

Bimonthly November-December No 6 (XXXIV)/2018

20 PLN (w tym 5% vat) | 10 EUR | 12 USD | 7 GBP

www.neweasterneurope.eu

New Eastern Europe

1918 THE YEAR OF INDEPENDENCE

ISSN 2083-7372

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The European Solidarity Centre

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The European Solidarity Centre is a multifunctional institution combining scientific, cultural and

educational activities with a modern museum and archive, which documents freedom movements in the modern history of Poland and Europe. The Centre was established in Gdańsk on November 8th 2007. Its new building was opened in 2014 on the anniversary of the August Accords signed in Gdańsk between the workers' union "Solidarność" and communist authorities in 1980. The Centre is meant to be an agora, a space for people and ideas that build and develop a civic society, a meeting place for people who hold the world's future dear. The mission of the Centre is to commemorate, maintain and popularise the heritage and message of the Solidarity movement and the anti-communist democratic opposition in Poland and throughout the world. Through its activities the Centre wants to inspire new cultural, civic, trade union, local government, national and European initiatives with a universal dimension.

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The Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe

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The College of Eastern Europe is a non-profit, non-governmental foundation founded on February 9th 2001 by Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, a former head of the Polish section of Radio Free Europe and a democratic activist. The foundation deals with cooperation between the nations of Central and Eastern Europe. The aims of its charters are to carry out educational, cultural and publishing activities, and to develop programmes which enhance the transformation in the countries of Eastern Europe. The organisation has its headquarters in Wrocław, Poland, a city in western Poland, perfectly situated in the centre of Europe and with a deep understanding of both Western and Eastern Europe.

Dear Reader,

Commemorating anniversaries is one of the key elements in collective memory and shaping national identities. This year's events surrounding the centennial anniversaries of 1918 are no exception. In the West, the Armistice of Compiègne signed on November 11th 1918 marks the end of the bloody First World War – a war that saw the use of advanced technologies leading to a mass number of deaths on all sides. In the eastern parts of the European continent, that year is remembered not only as the end of the war, but also saw the emergence of newly-independent states and the rise of geopolitical struggles which are felt until this day. For Poland, it was the rebirth of the state – for the first time in over 100 years, Poland was found again on Europe's maps. Other states in Central and Eastern Europe also took advantage of the chaotic times, declaring their own independence. Such was the case with Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan – all of which declared their independence, even before the end of the war. The independence for many of these nations, however, was short-lived as the Bolsheviks pushed their way into the remnants of the fallen Russian Empire. These are the stories our authors examine and we encourage you to join in their reflections as we seek the relevance of these lessons of 1918 for today.

Returning back to 2018, this issue of *New Eastern Europe* also features analysis of the situation unfolding in Russia – socially, economically and politically. An essay on Georgia's approach to its transformation by **Bakar Berekashvili** raises the uncomfortable question on the role that populist and illiberal forces may play in the coming years in that country. Meanwhile, **Piotr Oleksy**'s essay illustrates how Moldova has all but abandoned its pro-western path. The final section of this issue continues the debate on Belarus – started in the previous issue – with an evaluation of the situation from its closest neighbours and partners. It can be argued that one of the keys to unlocking this region's impasse may indeed be found in Minsk. Lastly, we would like to congratulate **Basil Kerski**, the director of the European Solidarity Centre and NEE's co-publisher, for being awarded the Polish Prize of Sérgio Vieira de Mello for his long-time work and commitment to the peaceful co-existence of societies, religions and cultures.

As always we would like to wish all of our readers a peaceful and joyous holiday season and New Year.

The Editors

Erratum: In the previous issue in our review section we indicated that the Polish Consulate in St Petersburg was the publisher of the book – Nieprzetartym szlakiem. Wspomnienia pionierskiej farmaceutki Antoniny Leśniewskiej (An Unexplored Track. The Memoirs of Antonina Leśniewska, the Pioneer Pharmacist). In fact, the publisher was the Polish Institute in St Petersburg.

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EDITOR AND PUBLISHER

The Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College
of Eastern Europe in Wrocław
office@kew.org.pl, www.kew.org.pl



Zamek Wojnowice
ul. Zamkowa 2, 55-330 Wojnowice, Poland

CO-EDITOR

European Solidarity Centre
ecs@ecs.gda.pl, www.ecs.gda.pl



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LAYOUT AND FORMATTING

Małgorzata Chyc | AT Wydawnictwo

EDITORIAL OFFICES

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

European Solidarity Centre
Plac Solidarności 1, 80-863 Gdańsk
tel.: +48 58 767 79 71, ecs@ecs.gda.pl

Legal Services Provided by KOKSZTYS S.A.



KOKSZTYS

Circulation: 5000

Printing: Media Drukarnia / Studio reklamy (Będzin)
International Distribution: www.pineapple-media.com

Printed in Poland | Published since 2011



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Texts and opinions published in *New Eastern Europe* do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders, publishers and editors.

New Eastern Europe is co-financed by the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.

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New Eastern Europe is also co-financed by the Marshal's Office of Lower Silesia, Poland.

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The section on "Belarus in the eyes of its neighbours" is published on the occasion of the Minsk Forum 2018.

The project is co-financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany. Gefördert aus Mitteln des Auswärtigen Amtes der Bundesrepublik Deutschland.

The partner of the project is the Foundation for Polish-German Cooperation.

In Kooperation mit der Stiftung für deutsch-polnische Zusammenarbeit.



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FUNDACJA WSPÓŁPRACY
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The section on "1918 – The year of independence" is Co-funded by the Europe for Citizens programme of the European Union.



The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

The project is in partnership with WiseEuropa – an independent think-tank based in Warsaw.



WiseEuropa

The decline of the West and the joy in the East

Interview with Andrzej Chwalba, Polish historian and professor of history at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. Interviewer: Andrzej Zaręba

ANDRZEJ ZARĘBA: The title of your book about the First World War is *Samo-bójstwo Europy* (*The Suicide of Europe*). Suicide suggests a certain will and a lack of determinism. Hence my first question: What would have happened on June 28th 1914 had Archduke Franz Ferdinand not been assassinated? Would war not have broken out?

ANDRZEJ CHWALBA: There were many assassination attempts on many important people at that time. There was no month without at least one assassination attempt. In the months before 1914 there were at least a dozen successful attempts, including the killing of the king of Serbia, the king of Italy, the Russian tsar, two US presidents as well as many prime ministers. Based on data from Austrian intelligence, there were eleven attempts to assassinate Franz Joseph – the goodhearted and beloved leader. There

were attempts on Franz Ferdinand's life as well – the June 1914 assassination, as we know, was the successful one.

Would there have been no war? War was unavoidable because Europe reached such a level of mental and emotional preparation that it had to be released. The whole European culture, together with the European avant-garde, was supporting a forceful solution. Europeans had to spill blood as the continent was getting mentally old, not to mention the fact that men were starting to behave like women and Europeans were more and more emasculated. With the arrival of new world powers, such as Japan and the United States, this mental and emotional state was leading Europeans to a calm, but unavoidable death. For this death to not take place – a civil death so to speak – war had to take place. There-

fore, maybe it would have appended a few months later, maybe a year or two later, but everything was indicating that this conflict was to take place...

Yet this conflict went beyond the expectations of all sides. To what extent, in your view, was this astonishment? What I have in mind was the technological aspect...

Franz Joseph did not live to see the time, but he and his advisors had a good imagination that allowed them to understand that the oncoming war would be different from any 19th century one which were much easier to predict – one or two battles followed by peace negotiations. The astonishment could have been avoided at least that moment... And there were others who foresaw that the war would be different. Among them, for example, was Jan Bloch – an entrepreneur and pacifist whose works are still talked about and quoted today. There were also some officers (especially British ones) who at the time said the war could last much longer than a few months...

What did they base these opinions on?

According to the British officers and war planners, there was a military and economic balance in Europe, and Otto von Bismarck's construction had assumed the creation of a balance system that was perceived as well thought-out. However in 1914 representatives of the German elite began to believe that Germany had reached an economic and military advantage to fight for a new division of power, while Helmuth von

Moltke the Younger, who served as the Chief of the German General Staff, was convinced that war would be short.

In addition there was also a naval race on the sea, which was irritating the British. Considering this context we can see that Eastern Europe – here I have Russia and Austria-Hungary in mind – did not have much significance in the whole mechanism of establishing a technological base, which later caused terrible destruction.

In terms of industrial potential it was indeed dominated by three countries – Great Britain, Germany and France – but also the United States which at the time was still neutral and on the other side of the Atlantic. It was these countries where new technology was introduced the earliest – and it was the most innovative. They were also decisive in the outcome of the war. Russia's participation, on the other hand, was much more modest. But we need to remember it was Russia that invented the best gas mask during the war. In turn, it is also hard to imagine better mortars than those produced by the Austrians. The Czech military industry, when it came to the quality of equipment, was among the best in Europe if not the world.

In this context, the question of Russia is crucial. Did the Russians fully realise the threat they were facing? They had great espionage and yet the Romanov Empire was the first direct victim of the war...

They also had great resources – first of all, territory; second, a huge mobilisa-

tion capacity. The number of the tsar's subjects was almost twice the size of the number of Wilhelm II's. However the Russians believed in the end it would be British and French technology that would change the outcome of the war. Thus, we saw investments in Murmansk's naval potential and the unsuccessful attempts to neutralise the Turks to gain access through the Turkish straits to the Allies. Third, after the conclusion of the French-Russian alliance, western capital investments in Russia were impressive. This was a very attractive and absorbing market. That is why, in just two decades, industry was developed even though it was in enclaves, but it was very modern nonetheless.

And yet the still frequently repeated myth about the October Revolution is that of an agricultural Russia. It suggests it was the Bolsheviks and Stalin who built industry in Russia. But this industry was there before...

Around a quarter of a million people worked for Petrograd's industry. The Putilov Company, for example, employed between 12,000–13,000 people during the war. Their field cannons were comparable in quality to the best western artillery that was used in the Second World War. The Russians believed that industry sustained by modern technology would be able to produce as much as was needed for the three or four months of the planned military action. The question is whether some very serious weaknesses were taken into consideration?

Such as?

First of all, the level of literacy.

How high was it among the recruits?

Among the recruits, on average one in three could read. However the generation of 18–20 year-olds had a higher level of literacy than their grandparents. Unfortunately before 1914, there was no census in Russia and we only have data from the 1897 census.

And the second problem?

The second more serious problem was that Russia paid a huge price for its railway system. Helmuth von Moltke Senior once said that rails will win the war. And indeed Germany created a dense railway network that was a huge advantage during the war. Located in the centre of Europe, they could transfer soldiers to any place thanks to this system. Russian railways were very thin. The negative outcome of that was, for example, the 1917 February Revolution when food could not be delivered from the south of Russia to Petrograd and people were starving. During the war, Russia also had a shortage of trains. While Germans would go to war in trains, at least to the border with Russia, Russian troops often marched on foot to the front.

When did Russia begin to notice Germany's advantage?

Fairly quickly – as a matter of fact, in 1914 after the lost Battle of Tannenberg and the First Battle of the Masurian Lakes. From that time on, Russian

troops would unwillingly attack German forces. They were more eager to attack Austro-Hungarian troops as they had a better chance for victory, especially as in 1914 they had a lot of success in Galicia. They were also not happy since 1915–1916 when they attacked the Polish Legions that – in their view – were the best troops on the Eastern Front.

After the war a book titled *The Decline of the West*, authored by Oswald Spengler, was published. Spengler was called a prophet, yet it is not too difficult to be a prophet after such an event took place. What, in your opinion, was the situation in Eastern Europe, in the context of Spengler's announcement of the decline of the West? Was the East part of the West until war broke out?

For Spengler, or for Germans, the East was the East. Russia was a separate civilisation and a separate culture. Spengler and others claimed that war was to revive (and a short war could indeed do that) what was wasted. The war was to make Europeans stronger, both spiritually and militarily, but it led to their psychological and emotional demilitarisation. Hence, there was an increase in pacifism, which was there before the war but did not have much meaning. And it is difficult to understand the history of 1930, including appeasement, without understanding what the First World War was about and how it changed people's minds and convinced them to be defensive and not offensive. On the other hand, it turned out that a broken Europe was a chance for future

totalitarian regimes such as Germany and Russia. Their leaders came to the conclusion that the existing liberal model of power was ineffective. After nations showed that they can say "no" – where the people can debate and vote – they realised they had to take full control of human and material resources; assuming that, in this way, they could save civilisation – namely, the Bolshevik or the German race. A change from an economy of peace to war turned out much easier in totalitarian states where there is no room for discussion. In Soviet Russia a system of total control was established with the aim to save the country from the "decaying West". Let me add that this phrase was not coined in the 1950s, but as early as the 1920s.

However, Great Britain rose up, but France did not...

But Great Britain was not the same Great Britain. It was not the great empire it was before, as the signal that it could also lose reached the minds of the elite in the colonies. This was a psychological change. Spengler's *The Decline of the West* was an intellectual provocation but the amount and quality of discussion it generated proved that Spengler addressed the true problems that existed in Belgium, France, Scandinavia, and Spain. Also in England, although to a lesser degree...

Speaking still about Russia, do you think there was still a chance for democratisation in 1917?

Did Russia have a chance to democratise? Every answer is possible because our conversation is about alternative history. Russia could have probably become democratised had it not been for the Bolsheviks. Yet on the other hand, this new Russia, with its ambition to create a civil and liberal order which emerged after the fall of the tsar, was weak. Alexander Kerensky or Prince Georgy Yevgenyevich Lvov were not politicians who would get enough esteem to introduce comprehensive change, especially as the timing was so unfavourable; the war was still taking place and people were starving.

And the tsar was still alive... Couldn't the elite have said: "Dear Nicholas, we are sorry..."?

The generals and monarchists, of course, wanted a return to tsarist Russia, but not with Nicholas II. The problem was that the tsar had lost and he was not a good candidate for the monarchists. He signed the act of abdication and after that, knowing him, no matter what we say about him he was a man of honour; he surely would not have wanted to return to power. His son, who was seriously ill, could not do that either. Maybe one of the cousins... But the future of Russia was dependant on a leader who would first get Russia out of the war. Kerensky and his people wanted to continue the war, which was irresponsible. But it was the British and the French who, to a great degree, were responsible for the pro-war policy of the Russian Provisional Government.



Photo: Janusz Jabłoński/Wydawnictwo Literacki

Kerensky opted for an offensive in a situation where the rank and file soldiers were murdering the officers, when the Russian army was being demoralised by the Bolsheviks who were calling for peace, and when the power of the individual regiments and divisions was being taken over by the revolutionary councils. Kerensky could count on the newly established Polish I Corps in Russia and the Czechoslovak legions, which were the best formations in the East. Yet for success this was not enough. In this way, it

was impossible to implement democratisation. Had there been a deep liberalisation in Russia after 1906 with significant limits to the monarch's power and assurance of the government's responsibility to the Duma, then maybe the Bolsheviks would not have taken power.

The idea that Europe after 1918 was in a better position to build democracy also does not encourage a positive answer to the question about the chances of democracy in Russia. The truth is that in some European countries, democratic systems were completely destroyed, while in others they were significantly limited. We saw autocratic tendencies grow in Central and Eastern Europe as well as the victory of totalitarian regimes. Even when states put on the democratic costume, it did not necessarily mean their societies were willing to fully embrace democracy. Millions of Russians were also not ready for a functioning democratic system, because of low levels of education and high levels of illiteracy. It is difficult to build democracy with people who do not understand basic political categories such as constitution, power, state, division of power, etc. Even when they can put letters together to form sentences, they still do not understand the world as they have not seen much outside their communities.

This suggests that the Bolshevik Revolution was unavoidable.

Considering the facts, yes. Kerensky's Provisional Government was too weak to counteract preparations for a mili-

tary coup and Kerensky himself did not want to use drastic methods to demand obedience.

He would have to start killing...

Exactly and this is not what he wanted as he thought of himself as a democrat. A people's man.

However, without Lenin and this complete political deconstruction, was any other form of political arrangement possible for Russia?

This is a difficult question to answer because, again, we are entering the waters of alternative history. Certainly, the decomposition of the Russian state was an opportunity for the Bolsheviks. That is why in the years 1914–1915 Lenin did not have much chance to start a revolution. He had to wait for momentum. The February Revolution in 1917 generated the energy of the masses and helped a lot. Yet, later came a time of anarchy and chaos. The greater the mess, the higher the chances of the Bolsheviks to gain power. Their seizure of power in the councils (soviets) and the army, the creation of the secret units of the Red Army gave the Bolsheviks an advantage over the Provisional Government before the revolution broke out. Thus, the revolution was just the icing on the cake. In the autumn the government had no control over the problem it, to some degree, generated. That is why the Bolshevik takeover of power in November 1917 was not a complicated operation. It was much harder to maintain it.

Russian historical policy today is based on the thesis that had there not been the bad Bolsheviks, the Christian-Tsarist order would have survived.

Such significant events like a revolution greatly depend on its leaders. This was the case with the French and English revolutions. The revolutionary process has to be set off, but the leader has to have the tools available. At the same time, he or she needs to know that the situation is mature enough – this is something the leader needs to determine. Of course, it just happens to be the case that someone like Lenin was born in Russia and was gifted with strategic talent. He knew the right moment to take power. In the political bureau of the Bolshevik party, there were differences in opinions: should there be a revolution or not, even though power was there for the taking.

The Bolshevik revolution was not made by millions of people. It was a Blanqui-style revolution. A few professional revolutionaries obtained power from the state. They hung red flags and announced the establishment of a new state. Millions of people just accepted it, believing that Lenin saved Russia from anarchy and a war of all against all. The revolution, and personally Lenin, also received help from Germany, which allowed him and his colleagues to return to Russia through Germany and to develop, with German financial support, active revolutionary propaganda which was to destroy the Russian state and army from within.

But perhaps without this mess there would not have been an opportunity for countries like Poland to regain independence?

Indeed a vacuum emerged in Central and Eastern Europe, and somebody had to fill this vacuum after the Austrians retreated. It would have been a disgrace if we had not used this opportunity, as we would have acted to our own disadvantage, just like other nations in our region.

In other words, the collapse of empires was a necessary condition for the independence of countries like Poland, Czechoslovakia and Ukraine?


The collapse of the Habsburg Empire and the problems in Russia created a favourable environment for the nations of “our” Europe. That is why it was possible to build a new political architecture.

Let us imagine there was no war. The Russian Empire and the Habsburg Empire survived. Would it have been possible, then, to create some kind of conditions to negotiate and discuss the Polish question?

Most likely, no. The Poles were not a subject in international relations, neither were the Czechs, nor the Slovaks, nor the Lithuanians or the Finns. If the future of the continent had been decided by one of the major powers of Europe, they would not have wanted significant changes as it was simply not in their interest. The 1815 Vienna System had indeed failed, but the idea that a large power decides what happens in Europe remained. As a result, there was no room for such

dreamers like Józef Piłsudski had the war not taken place.

This is probably why there was a fundamental difference in interpretations of the war in the East and the West. The memory of Western Europe is a tragic one.

Yes, that is why later on pacifism became popular in France, while the war, despite the destruction, was celebrated in the East. It was a joy for the people who lived in mud huts. The people understood the value of having their own state. 

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

Andrzej Chwalba is a Polish historian and a professor of history at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. He has written dozens of books on early 20th century history in Central and Eastern Europe, including *Samobójstwo Europy. Wielka Wojna, 1914–1918* (*The Suicide of Europe: The Great War, 1914–1918*).

Andrzej Zaręba is completing his PhD in military history at the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Kraków. He is also the illustrator for *New Eastern Europe*.

More than independence

Poland and 1918

ADAM BALCER

After the First World War Poland regained its independence. At the same time, **it failed to recreate its former state**, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and reconstruct a map of western Eurasia.

In 1918 a newly independent Poland appeared on Europe's stage with a complex and ambitious vision to rebuild the western parts of the former Russian Empire. The new opportunities that Poland saw were a result of Germany and Russia's defeat in the First World War. Poland, seeing a geopolitical vacuum in the East, came up with three visions. The first was a recreation of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth through a federation of Poland, Belarus and Lithuanian (and maybe Latvia) that would be closely allied with an independent Ukraine. The second vision, called Prometheism, was the liberation of non-Russian nations. At a later stage it was also to offer support to non-communist Russian left groups. The third vision, Intermarium, foresaw co-operation among the newly independent states located between the Baltic, the Black and possibly the Adriatic Seas.

Historical roots

In the years 1918–1921 these visions became the foundation of Józef Piłsudski's foreign policy. Before 1918 Piłsudski, who is widely considered to be the father of Poland's independence and was affiliated with the Polish Socialist Party, was convinced that imperial Russia should be seen as the biggest threat to Polish independence, no matter who the ruling elite. After 1918 Piłsudski had hoped that a

reconstruction of western Eurasia would bring about a guarantee of Poland's independence. His view was opposed by Roman Dmowski, the leader of the National Democracy – a nationalist party propagating a vision of Poland as a regional power dominated by ethnic Poles. Unlike Piłsudski, before the First World War Dmowski treated Russia as a potential ally against Germany, which he believed was Poland's greatest enemy. The rivalry between the two politicians and their visions dominated Polish politics from the end of the 19th century and well into the 20th century.

The ideas promoted by Piłsudski – mostly associated with the Second Polish Republic which lasted from 1918 until 1939 – were deeply rooted in pre-modern Poland. The concept of a Lithuanian-Polish federation was inspired by the 1386–1569 dynastic union as well as the later Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth which lasted from 1569 to 1795. The latter was a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state, one that hosted also Muslim Tatars on its territory – quite unusual for a Christian state at that time. However the Commonwealth gradually became dominated by Catholic Poles.

The concept of Intermarium was also linked to the experience of the Commonwealth and, especially, the Lithuanian dynasty of the Jagiellonians, who ruled Poland and Lithuania from 1386 to 1569. In fact, the term Intermarium (in Polish *Międzymorze*, meaning in between the seas) was first used in 1564 in a poem by the great Polish poet, Jan Kochanowski. It was used to describe the state's location between the Baltic and the Black seas, Poland's and Lithuania's territorial reach between the early 15th century and the 16th century. For Kochanowski it was a symbol of their greatness. It is worth adding that at the turn of the 16th century the Jagiellonian dynasty also ruled the Kingdom of Bohemia and the Hungarian Kingdom which had access to the Adriatic.

Intermarium was also an attempt to establish an anti-Moscow alliance, which would include states located on the North-South axis, between the Baltic and Black Seas. It included at different periods Lithuania-Poland, Sweden, the Duchy of Livonia, the Crimean Khanate and the Ottoman Empire. The belief that Poland's power came from its vast territory stretching between seas became an element of national identity after Poland lost independence in 1795. It was based on the prophecy of the legendary Cossack Wernyhora, who foresaw Poland's rebirth. However in this prophecy the key role was to be played by...Islamic Turkey.

Prometheism

Prometheism, as the name suggests, was a vision inspired by Prometheus, who was chained to a rock in the Caucasus for stealing fire and giving it to humanity.

As a foreign policy concept, Prometheism assumed the liberation of non-Russian nations from the oppression of Tsarist rule. These nations were then to become brothers in arms, despite their religious and ethnic differences. In their fight they were to be supported by Russia's neighbours.

The term Prometheism was coined in the interwar period, but its roots date back to the early 18th century when two Ukrainian Cossack hetmans – Ivan Mazepa and Pylyp Orylyk – started to co-operate with Sweden, Poland, the Crimean Khanate and the Ottoman Empire, as well as the mountaineers of the Northern Caucasus, the Volga Tatars, Bashkirs and Don Cossacks. In the 19th century this tradition was carried on by Polish political emigration, led by Prince Adam Czartoryski. He invoked a concept of different rings for opposing Russian imperialism. Two of them were within Russia and included Ukraine, Don Cossacks, Latvia and Estonia (the first ring) as well as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (as it existed before Poland's partitions), Finland, Tatars, Northern Caucasus and Central Asia (the second ring). The external ring was made up of the Russian empire's neighbours: Sweden, Austria and Turkey.

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Piłsudski and his party further developed this idea at the turn of the 20th century, believing that ethnic heterogeneity of the Russian empire was its Achilles' heel. According to him the division of Russia along ethnic lines should constitute a key goal for Poland. To achieve this Piłsudski used slogans of the social revolution which erupted in Russia and also reached Polish lands. The revolution, in his view, could bring about a complete collapse of the Russian empire. As a result, "independent states would emerge, including a Polish-Lithuanian state, a Latvian, an Estonian, a Finnish, an Armenian and maybe even a Tatar state. All of these states were to form a union which would squeeze and suffocate Moscow."

The concepts of Intermarium and Prometheism were interconnected. The former foresaw Poland as a power "from sea to sea" that would compete with Russia over dominance in Eastern Europe. The latter foresaw the breaking up of Russia, which would take place as a result of uprisings of non-Russian nations living in the empire, and that would be led by Poland. Both made references to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which was idealised by Poles. Poland was seen as predisposed for the position of leader since its own Tatar minority could assist in the plight of the Russian Muslims who, at that time, were one of the largest Muslim communities in the world.

Piłsudski's support for Intermarium and Prometheism was a reflection of his biography. His family came from Lithuania's most Lithuanian region – Samogitia.

However, born north of Vilnius, he was, since childhood, surrounded by Belarusians, Lithuanians, Jews and Tatars. His cousin became the wife of Antanas Smetona, the father of independent Lithuania. In the 1890s when the first national gathering of the Polish Socialist Party took place in a forest near Vilnius, among its five attendees were two Tatars. One of them was Aleksander Sulikiewicz – Piłsudski's friend and the party's general secretary. Not surprisingly, when looking at Piłsudski's support from the time they were implementing Poland's foreign policy between 1918 and 1921, there were some people who were more connected with the East because they were born and raised in Russia, Siberia, the Caucasus or even Central Asia.

Liberation and freedom

Shortly after gaining independence, Poland suggested to Belarus, Lithuania and even Latvia a "reconstruction" of the Great Lithuanian Duchy. In other words, it offered to rebuild a republic composed of three components (Vilnius-area Polish, Lithuanian and Belarusian). If Latvia was to be included, it could have been a four-part union. These republics would then become part of a federation with Poland.

The Polish political elite hoped that the main factor favouring co-operation of these nations was the Bolshevik threat. In April 1919, when Polish troops freed Vilnius from Bolshevik hands, Piłsudski issued a call, in Polish and Lithuanian, "To the inhabitants of the former Great Lithuanian Duchy". After the takeover of Minsk, calls were also made in Belarusian. In these appeals Piłsudski wrote the following: "The Polish troops, which I had brought here, to expel the rule of force and violence, to abolish the ruling of a state against the will of the people – these troops

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are bringing you liberation and freedom. I want to give you the possibility to solve internal problems, ethnic problems and religious problems, in the way you want them to be solved, without any force or coercion on behalf of Poland."

The Lithuanians, however, did not agree with the idea of a federation, seeing it as a threat leading to their Polonisation. Thus when Poland was at war with Lithuania over Vilnius (1919–1920) and the Polish offensive was progressing into Lithuanian lands, the war from the point of view of Lithuanians turned into a fight for Lithuania's independence. After the war, in 1920–1922, Poland tried to force Lithuania into a federation by creating an internationally unrecognised state called Central Lithuania (*Litwa Środkowa*) where Poles were the majority. In the end, Poland annexed Central Lithuania.

The Polish appeal to Belarusians ended with a bit better result; however the Belarusian national movement was much weaker than in Lithuania or Ukraine. Thus, a part of the Belarusian political elite supported a federation with Poland. To achieve its goals, Poland began creating military units with Belarusians who supported a federation. However other Belarusians allied with Lithuania while others supported the Bolsheviks. Interestingly, Lithuanians and the Bolsheviks wanted a federation deriving from the tradition of the Great Lithuanian Duchy.

Poland had greater success with the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR), led by ataman Symon Petliura – despite the war for Eastern Galicia in 1918–1919. In fact, a few Poles held key positions in the administration and army of the UNR. In April 1920 Poland and Ukraine concluded an alliance and began an offensive which led to taking Kyiv from the Bolsheviks for a short time. The Bolsheviks countered by moving deeper into Ukrainian and Polish territory. By the time the Bolsheviks approached Warsaw in August 1920, where they failed significantly, the Polish army had around 30,000 Ukrainian soldiers among its ranks – nearly ten per cent of its total field forces. No other country than Ukraine supported Poland's independence to such an extent at this difficult time. Unfortunately there is not enough recognition of this fact today.

A huge goal

For Intermarium, Poland's relations with Lithuania were crucial; and partly because the Polish-Lithuanian alliance would provide clear proof of Warsaw's ability to co-operate with the Baltic states and the newly independent countries of Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, the survival of these states was perceived as a precondition for the strengthening of Polish independence. As Tadeusz Hołowka, a Polish diplomat and politician at that time, presciently said: "Poland's independence would not be thought about without the independence of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, Ukraine and Belarus. Poland's independence is one of the displays of a deep process which is today taking place in Europe; that is the liberation of nations from political imprisonment. If Poland is left alone, if other states that emerged from Russia's collapse do not succeed, then we will have a sad future ahead of us."

Even more ambitious was the idea of regional integration put forward by Włodzimierz Wakar, a distinguished commentator who saw a threat to Poland's independence not only from Russia but from Germany. In his essay titled "The Jagiellonian idea in today's times", he claimed that Intermarium would lead to "the creation of a huge union of liberated nations that would be between Germany and Russia, which would prevent them from future conquests. As a result, they would



become tamed for centuries, would need to moderate their greed, and a just peace would rule over the nations; it would be from us that the Russians and Germans will finally learn to lead an honest national life. This is a significant goal that is worth working towards.” Wakar assumed that an “honest, just and free from ‘secrets and tricks’ Polish politics will encourage the newly independent states, starting with Latvia, down to Yugoslavia and Greece, to become united”. Clearly for Wakar, *Intermarium* was the biggest guarantee of Poland’s independence, which since the 18th century had been threatened by the presence of Germany (before Prussia) and Russia.

Soon after gaining independence, Poland proposed the establishment of a Baltic Union, which would be made up of Poland, Estonia, Finland, Lithuania and Latvia. Poland also played a very important role during conferences with these states that were also often attended by representatives of Ukraine and Belarus. For example, during a conference in Bulduria (near Riga) in August 1920, soon after Poland’s victory at the battle over Warsaw, a pact was signed. It stipulated that the Baltic states would be solving “disputes between themselves by peaceful means and not make any pacts against each other, not tolerate any activities directed against any of the agreeing parties on their territories, guarantee the freedom of ethnic minori-

ties and together conclude a defensive military convention". This pact did not enter into force, however. It was hindered by the Polish-Lithuanian conflict over Vilnius.

Yet Poland pursued initiatives that went beyond diplomatic ones. It established military co-operation with Estonia, Finland and, especially, Latvia. In early 1920 Polish and Latvian troops liberated Latgale (a south eastern part of Latvia inhabited by a large Polish minority) from Bolshevik control. This region became part of Latvia.

Southern ties

The most ambitious idea in interwar Poland's foreign policy was the attempt to put Prometheism into force. The biggest asset in this regard were the Polish-Lithuanian Tatars –recognised in the 19th century by their Turkic relatives as a source of inspiration for the processes of modernisation and nation-building. This shows that the concept of Prometheism included a notion of freedom that was also closely connected to the programme of social modernisation and the building of modern national identities. Therefore it is not surprising that the Tatars of the former Great Lithuanian Duchy took up key positions in the government of the autonomous Crimea.

Moreover, in 1920 the Crimean government in exile approached the League of Nations to establish a Polish protectorate in Crimea. After the Bolshevik takeover of Crimea, Lithuanian Tatars moved to Azerbaijan, which was the first secular democratic republic that legally recognised the equality of men and women. Crimea's former prime minister, Maciej Sulikiewicz (Suleyman bey Sulikiewicz), became the head of the military force, and established Azerbaijan's army from scratch. However he was murdered in 1920 after the Bolshevik's takeover of Azerbaijan.

Looking at Poland's relations with the Caucasus states during the interwar period, it is worth remembering that many representatives of their elite studied in Poland, while many Poles moved to Tbilisi or Baku for employment. While settling there, they had a huge impact on the development of both cities. Not surprisingly the father of Azerbaijan's independence, Mahmud Rasolzade, had a private Polish teacher, while his Georgian counterpart, Noe Zhordania, became a socialist during his studies in Warsaw, where he established contacts with future builders of independent Poland. Therefore, it should not be difficult to understand why in 1918 the parliament of the Federation of Southern Caucasus changed its name into the Polish "Sejm".

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In the spring of 1920 Poland sent a large delegation to Georgia and Azerbaijan. In Tbilisi, Polish diplomats proposed a military alliance. It included plans of shared support to start an anti-Bolshevik uprising among Muslim mountaineers in the Northern Caucasus. However during the visit of the Polish delegation in Baku, there was a Bolshevik invasion and the Polish diplomats were arrested.

Poland also established co-operation with Don, Kuban and Terek Cossacks who lived in the vicinity of the Caucasus. After the Bolshevik revolution, they also came up with the idea of building a common state that they would share with Muslim mountaineers from the Northern Caucasus and Cossacks from Astrakhan, the Urals and Central Asia. Those aspirations were partially linked with the emerging idea of Cossacks as a nation separate from Russia. Even though no independent federation of Cossacks and Northern Caucasus emerged, Cossack military units were created in Poland in 1920. Together with Polish and Ukrainian troops, they fought against the Bolsheviks. There were also plans to create a unit of Caucasus mountaineers to fight with the Cossacks in the Polish military forces.

The apogee of Polish Prometheism was Poland's support for socialist, non-communist and non-monarchist political forces inside Russia. In 1920 Piłsudski established co-operation with Boris Savinkov, a socialist revolutionary with Russian-Ukrainian roots. As a result, a Russian Army that was to fight against the Bolsheviks was set up in Poland. However, it did not manage to join the fight before the signing of the Polish-Bolshevik truce in October 1920. Nevertheless, Poland managed to train around 6,000 soldiers.

I am sorry, gentlemen

Between 1918 and 1921 Poland defended its independence and became the largest state that emerged after the First World War in Europe. However the Riga Peace Treaty, signed in March 1921 between Poland and the Soviet Union, marked a failure in Poland's attempts to build the Polish-Lithuanian federation which was to be strictly linked with Ukraine, promote the liberation of all non-Russian nations and build an Intermarium. The Peace of Riga meant that Poland withdrew its support for independent Belarus and Ukraine. Their delegations were not allowed to participate in the negotiations in Riga. In turn, Warsaw recognised the new Soviet republics of Belarus and Ukraine, created by the Bolsheviks. In fact, both countries were divided between Poland and Bolshevik Russia. This situation was perceived by many Ukrainian and Belarusian politicians as a betrayal. Such was the policy promoted by the National Democrats led by Roman Dmowski. At this time, they became the most popular political force in Poland.


As a result, Piłsudski could only say the following to his Ukrainian soldiers: “I am sorry, gentlemen. This is not how things were meant to be.” It turned out that history, contrary to Piłsudski’s convictions, was more of a burden than an advantage in Poland’s relations with its eastern neighbours. Since the beginning of Poland’s independence, Lithuania refused any kind of a union with Poland. At the same time, Poland’s harsh policies towards Lithuania, which included an attempted coup d’état and an attack on ethnic Lithuanian lands, raised concern among the small Baltic states regarding Warsaw’s intent. Quite often they interpreted Intermarium and the federation as an expression of Poland’s imperial aspirations and an attempt to impose its dominance over them. Russia succeeded at concluding separate peace treaties with all of the Baltic states, including a de facto alliance with Lithuania, undermining regional solidarity.

Belarusian and Ukrainian peasants, who were a decisive majority of inhabitants in Eastern Europe, were unwilling to accept the presence of Polish military forces and a provisional civil administration on their lands. The Polish army clearly supported Polish aristocracy, which had large land holdings and disregarded the non-Polish population in the administration. This situation made it very difficult to break the unwillingness of the Ukrainian and Belarusian peasants towards the idea of a federation with Poland. Piłsudski and especially people from his inner circle were concerned about this but they were incapable of overcoming the strong opposition of Dmowski’s National Democrats.

As stated above, the establishment of a Polish-Lithuanian federation in an alliance with an independent Ukraine was the basic condition for implementing the concept of Prometheism. That is why the failure of the former did not allow for the success of the latter. Despite that fiasco, Piłsudski’s policies had important long-term positive consequences. Without the Polish victory in the war for independence, probably the entire Central Europe might have been conquered much earlier by the Soviets. The Treaty of Riga together with the Treaty of Versailles established an international order in Europe which allowed several nations (Poles, Baltic countries, Finns, part of Ukrainians, etc.) to remain outside Soviet rule for almost 20 years. This situation contributed significantly to the strengthening of their national identities. Thanks to that strength they were able to survive Soviet aggression or domination. Today it helps them to counter the neo-imperial policy of Russia.

