

Russia
Trapped
in Strategic
Mismatch

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Yaroslav Trofimov

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Russia faces a fundamental asymmetry as it seeks to beat Ukraine into submission with intensifying airstrikes on shopping malls, power stations, ports and other infrastructure. Kyiv can rely on a secure hinterland beyond its borders—its European neighbors—for economic resilience and for military logistics.

The Kremlin, whose refineries, ports and defense industries are also under attack by Ukrainian missiles and drones, has no such backup. Hits to Russia’s militarized economy translate more directly into damage to the country’s ability to keep the war going.

Please turn to Page 2

More Schools Are
Imposing Phone
Bans. Do They
Really Work?

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Julie Jargon

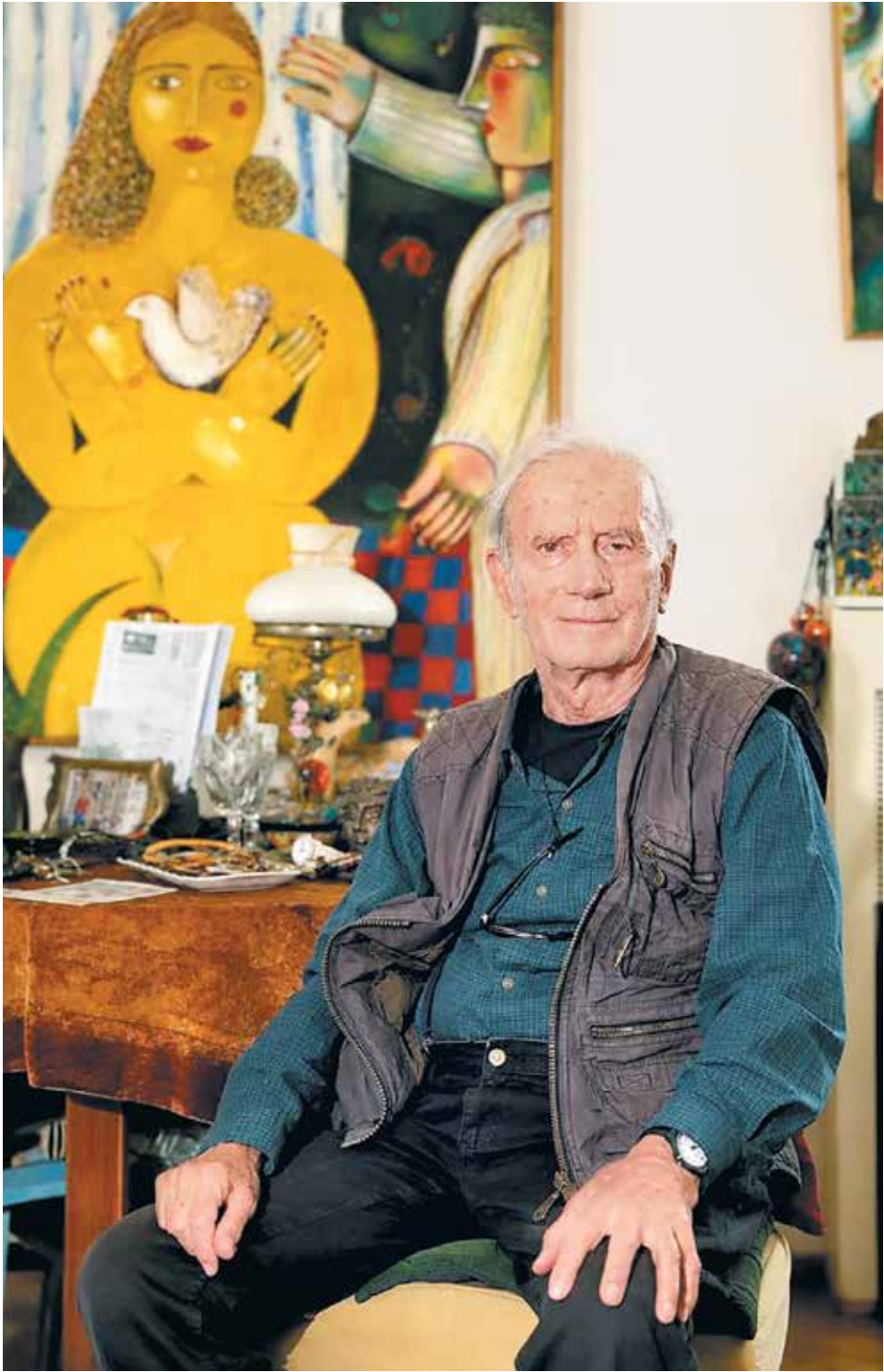
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Student phone use at school has been a divisive issue since the pandemic, but for the first time, more Americans now favor all-day bans than oppose them.

