

THE. ATLAS

A NEWSPAPER

**THE COMPANY
THAT WANTS TO
HIJACK THE SUN**

Astronomers fear the end of
the night sky as we know it

P12

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WELCOME TO THE ATLAS.

This edition's cover story may not be the most important story in the world. But it might just be the most important story in the galaxy. Zoom out far enough, and the Earth becomes but "a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam", as described by the astronomer Carl Sagan in *A Pale Blue Dot*. "There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world," Sagan concluded. But some follies, and some conceits, are so dangerous that even astronomers – whose concerns tend to be more cosmic in scale – must pay attention. And if something is worrying the people whose job it is to worry about the fate of the universe, then maybe the rest of us should worry too.

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

▼ **UPON REFLECTION:** The plan to send 50,000 mirrors into low Earth orbit may obscure the rest of the universe. Illustration: Anna Jibladze



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CURRENTS

Earth's waters are running out of breath

Across the world's waters, fish are struggling to breathe. Human-driven warming and nutrient pollution are stripping oxygen from oceans, lakes and rivers. That's the warning from a new study led by researchers at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography. The global ocean has lost about 2% of its dissolved oxygen over the past 50 years. In Denmark, the impacts are already visible: in 2025, around 40% of marine waters were affected by low oxygen levels. Researchers argue that aquatic deoxygenation should be treated as one of the defining environmental challenges of our time.

– Victoria Jensen in Ghent

▼ Photo: Annika Hammerschlag



France has not got your back, whistle-blowers

At great personal risk, Ephrem Yalike Ngonzo helped reveal the inner workings of the Wagner group's Russian propaganda network in the Central African Republic in 2024. He received plaudits for his bravery from human rights organisations; and death threats from people who want him to keep his mouth shut. What he has not received is asylum in France.

His claim was rejected this month. Ngonzo now risks being deported back to the CAR, where ex-Wagner operatives still provide security for the president. The Platform for the Protection of Whistleblowers in Africa is appealing the decision. Other would-be whistleblowers are re-evaluating their risk calculus.

– Olatunji Olaigbe in Cotonou

▲ Wagner whistle-blower Ephrem Yalike Ngonzo. Photo: PPLAAF

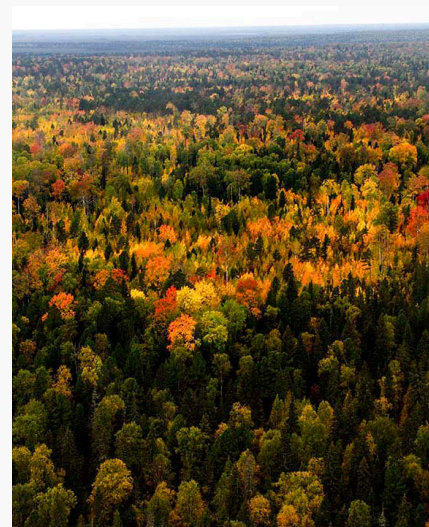
The report that's too scary for the public

The ecosystems that we – and all the other species on this planet – rely on to stay alive are collapsing everywhere. In Britain, a national security assessment pointed to six key ecosystems that will collapse in the coming decades, with devastating consequences for global food security and the climate. The report's findings are so grim that the government initially declined to publish the report. A redacted,

14-page version was only released through freedom of information requests. Parliamentarians are now demanding access to the unredacted version. The vulnerable ecosystems identified in the report are the Amazon Rainforest; the Congo Basin; coral reefs and mangroves in South-East Asia; the Himalayas; the Russia taiga; and boreal forests in Canada.

– Sipho Kings in Norwich

► The taiga or boreal forest is the largest forested region on Earth. Photo: Tatiana Bulyonkova





BORDEAUX

Fanning the flames: Wildfires in France and Spain – ‘the effects of the climate emergency,’ said Spain’s prime minister, Pedro Sánchez – forced the evacuation of tens of thousands of people in late July, even threatening major cities. Here in Bordeaux, in south-west France, the fires reached within a dozen kilometres of the city itself. Photo: Christophe Archambault/AFP

There was a massacre in West Kashmir this week

And the government of Pakistan would very much prefer that you didn't know about it.

Anuradha Bhasin

Twenty-one people were shot dead and scores of others were injured when security forces allegedly opened fire on protesters in Rawalakot in Pakistan-administered Jammu Kashmir (PaJK) on Monday.

The shooting coincided with the first phase of polling for the local assembly. Authorities switched off electricity in the area as soon as firing began, while the story of the massacre was largely ignored by Pakistan's television channels and newspapers. One blackout for the lights. Another for the truth. A perfect metaphor for darkness by design.

That darkness has enveloped West Kashmir since 5 June, when internet and mobile services were shut down and physical movement and access to healthcare were restricted.

In that time, scores of civilians have been killed; hundreds, including teenagers, are missing or detained, but families know nothing about their whereabouts; and thousands are organising a round-the-clock sit-in

protest, refusing to disperse.

At the heart of this crisis is the campaign by the Jammu and Kashmir Joint Awami Action Committee – a civil society coalition founded in 2023. JAAC's sole political demand is to abolish the 12 seats in the local assembly reserved for refugees from Indian-administered Kashmir. The group argues that these seats allow the state to engineer the formation of the local government.

On 5 June, authorities banned JAAC, filed sedition cases against its leaders, and the top court ruled that the seats are constitutionally protected. Protests erupting across cities in PaJK were met with barricades and gunfire.

Casualty figures remain contested. Officials claim 30 deaths in the unrest, including police personnel, but civil society groups put the civilian toll at between 65 and 70. Police confirm 400-plus detentions, though locals cite a far higher number, including several hundred missing.

Rawalakot is being heavily surveilled. Digital devices are monitored at checkpoints while drones hover around the sit-in sites,

▲ **Supporters of the Joint Awami Action Committee gather during a protest in Rawalakot, in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Photo: AFP**

says journalist Danish Irshad.

Still, the largely peaceful sit-ins are continuing. Women and children, usually absent from such protests, are turning out in large numbers, sustained by community aid.

Though the crisis was triggered by demands related to services and accountability, it is deeply intertwined with the unresolved 1947 dispute that split Jammu and Kashmir into Pakistan- and India-administered territories. Both countries claim the region in full.

India's decision in 2019 to scrap autonomy for India-administered Kashmir, and split the region into two federally governed territories, deepened fears in PaJK of similar treatment, feeding JAAC's push for accountability.

Already indelibly stained by violence, the polls continue until 10 August. ●

Anuradha Bhasin is the executive editor of the Kashmir Times



CURRENTS



South Africa's most dangerous question

“Where are you from?” Across South Africa, especially in its poorest areas, this question is being asked over and over again – by anti-migrant vigilante groups, by police, by immigration officials, and even by journalists trying to make sense of it all. And if you are poor, and black, and from anywhere else in sub-Saharan Africa, then you risk being evicted, assaulted or deported. *The Continent*, sister publication to *The Atlas*, reports this week on a 3am vigilante raid in Dokathule, an informal settlement outside of Johannesburg, where Mozambican families were dragged from their beds by angry men bearing whips and pangas. It is not



▲ Destroyed homes in Dokathule.
Photo: Paul Botes/*The Continent*

an isolated incident, but part of a broader campaign of intimidation and violence that has forced more than 70,000 people from their homes. Whatever the question may be – and South Africans, living in one of the world's most unequal and most dangerous countries, have plenty of these – surely this is not the answer. – *Simon Allison in Johannesburg*

US dangles dollars to make Europe great again

Last year, the United States abruptly stopped funding international development, with devastating consequences for the world's poorest and most vulnerable people. Now it is back in the global grant business – but with a MAGA twist. On 13 July, the state department invited European organisations that share “our common Western civilizational heritage” to apply for grants of up to \$3-million to address “national sovereignty, migration, censorship and lawfare challenges”. In direct response, German chancellor Friedrich Merz warned the US against interfering in German elections. – *Irina Matchavariani in Tbilisi*



GANTANG

Dining in the dark: On 9 July, a reservoir near the small rural town of Gantang, in China's southern Hunan province, collapsed beneath torrential rain delivered by Tropical Storm Maysak. Flooding knocked out Gantang's power supplies, prompting families to eat by candlelight outside. At least 39 people died in floods in the neighbouring Guangxi region. Photo: Greg Baker/AFP

Dammed if you don't

Villagers have had it up to here with India's \$5-billion mega-project.