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As stated by the Polish historian Jerzy Borzęcki: “Even though Polish federalism was not the most popular, it forced Moscow to activities that were aimed at maintaining the illusion of Belarusian and Ukrainian independence. As a result it contributed to the establishment of the Soviet Union as a federation of republics, which included two most important ones, apart from Russia – Belarus and Ukraine.

It is worth noting that in 1922 the Soviet Union added one more republic: the Transcaucasian Soviet Socialist Republic (which was made up of Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan). The federal nature of the Soviet Union, though often only nominally, was different from the centralised system of Tsarist Russia. And in 1991, after the collapse of the USSR, it became the foundation for the creation of over a dozen newly independent states. 

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

Adam Balcer is head of the foreign policy programme at WiseEuropa, a private Polish think tank. He also works as a national researcher at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) and is a lecturer at the Centre of East European Studies (SEW) at the University of Warsaw.

1918 – A geopolitical catastrophe for Ukraine

YAROSLAV HRYTSAK

There is merit in perusing counterfactual history – which is not about what happened, but what could have happened. It allows us to reconsider simple questions and search for more precise answers. **Why the Ukrainian revolution lost** in 1918 is one such question.

When we recall 1918, within the context of Polish-Ukrainian relations, the first thing that springs to mind is the Polish-Ukrainian war for Lviv and Galicia. And this is only natural. This war has deeply influenced relations between the two societies for the decades that followed. As Christoph Mick described it in *Lemberg, Lwów, L'viv, 1914–1947: Violence and Ethnicity in a Contested City*, interactions between Poles, Ukrainians and Jews – until the horrors of the Second World War – developed under the influence of the memory of November 1918. Poles celebrated the victory and Ukrainians prepared for revenge, while Jews contemplated memories of the pogrom staged by the Polish army when it marched into Lviv and hence feared Polish antisemitism more than Ukrainian antisemitism.

War of all against all

But memory is an unreliable guide to the past. It is selective and treacherous. In this particular case, the memories of the Polish-Ukrainian war deflect our attention away from more significant events. Despite its decisive importance for the fate of Lviv and Galicia for the next two decades, the war did not carry strategic

importance for the whole of Eastern Europe. Much more consequential events unfolded further to the east in Kyiv. There, while the German occupation finally came to an end, the uprising by the Directorate troops – the revolutionary government of the Ukrainian People's Republic – was spreading against the regime of Hetman Pavlo Skoropadsky. This uprising was followed by a new campaign of the Bolsheviks against Ukraine. It started in January 1919 and marked the beginning

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of one of the most tragic years in the history of Ukraine, which could be compared perhaps only with the famine of 1932–1933 or the German occupation of Ukraine in 1941–1944.

It was the year of the “war of all against all”. The Red and White armies of Russia, the French troops, the army of the Ukrainian People's Republic (together with the Ukrainian Galician Army, which in summer of 1919 crossed the former Austrian-Russian border and joined the fight for an independent Ukraine after the defeat in Galicia), the great Peasant Army of Makhno (also known as the Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine, or the Black Army, Makhno's group was composed of both peasants and workers dedicated to establishing an anarcho-communist society – editor's note) and squadrons of self-governed warlords, confronted each other on the Ukrainian lands of the former Russian Empire. None of the armies had a decisive advantage. This made the military confrontation exceptionally bloody and tedious. It also presented a Hobbesian scenario where any sign of a functioning state and its monopoly on violence had disappeared from the Ukrainian territory and violence became universal.

The local Jews were the most affected by the horridness of the situation. They became victims of massive anti-Jewish pogroms, a practice that was implemented by all the warring parties without exception, though the lion's share was carried out by the army of the Ukrainian People's Republic and peasant atamans.* The mass character of the anti-Jewish pogroms, however, should not obscure the fact that none of the other ethnic or religious groups were spared from violence and that each of them had their own share of victims and perpetrators. Although violence was omnipresent, it also was spontaneous and chaotic. Yet there was still one military-political force that resorted to violence on a regular and systematic basis: the Bolsheviks. This was one of the leading – though certainly not exclusive – reasons why they became the decisive and sole victors in this “war of all against all” in 1919.

* Author's note: I deliberately do not provide detailed dates and statistics in order not to distract the reader from the arguments – except when it is important for the argumentation of the main theses of this article.

In the spring of 1920 the final attempt to force the Bolsheviks out of those lands, known as the “Kyiv Offensive”, was launched by Józef Pilsudski in alliance with Symon Petliura. This attempt almost ended in the death of the newly born Polish state. After a series of initial defeats, the Red Army pushed forward on the offensive and reached Warsaw. There it was halted by the Polish Army (again, along with Ukrainian forces) during the summer months in the battle that was later called the “Miracle on the Vistula”.

Counterfactual history

Getting back to 1918 and the Polish-Ukrainian war for Lviv and Galicia in the broad context, it was a local war with a marginal impact. Yet it drew back the forces for the truly decisive battles in eastern Ukraine. The Ukrainian Galician Army was equal to that of the Ukrainian People’s Republic (UNR) army in terms of numbers and significantly exceeded it in its organisation and discipline. Tellingly, among the warring parties it was the least involved in anti-Jewish pogroms. By all accounts, if the Ukrainian Galician Army (UGA) happened to be in Kyiv instead of Lviv in the first half of 1919, the outcome of the Bolshevik-Ukrainian war could have been quite different. In the spring of 1919 the balance between the Bolsheviks, the Polish army, the army of the UNR, the White Russians, the ataman squadrons, and the UGA was 30:21:14:10:8:17 (there is no data on the numbers of the Makhno Army). The factual unification of the UNR and Galician armies (formally they were in coalition due to the unification of the Ukrainian and Western Ukrainian People’s Republic on January 22nd 1919) would have equalised the numbers of Ukrainian troops to that of the Bolshevik Army. Then the fate of Kyiv would have turned out quite differently. In other words, if there was no battle for Lviv then, conceivably, there would have been no need for the Miracle on the Vistula. The Bolsheviks would have been stopped not on the Vistula but on the Dnieper River.

All these contemplations have nothing to do with real history. Nonetheless, there is merit in understanding the counterfactual – which is not about what happened, but what could have happened. It allows us to reconsider simple questions and search for more precise answers. Why the Ukrainian revolution lost is one such question. This topic dominated the interwar discussion among the Ukrainians in emigration. To simplify it out of necessity, there were two answers to the question, each influenced by partisan ideology. The socialist leaders of the Ukrainian People’s Republic explained the defeat by the underdevelopment of the Ukrainian nation crippled by several centuries of Russian influence. Their conservative and nationalist opponents – the latter were predominantly represented by Galician

Ukrainians – on the contrary, laid the blame on the leftist elite. They contended that instead of rigorous state-building, the UNR government resorted to socialist experiments and thus condemned the Ukrainian revolution to its defeat. The only untinged moment of such an interpretation was the conservative Hetman state of Pavlo Skoropadskyi in 1918. However, it was destroyed by uprisings led by the Ukrainian socialists at the end of the same year.

This discussion has also been translated into the works of contemporary Ukrainian historians. However they overlook or underestimate the underlying fact that 1918 was the last year of the First World War. And, hence, the fate of the Ukrainian state was tightly intertwined with the outcomes of the war. To demonstrate this connection, one example may suffice: the Ukrainian right accused the Ukrainian left of postponing the proclamation of national independence. The latter declared the independence of the Ukrainian People's Republic only on January 22nd 1918 in the Fourth Universal (the highest law) while the previous three Universals considered an autonomous Ukrainian state as a part of a federal Russia. If we consider this issue from a broader perspective, it becomes apparent that, among the so-called non-state nations of the former Russian Empire, Ukraine was not only far from being the last – it was the first – to proclaim independence. Lithuania did the same on February 16th 1918, Estonia on February 24th, Belarus on March 25th, Georgia on May 26th, Armenia and Azerbaijan on May 28th, and Latvia only on November 18th. All the declarations shared a common purpose – to insulate themselves, under the umbrella of German occupation, from the menace of Bolshevik aggression.

External factors

If the First World War had been won by the Central Powers and not the Allied Powers, Ukraine probably would have remained an independent state. Most likely, however, it would not have been stable. It would have been tormented by political crises and its government would have shown authoritarian tendencies. It would have had tough challenges with national minorities – as happened with neighbouring interwar Lithuania, Poland and Romania. Nonetheless if such a state did appear, Ukraine would not have had either the Executed Renaissance (Ukrainian writers and artists who were executed or repressed by Stalin) or the Holodomor famine of the 1930s.

Whichever path the Ukrainian national parties would have chosen, an autonomous transition towards totalitarianism would hardly be imaginable – not to mention the improbability of their decision to exterminate the national elite and peasantry, the two groups that were considered to make up the nation's founda-



Source: Polish Central Military Archive (CC) commons.wikimedia.org

Symon Petliura with Ukrainian troops in May 1920 in Kyiv. The final attempt to force the Bolsheviks back was launched with the "Kyiv Offensive" in alliance with Poland and Józef Piłsudski. The Ukrainian troops lost and the Bolsheviks pushed forward towards Warsaw.

tion. Bolshevism did not have prominent support in Ukraine either before or after the revolution. Even within the small group of the Russian-speaking proletariat, political sympathies were on the side of the Mensheviks – moderate Russian social democrats – rather than the Bolsheviks. Bolshevism was introduced to Ukraine from the outside at the tip of a bayonet. Eventually the question arose as whether the Bolsheviks would have retained power in Russia if they did not have access to Ukraine and its resources.

However the war was won by the Allied Powers. Its members more or less reached a unanimous consensus: they treated the Ukrainian question as an internal issue of the Russian Empire. Moreover the independent Ukrainian state had a pernicious image either of a German satellite or another leftist regime on the verge of national communism. Each of those images considerably reduced the chances of Ukrainian independence receiving international recognition. Ultimately the causes of the defeat of the Ukrainian revolution must be traced not only to its inner weaknesses, but to external factors. Ukraine had become a victim of cataclysmic geopolitics. It does not presume that the Ukrainian state was strong. Yet it was not seriously weak either. Comparative studies show that the 1917 Lithuanian revolution was weaker in terms of mobilisation than the Ukrainian one, though Lithuania became independent after the war while Ukraine did not. Among the reasons for that, one should mention the fact that the Lithuanian question did not have as much geopolitical weight as Ukraine. Firstly, it was not so closely connected to

the Russian question: it was easy to imagine Russia without Lithuania, but harder to imagine Russia without Ukraine. Secondly, the geopolitical status of Ukraine was determined by its vast natural and human resources and control over these resources was of great importance for victory on the Eastern Front.

Price of Independence

Recently, there emerged a consensus among non-Ukrainian historians that the fate of the military and political events in Eastern Europe depended, more than anything, on what was happening with Ukraine. This was the case during the First World War – and so it remained until the end of the Second World War. But the geopolitical catastrophe in Ukraine – and, in my opinion, for the whole of Eastern Europe – began in 1918.


I would like to end this exercise in counterfactual history with the conclusions presented by Alexander Gerschenkron in his famous 1962 essay “Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective”. Though it focuses on economics, it has influenced – and continues to influence – Eastern European historians. In particular, it was due to the fact that Gerschenkron, who was born in Odesa and worked in interwar Vienna, deduced lessons from our region’s past but applied them to a broader historical perspective, which crossed the line of what Bernard Russel called the “dogmatism of the untraveled”. The main lesson of the 20th century, according

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to Gerschenkron, is that the problems of the weaker, less developed nations are not only their problems, they are also – and to a greater extent – the problems of developed nations.

To translate this experience into the language of Polish-Ukrainian relations, it is apparent that the role of the stronger nation historically belonged to Poland. Despite this fact, Poland lost its independence at the end of the 18th century. Still, throughout the long 19th century (1789–1914), it was not considered among the stateless nations, as Ukraine was. This was mainly due to the fact that Poland managed to preserve its rather numerous political and cultural elite. The presence of a political and cultural elite is the main criterion for a state-like character of a nation. Polish culture was widely recognised in Europe, and its aspirations for independence in the 19th century appealed to many European governments and parties. And, moreover, no matter who would have won

the war in 1918, the Allied or Central Powers, both sides were ready to recognise Polish independence.

This was not the case for the Ukrainians. Their nation was rural and their culture was young and unknown to the outside world. By 1914 the geopolitical significance of the Ukrainian question was close to zero. They had to take their chances during the war and the revolution – but unfortunately, and ultimately, with deplorable results. When the Polish people celebrate the 100th anniversary of statehood in November this year – a much deserved and undoubtedly important day – they should remind themselves that their victory partially came at the price of the defeat of other weaker nations. National selfishness yields benefits only for short-term goals. In terms of long-term objectives, it brings more trouble than solutions. It is, surely, one of the main lessons of history – regardless of which scenario, real or counterfactual, we choose to examine. 


Translated by Margaryta Khvostova

Yaroslav Hrytsak is a Ukrainian historian and professor of history at the Ukrainian Catholic University. He is also a member of the *New Eastern Europe* editorial board.


Identity building after the rupture

Post-war memorials in Central and Eastern Europe

ARNOLD BARTETZKY



Following the First World War, a significant number of conspicuous monuments and memorials were put up in Central and Eastern Europe. More than just an attempt to come to terms with the trauma of the war, they were also a method of nation- and state-building. Consequently, it was associated with the **revival or invention of traditions** in order to stabilise the societies in the newly founded, re-founded or reshaped states.



The First World War was followed by the construction of mass number of monuments and memorials. In Central and Eastern Europe, however, the erection of new monuments was first preceded by the destruction of existing ones. In countries which had gained or regained their independence, symbols of the former regimes were removed from public view as they were associated with foreign rule and oppression. In Poland and the Baltic states, countless monuments dating back to tsarist Russia were torn down. In several cases, this happened even before the end of the war and the establishment of independence. In Warsaw, for example, the statue of Governor Ivan Paskevich was dismantled in 1917 with the authorisation of the German occupiers who had arrived following Russia's withdrawal.

Demolishing old identities

After the end of the war, monuments erected during Russian rule were systematically removed by the new authorities in Poland and the Baltic states. Russian Orthodox churches were also destroyed. The most conspicuous example in Poland was the razing of the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in the 1920s which had dominated Warsaw as a symbol of tsarist rule and cultural Russification, while the Nevsky Cathedral in Tallinn narrowly escaped destruction. At the same time, in Poland's western regions, formerly annexed by Prussia, statues of German monarchs and political rulers were toppled from their pedestals. In newly established Czechoslovakia, numerous visual remnants of the Austro-Hungarian dominance were removed. One spectacular example was the blowing-up of the Árpád monument in Dévin, Slovakia, in 1921. The statue of the Hungarian progenitor had been a particular bone of contention due to its highly symbolic location surmounting a Slavic castle regarded as a cradle of the Slovak nation.

Although seemingly destructive in nature, the demolition of monuments also had a constructive aspect. By abolishing signs of foreign rule, it contributed to the construction of national identities in the new states and its symbolic impact was far greater than the limited effort required. In contrast, the erection of new monuments took a lot longer and was far more expensive. Moreover, in the years following the turmoil of the war, new memorials were not always a priority and some projects became very lengthy. Nevertheless, a significant number of conspicuous monuments and memorials were put up in Central and Eastern Europe in the interwar period.

Commemoration practices were shaped by different perspectives. As in the West, the war had been a traumatic experience in the eastern part of Europe. Numerous towns were destroyed and in many places the death toll was even higher than in Western Europe. But seen from a political perspective and regarding future prospects, the deaths were arguably not senseless. More than just an attempt to come to terms with the trauma, commemorating the war was also a means of nation-building and state-building. Consequently, it was associated with the revival or invention of traditions in order to stabilise the societies in the newly founded, re-founded or reshaped states.

More than just an attempt to come to terms with the **trauma**, commemorating the war was also a means of nation-building.

Ideally, the commemoration of war should help create a united country. However, in the predominantly multi-ethnic and religiously heterogeneous states, the identity models connected with remembrance mostly did not address the whole



The massive Mărășești Mausoleum commemorating war victims in Romania. The memorial project, which had been initiated in 1919 by the National Orthodox Society of Romanian Women, took almost two decades to complete.

population. They were exclusive rather than integrative. An example of this is the Mausoleum of Mărășești, an outstanding memorial for the war victims in Romania. It stands on the site of the victorious Battle of Mărășești in 1917 which played a central role in Romania's war historiography and commemorative practices.

Speaking to one group

The Mausoleum to the Heroes of Mărășești (*Mausoleul Eroilor de la Mărășești*), designed by the architects George Cristinel and Constantin Pomponiu, was inaugurated in 1938 after a construction period of almost fifteen years. It contains crypts with the remains of about 6,000 soldiers and a funerary memorial to General Eremia Grigorescu, the Romanian commander at the Battle of Mărășești. With its compact cylindric tower topped with a dome-like conical roof and standing on a massive, terraced base with rough stone cladding, the monument dominates the landscape and is evocative of a fortress. The frieze surrounding the tower depicts

the battle while the inscription above the entrance dedicates the memorial to “the Glory of the Nation’s Heroes”. The shape of the tower refers to the Tropaeum Traiani monument in Adamclisi, the most significant relic of the Roman presence on Romania’s territory, thereby claiming a national heritage going back to antiquity. But there is also a reference to the Orthodox Christian tradition by virtue of the cross on top of the tower. The Christian Orthodox character of the memorial is also underlined by the Chapel of Glory at the centre of the mausoleum.

The memorial project, which had been initiated in 1919 by the National Orthodox Society of Romanian Women, took almost two decades to complete, and for various reasons it did not always enjoy the full support of the Romanian government. Nonetheless, it played a key role in the official mourning and remembrance culture of the Romanian state. This was expressed not least by the presence of King Carol II and numerous state officials at the inauguration ceremony, which drew thousands of people from all over the country to the small town of Mărășești. Devoted to mourning and commemoration, the Mărășești mausoleum was also a monument to the triumph of a country whose territory had grown by nearly half thanks to the outcome of the war. Thus, the monument bore a nationwide meaning and message, but, as the historian Maria Bucur concludes, the nation of the multi-ethnic state was defined exclusively. This is expressed by the inscriptions in Romanian, the cross topping the monument, and the chapel addressing solely the Orthodox Christian part of the population. This tendency to more or less explicitly speak to only one dominant ethnic group of the state is typical of most post-First World War monuments in the eastern part of Europe.

In Slovakia, the memorial to General Milan Rastislav Štefánik on Bradlo Hill is comparable to the Mărășești mausoleum in its state-wide significance as well as its appearance as a monumental architectural landmark dominating the landscape in a rural area. Although the burial mound in the vicinity of the town of Brezová pod Bradlom, perhaps Slovakia’s best-known monument, is not strictly speaking a First World War memorial, by commemorating the Slovak military commander and statesman it evokes the crucial significance of the war on the road to national emancipation. As a co-organiser of the Czechoslovak Legion, which fought against Austria–Hungary and Germany, and a co-founder of the Czechoslovak National Council, Štefánik had contributed decisively to the achievement of sovereignty, albeit within a confederation with the Czechs.

After his tragic death in a plane crash in 1919, Štefánik was glorified as the liberator of Slovakia and even sacralised as a martyr. This was reinforced by the unexplained cause of the crash which fuelled theories of an assassination by an anti-Slovak conspiracy. Štefánik’s death was considered by many contemporaries a blood sacrifice for the redemption of Slovakia from a millennium of slavery.

The tomb near his hometown, Košariská, became a national shrine. It was designed by Slovak architect Dušan Jurkovič, who was already renowned for more than 30 soldiers' cemeteries he had designed for the Austro–Hungarian army in West Galicia between 1916 and 1918. The cemeteries were widely acclaimed for their original adoption of regional vernacular forms combined with traditional elements of sepulchral art and their sensitive integration into the landscape.

At Bradlo, however, Jurkovič referred to universal architectural motifs. The starting point for the memorial's design was the ephemeral funeral decor in 1919, also devised by Jurkovič. Even so, it was not until 1928 that the monument was consecrated. Štefánik's sarcophagus was placed on the large top surface of a truncated pyramid fashioned from rough stone and framed with four massive obelisks rising into the sky on top of the hill. The monument's archaic force and roughness are reminiscent of a prehistoric temple, lending a timeless significance to Štefánik's life and death.

More than symbols

It was not only the monuments directly or indirectly related to the First World War that were the focal points for identity constructions in the new states. In the Czech part of the Czechoslovak state, two pre-independence monuments in particular took on this role: the equestrian statue of Saint Wenceslas and the Jan Hus memorial. This was made possible by the relatively liberal nationality policy in the late Habsburg Empire which gave the national movements and the autonomous regional authorities, in various parts of the empire, plenty of scope for symbolic politics.

The monument to Saint Wenceslas, unveiled in 1913, commemorates the 10th century Duke of Bohemia, the Czech patron saint and martyr. It symbolises not only the thousand-year-old Christian tradition but Bohemian statehood. Due to the latter meaning, on October 28th 1918 the statue on Wenceslas Square served as the backdrop to the public proclamation of the independent Czechoslovak state. In 1929, the area around the monument was one of the venues used to celebrate the millennium of Saint Wenceslas.

The Jan Hus memorial on Prague's Old Town Square glorifies the Bohemian church reformer, who was executed at the Council of Constance in 1415. However, the monument does not primarily commemorate his significance for religious history. Since the 19th century, Hus, who had preached in the Czech language, had been venerated by the Czech national movement as a pioneer of national emancipation. His struggle against the medieval church was seen as a forerunner of the

Czech resistance to Catholic Austria and the dominance of German culture. The erection of the monument was politically highly contested, not only because it challenged the Habsburg monarchy, but also because Hus, being a heretic, was unacceptable to much of the Catholic Czech population. Accordingly, the Austrian authorities forbade a public unveiling ceremony of the finished monument on the 500th anniversary of Hus's death in 1915, to the disappointment of the memorial's initiators who had spent 25 years raising the funds for its erection.

The big ceremony at the Hus memorial was finally held a decade later when the Czechoslovak state commemorated the anniversary of Hus's execution. The involvement of the state drew some criticism and protest, mainly among non-Czech citizens as well as pious Catholics who did not feel represented by Hus and, instead, identified with Saint Wenceslas. Despite these conflicts, the commemoration received much support, not least from state founder and president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who was presented as a legitimate heir of Jan Hus. In her study of the political use and perception of Saint Wenceslas and Jan Hus in the 1920s, Cynthia J. Paces explores the antagonisms surrounding the two monuments, which represented two poles of Czech identity-building. In some respects, the disputes can be seen as exemplary for the period. As political monuments were focal points of identity-building in post-First World War states, arguments and conflicts around them were the rule rather than the exception.

The erection of the Jan Hus monument was highly contested, not only because it challenged the Habsburg monarchy but also because Hus was a heretic.

Division of remembrance

However, in no other state was identity building as divisive as in Germany, the once-powerful empire which had lost the war and forced to cede a significant part of its territory – feeling humiliated by the Treaty of Versailles. In the Weimar Republic, monuments were erected on a massive scale. In its final years, there are thought to have been more war memorials in Germany than in any other country in the world. While mostly initiated by right-wing organisations, agitating more or less explicitly against the republic, there were also memorials of republican or left-wing origin. Monument production hence reflected the political division of remembrance. Regarding the war memorials in Berlin, Christian Saehrendt coined the term “trench warfare of monuments” (*Stellungskrieg der Denkmäler*).


Neither civil society nor state institutions were able to agree on the erection of a memorial with a nationwide, unifying message. The clearest example of this inability is the failed project for the Reichsehrenmal (Imperial Memorial) for fallen German soldiers. Already broached during the war, in 1924 the idea for such a memorial was adopted by the German government which hoped it would have an identity-building effect on the country's traumatised, politically fragmented society. In fact, it had the opposite effect. From the outset, it proved impossible to agree on the memorial's location, and the animosities between politicians, state institutions and veterans' associations thwarted all attempts at reconciliation.

In sharp contrast with the plan for a unifying Reichsehrenmal project, another memorial was built with a distinctly divisive character. The Tannenberg-Nationaldenkmal (National Memorial to the Battle of Tannenberg), which was unveiled in 1927 after a three-year construction period near Hohenstein in East Prussia (today Olsztyn), had been initiated by revanchist veterans' associations and largely financed with donations. The project was contentious from the beginning. The succession of cabinets of the central government only supported it intermittently whenever nationalist forces had gained the upper hand. The memorial commemorated the victory over Russian troops in the (misleadingly named) Battle of Tannenberg in 1914. In the initiators' view of history, this triumph was part of the centuries-old struggle for German dominance in this part of Europe and, above all, a revenge for the defeat of the Teutonic Order against Polish–Lithuanian troops in the First Battle of Tannenberg (Battle of Grunwald) in 1410. In order to symbolically link the two clashes, the battle in 1914 was also named after the village of Tannenberg, even though the main fighting had taken place several kilometres away.

The monument's architecture, designed by Johannes and Walter Krüger to express the glorification of military power, had some aspects in common with the memorials in Mărășești and Bradlo, being another huge structure towering over the landscape in a rural location. It consisted of a massive, octagonal wall surmounted by eight towers forming a fortress-like ring with a soldiers' grave in the centre topped by a cross. The main architectural points of reference were Castel del Monte (a 13th century citadel built for Emperor Frederick II) and the prehistoric monument Stonehenge. With such references to the medieval Holy Roman Empire and an imagined proto-Germanic culture as alleged sources of the German spirit of strength, the Tannenberg monument followed some patterns of tradition-building developed since the 19th century. On the other hand, its aggressive, sharp-edged monumental forms were a harbinger of architectural developments in the Third Reich.

The Tannenberg Memorial could be seen as a monumentalised threatening gesture by the loser of the war to neighbouring Poland. Given this symbolism, it

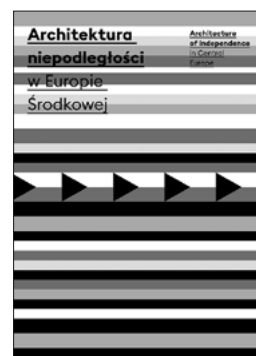
was for its initiators the true Reichsehrenmal. Nonetheless, in the early 1930s the German government tried one more time to revive the official Reichsehrenmal project. However this attempt was in vain because in 1935 Adolf Hitler officially declared the Tannenberg Memorial to be the Reichsehrenmal, fulfilling the desire of its initiators. At this time, the monument was remodelled and upgraded to serve as the last resting place of Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, who was admired as the victor of the Battle of Tannenberg, and after his death exploited by the Nazis as their forerunner and ideological patron.

The Tannenberg Memorial was a symbolic stronghold of the nationalist and revanchist forces which destroyed the Weimar Republic and paved the way for Hitler's takeover of power. Its elevation to Reichsehrenmal in 1935 signalled their triumph. Yet just a few years later, the Tannenberg Memorial was destroyed along with the Third Reich. It was partially blown up by retreating German troops in 1945. In the 1950s the remnants were removed on the orders of the Polish authorities. It was probably the biggest victim of a new, vast wave of monument destruction in the eastern part of Europe. 

The author would like to thank Bettina Haase, Frank Hadler, Nicolas Karpf, Greta Paulsen, Karin Reichenbach and Anna Reindl for their advice and assistance; and Chris Abbey for linguistic improvements.

Arnold Bartetzky is an art historian and architecture critic. He is head of the department "Culture and Imagination" at the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO) in Leipzig and an honorary professor of art history at the University of Leipzig. His fields of research include architecture, urban planning, monument preservation and political iconography from the 19th century to the present.

This essay is based on a text from the forthcoming book titled Architecture of independence in Central Europe prepared by the International Cultural Centre (ICC) in Kraków for the exhibition with the same name showing at the ICC Gallery from November 9 2018 – February 10 2019.



The failure of mapmaking and territorialisation of statehood in Polesia and Belarus in 1918

DIANA SIEBERT

For various reasons, the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty, signed on March 3rd 1918 between the Central Powers and Soviet Russia, was published without the agreed upon map. This insufficiency may have had dire consequences on the success of an independent Belarusian People's Republic, which was later overtaken by the establishment of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Belarus in 1919.

Why was the map of the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty neither published nor handed down? It was an integral part of the binding international treaty that was adopted on March 3rd 1918. Instead of a written definition of the border demarcation, Article III of the treaty contained a fleeting reference to a map in the annex. The border was drawn according to a map kept in the Political Archive of the Foreign Office in Berlin since June 1918 at the latest. The original map is very large, on a scale of 1:800,000, and allowed the territorial assignment of places that are only ten kilometres apart. However, this graphic representation was never used.

The non-publication of the map raises the question as to its influence on historiography and the extra-historiographic reality. Given that the Belarusian People's Republic (BNR) was established just a few weeks later (on March 25th 1918), the

question remains whether this act would have been bolstered by greater visibility of the Brest-Litovsk agreements, even insofar as it would have made indirectly clear that there is an area which had not been discussed at the negotiating table in Brest-Litovsk.

Finding territory

Those involved in founding states at the end of the First World War had already internalised the modern Jellinek principle that “a state needs a territory”. The creation of corresponding maps was an external expression of this principle. Both the Ukrainian People’s Republic (UNR, which was declared in 1917 prior to becoming a part of the Soviet Union) and the BNR took this very seriously and were more concerned about the size of their territory than with developing their state administration. It is striking that the territorial consequences of the Brest-Litovsk agreement in March 1918 between the four Central Powers and Soviet Russia have until now often been represented by imprecise and incorrect maps. This is also because the original map was not published. There are various reasons for this.

First, a Belarusian territory, as a political space in the Central Powers’ plans, did not exist, not even as a geographical idea. At the time of the negotiations and the signing of the Brest-Litovsk treaty, there existed the area designated as Ober Ost (formed in 1915). From the outset this was a territorialised *Land* established by the German occupying forces according to purely geostrategic criteria, an over-bureaucratised occupied territory governed quite autonomously by its commander in chief (the *Oberbefehlshaber Ost*). Ethnic or religious criteria played no part in the demarcation of its borders. On the contrary, the Ober Ost space looks rather like a geographical semicircle around Königsberg. So the question is what did the German Reich intend to do with those occupied areas of Polesia and Belarus that did not belong to Ober Ost? The answer is that the occupying forces themselves did not know. There are different names for this territory even today: Jerzy Turonek called it the “operation area”, while Uladzimir Ljachoŭski termed it the “rear administrative district”. The fact that the German Reich representatives had made no firm efforts at territorialisation of Belarus was surely because it simply did not exist for them as a political and geographical entity.

A Belarusian territory, as a **political space** in the Central Powers’ plans, did not exist, not even as a geographical idea.

The fact that the Central Powers did not recognise Belarus as a territory is contrasted by the case of Ukraine. There had been symbolic recognition of Ukraine

as a territory and the Ukrainians (Little Russians, Ruthenians) as a “people”, particularly in Austria-Hungary and to a lesser extent in the German Reich since the times of Bismarck, prior to the First World War and then even more so during it. In negotiations with the representatives of the Ukrainian Rada (as the government of the UNR) at the start of 1918, at the request of the Habsburg Empire, the Central Powers avoided negotiating the issue of Ukraine’s western and south western border officially so as not to question the territorial integrity of the Habsburg Empire in its pre-war boundaries. The UNR itself had given priority to expanding its territory from the outset.

About the future Ukrainian north western borderline there were, by contrast, official negotiations of two very different types. While on border demarcation in the region of Chełm there was a heated yet diplomatic debate among the Ukrainian, Polish and German speaking public, the border in Polesia was negotiated between the Central Powers and the Rada of Ukraine almost parenthetically. The negotiating partners were able to reach an agreement quickly over western Polesia, unlike the case of Chełmszczyzna. Firstly, this was because the third parties (Belaruskaya Rada, Soviet Russia) were very weak political entities in these times, and secondly because the negotiators for the Central Powers had limited knowledge of the geography and history of Polesia. Even the name “Polesia” was not familiar to the German and Austro-Hungarian occupying forces, so they called the west Polesian area the “Rokitno Marshes”. Hence, in a relatively relaxed discussion on January 19th 1918 the Central Powers agreed with the Ukrainian Rada and UNR on the borderline and established it in the treaty of February 9th 1918. Western Polesia was handed over to Ukraine.

Strategically unimportant?

Representatives of the hastily established BNR, which also laid claim to Polesia, now had to negotiate with UNR representatives on this region. But was Polesia really less important than Chełm? The Ukrainian Rada desired both irredentist aims. For the Ukrainians, though, it was not about Polesia, but about what they considered Ukrainian-speaking areas.

Similarly, the Polesia and Belarus issues seemed to be treated as almost unimportant in the ongoing negotiations between the Central Powers and Soviet Russia. In contrast to the question of Ukraine and the Baltic provinces of Estonia and Livonia, which were the subject of fierce debate in the German Reichstag, there was almost no dispute between the negotiating partners on the issues of Belarus and Polesia. The Soviet delegation recognised the February border in western Polesia,

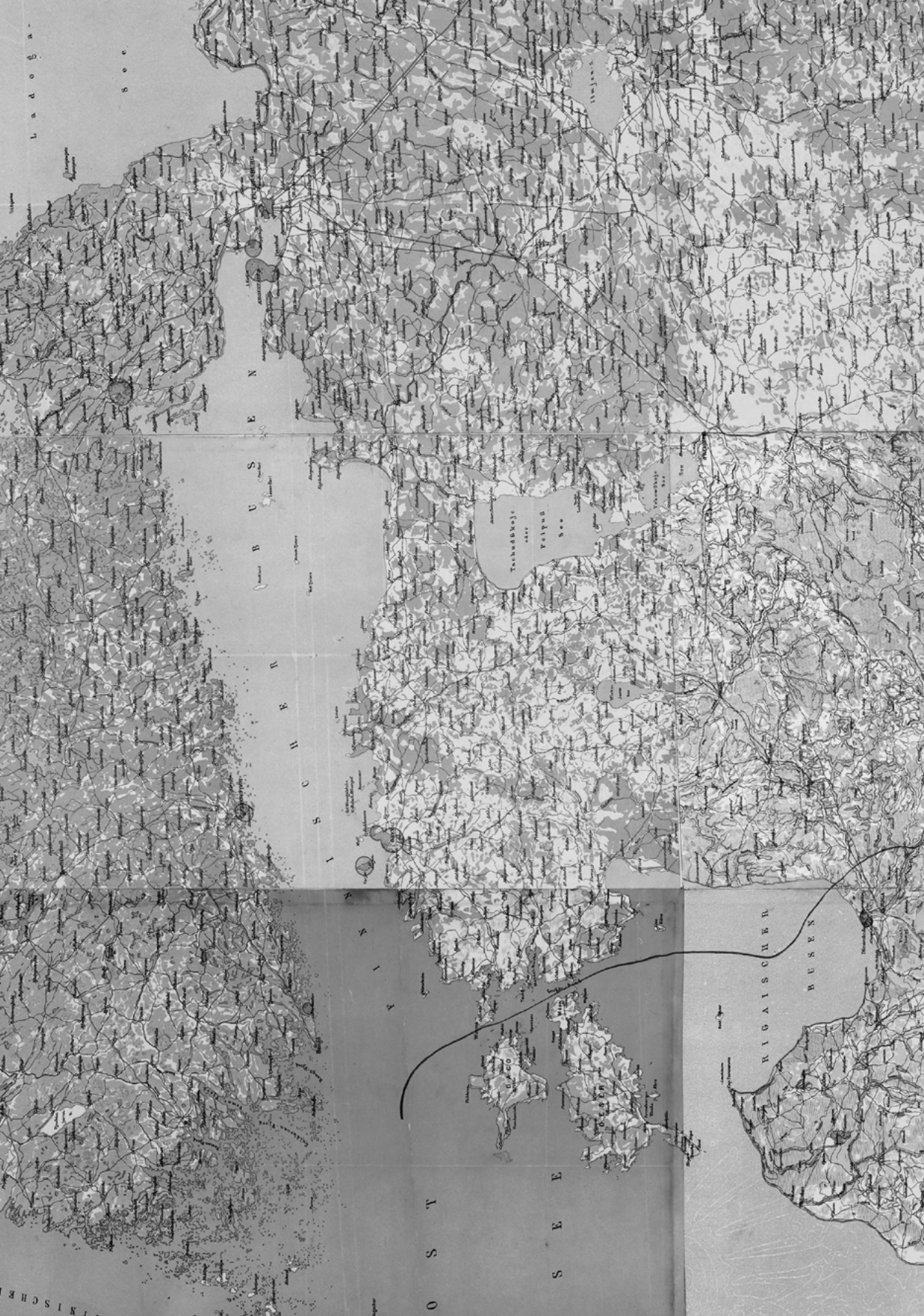
and in the March treaty there was a cursory stipulation that the UNR and “Russia”, as it was called throughout the contract, would have to agree on the course of the borders for east Polesia, and generally the northern and eastern borders of Ukraine. So the territories of neither Polesia nor Belarus were subjects of the negotiations as political entities. Thus, we could speak about the failure of territorialisation of both Belarus and Polesia.