Support for bans stands at 48% of American adults, up from 36% two years ago, according to a new study from Pew Research Center.

Many parents were initially hesitant to embrace day-long phone bans. One concern: They wouldn’t be able to reach their child in an emergency.

Please turn to Page 2



TO BHMA International edition

Vassilis
Sperantzas:
‘Art Has
Always Been
My Refuge’

By Panos Kougias

The journey to Thessaloniki seems to prepare, without one quite knowing it yet, the atmosphere for the encounter. When I arrive at the apartment where Vassilis Sperantzas has lived for the past several years, my eyes instinctively turn towards the balcony. From there, the Thermaic Gulf stretches all the way to the horizon.

I think it could have been a source of inspiration for the famous balconies with female figures that

appear so frequently in his work—the “mothers of the birds,” as Lakis Papastathis so aptly called them.

Stepping through the door, I find paintings from different decades alongside bronze and plaster sculptures, painted wooden pieces, lithographs and works that seem still to be engaged in an ongoing dialogue with their creator. There is no strict chronological order, nor any sense of display. Anastasia, his gentle companion of many decades, welcomes me with a glass of cool ginger beer in her hands.

Please turn to Page 6

The artist Vassilis Sperantzas sitting on a lounge chair, surrounded by his artwork, in his home in Thessaloniki, Greece.

TO BHMA International edition

The 15-Minute City: Can Greece Make Its Cities Walkable Again?

By Maria Paravantes

In the not-so-distant past, life in the cities of Greece, including Athens, was relatively easy. Everything you needed was within walking distance: the market, school, church, pharmacy, coffee shop, parks and squares, even many municipal services.

Today, getting to any of these can mean endless hours in a car stuck in traffic, or on a crammed bus taking twice as long because of cars illegally parked along major streets.

And if someone is bold enough to walk, particularly in Athens, they face a grueling obstacle course of vehicles parked on pavements, dangerous open holes from

never-ending telecommunications works, and chairs and tables occupying almost every available space in squares and on sidewalks.

Imagine what this experience must be like for a child, a mother pushing a baby stroller, a visually impaired person, your ageing parents or someone in a wheelchair!

Please turn to Page 4



A row of parked bicycles in Apeldoorn, Netherlands.

YOU HAVE THE
BUSINESS
WE HAVE THE
ENERGY

Integrated energy solutions
for your business.
Find the products that suit
your needs, at dei.gr

ΔΕΗ

One with the future

The Geopolitical Mismatch Driving Russia to Threaten the West

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Europe pays for Ukraine's war and offers a safe base, offsetting Moscow's superior firepower

Continued from Page One

This lopsided geopolitical setup offsets, to a significant degree, Russia's advantage in firepower. It has also become the key reason driving what Western officials say is a widening Russian campaign of sabotage, hacking and other hybrid operations aimed at intimidating European leaders and voters.

Warning Russia against taking hostilities to North Atlantic Treaty Organization members in Europe was a key message delivered by Central Intelligence Agency director John Ratcliffe on his recent trip to Moscow, according to people familiar with the matter.

Russian officials have long described their war as one against the "collective West," and not just Ukraine. Russian threats have become increasingly strident this summer, including warnings of military strikes against the Baltic states and even the U.K.

Ukraine's economy and military effort were funded by \$105 billion in new European assistance approved this year, money that came on top of vast amounts of aid and arms received from the U.S. and other NATO members since the 2022 full-scale invasion. European officials are already talking about another package of comparable size, perhaps to be funded with frozen Russian assets.

Russia, however, has to pay for its own war at a time when its economy is under pressure from Ukrainian strikes and Western sanctions. Two of Moscow's closest



Smoke rises from an oil refinery following a Ukrainian drone attack in the course of Russia-Ukraine conflict, in Moscow, Russia, June 18, 2026, in this picture obtained from social media.

est allies, Iran and North Korea, are broke. China is taking advantage of Russia's predicament to negotiate lower oil and gas prices, and is facing its own economic headwinds.

Russian leaders believe that they need to reverse this imbalance, fast, said Sergey Lagodinsky, a German member of the European Parlia-

ment and a Russian native. "They see that Ukraine can survive and can continue to fight because it has access to outside resources and outside solidarity, and that is what they want to cut or damage," he said.