Words & photos by Ishan Tankha
in Chhatarpur, Madhya Pradesh

Reaching Kupi village from New Delhi isn't difficult. A train connects Delhi to Khajuraho, the Unesco heritage site famous for its intricately carved erotic temple sculptures. Chhatarpur, the station before Khajuraho, is barely 50km from the village.

Since July, after talks with the

district administration stalled, hundreds of villagers have been camped out near Kupi, demonstrating against the Ken-Betwa Link, a plan conceived in the 1980s to move "surplus" river water into drought-starved basins. It broke ground in December 2024, when Narendra Modi laid its foundation stone at Khajuraho.

It is now billed as the country's first river-interlinking project to enter construction: a 77m-high, 2.1km-long dam at Daudhan on the Ken river, feeding a 221km canal that will carry water into the Betwa basin, at a cost of roughly \$5-billion.



At the protest, women smeared their faces with mud; some stood neck-deep in the river for hours; others lay on makeshift funeral pyres, enacting their own cremations. Men nearby hung loose nooses around their necks, with placards reading, "Give us justice or death."

On 3 July, Amit Bhatnagar, an activist in Chhatarpur and the face of the protest, went on hunger strike. But on 19 July police in riot gear forcibly took him to hospital.

Submerged in the river, Divya Ahirwar, a former councillor, said power had been cut to force villagers to give in. Families hadn't eaten roti in days, as the local mills run on electricity. "Our demands are simple," she said. "Adequate compensation for all affected families." ●

Chile casts care aside for Trump's lithium lust

Phineas Rueckert
in San Pedro de Atacama

After kilometres of flat, orange desert, the bus dives down through an increasingly lunar landscape as it reaches San Pedro de Atacama. A small sign appears on the side of the road. The entry marker has been tagged in graffiti. “Se vendió los salares” – they sold the salt flats.

The town of San Pedro, located in the north of Chile not far from the borders with Argentina and Bolivia, then appears like an oasis.

In this hub for international tourism, small buses packed with visitors make trips from the dusty, bustling centre to explore the region's various geysers, sand dunes and volcanoes. Night sky tourism ventures offer a unique look at the southern stars. But it is the vast white salt flats, formed between 10- and 100-million years ago, that people come from around the world to see.

Mining companies and major economies are interested for a different reason.

The broader area where the borders of Chile, Argentina and Bolivia converge is often referred to as the world's “lithium triangle.” This corner of South America is believed to hold 68% of the world's lithium reserves – a key element in the production of the lithium-



▲ The lithium-rich salt flats outside San Pedro de Atacama in Chile. Photo: Phineas Rueckert/Coda

◀ A worker displays 9% lithium from a sample pool at Chilean company SQM's mine in Salar de Atacama. Photo: Martin Bernetti/AFP

ion batteries that fuel not only electric vehicles, but, increasingly, data centres and other large “green” infrastructure projects. San Pedro, roughly in the middle of the triangle, is sitting on a modern gold mine – and a faultline for the future of renewable energy.

On 11 March, Jose Antonio Kast, Chile's new president took office. Kast, a conservative ostentatiously close to Donald Trump, immediately signed an exploratory deal with the

United States to extract rare earths and essential minerals.

Chile is central to the Trump administration's plans to reduce its reliance on China as a source of the rare earths and metals. Kast has also removed environmental protections from roughly 40 different types of natural resources.

Processing lithium demands huge amounts of water – and for local communities, the strain is already noticeable. In San Pedro, an estimated 49% of residents don't have access to running water.

“We're sitting on a watershed, and yet there is water scarcity,” said Sonia Ramos Chocobar, a prominent local environmental activist. “We're being conquered, in a sense – commercially, economically.” ●

A longer version of this story was first published by Coda Story.

This corner of South America is believed to hold 68% of the world's lithium reserves - a key element in the production of the lithium-ion batteries that fuel electric vehicles and increasingly, data centres



NEW YORK CITY

Water wars: The 'heat dome' that settled above most of North America this month brought extreme temperatures to most of the United States, and sparked devastating wildfires in parts of Canada. To cool down, New York City is distributing 'spray caps' for fire hydrants – like this one in Hamilton Heights – turning them into makeshift water fountains. Photo: Charly Triballeau/AFP