Secondly, there was another important reason for the non-publication of the map: representatives of both Soviet coalition partners in Petrograd – the Bolsheviks and the party of Left Social Revolutionaries – placed little value on the territorial and geostrategic questions during the negotiations. From the outset there was an ambiguous foreign policy by the Soviets that was nominally designed to bring down the “old” dynastic as well as “new” republican states from below – from the inside, not the outside. It is known that the Soviet delegation in Brest-Litovsk used the public negotiations to disseminate their propaganda calling for world revolution. But the demand for peace without annexations (and contributions) sounded very territorial.

And yet, for the Bolsheviks at this stage, the right of self-determination they proclaimed for other countries turned out to be purely tactical: the party’s “proletarian” rule within their own country did not know self-determination. But now, as the borderline had to be determined and hence territorialised in the progressing negotiations, the Soviet representatives also agreed to define the “Russian-Ukrainian” border only as far as Lake Vyhanaščanskaje and to leave its course eastwards open. The negotiators also agreed in Article III of the March 3rd 1918 treaty on the border demarcation (as described above) between the two spheres of influence.

A third reason is that the provisions of Brest-Litovsk were embarrassing for relevant political forces in the German Reich. In Berlin it was clearly noted that in Estonia and Livonia different zones of influence were assigned to the mainland on one hand and their islands on the other. The map of Brest-Litovsk includes distribution of spheres of interest between Germany and Soviet Russia, but contrary to the Reichstag’s Peace Resolution in 1917, it outlined possible annexations – the Ober Ost region in particular. A look on the map proves this very clearly. Furthermore, the publication of the map would have shown that there had to be a retreat of the German Army from the trenches and a relinquishment of Belarusian territories around Njasviž, Baranavičy and Ašmjany, territories where German soldiers had been for over two years.

The publication of the map would have shown that there had to be a retreat of the German Army and a relinquishment of Belarusian territories.





Fragment of the original map from the Brest-Litovsk treaty.

Source: Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Berlin

More about peace than treaty

Fourthly, this map was extremely awkward for the Bolsheviks and the Left Social Revolutionaries who were also present at the negotiating table. Vladimir Lenin had not even submitted the text of the treaty to the delegates of the Soviet Congress, let alone the map. Yet, more delegates voted against the treaty than the number of the opposing Left Social Revolutionaries representatives at the Soviet Congress. But popular support for the contract was high. For the population in the ruins of the Russian Empire at the beginning of 1918, the word “peace” in the peace treaty was more important than the word “treaty”. Lenin understood this acutely. For the Bolsheviks – avowedly or not – the central notion was that “their” state was now diplomatically recognised by the treaty, wherever its boundaries with Belarus or Polesian swamps would be. The fifth point is that there were technical and organisational reasons for the non-publication of the very big and colourful map.

But why has the map attracted so little attention in contemporary discussion and why did it remain neglected by historians in the archives? It may be that the cartographic interest was short lived because the treaty had already been rendered invalid with the November 11th 1918 Armistice of Compiègne – which brought not only an end to the war in Western and Central Europe, but also the existence of new states onto a new Eastern European map.

Nevertheless the March 1918 map is relevant because the border demarcations arising from the *de jure* recognition of the Ukrainian People’s Republic and Soviet Russia by the Central Powers resulted in some territorialisation. The criteria for

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this were not linguistic or ethnographic. In the case of Ukraine it had been unwanted mostly by Austria-Hungary, and in the case of Belarus the problem had been ignored or not even recognised. The non-publication of the map was, so to speak, successful, because later almost no one in Germany or Austria – as well as in the Soviet Union – knew the location of the borderline specified in March 1918. So it was not clear to contemporaries, let alone to posterity, whether the non-withdrawal of the Central Powers’ forces after March 3rd 1918 in the mentioned western Belaruthenian area, and the advance of the German forces which began on February 18th and even continued

after March 3rd, was lawful or not, nor whether they should have moved out of the occupied territories in Belarus. This ignorance and the resulting inaccuracies continue into present day cartography and historiography.


Colonial paradox

The publication of the map from the Brest-Litovsk treaty would have provided visual evidence that the Prussian-influenced German rule was divided over what to do with the conquered territories. This was because there existed what I call the Prussian-German colonial paradox. Prussia had become great by increasingly exerting direct rule over its subjects who were less and less divided into estate entities – in a constitutional state without democracy. Prussia, subsequently Germany, had no experience with indirect or intermediary rule, with domination without annexation, as practised by the Western European powers from Great Britain to Portugal in their overseas colonies; neither did the Eastern and Southern European land empires – the Habsburg, Ottoman and Russian Empires with their partly direct, partly indirect rule over their adjacent “colonies” – provide a blueprint. This Prussian will for direct rule led to an unwillingness to establish colonies and thus even hindered the German *Drang nach Osten* into non-German areas.

While the *Oberste Heeresleitung* and the *Oberbefehlshaber Ost* wanted to annex their *Land Ober Ost* as well as a big border strip called *Randstreifen* in the then-northwestern Polish territories, the fractions represented in the Reichstag by the political left and the centre increased their votes for the creation of a German nation state to prevent trouble with potential ethnic minorities. In their eyes, the borderline of the March treaty, which carved up the ethnic homelands of Belarusians, Latvians and Estonians, could have caused only unrest within Germany.

Even the representatives of Austria-Hungary, experienced with indirect rule, had only one reason why they finally participated in the invasion of Ukraine on February 28th 1918: they did not want to leave the confiscation of grain to the German Reich alone. Other than that, the decision-makers of the Habsburg Empire did not know what to do with the country. A territorial entity called Belarus was not negotiated in Brest-Litovsk, and the Belarusians were barely considered a people. Ironically, it was this geostrategic (and, as I call it, geographistic) approach that made Belarus disappear because the region, which the Central Powers would have had to vacate, could remain ignored and unmarked in the German-speaking space throughout 1918. If the “White Russians” or “White Ruthenians” were mentioned in German publications at all, it was almost always merely as one of the many ethnic groups in the region. The BNR, after its establishment in March 1918, could be largely ignored in Germany not only for the familiar reasons but also because it went almost unnoticed by the public that the German armed forces did not retreat from, but reconquered a large part of, Belarusian territory.

The regime of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, subsequently the Soviet Union, capitalised on this situation. In recent historical studies the es-

tablishment of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Belarus (SSRB) in 1919 has mostly been portrayed as a concession, as a reaction to the declaration of the BNR. But moreover, for the Soviet Union, after the failed experiment of the short-lived Lithuanian-Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, the SSRB had become an ideological trump card over the Middle East and west European states. Belarus mattered. The reasoning for its existence was consistent with the Wilson Doctrine and the associated nation-state principle and it could be brought forward against the Second Polish Republic. It provided not only a justification but a significant ideological advantage in the dispute with the White Guards and the “foreign invaders”, as it did throughout the interwar period. The results in 1939 are well known. 

*The author would like to thank Felix Ackermann for
his assistance in the publication this text.*

Diana Siebert is a scientific associate of history at the
University of Siegen (and lives in Köln), Germany.



A Ruthenian peasant boy in Galicia, somewhere near the border to Bukovina. Circa 1917.

Photo-report: The road to independence

**Eastern Europe at the end
of the First World War**

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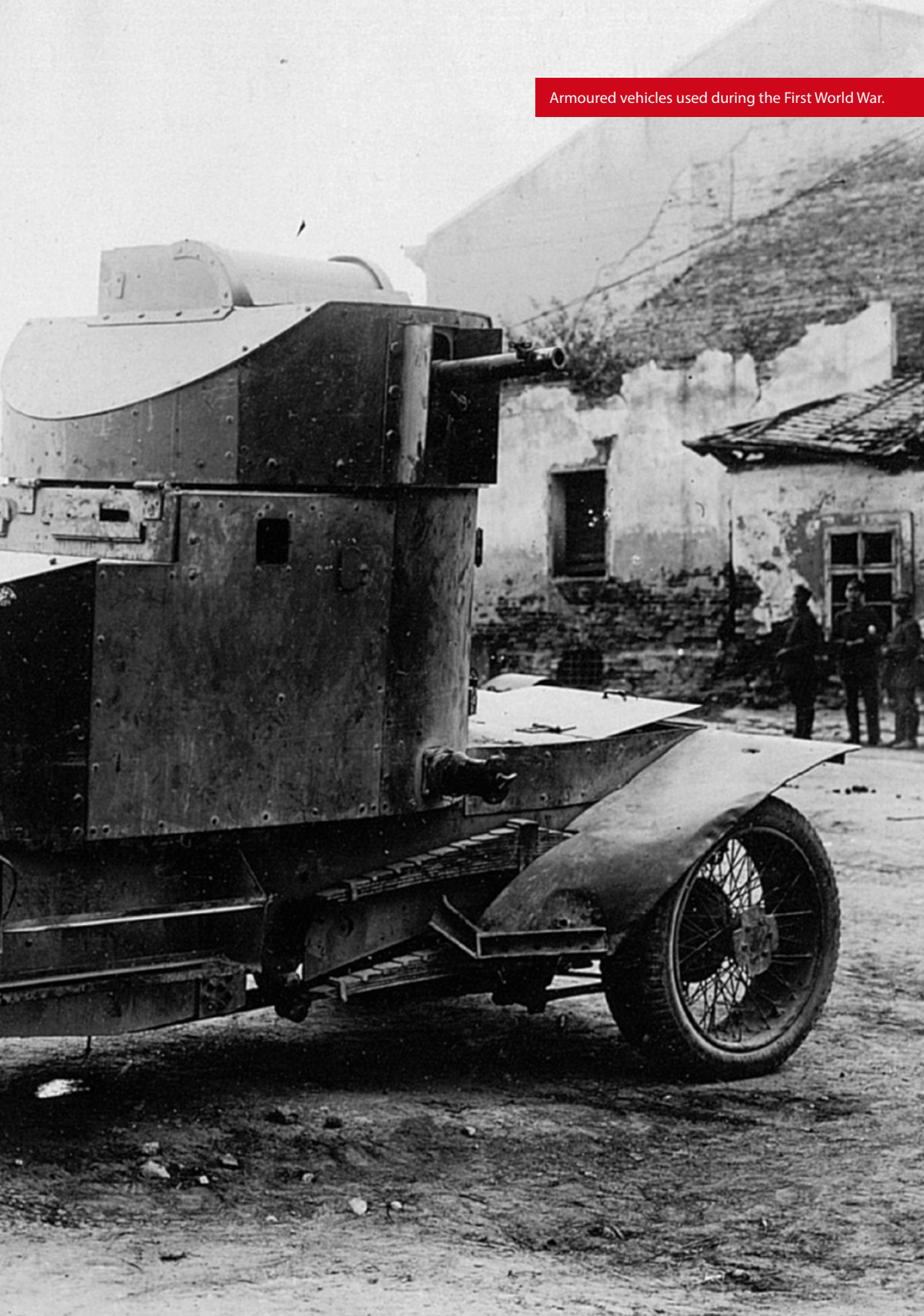


Graves of fallen soldiers from battle. The village of Twardosławice, near present-day Piotrków Trybunalski / 1916.





Armoured vehicles used during the First World War.





Ukrainian national dance performed by girls at a Ukrainian school – December 1917.



Mortar on a wet road near Brzezahny (present-day Ukraine).



What does independence mean in the Baltics?

KOEN VERHELST

The three Baltic countries are celebrating 100 years of independence this year. What kind of societies have they become in the last century marked by both **freedom and occupation**? Three creative leaders from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania reflect on their struggles.

Not a lot of countries are so often mentioned in the same breath as Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. When Pope Francis visited the three Baltic republics in September, he did not even need a whole week to set foot in all the countries. In recent history, of course, the trio have a lot in common. All suffered under Soviet occupation for nearly half of the 20th century, a period included in the 100 years of independence because they (plus the western world) never agreed with Moscow that the Baltics entered the USSR voluntarily.

One moment also commemorated in this centenary is the 1989 Baltic Way, the human chain where around two million Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians stretched the full 600 kilometres from Vilnius through Riga to Tallinn. To this day, older Balts will tell you, without being asked, that they stood in that very chain. Hand in hand with a neighbour, partner or a stranger that became a friend.

Growing independence

Even if the Baltics were officially independent, the years under communist rule left their influence on all three republics. No countries that were part of the Soviet

bloc have made such progress in democracy and life quality as the republics on the Baltic Sea. Since 2004 they have been part of both NATO and the European Union. And when Lithuania joined the Eurozone in 2015, that integration also was fulfilled. Slowly now, the Baltic countries are unlocking themselves from dependency on Moscow when it comes to gas and electricity supplies. The new Rail Baltica railway project, although marred by delays and infighting, is poised to connect Tallinn to Warsaw and slash travel times between the Baltic capitals and Western Europe.

On top of that, employment has increased, economies diversified and education improved. Local tech companies have sprung up to take advantage of savvy programmers and designers. Estonia is most famed for this, with the likes of Skype and TransferWise now global companies. But Lithuania is also catching up, most recently by opening what it calls a regulatory sandbox for cryptocurrency-related companies. They can build whatever they like, to be subject to rules only at a later stage. Latvia has its own startup visa programme and is slowly trying to pivot away from transiting Russian oil and gas.

The speed with which these changes have taken place often surprises visitors from other countries. Locals are not so much less impressed, but rather explain that this stems from a desire to finally develop after many decades of stagnation

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behind the Iron Curtain: not necessarily with a desire to be more like the Nordics or Western Europe, but to finally carve out a place of their own in a region that has for centuries been a territory where bigger powers clash. Where some smaller countries would despair in the age of globalisation, the Balts have forged onward; consider Estonia and its efforts to open up its e-governance services for the whole world by way of e-residency – an online identity card that grants users

access to banking in the eurozone and the possibility of maintaining their business completely online. In conversations with Baltic people, they will sometimes talk about “Europe”, as if it is an entity they are not really part of. It may show a relative isolation, but also their desire to finally do things their way.

Sustainable Estonian fashion designer Reet Aus is one of them. In her global industry, being located in Tallinn is the exception rather than the rule. “I have to explain so often why I am based here”, she says. “In some way, it would make more sense for me to live closer to where my products are made, in India for example.” This is because the Up-shirt, an upcycled t-shirt designed by Aus, is made from the cotton waste that Indian and Bangladeshi clothes factories would otherwise discard. It is sewn together from different coloured pieces of cotton to form an upward pointing arrow. Each of them saves 91 per cent water use when compared

with a t-shirt made from scratch; there is also an 87 per cent reduction of energy use and it produces 80 per cent less carbon dioxide.

The Up-shirt can often be seen in the fashionable street life of Tallinn. Aus has also opened her own boutique in the city, recognisable by its bright blue and white exterior. Even in the colourful and gentrified quarter of Telliskivi, it is a visually striking shop. Like many other post-industrial areas in Europe, Telliskivi has gone through a major change. What started with one café less than a decade ago is now the heart of the creative and techy culture. It hosts a theatre, multiple bars and the mysterious sounding Club of Different Rooms – the hippest conference space in the country.

“In the end, for me it makes the most sense to be here,” says Aus. “It’s at most some two or three hours from most places in Europe. It’s quiet, affordable and small. The beauty of a small country like Estonia is that most people are just one phone call away. It makes the place very flexible.”

Fragmented societies

Museum director Lolita Tomsone notes something similar about Latvian society: “Because I knew the curator at the Latvian National History Museum, we were able to include the stories of people that helped Jews by hiding them in the very building the museum is located in these days. Imagine how hard that would be if Latvia wouldn’t have been such a small country.”

Tomsone is famous in Latvia for several reasons. First, she heads the Zanis Lipke Memorial in Riga. It commemorates Zanis and Johanna Lipke, who helped 40 Jews escape the Riga ghetto in the Second World War, close to a quarter of all Latvian Jews that survived the Holocaust. The location of the museum, close to the Daugava River, is the very same one as the bunker Lipke himself built to hide the refugees. A reconstruction of the shed that covered the bunker stands right next to the museum walls, as does the former house of the rescuers. The outside of the memorial museum is made from the same tarred wood from which the boats of Latvian fishermen were built. Tomsone is also famous for her outspoken position on many issues in Latvia that draw attention – so much so that no less than three political parties approached her to run in the last parliamentary election.

“It also shows how Latvian politics is getting more and more fragmented,” she admits. “We even have big populist parties now.” Two requests came from progressive parties and one, to Tomsone’s surprise, from a new conservative alliance. Tomsone thinks the latter one was interested in her because she rallied all different kinds of people together in a successful protest against the cutting down of

old trees in Riga to make way for a controversial new tramline. “Suddenly I was campaigning with people that would be on the other side of the arguments in my fights for the recognition of Jewish history and the position of women [in society].”

She chose to stay away from direct involvement, all the while still amused by the requests. The last few years perhaps marks a break in that tradition. Latvia is starting to protest again and Tomsone is one of the more active figures in Latvian society. Not only protesting against controversial tramline, she also headed a resistance against a proposal to ban women who have not given birth from donating egg cells. “A lawyer that was trying to fight it said there was nothing to do about it anymore. But I thought: ‘I can’t let this happen.’” Tomsone organised protests outside the parliament, usually waiting in the early morning for members to arrive. It worked. The president refused to sign the law. Eventually, the requirement for donors to be mothers was scrapped. “For a long time, demonstrators had a bad reputation. I’d say this is because of the Soviet past, when you simply had no choice but to take part. The rule of thumb was that only freaks would march after it wasn’t required anymore.”

While the efforts led to a success, Tomsone sometimes feels frustrated by the conservative nature of Latvian society. She mentions domestic violence as an example. Thirty-nine per cent of Latvian women have, at one point, been victims of domestic violence – emotional, physical, sexual or otherwise. This is significantly higher than the 33 per cent EU average that came out of the same research. At the same time, only 64 per cent of Latvians think domestic abuse is unacceptable – the lowest of any EU member state. Thirty-one per cent consider it a family matter and police officers often tend to treat domestic violence cases as such.

Despite these worrying statistics, several parties that were running in the October 2018 elections explicitly stated they will not ratify the Istanbul Convention, which aims to reduce violence against women. One of the parties in government, the right-wing National Alliance, hired a law firm in 2014 to advise the justice minister (of the same party) not to sign the Convention, since it would, in their view, stop Latvians from honouring predominantly male freedom fighters.

All inclusive?

Inclusion is a topic that does not resonate widely in Latvia, Tomsone argues. She sees the celebrations around the 100th anniversary of the country as a good example: “It’s very Latvian-centred. In general, ‘we’ as Latvians think about our identity mostly based on ethnicity. Even if, for instance, Jews, Poles and Old Believers played a role in the country that we live in today.”

One self-declared half-breed, which is a reminder of inclusion in Lithuania, is Jurgis Didžiulis. The singer-songwriter was born in Bogotá, Colombia, but has been living mostly in Vilnius in recent years. “I may not be a millennial by age, but I definitely am by operating system,” he says in a fashionably low-lit Vilnius coffee shop. His mix of cultures sometimes confuses fellow Lithuanians, but Didžiulis has noticed that people generally have no problem with his Colombian side: “Let me give you an example. I say I am 100 per cent Lithuanian and 100 per cent Colombian. That’s still fine. But if a neighbour of mine would say he’s 100 per cent Lithuanian and 100 per cent Russian, that’s suddenly an issue.”

When it comes to work, Didžiulis is occupying himself less with music than before. In 2010 he represented Lithuania in the Eurovision Song Contest with his band InCulto. With a degree in marketing, he is now using his skills to give musical seminars that explore social dynamics in organisations. “Think of it as a mix of entertainment and mass psychology,” he says with a smile.

Perhaps more importantly, he has been working together with Lithuanians abroad and the government on ideas to convince the sizeable diaspora of Lithuanians to return home. More than half a million Lithuanians have emigrated in the past number decades, with the 2008 economic crisis being the largest motivating factor. Many ended up in Ireland, the UK, Norway and the Netherlands – in search of better wages.

Now that Lithuania has a booming economy once more, the moment seems ripe to entice them to return. Perhaps the wages are not yet as high as in Western Europe, but housing prices are still modest in most cities and there are plenty of openings in a multitude of sectors. Lithuania opens its arms for its lost sons and daughters.

Or does it? Didžiulis is critical of the place his compatriots may be returning to. “The focus is now mostly on the money side of the argument. That’s really tough when you consider Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Once you survive, a human needs purpose. The problem is not finding a way to survive here once people come back. If that were the main issue, they would be back already. These days it’s more about a loss of faith in society and corruption.”

What to offer the world

In Didžiulis’s view, those who emigrated are not likely to return if “the government doesn’t fix the Soviet background of our society”. When pushed to clarify that point, Didžiulis says: “Estonia has cleaned up in that regard. We still have to struggle with Soviet backwardness. The society is caught in between, more or


less paralysed, and the result is that there's not much dialogue about the issues of diaspora, who we want to be as a country, or what we want to offer the world."

Back in Tallinn, Reet Aus, the fashion designer, agrees that Estonia does know what it wants to offer the world. "Having your own company is probably easier here than anywhere else." A lot of others have also recognised this advantage and have applied for their own business papers here. With a keen eye for marketing, the government has launched a digital ID card that allows everyone in the world

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to operate a company from Estonia – ideal for any entrepreneur that hopes to enter western markets. It is an initiative that has served Estonia well. For one: the media attention around the initiative has been immense. "I was in Seoul last week," Aus says. "The only reason people there know Estonia is because of the IT sector."

Like in Lithuania, however, emigration remains an issue. Estonia may have advanced marketing teams taking care of its reputation abroad, but a lot of places in the country are not as appealing as Tallinn, or the academic centre of Tartu. Employment is still an issue in many smaller cities and towns and the young people that leave generally do not return. In recent years, wages have decreased in the westernmost mainland province of Estonia, while the national economy grows at a very healthy rate.

Aus's eldest daughter has just left for the UK. "She will study art curation over there. People continue to leave Estonia, and I can see why. In her case, there was no similar course over here. I would, of course, love to see her come back, but I think the chance is that won't happen if she chooses to have a good, international career." With a chuckle she adds, "Even my 11-year-old is already saying he wants to study abroad, too. I just think borders don't really exist anymore for the young." 

Koen Verhelst is a Dutch freelance journalist based in Riga since 2014.

He covers topics of innovation, technology, politics, society and defence in the Baltic countries, Scandinavia and Finland.

Note from the author: The centenary in the Baltics has also prompted me to reflect on the past four years that I have spent here, trying to understand three very different and yet also similar societies. Increasingly, I have become convinced the three republics are in a crucial transitional period. The strategy of focusing on economic development has been proven right because it has significantly improved the quality

of life, attractiveness to do business and integration with the rest of Europe. In more ways than one, though, these developments do obscure my – and my interviewees' – observation that the societies have a significant illiberal and dissatisfied component.

The transition to capitalist economies in the 1990s has ripped many families apart when the breadwinners could not cope with the sudden pressure. Less than 20 years later, in 2008–09, another crisis crushed the three economies into a deep recession.

Many people who started their careers in the 1990s feel like they have not felt the economic improvement in their own lives. A big portion moved away out of necessity, others stayed and to this day struggle to make a living – particularly pensioners.

With only a small presence of labour unions and often a weak judiciary system, the political elites are much freer to what they please than in other EU member states, perhaps with the exception of Estonia. Luckily, also here we can see improvements from north to south. The first generation that grew up after the restoration of independence seems to be keener to get involved in politics or civil society. Voters also accept corrupt behaviour of their ruling class less and less. They know very well that prosecutors will often not go to court on suspicions and that political repercussions are their only weapon to show their dissatisfaction.

Selective memory in the South Caucasus

JAN BRODOWSKI

This year is the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the **short independence in the South Caucasus**. Politicians in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan have used this opportunity to remind about the history of statehood and present their own vision of those times and the current situation. Sadly, what is presented today is largely distant from the visions for these countries 100 years ago.

It was a sad morning in Batumi. Noe Zhordania – the founding father of an independent Georgia in 1918 – was standing on the deck of a ship waiting for his departure. The beautiful view of the mountains towering over the Black Sea coast was probably the last one he saw before leaving his homeland forever. At that moment he was unaware, but the prospects of his return were not too optimistic. Just a few days earlier Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, had been conquered by Sergo Ordzhonikidze and his comrades. The head of the Red Army in the Caucasus enthusiastically wrote to Lenin that “The red banner of Soviet authority is fluttering above Tiflis. Long live Soviet Georgia.”

Zhordania did not expect that his farewell, or rather escape, would be tantamount to the end of sovereignty of the whole region. He would be the last head of state of independent Georgia. It was a disaster not only for Georgia but also for Armenia and Azerbaijan, three republics which became independent after the collapse of imperial Russia. At first the Georgians, Armenians and Azeris created a common state, the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic, which existed just 35 days. After the dissolution by the Transcaucasian Seim on May 26th

1918 Georgia declared its independent sovereignty. Armenia and Azerbaijan did the same two days later.

End of an era

This year we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the short independence for all the South Caucasus states. Politicians in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan use this opportunity to remind their populations about their countries' history of statehood and present their own vision of both that time and the current situation. What is the general perception of that period? Are the traditions of the short independence still alive in the hearts and minds of the people or politicians? One hundred years since this significant moment, the region today faces new challenges. Independent again after 70 years of Soviet domination, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are still in a transition process. And 2018 is also special not just because of the independence anniversary but also because of the ongoing political transition and political turbulences.

In the spring of this year citizens in Armenia showed a final lack of trust to the newly appointed prime minister, Serzh Sargsyan – who after ten years as president was unable to maintain power any longer. It was the end of an era. Amendments to the nation's constitution should have opened a way for the former president to take the post of prime minister. However there was, unexpectedly, a visible deficiency of social support for this idea.

Armenia is independent but the state is in a very difficult position in the South Caucasus region. What is even more important is that the social situation determines a lack of perspectives for many Armenians and the government is unable to adequately address these issues. There is a low level of political engagement from society and a high degree of apathy. The arrival of a new political star – Nikol Pashinyan – has brought a new ray of hope. Leading popular protests he achieved something that has been impossible for a long time – he broke the monopoly of the elite and forced them to redistribute power. In fact, the social pressure was strong enough to remove Sargsyan as prime minister, but the question of a general election remains open.

Pashinyan, as the new head of state, faces many difficulties and his main task is to focus on survival. His government has a minority in parliament, where the previous ruling party still carries a lot of weight. In this political landscape the anniversary of independence was a true opportunity for strengthening Pashinyan's position. "We have won and we will win in all the events when we will decide to win, when we will rely on ourselves rather than others, when we will not give in

before any difficulty, when we will love, love unlimitedly our fatherland and each other, when we will not attempt to tie our personal interests to our own people and the state, when each and every citizen will realize that he is an owner in his country, not a vassal,” Pashinyan said in his anniversary speech.

Drastic kick-off

This statement reflected confidence and optimism for future developments. Commemoration of the past was also expressed and strongly connected with the present: “The establishment of the First Republic was crowned with the proclamation of the Third Republic, was glorified with the victory of our people in the Artsakh War and gained worldwide fame with the non-violent people’s velvet revolution,” Pashinyan emphasised.

The new president, Armen Sarkissian, reflected a similar point of view. In his presidential address we can find both history and reference to the situation in Armenia. He stressed that “100 years ago, our people who saw genocide, and stood on the edge of life and death, restored the independent Armenian statehood with highest effort – declaring the birth of the First Republic of Armenia” as well as “today we must with special depth realise the significance of Armenian statehood. As a result of the latest changes in Armenia we have the chance of a drastic kick-off, and the required sufficient human and institutional resources are available.” Both politicians strongly highlighted not only the current situation but also the crucial events for Armenian historical policy – the genocide and the Artsakh War (Karabakh War).

Karabakh, as the Azeri say and its more commonly referenced name (which means Black Garden), is at the centre of attention both in Armenia and Azerbaijan. This long conflict has strongly influenced the political and social life as well as geopolitical relations in the region. It was no surprise for anyone that on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Azerbaijani independence President Ilham Aliyev would refer to the unresolved conflict in his official speech during the celebration. Aliyev stressed that: “No matter how hard the Armenians of the world have tried, no state has recognised the illegal Nagorno-Karabakh regime” and added that “two years ago, the Azerbaijani army managed to free some of the occupied lands from the invaders”.

In his speech Aliyev mentioned his father – the late Heydar Aliyev and previous head of the Azerbaijani Republic and founder of the ruling clan – 15 times. No one who was involved in the creation of the first republic 100 years ago was named. Even if this year has been declared the “Year of the Azerbaijani Democratic Repub-

lic” the main focus in the speeches has been centred on the legacy of president’s father. In Aliyev’s view: “Unfortunately, we lost our independence [in 1920]. This shows again that it is more difficult to preserve independence than to gain it. The flag raised in 1918 was lowered in 1920, but it was raised again by the great leader Heydar Aliyev at a session of the Nakhchivan Supreme Majlis 70 years later.”

This quotation is one of several concerning the role of the former president in Azerbaijan’s history. It is important for understanding the historical policy of Azerbaijan. Aliyev noted that: “The establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic is a historical event. A democratic republic was created for the first time in the Muslim world. We are rightfully proud of the fact that the Azerbaijani people created this republic” – yet it is very difficult to find a connection between the first republic and contemporary Azerbaijan. Rather we can notice a continuity between today’s situation and the Soviet times when Heydar Aliyev was in charge as the first secretary of the communistic party of Azerbaijan.

In essence, Azerbaijan has been ruled by one family for decades. This year’s early presidential election held in April showed to the international community that nothing would change in the near future. According to the OSCE Election Observation Mission’s final report, the election “took place within a restrictive political environment and under a legal framework that curtails fundamental rights and freedoms which are prerequisites for genuine democratic elections”. Based on constitutional amendments, which had been introduced after a referendum in 2009, Aliyev was elected for a fourth term in office.


It is difficult to find a connection between the first republic and contemporary Azerbaijan. Rather we can notice a continuity between today’s situation and the Soviet times.

Link to the past

A slightly different election environment has been observed in neighbouring Georgia. But also in this country, along with amendments to the constitution and the ongoing transition of the political system, we have witnessed a historical election in October. It was the last time when citizens elected the president directly. The role of the president in Georgia’s political system has already been diminished during the second term of Mikheil Saakashvili. The decision that the next president would be elected differently was made by the Georgian Dream coalition, which has a majority in the current parliament. It is no secret that a lack of understanding between the ruling party and the outgoing president, Giorgi Margvelash-

vili, was the driving force behind this decision. Despite the disagreements Margvelashvili hosted foreign leaders in Tbilisi in May this year. The president in his statement on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the independence of Georgia underscored that “such delegations that we see today in Georgia have never visited the country before and I strongly believe that May 26th is a prerequisite for the great victory leading us to our strategic goal – NATO and EU membership”. The president focused mostly on felicitations and the current policy. In all his statements we can find only one sentence referring directly to the historical legacy of Georgian statehood. In greetings to representatives of the Georgian diaspora the president noted that “their ancestors’ contribution brought our country to this day; their ancestors declared the first independence”. And again no specific names were mentioned.

A few years ago Redjeb Jordania – son of the leader of the first independent Republic of Georgia – asked whether the first republic would be remembered in the modern state. He wondered if there is there any link between the past and present – not only on the level of political declarations. His conclusion was not very optimistic. Despite such symbols as the Zhordania Avenue on the bank of Mtkvari River or the commemorations in the parliament, the political legacy remains widely unknown. Even the three-colour banner that symbolised the social democrats ruling in the short period of sovereignty was shed for newer symbols after the Rose Revolution in 2004.

This lack of historical reflection is not only the case in Georgia. The reason is that the 20th century is still associated with the painful legacy of Soviet times, and during those times any commemorations of sovereignty were forbidden. Today the 100th anniversaries of independence are being recognised, but in general the legacy of 1918 remains elusive in the political and historical comparisons. Instead, only certain elements are cherry-picked and exploited to match the narratives of today. Any close inspection of this legacy would reveal that the visions today are sadly detached from the ideas which inspired these countries’ “founding fathers” 100 years ago. 

Jan Brodowski holds a PhD in political science from the Jagiellonian University.

His research focuses mainly on geopolitics, modern diplomacy
and democratisation in the post-Soviet countries.

Is the blockchain revolution starting in Russia?

AGNIESZKA PIKULICKA-WILCZEWSKA

Russia, with its cheap electricity and talented tech professionals, has become an important **hub for cryptocurrency**. And it seems the Russian authorities are starting to see the benefits of blockchain technology, especially in terms of overcoming US sanctions.

“Can you see this bag?” Sanjarbek Nasirbekov, an Uzbek technology expert and bitcoin trader, asks me pointing to a black sporty backpack resting on a hanger. We are sitting in his Tashkent office on the third floor of a hip co-working space with a gym and a game room, sipping afternoon tea. “This is where I carry the cash when I go to Moscow,” he explains. Sanjarbek’s trips to Russia with the black backpack began when his business started growing and his clients’ demand for bitcoin increased. At the time, buying two bitcoins per day from his Moscow-based partner was no longer a sustainable option. Sanjarbek needed more. And his Russian partner could help him.

Through a network of intermediaries, each getting a commission for their referral, Sanjarbek reached the top of the business chain. At 11:40 AM, he arrived in Moscow City, the country’s main financial district, and checked himself in at the reception desk of an elegant skyscraper.

Crypto boom

Soon after, Sanjarbek was in a lift, passing the endless floors of the building, accompanied by a stranger who would soon introduce him to the people that could help him with business. He was asked to wait and queue behind other men with backpacks. When his turn came he was escorted by armed guards into a closed room. They asked him to put his arms up and they conducted a careful security check. The atmosphere was like something in a film. “Apart from you, there is no one. If they want to get rid of you, they can do that,” Sanjarbek recalls. He passed the bag full of US dollars – enough to cover the cryptocurrency deal and the commission – to a cashier together with his bitcoin address. Seconds afterwards, his phone screen showed that the bitcoins were transferred to his virtual wallet. For the next hour cryptocurrency miners across the country would consume a substantial amount of energy to verify the transaction. After the whole process, Sanjarbek could now use his newly-acquired coins.

According to the Russian Association of Cryptocurrencies, three million Russians own cryptocurrency, and 70,000 work in areas of the cryptocurrency sector other than mining – a process of verifying transactions and adding them to the blockchain digital ledger. In the first half of this year, the number of crypto mining companies in Russia increased by 15 per cent, to 75,000. The mining business currently employs 350,000 people.

“There are a lot small companies with just one person who mines. Of course the data shows an official number and do not include people who just bought a computer and started mining in their bathroom,” Alexey Studnev, founder of Bloxy.info – a blockchain analytics project – tells me. The numbers might not seem large for a country the size of Russia, but for such a young industry the data is significant. Needless to say businesses like the bitcoin exchange point Sanjarbek visited in Moscow City do not operate legally. “For Uzbeks and other citizens of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), Moscow is now like an etalon. They are guiding us and we are following them,” Sanjarbek says.

Russia, with its cheap electricity and talented tech professionals, has become an important hub for cryptocurrency mining. Thanks to the emerging blockchain technology, a large number of companies in Russia, China, Turkey and the CIS have managed to maintain high trade volumes despite US sanctions, since bitcoin transactions are independent of the US-led international banking system. The process has created a huge grey area in which companies find it easier to bypass official procedures, speaking in dollars but using bitcoins to trade in goods as basic as fruits and vegetables. For Russia this means less revenue from taxes and related payments.

It does not take a genius to conclude that regulating and embracing blockchain would be a sensible move for Russia. But the country has a love-hate relationship with cryptocurrencies and it is not yet clear whether the story will find a happy ending.

Crypto-rouble

In 2014 Russia decided to ban bitcoin use in financial institutions. Later, in June 2017, Olga Skorobogatova, the deputy governor of the Russian central bank, stated that the agency is working on issuing a national virtual currency. Speaking at the St Petersburg International Economic Forum 2017, Skorobogatova said, “Regulators of all countries agree that it’s time to develop national cryptocurrencies – this is the future. Every country will decide on specific time frames. After our pilot projects we will understand what system we could use in our case for our national currency.”

Several months later (in October 2017), however, Sergey Shvetsov, the first deputy governor of Russia’s central bank, stated that the body was working to ban exchanges that traded in cryptocurrencies. He compared bitcoin to a pyramid scheme. Russian President Vladimir Putin repeated Shvetsov’s reservations, saying that cryptocurrencies carried risks, as they are issued by “an unlimited number of anonymous bodies”.

Soon after this declaration Putin himself reportedly ordered the creation of Russia’s national cryptocurrency, dubbed the crypto-rouble. As the Russian minister of communications, Nikolay Nikirofov, stated at the time: “I so confidently declare that we will soon launch a cryptocurrency for one simple reason: if we do not, then in two months, our neighbours in the Eurasian Economic Community will do it.”

The crypto-rouble never materialised, however, and in June this year, the president made clear that the creation of a national cryptocurrency is nowhere in sight. “Russia cannot have its own cryptocurrency inherently, just like no other country can have its cryptocurrency,” he said during the question and answer session with Russian citizens. “This is because when we are talking about cryptocurrency, this goes beyond national borders.”

