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2011–2021

WHITHER DEMOCRACY?

And what lies ahead for our region

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DEAR READER,

We start this new year with a lot of questions, some hope and certainly plenty of reflections. The previous year, 2020, will for sure remain in our memory as the year of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Yet we also all know that beyond the public health crisis, the region of Central and Eastern Europe continued to confront political challenges as well. Most visibly, this is seen in Belarus. However, the recent elections in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova indicate significant changes too. These developments have compelled our authors and interviewees to posit the question on the current state and direction of democracy in the region and the world at large. Do they symbolise optimism for a turn away from illiberal practices? Such seems to be the case of Lithuania and Moldova. Or will authoritarian rulers use the illusion of elections to consolidate even greater power – as this year's Duma elections in Russia will certainly demonstrate.

Likewise, the election of Joe Biden as president in the United States signifies a political shift that reverberates well beyond domestic American politics. The new administration has already suggested an ambitious agenda for its foreign policy which includes a strong emphasis on transatlantic relations and a renewed focus on human rights in many parts of the world. That is why in this issue, our authors also reflect on what a Biden presidency might mean to some key parts of our region, including Russia, Ukraine and Central Europe.

Hence, we are left wondering how hopeful we should be when thinking about 2021. As Václav Havel once said: "Hope is the deep orientation of the human soul that can be held at the darkest times." Perhaps the stories from our region demonstrate that even in dark times and in difficult circumstances, hope can steer us in the right direction.

Speaking of hope, this year *New Eastern Europe* is celebrating 10 years of publishing. Hence, we sincerely count on you in joining us during this important anniversary as we have many events and activities planned – including a special crowdfunding campaign which will help us start off with year 11 on the right foot. Make sure to check out our website as well as social media for further announcements.

The Editors

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We need innovation and courage to rejuvenate democracy

A conversation with Basil Kerski, director of the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk. Interviewer: Iwona Reichardt

IWONA REICHARDT: With 2020 behind us, we are now entering into the third decade of the 21st century. There is a sense that the beginning of each decade can indicate a certain change which determines the years to come. 1989 and 1991 marked the beginning of a new post-Cold War order; the first decade of the 21st century was marked by the terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001; while the second decade of this century started a bit earlier, with the 2008 financial crisis. This time we have the COVID-19 pandemic which started in 2020. In a way, all of these events were surprises as well….

BASIL KERSKI: It is hard to say whether decades are a good measure to describe political and economic phenomena, but let's say that this is some sort of ordering perspective. We must distinguish between two things. First, the breakthrough events are always preceded by some processes that are visible and predictable. Only then, do we see their effects. When it comes to 1989 and 1991, I think that the process that everyone had expected was the democratisation of Central Europe. As early as the second half of the 1980s, there was a very intense debate on the Finlandisation of Central Europe. Therefore, when Solidarity returned in Poland in 1989 and when Hungary launched a new wave of democratisation, there was enthusiasm, but no surprise. What was surprising, however, was the strength of this wave and its impact on the centre of the Soviet empire. Just as much as was the reunification of Germany, and then the collapse of the Soviet Union, whose anniversary we will be celebrating this year.

Moving on to the next decade and the process that preceded it, let us not forget that the period of the collapse of the Soviet Union was also the moment of the beginning of the crisis in the Middle East, when Iraq attacked Kuwait –

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this is a forgotten but very important event that resulted in the freezing of the Iraqi issue. Even then, Iraq's policy and the stability of Saddam Hussein's regime were largely dependent on relations with Iran. This conflict returned in 2001; and 9/11 is not only a symbol of the globalisation of Arabic Islamic terrorism, but from that moment the attention of the whole world was drawn to the order, or rather disorder, of the Middle East. Thus, the example of the beginning of these two decades shows us that there are certain processes that we, as Europeans or the Transatlantic community, witness and accompany, but at a certain point, they gain their own strength, of course through single and unexpected events…

And what about the financial crisis of 2008? Was it a surprise and a marker of a new decade?

This crisis was also hardly a surprise. It was accompanied by the great disappointment of many democrats with the economic system, which was not interested in political consequences and global capitalism, which did not seek to secure its foundations with political methods. Instead, liberals focused on fast money-making and the possibilities of new technologies. In this way, capitalism abandoned its earlier ideas of multiplying not only material values, but also other values that are needed for people to work effectively and create an innovative quality. All this had started collapsing earlier, but 2009, with the crash of banks such as Lehman Brothers, was a symbol of this crisis.

And the second decade of the 21st century…

This last decade has been very interesting indeed. Several important processes characterise it. Let me start with the most positive, which was the formation of a more critical liberal democratic discourse on capitalism. Unfortunately, this discourse did not contribute to the emergence of a strong political party that would make any change. At least I do not see such a force, yet. There may have been successes of individual politicians, such as Emmanuel Macron in France, or earlier Barack Obama in the United States; now Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. They are all, in a sense, the voice of this humanitarian liberalism that criticise an inhuman approach to capitalism. However, the voices criticising global capitalism, less focused on democracy and human rights, were also louder in this decade. In this way, paradoxically, it turned out that inhuman capitalism has more supporters than it seems. Let's take a look at contemporary authoritarian systems – they also function thanks to global financial markets.

What, then, did the democrats miss in the last decade?

The last decade, within the social sciences, has brought many valuable ideas for reforming democracy. Nonetheless its image is weaker than populism. Populism, as I said earlier, emerged from crit-

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icisms of global capitalism but does not reform it at all. It uses capitalism, which we can best see in the example of Donald Trump who has shown us how much show business there is in politics. Trump is, above all, a kind of false spokesman for the victims of new capitalism.

Can we not say the same about Putin?