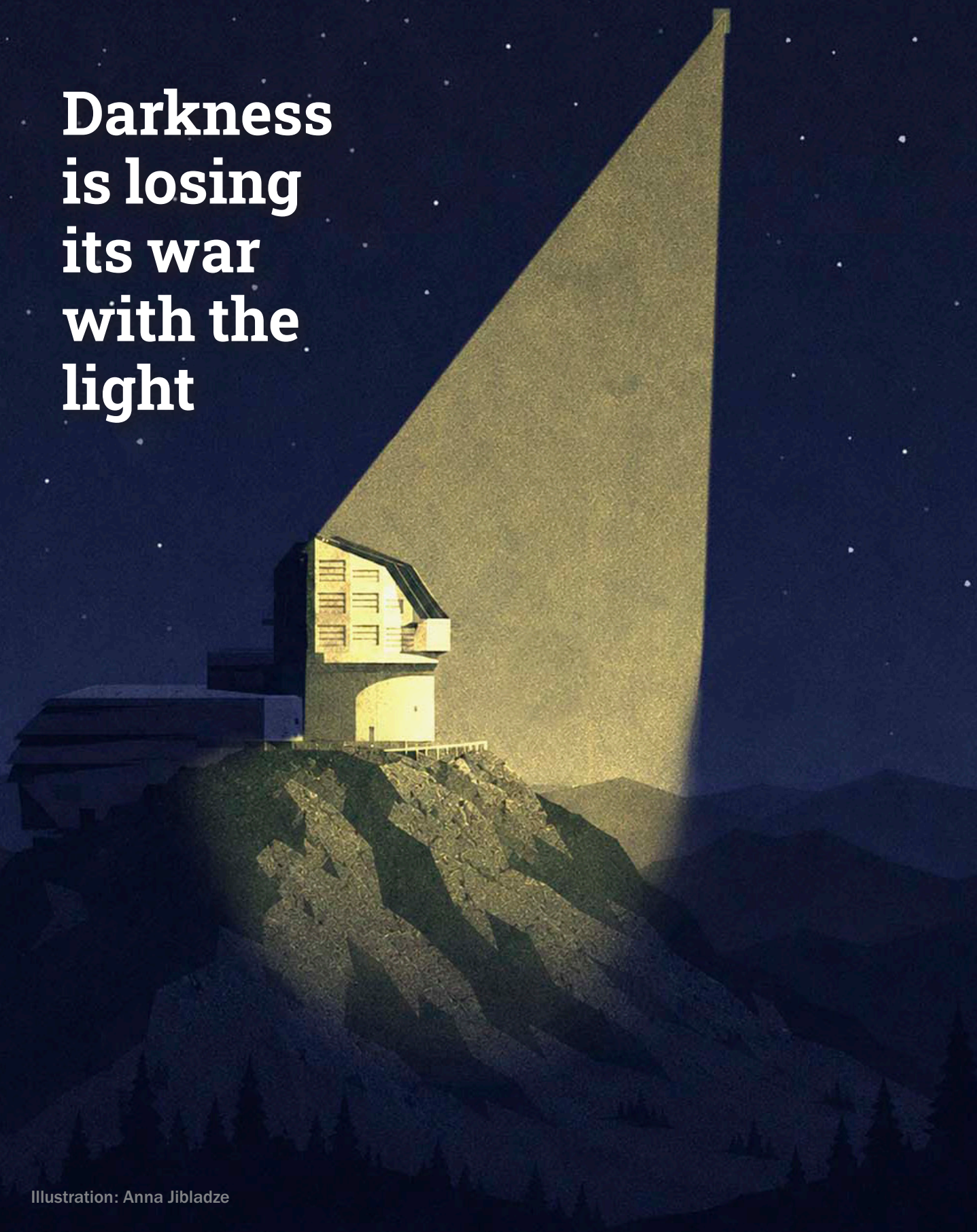


The Continent

African journalism.

Illustration: Wynona Mutisi

Darkness is losing its war with the light



Nothing on Earth is as sure as night following day. An American tech start-up with military backing wants to change that. Not everyone thinks a brighter future is such a good idea.

Simon Allison in Johannesburg

Astronomy, our window into the rest of the universe, happens in the dark. Planets, stars and galaxies – all the mysteries of the cosmos – only reveal themselves at night. But the night sky may be getting much brighter, thanks to an American company with a plan to conquer darkness itself by sending 50,000 giant mirrors into space.

Astronomers are panicking.

It is an “existential threat” to optical astronomy, says the European Southern Observatory. A “disastrous” idea that will “permanently scar” the night sky, according to the Royal Astronomical Society. The American Astronomical Society told *Nature* it “would probably mean the end of ground-based astronomy, or optical astronomy, at least”.

Sthabile Kolwa agrees. “It will take away a very crucial part of our civilisation,” she tells *The Atlas*. Kolwa, a senior lecturer in astronomy

at the University of South Africa, studies the life cycles of galaxies, but today her concerns are more immediate. “It might come to this, that we just have to find them in the parking lot and say, ‘Hey, what are you guys doing? You’re going to ruin science for us.’”

LIKE UBER BUT FOR THE SUN

The parking lot in question is in Hawthorne, California, outside the headquarters of Reflect Orbital. They call themselves The Sunlight Company. The start-up is celebrating: Earlier this month, the United States Federal Communications Commission (FCC) approved the launch of Eärendil-1, likely in a few months time.

This satellite, named for a character in JRR Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion*, will

▼ Reflect Orbital’s vision for how a beam of reflected sunlight could illuminate a town at night.

Image: Reflect Orbital

unfurl an 18m x 18m mirror in low Earth orbit. It’s designed to reflect sunlight onto the dark side of the earth, lighting a 5km² patch of land with the strength of four full moons.

It is a proof of concept.

By 2035, Reflect Orbital wants 50,000 of its mirrors in space, delivering illumination “comparable to daylight” on demand to paying customers (“sunlight is the new oil,” says chief executive Ben Nowack).

The company says this will allow solar panels to generate clean energy overnight; provide “safer, evenly-lit streets” to cities that pay for it; and keep construction sites and farms working 24/7.

There will be an app, of course, offering “sunlight as a service” – lighting up the night will be as easy as ordering an Uber.

Clean, renewable energy is at the heart of the company’s vision, a spokesperson told *The Atlas* in a statement.

Reflect Orbital declined to respond to specific queries and said it is in constant dialogue with astronomers, scientists and environmental researchers to mitigate the impact of the light pollution: “We are able to dim the brightness of the service and turn it off at any stage. We control where the light shines when serving an authorised customer. Most people and most places will never see this light. It is precise, targeted and customers will require permits to receive the service.”

CIRCADIAN ARRHYTHMIA

A new research paper, published in May, challenges Reflect Orbital’s position. Its author, the European Southern Observatory’s Oliver Hainault, concluded that the company’s 50,000 satellites would increase the background brightness of the sky by 300% – even when their mirrors are pointed somewhere





else. This, coupled with a proposal from Elon Musk's SpaceX to build vast data centres in space, would go "beyond the limit" of what astronomy can withstand.

What that means, in practice, is that the images from ground-based telescopes will be dramatically less useful, marred by streaks of light from passing satellites.

The most distant light sources won't be visible at all.

This will obscure evidence of other galaxies, hinder research into black holes and other cosmic phenomena, and potentially prevent early warnings of asteroid approaches. Cutting-edge astronomy will only be possible from space-based telescopes like the James Webb and the Hubble

It's the most wealthy, most powerful individuals who are gobbling up as much of that orbital space as they can before someone else can get that opportunity.

— access to which is already massively oversubscribed, and subject to political interference.

The night sky will look different to the naked eye, too. "The next time you're away from urban light pollution, spend some time outdoors after dark and enjoy the view of the Milky Way and the constellations that have inspired awe since humankind woke to consciousness. Chances are those views are not here to stay forever," wrote journalist Tereza Pultarova for *Space.com*.

RUNNING OUT OF SPACE

The night sky is already a lot brighter than it was 150 years ago, when light bulbs started to become commonplace.

According to Dark Sky International, a US-based nonprofit that advocates against light pollution, 80% of Earth's human population already lives under some form of sky glow, most of which is generated on land. This has forced astronomers to seek out "dark sky places", like

▲ Ever since the commercialisation of the light bulb, human settlements like this one in Chongqing, China, have been getting brighter and brighter. Photo: Getty Images

the Atacama Desert in Chile or the Upper Karoo in South Africa, for their telescopes.

Humans can adapt to less darkness. But it is much harder for animals and ecosystems that have evolved alongside predictable rhythms of day and night. Nocturnal predators lose the ability to hunt; sea turtle babies can't find their way to the sea; migratory birds are thrown hopelessly off course; and moths expend all their energy helplessly chasing artificial light sources.

"It's almost like we are on a mission to obliterate natural darkness from earth," said Ruskin Hartley, Dark Sky's chief executive. "And now rather than do it street by street and bulb by bulb, let's do it from space."

Space is, in theory, protected

by the Outer Space Treaty, a 1967 agreement signed by 110 countries, including all the major space superpowers. It states that “space is the province of all mankind”.

But that’s not what’s actually happening, Hartley argues. “In the US, it’s the most wealthy, most powerful individuals who are gobbling up as much of that orbital space as they can before someone else can get that opportunity” – with China, Russia and Europe all scrambling too for a greater presence in low Earth orbit.

“Who gets to choose that we light up the night sky? Who gets to make that decision?” Ruskin asks.

In the US, it is the FCC’s job to decide what satellites are allowed in space. But it has said that assessing the impact of light pollution or environmental damage is not within its remit. Instead, it wants to slash regulation so American companies can take advantage of the “space industrial revolution”.