Much of Russia, up to the middle of Siberia, is now within range of Ukrainian drones, and Ukrainian at-

tacks on energy installations and logistics warehouses occur nightly—as do Russian strikes on Ukraine.

In one illustration of the disparity in consequences, Russia is struggling with a full-blown fuel crisis because Ukrainian drones have disabled more than one-third of the nation's refining capacity. By contrast, gas stations

are functioning normally in Ukraine because of fuel imports from Europe—even though Ukraine's own refineries were heavily bombed as far back as 2022.

Ukraine's military uses logistics hubs in countries like Poland, Germany and Romania, while Ukrainian defense companies have established production lines

across Europe, including a plant making ballistic-missile fuel that is under construction in Denmark.

With the exception of Belarus and North Korea, none of Russia's neighbors, including its formal defense allies in Central Asia, are openly helping its war effort. Even Belarus is careful these days not to provoke

More Schools Are Imposing Phone Bans. Do They Really Work?

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Locking up student phones leads to improved well-being but has shown minimal effect on test scores and attention so far

Continued from Page One

Yet support grew as legal cases exposed the harms of social media and researchers like Jonathan Haidt advocated for a more thoughtful approach to technology. As of this summer, more than two-

thirds of U.S. states have enacted legislation or policies requiring school districts to restrict phone use in schools.

Phones, as a portal to social media, have been linked to a variety of problems in school including fights, bullying and declin-

ing academic performance. The fix, it seemed, was simple: eliminate phones and everything else would improve.

The question now is, do school phone bans actually make a difference in students' lives? The answer depends on what aspect of

improvement you're looking for.

Early data suggested a small boost in test scores and a drop in disciplinary actions were linked to phone bans in a large Florida school district. But as more time has passed and more states have adopted bans, a clearer pic-

ture has emerged.

A study of nearly 5,000 schools nationwide that lock student phones in Yondr pouches found them to be an effective way to curb student phone use. Though there have been stories about kids cutting through the pouches or duping administrators



more sanctions from the West or a military response from Ukraine.

Seen from the Kremlin, the situation is intolerable: NATO countries are inflicting strategic blows on Russia’s economy and military capacity, including its space program, ballistic-missile industry and strategic bomber fleet, with Ukrainian hands—and without paying much of a price.

“There is an asymmetry in terms of the ability to inflict pain and extract costs by Russia from the West for its support of Ukraine,” said Alexander Gabuev, director of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center in Berlin. Ukraine, he said, has eagerly taken “the war to enemy territory—and it gets a lot of training, advice and material support for these operations behind enemy lines.”

Russia, meanwhile, is constrained by the fact that Moscow doesn’t have a Ukraine of its own, an ally that could strike NATO and absorb the retaliatory blows, Gabuev said. Iran and Yemen’s Houthis are the closest approximations—but they have their own priorities focused on the Middle East that are only partially aligned with Moscow’s, and they possess little capacity to affect European calculations.

This has left Moscow with hybrid warfare—a loose term that includes a recent drone incident involving a Ukrainian cargo plane at Germany’s Leipzig/Halle airport, cyberattacks that disrupted Polish rail services and a series of explosions that struck European defense plants—as a key lever to reshape European attitudes.

“What we see is that, even as the Russians are facing very substantial resistance from Ukraine, they are stepping up hybrid acts in Europe—and their risk appetite is going up,” warned a senior NATO official.

The notion that Russia must hit military and logis-



A firefighter works to extinguish a fire as smoke rises from a warehouse damaged during Russian drone strikes, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in Kyiv region, Ukraine, August 27, 2026.

tics targets in European nations to win the war is gaining currency in Moscow, said Hanna Notte, Eurasia director at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies and author of a recent book on Russia’s foreign and security policy, “We Shall Outlast Them.”

“There are hawks on the Russian side who have been saying for a long time that Russia is fighting with one hand behind its back. These voices are becoming louder and will become louder,” she said. “The key question is: How far will Russia go? How much will they step up the game to deal with this problem?”

Moscow’s next step on the escalation ladder could be a limited one-off attack—possibly using captured Ukrainian drones, but also missiles—on one or two logistics targets involved in assisting Ukraine on European territory, some officials warn. Semiofficial commentators on Russian TV have

been clamoring for just that for months.