Exactly the same! Putin is a spokesman for global capitalism, which knows no homelands. A homeland is a community of values and as such it serves everyone, and not only for the few to profit. But let's go back for a moment to the second decade of the 21st century. Just like when the 1980s ended, this decade began with hope of another wave of democratisation. It is worth remembering that in the 1980s democratisation was not only limited to Central Europe. It was a global wave that spanned processes in Asia, Africa and Latin America, although it did not bring democratic changes everywhere. Returning to the last decade, it also gave great hope that it would be possible to overthrow authoritarian regimes and complete the democratization that had begun earlier. Today, however, we have a different picture after a decade of catastrophe: Democracy is still lacking in Egypt; the civil war in Lebanon has worsened; and in Libya it has been frozen. In Syria, we have witnessed one of the cruellest wars, which is also a failure for us Europeans. Nevertheless, while the war in Syria was unexpected, the same cannot be said of the Arab revolutions, which were propelled by earlier waves of democratisation, but also by the presence of democratic states in the Middle East. The latter, among other things, contributed to the overthrow of Hussein's regime. We know that in Iraq this process was a disaster and we, in the West, are to blame for this – but this is a well-known topic.

Photo: Grzegorz Mehring / ECS Archive

And what world do we have now?

Now we are seeing the dynamics of these three decades interact. To begin with the Middle East. Those who announce that the Arab Spring is over are wrong. Certainly, the reconstruction of such countries as Syria or Iraq is a process that exceeds an individual's time horizons, but the very process of the democratisation of the Arab world will come back. I would even compare the

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Middle East with Poland in 1980. The martial law introduced in Poland in 1981 destroyed everything, including the positive civic power of the Solidarity movement. What is worse, Poland never returned to this optimistic social force and lost this positive attitude to democracy. But let us also remember that any force that legitimises its power through violence will eventually lose. The same will happen in Syria. The bigger problem, however, is establishing a democratic culture. This challenge is not only limited to the Arab states and Central Europe. It was also a problem of the transformation in Western Europe after 1945. Nevertheless, I am optimistic.

Do you see Belarus in a similar way?

Yes, even if the current situation seems to be at a stalemate. We know that democratic forces will not overthrow Lukashenka by peaceful means and only such instruments will guarantee the support of the West. We know that Lukashenka has Putin's support, but we can see that his power has hit a certain barrier and thus he will not be able to manage the country without Russia's military assistance. Yet, I have a feeling that, after Ukraine and Crimea, Russia will not opt for such an intervention…

I don't think so either…

Even the little green men no longer seem possible. In the case of Belarus, Russia clearly lacks the myth of secession that it had in Crimea, where the little green men appeared to legitimise the Russianness of the area. And it worked, even in the West. Coming back to Belarus, it seems to me that what is happening on the streets in this state is the last stage of the process which began in 1991. We are the witnesses of historical events. If Lukashenka does not survive, and he will not, a new model of the Belarusian state will emerge. We do not know yet what form will it take – whether it will be fully democratic, or some compromised model which will include the old elite. Regardless, Belarus's political independence will be a defeat for Putin who built his power on nostalgia for imperial Russia, traditionalism, anti-western rhetoric, as well as the claims of Russia's spheres of influence. Therefore, democratic, or at least politically independent Belarus, together with Ukraine and the Baltic states, will cement the defeat of Russia's imperial aspirations.

Would you then say that we will end the decade of the 1990s sometime in the next decade?

Perhaps. But what is happening in Belarus is a process that actually began in the period after the First World War. It was an attempt to build new states after the collapse of three empires in Central Europe. The order that was to emerge as a result was not only to take the form of nation states, but also democratic societies. It failed. The Soviet Union also contributed to the creation of a new order which was based on the principle of spheres of influence. Today's protests in Belarus would not be possible without

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Ukraine. As a matter of fact, the key to their understanding lies in Ukraine. What I have in mind is the emergence of an independent Ukraine which is a strong nation state. Today, Ukraine, paradoxically, owes its strong national identity to Putin. Of course, it owes independence to its intellectual elite at the same time. The elite, whose memory is impressive and who have followed a similar path to that of Polish émigrés in the 20th century. It was a path of critical self-reflection. This is the strength of the Ukrainian intelligentsia.

Let us once again analyse this relationship between democracy and capitalism … How do you see its future in the next decade?

The populist experience of the last decade has forced democrats to strengthen and reform democracy, but also to start thinking about how to change the free market economy so that it begins to bring positive effects again. Here we can reap the benefits of the last two decades if we wish to, and build appropriate political alliances. Clearly, the reforms I have in mind cannot only be national. They must bring about change internationally. The last decade was also the one that taught us something new about the democratisation that started in 1989–1990 in Central Europe. After all, that wave of democratisation did not only change Central Europe. Its result did not bring about the Finlandisation of Central Europe, as there is no such thing. The Central European countries – especially Poland, the united Germany, and Hungary – rather sought to redefine Europe. It is thanks to them, as well as the positive role played by France and Germany, that Europe has deepened and expanded its integration. But, this last decade has been a greater disappointment. These last five years in Poland and ten years in Hungary are an incomprehensible negation of this order.

And now there is also a pandemic…

The pandemic is now an additional, unexpected catalyst. A factor which nevertheless fits into the ecological discourse where humans should return to harmony with nature. Through the pandemic, humanity has also faced its limitations. After all, the pandemic has changed every aspect of our life. It affects all of humanity, every human being…

In a sense it is very democratic…

Indeed, and we actually have a state of emergency now. I would not use the word "war" because these two concepts are incomparable. The only thing comparable with war is that during the pandemic we have a shorter horizon of expectations. What we worry about is whether we will survive the next day or be healthy next week. Who in our family will survive? This may not be as dramatic as war, of course. The pandemic does not generate mass violence, but it has a very strong influence on our existence. We are unable to plan anything; all our plans are hypotheses. Most importantly, we do not know how the pandemic will affect the dynamics we talked about.

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Maybe we already know something. In the United States, it was the pandemic, among others, that likely removed Trump from power…

But the pandemic can also serve authoritarian regimes and their consolidation. Therefore, while it is easier to define the negative health and economic consequences of the pandemic, I suggest that we start treating the pandemic as an opportunity.

What do you mean by that?

My hope is that we will see a return to the kind of thinking that was popular in the 1980s and 90s on the principle of subsidiarity. On the one hand, this principle sees a place for decentralisation – in other words, it assumes that services should be tailored to the needs of the people living in a given region, village, or state. On the other hand, it also assumes co-operation among nation states and democratic entities. The pandemic has demonstrated how important it is to have a good doctor nearby and access to effective public services. At the same time, the pandemic is a global challenge which raises such questions as: Why should we not subsidise healthcare? Why should we not create a European health service? The pandemic is a chance to rethink how we want to organise the world and respond to the cycles of the last three decades which we have been talking about.