Adding to the sense of an ambiguous approach to cryptocurrencies among the Russian authorities, the Oktyabrsky district court of St Petersburg ordered a closure of 40 websites for “promoting cryptocurrencies” in May last year. Then the decision was annulled by a court of higher instance this year. Using, buying and

Russia has a **love-hate relationship** with cryptocurrencies and it is not yet clear whether the story will find a happy ending.

exchanging cryptocurrencies, for the moment, has not been banned in Russia and, in fact, foreigners who visited during the 2018 FIFA World Cup were often able to pay for hotels and other services with bitcoin. In September, however, the Russian police confiscated 22 bitcoin ATMs for what they termed “routine checks”.

In search of regulation

It seems that Russia sees the benefits of blockchain technology, especially in terms of overcoming US sanctions, while remaining sceptical of an unregulated cryptocurrency market. Since the beginning of the year, Russia has been developing a law that would regulate the use of virtual currencies. The first draft was presented to the State Duma in May but so far it has not been voted on. In the past few months it has undergone a number of changes.

As the Russian daily newspaper *Izvestia* reveals, the most recent version of the draft has left out the word cryptocurrency altogether. Moreover, according to the newspaper’s source, the definition of mining has been revised and the existing cryptocurrencies will most likely be treated as tokens rather than a currency. Registered businesses with appropriate licenses will be able to issue tokens and sell them to identifiable buyers.

It is too early to predict which version of the law will be adopted. The first draft was already criticised for failing to make cryptocurrencies a legitimate means of

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payment. What is certain is that the authorities are trying to bring the market more fully under state control, make identification of sellers and buyers easier and impose know your customer (KYC) requirements for selected crypto transactions. Reportedly, there are also plans to make mining a taxable activity.

In a bid to control cryptocurrencies, Russia granted 195 million roubles to the Moscow Institute for Security and Information Analysis to set up a new system of tracking cryptocurrency transactions. The tool, which is likely to be developed by the end of the year, will allow for the identification of the names, bank accounts and cards details of users to track financial crimes and other illicit activities.

Many of those involved in the cryptocurrency business worry that regulations may undermine the freedom and anonymity that make blockchain technology so attractive. Denis, a young Russian miner who has been in the business for three years, shares these reservations. “Blockchain, in principle, is a decentralised technology and it should not be regulated,” he tells me in an email. “The future of

cryptocurrencies in Russia and other countries has perspectives. The technology has been applied and adopted by masses and has begun to bring people benefits.”

Whatever the new regulations turn out to be, many in Russia will almost certainly continue exchanging suitcases of money for bitcoin, creating new bitcoin addresses for each transaction in order to escape identification and turn to cryptocurrencies such as Zcash that grant complete anonymity. The expert opinion, however, is that control over blockchain transactions is, in most cases, a matter of time and technology.

“Bitcoin is pseudo-anonymous. Do you have a pseudonym? Of course you do, you have a username on Facebook or on Instagram. And the public key I’m using on the public bitcoin blockchain is my pseudonym,” Alfred Taudes of the Vienna University of Economics and Business tells me. “The bitcoin blockchain is public and everyone can view the transactions. I can link all the transactions that you have done with the public key and if I have some other data that links this public key to your personal information, I can track everything you’ve done.”

New approach?

Studnev agrees that the anonymity of blockchain transactions is not always a given. “Sometimes the blockchain makes transactions less traceable because it crosses borders. But if you’re going to make real money from bitcoin, you should find a way to exchange it and it will require your documents and your clearance of money laundering,” he explains. “Of course you can do it on the black market, you can exchange bitcoin with someone who is not doing this officially, but this is already out of the blockchain question.”

The Danish police claims to have the most advanced crypto-tracking system and it is clear that, while it is still possible to escape identification, it has become increasingly difficult. The US is not far behind. The Russian intelligence officers involved in leaking Hillary Clinton’s emails during the 2016 presidential campaign had a chance to experience the effectiveness of the US tracking system. Having invested 95,000 dollars’ worth of bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies in domains, servers and accounts to store and disseminate the stolen information, they were tracked down and convicted of “conspiracy to commit an offence against the United States”.

With the new regulatory framework in place, Russia may finally begin to treat cryptocurrencies seriously. On September 20th this year Leon Li, founder of the cryptocurrency exchange Huobi, and Sergey Glazyev, an advisor to Putin, met in Beijing to discuss blockchain technology, cryptocurrencies and a potential expansion of Huobi in Russia. It could be a sign of the new approach. If so, Russia will

not be in this alone. In a struggle against the global domination of the US dollar and the United States' control of international financial institutions, Russia has a number of allies. US sanctions have affected many countries which make up a substantial portion of the world's GDP. Turkey, Iran, Cuba, and China, among others, have been more than eager to join Russia in a global backlash against the dollar.

Russia and China have already developed their own versions of the SWIFT system to facilitate international transactions between banks. Together with China, Iran and Turkey, Russia has also vowed to make efforts to stop using the dollar in trade, especially in oil. Last year Iran and Turkey agreed to trade in their own currencies.

As US sanctions ban Iran from using the dollar in trade and are soon to hit the country's oil sector, Iran has been making further moves to embrace crypto. "Over the past year or two, the use of cryptocurrency has become an important issue. This is one of the good ways to bypass the use of the dollar, as well as the replacement of the SWIFT system," Mohammad Reza Pourebrahimi, head of Iran's Parliamentary Commission of Economic Affairs, stated recently. "They [the Russian authorities] share our opinion. We said that if we manage to promote this work, then we will be the first countries that use cryptocurrency in the exchange of goods."


An institution in itself

During the September Eurasian Media Congress in Kazakhstan, Eurasian Development Bank (EDB) board chairman Andrei Belyaninov confirmed that a new consensus regarding the use of cryptocurrencies between countries may soon emerge. "The [US] sanctions appeared to be instrumental in our efforts to consolidate internal resources, create a single economic space, form infrastructures within this space and develop them," he said. "We are in a position to create a regional settlement currency. I believe that it should be the rouble, although there are other points of view, for example, a blockchain-based currency."

There may also be plans to include the other BRIC countries – Brazil, China and India – in the new cross-border currency agreement, according to some reports. Studnev believes that such an approach has a high chance of success. "Blockchain has no institutions, and it's an institution in itself. Only the participants of blockchain can limit it and apply rules, so making a financial system or business driving system between Russia and other countries can have a good economic effect," he told me.

"You can trade between countries with a currency which is more stable for this kind of trade – for example with a currency that is equal to one barrel of oil – with-

out involving the US dollar which supports the US economic system and relies on it,” Studnev added. “With blockchain you don’t need that. A country can have relations with other countries and businesses it shares common interests with, and do it independently of the institutions which limit it from doing certain deals.”

If the efforts succeed, cryptocurrencies have the potential to change the world as we know it and dethrone the current financial system based on the primacy of the dollar. This would have a significant effect on the current international order, at least in terms of limiting the economic leverage the US currently enjoys over other countries. Sanctions would then prove to be less painful and cease to be an adequate means of exerting pressure. It would pose a new dilemma for the US and the West. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Russia is bracing itself to enter the new blockchain-enabled world of cross-border economic opportunities, independent of US sanctions and financial institutions. But how much freedom is Russia ready to grant its citizens, whom the blockchain technology, by definition, should serve? This remains to be seen. 

This story was written as part of “Diversity and Resilience” – a journalism workshop run by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, European Forum Alpbach and the National Endowment for Democracy.

Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska is a freelance journalist focusing on the post-Soviet space and a former editor with *New Eastern Europe*.

Russia's economic policy in Putin's fourth term

ALEX NICE

Despite some initial disruption, the Kremlin's efforts to counteract and mitigate the impact of sanctions have been quite successful. The state-led redistributive model has ensured that the authorities are well placed to respond to any disruption caused by the sanctions.

In essence, **the effect of the sanctions** has reinforced a highly interventionist economic policy and a dominant role of the state in driving economic growth.

Is Russia's economic policy a success or failure? The answer may strike many as self-evident. By most conventional measures, the economy has performed poorly in recent years. Between 2000 and 2008, Russia's economy grew by an impressive seven per cent per year, driven by both rising oil prices and substantial productivity gains. Over the past ten years, however, Russia's real GDP has risen, on average, by just one per cent per year. This was a period where demographic trends were still relatively favourable and the labour force was growing. This demographic dividend is set to disappear in the near future, and barring a sharp increase in migration, the labour force will start to gradually decline. Russia's per capita income remains just 30 per cent of the European average, and the potential for rapid catch-up growth appears to have faded.

For the more liberally inclined members of Russia's establishment, the slowdown in growth since 2008 is evidence of the exhaustion of Russia's resource-based economic model. The standard-bearer of this group is Alexei Kudrin, a former finance minister and trusted ally of Vladimir Putin. He sees the fundamental problem as

the dominant role of the state, which uses oil and gas rents to prop up an inefficient manufacturing sector. Soft budget constraints resulting from state subsidies and cheap credit to inefficient state-sponsored firms depress competition and prevent the reallocation of resources to more productive firms and sectors.

Quick evolution

Kudrin is in no doubt that the economy is seriously underperforming. He describes the last ten years as a “lost decade”, in which Russia failed to make the necessary structural reforms to allow it to move away from its over-dependence on oil and gas exports. In 2015 he proposed a new growth model based on conventional liberal measures. Improving the business environment by promoting investment and reducing the state's involvement in the economy was the principal motors of growth. Since then his think tank, the Centre for Strategic Research, has produced a comprehensive reform agenda covering almost every aspect of the Russian economy.

The diagnosis seems dire. But if we look at Russia from a geo-economic perspective, the Kremlin's economic policy could actually be considered a success. While low GDP growth might suggest stagnation, Russia's economy has, in fact, been rapidly evolving over the past six years. At the heart of the new policy has been a comprehensive range of measures to insulate the economy from external shocks. Elements of this strategy have been part of Putin's economic policy from the beginning. In the early 2000s, his government used the windfall from high oil prices to pay down foreign debt and build up sovereign reserves. At the same time, the economic policy was broadly focused on integration with western and global markets while conditions were favourable.

Then the uprisings across the Middle East and the 2011 mass protests in Russia prompted a decisive shift in focus towards insulating the regime from external influence. In the economic sphere, this led to an increased securitisation of economic policy (turning loans into tradable bonds), attempts to de-offshore Russian capital, and a policy of import substitution in certain manufacturing sectors. Economic integration increasingly came to be seen as a means of power projection rather than mutually beneficial exchange. This culminated in the Ukraine crisis in 2014, which was in part a product of competition between rival models of economic integration.

Since 2014 the United States and European Union sectoral sanctions have put economic sovereignty at the heart of the Russian government's decision-making. There were three main components to this strategy. First, it mobilised public funds and state-owned banks to provide liquidity and financing to sanctioned firms. Second, the programme of state subsidies to support manufacturing and import



Photo: Press Service of the President of the Russian Federation (CC) commons.wikimedia.org

Russian President Vladimir Putin visits a shopping centre in Artek. Despite the ongoing economic sanctions, the Kremlin is showing signs that it is able to think strategically about its political economy.

substitution was substantially expanded. The most radical and disruptive moves were taken in the agricultural sector, where almost all western food imports were banned. Third the government has sought to replace western financing and technology, where possible, with alternative sources.

Strength or vulnerability?

Despite some initial disruption, the Kremlin's efforts to counteract and mitigate the impact of sanctions have in fact been quite successful. As the British academic Richard Connolly recounts in his new book, *Russia's Response to Sanctions*, it is precisely those aspects of Russia's economy that Kudrin identified as a drag on productivity that have been pivotal in its response to the sanctions. The Kremlin was able to support the economy effectively because the state already played a large role in it, and it had established mechanisms for redistributing hydrocarbon rents to other sectors. The state-led redistributive model ensured that the authorities were well placed to respond to the disruption caused by sanctions and that support was offered to affected sectors and organisations. The effect of the sanctions has therefore reinforced a highly interventionist economic policy and a dominant role of the state in driving economic development.

The impact of the sanctions on energy and defence sectors has also been limited. Russian oil firms were forced to abandon joint ventures with western firms to develop off-shore fields, but considering the sharp drop in oil prices from mid-2014 this retrenchment makes some commercial sense. At the same time, despite limited access to external financing, Russia's oil companies have been able to maintain – and even expand – production in existing fields. The Russian defence sector has had some success in replacing western and Ukrainian components with other suppliers (including domestically produced equivalents), albeit in some cases of lower quality. Following an extensive programme of import substitution, it is unlikely that the Russian defence sector, in the event that sanctions were withdrawn, would now seek to re-establish supply links with western or Ukrainian businesses.

What conclusions should we draw from this? First, from the Kremlin's point of view, the current economic model is a source of strength. It is therefore highly unlikely that the government will undertake the kind of liberal reforms that most critics of Russia's economic

It is highly unlikely that the Kremlin will undertake the kind of liberal reforms that most critics of Russia's economic policy advocate.

policy advocate. If anything, the government is likely to further expand the use of state-led initiatives and administrative diktat in an attempt to push up the growth rate. Following his re-election in March this year, Vladimir Putin called for the government to raise Russia's growth rate above the global average (implying a rate of expansion of 3.5 to 4 per cent per year) and to increase investment to 25 per cent of GDP (from its current level of around 20 per cent). In August, Andrei Belousov, a presidential advisor, called for a windfall tax on the excess profits of 14 major businesses in order to fund the state investment programme. In September, Sergei Shvetsov, a central bank deputy governor, called for Russian businesses to show more patriotism and to invest domestically.


Second, regardless of its effectiveness, the experience of the past six years shows that external analysts need to take developments in Russia's economic strategy seriously. There has been a tendency among pundits and policymakers to dismiss Russia's economy as either a petro-state or a kleptocracy. As former US President Barack Obama dismissively put it in 2014, "Russia doesn't make anything. Immigrants aren't rushing to Moscow in search of opportunity ... history is on our side." The late John McCain declared Russia a "gas station masquerading as a country." These characterisations are, at best, one-sided. Russia has a sizeable manufacturing sector, though admittedly for the most part uncompetitive on global markets. In 2013, before the international sanctions were imposed, Russia was the eighth largest manufacturer in the world. In 2017, Russia was the fourth largest recipient

of immigrants in the world. Undoubtedly, corruption and capital flight are serious problems. However, examining Russia's political economy through the prism of a rent-seeking model leads to a narrow understanding of the government's policy. In fact, a survey of the past six years suggests that the government is able to think strategically about its political economy and act decisively in response to external pressures.

Vindication?

This suggests that analysts should give serious attention to the major economic initiatives that Russia is likely to pursue in the coming years. Three in particular come to mind: the expansion of economic ties with Asia; the development of alternatives to the US financial system; and the Eurasian Economic Union. To date, progress on all three has been limited. Beyond a few flagship deals – such as the Power of Siberia pipeline that will deliver pipeline gas from Russia to China for the first time – Russia's pivot to Asia has failed to deliver a significant increase in Chinese direct investment. Portfolio investment from Asia has also failed to offset the sharp decline in western financing as a result of the sanctions. However, this could change, as is likely, if western sanctions on Russia remain and US-China relations continue to deteriorate.

Likewise, official Russian strategic documents depict the international system as increasingly characterised by competing economic and political blocs and intensifying competition for resources. This suggests that the Eurasian Union, which tends to be dismissed by many observers as a virtual integration project, will remain a significant element of Russian strategic thinking. Arguably the EU's failure to take the Eurasian Union seriously as an economic and political project contributed to the geopolitical crisis in Ukraine.

The last six years have seen major changes in Russia's political economy, with important implications for its foreign policy. There remains a risk that, as Obama predicted, low growth will relegate Russia to the periphery of the economic system. The international order, seen from Moscow, appears to be evolving in a direction that vindicates the Kremlin's turn to "economic sovereignty". For the moment, however, its economic policy appears increasingly in tune with the times. 

Alex Nice is a freelance analyst and former Europe Manager
at The Economist Intelligence Unit in London.

Russia's denial syndrome

OLGA IRISOVA

The HIV epidemic continues to spread in Russia while the authorities appear to be doing very little to effectively counter it. It does not help that the dedicated NGOs that try to prevent its spread are faced with legal obstacles and conspiracy theories claiming that the HIV epidemic is a hoax fabricated by the pharmaceutical industry.

In 2015 as many as 120,000 Russians were diagnosed with HIV. This figure is 70 per cent of the total number of new diagnoses in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. That year the number of officially registered HIV carriers in Russia exceeded one million, and the Russian authorities had to finally recognise the existence of a full-scale HIV epidemic. Natalya Ladnaya, a senior researcher at the Federal AIDS Centre with Rospotrebnadzor (a federal agency responsible for consumer protection and welfare) has repeatedly stated that in 20 regions of the Russian state the epidemic has reached a generalised level according to the World Health Organisation and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) criteria. More than one per cent of pregnant women were infected in these regions, which means the epidemic has moved beyond traditional risk groups and is now rapidly spreading among the heterosexual, sexually active population.

Against this backdrop, government officials have declared their intentions to devote more attention to the problem. Yet in reality no effective changes have been implemented. As a result, the problem is ignored and stigmatised, despite its increasing societal pertinence.

Growing problem

According to official statistics, the number of people carrying HIV in Russia has already exceeded 1.2 million and, according to the United Nations, Russia is now the third largest country in the world in terms of the number of new HIV infections (after South Africa and Nigeria). In 2017 a number of Russian regions saw more new cases of HIV infections than in 2016. According to the Russian ministry of health, the number of new HIV diagnoses increased in Moscow alone by 20.4 per cent (2,900 new diagnoses in 2017 versus 2,400 in 2016). In the Chukotka Autonomous District, the rise was as sharp as 151.7 per cent, while in the Republic of Tyva it reached 133.3 per cent. The number of new HIV carriers in Tambov oblast, Ivanovo oblast, the Republic of Mari El and Karelia rose from 50 per cent to 66 per cent.

In recent decades the social picture of a Russian HIV carrier has changed dramatically. During the 1990s, HIV mainly spread within at-risk groups, such as drug abusers. Today heterosexual contact is the primary mode of spreading the virus. According to Vadim Pokrovsky, head of the federal research and methodological centre for prevention and control of AIDS, 1.2 per cent of people ages 15 to 49 are HIV carriers in Russia. The most affected group are men aged 35 to 39 (3.3 per cent). At the same time, more than half of the cases are associated with heterosexual transmission – 54.4 per cent of all new diagnoses registered during the first half of 2018. By contrast, 42.8 per cent were infected through the use of needles and only 2.1 per cent of new cases were the result of homosexual intercourse.

The rise in HIV-related mortality has also reached new levels. In just ten years it has increased more than tenfold, and continues to grow. The average age of death for someone infected is just 35, which means that the country with an aging population is losing even more of its workforce. This dynamic is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future because of an unwillingness of the Russian leadership to adopt methods proven to be effective in other countries, such as the introduction of substitution therapy for drug addicts and the inclusion of sex education classes into the school curriculum. Only about a third of HIV carriers in Russia are receiving antiretroviral therapy, and amid the current economic crisis there is a growing problem with access to medicine. According to the social movement Patient Control, many regions in Russia have already faced serious interruptions in the supply of essential drugs.

The number of HIV carriers might be much higher than the official 1.22 million since statistics only take into account officially registered cases. At the same time, the authorities often point out that around 20 per cent of Russians are tested for HIV each year. However, this figure is largely made up of the same people who are

obliged to undergo annual medical checks such as law enforcement officers, blood donors, medical personnel and prison inmates. Therefore we can speculate that the true scale of the epidemic remains unknown. The results of rapid HIV tests in Novosibirsk, for example, revealed that the virus was present in 40 out of 888 tested individuals. Among those who tested positive, five out of six did not know they were infected.

Political activity

The current round of confrontation between the Kremlin and the western world has also affected HIV-positive Russians. With a shrinking state budget, defence spending became an instant priority while non-governmental organisations involved in HIV prevention and care have seen cuts in funding. What is worse, any NGO looking for support from international donors has to register as a “foreign agent” under Russian law. In fact, in 2016 the ministry of justice added eight non-profit organisations that deal with HIV prevention to the list of foreign agents. The reasons for including these organisations in the register are quite symptomatic. According to Russian law, in order to be labelled a foreign agent, the organisation should be engaged in political activities. Yet due to uncertainties in the law, almost any type of activity can be interpreted as political.

Take the example of Sotsium, an NGO based in the Saratov region. The district court has decided that conducting surveys among HIV-infected persons and distributing 100,000 syringes and 10,000 condoms (allegedly bought with funds obtained from abroad) is considered political activity. The prosecutor's office referred to the expert opinion submitted by Ivan Konovalov, a professor of history at the local law academy, who concluded that Sotsium “can be regarded as a participant of the hybrid war against Russia aimed at changing the political regime in our country”. According to the same expert, the distribution of free condoms and syringes “destroys both our traditions and our national values”.

The current policy affects not only organisations directly involved in working with HIV-carriers but also NGOs that focus on education. The Russian Orthodox Church and a number of high-ranking conservative politicians are some of the strongest voices against removing sex education in schools. In May 2017 Roskomnadzor experts concluded that a training programme for 10th and 11th graders in Chelyabinsk schools, conducted by an NGO called Compass, violates federal law. “Experts” especially stressed the link between the programme and western structures that allegedly develop such programmes in order to “destroy chastity in children” and reduce the birth rate.

The language used in both cases is unfortunately not that rare. In 2016 a state think-tank called the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS) presented a report to the Moscow City Council on HIV in Russia. Its main topic was not the growing epidemic, but an illusory intervention of the West. The report stated that western countries “are using the HIV/AIDS problem as a weapon in the information war against Russia” while the contraceptive industry is “interested in engaging the maximum number of minors in early sexual relations”. According to the same report, sex education for schoolchildren is imposed by the West as a means of “demographically deterring countries seen as geopolitical competitors”. What is their recipe against AIDS then? “Abstinence and monogamous, heterosexual family”.

It is quite likely that the few remaining independent NGOs dealing with HIV in Russia will see further complications. In September this year, the ministry of justice drafted a bill on a new procedure for conducting foreign-funded programmes aimed at stopping the spread of HIV. The ministry proposes that all NGOs that conduct HIV prevention programmes in Russia and receive money from abroad notify the state of its activities. The state will have a month to consider whether to issue consent (or refusal) for the work. If the NGO continues to work on HIV prevention after receiving a refusal, it will be closed down. Should this bill be adopted, it may lead to the closure of the majority of NGOs working on HIV in Russia.

Conspiracy theories

The use of conspiracy theories by authorities and state-owned media has become commonplace in Russia, especially when concerning the image of the West as an enemy. According to recent polls conducted by VCIOM – a Russian public opinion research agency – the number of Russians who believe in the existence of a secret world government has increased over the past four years from 45 to 67 per cent. Another survey conducted by the Levada Centre in March 2017 showed that the share of Russians who believe the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution was a plot against the Russian people has risen by 20 per cent. Another conspiracy that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the result of a “plot of foreign forces hostile to Russia” is also gaining popularity. In December 2006, around 18 per cent of those surveyed by the Levada Centre thought so; after the annexation of Crimea, that number grew to 28 per cent (decreasing again to 23 per cent in 2016).

Therefore it is no surprise that a similar trend can be seen in the debate around the HIV epidemic. In fact, one recent study carried out by Medialogy – a media research group – together with the newspaper *Vedomosti* highlights this trend. The study, which analysed the use of conspiracy theories in the Russian media be-

tween January 2011 and December 2017, found a total of 36 different conspiracies. Two of the most widespread conspiracies, according to the study, include a plot of historians against Russia and that a world government order exists. The third most popular conspiracy theory is that HIV/AIDS are not real. This conspiracy has grown 36 times over the past seven years within the Russian media.

Therefore, HIV deniers (or dissidents) – those who do not believe in the existence of the virus and consider it to be a part of a pharmaceutical plot (or an American one – it depends on who you are talking to) – has become a very visible force in Russia. The Svecha Foundation – a charity that works to prevent HIV infection – conducted a study that claims there are more than 15,000 HIV deniers in Russia who actively spread their views online. They sometimes succeed in reassuring newly-diagnosed people that the virus is not real and there is no need for treatment. Many of the HIV deniers are active on social media, and considering that some people who have just discovered they are HIV positive are likely to go through a stage of denial, they are offered a convenient answer: “There is no virus, what kills is the treatment.”

A study by the Svecha Foundation found that there are more than 15,000 HIV deniers in Russia who actively spread their views **online**.

This problem was widely publicised in 2017 when it was reported that several resonant cases of death in HIV-positive children whose parents were HIV deniers and refused antiretroviral treatment. One of the most high-profile instances was a criminal case against the foster parents of a ten-year-old girl who died of AIDS. The foster father of the girl and his wife did not treat her since they believed HIV was something that was made up by the pharmaceutical industry. What makes the story even more difficult to understand is that the father was not only an HIV denier but also an Orthodox priest. Officially, the church does not deny the existence of HIV. But according to Archpriest Georgy Pimenov, there is still “a semi-underground movement of HIV deniers” within the church.


Easier to deny

On Russia's most popular social networking website, Vkontakte, there are a number of popular communities where HIV deniers openly propagate their ideas and discuss the need to refuse any treatment. Pavel Chikov, the head of Agora, an international human rights organisation, pointed out that one of the groups called “HIV/AIDS – the greatest mystification of the 20th century” (with 16,837 members), had an interesting member. Anna Kuznetsova, the Children's Rights

Commissioner for the President of the Russian Federation and wife of an Orthodox priest, was following the group. The second most popular HIV denial group on Vkontakte, called “A movement against HIV/AIDS fraud”, has over 8,000 followers and over 3,000 followers on their YouTube channel. The motto of another group (with 3,794 members) is “Do not test for HIV – be safe”.

Many of the members of those communities are HIV-positive themselves and, naturally, the ideas that are being propagated are harmful, especially for those who are HIV positive, but in denial. Some former HIV deniers eventually start treatment – most of the time when their health has already deteriorated – and some are too late. There is a group that tries to work with HIV deniers on social media. The “HIV/AIDS dissidents and their children” social media community has collected open source data on the number of deaths within the HIV-denier community. Since 2015, 93 people within the Russian HIV-denying groups on Vkontakte have died, including children. This is only a fragment of the full picture; the overall numbers are still unknown. Clearly, those who do not believe in the existence of the virus, and those who do not seek medical treatment not only hurt themselves but also their sexual partners by infecting them with something that has no cure.

Current Russian laws do not regulate the propaganda of HIV/AIDS denial. Those who actually contributed to the death of someone by convincing them that HIV does not exist risk very little. The same is true for doctors promoting these ideas via online consultations. The most vivid and deadly example of a conspiracy physician is Olga Kovekh, or, as some in the media call her, Dr Death. It is known that Kovekh consulted at least 50 HIV-positive people, and five of them have died. She was fired from her position in 2017, although she started her “dissident” activity much earlier, presenting her ideas on Russian television. Her medical degree has not been revoked.

Medical professionals like Kovekh also believe in other conspiracy theories, such as that a one-world government order exists or that there is an international plot against Russia, an idea often perpetuated in Russian media. The difference is that Russian media does not deny the existence of HIV. In the spring of this year the government proposed to ban public information that denies HIV and AIDS. The bill proposes to block HIV-denying websites. However, the initiative (if approved) could still be useless. As long as the media continue to propagate other political conspiracy theories, the Russian consciousness will continue to be framed by conspiratorial thinking. In that case this law will not be of much help. 

Olga Irisova is a political analyst and editor-in-chief of
Riddle (ridl.io), an online journal of Russian affairs.

Georgia's liberal transformation

An ongoing adventure

BAKAR BEREKASHVILI

Over the past two decades, the liberal capitalist transformation and the new **cultural purification of post-communist Georgia** has gained the form of political-ideological rituals and cultural exorcisms. All are invited to take part in post-communist exorcisms and rituals, but only the ruling class enjoys the fruits of the transformation.

What do we mean when we speak about the liberal and neoliberal transformation, or the purification, of contemporary Georgia? First of all it is the story of the post-communist order and mentality. And this story begins in the new era of the post-communist transition in Georgia, where the new elite resort to a number of western liberal canons that they perceived as the basic intellectual and ideological tools for an effective liberal and democratic transformation. Among those canons are: individual liberty and the idea of a liberal capitalist state. By idealising the Anglo-American traditions of freedom and the free world more generally in its drive to westernise, neoliberalism became part and parcel of the social and political thought in post-communist Georgia. Cultural liberalism was also welcomed as a means of moving away from the dominant Soviet cultural narrative. Hence, neoliberalism and cultural liberalism became the tools for exorcising the phantoms of Soviet heresy.

Today, the liberal assumptions are being challenged by illiberal reactionaries. Interestingly, the illiberal resistance is itself an alternative method of exorcist ritual

in post-communist Georgia. The task they set themselves is to fight neoliberalism and cultural liberalism.

On neoliberal purification

It is not surprising that the post-communist transition in Georgia was dominated by the spirit of Atlantic liberal capitalism. The post-communist ruling class had to deconstruct the Soviet past. Western liberalism, including its cultural and radical economic dialect, was globally dominant and promised highly appealing material gains, and had always defined itself in opposition to communism. During the transition, the struggle against Soviet phantoms became a moral mission of the post-communist elite in many post-Soviet states. In their monumental work, *Making Capitalism without Capitalists: Class Formation and Elite Struggles in Post-Communist Central Europe*, published by Verso in 2001, scholars of post-communism Gil Eyal, Ivan Szeleniy and Eleanor R. Townsley detail the key rituals accompanying the transition from communism to capitalism, amongst which purification features prominently. In particular, the authors argue that purification is a ritual which aims to deconstruct the socialist welfare system in order to purify the population from socialist state dependence and thus to make a new “capitalist man”.

Georgia was no exception to this trend. Indeed, it is perhaps one of the best examples of how these rituals were carried out, sometimes to the extreme. Georgia wholeheartedly embraced neoliberalism, the *modus operandi* of the West in the 1990s. It was thus not only a national project organised by Georgia's national elite, but it was also ethically and technically supported by the global elite who aimed to export the practice of neoliberal democracy to peripheral areas of Europe. In his book, *Europe since 1989: A History*, published in English by Princeton University Press in 2016, Austrian historian Philipp Ther argued that the embrace of neoliberalism by the East European elite was strongly influenced by the Atlantic political elite and experts who believed that “development of a market economy and democracy were interconnected and interdependent”. Thus in Georgia, the ritual of purification was part of a larger wave of neoliberal experimentation in the regions opened up by the fall of communism. The western powers had earlier applied these techniques in Latin America – and now it was the turn for the post-communist economies to experience the social and economic programme developed by the Chicago School in the early 1970s.

Neoliberalism was celebrated after the Rose Revolution, under the political rule of eccentric right-wing president of Georgia Mikhail Saakashvili, which put stronger emphasis on neoliberal hegemony. Since that revolution, neoliberal-

ism has been presented as the victorious western ideology that has triumphantly defeated communism. By demonising the communist past, on the one hand and supporting the westernisation of Georgia on the other, the neoliberal elite consolidated itself. They naturally consider the Baltic states to be ideological partners for their success in implementing the historic mission of decommunisation and the neoliberalisation of political and cultural life. They perceive a common historical experience and thus the potential to learn from each other on how to find proper political and cultural strategies for transforming society. Of course, similar to many post-Soviet states, the drive to establish a right-wing liberal hegemony has been just as much to institutionalise inequality and strengthen the dominant position of the new ruling class.

The liberal transformation of the cultural space

The liberal transformation of the cultural space, or more precisely the change of attitudes and behaviours in cultural life, became a dominant exercise in many post-Soviet states, including Georgia. This was a rather imitative and repetitive process, essentially replicating western culture. Scholars and intellectuals were prominent in positioning themselves as pro-western elites, translating Atlantic cultural discourse and moral reflections to the local, peripheral space. This allowed them to flirt with western institutions as they saw themselves as having an ethical mandate to purify Georgia of any remnants of communism. Ironically, however, many of these liberal exorcists – knights crusading against Soviet ghosts – were previously members of the privileged class during Soviet times. It was their families who enjoyed the dominant roles in the communist hierarchy.

The process of transformation is largely visible when one sees the changing attitudes of society. Although the liberal mindset is not native to Georgian culture historically, individualism, self-expression and globalised thinking are now embraced, especially amongst the younger generation. Many young people are now receiving education at pro-liberal institutions in Tbilisi and are naturally well disposed towards liberal narratives. Their outlook increasingly puts them at odds with the rural population, including the rural youth, who are more concerned with economic survival than theoretical ideals or grand social transformations. Their lives remain very traditional.

Although the liberal mindset is not native to Georgian culture historically, individualism, self-expression and globalised thinking are now **embraced**.

The liberal transformation is an ongoing adventure, far from completion. Like the communist ideals of the Soviet Union, liberalism in post-Soviet Georgia is expanding and backed by the new ruling class; it is presented as conventional wisdom, a universal way of life to which there is no alternative. To be sure, both communism and liberalism emerged from intellectual circles in Western Europe, but importing such systems from abroad wholesale, without qualification, necessarily means sidelining local traditions.

Thirst for career

Liberalism and its radical contemporary offspring, commonly referred to as neoliberalism (admittedly a contentious term, and unlike liberalism, neoliberalism is not a moniker many will use to describe their own school of thought), is an important tool for career-making in contemporary Georgia. This ideological flirtation with liberalism is reminiscent of the practice of career-making in the Soviet Union. While some people were genuinely fascinated with Bolshevism, others just pretended to be passionate merely to enhance their careers. In fact they had to as Bolshevism was the only philosophical-ideological basis of all political, cultural and administrative institutions in the Soviet Union. The same practice can be seen in post-communist Georgia today – the only difference is that Bolshevik narratives are replaced by liberal ones. Politicians, scholars, public servants and civil society technocrats are all engaged in a race to prove their loyalty to the narratives of liberal capitalism. To give an example: an effective approach to building a career in contemporary Georgian academia is to be a right-wing scholar, to glorify capitalism and demonise any theory that opposes it. The prestige attached to aligning oneself with this school of thought exerts a steady influence on how scholars are inclined to see the world. The influence has meant a specific ideology has become an endemic feature of academic life, which rather limits its power to generate genuine knowledge.


As in cultural life, a commitment to liberalism and neoliberalism is one of the keys needed to make a good career in Georgian politics. Politicians sing the praises of the minimal state and extol the virtues of free enterprise as an alternative to the Soviet welfare state. Career politicians and public servants are hijacked by the spirit of the free market hegemony. The term neoliberalism is not something that is regularly used by career politicians, but their ideas and thoughts all spring from that source: free market enterprise, small government and deregulation. Their ideological conformity has been practically a recreation of the situation under communism, in which dissenting voices were faint, if they could be heard at all.

Illiberal reactions against liberal exorcism

Today, liberal democracy in Europe is in crisis. An anti-elitist and populist uprising is challenging neoliberal democracy. Although Georgia is not the best example of such a crisis, cultural liberalism and neoliberal globalism are being challenged here by illiberal forces, from the left and the right. The language used by Georgian liberals is the same as the language used by European liberals, and anyone who challenges the current hegemony is labelled a fascist, an extremist or a communist. They can be more accurately thought of as illiberal groups, a term already well established in western academia.

The agenda of the conservative resistance is, of course, different to that of the left. Conservatives attack cultural liberalism because, in their eyes, it is incompatible with the social and cultural traditions of Georgia. They form a new breed of illiberal exorcists, who plan to save the nation from the post-Soviet liberal devils. The liberal counter-strategy portrays Georgia as part of European civilisation and argues that it should follow the values that are celebrated in Europe. But this is perhaps wishful thinking. Modern European civilisation is rooted in western Christianity and the ideals of the Enlightenment. There is no use pretending that Georgia has played any part in this history.

Attacks from the left focus rather on issues of socio-economic emancipation, but they are just as opposed to neoliberalism as the cultural conservatives. They campaign against the tyranny of big capital that is supported by a small circle of intellectuals. It is rooted in western leftist activism and it has also gained some prestige by imitating the admired West. Thus we might also see this as a form of neo-colonialism. Their campaign faces large obstacles in Georgia, however. For one, they are divided. Leftist intellectuals fall mostly into two camps: left-liberals and anti-liberal leftists, who share different views on politics and morality. The left-liberals have an increasingly hard time selling their views to the Georgian public, who are growing tired of the neoliberal narrative that does not seem to reflect their lives.

Will Georgia experience the same kind of illiberal uprising as the European democracies? It depends. The ruling class remains committed to western liberalism. But as discontent with the state of the economy and democracy in Georgia grows, the space into which anti-liberals could insert themselves grows increasingly wider. 

Old Moldova in new Europe

PIOTR OLEKSY



Since 2009, **Moldova's ruling elite** have primarily based their political narratives on pro-European integration. Events that have unfolded in 2018, however, have made the continuation of this course nearly impossible.



In September 2018 Vladimir Plahotniuc, the leader of Moldova's ruling Democratic Party and the most powerful oligarch in the country, announced that his party was set to change political course. Up until then, it had been the most important pro-European political force in Moldova. However, while preparing for the 2019 February parliamentary elections, it became a "pro-Moldovan" party. To many commentators this announcement was interpreted as a future turn towards Russia. At the same time, the state of European affairs has become so complex that it allows Plahotniuc to succeed in the difficult art of balancing between East and West; something that many of his predecessors attempted in the past.