“I am increasingly worried that we may see one single strike somewhere, as messaging to see what the populations will be doing, at the time when European societies are growing very tired of the war,” said Daniel Szeligowski, head of the Eastern Europe program at the Polish Institute of International Affairs. “In that situation, I would be much more worried about the social response. To what extent are our populations prepared for this psychologically, I do not know.”

Such a gamble, of course, could also massively backfire, increasing European determination against Russia just at the time when parties favorable to Moscow are gaining ground ahead of elections in France, Germany and Italy.

In Germany’s case, the intensification of Russia’s hybrid warfare has already shown itself to be counter-

productive, said Norbert Röttgen, a prominent lawmaker from the governing CDU party. “It is becoming increasingly clear to Germans that Russia is also a threat to them, and thus strengthening German political resolve,” he said. “Admittedly, a third of the population is against strong support for Ukraine. However, the other two thirds are reinforced in their support.”

Ukraine’s Western supporters, and Ukraine itself, have ways of inflicting more pain on Russia if the conflict escalates. The U.S. could dramatically increase Ukraine’s ability to target Russian ballistic missile batteries by allowing the use of the Starlink satellite network to guide drones over Russian territory. Kyiv, meanwhile, has so far refrained from targeting Russian airports—even though Ukraine’s own civil aviation has been grounded since 2022.

“Ukraine has already started to strike in a way

that ordinary Russians can see that the war is real, it is in their homes and not something on television,” said Hanna Shelest, security studies director at the Ukrainian Prism think tank in Kyiv. “Yet, Ukraine is still showing a fair bit of restraint. The question is, ‘how much longer for?’”

Despite the mounting problems of the Russian economy—industrial production flatlined in the first half of 2026, with zero growth despite huge spending on new weapons—few Western officials expect that Vladimir Putin will seek peace because of the pain inflicted by Ukrainian attacks.

“One way or another, the Russians will expand the war because in their grand strategy, Ukraine is an obstacle and not the prize. Their goal is greater influence over Europe and beyond. NATO has failed in deterring Russian aggression against Ukraine, and the question arising now is whether NA-

TO can really deter Russian aggression against NATO,” argued Oleksandr V. Danylyuk, chairman of the Center for Defense Reforms in Kyiv and a former military and intelligence official.

By stepping up the destruction of Ukrainian cities, Moscow is signaling to the rest of Europe that any defiance is so painful that it would be preferable to accommodate the Kremlin’s will, Danylyuk added: “A fortress that resists must be razed as a warning to others—this is an old principle, from the Assyrians and from the Mongols, and one that Russia follows today. The message is that if NATO cannot protect you and if you don’t want to be destroyed like Ukraine, then your only source of security guarantees is Russia.”

Marko Mihkelson, the chairman of the foreign affairs committee of the Estonian parliament, said he agreed that Moscow’s strategic goal remains unchanged: conquest of Ukraine and the destruction of European collective security. Yet, he added, there has been no change of Russian military posture along borders from Finland to the Baltic states to Poland—and no indication of preparations for an invasion.

“The picture behind our borders is that all their focus is on Ukraine,” he said. “I don’t think that militarily they are right now both ready and willing to do something here.”

But some worry that could change. Poland’s Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski, in a recent essay published by the Economist, warned that Russia’s hybrid attacks on European nations represent a “razvedka boyem”—reconnaissance by combat that tests reactions and precedes a larger offensive.

To deter that offensive, he added, Europe must convince Russia “that we are willing to sacrifice more than money to stand up for ourselves.”



by putting in decoy phones, those troublemakers amount to only a small percentage. All told, the share of students who used phones in class for personal reasons dropped from 61% to 13%.

But there is often turbulence when a ban is enacted. The first year phones were banned typically resulted in disruption as students adjusted to the change, according to the study, which was conducted by university professors affiliated with Stanford University’s Institute for Economic Policy Research and the National Bureau of Economic Research.

Only in the second year

of the bans did schools see a decrease in disciplinary problems and an increase in student well-being. This was measured by survey questions about students’ feelings of happiness, excitement, sadness and frustration.

What’s less clear is the effect on student attention and academic performance. A 2025 Pew survey found that a majority of adults believed all-day bans would improve students’ grades, social skills and classroom behavior.

However, in schools that had implemented phone bans for three

years—the longest stretch in the study—there was close to no change in test scores, according to the Stanford study. There also was little effect on self-reported classroom attention, as students may have shifted the attention they once paid to their phones to interacting with friends, daydreaming or watching YouTube on their school laptops, the researchers suggest. There was also little evidence of phone bans’ impact on school attendance, chronic absenteeism and online bullying.