In a pandemic, we see how difficult politics is. After all, it is the politicians who have to make strategic decisions. Immunologists or epidemiologists can only help by providing partial answers. Yet, when the political process is transparent and accompanied by wide consultations then politicians can show their citizens that they are making rational decisions. Here I agree that Trump has lost as a result of the pandemic. It seems to me that his arrogant approach to this threat, his disregard for public health and a lack of extensive consultation mobilised his opponents. Here in Poland, the pandemic also caused the propaganda mechanisms to jam.

For these reasons I see a potential opportunity in the pandemic. National alliances, even European ones, will not be enough. Therefore, I am full of hope about the new US administration. I believe that, under this new president, the United States will be an important moderator in the global dialogue among democratic states – starting from New Zealand, Australia, through the states of Africa, Asia and the Americas. Here the influence of Europe is limited. That is why US leadership is still needed.

You aren't afraid that Biden will start his term by cleaning the American house first? Today, America is divided and polarised. The new administration, with the support of Congress, will have colossal work to do in order to heal American society…

In my opinion, what we need to understand is how deeply America is divided and politically diverse, by its federal system. It is much easier to see Trump's induced polarisation, but it means fol-

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lowing his way of thinking. Likewise, I would say it is wrong to assume that America is a young state with relatively young traditions. Just the opposite, in fact. Looking at its political and legal system, you can see that they have been somewhat frozen to keep peace after the civil war. As a result, America still has an electoral system that I consider deeply unfair. Trump emerged from this system and he has nurtured it with new technologies.

The same holds true for isolationism. Here we show our lack of knowledge about America. For me, the "America First" policy was not very original either. Especially after I read Martin Pollack's *The Emperor of America*, in which he tells the story of the migrants from Galicia, but also how America perceived Europe and the world before the First World War. From this reading, we learn that the dominant rhetoric has always been against something – against immigrants, the old against the new, it has always been racist or strongly isolationist.

Returning to the topic of US leadership, we need to understand that this role of the US as a global trouble shooter will always be the exception rather than the rule. Thus, it will also be difficult for Biden to be active internationally, depending on the public mood. After all, America never wanted to participate in the First or Second World Wars. Its involvement in the last phases was always the result of public pressure. But we also know that in both cases ethnic ties explain America's involvement, also in the process of post-war reconstruction. And this has basically come to an end. But honestly, I do not want America to be a hegemon, or to dictate the terms of a world order. Europe does not need America to be like this.

I don't think even Biden wants that…

Internationally, we now need similar thinking as we have in the European Union: that there are smaller states and larger states, but every state is equal. And in this equality, the larger states must show their wisdom. The United States will therefore have an impact when it proposes good solutions. I am counting on the Biden administration to address the issues we have been talking about. The pandemic shows that the United States is no longer what it was in the 20th century (i.e. a global player isolated on its own island). I think that Biden's presidency, or perhaps we should even say Harris's presidency, will be a time when America will work out a new style through which it will retain its individuality, its passivity also, but will allow itself to actively participate in global processes.

Thus, the democratic world regains a partner and the authoritarian world loses one…

Indeed, with Trump's loss the world's autocrats lost their greatest ally. Those of us who respect democracy and oppose authoritarian tendencies we need to speak a different language. We need

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to recognise the power of the Biden-Harris victory because it has proven that democracy can win over populism. Looking forward, we know that neither Trump nor his voters will disappear, but let's focus on the positive dynamics because this trend has been noticed – as you said – by authoritarian regimes. This new democratic dynamic will also have an impact on our alliances, including military ones. At the same time, we do not have to expect that this new administration will offer us global and ground-breaking solutions. In my opinion, it is enough for Biden to focus on purely American good practices. This could be a modified migration policy, a return to thinking about a political and economic union of North Americas, or new ecological policies.

To me it looks like this administration will be that of a new generation of Americans. You mentioned the environment, I suspect that representatives of the youth climate movement and those involved in the Black Lives Matters movement will now have a greater say in public life…

Absolutely. Especially in matters of equality.

And issues such as human rights will return to foreign policy.

The values of universal human rights will return for sure. That is why I find the Biden-Harris tandem fascinating. I believe that Biden, because of his age and his life experiences, can really show how to overcome political disputes. And to me today's political dispute is largely focused around this axis of universal human rights.

And this year we will be celebrating the 45th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, which called for the respect for human rights in the authoritarian Soviet Union. This can be an adequate moment for the reflection on how human rights can help overcome authoritarianism…

But remember that authoritarianism can also be innovative. Putin replaced the authoritarian Soviet-style system with a mixture of freedom narratives, longing for imperialism and an anti-western attitude. We forget how innovative authoritarian systems can be in their eclecticism. And they, too, can benefit from the youth. That is why it is so important for democratic forces to be innovative.

And what does innovation mean here?

Courage. Also in the distance to the glamour of political staging. That is why Obama did not fully appeal to me, although of course I considered his victory important and needed. And what irritated his opponents aroused enthusiasm in me. Yet for me he was also a kind of "Twitter president" – an outsider who won because he had the best staging. In a way, he preyed on people's dreams and hopes. Clearly Obama did not fool anyone, but he did not bring any solid good either.

That is why I value Biden much more. With his victory I can see that society has truly started to be warier of this political

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staging. Biden hasn't changed. Ten years ago, Biden was not a super star, although he was younger than he is now. I do not know if he is a super star now, but he certainly represents people's dreams of politics that is not technocratic, but still focused on problem solving.

Biden shows that people now dream of credible politicians. I hope that the new decade will bring about this type of politics. Political charisma is not about staging. Charisma means that under your leadership citizens can go to bed in the evening and wake up in the morning knowing that you have done your best to face challenges. Charismatic politicians are not corrupt. They accept that authorities should be controlled. They also know how to balance national interests with the responsibility of the wider world. This, I say, is the ideal of politicians for the third decade of the 21st century.

I do not see this ideal yet, mainly because we may all criticise capitalism, but continue to accept its ugly face, which is digital technologies and the power of artificial intelligence. And it is them who set the stage for narcissistic individuals. Thus, we all have our own narcissists and they speak the language of our communities.