In Moldova's political culture, the term "pro-Moldovan" assumes a rhetorical departure from geopolitics and identity divisions. It is understood as an attempt, also rhetorical, to build a united society, one that is concentrated on its own problems and not on abstract ideals detached from everyday reality. In the 1990s this approach was pursued by the Democratic Agrarian Party and later also by the communist party which, after rejecting the Kremlin's plan to solve the Transnistrian conflict, had to give up its pro-Russian rhetoric. Since 2009, Moldova's ruling elite have based their political narratives on European integration. Yet events unfolding in 2018 have made continuation on this course impossible.

Winter has come

Serious cracks in relations between Chişinău and Brussels emerged following the scandal which saw the disappearance of one billion US dollars from the three largest banks in Moldova, the arrest of Vlad Filat (a former prime minister and political rival to Plahotniuc) and the creation a new, formally pro-European majority in the parliament in January 2016. Local civic activists and international observers have also openly discussed the shady methods, such as blackmail and corruption, used to build this political majority, not to mention the extreme politicisation of Moldova's judicial system. The European Union found it difficult to accept Moldova's introduction of a new mixed electoral system which overtly favours the two largest parties. The reform was heavily criticised by the Venice Commission, a European body which evaluates constitutionality and the rule of law in Europe. However, until the authorities crossed the line by engaging in openly anti-democratic activities, the EU was happy enough to continue co-operation and maintain financial support for Moldova.

A primary motivation for the recent turn taken by Plahotniuc and his Democratic Party is the emergence of Andrei Năstase and his supporters. It was their votes that led to the unexpected victory of Năstase, the leader of the pro-European opposition, in the elections for Chişinău mayor in June 2018. This unexpected election outcome undermined Plahotniuc's political plans. It was believed that Silvia Radu, a formally independent candidate supported by the ruling party, would win the mayoral race. The lesson learnt from Năstase's victory is that when it comes to the 2019 elections there will be no easy projections of the outcomes in single member districts, as had been believed.

What is more, as mayor of Chişinău, Năstase would have the chance to demonstrate his effectiveness and prove that Plahotniuc's power system can be challenged. In the 2019 parliamentary elections this could give a real boost to the pro-European opposition. The ruling party panicked, and made a move which was highly revealing as to their commitment to democracy – they annulled the election results, and Năstase has been kept out of the mayor's office. The Supreme Court absurdly ruled that the results were invalid, claiming that Năstase broke the rule of pre-election silence by publishing political posts on Facebook the day before the election.

The EU's deep concern and criticism made little impact in Moldova. It was only after the announcement that the EU would stop the transfer of 100 million euros

The EU found it difficult to accept Moldova's new mixed electoral system, which overtly favours the two largest parties.

in financing that the message hit home. The reactions of the political class and the public are characteristic and say much about Moldovan society. While Prime Minister Pavel Filip expressed his anger at the EU, saying they would be responsible if there is no food for Moldovan preschool children, research showed that public support for the EU grew by several percentage points.

Strange bedfellows

It has been clear for quite some time that after the 2019 elections the Democratic Party will not be able to maintain a majority in the parliament. The elections will most likely be won by the Socialist Party which is informally led by the Moldovan president, Igor Dodon. Democrats can count on the third place at best. The second place will most likely be taken by the bloc of the pro-European opposition parties composed of Andrei Năstase's Dignity and Truth Platform and Maia Sandu's Party of Action and Solidarity. According to opinion poll research the Democrats will garner nine to ten per cent of support at most.

That is why the election system has been adjusted and the democrats are now counting on winning in many of the single mandate districts. They are working to get local leaders on their side, rarely with the most honest of methods. Yet, even if such activities prove successful, Plahotniuc's party will clearly need a coalition partner. Before the mayor of Chişinău elections two scenarios were under consideration: one was to force Maia Sandu, a pro-European politician who unsuccessfully ran for president in 2016, to enter the coalition through blackmail, accusing her of ceding power to pro-Russian forces if she didn't join the coalition. The second scenario was to force a coalition with the socialists. By invalidating the mayoral elections in Chişinău, a coalition with Sandu or anyone from the pro-European opposition has become virtually impossible. The second scenario thus looks more likely, especially since it offers greater opportunities. Together, the democrats and socialists can have a massive majority in the parliament, which until recently was much more difficult to obtain, due to both image and rhetoric.

In recent years, however, the Moldovan Democratic Party has established its position on the international stage by presenting itself as a guarantee of Moldova's pro-European orientation and a safety check on president Dodon, with his strong ties to the Kremlin. It will not be an easy task to explain an alliance with the socialists to western partners. And Dodon will have an even harder job explaining himself to the Russians and his voters, neither of whom want to see this coalition. This is even more evident when we consider that the president has built his support on anti-western, populist conservatism. It presents Europe as being domi-



Photo: Kremlin.ru (CC) commons.wikimedia.org

Moldovan President Igor Dodon, often portrayed as a pro-Kremlin figure in the country, and his socialist party appear set to win the 2019 parliamentary election. They will most likely enter into a coalition with the declared pro-European Democratic Party led by oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, consolidating Moldova's political scene.

nated by a corrupt and demoralised elite which serve the interests of international bankers and destroys Christian values. This is why the democrats have adopted the “pro-Moldova” rhetoric, which is designed to allow a common narrative with the socialists to develop.

Rumours about Plahotniuc and Dodon's co-operation did not start yesterday, however. For many observers of Moldovan politics, Dodon's victory in the presidential election was part of Plahotniuc's overall plan. Both politicians have often been perceived as leaders of the same political cartel who nonetheless have different political views. Together they consolidate Moldova's political scene and share the profits. In this case, establishing a coalition of the two forces would be an act of unmasking and formalising the already existing relationship. It is also worth noting that not so long ago, Dodon said a coalition with “pro-European” parties was not an option for him, but he would consider a “pro-Moldovan” coalition.

The state and the people

The pillars on which the new narrative of the power elite will be based are becoming evident. It will be a story of a strong Moldovan state which distances itself from pro-Romanian groups and the EU. It will also be a welfare state which is close to the ordinary citizens. This first pillar was revealed in September 2018 when the

police aggressively broke up a manifestation of groups supporting a union with Romania. First, the police took over the buses that were accompanying the march (coming from the Romanian city Albo-Iulia) and then skirmishes broke out between police forces and demonstration leaders. As a result, the march turned into a protest against Plahotniuc and Dodon. Until that moment the unionists enjoyed

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some privileges from the authorities; there were even rumours that Plahotniuc was financing some of their activities. Prior to September the oligarch was never overtly criticised in the unionist demonstrations; now he is placed in the same bag as the pro-Russian president. It is quite possible that the whole incident was carefully planned. The harsh reaction of the authorities was clearly a bid to please pro-state patriotic voters. Yet it also brought some attention to pro-Roma-

nian groups and may help them become an alternative to Maia Sandu and Andrei Năstase. Undoubtedly, an opposition that attacks the government with ethnic and geopolitical arguments is more comfortable for the Democratic Party than a democratic and anti-oligarch opposition.

The second pillar of the narrative emerged shortly after Plahotniuc announced the change in his party's direction. Subsequently, his words were further explained by party politicians who stressed that their leader's decision did not mean a departure from the West, that it was a relatively minor shift in focus: more emphasis on ordinary people and their needs, and less on the expectations of EU bureaucrats and their ideological commitments. More energy will be put into building roads, preschools, hospitals and social security for the poorest. But it is difficult to avoid the impression that Moldova's Democratic Party sees European values as an obstacle to building infrastructure and providing social benefits.

Geopolitical blackmail

A change in the government's rhetoric does not necessarily mean that Moldova is taking a pro-Russian turn, at least not in the sense often implied in Central and Eastern European geopolitical discourse. Just a few years ago Eastern European states seemed to face a stark and unconditional choice: integration with the West or exclusive co-operation with the Kremlin. Today's world, and especially Europe, looks quite different.

Moldova's Democratic Party started its "pro-Moldova operation" quite early – five months before parliamentary elections. Yet a lot can happen between now and

February. One certainty, however, is that EU-Moldova relations will drastically cool down as EU diplomats, bureaucrats and members of the European Parliament have become frustrated with Moldova's lack of progress. Interestingly, Plahotniuc has invested considerable energy and money in his lobbying activities in Washington DC. This suggests that he perceives the United States as a more congenial partner than the EU. The foreign policy of the latter is seen as less pragmatic and predominantly value-driven. To the US, the "pro-Moldovan" course announced in September 2018 could be interpreted as a way of sending the following signal: "Stop pressuring us with all this democracy and rule of law talk, or we will look for partners in the East."

This move can be seen as a type of geopolitical blackmail. Instead of greater support for pro-European reforms, Moldova seeks financial support in exchange for maintaining strategic adherence to western (mostly US) interests. In the Trump era, these interests, especially in relations with Russia, are admittedly difficult to define. However, this muddiness benefits Plahotniuc even more. Should Plahotniuc indeed make an offer to the US, or other western partners, their reactions will have no effect on him entering a coalition with the socialists. This in turn would mean that the international community will have little influence on the future ruling elite in Moldova.


New opportunities

A remaining question is how Moscow would react to an alliance between "its Moldovan president" and the "pro-western" oligarch. It is difficult to imagine that the Kremlin is unaware of their mutual interdependencies. Investments in Dodon were made mostly for public relations and not strategic reasons. In terms of PR, such a move certainly pays off for the Kremlin – a Moldova governed by a coalition of democrats and socialists will be much more open to strengthening ties with Russia and stressing historical and cultural links. In strategic terms, however, this does not change the fact that Russia is content with its influences in the region as long as it has Transnistria, the unrecognised breakaway republic. The real value added for the Kremlin would be a unification of the separatist republic with Moldova, making the whole state permanently bonded to Russia. The rest is only a matter of spinning it for the international community.

The unification of Transnistria with Moldova is certainly not in the interests of Moldova's political and business elite. Dodon is well aware that the federalisation he promotes is little more than a political trick. A coalition with the democrats will give him an excuse to drop this narrative, in the name of political concessions

that go hand in hand with coalition. This also lends strength to the hope that this coalition will not turn Moldova too vehemently towards the Kremlin. Plahotniuc and Dodon can draw on the experience of Vladimir Voronin from 2003 when, after two years of political friendship with Moscow, he was almost forced to pursue unification with Transnistria and become wholly subordinate to the Kremlin. He eventually rejected the plan; it was too big of a threat to his own interests, just as much as it will be to Plahotniuc and Dodon.

In his day, Voronin was forced to pursue a policy of geopolitical balancing. The only exception is that conditions were very different than they are now: Moscow was offended by Voronin's move, while the West kept its distance from the president, who was after all the leader of the Communist Party. Today, a Europe facing multiple crises and an America led by Trump provide much more room for geopolitical ambiguities. Moldova will not be the only state that touts anti-EU rhetoric, talks about the necessity for dialogue with Russia and at the same time presents itself as a truly European state. Its diplomats are unlikely to receive a warm welcome in Paris or Brussels, but they may feel quite comfortable in Rome or Budapest.

Indeed, Moldova will most likely join the many states of Southern and Eastern Europe who seek support from alternative sponsors, somewhat outside the axis of the geopolitical dispute and willing to support "people's conservatism" in conflict with the liberal world. A visible sign of that direction can be seen in Moldova's recent deportation of eight school teachers who worked in schools financed by Fethullah Gullen, a critic of Turkey's Recep Erdoğan condemned for alleged involvement in the 2016 attempted coup. In fact, the second half of October saw Erdoğan's long-awaited visit to this tiny yet geopolitically significant state. Dodon did not mince his words when he described Erdoğan's leadership of Turkey as setting an example "when it comes to defending national interests". 

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

Piotr Oleksy is a Polish historian working at the Institute of Eastern Studies of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. He contributes to such magazines as *Nowa Europa Wschodnia* and *Tygodnik Powszechny*. He is also a member of the board of the Center for Regional and International Initiatives and an author of two books on Transnistria.

Poetry, music, politics

A conversation with Tomasz Sikora,
a Polish musician and member of Karbido.
Interviewer: Zbigniew Rokita

ZBIGNIEW ROKITA: Your band Karbido has recorded several records with a symbol of Ukrainian literature – Yuri Andrukhovych. How did this co-operation between a band from Wrocław and a writer from Ivano Frankivsk begin?

TOMASZ SIKORA: It was actually by coincidence. Back in 2005 Serhiy Zhadan, Andriy Bondar and Yuri Andrukhovych were among some Ukrainian writers invited to a literature festival in Wrocław. The idea was that the poets would read their own poems on stage. However, the organisers were worried that the audience would fall asleep, so they suggested that our band create a musical background to keep people awake. Recitations of poetry do not stir much emotion in Poland – as I would later find out, public recitation or the singing of poetry is more engaging in Ukraine. Andrukhovych knew what he wanted for his recitation; he came to us and explained how we should play. We immediately found a common language. Soon after we recorded an album together. It was called *Samogon* and con-

tained his poetry from *Songs for the Dead Rooster*.

What was Andrukhovych's standing in Ukraine at the time? Was he already considered the "Patriarch" of Ukrainian literature?

Yes, when I was travelling to Lviv in the 1990s, he was already a part of the canon and being studied at university. He was such a legend and I was surprised when he came to Wrocław in 2005 – I thought he had passed away, even though he was only 45. I didn't know any of his books at the time. I chose not to read them during the first few years of our collaboration. I only knew the texts we were working with on the records. It took a while before I took out the books and actually read them.

Your last album *Atlas extremo* is based on Andrukhovych's book *Lexicon of Intimate Cities*, where he describes his experiences from dozens of towns. In a piece called *Moscow* the poet sings out loud: "God how I would want to be English, German, French or even Japanese, just so I could truly like



Photo: Denys Ovchar

The music group Karbido.

Moscow! As if something grand, freaking rich, exotic and alien, placed within a safe distance like Rio, Shanghai or New York." In Minsk, he sings in Belarusian, which cannot be a coincidence. Are you interested in politics?

Over the years we have become increasingly interested, reacting to the changing reality. Andrukhovych himself often talks about political issues. During the Revolution of Dignity, he had a thesis: if people like Yanukovych win thanks to Donbas, then maybe it would be better to leave that region to Russia...

This caused numerous controversies, but many started to repeat it after him: either Euro-integration or territorial integrity at any cost...

A few years earlier, when we went to Kharkiv in the east of the country, we asked him to tell us something about the place. He answered ironically that, "I come from western Ukraine. In Kharkiv, I feel like a Croat in Serbia." On the topic of Crimea, he criticises the Tatars, that they didn't do anything other than take to the streets in order to defend the peninsula. Our third album *Absynth* came out in 2012, during the European Football Championships, which were held in Poland and Ukraine and when Kyiv was looking West. We asked about Ukraine's place in Europe. *Atlas estremo* is a spontaneous reaction to the events in Ukraine in the last few years. Later we played concerts as far as Mariupol, a few kilometres from the frontline.



You decided not to perform on the Maidan during the revolution. An iconic picture from the protests was a man playing the piano in front of the Berkut officers. Did music play an important role during that revolution?

The stage at the Maidan was alive and it gathered many musicians. Friends from a Ukrainian band called DachaBracha told us that for the people who were guarding the square, the fact that music still played meant the revolution was still alive. Ukraine is a musical nation, more than Poland. Take parties as an example. In Ukraine people start singing songs and it isn't about drunken tunes. Everyone knows those songs, but not from school. It is like they know them, just like that. So the Maidan concerts were

one thing. People were also singing and playing.

Could you explain this somehow?

It is a nation with a strong sense of community. You remember the anthem of the Orange Revolution?

Razom nas bahato (together we are many)...

...Nas ne podolaty (we can't be defeated). Exactly.

How did the Ukrainian music scene react to the events of recent years: the Maidan, Crimea, Donbas?

This scene has undergone a lot of changes in the last few years. Over a decade ago, when we started to tour Ukraine

with Yuri, I was buying loads of CDs there and I would listen to Ukrainian music over internet radio. I didn't know a lot of bands, so I was sometimes buying blind, usually attracted by the cover. There was some good Ukrainian language music at that time, but the scene was largely dominated by Russian language music. But there were bands, like Dead Rooster, who were performing in Ukrainian since the 1990s (and which the book *Songs for the Dead Rooster* is related to). Ocean of Elza is another band that performs in Ukrainian, but these were often the exceptions.

Today, listening to Ukrainian or Russian music has become more of a political choice. The choice is made not only by the audience, but by the media and state as well. There are regulations that oblige broadcasters to allot time to certain material like Ukrainian language music. The media are now promoting the popularity of Ukrainian bands which, in turn, leads to exposure and greater revenues from concerts. Since more and more Ukrainians, especially younger generations, are learning Ukrainian as their first language, it has an effect on the language of the emerging bands.

This will be a long battle. A pop star singing in Russian could potentially reach hundreds of millions listeners in Russia, Kazakhstan or in Belarus. While Ukrainian performers only reach Ukrainians. And the Russian-language music industry is much more developed. It is also easier to be successful in countries of the former Soviet

Union, mostly because of being close to the language and culture...

Popular music is a different topic, although the divide between Ukrainian language niche rock or punk music and Russian language pop blurs. Today, Ukrainians often create popular music for themselves in their own language.

What are some of the other issues Ukrainian music bands face?

One of the biggest issues is organising concerts. There is a lack of professionals in this regard. If it hadn't been for two women from a certain agency, we would not have been able to have concerts with Andrukhovych in Ukraine so many years ago. Another time we arrived for a concert in a large theatre in Kyiv and the director provided just two small speakers, saying it was enough for a proper rock concert.

Copyrights are also a problematic issue in Ukraine. It is relatively easy to download an album online or to buy a pirated version at a bazar. It is even possible to hear a song from an illegal source on the radio.

While this is true, CDs have stopped being the main income source for musicians. The fees they receive for music, legally streamed, is almost nothing. Artists earn mostly on concerts these days. This is where the problem lies. Things are changing, thankfully. Kyiv is a large city with hipster spots that could have just as easily been in Warsaw or Berlin. And there are a few good clubs. But outside Kyiv, it is much worse. The problem for

concert organisers is the dim perspective of low turnovers in ticket sales.

Does Ukrainian music have a chance to reach a western audience?

This question is timely as I have noticed that the Ukrainian state has started to think about ways to promote their country through music abroad. Observing the efforts of the Ukrainian embassy in Poland, I see that they are eager, but the resources are lacking.

What could interest westerners in Ukrainian music?

It has this unique and frequently used folk component. I am even getting a bit tired of it, as there is so much of it. Even if they play rock or punk, there are these references to national songs. Take DachaBracha, for example, who play ethnic music from all over the world, describing it as “ethno-chaos”. Another example is Perkalaba, from Ivano-Frankivsk, who take inspiration from punk and ska. This is a unique and interesting phenomenon.

Perkalaba's concert in Kraków was in a small venue. It is still very niche...

This is why I have no illusions. It will be difficult for Ukrainian music to reach mass audiences in the West. Its fate is to remain a niche. It isn't Anglo-Saxon pop. But this doesn't mean it won't interest the connoisseurs. One should refrain from belittling the popularity of Ukrainian bands. DachaBracha tour the US each year and get some attention.

Just like how the Ukrainian authors in Wrocław in 2005 were helped by the Orange Revolution, now artists are associated with the Revolution of Dignity – the world was reminded of Ukraine. DachaBracha tell their audience about the annexation of Crimea, and Oleg Sentsov (the Ukrainian filmmaker who has been in a Russian prison since the annexation of Crimea). They have been successful in raising Ukrainian issues to a wider audience.

What other developments do you see in Ukrainian music today?

One interesting development has been in the electronic music scene, where ethnic inspirations have also played a part. A precursor was Zavoloka some ten years ago. Folk-electro is a respected and growing genre. Just take a look at what Onuka did last year at the Eurovision Song Contest. After a dozen weak songs at this pop festival, she got on stage and played an intriguing piece which combined electronic and folk music. It was poppy, but original. I think that, in this way, she has become an ambassador of Ukrainian culture.

There has been some speculation that Sviatoslav Vakarchuk, the lead singer of Ocean of Elza, could run in the 2019 presidential elections with some polls suggesting he could be competitive. How symbolic of a figure is Vakarchuk to Ukrainians?

The strength of Vakarchuk and Ocean of Elza is that they have been consistent for years. Since the 1990s they have been


singing in Ukrainian, identified with the country, active proponents of a democratic and sovereign Ukraine – especially during the Revolution of Dignity. People appreciate this consistency. I would like the 43-year-old Vakarchuk to replace Poroshenko as president.

It is hard to remain a public figure removed from politics in Ukraine.

We had problems connected to this. One of our concert tours was supported by Poroshenko's foundation which was officially pro-European – I remember the EU flag on its logo. Suddenly, a week ahead of the first concert, Poroshenko entered the government of Mykola Azarov as the minister of economic development and trade. Andrukhovych called me and said: "Listen, we have to break off the concert tour, because we can't be connected with this." In the end, we swal-

lowed our pride and played with the support of one of Yanukovych's ministers.

The best two authors in Ukraine are, in my opinion, Zhadan and Andrukhovych – both have music bands. Both have a clear standpoint in political matters. Is this a Ukrainian phenomenon? That the authors want to be bards and "sing on the barricades"?

Zhadan and Andrukhovych both like to recite or sing their poetry. I mentioned how we met with Yuri – we were supposed to play music so people wouldn't fall asleep during the poetry recitals. Ukrainians are more energised during such performances. They want direct contact with poetry, also in its singing form. The fact that music is a way of expressing yourself politically in Ukraine is because the political reality there forces people to take sides. 

Translated by Daniel Gleichgewicht

Tomasz Sikora is a Polish musician and a member of the band Karbido.

He is the founder of the artistic platform "Hermetical Garage".

Zbigniew Rokita is a Polish journalist specialising in Eastern Europe. He is the author of a recent book titled *Królowie strzelców. Piłka w cieniu imperium* – a report on Eastern Europe as shown through the prism of sport and politics over the last century.



solidarity academy

SOLIDARITY ACADEMY: BORDERLANDS 2018

Project supported by the grant from
International Visegrad Fund

• Visegrad Fund

This year's **Solidarity Academy: Borderlands 2018** project will take place from **17-24 November** in Gdańsk at the European Solidarity Centre.

The **Solidarity Academy**, managed by the European Solidarity Centre, is an international project aimed at inspiring and supporting the development of young intellectuals all across Europe since 2007. The project's title refers to the Polish social movement **Solidarność (Solidarity)** and the peaceful socio-political transformations that took place in Poland and the other countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

Each edition of the Solidarity Academy has a specific theme and this year's topic is **"Borderlands"**. The idea of borderlands opens us to the widely-defined problems of relations, conflicts and interferences, and can serve as a starting point for discussions about the media and the way of telling stories.

During the workshops and lectures held within the framework of the Solidarity Academy, 16 active, aspiring and

young journalists, reporters, activists, bloggers, analysts or writers from the Visegrad, Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries will have an opportunity to expand their knowledge and improve their skills on such issues as borderlands on both a local and global scale. The practical part of the project includes field trips to Kaliningrad (Russia), Kartuzy (Poland), Szczecin (Poland) and Żuławy (Poland) where participants will have the opportunity to conduct fieldwork and employ tools and concepts developed during the workshops as well as develop their own definition of borderlands.

The co-organisers of the academy together with European Solidarity Centre are The Common Europe Foundation, New Eastern Europe, Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, József Attila Circle Literary Association of Young Hungarian Writers, Balkans, let's get up! Organisation in Serbia, Literary club in Slovakia, and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's Warsaw Office.

More information | solidarityacademy.eu

ecs.gda.pl

SOLIDARITY

HERE AND NOW

SOLIDARITY HERE AND NOW

is a long-term project that aims to bring together volunteers and volunteer coordinators engaged in working with refugees across the European continent to share experiences, discuss common issues and learn from each other. We all hear about refugees but not many of us know the every-day heroes who make the re-

fugees' situation a little easier. Many volunteers across the world have decided to step in the line of the conflict and open their hearts to help the newcomers, acting merely on the value of solidarity and compassion.

The first edition of the project took place in 2017 with the main goal to diagnose and confront the needs



Photo: Grzegorz Mehring / ECS archive



Photo: Grzegorz Mehring / ECS archive

and expectations of volunteers from the Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Russia, Serbia and Spain. The second edition will bring in nine new participants from Greece, Hungary, Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Russia, Serbia and Italy and also gather the nine graduates from the first edition. This 2018 edition will take place on 26-30 November in Gdańsk, Poland at the European Solidarity Centre. The project organizers include the Allianz Cultural Foundation and the European Solidarity Centre. The outcomes of the edition 2018 will be created together with the participants, trainers and graduates. Since the outcomes of the first edition were more educational, this year's edition will look at planning the postproduction of the 2018 edition to be more artistic.

The specific aims of the project dedicated to the refugee volunteers are:

- to enable volunteers to give an account of their experience and share it with each other
- to help participants understand their situation from the psychological perspective
- to shed light on intercultural and ethical perspectives of their work
- to give the volunteers practical understanding of some aspects of the situation of their clients
- to continue supporting and networking for the graduates of the first edition of the project



Photo: Natalia Jążdżewska / ECS archive

"Working with refugees is very emotional, even for me as a non-emotional person. Sometimes you don't know how to cope with it. Here [during the Solidarity Here and Now project] I was taught how to accept my emotions. It is great to have an opportunity to talk about it and to learn some practical tricks for my everyday work."

Evgeny Yastrebov
Volunteer at Civic Assistance, Russia



Photo: Grzegorz Mehring / ECS archive

"Before you come to a camp, leave your ideas and expectations aside. People usually expect to see a lot of suffering, sadness and depression; they expect children to wear old clothes. They believe they know where the people come from, they have a ready image of a refugee but already this sets a power balance and doesn't allow for meeting a person as a person, before you meet a person as a refugee."

Hania Hakel
a psychologist responsible for
volunteer training and mentoring at
Give Something back to Berlin, Germany

project organizer



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Wolfgang Templin

Der Kampf um Polen

Die abenteuerliche Geschichte
der Zweiten Polnischen Republik
1918–1939



1. Aufl. 2018, 254 S.
24 s/w Abb., 1 s/w Karte, Festeinband
EUR 39,90
ISBN 978-3-506-78757-6

Wolfgang Templin, geb. 1948 in Jena, studierte Philosophie in Ost-Berlin und Warschau und erhielt 2016 den Verdienstorden der Bundesrepublik Deutschland.

„Faktenreich und überaus dicht geschrieben. Wer es liest, der gewinnt tiefe Einblicke in die Geschichte einer Nation [...].“

Bernd Schekausti, MDR Kultur

Wolfgang Templin

Der Kampf um Polen

Die abenteuerliche Geschichte der
Zweiten Polnischen Republik 1918–1939

Wolfgang Templin erzählt die unwahrscheinliche und abenteuerliche Geschichte der zweiten Gründung des polnischen Staates: Nach 123 Jahren der Aufteilung zwischen Russland, Österreich und Preußen ließen die Polen im November 1918 ihr Land als souveräner Staat wieder entstehen. Der Zweiten Polnischen Republik aber gab kaum einer seiner Nachbarn eine Überlebenschance. Dennoch blieb es über 20 Jahre selbständig. Erst der gemeinsame Überfall Deutschlands und der Sowjetunion beendete 1939 die Existenz Polens zeitweilig wieder.

Der frühere DDR-Bürgerrechtler und Publizist Wolfgang Templin schildert die frappierenden Umstände der Gründung der Zweiten Polnischen Republik, ihre äußere Bedrohung durch die Nachbarstaaten wie etwa den Krieg gegen Sowjetrußland, aber auch die inneren Konflikte.

NGOs in Hungary learn to adapt under pressure

BALINT JOSA AND ANNA FEDAS

Since the passage of a new anti-NGO law in Hungary, civil society organisations have been on the edge. No one knows for certain **what will happen**. The biggest fear is that there will be a backlash after the European Parliament voted to support triggering Article 7 against Hungary.

It is an average Monday at Menedék, a Budapest-based NGO. The team meets in a big conference room to discuss weekly issues and report back from the weekend, while project managers share recent developments, good and bad. The phones are off, but there is always somebody waiting for a random client to show up and ask for some assistance or to sign up for an activity. The mood is casual, as usual. The team is very diverse and made up of old and young members. They are expats from non-EU countries, former refugees, university students and experienced NGO workers. The association is pretty liberal when it comes to political or religious backgrounds and has residents, citizens and former asylum seekers on the board. Yet the team is significantly smaller than it was last year; many chairs in the conference room are empty.

Menedék is an association of individuals, independent from politics or any formal institution, created to offer help to foreigners arriving in Hungary or Hungarians leaving the country. It carries out a wide range of projects, mostly assisting migrants with social programmes, organising cultural activities and language courses, holding intercultural workshops and helping with the integration process. It is one of the largest Hungarian NGOs in the field. Yet the NGOs involved in

this kind of work are often labelled by the media, which support the ruling party Fidesz, as “Soros-NGOs”.

Polarisation and hateful rhetoric

Recently all public funding mechanisms aimed at assisting migrants, which were funded under the umbrella of the Hungarian ministry of interior and referred to as the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), have ceased to function. All new calls for proposals by the immigration and asylum office are on hold. Any NGO in Hungary that has offered assistance to people in the migration or asylum process are closing down, significantly decreasing their activities, or seeking new sources of funding. The AMIF grants sponsored a variety of programmes, including language courses, work placements, integration training, police education, research and all sorts of social and cultural programmes. However, after an interview was published with Kristof Altusz, a deputy state secretary within the Hungarian foreign ministry, who admitted that nearly 2,000 people a year were receiving protection and that the immigration and asylum office were sponsoring

The government of Hungary invests an inordinate amount of its political energy into the **single issue** of migration.

“Soros-like” activities for NGOs, the interior ministry put everything on hold. Menedék and several other NGOs had to let many staff go. Since then, the mood has been grim, but people continue to sign up as volunteers. There are still plenty of citizens who are deeply concerned to show that Hungary is not a xenophobic, hostile country.

The government of Hungary invests an inordinate amount of its political energy into the single issue of migration. The society is extremely polarised. Many are convinced that our borders are under siege by Islamic terrorists, controlled by hidden powers, embodied in the “evil” George Soros – a former Hungarian citizen of Jewish origin currently living in the United States, who has donated millions of dollars to philanthropy and funding the globally-respected Central European University in Budapest. On the other side are those who do not believe in the threat of migration and claim that the real issue is state corruption, including the rapid acquisition of wealth by the family and close circle of the prime minister. They are worried about the lack of democracy, the power shift and the inhumane experiences that the small number of asylum seekers in Hungary must endure.

Rhetoric in Hungary is full of hate, with each side labelling the other as a traitor, despot, mercenary, communist or agent for some hidden interest. In recent years



Photo courtesy of Josa Balint

During a workshop organized by an NGO in Budapest, children were asked to draw how they saw the future.

a large number of critical and independent newspapers and radio stations have disappeared and the Hungarian press reflects this widening division. Government-sponsored media, like *Magyar Idők*, *Origo* and *Ripost*, regularly pay significant fines for spreading lies about NGOs and the political opposition, while the prime minister, Viktor Orbán, often brands opposition-owned media as fake news.

In this environment, NGOs are treated with an unprecedented level of suspicion. On a daily basis we are forced to deal with new laws and policies, cuts to funding and flagrant hate speech. Accusations lacking any concrete evidence are commonplace, and death threats are becoming routine. Workers at NGOs like

Menedék are forced to create new security protocols. We have lawyers on call and ask our families not to tell random people what we do or where we work. It is tiring, expensive and counterproductive. Many people have been unable to put up with the pressure and have left the NGO sector altogether, but those of us who remain are more dedicated than ever. It is an interesting time to be a human rights defender in Hungary. It is challenging but empowering. We did not expect to be political, but politics has found us.

What lies ahead?

The biggest challenge NGOs face, alongside the Central European University, is uncertainty. The legislation is unclear and, as of yet, nobody has been sanctioned. No fines have been made and there are activists in jail. Yet we do not know what is on the horizon. Many NGOs fear that there may yet be a backlash as revenge for the European Parliament's recommendation to trigger Article 7 (which would sanction Hungary in the EU – editor's note). Many NGOs advocated for the European Parliament to support the move. The subsequent discussions on social media were extremely hostile, which may lead to some form of pushback towards the "supporting" camp.

Neil Clarke, head of the Europe and Central Asia Programme with the International Minority Rights Group and based in Budapest, has this to say: "I am mostly disappointed with the fact that the Hungarian government is so easily pushing out the human and minority rights know-how that has been gathering for the last 25 years in Budapest. Budapest has become a unique international centre for minority rights civil society with several international organisations based here. The new laws will definitely complicate the everyday work by numerous human rights organisations in Budapest. Some of them, if not most of them, will pack up their offices and relocate to a different country. It is a great loss not only for the minority communities, for whom these NGOs play an important role, but simply for the city and its intellectual development. Along with the offices and expertise, the staff will also leave. This heritage of civil society awareness will not be easy to rebuild. Indeed it is even sadder since it was the Hungarian government, with its historic commitment to minority rights, which has supported the development of this unique heritage over the years."

The Minority Rights Group has over 40 years of experience working with non-dominant ethnic, religious and linguistic communities, and they bring a long-term view of human rights issues to bear in all the work they do. They use tools typical for human rights organisations, like training and education, legal support, publish-

ing, media and cultural programmes, capacity building, international advocacy and networking. Their Budapest office has functioned there since 1996.

Who will support human rights?

What are the observed results of the “Stop Soros” laws? What are possible reactions and solutions to this situation? The Hungarian Helsinki Committee’s statement regarding the adoption of the proposals speaks for itself: “The primary aim of this legislation is to intimidate, by means of criminal law, those who fully and legitimately assist asylum seekers or foreigners, protecting humanitarian values and the right to a fair procedure. It threatens to jail those who support vulnerable people. This runs counter to all we consider as the rule of law, European and Christian values.”

The Mahatma Gandhi Human Rights Organisation is a Budapest-based humanitarian NGO that was created in 1992. “We use football as a tool to fight racism,” says Gibril Deen from the Mahatma Gandhi Human Rights Organisation. “What we observe now, after adopting the new law, is a lack of courage within society to openly support human rights organisations. No one wants to be the first one to be officially convicted. What is more, the section of society that only follows the media managed by the government doesn’t know what is going on in the country. Whereas our partners from abroad constantly ask us about how are we surviving in these hard times.”


Neil Clarke of the Minority Rights Group Europe notes the effect of intimidation and disinformation that the Stop Soros package has had on Hungarian NGOs: “Hungarian NGOs have started to co-operate in order to exchange information and consolidate their positions. They are also trying to explain to the public the threats in the new law. The Minority Rights Group has historically worked in countries and regions outside of Hungary. But due to the political situation here, it has become more directly involved in what is going on in the country.”

András Kovats, the director of Menedék, notes that the difficulty continues in spite of their strong or well-thought out messages. In the extremely polarised media world, whatever you say or do is often not heard, or else it can be turned inside out. The only powerful tools that are almost immune to this are humour and dedication to the cause.

“First of all we can start to co-operate and be linked more than ever before,” suggests Deen from the Mahatma Gandhi Human Rights Organisation. “We, the civil society actors of Central and Eastern European, need to have a common strategy to

The best **defence** is the good, reliable and high-quality work that these NGOs carry out.

resist the current political situation,” adds Clarke from the Minority Rights Group Europe. “We have a greater duty and motivation than we used to have before.”

It is also important to stay calm, accept the necessity to be on the defensive and act whenever necessary. And we need to be wary of burning out under the pressure. What is more, if we shout “dictator” too often it might become part of the background, people will tune it out and stop hearing the meaning. The best defence is the good, reliable and high-quality work that these organisations carry out. Reaching out to ordinary people by talking about our work and showing them the results of our activities might be, in the end, an effective and constructive way to close the polarised gap. 

Balint Josa is a human rights activist, trainer and project manager. He is a board member of Hungarian and international NGOs focused on empowering minorities and combatting hate-speech.

Anna Fedas is a social development co-ordinator with the Gdańsk-Gdynia-Sopot Metropolitan Area and co-creator of the Immigrants Integration Model and Equal Treatment Model in Gdańsk.

Polish Muslims, Polish Fears

A reflection on politics and the fear of the Other

MAXIM EDWARDS

Like other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Poland's **public debate on migration and Islam** has become a discussion about how to “prevent the danger” from entering the country. And amid it all, one group of voices is absent: those of Muslims themselves.

Through smashed windows, a few figures could be seen hurrying inside to afternoon prayers. Candles left by well-wishers flickered beneath the shards, beside a bouquet of flowers. In November 2017 unknown attackers vandalised the Ochota Muslim Cultural Centre, the largest Islamic community in Warsaw. It was just one more sign of rising intolerance against Poland's few Muslims. Some commentators in right-wing media have labelled these attacks as “resistance to Islamicisation,” while several politicians in the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) seem to agree: the former foreign minister Witold Waszczykowski once publicly proclaimed himself an Islamophobe, and PiS chairman Jarosław Kaczyński has castigated Muslim migrants as carrying “parasites and protozoa.”