And Reflect Orbital has rich and powerful backers. Earlier this year, it secured a \$1.5-million contract from the US air force, hinting at possible military applications for its mirrors.

Last year, it raised \$20-million from three venture capital firms, including Sequoia Capital, one of the biggest investors in Silicon Valley. Sequoia also owns a multibillion-dollar stake in SpaceX, which has its own plans for low earth orbit.

There are already more than 10,000 Starlink satellites up there, giving Elon Musk unprecedented influence over global communications. The company wants to launch one million more satellites over the next few years to build a network of space-based data centres.

In addition to the light pollution, astronomers worry the potential for collisions will increase dramatically, as will risks to the ozone layer.

A BRIGHTER FUTURE

On her blog *Higher Dimensions*, the astronomy professor Janna Levin contemplates our brighter future.

“It is quite possible that the hot glow of the swarm of data satellites will saturate the night, washing out the stars from our perspective on Earth. We’ll look up into the sky and instead of Zeus transformed into a swan outlined in a constellation of a few stars, the machine gods will

Reflect Orbital has rich and powerful backers. Earlier this year, it secured a \$1.5-million contract from the US air force, hinting at possible military applications for its mirrors.

literally loom above us, glowing with radiant heat, making declarations, predicting the weather, forecasting then determining our fate.”

Kolwa, the South African astronomy lecturer, offers a different metaphor: that of empires “colonising low Earth orbit”.

This was an ambition of one of the most infamous imperialists of them all, Cecil John Rhodes, who said that he looked up at the stars and thought: “I would annex the planets if I could; I often think of that. It makes me sad to see them so clear and yet so far.”

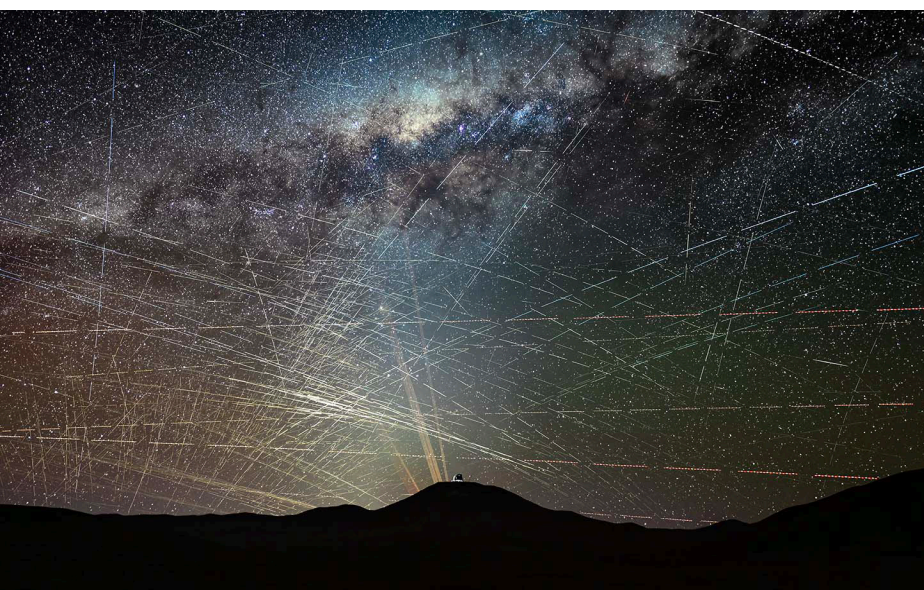
But it hasn’t been colonised just yet.

“I’m still trying to figure out what we can do, what responsibility we have as scientists,” says Kolwa. “How could we engage our communities to stand up to these corporations and say no? We must keep our night skies dark, as dark as possible.” ●

Tell us what you think

What’s your favourite memory of the night sky? Who should decide its fate? Send your thoughts – or a photo of the night sky – to simon@codastory.com. We’ll publish our favourite responses in the next edition of The Atlas – and send you a limited edition print of the cover illustration.

◀ A time-lapse image of satellites and airplanes crossing the night sky above the ESO’s Extremely Large Telescope in Chile’s Atacama Desert, capturing just one hour in October last year. Photo: F. Kamphues



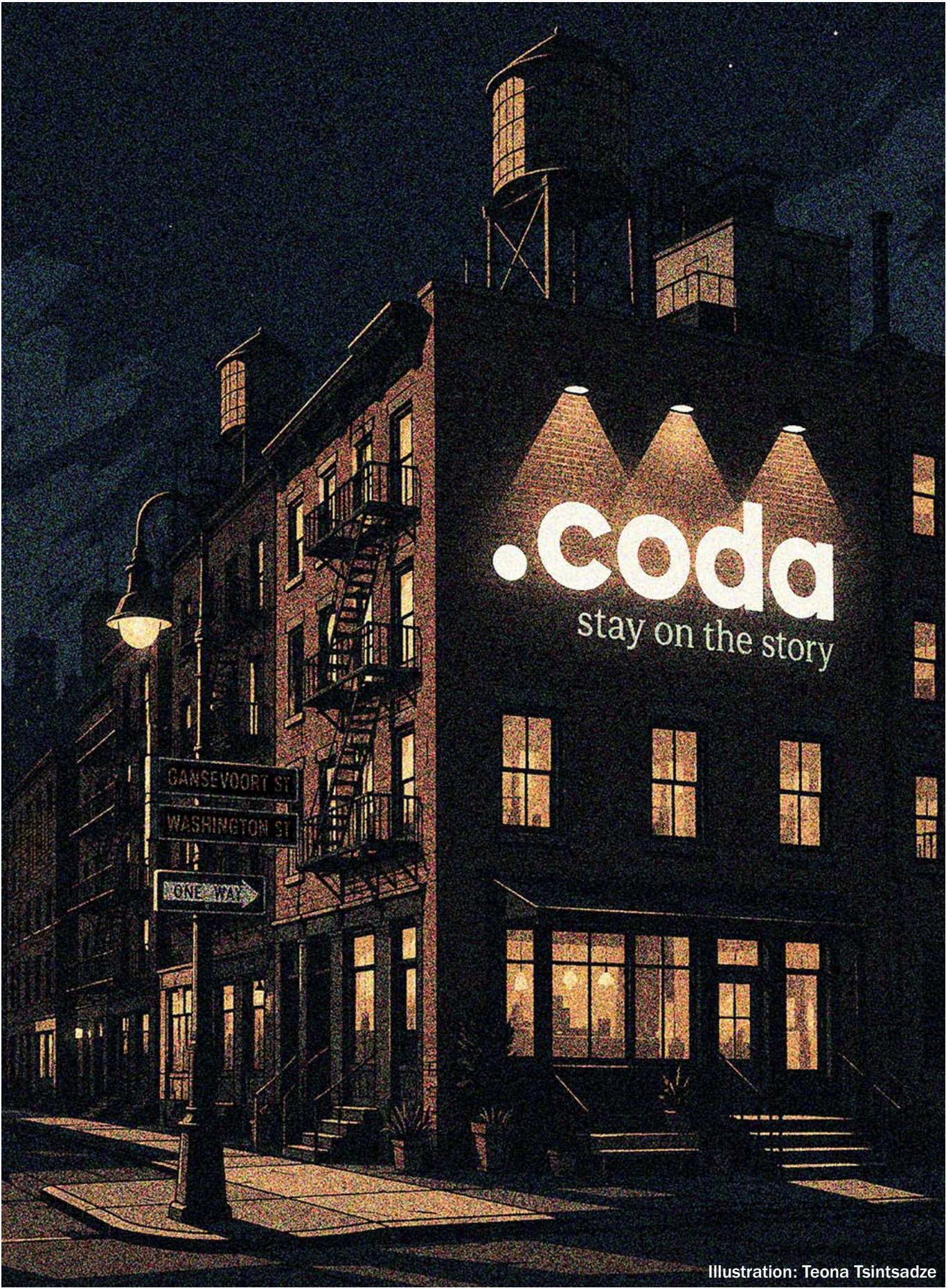


Illustration: Teona Tsintsadze



DRESSED TO PROTEST

Irina Matchavariani in Tbilisi

My mind often goes back to mid-January, 2025 – more than a month into daily protests in Tbilisi, Georgia, denouncing the government’s decision to halt Georgia’s constitutionally-mandated path to the European Union. I wore my protest uniform: Carhartt long johns, a winter coat too heavy to outrun the riot police and my pink-grey scarf designed for New England winters.