Basil Kerski is the director of the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk and the editor in chief of *Dialog*, a Polish-German bilingual magazine.

Iwona Reichardt is the deputy editor in chief of *New Eastern Europe*.

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Russia in the starting blocks for the 2021 parliamentary election

MARIA DOMAŃSKA

The 2021 State Duma election will be the most important stress-test for the Russian regime in the run-up to a possible transition of power in the coming years. The Kremlin has responded to real or imagined threats linked to this election with a new wave of highly repressive laws. However, this authoritarian overreaction may backfire, thus confirming the Kremlin's fears of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Parliamentary elections in Russia are about much more than just window-dressing. They serve to legitimise the authoritarian regime in the eyes of the public as well as verify the efficacy of the state administration machinery. The tangible unease among the Kremlin's decision-makers, provoked by an unfavourable economic future and a worrisome evolution in the social mood, has accelerated efforts to consolidate authoritarian rule. New repressive laws, passed in 2020, are intended to ultimately suppress civic rights and freedoms and nip any forms of grassroots mobilisation in the bud.

Mirage of stability

Putin's plan for 2020 seemed perfect. The rotting authoritarian regime, which has lost some public support since the 2018 presidential election, badly needed

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to revive a "rally around the flag" spirit among Russian citizens. The Kremlin had planned to mark 2020 as a kind of coronation of Vladimir Putin's 20-year rule, and its strategy was based on two pillars. First, the constitutional reform and the government reshuffle, announced in January, served to create the impression of a complex renewal of the system leading to its greater effectiveness and legitimacy in the eyes of the public. However, in fact, the essence of the constitutional amendments boiled down to the final consolidation of authoritarian power in Putin's hands and enabled him to potentially hold the office of president until 2036.

Second, the 75th anniversary of the victory over Nazism, solemnly celebrated in a traditional imperial setting, was intended to demonstrate the unity of the Russian nation against external threats, as well as offset the effects of growing socio-economic problems. The hope was that both manoeuvres would guarantee stability on the domestic front over the coming years, which is deemed indispensable for planning a seamless transition of power (possibly between 2024 and 2030).

However, a series of unwelcome surprises almost nullified the propaganda effects of this strategy and ruined the mirage of Putin's perfect stability. Among them the COVID-19 pandemic, which laid bare the defective state management, is merely one of the cracks in the façade. From the Kremlin's point of view, there are even more reasons for anxiety. The unprecedented rebellion against Alyaksandr Lukashenka's rule in Belarus revived the Kremlin's fear of another "colour revolution" in Russia's backyard and revealed the potential fragility of Russian authoritarian regime. The victory of Joe Biden in the American presidential election will probably make Russia more vulnerable in the international arena. And, last but not least, the Kremlin was taken by surprise by the mass, months-long protests in Khabarovsk (Russian Far East), with a strong anti-Kremlin tone, provoked by the scandalous arrest of the local governor in July 2020. All these challenges feed the Kremlin's obsessive fears of a West-orchestrated coup d'etat and exacerbate the "besieged fortress" syndrome in Russian domestic policy. Against this backdrop, the Russian political system will undergo a stress-test this year, namely the parliamentary election planned for September.

Looming challenges

Although the tripartite division of powers in Russia, significantly mutilated under Putin's rule, has further eroded under the amended constitution, parliamentary elections continue to play a role that goes beyond a merely decorative one. The parliament, an appendage to the executive, is used as one of the key tools for maintaining stability in the political system and one of the lobbying platforms for

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interest groups inside the ruling elite. This is why the Kremlin strives to keep a firm grip on both the formation and work of this body.

Parliamentary elections (which determine the makeup of the State Duma – the lower house of the Federal Assembly) have several major functions, encompassing both purely image-building functions and practical ones. The regular holding of elections is intended to legitimise the authorities in the eyes of the public by creating the appearance of citizen empowerment, and by offering a substitute for real dialogue between the government and citizens. Elections are also intended to mobilise the state administration machinery, verify its effectiveness (as well as reveal weak points in the system) and select the "staff reserve" for top positions in the central and regional apparatus. The 2021 election, in particular, will be a crucial test for the system ahead of the next presidential vote (so far planned for 2024), and to prepare the ground for a major reshuffle and generational change within the ruling elite. However, there are quite a few reasons why this year's election may prove problematic for Putin's regime.

The looming challenges that may influence the course and results of the next parliamentary election refer mainly to the social consequences of the current economic crisis and the prospect of long-term stagnation. Since 2013 the Russian economy has been swinging between stagnation and recession. Average annual GDP growth in 2015–2019 did not exceed 0.6 per cent. Russia is lagging behind developed countries in socio-economic and technological terms and this gap has been widening for years. The present crisis, provoked by the pandemic, has merely exacerbated the intrinsic long-term barriers to growth, including an over-dependence on raw materials and the deeply kleptocratic nature of the regime. The real incomes of citizens have been falling since 2014, and according to forecasts this trend will continue over the next four to five years. The very structure of the Russian economy will impede compensatory growth after the present recession.

The 2021 Duma election will prepare the ground for a major reshuffle and generational change within Russia's ruling elite.

In these circumstances the ruling elite cannot use economic development and growing living standards as the basis for their legitimisation, as was the case of 2000–2008. Moreover, after the revival of the imperial spirit among the public in 2014, the regime now displays a conspicuous ideological void and has failed to formulate any attractive vision for the future. The years 2018–2020 have been marked by "deep trends" revealed by independent sociologists: growing social dissatisfaction with the present model of state management; mounting awareness of civic rights; demand for systemic change; and increased readiness to engage in public protests. Public trust

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in Putin fell to around 30 per cent, and although the approval of his policy is approximately twice as high, it significantly lags behind its previous "Crimean" peak of over 80 per cent and does not meet ideal authoritarian standards. Moreover, both indicators are mainly the consequence of the total lack of a political alternative, thus they do not reflect citizens' real preferences.