Such views may have mainstreamed. One survey from last year found that 71 per cent of Poles stressed that “all further migration from mainly Muslim countries should be stopped,” while in a Pew Survey of the same year two-thirds took a negative view of Muslims living in Poland. Like most Europeans, Poles also overestimate

the number of Muslims living in their country: they believe there are 2.6 million in Poland. In fact, they number just 35,000, or 0.09 per cent of the country's population. With so few Muslims to encounter (just 12 per cent of Poles admit to having knowingly met one), the strength of the convictions about them demands some reflection.

Vocal minority

Poland's public debate on migration has become a discussion about how to "prevent the danger" of Islam from entering the country. And amid it all, one group of voices is absent: those of Muslims themselves. Just a week before the act of vandalism in Ochota, a group of protesters unfurled a banner off the side of Warsaw's Poniatowski Bridge. It depicted a Trojan horse labelled "Islam," with a caricatured Arab man wearing a suicide vest crouching inside, waiting to be let into a fortress named "Europe".

This rally, held on Poland's Independence Day in 2017, drew a crowd of around 60,000 – some from ultra-nationalist groups. And while marchers later attacked the international media and their apparent uncharitable reporting of the rally, it would be fair to say there was a very loud and very visible minority present. Their messages could not have been clearer: "Islam equals terrorism" read one banner beneath Warsaw's Palace of Culture and Sciences. Government statistics show a sharp rise in attacks against Muslims: between January and October 2017, 664 hate crimes were committed against Muslims in Poland. In an emailed statement, the Polish ombudsman's office said the number of hate crimes directed towards Muslims (or people perceived to be Muslim) in the country has almost doubled between 2015 and 2017.

I meet Nezar Cherif at Warsaw's first mosque in the city's southern Ursynów district. The Moroccan-born imam explains that before 1991 Warsaw had no permanent mosque; Muslims used to pray at the Egyptian embassy. As we sit in his office, he is eager to share his experiences working with Muslim Chechen and Tajik refugees in asylum seekers' camps across eastern Poland, as well as their children's drawings – drawings of the lives they left behind and the new lives their parents have promised. Cherif says that while public attitudes do not always make Polish Muslims' lives easy, they largely continue as normal. "If you want to be popular, just criticise Islam," he says. "We hold press conferences here, but few people come. The problem isn't journalists, but editorial slants; people want a *story* about Islam."

"As a minority, and when I say a minority I really mean a minority, none of us can raise the issue [of media portrayal] in the courts: nobody wants to draw attention to themselves," explains Mahmud (a pseudonym), a student from the Middle

East who regularly attends the mosque. “There are mechanisms to deal with hate speech, but newspapers know they won’t be challenged when it comes to Muslims.”

Yet some have stuck their neck out, such as fellow Moroccan-born imam Youssef Chadid, director of the Muslim Cultural-Religious Centre in Poznań and a frequent prayer leader at the Islamic Centre in Ochota. Since 2017 Chadid has received death threats after a video purportedly showing him making extremist statements were released online. Chadid insists the film was fabricated by nationalists as punishment for his outspoken public attempts to counter Islamophobic attitudes (his fellow Poznań citizens then held a rally in solidarity with the imam).

“At first they started to debate about refugees with no refugees present... and politicians and the media soon changed it into a discussion about Islam,” Chadid told me in a written exchange. He feels the media has played a negative role: “It has marginalised Muslims and those with knowledge of Islam, leaving no field for their opinions. National[ist] movements have become more active, attacking Muslims and Islam at every event without being deterred.”

In the media,
Muslims were
portrayed as being
synonymous with
migrants attempting
to reach the
European Union –
an anonymous and
dehumanised crowd.

Co-existence

But what Muslims do the Polish media talk about? A survey of portrayals of Muslims in the Polish press between 2015 and 2016, commissioned by the Ombudsman’s Office, revealed that articles focusing on the country’s Muslim community were actually very rare. Instead, Muslims were presented as synonymous with migrants attempting to reach the European Union – an anonymous and dehumanised crowd. Far from having a voice, the report concluded that Muslims had become a “polemic device” instrumentalised in a diverse range of political debates to smear political opponents.

In the summer of 2017 the leaders of various Polish Muslim organisations sent an open letter to the government expressing concerns about rising levels of intolerance and hate speech. There was no immediate response. The Polish Ombudsman’s office concluded that the obstacle in tackling these issues was not just the inaction of the authorities, but also moves that could be seen as openly obstructive: not least the government’s abolition of Poland’s Council for Preventing Racial Discrimination and Intolerance in May 2016.



Photo: Max Edwards

The mosque in Kruszyniany – a village with a population of 160, located near the Belarusian border.

In October 2017 thousands of Poles joined arms to encircle the country in a 3,500 kilometre “rosary of the borders”, marking the Feast of the Rosary – a festival celebrating the Christian victory over the Ottoman Turks at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. As the organisers put it, this was faith on the frontline; they aimed to “defend the Christian identity of Poland”, and by extension combat the “Islamicisation of Europe.” One wonders what the residents of Kruszyniany, a village with a population of 160 located near the Belarusian border, made of this spectacle. Here stands one of Poland’s oldest mosques, in one of the cultural centres of Poland’s tiny Lipka Tatar community – Muslims whose ancestors arrived here in the early 14th century. Legend has it that in the late 17th century, Polish King Jan III Sobieski was so pleased with a Tatar cavalry commander’s service that he granted the community as much land as he could ride across in a day – and his descendants settled here, in the forests of the rural Podlasie province. They came to play important roles

in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, even entering the *szlachta*, the class of nobles eligible to elect the monarch.

Apart from their Islamic faith, little now distinguishes Poland's Tatars from their Christian neighbours, with whom they have co-existed for centuries. Their language faded away and their ancestors' mossy gravestones in Kruszyniany's cemetery bear almost stereotypical Polish surnames. Poland's Tatars are, as the scholar Katarzyna Warmińska calls them, a "familiarised other" – closer than a "migrant" yet not quite "indigenous".

Ever since conflict erupted between Warsaw and Brussels over resettling Syrian refugees across the European Union, the Lipka Tatar villages have attracted the attention of western journalists. Their reports tend to strike the same chord: Poland's Tatars are a "gotcha" against Polish xenophobes. But things may not be so simple. If there is one thing Poles know about the country's tiny Tatar community, it is the role they played in 1683, fighting alongside the Polish army to defeat the Ottoman Turks in the siege of Vienna. Thus Poland's Tatars have earned their martial valour and, accordingly, were largely treated with tolerance. They formed the backbone of the Muzułmański Związek Religijny (MZR), or Muslim Religious Union, founded in 1925. Tomas Miśkiewicz, a Tatar imam from the MZR, currently serves as the country's Chief Mufti (Miśkiewicz did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

"Until fairly recently, to be Muslim in Poland was to be Tatar," begins Artur Konopacki, a Polish academic of Tatar origin and the author of *Muslims on Polish Soil*. Muslims of other backgrounds, he adds, began to arrive from "fraternal socialist states" of the Arab world during the socialist period, and more recent Muslim immigrants founded the Liga Muzułmańska (LM) in 2001. Relations between the two organisations are complex and sometimes fraught; some argue that the Polish state privileges the MZR in official events.

"Some governmental departments present the Islamic Tatar model as the only one in Poland, which is not true," says Youssef Chadid, the Moroccan-born imam from the LM. "The government must take into account that the rest of [Poland's] Muslims actually are the majority of Muslims, and they follow other organisations than the Tatars." Nevertheless, "our relations with the Tatars are friendly: we have a shared religion and homeland," he adds.

Good example?

Konopacki adds that the Tatars' form of Islam is widely perceived in Polish society as a "moderating influence", which could be corroded by fundamentalist

newcomers. And while one might think Poland's Tatars could have a common cause with their fellow Muslims, Konopacki adds that Tatars largely do not associate themselves with the immigrants depicted by the Polish press. While some Polish Tatars initially voted for PiS, like most of their neighbours in Podlasie, the party's xenophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric soon made them think twice.

Konopacki sees the Polish Tatar story as one of peaceful co-existence, but contrasts the assimilated Polish Tatar with the common image of the migrant who disrespects the majority by "taking social security". And that sentiment cuts both ways: Konopacki adds that Tatars are as sceptical about immigration as most in Poland, fearing that "bad behaviour" on the part of the new arrivals will make Catholic Poles see them differently. But while others often invoke them as an example of Polish tolerance, Konopacki believes Tatars still do not get an adequate social platform to talk about their faith. "The Polish press always get a Polish scholar of Islam or a political scientist to comment on the issue," he sighs, "but never a Polish Tatar who actually lives the religion."

And while there are few other Muslim minorities in Europe today who can insert themselves into nationalist historiographies with such ease, Poland's Tatars have found themselves on the receiving end of some unwelcome attention, too. In February 2015 for instance, an article was published in the Polish daily *Rzeczpospolita* titled "Dokąd deportować Tatarów?" ("Where could the Tatars be deported?"). It was a follow-up to a piece by geopolitical analyst George Friedman who earlier published in *Rzeczpospolita* stating that Europe should consider deporting Muslims out of security interests. The obvious question was asked: Does this include the Polish Tatars? The previous June, the cemetery and mosque in Kruszyniany were vandalised just after the village's Muslims started to fast for Ramadan; a pig was spray-painted on the side of the mosque and offensive graffiti was scrawled on many of the gravestones. Given the tiny village's isolation, the vandalism was probably an organised excursion.

The mosque in Kruszyniany is understated. A small 18th-century wooden building at the edge of a forest, its minarets are reminiscent of the Orthodox Church towers which also stud the landscape of this mixed region. I find the mosque's caretaker Dżemil Gembicki inside, entertaining a tour group of Polish pensioners. They are smitten; it seems he has done this many times before. Gembicki is eager to stress that Islam has a place in Poland, and the Islam of the Polish Tatars is a special one. He dismisses what the papers and the "patriots" say with a wave of his hand, but as our discussion continues, his good humour gives way to an ashen sulk. Before I manage to, he notes the abovementioned *Rzeczpospolita* article. "Some Poles see the fact that we've kept our faith as a sign of extremism ... but why have the Copts in Egypt not become Muslims?" he asks. "Are they fundamentalist for not assimilating?"

When some Poles argue that they're fighting Islamism, not Islam, we know what they mean. It's like others fight social democracy when they mean communism."

A group of female tourists arrives, and Gembicki stands up to greet them. He does not offer them headscarves. "You see, people like to come here to the 'Polish Orient' for a bit of exoticism," he laughs. If Poland's Tatars are anything, says Gembicki, they are a "Dobry Przykład" – a good example. It is his favourite phrase.

Fear of the unknown?

This Islamophobia without Muslims is not just a Polish phenomenon. Some of the most resolutely anti-immigrant Brits live in areas with the lowest levels of immigration, as do many Germans who support Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). Nor on closer reflection is it a phenomenon, something which eludes explanation. After all, Poles' problems with Muslims, or the impulses which nourish them, were not conjured up recently by right-wing populists or disinformation in the "patriotic" press.

"We had the disappearance of the Jewish other, the disappearance of the communist other, and now the appearance of the Islamic other. Poland has seen anti-semitism without Jews for over 60 years; why should Islam be any different?" asks Konrad Pędziwiatr, a professor at Kraków's University of Economics, who has written extensively about Poland's Muslims. Pędziwiatr believes one reason why Islamophobia has taken deep root is because Polish society has yet to fully reckon with antisemitism: "Nobody wants to discuss Jedwabne or Kielce [massacres of Jews in 1941 and 1946], people only want to discuss the righteous among nations [Poles who saved Jews.] And this silence has been politicised," he explains. "Polish society has never really critically reflected on its relationship with the Jewish and now Muslim other."

Or at least, its others in the east. Monika Bobako, an assistant professor at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and author of *Islamophobia as a Technology of Power*, believes that Poland's "semi-peripheral" place within the European Union helps explain the potency of Islamophobia in Polish society. While Poles may still be denigrated as "easterners" in post-Brexit Britain, they become stalwart Europeans when they defend the continent against mass migration from the global South. Demonising Muslims and emphasising their civilisational "otherness," Bobako explains, allows Poland to symbolically "re-enter" Europe.

Economic success over the last decade complicates the more conventional left-wing explanations for xenophobia.

Bobako links this dynamic to the uncertainties many Poles faced about their country and its place in the world during its transition from socialism. During the 2000s the average Pole's wage skyrocketed, and while the economy weathered the storm of 2008, the gap between rich and poor grew wider. Poland's economic success during these years complicates the more conventional left-wing explanations for xenophobia. As two Polish essayists Adam Chmielski and Michal Kozlowski point out, for the first time ever Poles have everything; so when foreigners came, they felt they had something to lose. Meanwhile, increasing numbers of young Poles sought their future elsewhere in the EU, mainly working in the UK or Germany. And while abroad, they encountered those strangers, but exposure to more multicultural societies has not been enough to change some opinions.

Securitisation

These days ideas and fears cross borders as regularly as young Polish migrants. Sociologist Katarzyna Górak-Sosnowska argues that Poland's "Islamophobia without Muslims" is an import of the digital age, as xenophobic images of the "global Muslim" travel across the world and become even more potent in countries where people have next to no experience with Muslims (let alone positive ones) on which to base their views. While PiS has clearly pandered to such sentiments, Pędziwiatr warns against laying all the blame at their door. "This is not just about one party, but about structural matters and how Poles are conditioned to see super-diversity," he explains.

Bobako adds that such views are hardly the preserve of Poland's resurgent nationalist right: liberals can denounce Muslim refugees as inherently illiberal and therefore a threat to the rights of LGBT people or Jews in Poland. This "liberal Islam-


Ideas and fears cross
borders as regularly
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"Islamophobia
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the digital age.

phobia," according to Bobako, also reaffirms Poland's position in Europe, but appeals to a Europe of liberal values rather than the Europe of traditional cultures and nation-states. After all, when it comes to the securitisation of Muslim populations as inherently suspect or criminal (a trait shared by both liberal and nationalist Islamophobes), Polish attitudes and policies alike may not be outliers in Europe. In one chilling example, Iraqi doctoral student Ameer Alkhawlani was arrested in October 2016 under unclear circumstances,

allegedly because he had refused to report on Muslim communities in Kraków for the Polish security services (Alkhawlani was eventually deported from Poland

last April). In a letter written during his detention and published by *Political Critique*, Alkhawlany claims he told officers that he was an atheist and would not know how to conduct himself as a regular worshipper in a mosque, but they refused to believe him.

Perhaps a fixation on the miniscule number of Poland's Muslims – from the Pakistani businessman in Warsaw to the Polish Tatar in Kruszyńiany – only reinforces the logic at the heart of society's fearful attitude towards them. "Why worry about your Muslims," one could ask, "when you have so few of them to fear?"

"The smaller a minority is in a given country, the easier it is to politicise them and portray them as a threat, especially if they have little recourse," concludes Pędziwiatr. "Islamophobic rhetoric has always been here, but what we're witnessing now is its banalisation – it's no longer just the slogans of backbenchers, it's now also coming from cabinet ministers." 

Maxim Edwards is a journalist writing on Central and Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space, and a former editor at openDemocracy Russia (oDR). He is currently assistant editor at OCCRP in Sarajevo. He writes here in a personal capacity.

Nord Stream

The narrative of a new Molotov–Ribbentrop pact?

FRANCIS MASSON

The debates that took place on the first Nord Stream pipeline exemplify the politically detrimental consequences that can arise from the **misuse of the past for political gains**. Carefully analysing the context and history of the comparison shows that Polish politicians are not trapped in memories of the past, rather they have developed tools to play on their audience's sensitivity to its own history.

History appears in various shapes within the public debate. Though not a Polish specificity, the Polish political sphere offers fertile ground for memory studies. History can be the object of public policy, as in the ongoing debate on the 2018 amendments to the 1988 Act on the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN law). It can also be used as the legitimating argument for the conduct of a policy: hence the repeated claims for war reparations from Germany by members of the PiS party. Finally, the traumatic memory of historical events can be brought to the surface by a symbolic policy. This was the consequence of the Polish authorities' plan, revealed (and later abandoned) last summer, to include illustrations of historical Polish landmarks on Polish passports that are now within its neighbours' borders –for instance, the Polish military cemetery in Lviv, Ukraine and the Gate of Dawn in Vilnius, Lithuania. Such appearances of history within public debate often become the focus of intense media coverage.

Return to 2006

On April 30th 2006 during a conference in Brussels on transatlantic security, Radosław Sikorski, then the Polish minister of defence, described the Nord Stream pipeline project as a “new Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact”. The analogy was triggered by German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s refusal to back out of the pipeline project that was agreed upon with Gazprom (the large Russian natural gas company) by the former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder. The historical similarity initially encompassed more than the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. As reported by Germany’s public international broadcaster *Deutsche Welle* on May 1st 2006: “Poland has a particular sensitivity to corridors and deals above our head. That was the Locarno tradition; that was the Molotov-Ribbentrop tradition. That was the 20th century. We don’t want any repetition of that.” At that time, Sikorski was the defence minister under the PiS government of Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz and Jarosław Kaczyński. In February 2007 he resigned from his post in protest to Poland’s engagement in the Afghanistan war. He later joined the Civic Platform (PO) government as foreign minister from 2007 to 2014.

The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, signed on August 23rd 1939 on behalf of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, was a treaty of non-aggression that led to the de facto fourth partition of the Polish state (following the partitions of 1772, 1793, and 1795). The 1939 partition was foreseen in the pact’s secret protocol. By using this historical reference in his Brussels speech, Sikorski implied continuity between (1) the three partitions of Poland by Prussia, the Austrian Empire and Tsarist Russia in the late 18th century, (2) the division of Poland by Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia in 1939, and (3) what was considered to be the geopolitical consequences of an energy infrastructure project between the contemporary German Federal Republic and the Russian Federation. In essence, Sikorski referred to the historical argument of a German-Russian threat against Polish sovereignty in order to discredit the validity of the Nord Stream pipeline project.

Poland referred to the historical argument of a threat against Polish sovereignty in order to **discredit** the Nord Stream pipeline.

Are such references expressions of Polish fear of German-Russian alliances inherent to the national collective memory? Are we observing a memory game that is typical of Polish political life? Or is the use of history merely a rhetorical technique used by a select number of politicians? These questions shed light on the issue of the “weight” (influence) and “choice” (conscious use) of history in political debates, essential concepts within the field of memory studies developed by French political scientist Marie-Claire Lavabre in 1991. Examining the Polish debate on

the first Nord Stream pipeline project reveals that the historical comparison was initially employed by Polish right-wing politicians. Later, they kept it alive using it against Sikorski after his appointment as minister for foreign affairs in the subsequent PO government.

A recycled metaphor

The Nord Stream pipeline project was first described as a new Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact in the lower house of the Polish Parliament by Gertruda Szumska, a member of the nationalist Catholic party *Dom Ojczysty* (Ancestral Home). In her speech on July 5th 2005 Szumska denounced Nord Stream as a “Moscow-Berlin-Paris axis,” implying that it represented geopolitical interests which contradicted the solidarity that EU membership should guarantee in foreign affairs and defence. The Nord Stream, in her view, defied economic logic and was only conceived as a tool to harm – “deliberately and flagrantly” – Polish sovereignty. Such agreements were “made above Poles’ heads”, as Szumska phrased it, and ostensibly echoed the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact.

Her comparison did not receive coverage in the international media: speaking in Polish to a national audience in the closed environment of the Polish parliament did not attract much attention. On the other hand, when the comparison was used by the defence minister in front of an international audience of high-ranking officials in Brussels, it was reported by leading international outlets such as *The Guardian* and *Deutsche Welle*. The context of growing tension in EU-Russian relations gave it an added degree of potency. In January 2006 Russia cut its gas supply to Ukraine in the middle of a very cold winter, undermining not only Ukraine’s energy supply but also the energy markets of Central and Eastern European countries. For the EU, this dispute catalysed thinking about what it could do to secure its energy supply.

In this tense geopolitical landscape, Sikorski’s misuse of the past was negatively received in Berlin and Brussels, and including those who agreed that the Nord Stream was detrimental to the energy security of the EU and its Central and Eastern members. Hence, the Latvian Defence Minister Gediminas Kirkilas considered Sikorski’s metaphor “too strong,” but thought it reflected the “essence of the problem”. On the other hand, the European Commission’s chief spokesman Johannes Laitenberger said, “the language employed was certainly neither helpful nor proportionate to the problem.” Ruprecht Polenz, head of the German Bundestag’s foreign policy committee, described the comparison as “absurd” and “harmful for German-Polish relations.” At the time Polish-German relations had

already suffered a deeply historically-loaded crisis, linked to German civil society groups claiming remedies and compensation for the displacement of populations after the Second World War.

Memory game strategies

At an international level, how can we explain this use of the past? One hypothesis is that Sikorski was deliberately aiming for broad media coverage of his criticism of the Nord Stream project as an existential threat to Polish sovereignty. In this case, the result was achieved, but the coverage was negative and Sikorski's gambit became a recurring anecdote in scholarly and journalistic writings. One could also argue that Sikorski used the historical argument in an attempt to evoke empathy on the part of his European (notably German) partners. However, he did not convince his European partners that the Nord Stream would threaten Polish (and, by extension, European) sovereignty. On the contrary, it was the misuse of the past that was denounced as inappropriate.

This attempt to trigger historical solidarity failed because the European partners did not share the collective memory on which the metaphor's persuasive power relied. As the French political scientist Valérie Barbara Rosoux explains, collective memory is triggered only when a specific formulation of the past by an official echoes representations of the same past of the individuals comprising the target audience. In the absence of a shared European collective memory, the image of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact does not summon the same existential threat for everyone. Not only did Sikorski fail to gain the support of the European Commission and German politicians in preventing a feared fifth partition of Poland that would damage European sovereignty, but his rhetorical gambit also had a long-lasting detrimental impact on his credibility on the issue, and to some extends, on the credibility of all Polish politicians when it comes to debating European energy policy.

The third hypothesis is that Sikorski wanted to make gains on the domestic political scene, thanks to the media coverage his controversial comments received. It is indeed common for politicians to use the past in foreign affairs, given that collective memory is mainly enshrined at the national level. As theorised by the French sociologist Georges Mink, politicians use their nation's history and official memory on the international stage in order to present themselves as patriots at home and to secure their geopolitical position internationally. When formulated on the international stage, official memory – understood as the sum of the representations of the past promoted by the state – is directed not only towards the international community, but towards the assumed collective memory of the national electorate.

Debates in the Sejm

Despite the international backlash that was caused, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact comparison remained a vivid rhetorical device within the national debate in the Sejm, Poland's lower chamber. It served two aims: to reassert again and again the argument that the pipeline project poses an existential threat to Polish sovereignty and to discredit Sikorski as a politician.

Analysing the Nord Stream debates that occurred between 2004 and 2014 in the Sejm, it is obvious that the argument remained a marginal one within the wide set of arguments raised to discredit the pipeline project. Over the space of ten years the historical argument was only brought up 11 times. However, the use of history in Polish debates on European energy policy reveals some interesting patterns. Eight of the 11 times the issue was raised, a speaker played on the negative memory. This suggests that the historical reference recalls a traumatic moment in the Polish collective memory, such as the partitions of Poland in the late 18th century, the 1815 Congress of Vienna, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Second World War and the Cold War. Another historical parallel compares the economic practices of contemporary Germany with the relations of the former Soviet Union to its satellite states.

Some evocations of the past, to be sure, are extremely precise, which makes them difficult to understand. The most telling example occurred on March 29th 2012, while the offshore lines were already built but not yet in operation. The MP Ludwik Dorn, referred to a very specific historical concept: the *"Kanonenboot-diplomatie"*. It refers to the usage of political-military pressure against an enemy instead of direct confrontation. He associated this military technique, employed by late 19th century colonial imperial powers, with the Russian military doctrine that would drive the Nord Stream pipeline project. By doing so, Dorn highlighted the new strategic importance of the Gotland Island through which the pipeline route goes. More broadly, he sought to raise awareness of military exercises simulating terrorist attacks on the infrastructure, conducted by the Russian Federation along the pipeline's route.

All the aforementioned mobilisations of a traumatic past echo moments of the traumatic collective memory of the disappearance of the Polish state as a sovereign entity. Describing something as an existential threat is the first step of what the Copenhagen School of security studies theorised as a "securitisation" of the public debate. If a threat is acknowledged by the target audience as existential and bearing substantial political risks, this could then lead to the formulation and implementation of extraordinary emergency measures. In this way the securitisation move is successful.

If we consider references to the past as attempts to securitise the debate on the Nord Stream pipeline, we may conclude that they were unsuccessful. Sikorski's attempt failed because the international audience didn't consider the threat to be existential neither for the EU, nor for Poland. All attempts failed at home, if not because the threat was not acknowledged as existential, at least because the argument did not eventually lead to extraordinary emergency measures.

Enduring echoes

Another pattern of referring to the past during parliament debates is evoking Sikorski's 2006 analogy in order to discredit him. Indeed, after moving to the Civic Platform (PO) party in 2007, Sikorski had to defend himself against PiS politicians for the controversial remarks he made. For example, on 8th April 2010 Karol Karski (a PiS MP) criticised the PO government's track record on improving energy supply. While challenging the real added value of the newly signed gas contract with Qatar and the government's efforts to prevent the finalisation of the Nord Stream pipeline, he made the following comment: "Germany and Russia are building a pipeline through the Baltic Sea, which Minister Sikorski compared to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact when he was still a member of the PiS government. Today, being a member of the Tusk government, he doesn't have the same scruples."

Sikorski, then the foreign minister of the PO government, would reply to such attacks by arguing he had already corrected his words that were widely distorted in the media. He responded with the following: "All I said as a member of Jaroslaw Kaczynski's government was that Poland is particularly sensitive to alliances made above our heads, after which I proceeded to give a couple of examples of such alliances. Included in this category are the partitions, Locarno, Rapallo, and, naturally, the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact."


On April 8th 2010 he went on to say, "I don't think any Pole would find anything controversial about my statement, which is why I'm so surprised that its abbreviation has been cited by the press in a controversy-ridden climate." In Sikorski's view, the historical comparison is self-explanatory and therefore uncontroversial for the Polish people. In other words, it is part of the Polish collective memory.

A partisan political tool

Still, the use of history in this very debate is peculiar to Poland's right-wing political landscape. Before April 2006, referring to the past was made by members

of the party *Dom Ojczysty* and PiS. After Sikorski's gambit, all references to the past are from PiS members, except one from the far-right nationalist conservative party *Liga Polskich Rodzin* (League of Polish Families). Noteworthy in all this is Ryszard Zbrzyzny, a member of the social-democrat leftish party *Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej* (Democratic Left Alliance), who in 2011 made a reference to Sikorski's comments with the purpose of condemning such a misuse of the past in Polish relations with its European partners. It appears that while playing on the Polish collective memory, the use of the past is a political strategy limited to a specific part of the Polish political spectrum. Still, it is important to recall the French scholar Christian Schülke's work on evocations of the past in German-Polish relations. Using the past, according to Schülke, is never pure instrumentalisation, but also shows specific aspects of how the collective memory is expressed by political elites.

Nevertheless, when it comes to European energy policy, the historical argument was part of a securitisation strategy meant to prevent the pipeline from being built. History-based arguments disappeared from the national debate on Nord Stream after the two offshore lines went into operation in 2012. In 2013, the debate on the creation of two subsequent pipelines (what is called Nord Stream 2) raised the same technical objections that were already used against the first two lines. In 2014 the debates were dominated by geopolitical considerations that echoed the growing Russian threat following the annexation of the Crimean peninsula and the war in eastern Ukraine. On top of the technical counter-arguments, the rejection of Nord Stream 2 by the Polish government and its affiliated parliamentary members shifted away from the national historical narrative and since 2015 has focused more on the idea of a breach of European solidarity from the West towards Central and Eastern Europe. If Nord Stream 1 was tagged as the repetition of a secular German-Russian, anti-Polish geopolitical orientation, Nord Stream 2 is depicted as proof that European solidarity, which was promised to the former members of the communist bloc that joined the European Union, was just hot air.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop comparison could not convince Poland's European partners of the threat posed by Nord Stream 1. The argument that it would threaten European solidarity, on the contrary, is a narrative that talks to Poland's European partners and successfully mobilises them. It is moreover efficient because the geopolitical context, since the beginning of the talks on the construction of Nord Stream 2, requires EU members to find a single voice in shaping their position towards Russia. 

EASTERN CAFÉ



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Postcolonialism in the Soviet Bloc

TOMASZ KAMUSELLA

Socjalistyczny postkolonializm. Rekonsolidacja pamięci
(*Socialist Postcolonialism: Memory Reconsolidation*).

By: Adam F Kola. Publisher: Wydawnictwo Naukowe
Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń, Poland, 2018.

During the latter half of the 1980s I was a student of English language philology and literature at the University of Silesia in Katowice. Through assigned readings we were introduced to the western discourse of postcolonialism, but the lecturers took care to not operationalise these analytical instruments for any research on books and essays written and published in communist Poland or the Soviet bloc. Some conclusions that we could arrive at about our own communist regime might be ideologically dangerous for ourselves and our tutors. When communism collapsed in 1989 and the Soviet Union broke up two years later, the imageries and analytical approaches of postcolonialism suddenly



began to make much sense to my colleagues and myself. We began toying with the collocation of “post-communist postcolonialism” in order to describe the then as yet nameless huge socio-political changes, which nowadays are referred to as (post-communist) systemic transition in the literature. But this discourse of post-communist postcolonialism never took off. Most of us were busy finding gainful employment or determined to continue education and research abroad, that is, in the West. Meanwhile in Central Europe’s post-communist states the discourse of (re-)joining the West (that is, NATO and the European Union) achieved more traction among politicians in the press and in scholarship.

Forgotten discourse

During the early 21st century, a conscious scholarly reception of and concomitant reflection on postcolonial literature and discourse commenced in Poland. This is the starting point of Adam F. Kola's monograph under review. First of all, he was stunned by the derivative quality of Polish engagement with postcolonial studies and its silences on a socialist (communist) version of this discourse prior to 1989. A popular assumption was that in communist Poland there had been little if any serious research on the postcolonial (Third) world and that all the intellectual and political effort was focused on collaborating with or rejecting the Soviet-style communist system. Thanks to his perusal of Polish-language books on Asia and Africa during his childhood and teenager years before the end of communism, Kola serendipitously recollected that Polish authors from the communist "Second" (socialist/communist) world did engage in the discussion on the decolonised areas of the globe. This realisation developed into a years-long research project that finally bore fruit in the form of the volume under review, which is devoted to uncovering and analysing the socialist discourse on the postcolonial situation as conducted in communist Poland.

Kola reintroduces this unduly neglected and forgotten discourse, proving that postcolonial studies in Poland only began around the year 2000 and solely under the influence of western

scholarship. His efforts give a temporal and methodological dimension to the field, hence the book's subtitle: *Memory Reconsolidation*. The alluded memory is the continuing silence on communist Poland's postcolonial discourse, which this monograph strives to break. Furthermore, the book also goes in a potentially rewarding direction: instead of following the well-trodden western paths that many postcolonial scholars go down, this work reincorporates postcolonial reflections from the communist period into the general discourse. Obviously the communist reflection on the postcolonial condition was skewed in line with the ideological needs of the Soviet bloc. However, the degree of skewing was not necessarily more than the way in which ideology has continually influenced the way western scholars think about the postcolonial world since the eruption of the unprecedented phenomenon of mass decolonisation in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Kola's monograph is divided into three parts. The first part on memory outlines the scope of the issues analysed and the theoretical framework employed, and reflects on the processes of forgetting and remembrance in the context of postcolonial studies in the Soviet bloc and communist Poland. I believe that in this part it would be of import to add some material on the self-conscious postcolonial discourse that was independently developed in communist Yugoslavia.

via. On the strength of this discourse and its translation into real-life political action, Yugoslavia became one of the leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement, alongside India. This example would be quite attractive, showing that instead of having to choose between the western or the Soviet blocs, postcolonial countries could opt for socialism – which

was not Soviet in its character. Hence, a postcolonial state could disengage from the Cold War conflict which was, in essence, a western (European, “white”) quarrel. I believe that thanks to linguistic proximity, Polish scholars and writers have learnt much about the postcolonial world from books published in Yugoslavia.

Historiography

The second part on history opens with the 1948 World Congress of Intellectuals in Defence of Peace, held in the newly Polish Wrocław (three years earlier it had been Germany’s city of Breslau). The liminal space of the German-turned-Polish lands perhaps attuned the region’s party and intellectual elite to the postcolonial condition and they used this event to boost the legitimacy of post-1945 communist Poland worldwide. Newly founded postcolonial states offered an easier path of gathering international legitimacy for communist Poland than the staunchly anti-communist and anti-Soviet West, self-styled as the “Free World”.

Kola shows that the Polish scholars and writers who engaged in writing about postcolonial countries predictably chose those at the frontline of the confrontation between the East and West – i.e. Korea and Vietnam. The pro-Soviet India was also written about alongside the newly communist China, prior to Mao’s rift with the Kremlin in the 1960s. Interestingly,

and perhaps not in communism’s interest in this never-ending strengthening of the unity of communist Poland and the Soviet bloc, some Polish authors engaged in a deepened reflection on the creation of a new state in Nigeria’s secessionist region of Biafra.

Some concepts of Polish historiography also lent themselves to the rather deceptive likening of Polish history to that of postcolonial states. Polish writers, led in this practice by the famous reporter Ryszard Kapuściński (1932–2007), claimed that Poland and the Poles had been colonised by enemy neighbouring powers after the partition of Poland-Lithuania in the late 18th century. Hence the commonality of the Polish and postcolonial experience was ethically deepened by the fact that Poland never had colonies (apart from Poland-Lithuania’s vassal of Courland that did engage in maritime colonial ventures).

Obviously, as Kola rightly points out, Polish intellectuals who supported this normative claim chose to not remember

the colonial-style treatment of slave-like serfs in Poland-Lithuania, or the colonial character of the oppression of Belarusians, Jews and Ukrainians in interwar Poland. Most interestingly, Kola emphasises that despite the isolating effects of the Iron Curtain, Polish scholars in many ways continued to engage in research conducted both in the West and East. Among them, Marian Małowist (1909–1988) contributed novel insights into the comparative history of colonialism and, by extension, of the postcolonial world. Immanuel Wallerstein acknowledged the importance of Małowist's findings and models for the development of his own world-systems theory.

The monograph's third and final part is devoted to Polish-language fiction and non-fiction on postcolonial countries and themes written during the communist period. The selection of texts is a bit subjective and the omission of Zbigniew Domarańczyk's *Kampucza, Godzina Zero* (1981, *Kampuchea: Hour*

Zero) is surprising given that it was apparently the first book ever written on the aftermath of the Cambodian Genocide. Domarańczyk was a member of the first group of journalists (all from the Soviet bloc) allowed into the newly post-Red

Kola emphasises that despite the **isolating effects** of the Iron Curtain, Polish scholars in many ways continued to engage in research conducted both in the West and East.

Khmer Cambodia. I also wonder about the status of Polish-language literature written by Holocaust survivors in Israel. Was it not a genuine form of participation in the postcolonial condition, rather than a reflection of it?

Cultural imperialism?


Kola's monograph breaks new ground on several counts. First of all, he recovers the forgotten Polish communist discourse on the postcolonial condition. Second, he points to the importance of the inclusion of sustained reflection on similar issues that developed in the Soviet bloc countries (and – I would propose – also in the Soviet Union's national republics) in today's global postcoloni-

al discourse. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, he reintroduces western postcolonial scholarship to some methodological roots that were developed in communist Poland.

Because of its unique aforementioned achievements, I hope this book will be soon translated into English so that it can be read by the broader community of scholars active in the field of post-

colonial studies. Otherwise the communist-period roots of the Polish and global postcolonial discourse may be forgotten again.

On a final note, I wonder to what degree postcolonial studies may be a concealed form of cultural imperialism, given the fact that the vast majority of contributions in the field are written in colonial languages (i.e. English, French, German, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish) and published in former imperial metropolises (Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Russia, and the United States). Hence, the current and communist-period development of postcolonial studies in Poland and other communist and post-communist states in Europe appear to amount to quite an unreflective emulation of the predominantly western-oriented postcolonial discourse. For instance, why should it be considered of more value to write about the postcolonial condition and remember older works on the subject composed and published in Albanian, Bulgarian, Czech, Hungarian, Polish, Romanian, Serbo-Croatian,

Slovak, or Slovenian *than* in Chinese, Hindi, Kamba, Kinyarwanda, Korean, Lao, Punjabi, Sinhalese, Swahili, Tamil, Vietnamese, Xhosa, or Zulu? Is this urge to show that the countries of the Soviet bloc also contributed to the postcolonial discourse a reflection of the West's neo-imperialist insistence that "real" scholarship is only possible at western universities, with the use of western languages? Would it not make more sense for postcolonial scholars in western and post-communist states to master the languages of the cultures they aspire to study instead of reinforcing the neo-imperial tradition of using works in colonial languages only? That is why hardly anyone objects to a monograph on the Rwandan Genocide based on material solely in French and English, while it is unacceptable to do research on communist Poland without the use of documents in Polish. Perhaps the author of this valuable work will consider including a reflection on these burning meta-methodological issues for the English translation of this work. 