The latest findings show

a disconnect between the hype behind school phone bans and the reality, says Jason Baron, an assistant professor of economics at Duke University, and one of the study authors.

“Test scores are a difficult outcome to move because they’re a function of many things both inside and outside of school,” Baron says.

“If your goal is to increase student well-being, you might be encouraged by this,” he adds. “But if you care about test scores, you might be disappointed that three years out we’re not seeing gains.”

The 15-Minute City: Can Greece Make Its Cities Walkable Again?

Greek cities were built around proximity. *TO BHMA International Edition* speaks with mobility planning expert Kosmas Anagnostopoulos about bringing that everyday convenience back



Colorful umbrellas hanging above a pedestrian street with cafes and people in the city center of Karditsa, Greece.



The northern port city of Thessaloniki is already considered a bright example of the proximity model in Greece.

Continued from Page One

This is the sad reality of many Greek cities today. It is also what the relatively new urban planning concept of the 15-minute city is trying to change.

TO BHMA International Edition sat down with spatial and mobility planning expert Kosmas Anagnostopoulos, founder of CIVINET Greece-Cyprus, to discuss whether the 15-minute city can realistically be applied to Greece.

What is a 15-minute city?

“In practice, in a ‘15-minute city’ you don’t need more than 15 minutes to complete the majority of your daily chores and movements, whether you’re walking, cycling, using micromobility, taking public transport—or a combination of these,” says Anagnostopoulos.

This requires a city where

homes, workplaces, shops, schools and services are distributed in a way that favors short journeys, supported by infrastructure that allows people to move without relying on a car. Simply put, a 15-minute city is a city where more people can walk, cycle or use public transport to get where they need to go.

But it’s also about much more than transport. A low-traffic neighborhood with shops and services nearby can create stronger communities, support local businesses, encourage people to be active and interact.

Proximity and convenience are the priorities.

The idea was developed and popularized in the 2010s by French-Colombian urbanist and Sorbonne University professor Carlos Moreno, who argued that essential urban functions should be close to where people live. The con-

cept gained even greater attention during the COVID-19 pandemic, when lockdowns and restrictions made access to nearby services critical.

At its heart, however, the idea is simple: your everyday life should not require a car.

Greece’s head start

Looking back to the 1970s and early 1980s, many Greek cities already had the characteristics of what is described today as a 15-minute city. Homes, markets, schools, workplaces and public spaces were often close by. Small businesses and mixed-use neighborhoods meant that people could meet many of their daily needs locally.

Urban growth changed that. Greece’s economic development, internal migration and successive waves of immigration contributed to the rapid expansion and transformation of its cities. Urban

development became more about accommodating growing populations, cars and construction than about preserving proximity and liveability.

Yet Anagnostopoulos believes that much of the original advantage remains.

“I don’t think the advantage of Greek cities—their mix of land uses and the preponderance of small and medium-sized businesses and micro-property—has been lost,” he tells *TO BHMA International Edition*. He does, however, see growing pressure from what he calls “Big Capital”, particularly investment coming from abroad.

“The government seems unwilling to curb these trends, which are spiralling out of control. Citizens are gradually losing their homes, neighborhoods and hangouts, not only in cities but also on the islands,” he says.

To counter this, he be-

lieves stronger social movements are needed to pressure municipalities and governments to rethink urban policies.

Making it happen

No major city has completely transformed itself into a perfect 15-minute city. But plac-

es like Paris, Barcelona, Melbourne, Portland and Milan have implemented significant elements of the model. In fact, Barcelona is frequently cited in the academic literature as a pioneer in this area.

Ljubljana and Seville are also examples Anagnostopoulos cites as places



GREECE



Streetcar tram on Queens Quay and a bike lane in Ontario, Canada.