Authoritarian reflex

The number of small-scale, localised protests taking place has significantly grown in 2020, and their causes vary from purely socio-economic through ecological to purely political (the latter remaining a minority, however). There is a growing number of protest hot spots across Russia, although the overwhelming majority of the public remains passive. Nevertheless, as the election to the State Duma will be most probably combined with annual elections in the regions, the many local problems festering there on a limited scale can be added to the general public frustration and disrupt the Kremlin's desired scenario for parliamentary voting. Additionally, the government is gradually losing its dominance in the information sphere as a growing proportion of Russians access online information and social media, thus bypassing traditional channels of Kremlin-sponsored TV propaganda. All these tendencies have made the decision-makers doubt the efficacy of the existing tools of political control.

However, the unconditioned authoritarian reflex to these challenges, which is deeply rooted in the Kremlin's political culture, is itself generating further problems and tensions. It envelops at least three mechanisms of reaction: first, it is an obsessively over-centralised regional policy; second, the hollowing out of the institution of popular vote; and third, the overzealous pursuit of total control over citizens.

The state called the Russian Federation is, in fact, a highly centralised entity. Not only are the regional budgets fully dependent on political priorities and whims of the federal government, but the governors are appointed without much regard to the needs and expectations of the local populace. Over recent years a growing number of newly-appointed governors are outsiders in their regions and draw their legitimacy primarily or uniquely from the federal centre of power. They are also expected to realise the vested interests of federal business circles at the cost of regional political-business clans and the social-economic development of the regions. As in the case of the Khabarovsk protests mentioned above, such practice often leads to accusations of "colonial policy of exploitation" addressed to Moscow.

The pursuit to rein in any undesirable social activity (often labelled as "anti-state" or "anti-constitutional"), including during the time of elections, has led to

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The Kremlin plans for the 2021 Duma elections to end in a landslide victory for the "party of power" – United Russia.

an array of repressive laws adopted in May-July and December 2020. The May-July novelties not only further restricted passive electoral rights, but significantly limited independent election monitoring through the introduction of a multi-day vote and an unprecedented expansion of voting outside polling stations. Both mechanisms allow for the flexible shaping of desired results on a scale much larger than before. Faulty and fraudulent as elections normally were in the past, they sometimes allowed surprises, as in 2018 and 2019 when some Kremlin-backed candidates lost regional elections. Now, independent candidates will be more effectively prevented from running and monitors will not stand much chance of collecting and publicising proof of fraud. In fact, the electoral technologies in Russia have evolved into a full-fledged neo-Soviet mockery.

A mere hint of how the parliamentary election may look like are the independent estimates made by analyst Sergei Shpilkin after the constitutional vote in July, where the new voting provisions were tried and tested. Based on a statistical analysis of the anomalies, he found that 22.4 million votes were suspicious – more than twice as many as in the March 2018 presidential election (i.e., almost a third of the total votes officially cast).

The December laws will allow for further suppression of horizontal self-organisation, as well as freedom of speech, of assembly and the right to access infor-

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mation. The authorities do not conceal that these pre-emptive legal initiatives are specially tailored to the Duma election. They are primarily targeted against non-governmental organisations, peaceful protesters, election monitors, independent candidates and journalists. First, the activities of independent NGOs and politically active individuals are likely to be paralysed as new provisions expand the existing restrictions referring to "foreign agent" status. Second, any form of anti-government protest (either collective or individual) could be treated as illegal. Third, in addition to the existing gate-keeping laws, independent candidates could, in fact, be ousted from electoral competition based merely on false accusations of "representing foreign interests".

The strategic goal of state repression is to obliterate the civil society that has emerged over recent decades.

The overarching goal of this legal campaign is thus to prevent all forms of anti-Kremlin mobilisation (especially the "smart vote" initiative developed by Alexei Navalny's network) in the run-up to the vote, as well as to intimidate frustrated citizens and scare them away from protesting. Apart from this tactical goal, the strategic goal of state repression is to obliterate the civil society that has emerged over recent decades against the tradition of social atomisation inherited from the Soviet Union. Moreover, the new laws are most likely intended to pre-emptively set the stage for future relations with the new American administration headed by Joe Biden, renowned for his strong attachment to democratic values.

In fact, Putin's inner circle has embraced a dangerous strategy of openly breaking with the Kremlin's previous policy of maintaining the appearance of legality, and are now shutting down all the remaining safety valves. In this neo-Soviet sham, the public has been offered a mere role of "extras" without will and voice, while the ruling elite is anxiously seeking guarantees of their future positions in the system under possible transition.

Self-fulfilling prophecy?

The 2021 vote is designed to end in a landslide victory for the "party of power" – United Russia. The outlines of this strategy are quite clear: the Kremlin wants the party to officially gain at least a two-thirds constitutional majority. However, in accordance to its authoritarian logic, the actual ambition may be to retain the current majority of three-fourths. This would be unattainable without mass and ostensible fraud, as the present electoral rating of United Russia has long been stuck at around 30 per cent. The authorities hope that an overwhelming electoral victo-

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ry would not only demobilise the Russian public by demonstrating a total lack of suitable alternatives, but also demonstrate to the Russian political-economic elite and the world that Vladimir Putin remains strong enough to fully control the domestic political processes even during a time of serious economic turmoil.

The authorities have thus created all the tools needed to rig the election, officially announce fake results and suppress possible social protests. Apart from repressions, they will engage the entire administrative apparatus to mobilise the loyal electorate while discouraging regime opponents from voting (according to the Levada Centre surveys, three-fourths of those who do not vote are against the regime). Employees of the state sector will be forced to vote for Kremlin-backed candidates and other necessary votes will be bought through the additional distribution of social assistance, badly needed during the present economic crisis.

Furthermore, the image of United Russia can be partially rebranded by co-opting fresh blood, including pro-Kremlin social activists, to run in the election, thus creating an artificial impression of change. While these methods are nothing new in Russia, it remains an open question whether they will be effective against the background of mounting public disillusionment in the work of state institutions during the pandemic. The latter is adding to the usual frustration with the conspicuous arrogance and large-scale corruption of the "servants of the people".

