of mine. At some point they mentioned they were going on a road trip and invited me along.



The next day we rented a Dacia Duster and went up through the Kaçkar Mountains. The terrain was tricky, we got stuck in the mud a couple of times, and eventually we came across this valley where the photo was taken.

I remember the weather being foggy. We came across these little groups of houses, parked the car, got out and started walking by a little stream. We soon realized that these were temporary housing for hikers and climbers. It wasn't actually a village. It felt like we were in a ghost town; nobody was there. It was quite an eerie feeling. I think it was late fall, and the hiking season was over. As we walked around, taking photos occasionally, we saw that there was a light on in a cafe. It was open and we went in.

And of course, in typical Turkish fashion, they offered us tea. As we sat down to enjoy it, I saw this guy who I think was the owner. He grabbed a long net and went out back. My curiosity got the better of me and followed him outside. He walked out to a small pool just past the café area; it was filled with trout. There was a little stream running through the area, but these fish seemed to be part of an aquaculture set up. He caught some of them in this net and I saw him putting the fish on his fingers in a very particular way. I was struck by the imagery. It seemed practical, but I'd never seen it before.

I asked him in my best Turkish if I could take a photo. He agreed, and I took the snapshot. I remember being a little shy



Click to enlarge image

though. It's not always the easiest thing, asking someone for a portrait. Though I think in Turkey many people are more receptive to it. In other countries it can be more difficult. After I took the photo, he brought the fish back into the restaurant to cook them.

I was interested in photography from a young age, but didn't really get into it until later. And at this point in 2014, I didn't really know what I was doing. I just had an entry level DSLR with a 50mm lens. I was shooting most things on auto, I remember being happy that I managed to get this photo. Today I would probably take it differently, but at the very least it shows I've grown. I would frame the background a little bit better, take more shots. The exposure is a bit off; this was definitely a snapshot. That's what comes to mind when I think back on the photo these days.

Also, I keep remembering some of the other details about the trip that I find interesting, particularly because this region in Turkey is also very close to Caucasus. There are elements of culture, topography, and landscape that are all interwoven. The Black Sea region and the Caucasus defy easy categorization. They exist at the crossroads of continents, fallen empires, tectonic plates, mosaics of culture, religion, and language. I am forever fascinated by places like these.

I also remember some visuals on our way along the Black Sea coast from Trabzon to Rize. This is the part of Turkey where Erdoğan's family comes from. I remember at this time there were these giant banners and posters showing Erdoğan, on nearly every lamppost along this highway tracing the Black Sea coast. I remember the political transformation in the country as well, seeing car decals and phone cases with Erdoğan's image and signature alongside ubiquitous ones of Atatürk.



Uzungöl Lake, south of the city of Trabzon.

Click to enlarge image

The LAMB and the Black Spot



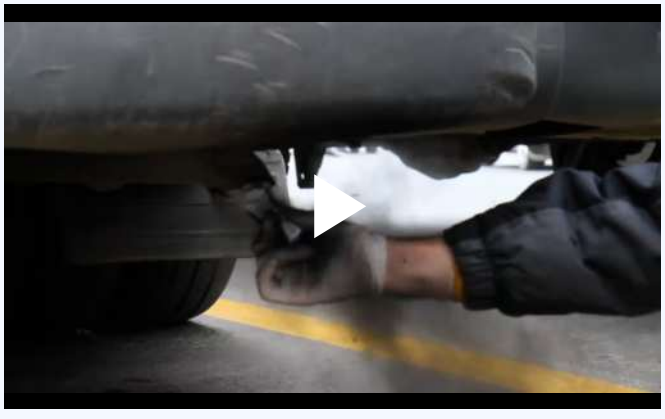
Mishiko Sulakauri in front of one of his creations on the streets of Tbilisi.

Renowned street artist Mishiko Sulakauri joined a J-Term trip to Georgia to show how graffiti can talk about socially important issues in an accessible and entertaining way.

Roaming the winding streets of Tbilisi, you may come upon distinctive graffiti of lambs adorning the walls of various buildings across the capital of Georgia. Depicted in cartoon-style, lambs can sometimes be found reveling, hanging out or facing off against a kaiju monster from Japanese folklore.

At times silly, other times angry, euphoric, or numb, they are the calling card of renowned Georgian street artist Mishiko "LAMB" Sulakauri. A self-taught artist, Sulakauri chose this animal because of its association with purity and innocence, but also with victimhood: the lamb has always been a victim of both other animals and humans, transformed into a crucial source of sustenance and livelihood.

The lamb thus identifies with Georgia's young generations and his art speaks directly to their aspirations and frustrations, as shown by the art piece entitled "Black Spot." The artist used pieces of paper to collect deposits from the exhaust pipes of outdated public buses, and created a monochromatic collage, which he then cut into pieces, put in envelopes, and sent to the Tbilisi mayor's office. The project sought to raise awareness about one of the main sources of pollution in Tbilisi. "Street art without criticism is simply a painting," Mishiko said in an interview for the Georgian Journal.