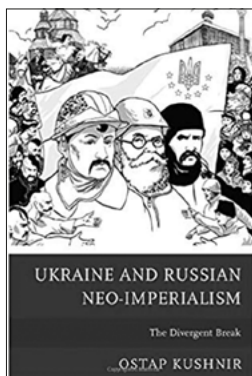
Tomasz Kamusella is a Reader in Modern Central and Eastern European History at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. His latest monograph *Ethnic Cleansing during the Cold War: The Forgotten 1989 Expulsion of Turks from Communist Bulgaria* was just published by Routledge.

A fresh look at political culture in Russia and Ukraine

MARGARYTA KHVOSTOVA

Ukraine and Russian Neo-Imperialism: The Divergent Break.
By: Ostap Kushnir. Publisher: Rowman & Littlefield,
Lanham MD, USA, 2018.

Ukrainian political culture presents an intriguing and rather unique case for analysis. Often a cause for debate, its origin and development, influenced by the rigorous winds of history and political geography, are not easy to grasp or apprehend. The complexities of the country's relations with Russia, in particular, tend to leave the outside observer in a state of bewilderment. This response tends to lead to an overgeneralisation and simplification of the problem, which does not contribute to finding good solutions. Ostap Kushnir's new book, *Ukraine and Russian Neo-Imperialism: The Divergent Break*, does not aim to add further complexity.



On the contrary, it seeks to deconstruct the phenomenon and replace confusion with clarity.

The conflict which broke out in 2014 brought into sharp focus Ukraine's split identity. The Maidan Revolution, which began in Kyiv and spread throughout the country in the winter of 2013–2014, represented a crisis in Russia's ability to influence a Ukrainian society that was proclaiming its alignment with the pro-European path. Since then, the political climates of Ukraine and Russia are often depicted as almost binary opposites: one patrimonial and authoritarian, the other democratic and liberal. The fact that only a few decades

ago Ukrainian politics was depicted in largely the same colours as Russian politics was quickly forgotten. This has unfor-

tunately led to deep misunderstandings. Ultimately, as the phrase goes, the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

Point of divergence

Political culture, the idea at the centre of this analysis, might not have all the answers – but it is a good starting point, one that can take us to the roots of the phenomenon. Using this as a guide, Kushnir retraces the history of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Insights start to emerge that seem self-evident and leave the reader astonished that the problem had not yet been addressed from this perspective. He endeavours to fill the gap in the literature: to take a good step back, assess the facts from a historical perspective and find the points of divergence between the two cultures.

The author's upbringing in Ukraine and exposure to its political culture gives him an insider perspective, largely absent from western analyses of Ukrainian politics. Though it may present a danger of viewing Russian political culture through the lens of a Ukrainian narrative, he tries his best to avoid this bias. Kushnir's academic career has been based in western institutions, which is evident in his methodology. A Ukrainian perspective and a western methodology is not a unique blend, but it is rather rare and lends strength to the analysis.

Ukraine and Russian Neo-Imperialism is not just for the expert, it can also serve as a guide for those less famil-

iar with the intricacies of Russian and Ukrainian political processes and the history of their mutual relations. Kushnir addresses discrepancies between the two political cultures by examining the historical experiences, institutional structures, national identity, religious attitudes, as well as the symbolic thinking inherent in each culture. We get a thought-provoking understanding of both Russian and Ukrainian political symbolism and traditions, through history up to the present day.

The main aim of the book, which Kushnir makes clear, is to provide a comparison of the two political cultures in order to address two commonly held assumptions. Firstly, to substantiate the claim that Russian expansionism is pre-defined by its imperial traditions and historical memories, which constitute the *modus operandi* of the state's domestic and foreign policies. The second assumption of the book is that Ukraine is inherently more democratic in its understanding of power, linked to the co-existence of two political symbolic traditions: *Dweller* (or Soviet) and *Cossack*. The methodology builds from two established frameworks: Eric Voegelin's political symbolism and Maurice Halbwachs's collective memory. Kushnir deepens the

analysis by bringing in geopolitical perspectives, and cites the work by Halford Mackinder, Arnold Toynbee, Jacques Elul and Samuel Huntington. The cumu-

lative effect of this richly layered analysis is a thorough scrutiny of the political, symbolic and civilisational dimensions of Russian and Ukrainian identities.

Symbolism

The book is divided into two major parts and consists of five chapters. The first two chapters focus on Russian political culture and the final two are dedicated to Ukrainian political culture, with chapter three being a transition between the two. The first section addresses Russian national identity, political symbolism and the tradition of imperialism, especially in its contemporary form and in the context of aggression in Ukraine. The second section of the book, which scrutinises the Ukrainian historical experience of state building, pays particular attention to Cossack semi-statehood, and political symbolism in modern Ukrainian politics. Kushnir also tries to explain the rationale and drive behind its revolutionary movements.

The analysis of Russian political symbolism is rather comprehensive. Kushnir supports the premise that Russian political culture stems from the traditions of Byzantium and the Golden Horde, which were adopted when Russia was first emerging as a model for statehood. These ancient traditions called for centralised political power and patrimonialism, where power and legitimacy are highly concentrated in the great leader, who sits above the law, infallible and

awe-inspiring. Nuance then arises with one of the most enduring features of Russian political symbolism, *sistema* (as initially defined by Alena Ledeneva), which penetrates all levels of social and political life and defines the power hierarchy for each of its members. But ultimately Kushnir locates the heart of Russian symbolic thinking in an influential idea developed by Sergey Uyarov in

The analysis of Russian **political symbolism** is rather comprehensive. Kushnir supports the premise that Russian political culture stems from the traditions of Byzantium and the Golden Horde.


1833, the *triad*: three gravitational poles of orthodoxy, autocracy and nationality which, working in harmony, constitute the very being of the Russian universe. Though not explicit in the public discourse today, Kushnir argues that this

triad remains fundamental to Russian political symbolism and informs both internal and external decision-making.

Turning to Ukraine, Kushnir traces the roots of its political culture to the Zaporozhian Sich and argues that its influence is seen in all major features of contemporary Ukrainian identity. He draws historical comparisons of Cossack symbolism to recent political events, in particular the 2014 EuroMaidan. Among the convergences of symbolism, Kushnir lists the ability to self-organise, the appearance of numerous grassroots leaders, as well as the reconstruction of the institutionalised structures of the Sich during the protests. The most curious parallel is the insight that, similar to the Cossack experience, grassroots leaders are usually only effective during the revolutionary period and fail in the process of transition and reconstruction. This helps to clarify why leaders in contemporary Ukraine have been so reluctant to implement much needed reforms, which are pursued in a selective, vague or incomplete manner.

Yet the Cossack identity is not universally shared among Ukrainians. Because of its size and history, there are

also strong conservative and conformist impulses which owe more to the centuries of Russian influence. It is not a mere copy of the Russian triad, however, and it does not function in the same way since competing local narratives are too dynamic for identical execution. Kushnir describes those more attuned to this second identity as 'dwellers'. The dichotomy of the two Ukrainian identities, according to Kushnir, will not cease to exist and, if overlooked, will continue to create unrest in the social integrity of society. The solution lies in treating the dichotomy as an asset and survival mechanism of the communities living on the great border – that is between Asia and Europe.

Considering the traditional view of Ukrainian political culture, either as a copy or a polar opposite of Russian political culture, *Ukraine and Russian Neo-Imperialism* offers a fresh, balanced and vibrant conceptualisation. Overall, the book will be an enlightening read for those who are not well-acquainted with Ukrainian political culture, and for specialists who are looking for a new perspective on the complexities of Ukrainian-Russian relations. 

Margaryta Khvastova is a student at the Graduate School for Social Research (GSSR) of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

Countering the realists on Russia and Ukraine

DANIEL R. JAROSAK

The Sources of Russia's Great Power Politics: Ukraine and the Challenge to the European Order. By: Taras Kuzio and Paul D'Anieri. Publisher: E-International Relations, Bristol, England, 2018.

Since the onset of Russian aggression in Ukraine in early 2014, there has been a plethora of works dedicated to the conflict, its impact on the West and the liberal world order, and Russia's motives in pursuing such a bold strategy. *Ukraine Crisis: What it Means for the West* by Andrew Wilson and *Russia and the New World Disorder* by Bobo Lo are just a few (excellent) examples that seek to bring light to the ways in which the conflict in Ukraine is affecting international politics.

The challenge for any new study of the conflict is to bring a fresh perspective and avoid the worn-out arguments



that dominate public attention. Thankfully, *The Sources of Russia's Great Power Politics: Ukraine and the Challenge to the European Order*, by Taras Kuzio and Paul D'Anieri, successfully meets this challenge. The authors' principal motif in writing this book is to counter the realist arguments, made by

academics such as John Mearsheimer, who claim that it is the West that ought to be held responsible for Russian military aggression in Ukraine. To do this, the authors put forward many arguments that are either novel or overlooked by analyses in the media and academia discussion. One key counter-re-

sponse to the realists is to demonstrate that Russia has never recognised an independent Ukraine. Another powerful response is to show that hybrid warfare is not the new and cutting-edge

phenomena it is normally portrayed to be, but is deeply rooted in the Soviet past; Russia is not simply reacting to the West in its employment of such techniques.

A dissection of arguments

The Sources of Russia's Great Power Politics is divided into seven sections: an introduction; an assessment of the debate and theories regarding the conflict; Soviet origins of hybrid warfare and Russian-Ukrainian relations; relations with the West between 1991–2013; Crimea's annexation and the war in Donbas; international ramifications; and the conclusion. Kuzio and D'Anieri first look at five of the major theories regarding the recent armed conflict and point out their flaws. The most popular arguments put either the blame squarely on the West for ignoring history and Russian interests, or else hold Russia entirely responsible and emphasise its expansionism and domestic problems. Naturally, these theories are deemed overly simplistic.

The next chapter, in which Kuzio and D'Anieri illustrate how hybrid warfare is not a novel tool, is highly original and illuminating. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union employed hybrid techniques very similar to those used by Putin in Ukraine to project its power around the globe, mainly by funding and arming radical left-wing parties and organisations in the West, Latin America, and East Asia. These techniques were further

developed and utilised by the Russian Federation well before 2014, notably in Estonia, Georgia and Ukraine.

We then get a detailed analysis of events between 1991 and 2013, which Kuzio and D'Anieri present as the crucial period for understanding the present conflict. They convincingly show that politicians and leaders in Russia never truly recognised Ukraine as independent. They highlight five key events which, taken together, provide near conclusive evidence against the realist view that the conflict was a knee-jerk response to the West encroaching on Russia's sphere of influence in the early 2010s.

The Sources of Russia's Great Power Politics goes on to detail the events of the annexation of Crimea, the invasion of Ukraine's east by Russian forces, and the Minsk peace talks. It zooms in on key events and attitudes in the run-up to the conflict, the turning points of the conflict itself, and the failed peace process that was supposed to bring the fighting to an end. Kuzio and D'Anieri raise two points that are particularly noteworthy. The first is how to define the conflict: is it an inter-state war or an intra-state civil conflict? The second is the mistake of

allowing Russia a seat on the ceasefire negotiation process.

The final part of the argument goes through the implications of the conflict on Europe and the world at large, including detailed accounts of the ways in which prominent actors such as the EU and NATO have responded. Part of this involves scrutinising the increasingly

popular view that current Russo-western relations constitute a new Cold War; the authors come to the conclusion that the term is indeed appropriate, though, admittedly, this is not one of their most convincing arguments. But they do not shy away from making their opinions known, and lament the fact that Russia is part of the peace process at all.

Origins of the conflict

The Sources of Russia's Great Power Politics is not only a great addition for anyone interested in both the war in Ukraine and current relations with Russia, but also for those new to the field. The writing is clear and the arguments are presented in a linear and comprehensive fashion, and the reader is spared any unnecessarily complicated jargon. Another strong point is that it genuinely sheds new light on the debate surrounding the origins of the conflict and on the concept of hybrid warfare more generally. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is a highly entertaining read. By avoiding dry statistics and rehashing well known opinions of experts, it reads more like a novel with a compelling narrative and vivid detail. Even those who are not well-versed in the subject will be drawn in to the drama.

Yet the book is not without flaws. One issue is the way Kuzio and D'Anieri use the term of Eurasianism without properly clarifying their understanding of it. The term is alluded to throughout the book,


but is only directly discussed a few times. Given that it serves as a major pillar in their argument, more attention should have been devoted to the origins and evolution of Eurasianism over the 20th and 21st centuries and the major effects it has on Russian political discourse. It

Kuzio and D'Anieri genuinely shed **new light** on the debate surrounding the origins of the conflict and on the concept of hybrid warfare more generally.

would help the uninitiated reader understand the origins of the *Russkiy Mir* phenomenon which comes up repeatedly. Another weak point is the characterisation of the current relations between Russia and the West as a new Cold War.

While there are similarities that the authors point to in order to make the comparison, their evidence is selective, and it ignores the many of the key differences that exist between the Cold War and the current situation. For one, there is no real ideological competition, as all sides accept capitalism in one form or another. And Russia today is a power in undeniable decline. The world is becoming more multi-polar, and the key challenger to western hegemony is China, which has the economic might to exert

real leverage over the West in ways Russia can only dream of.

Aside from these points, the book remains a great addition to the literature. *The Sources of Russia's Great Power Politics* is intelligently put together, brimming with insight into new ways of understanding a conflict that has become a defining feature of the moment of history we are living through. It is an essential work for any scholar interested in this conflict, and will likely be referred to many times in years to come. 

Daniel Jarosak is a former editing researcher for *New Eastern Europe* and is currently a Master's student in a dual degree programme between Tartu University and Jagiellonian University. His main fields of study are East-Central Europe and the Baltic Sea Region.

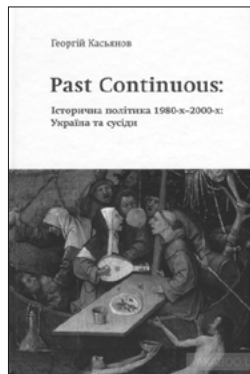
Past Continuous

Is Bandera replacing Lenin?

MAREK WOJNAR

Past Continuous: Історична політика 1980-х-2000-х: Україна та сусіди (Past Continuous: Political History 1980s-2000s: Ukraine and its neighbours).
By: Georgiy Kasyanov. Publisher: Laurus, Kyiv, 2018.

Historical policy is among the most discussed issues in post-Maidan Ukraine, and the discussion goes beyond Ukrainian borders. Important changes have taken place since 2014, namely decommunisation and the glorification of Ukrainian nationalism – including the controversial leader of Ukrainian nationalists, Stepan Bandera, who is generally considered an extremist. This generates heated discussion outside Ukraine. Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of Poland's ruling party Law and Justice, allegedly told the Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko that “with



Bandera, you will not enter Europe”. Critical statements have been recorded also in Israel, the United States and Russia. International interest in Ukrainian historical policy is not new, and while it recently attracts increased attention, there have been controversies in the past too. One of them was Viktor Yushchenko’s campaign to have the Holodomor (the Great Famine) recognised as a genocide against the Ukrainian people. The effort to rehabilitate Ukrainian nationalist leaders Roman Shukhevych and Stepan Bandera as heroes also dates back to before the Maidan revolution.

Internal and external dimensions

A recent Ukrainian book by Georgiy Kasyanov, titled *Past Continuous: Історична політика 1980-х–2000-х: Україна та сусіди* (*Past Continuous: Political History 1980s-2000s: Ukraine and its neighbours*), examines the issue of historical policy. Kasyanov, a professor at the National Academy of Sciences

Kasyanov aims to develop a deep understanding of the main **actors** who shape memory politics in Ukraine today.

of Ukraine, is a respected Ukrainian historian. An author of numerous highly praised publications, he also has regular contacts with western academia.

The book is an overview of Ukrainian memory politics from the end of the

1980s to 2017. Kasyanov aims to develop a deep understanding of the main actors who shape memory politics in Ukraine today. Kasyanov further adds breath through a comparative study of regimes of memory in other places, from Lisbon to Vladivostok. Yet the focus is of course Ukraine, and through his search he discovers not only the most obvious players, such as the president and the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, but also less obvious organisations, such as the Security Service of Ukraine, the courts, the postal service, political parties, the media and even individual historians. The final and longest part of the book focuses on the practices of historical policy in Ukraine, taking into account the internal and external dimensions of memory politics. We read about Lenin and Bandera and the roles they played in Ukraine, and about memory conflicts that Ukraine has had with Poland and Russia, amongst others.

Has Bandera replaced Lenin?

The level of detail in *Past Continuous* is impressive. The author digs into different aspects of historical policy, drawing on information from a wide range of documents and press reports. The most interesting are probably the excerpts from memory laws in Ukraine. Kasyanov takes a strikingly critical approach to the subject matter. It is clear

that his views are far from both the official rhetoric of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance and the Soviet nostalgia that is on the defensive in Ukraine these days. His scepticism towards both of these trends is to Kasyanov's credit.

Kasyanov tackles the interaction between two main narratives, which he

conceives as national/nationalistic on the one hand and Soviet nostalgia on the other, that characterise Ukrainian historical policy discourse. I use the word interaction rather than conflict because the relationship between the two narratives is not always one of conflict. There is at times considerable crossover between the two – they do after all have to grapple with the same historical events. When the nationalistic narrative started to dominate Ukrainian historiography, the earlier term “proletariat revolution” was soon replaced by “the national revolution of 1917–1920,” while the title “Ukrainian hero” became a substitute for the “Soviet hero”. In Galicia, monuments of Lenin were quickly replaced with ones commemorating Bandera.

Even more interesting is the conversion from communism to nationalism that many Ukrainian historians underwent in the 1990s, a process unfortunately treated rather superficially in the

book. It reveals the massive decommunisation of public space underway since the 2014 revolution to be largely a façade. The activities that are championed by

Kasyanov tackles the **interaction** between two main narratives, which he conceives as national/nationalistic on the one hand and Soviet nostalgia on the other.

the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance may be changing content, but not form. The main narrative remains anachronistic and one-dimensional. The fact that Bandera rather than Lenin is today the main protagonist is quite insignificant.

Two narratives


Past Continuous is a story of competing narratives. Kasyanov argues that the national/nationalistic narrative has dominated Ukrainian discourse since the 1990s and is alive and well today. It survived Viktor Yanukovich's rule and the activities of his minister of education, Dmytro Tabachnyk, which probably explains why Yanukovich's departure from the classical interpretation of the Holodomor as an act of geno-

cide did not bring about a significant shift towards Soviet nostalgia. However, while we can agree with Kasyanov's view regarding the dominance of the national narrative, the question remains whether the same is true about the nationalist one.

In my view, Kasyanov's concept of the national/nationalist narrative is too far-reaching and, as a consequence, not precise enough. Putting these two nar-

ratives into one cluster and opposing it with the nostalgic Soviet narrative leads *Past Continuous* to rely too heavily on the old debate of “two Ukraines” which was once put forward by Mykola Riabchuk. This perspective skims over the regional dimension of the debate, which Kasyanov is well aware of. The problem would presumably be that including a wider range of narratives would make

this already long book even longer and less digestible for readers.

That said, the book remains a welcome and effective antidote to the nationalistic narrative aggressively promoted by the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance. *Past Continuous* is one of the most interesting history books published in the Ukrainian language this year. 

Translated by Monika Szafrńska

Marek Wojnar is an assistant professor in the Institute of Political Studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences, a historian, an essayist, and a regular contributor to *Nowa Konfederacja* and *Nowa Europa Wschodnia*.

A miracle from the inside

MACIEJ ROBERT

Wszyscy ci wspaniali chłopcy i dziewczyny. Osobista historia czeskiego kina. (All the bright young men and women: a personal history of the Czech cinema). By: Josef Škvorecký. Polish edition published by Wydawnictwo Pogranicze, Sejny, 2018.

This year the Polish publishing house Pogranicze published the first translation of Josef Škvorecký's work on Czech cinematography – a book like no other. Hence four decades after its was original published it is worth reflecting on this book. Škvorecký, the author of the book, left Czechoslovakia in 1969, first heading to the United States and later to Canada where he spent the rest of his life. Škvorecký's decision to leave his homeland was a reaction to the political and artistic atmosphere after the 1968 Prague Spring. The artist, whose work was already quite problematic for the communist authorities – especially since the 1958 publication of *Zbábělci* (*Cowards*), his debut novel – found Gustáv Husak's normal-



isation policies unbearable. He joined many of his co-patriots who left Czechoslovakia at the time. Among them were distinct representatives of Czechoslovak cinematography: Miloš Forman, Ivan Passer, Vojtěch Jasný, Jan Němec and Pavel Juráček.

In solidarity with these artists, who were also Škvorecký's friends, and driven by a mission to popularise Czechoslovak cinematography in the West, he agreed to deliver a number of lectures at the University of Toronto. His classes on Czechoslovak film were so popular among students that in the end he decided to write a book on the subject. *All the bright young men and women: a personal history of the Czech cinema* was published in 1971.

More than a memoir

Škvorecký's publication was not a typical book. First, it was authored by a Czech writer but written in English, with a western reader in mind. It targeted readers who were less familiar with post-war Central European cinematography. Second, the book was – as Škvorecký admitted – a product of his nostalgia for his homeland. Third, it was the work of a mature writer, not an academic researcher; it read more like a diary. Fourth, Škvorecký was also one of the founding fathers of the Czech new wave, which is described in the pages of the book. Being a close friend of many Czech filmmakers, Škvorecký interpreted the phenomenon he was describing from the inside. Finally, while writing the book Škvorecký was not able to rewatch the films he was discussing. He had to rely solely on his own memory and research archival collections of Czechoslovak film magazines, which was probably unprecedented in film research.

All these things make *All the bright young men and women* a unique and highly valuable piece of work. It was a true “personal history of Czech cinema,” as the subtitle suggests. It is not only a private memoir but also one that provides the reader with brilliantly bal-

anced insights with anecdotes on the absurdities of the socialist film industry. Škvorecký correctly shows that the new wave of Czech cinema did not come out of a vacuum. The introduction of the book presents a brief historical outline of Czech cinematography along with the somewhat forgotten films of the 1950s. These were the works of artists such as Vojtěch Jasný, Ján Kadar, Elmar Klos and others.

While explaining the high value of their productions, Škvorecký points to the same causes that contributed to the success of their followers – namely, the nationalisation of the film industry in Czechoslovakia and the creation of the Prague film school. Seeing a certain difference between the generations, Škvorecký notes that while the “fathers of the revolution” were members of very strict brotherhoods, sealed by ties of faith and mission-driven, the “sons” were the rebels who wanted to live their lives to the fullest. In essence, it was this youth rebellion, laced with irony and humour, which marked the main characteristic of the new wave of Czech cinema, determining its uniqueness despite the differences that naturally existed between its representatives.

Unhappened history

As is often the case with such works, *All the bright young men and women* is


incomplete. There is little discussion in the book about Slovak directors which,

in Škvorecký's view, required a separate publication. Neither is there an analysis of many important films which were stopped right after they had been produced and stayed locked up in safes until 1990.

Nor is there any mention of the films that were never made. And, in this way, we can interpret Škvorecký's book as a kind of testimony to the "unhappened history" of Czech cinematography. It shows how the pictures of the new wave could have been even more interesting if some films were allowed to be made, including those based on Škvorecký's own works such as *Eine kleine Jazzmusik*, which Forman planned to make based on *Cowards*. Němec, too, wanted to turn the novel *End of the Nylon Age* into a film, Evald Schorm had planned to do the same with the short story *Murders for Luck*, and Hynek Bočan with *The Republic of Whores*.

Surely the fact these films were never made is a reflection of the times that accompanied them. More than anything else, this context has to be kept in mind when reading Škvorecký's *All the bright young men and women* today, as indeed the book is more than a story about a number of films that took place in a small European country which nonetheless revolutionised world cinema.

All told, *All the bright young men and women* is a story about Central Europe's fate, one that its author happened to be part of, just like many of his protagonists. In fact there were many of them, starting with the actress Lída Baarová (who was Joseph Goebbels's mistress and collaborated with Nazi Germans), Vladislav Vančura (who was a writer and a filmmaker murdered by the Gestapo), and the director Martin Frič (who died of a heart attack after Warsaw Pact troops entered Prague).

Many Czech artists faced situations where they had to collaborate with the authorities, make difficult moral choices, agree to concessions, or leave their homeland. While reflecting on this, Škvorecký admits that, while Hollywood might have seen all kinds of human tragedies, the ones coming from Czechoslovakia had its own idiosyncrasy. It is marked not only by illnesses and other malaises that put marks on the human condition, but also all kinds of competing ideologies that demand loyalties, often through coercion. Thus the miracle of Czech cinema is in its directors' ability to turn historical tragedy into films that were, at the same time, tragic and comical. Indeed, it was difficult to imagine Czech cinema without irony – as Bohumil Hrabal would say, tragedy and comedy are twins. 

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

Maciej Robert is a Polish poet, film critic and journalist.

Belarus in the eyes of its neighbours

Belarus in a post-Crimean deadlock

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Past as weakness or strength? The shared history, strained present and uncertain future of Belarus and Lithuania

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Germany is wrong in bolstering the status quo in Belarus

Joerg Forbrig

Published on the occasion of Minsk Forum 2018. | Herausgegeben zum Minsk Forum 2018.

The project is co-financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Gefördert aus Mitteln des Auswärtigen Amtes der Bundesrepublik Deutschland.

The partner of the project is the Foundation for Polish-German Cooperation.

In Kooperation mit der Stiftung für deutsch-polnische Zusammenarbeit.



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Belarus in a post-Crimean deadlock

IGOR GRETSKIY

The annexation of Crimea was planned as a response to the decrease in Vladimir Putin's approval rating in Russia. Now, after the pension reform has been introduced, the president's rating is lower than that of the military – for the first time ever. It may happen that **Belarus becomes the next goal** for the Kremlin's revanchist policies.

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union's foreign policy towards the countries of the socialist camp extensively followed a simple formula: loyalty of its satellites was bought with cheap natural gas and oil supplies. Today, it is widely implemented by Russia in relation to its post-Soviet neighbours, and its main client is Belarus. From Moscow, Minsk regularly receives trade preferences, cheap raw materials and generous financial assistance in exchange for loyalty to the Kremlin's foreign policy. It is unlikely that in the near future such a mode of interaction between the two states would undergo any observable changes. However, it is clear that Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea has triggered profound alterations in the nature of the Russo-Belarusian relations.

Russia's most expensive ally

Despite the fact that the leaders of Russia and Belarus have always confirmed their commitment to a strategic alliance and "fraternal friendship", the relations between the two has never been trouble-free or easy. Their usual attributes are

constant trade wars and mutual accusations of violation of previously made commitments. This, however, never prevented them from getting what they wanted from each other. Moscow de facto subsidised up to 40 per cent of revenue to the Belarusian budget, and Minsk has always sided with Russia on the international arena, whether it was about voting on the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from Moldova or a UN General Assembly resolution on Ukraine's territorial integrity.

However Alyaksandr Lukashenka was never in a hurry to fully comply with the Kremlin's foreign policy, often following a simple formula. Belarus fully supports Russia verbally or when voting on resolutions in international organisations, but avoids staking any further legally binding commitments. In his foreign policy, Lu-

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kashenka proceeds from the state of affairs of Russia's relations with the West, trying to play up the contradictions between them and selling his "golden share" at a higher price. In other words, during the time of mutual rapprochement between Russia and the West, Belarus positions itself as a Russian window to Europe, while during periods of tension as a reliable bulwark to the expansion of western influence. That was the case, for instance, after the 2008 Russian-Georgian war. Russia had persistently urged Belarus to recognise

the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in exchange for a two billion US dollar loan and a significant reduction in the price of natural gas. The Belarusian president received the money but delayed a final decision. As it turned out, non-recognition cost more and Lukashenka managed to resume co-operation with the IMF to get a loan of 3.6 billion dollars. When he asked Russia for another two billion, the Kremlin decided to withdraw the issue from the agenda.

Immediately after the annexation of Crimea, Lukashenka acted in a similar manner. He stated that Crimea was a de facto Russian territory and Kyiv would never be able to get it back. But the Belarusian president still did not officially recognise Crimea as a Russian territory, and on Belarusian maps the peninsula still belongs to Ukraine.

Although the Russian authorities see the issue of international recognition of Crimea as a principled matter, the possibilities of putting pressure on Minsk are now very limited. Belarus took an equidistant stance in relation to Russia, Ukraine and the West to receive considerable advantages. First, by enjoying its membership of the Customs Union with Russia, Belarus started to re-export EU goods to Russia that are banned by Russia as a counter-measure to western sanctions. Second, Belarus is no longer Europe's number one pariah. After the annexation of Crimea and the introduction of international sanctions, this status was inherited by Rus-

sia. Today, practically no one talks about Lukashenka as the last dictator of Europe and the Belarusian president and his entourage successfully got the EU to withdraw sanctions that were in place since 2010. Having established more constructive relations with the West, Minsk also managed to expand the list of its potential creditors. For the Belarusian government the problem of external debt is becoming more and more relevant, as in 2019 it will have to pay almost four billion dollars.

A fatal blow to Moscow-led integration

The idea of sacrificing national sovereignty and independence for the sake of membership in the Kremlin's integration project has always been perceived by the post-Soviet republics with great scepticism. Territorial integrity and inviolability of borders is the most sensitive issue for those relatively young political formations, and therefore the Kremlin's neo-imperial sentiments made them cautious and wary. The only exception to this was Lukashenka. Of all the post-Soviet leaders, he was the only one who saw the potential for a political future in new integration structures. Many Belarusians perceived the energetic and ambitious Belarusian leader, who managed to preserve the "island of communism" in his country, as the only hope to return stability. Responding to this demand, Lukashenka vehemently called for overcoming the "artificial split between the fraternal peoples" and criticised Moscow for being slow on this issue.

These slogans found the most vivid response in the hearts of many post-Soviet citizens. And in the late 1990s if they had to choose a single president of a restored USSR, then undoubtedly Lukashenka would have had every chance to gain the majority of votes.

However in 2000, after the change of power in Russia, everything has changed. When still considered Boris Yeltsin's successor, it was extremely important for Vladimir Putin that his claim to power be supported

Having established more **constructive relations** with the West, Minsk has also managed to expand its list of potential creditors.

by the Russian elite. He was able to achieve this, in part, due to the popular and unifying rhetoric of restoring the Soviet Union, which he made one of his foreign policy priorities. The law on ratification of the Union State Treaty with Belarus, for example, was among the first documents signed by Putin the day after Boris Yeltsin stepped down. Not surprisingly, Putin paid his first foreign official visit to Minsk.

Lukashenka's relations with the new ruler of Russia went immediately sour and their conversations were often heated. Putin yanked pro-Soviet rhetoric away from Lukashenka and immediately launched an offensive. He insisted on the inclusion

of Belarusian territories into Russia and to hold a presidential election for the whole Union State in 2004. Of course, the young and popular new Russian leader would easily have won. Therefore Lukashenka answered with a categorical refusal, claiming that Belarus would never become the 90th province of Russia. A wave of post-Soviet colour revolutions overshadowed the frictions between the two leaders and made the Kremlin take a softer tone in dialogue with Minsk. However it became clear that Moscow failed to fully integrate Belarus through its initiatives.

Nonetheless, the most serious damage to the idea of the Union State of Russia and Belarus was inflicted by the Kremlin's foreign policy adventures. Ironically, while planning the annexation of Crimea and the military operation in Donbas, Putin's inner circle had no intention to involve its Belarusian ally in the process.

After the annexation
of Crimea, the
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Hence, it is no wonder that the leader of the fraternal state did not want to share responsibility for the decisions taken by the Kremlin alone and share the burden of western sanctions. Russia's decision to annex Crimea violated a number of treaties concluded within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in order to guarantee the territorial integrity of its members and to tackle separatism. This led to a devaluated significance of not only the CIS as an integration

project, but of any Moscow-led integration initiatives. After all, the spring of 2014 showed that for the sake of illegal territorial acquisitions, the Kremlin can easily sacrifice economic co-operation with neighbouring countries. For years Ukraine was the largest market for Russian gas, but even this was ignored by the Russian leadership. It can be said that after the annexation of Crimea, the post-Soviet era of international relations in the region has ended.

Will Belarus be the next?

Lukashenka has always had a universal explanation for the causes of any territorial dispute, inter-ethnic clashes and armed conflicts in the post-Soviet space (be it Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia or South Ossetia). Those conflicts are "a natural consequence of the criminal demolition of the USSR", which Lukashenka, agreeing with Putin, considered to be the biggest geopolitical catastrophe. Like Putin, Lukashenka regularly exploits nostalgia for the Soviet Union to legitimise his political regime.

Yet in the case of Crimea, the story is different. In response to the actions of Russia in Ukraine, Lukashenka, for the first time ever, made no reference to the




Soviet Union. Instead, he claimed that Ukraine had itself to blame for the annexation as: “You did not fight for Crimea – it’s not yours then,” he stated. This is a fundamentally different logic. Even more importantly Lukashenka since 2014 publicly admits the threat of Russian aggression in Belarus. He is well aware that loyalty to Moscow and active participation in Moscow-led integration projects are no longer a sufficient guarantee of the territorial integrity of Belarus.

Lukashenka is trying to behave in such a way as to not give rise to Russian criticism. At the same time, he tries to take measures to challenge hybrid threats from the east. For instance, he called the Russian language a Belarusian people’s patrimony, but at the same time he increased support for Belarusian in schools and kindergartens. His effort to make Belarus more open is also very noticeable. Last year, a visa-free regime was introduced to more than 80 countries which caused a lot of irritation in the Kremlin. Belarus also introduced restrictions on the use of black-and-orange ribbons – the symbol of the Russian Spring – during the celebration of Victory Day. And this year a ban was imposed on the holding of Immortal Regiment marches – commemorations of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany. Minsk also resists the deployment of a permanent Russian military base on its territory.

The annexation of Crimea was planned as a response to the decrease of Putin’s approval rating in Russia. Now, after the pension reform in Russia was introduced, his rating is lower than that of the military – for the first time ever. It may happen that Belarus may become the next goal for the Kremlin’s revanchist policy. After all, the Kremlin’s idea of restoring historical justice does not recognise the norms of international law. For Belarus, therefore, maintaining relations with the West and

avoiding international isolation is not just an effective way of acquiring loans. Not to be isolated one-on-one with Russia has become a strategic necessity for Belarus.

Consequently the prerequisites for adjusting Belarus' foreign policy and its rapprochement with the West – namely, with NATO – are now taking shape. There is no doubt that the Belarusian army is ready to fight for its territory, but it is unlikely it has a clear idea of how to respond the hybrid threats. Lukashenka has always been an opponent of NATO's expansion in the east. Such rhetoric brought him popularity among those who longed for the Soviet Union. Yet unlike Russia, NATO has never had territorial claims against post-Soviet states. Therefore the fate of Belarus and the Lukashenka regime strongly depends on whether Belarus can effectively co-operate with the West. 

Igor Gretskiy is an associate professor at the School of International Relations at St Petersburg State University.

Pragmatic co-operation amid eroding security

MAKSYM KHYLKO

Belarus and Ukraine need each other now perhaps more than ever before, both in terms of security and economics. Despite Belarus's allied relations with Russia and their synchronised voting in the United Nations, Minsk has become an important platform for peace talks over the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Being anxious about a possible Crimean or Donbas scenario in Belarus, Minsk contributed to Ukraine's overcoming of difficulties caused by Russian trade restrictions, including dual-use goods.

The Ukrainian Revolution of 2013–2014 and the subsequent Russian military and neo-imperialist activities on Ukrainian territory put Belarus in a challenging and awkward geopolitical situation. On the one hand, Minsk has to co-ordinate its foreign and security policy with Moscow, according to its obligations within the Union State of Russia and Belarus, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Minsk also has to take into account its critical economic dependence on Russia, which accounts for about half of Belarusian foreign trade. Russian political culture is also much more congenial to the authoritarian Belarusian President, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who feels no sympathy to the revolutionary change of government in Ukraine.

On the other hand, Minsk has a vital interest in Ukraine preserving its sovereignty because of the possibility of something similar happening in Belarus. If Moscow succeeds in Ukraine, the temptation to forcefully “re-integrate” Belarus might prove irresistible to Vladimir Putin. Belarus also has a huge trade surplus with Ukraine, its second largest trading partner. A political and economic collapse

in Ukraine would put Belarusian statehood at risk. Finally, Belarus and Ukraine have a centuries-old tradition of co-operation and peaceful co-existence. Taking into account the different factors that push them together and pull them apart, it is clear that achieving satisfactory and stable bilateral relations is a fine balancing act. The vigilance and goodwill of both parties is indispensable.

An ally of my enemy is my friend?