The Kremlin's reaction to real or potential threats and the resulting authoritarian overstretch are proof of the mounting unease among decision-makers. Most probably the presidential administration is fearing an outburst of popular anger once the peak of the pandemic is over. At the same time, this over-tightening of the screws may easily backfire, leading to a wider electoral mobilisation of regime opponents or an eruption of mass protests in the wake of the parliamentary election, thus confirming the Kremlin's fears of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Even if the public's passivity and attachment to stability, which has been a trademark of the entire Putin regime, prevails over growing social discontent, gradual changes in the collective social mentality will continue to pose a risk for the regime. The mounting awareness of the state's dysfunctionality, together with the government's over-repressive strategy, will further weaken the regime's legitimacy. The widening gap between citizens and the state will most probably generate political micro-crises and possibly accumulate a critical mass that can disrupt Kremlin-designed political scenarios in the coming years. NEE

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2020's electoral lessons

Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine

DENIS CENUSA

Recent elections in Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine have proven that positive democratic changes are difficult to achieve but are still very possible. Even though oligarchs retain much of their power, political newcomers, civil society and the diaspora are turning into key players shaking up the status quo.

The political transformations that occurred in Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine in the second half of 2020 will have long-lasting consequences on the democratic development of these critical countries in the region. Each of them has made qualitative steps forward, leaving behind more oligarchic-centric rules of the game. In Ukraine, amid the territorial-administrative decentralisation efforts and electoral reform, the local elections brought to the frontline a new generation of locally-grown politicians. They obtained more tools to counter-balance the big political parties in charge in Kyiv. Local democracy got a chance to shine, but long-term success depends on how the political newcomers can be protected from being subordinated by the oligarchs.

The issue of oligarchy is still pervasive in Georgia. The elimination of the corruption-conducive mixed voting system through public protest definitely pushed the country in the right direction. Despite that, the oligarchs continue to have a veto-role on the parliamentary majority that emerged out of the elections. Moldova, meanwhile, stepped forward by electing a pro-reform president who is determined to fight corruption and other remnants of the pre-2020 oligarchic regime. The path towards a state free of corruption has many challenges lying ahead.

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A promising start

Against some expectations, Moldovan voters elected a new president without having to go through a "coloured revolution". Nearly 943,000 citizens voted for the first female president of the country, converting the former prime Minister, Maia Sandu, as the sixth president of Moldova. She was among the favourites from the onset. Nevertheless, the majority of pre-electoral polls were indicating that the incumbent Igor Dodon had the clear advantage for re-election. Nothing helped Sandu more than the historical mobilisation of the diaspora and the united anti-Dodon position of the major political forces of the country.

Primarily, the impressive electoral gathering of the diaspora is related to the active use of Facebook, where Sandu has around 236,000 followers, many of whom are members of the diaspora. Other social media platforms are either less relevant in Moldova or unable to connect actively with large groups of citizens. Notably, the diaspora with whom Sandu interacts via Facebook has had a special role in her political career since her first attempt to win the 2016 presidential elections. Back then, the diaspora mobilised about 67,000 voters in the first round and doubled it in the runoff to 138,720. Twice as many diaspora voters showed up in 2020 and even queued at polling stations in the second round of elections. That constitutes about one-quarter of Sandu's voters and 16 per cent of the total voters who participated in the runoff on November 15th. Around 90 per cent of the votes from the diaspora went for Sandu. The majority of those votes came from Moldovan citizens residing or temporarily working in other European countries or on the other side of the Atlantic. Sandu can use her privileged relationship with the diaspora to the advantage of her political party – the Action and Solidarity Party – in the inevitable early parliamentary elections in 2021. In this regard, she has already underlined the urgent need of introducing electronic votes, which could enhance the pool of potential voters interested in reforming the governance of Moldova from a distance.

Against expectations, Moldovan voters elected a new president without having to go through a "coloured revolution".

Last but not least, the mobilisation of the anti-Dodon vote was just as impactful as the diaspora factor. This explains why Sandu's victory occurred not only due to her electoral campaign but also because of the failure of the incumbent to clean up his troubled image. A series of scandals unfolded in 2020 which involved Dodon: his corrupt ties with the previous oligarchic regime; the obscure almost subservient relationship with Russia and its intelligence services; and the arrogance in handling the pandemic. Though only the latter has consistent evidence, Dodon cannot avoid political re-

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sponsibility, if not a legal one, to prove his innocence concerning bribes allegedly received from the fugitive oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc and the accusations of espionage in favour of Moscow. Altogether these circumstances made Igor Dodon an easy target for almost all eight candidates during the presidential election – from the anti-corruption Sandu to pro-Romanian unionist Octavian Ticu. Consequently, various segments of voters have campaigned against Dodon, supporting his rival Maia Sandu in the runoff.

Maia Sandu's victory creates a four-year certainty about at least one pro-reform centre of power. This represents a necessary starting point for subsequent changes in other state institutions. After the fall of Sandu's government in 2019, she knows that only through harmony between the executive and legislative branches of power, qualitative and enduring changes can materialise. To this end, Sandu needs early parliamentary elections that can reset the parliament as well as the government. Any scenario that involves early elections could develop smoother together with the socialists, led by Dodon, than resisting them at the cost of constitutional predictability and the eventual deepening of the political crisis. A Georgia-like situation, where the European Union and the United States facilitated political dialogue between the ruling Georgian Dream party and the opposition, could be beneficial. Lacking some constructive external mediation, the Russia-leaning socialists and Sandu's political allies seem trapped with distrust and animosities that could pave the way towards political instability.

Between oligarchy and political crisis

The political situation in Georgia is gradually overcoming structural shortcomings. This refers to the mixed voting system which allowed the oligarchic Georgian Dream party to gain comfortable majorities in the parliament which requires 76 out of 150 seats to rule. Over the last eight years, the Georgian Dream obtained 85 seats in 2012, and 115 seats in 2016. In this way, the party managed to monopolise power and exploited the system.

Social pressure in 2019 and 2020 pushed the government and the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili to allow a change in the election system through the gradual elimination of the mixed elements. Initially, the electoral reform was proposed for 2024 but the opposition used the public protests to advance the application of the proportional system already in the 2020 elections. The mediation of the EU delegation in Tbilisi and the US embassy was instrumental in setting up a middle ground during complicated negotiations which ended with the so-called "March Agreement". First, the election of 120 out of 150 members of parliament is run

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through a purely proportional system, leaving aside another 30 seats elected via a mixed system based on majoritarian constituencies (winner takes all). The same principle applies to any eventual first iteration of early elections triggered between 2020 and 2024. Second, in the context of the same negotiations, the Georgian Dream and the opposition agreed to de-politicise the judicial process. This led to the releasing of several opposition representatives, such as Giorgi Rurua, Irakli Okruashvili and Gigi Ugulava, sentenced between 2019 and 2020.