that have successfully implemented cycling infrastructure and pedestrian areas, green spaces, school streets and traffic-calming measures. “Cities were not designed according to the principles of urban planning as we understand them today,” he says. “But many cities are trans-

forming and adapting to new global directions.” And Greece, he believes, is particularly interesting because parts of its urban fabric already function in a similar way. “Greek cities already have the structure that could allow the 15-minute model to

become a reality. What they lack, for the most part, are green infrastructure and mobility policies that would also unlock the potential hidden in their public spaces.” **Athens’ first steps** The idea is not entirely new to Greece. The Municipality

of Athens has launched its “15-Minute Open Neighborhood” plan, designed to address accessibility, mobility and functionality. Design and mapping workshops have been organized in each of Athens’ seven municipal districts with the aim of identifying deficiencies

and prioritizing interventions. The northern port city of Thessaloniki, meanwhile, is already considered a bright example of the proximity model in Greece. Research published in the “Journal of Transport Geography”, which included assessments of walking and cycling accessibility, land use, transport infrastructure, and service location, found that, given its compact urban form, the city already “largely embraces” the concept. But in Athens the challenge remains. Central Athens may be compact and walkable, but getting around safely is becoming harder every day. Cars parked on sidewalks, privately owned outdoor seating in public spaces, poorly designed pavements, and ongoing utility works can turn a short journey into a dangerous sport. For a 15-minute city to work, reaching a destination in 15 minutes is not enough; people must also be able to get there safely and comfortably. **Where could it work?** Anagnostopoulos singles out smaller cities that already have the structure and infrastructure needed to support sustainable mobility. Karditsa in central Greece, he says, is one example. If he could choose three very different places to apply the scheme, he would choose Zografou in Athens, the island of Aegina, and his hometown of Zitsa, a mountain village in Epirus. In all three cases, he would propose “soft mobility” networks allowing residents to move around without cars, plus controlled traffic and parking zones to protect residential areas and town centers, and a general 30 km/h speed limit. The latter, he says, could “really change our lives.” The principle is straightforward: people should be able to physically reach their destination within 15 minutes, get there without having to deal with obstacles, and enjoy access to pleasant, safe and shaded routes and public spaces. **The arguments** The 15-minute city has not escaped criticism. One of the biggest concerns is that urban regeneration can increase property prices and force existing residents out. This is particularly relevant in Athens, where the proliferation of hotels and short-term rental properties has already transformed many neighborhoods. So can a city become more liveable without becoming unaffordable? “It depends on how the urban regeneration is carried out,” says Anagnostopoulos. For him, the 15-minute city should work as a blueprint for a better quality of life.

“The issue is not simply traffic congestion, but how people and goods can move in more sustainable ways, without deaths from traffic accidents and without restricting people with disabilities to their homes.” He acknowledges however that greener, safer and more functional neighbourhoods will inevitably become more desirable. “This is where the state must intervene and regulate the market, so that all citizens can enjoy the same quality of life,” he says. “Airbnb activity and tourism have provided Greeks with extra income and created jobs, to an extent. But we must move away from the monoculture of tourism and services, and regulate these activities before it is too late.” There are other concerns. In some cities, improvements have failed to reach poorer or peripheral neighborhoods. And during the COVID-19 lockdowns, the 15-minute city was also the subject of conspiracy theories claiming that the model was designed to trap people inside restricted zones or prevent them from owning cars. **The city we choose** For Anagnostopoulos, the future of Greek cities comes down to decisions that have to be made now. “The most difficult decision we have to make is prioritizing our actions, starting today,” he says. “Do we want the unobstructed, expensive and dangerous movement of our cars, or the unhindered, affordable and safe movement of all people equally, in beautiful, quiet and accessible public spaces with greenery everywhere?” His questions continue. “Would we prefer easy parking for our car outside our home, work or cafeteria, or to see our children walking or cycling safely to school, the square or the sports center?” And finally: “Do we want a car as a sign of wealth, social advancement and recreation, or do we want our elderly parents and siblings with disabilities to be able to spend quality time in public spaces?” For Anagnostopoulos, the answer is clear. The ART 2438 strategy, a national campaign by CIVINET Greece-Cyprus, sets out actions local authorities can take to make immediate changes. The plan is due for presentation at the CIVITAS Forum, in Thessaloniki on September 14. The 15-minute city, he stresses, is not a single policy. It is a collection of policies that have to work together. “The smell of freshly washed laundry, the sound of chirping birds and children playing in the streets must immediately return to Greek cities,” he says, “because they are tangible indicators of a city worth living in.”



Vassilis Sperantzas: ‘Art Has Always Been My Refuge’

After more than three decades, Vassilis Sperantzas opens his home and personal archive to *VIMAgazino*. He speaks about Paris, the dictatorship, his friendships with Alekos Fassianos and Nikos Stefanou, the nostalgia that brought about his paintings, and art as a way of creating a world more human than reality

Continued from Page One

We talk about my journey, the heat of the city, the transport links between Athens and Thessaloniki, and the train, which, following the Tempi disaster, has awkwardly found its way back into our conversations.