I called my friend to see where she was. “On the parliament stairs,” she said. “And I have a surprise.”

When I found her, I laughed. Here she was, wearing a grotesque mask of Bidzina Ivanishvili – the billionaire founder of the ruling pro-Russian party and Georgia’s grey cardinal since 2012 – and nonchalantly smoking a cigarette.

She was breaking the law. Authorities had prohibited face coverings at protests, supposedly to preserve public order. Violators were

When I found her, I laughed. Here she was, wearing a grotesque mask of Bidzina Ivanishvili, nonchalantly smoking a cigarette.

◀ Photo: Irina Matchavariani

fined around two thousand dollars.

It was, by then, the latest in a string of absurd restrictions around protests. The government had already installed surveillance cameras around the parliament, identifying and fining protesters for blocking the road. When protesters started hiding behind Venetian masks or ski goggles, the ban became total.

Now, approaching two years of daily protests, it’s even more absurd. Demonstrating on a pavement can bring five days in prison for repeat offenders. Georgia now has more political prisoners per capita than Russia. Facial-recognition cameras, reported to be Russian- or Chinese-made, are ubiquitous. I still wonder if my prescription glasses have hindered them from recognising me.

Yet I keep coming back to my friend’s Bidzina-face on a cold winter day. “Won’t we get fined?” I asked her then. A mother of two, she had more at stake than I did.

“They won’t fine Bidzina,” she replied. ●

WEAR YOUR FACES ON YOUR SLEEVE

A small fashion label is selling clothing designed to evade surveillance. Business is booming.

Victoria Jensen

“Thank you for your privacy power.” That’s the note tucked inside every order from Urban Privacy, a small German fashion label making anti-surveillance clothing.

It sounds tongue-in-cheek, but behind the slogan lies a serious question: in a world increasingly watched by cameras and algorithms, can what you wear become a form of resistance?

“Clothing is part of your identity, your convictions, your political standing, your idea about society,” Daniel Preuß, co-founder of Urban Privacy, told *The Atlas*. “You use it to represent your beliefs. There’s clothing for sports, for business, for almost every aspect of life, so why not

clothing for policy?”

Urban Privacy can’t make people invisible. It doesn’t seek to conceal faces. Instead, its clothing evades surveillance cameras by confusing the algorithms.

“The idea is to flood the system with false information,” Preuß says. Oversized, asymmetrical silhouettes make it harder for AI to analyse shape and gait, while the brand’s *Faceception* collection uses abstract face-like patterns to trick facial recognition software.

The Atlas tested one of the pieces from the *Faceception* collection. At first glance, it looks like a bold graphic print. Look closer, however, and hidden faces begin to emerge across the fabric.

“What happens is there’s more than one face with a person,” Preuß says. “The system has to decide which one is the real face.”

That philosophy reflects the founders’ broader concern about surveillance itself. “Surveillance is there to keep you in check,” Preuß argues.

Many people dismiss privacy concerns by saying they have “nothing to hide”, but co-founder Nicole Schneider offers a simple analogy. “Do you have curtains on your windows?” she asks. “Nobody wants a neighbour constantly looking inside.”

Founded in 2017, Urban Privacy remained a niche project for years, but demand has recently surged, particularly from the United States.



Photos: Luc Van Malderen

“The idea is to flood the system with false information,” Preuß says. Oversized, asymmetrical silhouettes make it harder for AI to analyse a person’s shape and gait.”

Despite the technical innovations and anti-surveillance stance, Urban Privacy insists it is a fashion brand first. “We want to make privacy fun, stylish and wearable,” says Preuß. “Style without the function will always work, but function without the style is difficult.”

While anti-surveillance clothing remains largely unregulated, the founders say they are less interested in outsmarting governments than in starting conversations.

The *Faceception* collection asks a provocative question: If surveillance has become part of everyday life, shouldn’t fashion respond?

“Fashion as a shield against surveillance is important,” Preuß says, “but it’s not the solution. Once these systems are in place, fashion alone won’t protect society.” ●





Confessions of a Jakarta street ninja

Photos and words:
Aryan Pramudito

Living in Jakarta forces you to be a bit of a ninja. You have to blend in and stay invisible most of the time, but the second something happens, you need to act quick before the moment disappears.

That's exactly how I shoot. I document the streets with the same mindset: just be a ninja. Be invisible.

To stay invisible, you can't carry big gear. People always ask what camera I use, expecting some heavy setup. The

truth is, I just pull out my phone. I really don't care about megapixels. If you point a huge lens at someone here, they freeze up or get annoyed. But a guy staring at his phone screen? That's just a typical Jakartan.

What am I looking for? Anything human. It could be the way the afternoon sun hits a wall, a random lens flare, or just a quirky contrast between a guy and his background. That's why I always end up in traditional markets and train stations. The visual chaos there just stacks up.

Things collide and create these weird, beautiful juxtapositions you can't plan. Daido Moriyama, the iconic Japanese street photographer, is my hero for this stuff. I don't want postcard-salon pictures. I want the raw, unfiltered side of Jakarta.

I hope when you see these photos, you don't just see the noise – I hope you feel a bit of that happiness and

energy. Jakarta never stops throwing great moments at you, as long as you let the city be itself. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to head back out to the streets and be completely invisible again. ●

To stay invisible, you can't carry big gear. People always ask what camera I use, expecting some heavy setup. The truth is, I just pull out my phone.









RESTAURANT REVIEW

A blast from Ethiopia's Armenian past

Sometimes a restaurant is not just a restaurant.