Despite the larger application of the proportional system, the Georgian Dream successfully retained its majority, receiving 90 seats in the election last October. The opposition parties, gathering at least eight political forces, including Mikhail Saakashvili's United National Movement, contested these results. The opposition refuses to enter parliament and is calling to repeat the elections. For a second time in one year, the EU and US ambassadors – Carl Hartzell and Kelly Degnan, respectively – aimed at playing the role of mediators trying to find a suitable solution to the stalemate, though less successful than previously. The European side supports a plan proposed by Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream, which includes more electoral reforms.

The Georgian Dream came up with some political tricks as well, such as organising a referendum about the need to have new parliamentary elections in the fall of 2021. That would give time for the Georgian Dream to regroup while in between gaining domestic and external legitimacy. Since they pursue the goal of quickly stabilising the country, the EU and the US have trapped themselves into the roles of mediators in negotiations between Ivanishvili's party and the opposition, which share a deep mistrust of each other. To overcome the perpetuated political stalemate, the Georgian Dream will have to accommodate the opposition's claims. That should start with dropping the retaliatory reflexes against the opposition through cutting access to budget funds and public broadcasting. In turn, the opposition needs to develop a feasible way out of the crisis, without losing the supervision power over the oligarchy-centric majority. European integration and security aspects are at stake in the country that neighbours both Russia and Turkey, two powers that began to fortify their regional positions in the aftermath of the 2020 Russia-brokered Armenia-Azerbaijan ceasefire agreement and the Moscow-Ankara bilateral deal about a joint observation mission in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The falling hope in Zelenskyy

The local elections in Ukraine did not play out in favour of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his Servant of the People party. In these elections, Zelenskky's

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political power, which he amassed in 2019, has all but vanished. The results published by the Central Election Commission, with a delay of several weeks strongly criticised by the National Security Committee, showed relatively little achievements for the ruling party. The 2019 abundance of votes changed with a more proportional electoral outcome. The Servant of the People party came in first place at the oblast and rayon levels – 17.6 per cent and 16.9 per cent, respectively. It also secured second place at a lower territorial administrative level, where the local representatives won between 19 per cent and 47 per cent of the seats.

Other prominent parties gained between nine per cent and 16 per cent of the votes each, including European Solidarity, the Opposition Platform For Life, the party For Future, and Fatherland. A significant share of votes, 27 per cent, went to regional political parties, formed around local leaders. Therefore, the freshly elected representatives of the local councils come from 110 political parties. Although this maximises local democracy, it might contribute to further detachment of local politics from national politics, embodied by the seven biggest parties represented in the 2019-elected parliament.

Zelesnkyy's declining popularity is seen as one of the main reasons for his party's stagnant result during the local elections.

Zelesnkyy's declining popularity is seen as one of the causes of his party's somewhat stagnant election result during the local polls. An October 2020 survey had suggested that decided voters are turning their backs on the previously adored Zelenskyy and his party. They did not recover from the dismantling of the anti-corruption policies as well as the dismissing of the pro-reform government in 2019. Electoral support for the president dropped from 40 per cent in April to 33 per cent right before the October local elections. The public's interest in the Servant of the People party deflated too – from 29.9 per cent in April to 18.7 per cent in November – among voters with defined political options. Dissatisfaction varied across the country, being more predominant in regions laying eastward, neighbouring Ukrainian territories where separatism flourishes with Russian support. Though, it is noteworthy that dissatisfaction with Zelenskyy is still lower than reluctance towards the old guard. Other pro-EU top politicians, like Petro Poroshenko or Yulia Tymoshenko, are twice as unpopular as Zelenskyy. In the case of the Russia-leaning politicians such as Yuriy Boyko and Viktor Medvedchuk, the differences are three or four times.

This aspect indicates that Zelenskyy's eroding popularity is not the only or primary cause that predetermined the outcome of the local elections. In reality, the reasons are multiple and break down to two major elements – low turnout, partially provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the united effect of the electoral and

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decentralisation reforms. The reduced turnout intensified the competition between more numerous parties than previously. Only about 36.9 per cent (or 10.5 million people) of registered voters showed up for the first round in 2020, compared to 46.5 per cent for the 2015 local elections.

Additionally, voters from the occupied territories of Luhansk and Donbas, as well as of the annexed Crimea, did not vote for obvious reasons. That corresponds to 18 territorial communities and about 500,000 voters. Some of the voiced reasons for low turnout are the public health conditions (20 per cent), a lack of local residency registration (19 per cent) and, of course, the pandemic (10 per cent). Therefore, the pandemic should not be overlooked as a factor of significant public de-mobilisation. From early October until the day of the first round of votes, October 25th, daily infections varied between around 4,000 and 7,000 cases. At the same time, it affected the overall performance of Zelenskyy's party among voters who probably decided to cast a vote of blame against the poor management of the pandemic.

Greater competition

New electoral rules embedded in the 2019 Electoral Code entered into force in July 2020. Apart from replacing the mixed system with the proportional open party-list voting, the revised electoral norms introduce the obligation for mayoral candidates to set-up political parties. As a result, voters could choose from over 360 political parties, which diversified the electoral options and diluted the monopoly of national parties. The new electoral reforms came with the decentralisation process which retained more finances to the local authorities and redrew territorial-administrative divisions, diminishing the number of the rayons (administrative regions) from 490 to 136. 1,400 new local communities formed after the merging when the local elections took place. The code also imposed a 40 per cent gender criteria for the composition of party lists for the local elected administrations. The current electoral cycle confirmed that the diaspora is willing to return and engage politically.

The elections in Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine show that positive democratic changes are difficult, but still possible.