Tagging Along

In January 2025, Harvard undergraduates from a variety of disciplines – from the humanities and social sciences to the natural sciences and STEM - joined a trip to Georgia organized by the Davis Center's Program on Georgian Studies. For two weeks they dove into the country's history, politics and culture. In the final days of the trip, Mishiko took them on a fascinating yet unconventional art outing: a tour of the historic city of Tbilisi. But instead of moving from monument to museum, the group moved from one work of art to another, talking about the power of street graffiti to raise socially important issues in an accessible and entertaining way.

Alongside Mishiko, our students explored the city's vibrant street art scene, where murals transform bridges into monuments of expression, and buildings become canvases for art collectives where artists respond to each other's tags in an ongoing dialogue of paint and politics. The tour was a highlight of the trip. It gave the students an intimate glimpse of the creative pulse of a city that is in constant dialogue with itself. "What I loved most" recounts Louise Kim, a sophomore in Dunster House double-concentrating in Sociology and English, was how his explanations made the city feel alive, like every mural or small piece

of graffiti was part of an ongoing conversation between the past and present." For Louise, Mishiko's work is less about rebellion and more about care, humor, and reflection. His art made her realize how graffiti can be a way of preserving memory and fueling discourse in, and through, public spaces.

For sophomore Mirika Jambudi, who studies Molecular and Cellular Biology and History of Science, the most vivid memory from the tour was admiring the cultural center and hostel Fabrika (Factory) located in an old industrial building. The walls were entirely covered by graffiti, including some made by Mishiko himself. "I noticed the symbolism of his graffiti as depictions of broader societal issues and concerns."

After learning about his moniker 'LAMB' and seeing it in various spots around Tbilisi, I realized how art is also a matter of seeing and paying attention to the details around you – if you aren't looking, you might miss it," Jambudi said.

For Ava Winer, a junior in Social Sciences, Mishiko's playful combination of pop art with political critique inspired her to be more aware of how she experiences urban spaces: "He taught me that street art can be both beautiful and provocative, as well as a powerful way to cope with difficult subjects, such as political tensions or civil unrest." She subsequently found herself becoming more aware of the presence of street art and examining it not only in Tbilisi, but in other cities she has visited since her trip to Georgia.



Click the image for a virtual tour of Mishiko's art on the streets of Tbilisi!



Mishiko presenting his mural in Somerville, MA.

LAMB in New England

In April 2025, the Program on Georgian Studies invited Mishiko to spend a few weeks at the Davis Center as artist-in-residence, to promote contemporary Georgian art. In Cambridge, Mishiko gave a lecture and created a mural at Warehouse XI in Somerville. His creation blended motifs of Georgian heritage with the industrial character of Somerville's arts scene to create a vivid symbol of the shared imagination between the two cultural worlds.

As a final gesture of gratitude, Mishiko donated one of his paintings to the Program on Georgian Studies. It currently hangs in the Davis Center hallway where Allison Hart, coordinator of the Program on Georgian Studies, sees it as "a lasting reminder of a collaboration that transcended geography and spoke to the shared language of art."



Click to enlarge image



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Wisdom In Practice



Davit Gasparyan

REECA '24



Davit joined the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), where he published a series of reports on Russia's aggressive involvement in Georgian elections. You may read Davit's reports here: **Part 1** and **Part 2**.

Following his work at ISW, Davit has been collaborating with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to research the role of middle powers and power projection, with a particular focus on Turkiye. During his time at the Davis Center, he focused on the varying European integration processes of post-Soviet states and Russia's reactions to them.

While at the Davis Center, Davit worked as part of the Imperiia team on the **Odes(s)a in Bloom** project, which digitally recreates the biodiversity of Odesa at the turn of the 20th century. He also helped build **Up in Flames**, a digital map of fires across European Russia in the 1860s.



Emily Hackett

REECA '25

Emily is a two time recipient of the US State Department's Critical Language Scholarship for Russian, for which she most recently studied in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 2023.

Emily's Master's thesis explores the impact of soft diplomacy, especially educational projects, on diplomatic relationships with and within the post-Soviet space.

In Fall 2025, Emily began her doctoral studies in History at the University of Chicago where she works with Tara Zahra.

During her Master's years, Emily was a very active member of the Slavic community at Harvard, organizing cultural events that included **movie screenings, philological events,** and **book talks**.

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2-3 Jeff Schmaltz, MODIS Rapid Response Team, NASA/GSFCO

4-5 NASA Earth Observatory image by Joshua Stevens, using VIIRS data from NASA EOSDIS LANCE, GIBS/Worldview, and the Joint Polar Satellite System (JPSS)

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