Minsk, officially an ally of Moscow, is obliged to fulfil commitments on the co-ordination of foreign policy. At the United Nations General Assembly, Belarus votes with Russia against resolutions supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity, and refuses to condemn human rights violations in the annexed Crimea. And yet Minsk has still not officially recognised the Russian annexation of Crimea, and has continued to develop economic co-operation with Kyiv since the conflict broke out in 2014. This was especially important in the first months of the conflict, when Moscow banned exports of fuel needed for the Ukrainian armed forces.

In the very beginning of Russia's aggression, there were cautions in Ukraine that Russian troops might attack Kyiv from Belarusian territory – only 200 kilometres separate the Belarusian border from the Ukrainian capital. It was important for the then-acting president of Ukraine, Oleksandr Turchynov, to hear from Lukashenka that his country would never threaten Ukraine militarily. It remains highly

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doubtful Lukashenka could actually prevent Russian troops invading from Belarus, in the event that Putin called for such a move. But at the very least the Belarusian leader made his position on this matter clear, which matters to both Kyiv and Moscow.

The meeting between Turchynov and Lukashenka on March 29th 2014 also indicated that Belarus recognised the legitimacy of the new Ukrainian authorities – a welcome olive branch amid Moscow's statements about a "coup d'état" and a reluctance to make contact with the post-revolutionary government in Kyiv. A few days later, speaking to Russian media, Lukashenka clearly confirmed his position on the "absolute legitimacy" of the acting Ukrainian government.

Not only did Belarus refuse to support Russian economic sanctions against Ukraine, it also helped Kyiv overcome the most painful restrictions through re-export schemes involving Belarusian companies and joint ventures. Despite the official suspension of military co-operation, continued economic co-operation effectively

meant that Belarus was securing the demands of Ukraine's military by supplying fuel and other resources. "If something is needed from Belarus, just say, and we'll do in a day everything that you ask for" – this is what Lukashenka said to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko at their meeting in Kyiv on December 21st 2014.

While Russia was implementing draconian measures in response to the creation of the EU-Ukraine free trade area, Minsk and Kyiv adapted to this new reality and were able to find ways to continue their economic co-operation. And this is not only a question of familial loyalty; Belarus makes big gains from that transaction. The Belarusian economy has traditionally been dependent on exports to Russia, and as Russia's economy stagnates, Belarus needs to develop trade links with other markets. Expanding trade with Ukraine allows it to patch up the holes in its own economy.

Quasi-neutrality

Being an ally of Russia and a CSTO member, Belarus is not neutral in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and for this reason Minsk was not considered an appropriate venue for peace talks. But after a series of fruitless international meetings in Geneva (April 2014), B  nouville, France (June 2014), Kyiv and Donetsk (June-July 2014), it was the Belarusian capital where the negotiating parties finally managed to sign the peace agreements that would help to significantly reduce the intensity of the conflict. The first Minsk Protocol, and follow-up memorandum proposing a set of measures to restore peace in Donbas, were signed on the 5th and 19th of September 2014 respectively, following the meetings of the Trilateral Contact Group that consisted of the representatives of the OSCE, Ukraine, Russia and the Russian-backed separatists.

On February 12th 2015, the "Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements" was signed in the Belarusian capital, following 16 hours of tough negotiations between Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France (the Normandy format established specifically for aiding Russia-Ukraine diplomacy). Agreements were supported by the declaration of Russian, Ukrainian and French Presidents and the German Chancellor; and a few days later endorsed by Resolution 2202 of the UN Security Council. Much criticised, the Minsk II agreement is still considered the primary basis of a future peaceful settlement of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Minsk also remains the traditional host of the meetings of the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine.

Along with contributing to the peace process, Minsk managed to win important geopolitical dividends for itself as a result of its new status as a negotiation platform.

It has enabled the regime to break out of its diplomatic isolation from the West. EU sanctions previously imposed in response to political repression have been lifted and discussions have begun on building up EU-Belarus economic co-operation.

For our freedom and your interests

Kyiv is also building relations with Belarus on a pragmatic basis. The Revolution of Dignity was not only about the European choice of Ukraine, but also democracy and human rights, and many Belarusian opposition activists and volunteers supported the revolution and struggle against Russian aggression. They hoped the new Ukrainian authorities would in turn support Belarusian democratic movements but were disappointed when it became clear that Kyiv was going to keep good relations with Lukashenka's regime.

Ukraine pragmatically chose to concentrate on its own survival. Kyiv can hardly be suspected of being naïve about Lukashenka's true motives, not to mention the actual limitations of his country's independence, neutrality and security assurances. And it goes without saying that Lukashenka does not agree with Ukraine's pro-western trajectory. Yet both capitals perceive the threat of the Kremlin seeking to restore Moscow's control within the former Soviet borders, and both feel the need to work together to survive. Though Kyiv is well aware of the limits of the solidarity shown by Belarus, it is still preferable to outright animosity, which would be the result if Minsk were to take its allegiance to Russia to its logical end.

Lukashenka probably anticipates that Belarus would be next if Ukraine fell, and he does not wish to become the leader of a Russian province. At the same time, many politicians and experts, in Kyiv and across the EU, believe that, at present, there is no real alternative to Lukashenka. An anti-regime protest movement in the vein of the EuroMaidan might be exploited by Russia as a pretext for military intervention in Belarus. Given Russia's dominance of the Belarusian media and cultural space, the strong pro-Russian sympathies in society and the penetration of the security and defence sectors with agents under Russian tutelage, such a scenario is certainly possible. Lukashenka has skilfully exploited these fears and insists he is the only guarantor of Belarus's independence and neutrality.

Uncertain perspectives


Purely pragmatic co-operation between Minsk and Kyiv will not guarantee a bright future for further bilateral relations, given their different geopolitical tra-

jectories and aspirations. Minsk claims neutrality, yet Belarusian law enforcement authorities enforce much harsher sentences on those who fight on the Ukrainian side in Donbas than those who join the illegal Russian-backed separatist forces. Take the detention of the 19-year-old Ukrainian citizen Pavlo Gryb in the Belarusian city of Gomel, who was further transferred to the Russian FSB office in Krasnodar. Or the notorious Russian-led aggressive Zapad-2017 military exercises held on Belarusian territory. The true loyalties at play here are no secret.

So far, Lukashenka has been able to co-operate with Kyiv in spheres of mutual interests. But in the long run he is likely to face increasing pressures from Moscow for full loyalty that will be hard to withstand. Russia has already initiated plans to limit duty-free deliveries of petroleum products and gas to Belarus. This will likely put a stop to their re-export to Ukraine and cut Belarus's foreign currency reserves to boot. On October 25th 2018, Belarus's second city, Gomel, hosted the first Forum of Regions of Belarus and Ukraine aimed at intensifying trade, economic and cultural collaboration between the regions of the two countries. But willingness to co-operate is not the only factor that will determine the future of Belarus-Ukraine relations.

In the long run, Lukashenka is likely to face increasing pressure from Moscow for full loyalty that will be hard to withstand.

Belarus's economic over-dependence on Russia and Lukashenka's reluctance to implement necessary political and economic reforms narrows room for geopolitical manoeuvring. Some experts have noted that Russia's new ambassador to Minsk, Mikhail Babich, who is also the special representative of the Russian president on the development of trade and economic relations with Belarus, is going to strongly influence the domestic and foreign policy in Belarus and foster integration processes within the Russia-Belarus Union State.

The coming year will demonstrate the ability of the new Belarusian government, headed by Syarhey Rumas as prime minister, to implement meaningful reforms and withstand pressure from Moscow. It would also be welcome to see more initiative from Kyiv in shaping a new strategy for relations with Belarus, designed not only for tactical benefits but also for a long-term partnership. 

Maksym Khylo is the chairman of the board at the East European Security Research Initiative Foundation and a senior research fellow at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv.

Past as weakness or strength?

The shared history, strained present and uncertain future of Belarus and Lithuania

DOVILĖ ŠUKYTĖ

How can barriers between two historically close countries like **Belarus and Lithuania** be lowered or eliminated? What are the prospects of improved relations between the two states? Ultimately, closer ties between ordinary Belarusians and Lithuanians could serve as the best guarantor of closer political relations.

During his September 2018 visit to Vilnius, Pope Francis quoted Lithuania's national anthem and encouraged people to "draw strength from the past". He reiterated what is often common knowledge: for one to look to the future, one must first know and make peace with the past. In theory the same logic could apply to Lithuania and Belarus, two neighbours that, over the centuries, have spent more time together – that is, belonging to (or being ruled by) the same state – than apart. The process of recovery from their shared past hardships, notably during the Soviet period, could provide fruitful grounds for co-operation. Unfortunately, in the context of the current strained relationship between the two states, the shared past is not utilised as a source of unity.

Barriers

Several barriers separate the two countries. The first one, which actually presents the fewest problems, is the 679 kilometre shared border: a well-fenced and clearly demarcated barrier that serves as the external boundary of the Schengen zone as

well as NATO. In fact, Lithuanian businesses have found it to their advantage as they can produce goods on either side of the border and thus export easily to the EU or to members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), especially Russia. The second barrier, one far more salient in terms of political relations, is the rift in democratic values, reflecting the contrast between the democratic safeguards in Lithuania and the disregard of human rights in Belarus which consistently restricts the latter's progress. Finally, the last barrier, which can be called a fog of oblivion, prevents people-to-people contact or understanding from emerging – even as the number of cross-border visits (to take advantage of opportunities such as shopping or entertainment) increases. Ultimately, closer ties between ordinary Belarusians and Lithuanians could serve as the best guarantor of closer political relations between Minsk and Vilnius; the continuing absence of such ties only contributes to the ongoing crisis in bilateral relations.

How can barriers between these two historically close countries be lowered or eliminated? And what are the prospects of improved relations between the two states? First, to return to Pope Francis' call to find strength in the past, throughout history there have been many positive examples of ties between Belarus and Lithuania. Perhaps the most symbolic is language. For centuries both states were part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which used Old Belarusian (also known as Ruthenian) as one of the main administrative languages until the late 17th century. While Lithuanian was often spoken, legislation – including the polity's main legal code, the Lithuanian Statutes – was written in Old Belarusian. However, in the ensuing two centuries of Russian imperial rule, both the Belarusian and Lithuanian languages were targeted by Moscow's policies of Russification. Civic resistance was widespread (for example, illegal Lithuanian-language books were secretly printed and then smuggled in from Germany's East Prussia region), later flowering in brief periods of independence, beginning in 1918.

Absorbed into the Soviet Union after only a year (compared to the 22-year period of statehood enjoyed by Lithuania), Belarus consequently suffered a greater impact from the renewed wave of Russification; only now are Belarusians reclaiming their language and increasing its use in the private and public spheres.

Whose history?

The revival of the Belarusian language is a part of a more ambitious process, fostering the resurgence of a more distinctive Belarusian identity, supported by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in order to reverse centuries of Russification and reduce the country's dependence on Russia. However, in drawing upon non-

Russian historical elements, notably by emphasising the Belarusian character of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, this campaign has, in fact, increased tensions between Minsk and Vilnius. As a result, when visiting the Duchy's ancient stronghold at Trakai Castle near Vilnius, Belarusian students frequently argue with their Lithuanian tour guides that the polity's rulers were Belarusian, not Lithuanian, in origin.

This argument is based on the above-mentioned fact that the Old Belarusian language was the administrative tongue of the Grand Duchy. For Lithuanians, by contrast, it is ancestry that is of greater importance. The Grand Duchy arose from Baltic-speaking tribes united by King Mindaugas in the 13th century. Moreover, the remembered past experience of statehood, both of the Grand Duchy and of the interwar Republic of Lithuania, helped fuel Lithuanian resistance to Soviet occupation and maintained hope that freedom and independence would one day be regained.

However, it is certainly true that as the Grand Duchy became more idealised over time, Lithuanians neglected the role that Slavic, especially Belarusian, people and regions played in contributing to its development and prosperity. Now, at least, Lithuanians learn about this role by walking the streets of Vilnius's Old Town and seeing memorial plaques to figures such as Francysk Skaryna, who established the first printing house in Vilnius and published the first book in what would become the Belarusian language in 1522. For Belarusians, the existence of such memorials ensures that the mark on the Grand Duchy left by their ancestors will not soon be forgotten.

The *Silva Rerum* series of books by the Lithuanian author Kristina Sabaliauskaitė is another way in which Lithuanians have slowly begun to lift the fog of oblivion and learn more about their joint heritage with Belarus. One book in the series focuses on the Grand Duchy's influential noble Radziwiłł family, whose main residence was Nyasvizh (Nesvizh) Castle in present-day Belarus. Yet despite such efforts, as well as technical work like the co-operation between Belarusian and Lithuanian archaeologists in preserving the castle, this joint history remains largely unknown within either Belarusian or Lithuanian societies. One way forward would be for historians – from both sides – to review the Grand Duchy period and agree on history textbooks that could be used in the two countries; after all, the era contains more than enough history to absorb.

Border issues

The current level of border traffic between Belarus and Lithuania offers another prism through which to view people-to-people relations, while digging deeper into

the roots of bilateral difficulties. In general, the establishment of a harder border (with visa requirements enacted by both sides) after Lithuania's accession to the EU in 2004 had a negative effect on Lithuanians' desire to visit Belarus; generally, only those with relatives on the other side of the border were sufficiently motivated to endure the bureaucratic hassles associated with obtaining permission to travel. Despite generally lower prices, Belarus was simply unable to compete with other countries that Lithuanian tourists could discover visa-free.

Belarusians, by contrast, are among the leading recipients of Schengen visas and have consistently shown an interest in traveling to Lithuania for purposes including entertainment and shopping. Many young Belarusians also come to study at the European Humanities University, a Vilnius-based Belarusian university in exile. Furthermore, due to the harsh restrictions and controls at home, many Belarusian non-governmental organisations are registered in Lithuania, as are many Belarusian businesses – for instance, IT companies that prefer having a base in the EU's single market.

In order to ease the border movement of Lithuanian and Belarusian citizens, a local border traffic system was proposed in 2010. Like similar measures in force between Latvia and Belarus, it was designed to facilitate the travel of residents in border areas to maintain family relationships, foster tourism and increase cultural exchanges. However implementation was shelved by the Belarusian side, mainly due to political reasons; Belarus, at the time, was subject to EU-imposed sanctions that were strongly supported by Lithuania. Instead, Lukashenko launched a unilateral visa-free regime for citizens of the EU (and most other) countries visiting Belarus, but not vice versa. For the government in Minsk, this system is more beneficial as it does not offer additional opportunities for Belarusian citizens to travel and spend their hard-earned roubles abroad; on the contrary, it boosts Belarusian tourism by attracting foreigners.

Lithuanians can now take advantage of these programs. One now allows visa-free access for 30 days to those flying to Minsk, while others offer access of up to 10 days to the western Belarusian cities of Hrodna and Brest. For Lithuanians, the prospect of paying premium prices to fly a mere 172 kilometres from Vilnius and Minsk is less appealing than traveling by bus or car to Hrodna, a city rich in the heritage of the Grand Duchy. At the moment, Belarusian pharmacies that offer medicines at prices several times lower than those in Lithuania (while often not requiring prescriptions) are notably attractive to Lithuanian residents.

Belarusians are among the leading recipients of Schengen visas from Lithuania and have consistently shown an interest in traveling there.

Lithuania's commercial engagement with Belarus is far larger – representing the second largest source of foreign capital for Belarusian firms (after Russia). Primarily specialising in wood processing, food processing (such as meat products) and construction, Lithuanian firms have been encouraged to set up production facilities in Belarus thanks to tax exemptions granted by Minsk as well as the prospects of access to EEU export markets (primarily in Russia). Of course, against these advantages must be weighed the risks that business assets can be seized by the Belarusian authorities at any time, given the relative lack of respect for property rights in what is still a largely state-controlled economy.

Landlocked Belarus utilises Lithuanian rail links as well as the port of Klaipėda to export goods outside the EEU. This dependence is actually increasing – with Belarusian cargo accounting for a third of all transit freight in Klaipėda – and the port has recently attracted Belarusian investments in terminal construction and expansion. Lukashenka has mused openly about the possibility of diverting transit shipments to the port of Riga, most recently in September this year when the newly-appointed ambassador to Latvia was given instructions to secure unobstructed access to maritime shipments via Lithuania's northern neighbour.

Power plays


While previous periods of bilateral political tension were primarily rooted in Lithuanian support for democracy and civil society in Belarus – notably of non-governmental organisations and opposition political parties, as well as the above-mentioned sanctions – it is currently dominated by one issue: the Astravyets Nuclear Power Plant (NPP). Belarus is now constructing the facility at a location less than 30 kilometres from the Lithuanian border and a mere 50 kilometres from Vilnius. Lithuania is exhausting all legal mechanisms to prove that the Astravyets NPP does not meet security requirements and is preparing for Plan B – to halt the selling of Astravyets NPP generated electricity on the Lithuanian market.

To the Belarusian public, Lukashenka presents Astravyets NPP as a key to decreasing the country's energy and economic dependence on Russia as well as a project that already provides jobs and will generate income from selling electricity. Lithuania is primarily concerned with the NPP's safety as several construction incidents have already taken place and were not properly communicated, stoking fears whether in the event of an accident an immediate warning would actually be issued to safeguard Lithuanian citizens from radiation exposure. Furthermore, the Astravyets NPP from a Lithuanian perspective is seen as a Russian, not Belarusian, project. It is fully loan-funded by Russia; thus, should Belarus fail to repay

annual loans, Russia would take over control. Furthermore, due to existing energy transmission links, electricity produced by the NPP would flood the Lithuanian energy market and jeopardize Lithuanian achievements in reducing dependence on Russian electricity by diversifying energy suppliers.

Paradoxically, both states declare the same aim – to decrease dependence on Russian energy – but there is not even the slightest attempt to co-operate. Mostly, due to a rift in democratic values, Lithuania is of the position that only if Lukashenka ensures free and democratic elections, stops persecution of opposition and civic activists, and upholds basic human rights, closer relations are possible. In September this year at a conference in Tbilisi, the Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius compared Belarus with Russia and said both countries should be treated the same. The Lithuanian position contradicts the new EU approach, which is to engage and involve Belarus in different co-operation platforms under the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative. Though Lithuania is among the strongest advocates of EaP policies, it has no illusions about a “warm up” of EU-Belarus relations. Lithuanian mistrust is based on lessons from the past, when no matter how open and engaging the EU was, Minsk ended up prioritising its ties with the Kremlin; as a result, progress during co-operation with the EU was set back by cracking down on pro-democratic civic activism.

For Lithuania, Belarus is a country highly dependent on Russian subsidies and loans. Belarusian and Russian security is also closely intertwined. Some experts even believe that in order to remain in power, Russian President Vladimir Putin might push the implementation of the Union State between Belarus and Russia where he would assume the position as Head of the Union. Therefore, even if Lithuanian concerns over the safety of Astravyets NPP would be appeased, it would not spark a new level of mutual trust. As mentioned, a precondition for Lithuanian co-operation is the democratic progress of Lukashenka's regime.

At this point no concrete recipe for improving Belarus-Lithuania relations can be prescribed. A breakthrough in political relations should not be expected anytime soon. Economic relations, despite Lukashenka's intimidations, will continue, as it is in the interest of both countries. The most promising area is people-to-people relations, which might be primarily focused on everyday needs such as affordable medicine in Belarusian pharmacies or quality goods in Lithuanian supermarkets; again, however, such a project requires a hitherto unrealized willingness among citizens of both countries to learn more about their joint heritage. Although shared history will not itself lead to an immediate improvement in bilateral political relations, over time it may help lead people (and their political leaders) to choose closer ties. 

Behind the thaw

MICHAŁ POTOCKI



For over two decades **Polish-Belarusian relations** have been connected to Belarus's relations with the West. There have been oscillations between years of warming relations and colder periods. Since Russia annexed Crimea and the Russian threat in Eastern Europe has become widely recognised, many European countries have re-evaluated their policies towards Belarus, which although authoritarian is not aggressive. Poland is one such country.



The foundations for a new opening towards Belarus were laid before Poland's 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections. It was in April 2014, during the first weeks of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, when President Alyaksandr Lukashenka asked the Polish government to join in a mediation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Poland's prime minister at the time, Donald Tusk, turned down the offer for fear that the Kremlin was behind the initiative. Based on information that I have gathered from sources, this proposal called for placing Belarusian peacekeeping forces in Donbas, thereby disregarding the Crimea issue as well as the guarantee of Ukraine's neutrality.

Proponent of stability

Out of all the post-Soviet states, Belarus is undoubtedly the one most integrated with the Russian Federation. This is especially true in the area of military co-operation. As stipulated in bilateral agreements, the Belarusian army will defer to Russian command and control in an armed conflict. Despite the high level of integration, Lukashenka has shown that his country can keep some distance from Russia. In 2008 Belarus did not recognise independence of Abkhazia and South

Ossetia (the breakaway republics had declared independence from Georgia already in the 1990s but were recognised by Russia after the 2008 war – editor’s note), nor the 2014 Russian takeover of Crimea. Belarus also kept some distance from the Kremlin’s intervention in Ukraine and even supported the Kyiv authorities in some aspects by exchanging intelligence data and repairing Ukrainian military equipment in its state-owned enterprises.

Lukashenka made peace proposals to more countries than just Poland. But he never suggested that Belarus would be a true mediator, indicating that his proposal was aimed more at providing a space for talks. In 2014 and 2015 this tactic bore fruit when the newly built Palace of Independence, located on the outskirts of Minsk, was host to international negotiations and the signing of the ceasefire agreement for Donbas. The latter agreement, known as Minsk II, saw participation by Germany’s chancellor, Angela Merkel, and the then-president of France, François Hollande. It was indeed a symbolic success for Belarus’s president who for years had been isolated by western states.

Lukashenka’s involvement in the peace process certainly led to an increased willingness by western states to reward Belarus, but under one condition: calm 2015 presidential and 2016 parliamentary elections. As expected, in both cases results were forged. Yet there were no repressions. Two representatives of the opposition were allowed to enter the parliament for the first time in more than a decade, and the European Union withdrew the majority of sanctions placed on Belarus after 2010. It turns out that even though Lukashenka may be “the last dictator of Europe”, he is also, at least for the moment, an advocate of stability in the region.

Lukashenka’s involvement in the Donbas peace process certainly led to an increased willingness by western states to reward Belarus.

Carte blanche

Belarus’s crawling opening to Europe encouraged Poland’s new government, elected in 2015, to consider a change in relations with its neighbour. The now-ruling party, Law and Justice (PiS), had a carte blanche. The previous Civic Platform (PO) government had been burdened by a failed attempt at a thaw. In 2010 Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski had attempted a package of reset with Russia and an EU-sponsored offer for Lukashenka. This strategy collapsed when Lukashenka oversaw the beating of protesters in December 2010, leading to the largest repressions in the history of independent Belarus. Poland swiftly changed track and became the main promotor of sanctions.



Photo courtesy of the Senate of the Republic of Poland (CC)

Polish speaker of the Senate, Stanisław Karczewski, during a 2018 visit to Belarus. Belarus's crawling opening to Europe encouraged Poland's new government, elected in 2015, to consider a change in relations with its neighbour.

The Law and Justice government is well-regarded by Belarusian opposition, unlike the Civic Platform. Its “Russia First” policy prior to the annexation of Crimea alienated Belarusians for whom Poland’s intentions were then just as incomprehensible as they were in Kyiv. The Belarusian opposition often associates the Polish right-wing with initiatives such as the Konstanty Kalinowski Scholarship, established in 2006 during the first PiS government and offered to Belarusian oppositionists dismissed from their national universities, and the establishment of Belarusian media outlets such as Belsat TV and Ratsyya Radio in Białystok. As a principle, the Polish right supports anti-Russia policies and promotes the independence of Eastern Partnership states.

The PiS government has not ruled out a partial reconciliation with Russia, but on the condition that Moscow makes changes in certain key areas. The warming of relations with Belarus as well as Kazakhstan – that is, the two post-Soviet states which are closest to Moscow – have thus been perceived as a test for a possible reset with the Kremlin. As it turned out, Russia showed little interest in making even symbolic gestures of friendship. Thus Polish-Russian relations will remain frosty for the foreseeable future, but this has not discouraged Poland from continuing to strengthen ties with Belarus and Kazakhstan.

Poorly prepared

The first months of Beata Szydło's government, formed in 2015 (Szydło was the prime minister of the PiS government between 2015 and 2017 – editor's note), were abundant with bilateral meetings. Belarus was visited by the foreign minister, Witold Waszczykowski, Deputy Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, who was responsible for economic policy, as well as the deputy speaker of the lower chamber of parliament, Ryszard Terlecki, the speaker of the Polish Senate, Stanisław Karczewski, and Konstanty Radziwiłł, the health minister. In return, Warsaw hosted, among others, Uladzimir Makey, Belarus's foreign minister and Bialaslaw Pirshchuk, vice speaker of the lower house of the Belarusian parliament. The Minsk authorities attempted to invite Poland's President Andrzej Duda to Belarus but were unsuccessful.

Most meetings have taken place at the parliamentary level, and their frequency has been notable. It would seem that the PiS government regard the Belarusian House of Representatives as a legitimate parliament. This would be a significant break from policies implemented since 1996, when Lukashenka replaced the Supreme Council with a parliament of highly questionable legality, still unrecognised by the western states. Commenting on the change in Polish-Belarusian relations, Krzysztof Mrozek of the Stefan Batory Foundation wrote the following for *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna*: "Economic issues are now at the forefront of Polish-Belarusian relations. They have started to dominate contacts between the governments and somehow pushed aside certain values which were previously regarded as crucial: the rule of law, human rights and democracy. The PiS government's position that democratic values are of secondary importance for the functioning of the Polish state translates into an increased readiness to cooperate with the Belarusian regime."

The problem with the thaw was that it was poorly prepared at the conceptual stage. There was no proper strategy for talks with Lukashenka, who typically operates under a tit-for-tat rule. It did not take long for him to realise that Warsaw had no real conditions in place for dialogue. The Polish side evidently had not grasped the basic truth that Belarus will not even try to implement a signed agreement if it sees no interest in it. The most illustrative symbol of Poland's poor preparation was the decision by the Polish foreign ministry to cut off financing for the Polish-sponsored Belsat TV; it was seen as a gesture towards the Lukashenka regime. The move was eventually reversed by the prime minister, thanks in part to a petition campaign by Polish journalists and Eastern policy experts (the petition letter was also signed by *New*

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Eastern Europe's editors among others – editor's note). However, the message that little effort is required to improve relations with Poland was not lost on Minsk.

Certain tiredness


Both countries are also improving economic relations. While this has led to an increase in trade, Polish companies are limited in operating in the Belarusian market due to the high level of state control. In Poland, no Belarusian firms have been allowed to register on the Warsaw Stock Exchange. This has resulted in certain tiredness on both sides, and the intensity of bilateral visits has slowly decreased. "We meet less often, but maintain channels of communication, which have been refreshed in the last three years," said one of the Belarusian diplomats in a conversation with me.

The thaw rhetoric has not as yet translated into truly meaningful activity. Belsat journalists working in Belarus continue to face repressions and there has been no progress in regards to the so-called Katyn list – a register of NKVD victims who were murdered in 1940 in the then Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). Minsk has not yet ratified the Polish-Belarusian agreement on small border movement which was finalised eight years ago. It has opted instead for a slow but steady implementation of a visa-free regime to all citizens of western states. There is also no discussion on meeting Minsk's expectations for Poland to buy electricity from the nearly-completed nuclear plant in Astravyets. Poland considers the plant a potential hazard, and the authorities categorically refuse to buy any energy that would be produced there.

Moreover, there still seems to be no chance of legalising the currently unrecognised Union of Poles in Belarus. In 2006 Belarusian authorities helped create a split within the organisation, which they perceived as a threat. Up to now they rather unhelpfully recognise only those members who are not recognised by Poland. Yet the warming of Polish-Belarusian relations has meant a slightly larger tolerance towards the activities of the unrecognised part of the organisation. In the very same text written for *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna*, Mrozek says: "Organisations such as the Polish Education Society, which are seen by the authorities as non-political, operate without many obstacles. The dilemma related to the Polish minority is whether the government should continue fighting for the recognition of the Union of Poles in Belarus or limit its efforts to focus on expanding Polish language education and promotion of Polish culture by other organisations. A scenario where the Belarusian side would transfer Polish houses to the board of the Polish Education Society is being considered by both governments."

The first victim

Anna Maria Dyner, an analyst at the Polish Institute of International Affairs, writing in the 2018 edition of the *Belarusian Yearbook*, pointed to one more factor that limits the possibility of resolving unfinished matters. “Some of them are a result of the overall political situation in Eastern and Central Europe,” she writes. “The security-related problems are connected to Russia’s increasingly aggressive policy towards Ukraine, which in turn raises questions about the security policy of Belarus, given that Belarus is a member of the Union State with Russia and in a close military, political and economic alliance with Russia. There are also doubts in regards to Belarus’s foreign policy independence, especially in the context of its relations with EU and NATO.”

Belarus is concerned above all with survival, and feels it is walking a tight rope in the current geopolitical order. It is engaged in a balancing act that will prevent it from an unbridled embrace of Poland or any other alliance with a western state. People close to the Polish authorities tell me that it is thanks to Poland’s warming of relations with Belarus that Minsk refused a permanent Russian military base on its territory. But such an interpretation sounds like a fairy tale. The truth is that Lukashenka opposed these bases before relations between Minsk and Warsaw started to improve. The Belarusian authorities have also avoided voicing outcry in reaction to increased NATO presence on the eastern flank. “We do not like it, but we want to keep tensions calm and not heat them up,” I was told by a Belarusian diplomat recently. “We know that should there be a conflict between Russia and the West, Belarus will be the first victim.” 

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

Michał Potocki is a Polish journalist. He is an op-ed editor with the Polish daily *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna*.

Germany is wrong in bolstering the status quo in Belarus

JOERG FORBRIG

The current way of thinking in Germany and the West, in shaping a policy towards Belarus, is to **accept the political status quo**, normalise relations with Minsk and help the Belarusian state preserve its independence. This view, however, is seriously flawed.

Europe has fundamentally changed its policy towards Belarus in recent years, and Germany is no exception. Previously, Berlin and other EU capitals addressed Minsk with clear demands to improve its dismal record on human rights, elections, civil society and democracy, and they responded with sanctions to the worst violations of these norms. Now, by contrast, the central driver behind German and European policy seems to be Belarusian independence, whose fragility has been thrown into sharp relief by the aggressive Russian return to geopolitics in the region. This effective shift to realpolitik is, however, fraught with problems and its success is far from certain.

At first glance, little seems to indicate a principal change in German-Belarusian relations. Most notable is certainly the increased frequency of shuttle diplomacy, culminating in two high-level German visits to Belarus over the past year. In November 2017 Sigmar Gabriel was the first German foreign minister to visit Belarus in seven years, followed, in June this year, by Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the first German president ever to visit the country. Both visits ostensibly marked historical occasions, with the first celebrating 25 years of diplomatic relations, and the second devoted to the opening of the Maly Trostenets memorial site. Neither visit,

at least in the public remarks, dwelled much on the changed geopolitical situation in Eastern Europe or the unchanged misery of dictatorship in Belarus.

Stability and the status quo

Back in Berlin, however, officials have become much more outspoken. For them the overriding goal of German policy towards Belarus must be to safeguard and strengthen Belarusian sovereignty. As their reasoning goes, European efforts to push Belarus towards political liberalisation have not borne fruit. The Belarusian democratic movement is too weak, Alyaksandr Lukashenka and his regime are too strong and the public are not ready for change. Even worse, any move away from the only domestic and international course acceptable to Russia – autocracy at home and Eurasian integration abroad – will prompt the Kremlin to interfere – for fear of losing its last true ally in the region. The only conclusion, in this view, is to accept the political status quo, to normalise relations with the powers-that-be in Minsk, and so to assist the Belarusian state to preserve its independence.

Though convincing to many, this view is seriously flawed. First and foremost, it uncritically adopts positions that have been tirelessly peddled by the Belarusian government over the years. One of these is that the Lukashenka regime offers domestic stability that is rare among post-Soviet countries.

Yet this alleged stability has long been held up only at the price of successive waves of repression against dissenters, ceaseless pressure on journalists and human rights advocates, and intimidation of civic activists. This has evidently kept in check political challengers to the government. However it is now the socio-economic situation that fuels discontent. As ordinary Belarusians increasingly feel the failures of the unreformed economic and social system – through wage cuts, job losses, price hikes and more – they have become more politicised, as a series of protests over the last years have shown. This bread-and-butter mobilisation is harder to reign in than earlier demands for democratic change. This source of instability will not go away, given that the government rejects any serious economic and social reforms that will eventually prompt demands for political change.

As ordinary Belarusians increasingly feel the failures of the unreformed economic and social system, they have become more politicised.

Just as chimerical is Lukashenka's often-repeated claim to act as an independent broker of regional stability and bridge between the East and West. Belarus has

been playing host to the negotiations on the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Though these Minsk talks have remained without any result to date, the Belarusian capital has since tried to fashion itself as the new Helsinki: from new discussion formats such as the Minsk Dialogue – a high level forum which aims to bring together experts on the region, most recently held in May 2018 – to calls by the Belarusian foreign minister for a pan-European process towards a new final act.

Belarus has become
a **showroom** of the
sphere of influence
the Kremlin works
to re-establish.

This admittedly smart seizure of geopolitical momentum by the Lukashenka regime is hollow, however. Belarus is no neutral Finland: it is clearly aligned with Russia, one of the parties, and is indeed the instigator of the new confrontation between the East and West. Politically, Belarus finds itself in a Union State

with Russia and it is integrated with Russian-led military and economic blocs, while materially its survival hinges upon substantial Russian subsidies in the form of oil, gas and loans. In all these respects, then, Belarusian independence is effectively one of the Kremlin's grace. The country is a showroom of the sphere of influence the Kremlin works to re-establish.

Instability and security

This existing degree of dependence on Russia basically renders the new German approach to Belarus an illusion. If the country's independence is indeed the central tenet, then a range and scale of engagement will be needed that goes far beyond what Germany and other western partners are able and willing to muster. Effectively, the asymmetrical ties that link Belarusian society, culture, media, economy, politics, defence and not least its state budget, to those of Russia would have to be complemented with a strong European vector. Only when some degree of symmetry was reached across these layers and sectors, Belarus would have an independence to speak of. But the engagement and investment this would require is one that Germany and the European Union barely approximate with other and more democratic Eastern neighbours. It is hardly realistic, then, that they will ever mobilise sufficient resources to wean Belarus off its deep dependence on Russia. This acknowledgment of their own political and material constraints should precede any noble announcements by German or other European officials to act in defence of Belarusian independence.


Strategically, too, current German thinking on Belarus falls short. The last century has seen examples aplenty when democratic nations of the West conceded to

dictatorial states in the name of security and stability. Germany itself has been at both the receiving and giving ends of such appeasement. It should know particularly well, therefore, that rapprochements with autocratic regimes rarely produce more than a short-term reprieve. In the long run, however, instability and insecurity return with a vengeance.

Along the way, unfortunately, democracies lose their credibility. They subordinate their principles, from human rights to the rule of law to democracy, to an elusive hope for a constructive relationship with their authoritarian neighbours. Those, in turn, become ever bolder by imposing their own conditions and demands, typically evolving around material benefits needed for political survival under threat of ending the rapprochement. State officials are the predominant conduit for bilateral relationships, while broader people-to-people contacts remain very limited, and with it the grasp among western partners for what is really going on in places like Belarus. The end result of this dynamic is cynicism rather than confidence.

Starting afresh

Germany, along with others in democratic Europe, can still avoid some of these traps. While the changed geopolitical reality in the continent's East cannot be ignored, some of the practical and policy conclusions bear rethinking. First, the Belarusian regime is much more brittle than it lets on. For its political stability and survival, it depends on Russian sponsorship no less than on recognition and support from the West. Such assistance to the Belarusian state may well be expanded beyond the hitherto meagre levels but only if, secondly, the regime removes obstacles to support Belarusian civil society and citizens-at-large.

While more ambitious democratic reforms are clearly a long shot, the more immediate and possible task is one of nation-building. Gradually over the last years Belarusian identity and culture, community-organising, citizen engagement, and social responsibility have been gathering momentum – all of which lay the foundations for a positive development of the country. Yet to realise this potential, thirdly, Germany and Europe need to substantially increase their outreach to understanding and support Belarusian society. This, more than the rapprochement with the Lukashenka regime, will really help to fortify Belarusian independence in the long run. 

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Taras Kuzio

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Bardhyl Selimi

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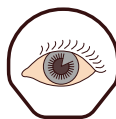
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Collectivisation of
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1968
Prague Spring



1968
Invasion



Normalisation
Everyday Life



Normalisation
Dissent



1989
Regime Collapse

CONTENT



period movie



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This learning environment enables you to find and analyse multimedia content about the communist regimes in Europe. Using the Czechoslovak example, we describe the specifics of life in the Eastern bloc. Instead of long texts, the portal offers video clips that are understandable

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