The Atlas ordered:

Mazoun Keufteh (meatball soup mixed with yogurt)

Baba Ganoush (Eggplant dip mixed with garlic)

Mixed Kebab – (a mixture of beef and chicken bbq Shish Kebab)

Lokhma – (Armenian pastries mixed with syrup)

2 x Habesha beer

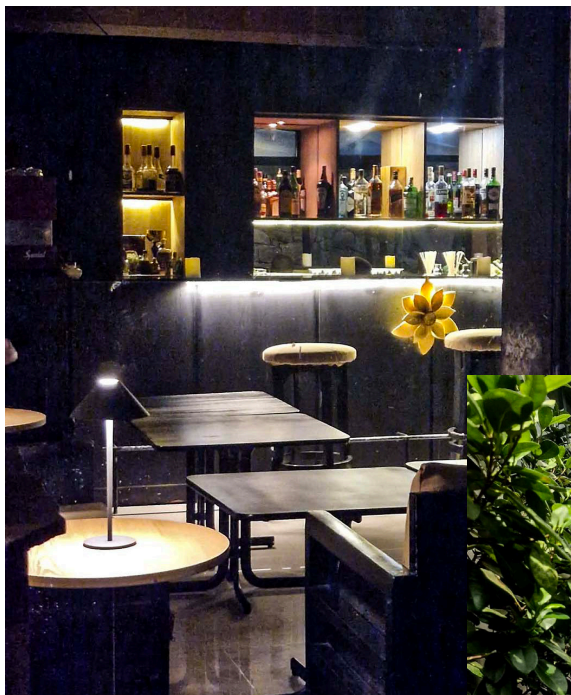
Bill: 4550 Birr (28 USD)

Nearly a century ago, Ethiopia's Prince Ras Tafari Makonnen visited Jerusalem. There, he was welcomed by a brass band made up of 40 Armenian orphans known as the Arba Lijoch. Captivated, he adopted them on the spot and brought them back with him to Addis Ababa.

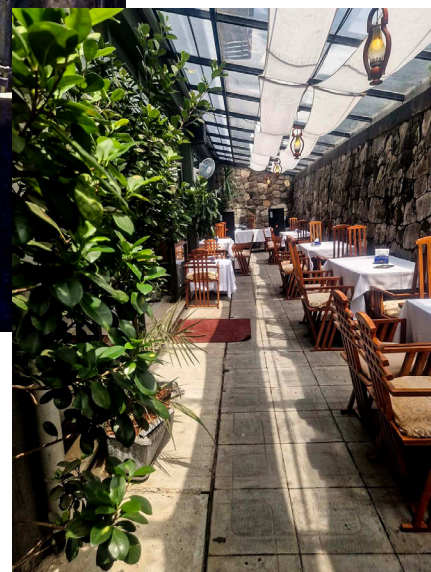
The 40 children joined a small but thriving Armenian community already living in Ethiopia's capital. The band's director Kevork Nalbandian went on to compose Ethiopia's first national anthem, *Ethiopia, Be Happy* – and the band performed at the prince's coronation, when he became Emperor Haile Selassie.

Only a handful of Armenians remain in Ethiopia. Yarmenoch Sefer, the once glitzy Armenian quarter in the Ethiopian capital, has been largely razed, with only a few landmarks – the church, a cultural centre, a school – surviving. But Aladdin, one of just two Armenian restaurants in Addis Ababa today, is a culinary reminder of this once-vibrant community.

Its menu reflects the millennia-long history of the Armenian diaspora, with influences drawn from the Caucasus, the Levant, Anatolia and Greece. Even the excellent pizza



◀ Threads of history are woven into the menu and atmosphere. Photos: Aladdin



selection tells a story – a legacy of Italy's brief, brutal occupation of Ethiopia.

Perhaps most historic of all is the basturma, Armenia's beloved cured beef. This is a modern version of "apukht", a dish that dates back two millennia, thought to have been developed by Armenian traders to sustain them on long voyages east to India and China.

This same history informs Aladdin's atmosphere. Diners eat to the music of the Ethiopian-Armenian singer Vahe Tilbian, a reminder of the transformative impact the Arba Lijoch had on the country. Music and food remain the lasting contributions of the Armenian community to contemporary Ethiopian culture.

A mouthful of the madzoon kufteh, a hearty yet delicate soup made of

yoghurt, mint and beefy meatballs, transports you to mid-century Addis, when the small but influential Armenian population was at its peak.

Restaurants like Aladdin must have been plentiful then, part of the fabric of Ethiopian life. So we must be grateful that Aladdin endures in the cosmopolitan Sar Bet neighbourhood.

The shish kebabs are succulent and the Lokhma, syrupy dough balls, will make Ethiopians of a certain age nostalgic for the age when Armenians were our neighbours, an intrinsic part of the life of our city. ●

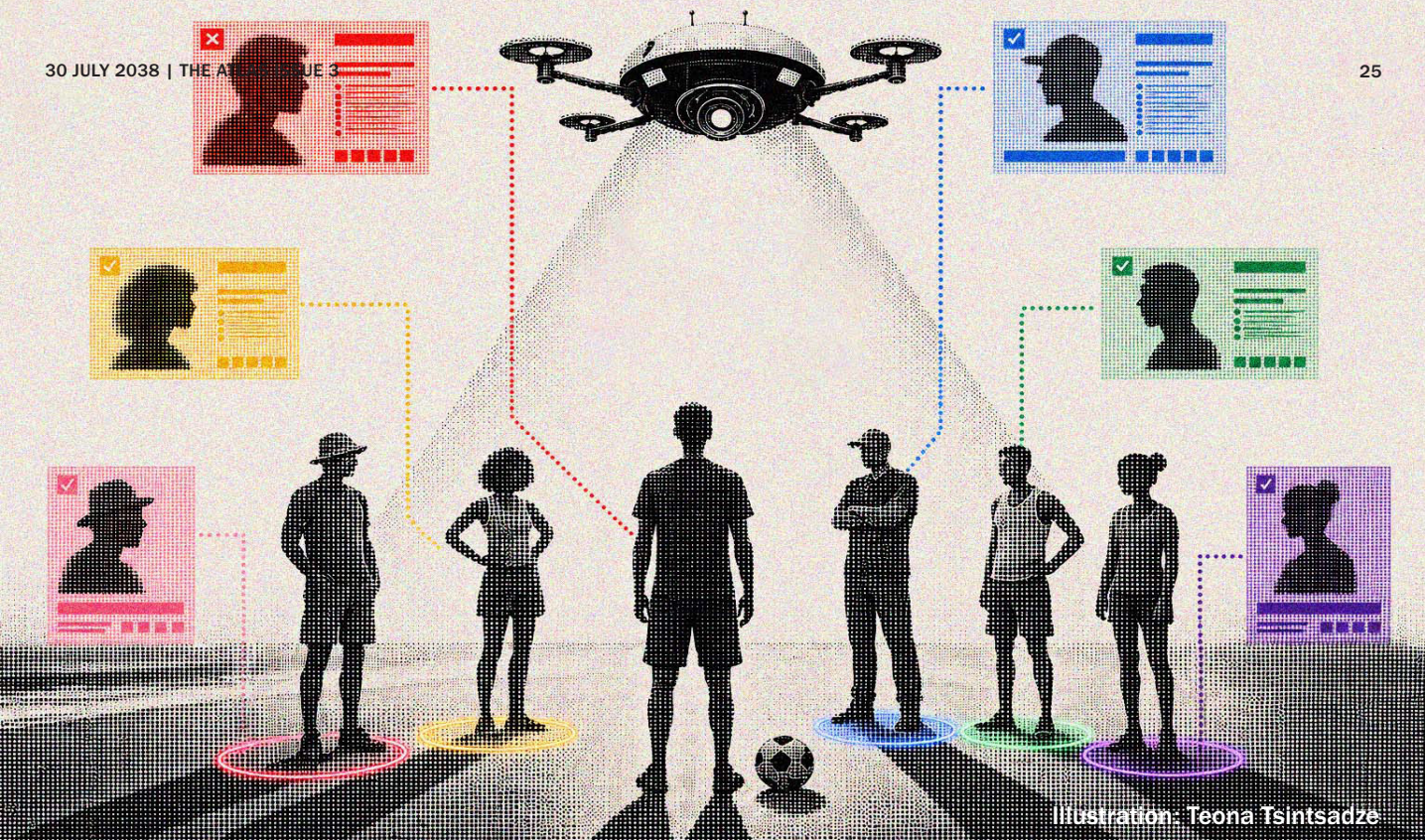


Illustration: Teona Tsintsadze

A SHORT SHORT STORY

Expiry date

Despatches from the future in 300 words or less

Heather Chaplin

The drone appeared an hour after they arrived.