As we talk, I notice that both of them possess that simplicity which makes a visitor feel that he is not intruding into the private space of a legendary painter, but entering an everyday life that has simply taken “a break” for some pleasant company and a meaningful encounter before continuing along its normal course.

Even before the recording begins, he repeatedly rises from his armchair. He approaches a painting, points to a lithograph, recalls a story, returns to a sculpture. It is as if every work serves as the starting point for a memory he had not intended to share, but which emerges spontaneously the moment he looks at it. “Where do you paint now?” I ask him. “Here, on this little table,” he replies with disarming simplicity, pointing to a desk covered with the tools.

There is no sense of a planned interview—perhaps because Sperantzas has never been one for self-promotion. For more than three decades, he avoided interviews and preferred to let his work speak for him. His last major public conversation took place in 1994, with his beloved friend Lakis Papastathis for the ERT program Paraskinio.

As he speaks, it quickly becomes clear that his recollections are not nostalgic in the conventional sense of the word. They return again and again to the people and places that shaped him: the Athens of his childhood; the small neighborhoods where he walked at dusk; Paris, where he arrived at the age of eighteen; the house in Kallithea which he shared with Alekos Fassianos and Nikos Stefanou. And to the years of the dictatorship, which kept him away from Greece for longer than he had ever imagined. “Painting was never a profession for me. It was the way I



The painter's workstation—a work of art in its own right.

created my own world and lived inside it,” he tells me. Perhaps, in the end, this sentence offers the best key to understanding not only the work, but also the life of Vassilis Sperantzas, an artist who is both distinguished and deeply modest.

You belong to a generation that came of age in the 1960s. How much did all

that influence your painting?

The truth is that art served as an escape for me. I never felt the need to follow the political or artistic currents of the time, nor to change direction simply because the world around me was changing. The core of my painting has remained the same from the beginning.

I was influenced by painters I loved, but never by movements. I remem-

ber how, at the time, some people would tell me, critically: “The world is burning and you are painting women with fans.” Perhaps they were right from their own point of view. But for me, it was a necessity.

Reality often hurt me, and painting was the way I endured it. I did not want to reproduce it; I wanted to create another world. Many times, shut away in the lithography and

painting studios in Paris, surrounded by the various avant-garde movements of the time, I felt the need to keep my distance. Painting was never a profession for me. It was the way I created my own world and lived inside it.

In 1956, aged just eighteen, you leave for Paris. How do you remember the young man leaving Athens

behind him?

As hugely enthusiastic, but with very little awareness of danger. I left without preparing almost anything beforehand. Most people asked me what exactly I was going there to do. I had only one goal: to get into the School of Fine Arts. Fortunately, I succeeded on my first attempt. From then on, my life was almost entirely devoted to my studies. I worked constantly. I went to exhibitions, spent hours in museums and met painters. Paris was an enormous revelation. Of course, it was not an easy city. During my first few years there, I lived in fairly difficult conditions. My first place was essentially an old bathroom that had been converted into a bedroom. Five square meters, with no window. Later, I found one of the well-known chambres de bonne, on the sixth floor of a Parisian apartment building. Small, with the toilet in the corridor. But none of that bothered me. I had gone there to learn how to paint.

What was it that moved you most deeply in Paris?

The opportunity to see up close, every day, things that until then I had known only from books. Picasso, Matisse and Chagall were the great names of the century. From the very beginning, I felt a particular attraction to Chagall. It took me longer to understand the other two. But that did not worry me: I never felt I had to follow some prescribed path in my preferences. Perhaps because I was always more interested in slowly absorbing whatever genuinely moved me than in being impressed by something simply because it was new.

And yet, the longer you stayed in Paris, the more intensely Greece began to appear in your paintings.

I think nostalgia did that. I cannot explain it any other way. When I was in Paris, I missed Greece so much that sunsets, churches, islands and birds in the light began appearing in my paintings. It was as if I were returning through painting. I remember once in New York.

It was a sunny afternoon. I took a ferry to a small island. The intense light, the shimmer of the sea, the pigeons flying through the last rays of the sun suddenly stirred a deep nostalgia for Greece in me. I immediately returned to my room and frantically painted sunsets, islands, churches, birds flying through the light. Those works took me back to my favorite places. I think this happens often: art comes to complete what is missing from our lives.

So the Greekness in your painting was born of distance more than it was of presence?

Yes, perhaps that is how it is. When you are far away from your homeland, you begin to see it differently. You do not reproduce what you see in front of you; you paint what you miss.