They all looked up. No one liked to see the drones. It spoke their names.

There were six of them, the maximum allowed. They all knew not to move.

The drone's light made a garish halo on the sand. The waves were drowned out by its thumping.

People used to think the heart-beat thumping funny – that it had been designed by an EDM AI. Not anymore.

José hated himself for the fear coursing through him. He dug his toes into the warm sand, looked to the waves crashing against the shore. It would go soon. He wouldn't have assembled without subscribing.

"José..." thump thump "...You are not subscribed..." thump thump.

José looked at his friends.

"I did," he said. "I am subscribed. My wife does it."

The light around José narrowed, brightened. He dropped into a crouch, shielding his eyes. The thumping got louder.

"Protest logged," said the drone. "Don't move while I investigate, José. You know accuracy is my number one concern. Only your safety is more important to me."

Hard little pellets shot in a circle around them, making the sand fly. The men huddled together. A pellet punctured their soccer ball.

"This assures your safety while I investigate," said the drone. Then, "No, not subscribed, José. You are in violation."

The bright colours of the subscription page flashed on the drone's belly. Then it was a fish-eye video of his wife, typing with one hand, holding a credit card in the other. She selected Right to Assemble for \$29, paid the \$4 activation fee.

But then, another screenshot – their expired credit card.

José opened his mouth, but the stunner got him. He dropped to his knees. His last thought, before keeling over: "I forgot to give her the new card." ●

Heather Chaplin is the founding director of Journalism + Design at the New School in New York City and author, most recently, of *Reckless Years, A Diary of Love and Madness*

The Historical Record

with ARMANDO IANNUCCI



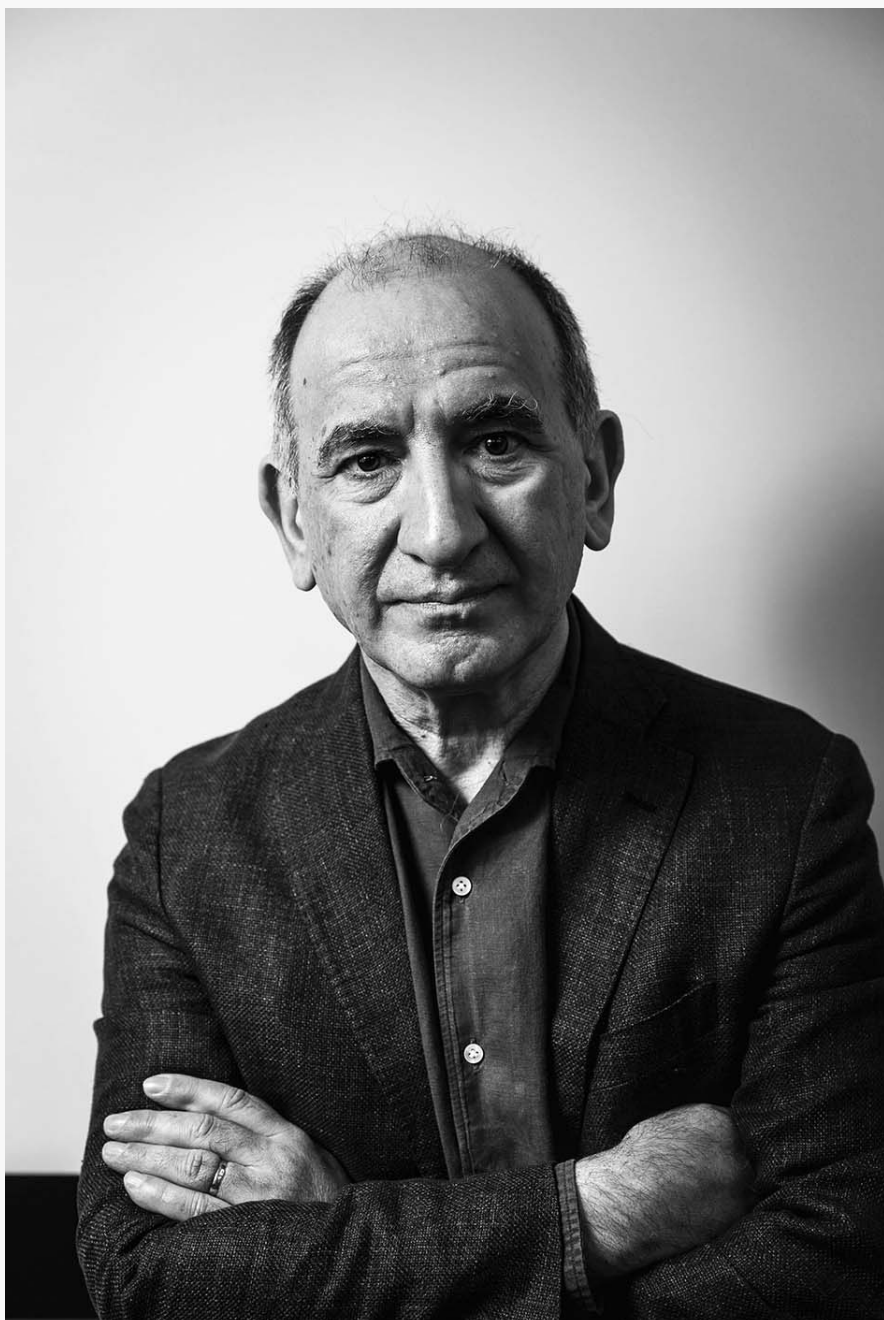
This month, *The Atlas* asks satirist and director **Armando Iannucci** what fragments of history – a record, a book, a memory, a turning point – he would preserve for posterity. Historians of the very distant future, human or otherwise, you can thank us later.

I loved books when I was young, but I couldn't afford them. There was a second-hand bookshop in Glasgow called "Voltaire and Rousseau", which sounds more pretentious than it was. It was full of all sorts of books. Everything was just thrown into a heap. Right in front of you was a mound of books that you just pulled things out to see what you found, and that was very magical.

I'm a classical music fan. Anything written after 1910 is tricky for me. I'm a huge fan of Gustav Mahler, who wrote ten symphonies, and his ninth is one of the most amazing pieces of music ever written. I've known that symphony since I was about 13 or 14. If I had to play a piece of music in my head, it would be bits of that.

The novelist Graham Greene, who wrote many, many books, was very popular in his time. Some of his books have gone out of fashion. He wrote tremendous thrillers and mysteries, very funny books, dark books, about religion and faith and guilt. If I had to choose one to preserve, I'd go with *Our Man in Havana*.

Food would have to be Italian. Or anything that my mother made. But I remember my nonna, my grandmother, made this extraordinary lemon rice cake – torta di riso – that was so delicious that as kids we'd devour the whole thing between a few of us in two minutes. She didn't pass on the recipe. I've spent the last 50 years trying to find a cake just as good.