I remember walking through small neighborhoods at dusk, or late at night in the moonlight. These images remained inside me, and at some point I felt the need to paint them so that they would not be lost. Later, I came to know many great cities. But I was always seeking those first emotions within them. I think all my painting begins with personal experiences. Techniques come later.

In 1961, you meet Alekos Fassianos. It is a meeting that would prove decisive for both of you.

We worked together for quite some time. What united us most was more than painting; it was Greece. We were both living in Paris, but we constantly talked about Athens, about the working-class neighborhoods, about Papadiamantis, about all those things we missed and said we would find again when we went back in the summer. A little later, Nikos Stefanou also arrived. It was him who told us about a house in Kallithea, with a wonderful garden, which the National Gallery was renting at the time to young painters. He suggested that we all work there together. We could not have imagined then how important that place would become in our lives.

The Kallithea house has acquired almost mythical dimensions in the history of modern Greek painting. What was it actually like?

Above all, it was a place of freedom. When I returned to Greece to do my military service, the first thing I did was rent a space there as well. I'd report for duty at

the barracks at dawn, but as soon as I finished, I'd head straight back to the studio. And spent the whole rest of the day there.

The house had a large garden with palm trees and cacti. It was an old villa, full of light and quiet. I could work there without thinking about anything else. I truly felt far from the world and its problems. The only thing that concerned me was painting.

There was also a particular kinship between Alekos and me. We shared common references and often influenced one another. At the time, some people said I was influenced more by him,



Painted plaster sculpture by Vasilis Sperantzas.

because he was already better known. That never concerned me particularly. We both knew very well what connected and what distinguished us.

Fassianos had already begun to emerge as a recognizable personality. You seemed to consciously keep your distance from publicity.

I was never a man for public relations. Alekos was a different kind of person. He knew Elytis, Karouzos, Embeirikos and many people from the literary world. He was outgoing in a way I am not. It is not that I did not love people. I simply always feared relationships built on ulterior mo-

tives. I remember a verse by Cavafy that made a real impression on me when I read it at a young age. It speaks of the danger of scattering oneself among countless social relationships and ultimately losing oneself. I have believed this very strongly all my life. Most people associate with others because they expect to gain something. I tried to avoid that. Perhaps that's why I have always remained on the margins. It never bothered me. I preferred to move more slowly, but to feel that I had remained myself. Success was never my main goal. Painting was.

That period in Kallithea came to an abrupt end.

Yes, unfortunately. It lasted about five years. Then the dictatorship came and everything changed. I left for Paris almost immediately, because I felt that Greece had become suffocating.

Alekos followed a little later. Nikos stayed longer. We all went our separate ways. During those seven years, I returned only for a few days in the summer. I did not want to live in that atmosphere. Then came work, teaching, everyday life in Paris, and eventually I stayed there much longer than I had initially imagined.

Yet there were also very specific experiences that changed the way you saw painting. You often refer to a small chapel in Pelion.

I will never forget it. It was hidden among dense vegetation. I found it completely by chance, around 1960. When I went inside, I was truly overwhelmed. The frescoes were the work of the folk painter Pagonis, whose name I did not even know at the time. Their power enchanted me. There was nothing contrived about them. On the contrary, they possessed a simplicity that concealed enormous richness. That was when I understood that one does not need to travel to the other end of the world to encounter great painting. Our country is full of such silent revelations. I think that little chapel taught me that the truth of art does not depend on fame or size; it depends on sincerity.

Today, looking back, is there anything you would change?

No. Perhaps I would have done some small things differently. But not the basic path I've followed. I feel grateful that I was able to live within painting. That is my great privilege. I never felt that I was doing it merely as a profession; painting is my life. And that is very different. Art has always been my refuge. Whenever the world became difficult, I have returned to painting. Painting gives me a world to which I can always return. I think that is what every person seeks: to find their own world. I am happy I found mine.

Leaving Vassilis Sperantzas' home, the Thermaic Gulf still stretches calmly beneath the balcony. From the street come laughter, the voices of boys and girls flirting, and the sounds of a summer full of vitality, as if a nocturnal scene from one of his paintings had sprung to life to see me off. Just before the door closes, we return one last time to a painting. He looks at it silently, without commenting on it. Perhaps because, after all these years, he still believes there are things painting can say better than any interview.



Paintings from different decades coexist with bronze and plaster sculptures, painted wooden works, and lithographs, all engaged in an ongoing dialogue with their creator.