Coming from the UK, I suppose the Brexit vote ten years ago was the biggest thing that happened to us. I remember at the time thinking when the result was announced, oh, we're going to have a lot of politics

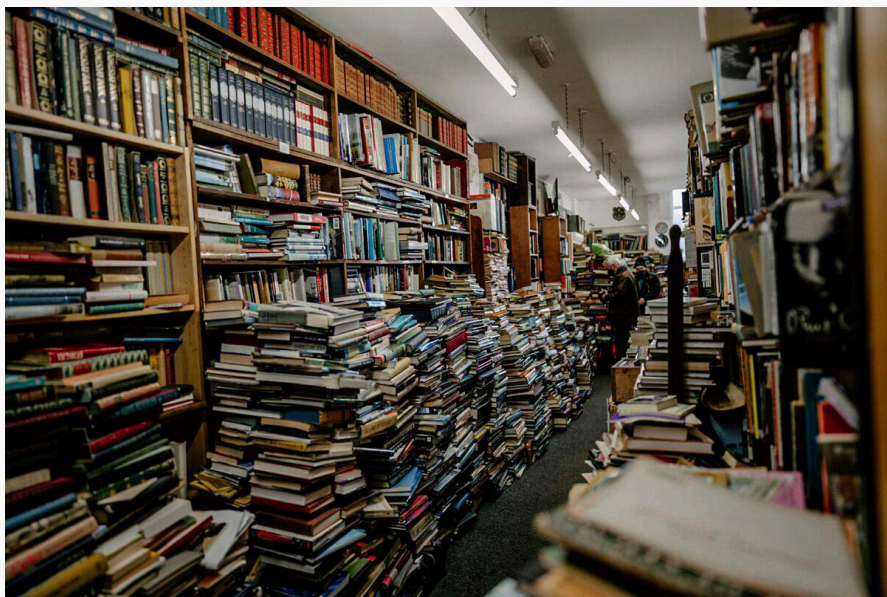
I'm a classical music fan. Anything written after 1910 is tricky for me.

▲ Armando Iannucci.
Photo: Guram Muradov/Zeg



ABOVE: Composer and conductor Gustav Mahler.

RIGHT: Second-hand bookshop 'Voltaire and Rousseau' in Glasgow. (Photo: Hidden Scotland)



now, and we did. We've got through four or five prime ministers (*five or six now – ed*), we've had three or four general elections. We're in that frustrating time of the majority of us knowing that it was a mistake, but no one being quite ready, in power, in government, or in politics to suggest that we try and reverse that decision. That will come in time.

I've seen close-up what that's done. It transformed the language of politics away from conciliation and compromise and more into very rigid ideology. Us and them, and people labelling themselves as either for or against, and dialogue breaking down ... hopefully, we'll get back to one where we're more prepared to talk to people who we disagree with rather than lock them out of the conversation. ●

Armando Iannucci is the creator of *The Thick of It*, *Veep* and *Avenue 5*, and director of *The Death of Stalin*. He spoke to *The Atlas* on the sidelines of the ZEG Storytelling Festival 2026 in Tbilisi, Georgia. *The Historical Record* is produced by Masho Lomashvili and Simon Allison.

How to read *The Atlas*

There are no wrong answers. But there are levels.

Level 1: Open the newspaper. Admire the photographs, and the illustrations. Skim the headlines. Maybe an article catches your eye, maybe not – either way you're staying in the loop, and we salute you for it.

Level 2: Make a cup of tea. Or coffee. Pour a glass of wine. Sit back. Relax. Are you comfortable? Open the newspaper. Read the news! This planet is fascinating, as are the people who live here. Travel it with us.

Level 3: This takes more commitment. Find a printer – at home, at a copy place. A4, double-sided. Two copies: one for you, one to leave strategically in your local library or coffee shop*. You are your own printing press. Put some music on. Sit back. Relax. Read a newspaper. No algorithm can mess with that.

**If you actually do this, tell us about it and we'll shout-out your favourite local spot in the next edition. Bonus points for photographic evidence of *The Atlas* in the wild. Email simon@codastory.com.*



Illustration: Teona Tsintsadze

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.

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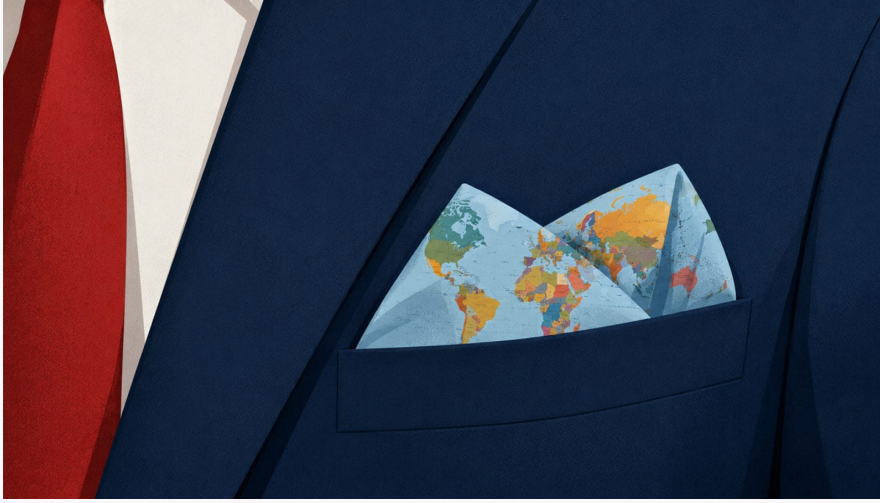
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Learn more about why
The Atlas exists and
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◀ Illustration: Teona Tsintsadze

Natalia Antelava in Tbilisi

I rarely feel much sympathy for the über-rich, but Silicon Valley's millionaires may deserve a moment of attention. According to Oxfam, billionaire wealth grew by \$2.5-trillion in 2025. A global push to tax the super-rich is gathering pace, with at least five serious proposals now under consideration from Brazil to the United States.

But a well-funded resistance to taxing extreme wealth is also beginning to take shape, and California offers an early glimpse of how it may work.

On 3 November, voters will decide whether to impose a one-off 5% tax on roughly 200 residents worth more than \$1-billion.

According to *Business Insider*,

On 3 November, voters will decide whether to impose a one-off 5% tax on roughly 200 residents worth more than \$1-billion.

wealthy tech figures have already committed more than \$120-million to defeating the measure, or backing rival initiatives that could override it. Google co-founder Sergey Brin alone has contributed \$82-million.

The measure targets a tiny group of billionaires, but its opponents are presenting it as a precedent that could impact far more people – including mere millionaires.

Our sources in Silicon Valley say that warning is resonating with founders and investors worth far less than \$1-billion.

This is how a billionaire firewall can form: not through support for billionaires, but through fear among the much larger class beneath them. A measure aimed at a few hundred people becomes a threat felt by millions more (there are 23.6-million millionaires in the US alone, according to the 2026 UBS Global Wealth Report).

This shifts the debate away from the extraordinary concentration of wealth at the very top, and towards more general fears about where taxation might stop.

But that \$1-billion threshold exists for a reason. Forbes now counts 3,428 billionaires worldwide. As per Oxfam, last year alone the wealth of billionaires grew by the total wealth of the poorest half of humanity. At that scale, wealth is not simply more money. It represents power of a different magnitude.

Collapsing millionaires and billionaires into one category hides that difference. They are not the same.

Instagram creator Kelsey Will explains it best: "If you were to earn one dollar every second, how long would it take you to earn a million dollars? Roughly 12 days. A billion dollars? Thirty-two years."

We checked.

Kelsey's maths is right. ●

**We live
in the
same world.
Let's read
from the
same page.**



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