It is certain that the Servant of the People faced greater competition this time around. This was the first local election for the party and competition came primarily from new political entities that harnessed the grievances of the increasingly dissatisfied public. Moreover, the domination of incumbent political networks, with "family-clan" roots, remained relatively unchallenged, allowing the re-election

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of old elites in cities like Kyiv, Odesa and Kharkiv. Another negative trend relates to the launching of new political projects by oligarchs such as Ihor Kolomoiskyy's For Future party which received about 11 per cent (or more than 100,000) of the votes.

All in all, the electoral processes in Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine have proved that positive democratic changes are difficult to achieve, but still quite possible. Oligarchs maintain their influence on decision-making, but the opposition during and after elections continuously challenges them. Local political newcomers and the diaspora are turning into key players, shaking up the status quo. Nevertheless, profound and lasting political transformations in these EU-associated countries necessitate protecting walls of rule of law and robust anti-corruption filters.

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When institutions fail, boycott and street protests remain the only instrument

ANASTASIA MGALOBLISHVILI

Georgian NGOs and election watchdogs have labelled the October 2020 parliamentary elections as "the least democratic and free among the elections held under the Georgian Dream government". As a result, the united opposition parties have boycotted entering into the new parliament and protests continue on the streets of Tbilisi, calling for fresh, free and transparent elections.

Once a frontrunner in democracy in the region, Georgia now faces a crisis of democracy. What was supposed to be the country's first predominantly proportional parliamentary elections that would strengthen representation and bring in a diverse, pluralistic parliament resulted in the opposite happening. Georgia's 2020 parliamentary elections became known as "the least democratic and free" in the Georgian Dream's rule by the country's leading NGOs and election-watchdogs.

With growing evidence and allegations that the elections were rigged, the united opposition has boycotted parliament and most have annulled their mandates. For the first time in the country's history since independence, a one-party parliament convocated alone on December 11th 2020. And despite growing hope

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that change could finally be made through the ballot-box in the country's 2020 elections, it was proven that street protests and boycotts remain the only effective way to engender change.

Boycotting rigged elections

Despite growing evidence and allegations of election fraud, the OSCE's relatively positive assessment of the country's elections, combined with subtle methods of election rigging, has made the opposition's decision to boycott the parliament rather controversial, both domestically and internationally. On the one hand, some citizens do not understand why their chosen parties now refuse to represent them in parliament. On the other hand, western partners – who are helping facilitate dialogue between the government and the opposition – have pushed the latter to enter parliament and seek electoral change from within. As Kelly Degnan, the US Ambassador to Georgia, stated in a briefing, the opposition's "reflex is to take it to the streets and boycott".

Indeed, the contentious nature surrounding the opposition's move is exactly what motivated me to write this essay. As someone who has observed the country's elections, I would like to provide my point of view on why entering parliament now would be, on the one hand, legitimising rigged elections and allowing the ruling party to get away with it in the future; and on the other hand, it would serve as window-dressing for democracy in Bidzina Ivanishvili's growingly authoritarian Georgia, where institutions matter less and less.

To begin with explaining why entering parliament would be legitimising rigged elections, it is first important to make clear why the elections were, indeed, rigged. With a limited observation mission due to the global pandemic, the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) stated in its assessment of the October 31st elections that "fundamental rights and freedoms" were respected on election day. Although they noted that "pervasive allegations of pressure on voters and blurring of the line between the ruling party and the state reduced public confidence in some aspects of the process", the overall impression it left on Georgia's strategic partners is that violations on election day did not warrant something as radical as a boycott.

Georgia's elections were, indeed, not rigged as explicitly as it happens in Belarus or Russia. Rather, the rigging of elections was a long, and sometimes subtle, process that took place before, during and after election day. Consequently, given its limited observation mission and less familiarity with the Soviet-methods used to rig elections, the OSCE's rather positive assessment is not surprising. The organi-

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A post-election protest against Bidzina Ivanishzhili in Tbilisi last November. In the post-election period, additional questions and doubts arose when the Central Election Commission took more than seven hours to publish the preliminary election results

sation made an almost identical assessment of the October elections in Kyrgyzstan which were later overturned through mass protests by the opposition.

Unlike the OSCE, however, Georgia's local NGOs and election watchdogs had greater presence and understanding of Soviet-style tactics used to rig elections and their assessment contrasts sharply from that of the OSCE. According to a joint statement released by 26 of the country's leading NGOs, including the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED): the "Georgian government has failed to ensure the elections adhere to democratic standards". Furthermore, they went on to say that the 2020 parliamentary elections were "the least democratic and free among the elections held under the Georgian Dream government".

Tactics

The most common and practiced violation in this predominantly poor, post-Soviet country has been vote buying and intimidation. For people who do not have food for the next day, or for people who fear losing their jobs, bribing and intimi-

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dating has served as an effective method for gaining votes both before and during elections. Although vote buying and intimidation has happened throughout many years of elections in Georgia, NGOs and local observers noted that its intensity stood out during this election season. Observers witnessed cases of vote buying outside polling stations and there were pictures of a man with a gun outside one polling station in a district in Tbilisi.

What especially stood out in this election, according to the ISFED, Georgia's leading election watchdog, was that in eight per cent of the election precincts, the number of voters and the number of votes did not add-up. In other words, there was either a greater number of ballots than voters, or vice versa. Even greater question marks are brought by the fact that when ISFED submitted complaints regarding these violations to the election commission and later to the court, they were largely disregarded. Out of 162 complaints submitted by the ISFED, only 10 were examined and ruled upon.

Aside from imbalances in protocols, the so-called Russian carousels, nullified ballots and blurred lines between state and party were other noted violations on election day. When it comes to the carousels, people were caught voting more than once in different precincts and bussed from one station to another. Although Transparency International recorded a video of someone voting more than once, their complaint and request to annul the results of that precinct was disregarded.

Furthermore, according to the ISFED, 3.5 per cent of ballots in total were nullified (not counted because of a ruined ballot or unclear demonstration of will by the voter), which is "significantly higher than in the 2016 parliamentary elections". The ISFED also issued complaints that, in some instances, these ballots were nullified even though the will of the voter was clear, and nothing was wrong with the ballot. In one of the precincts recounts after the ISFED filed a complaint it was found that votes for opposition candidates were more common than the official result suggested and that these votes were mostly disregarded as nullified ballots.

The blurring of the line between state and party created a hostile environment for election observers.

Finally, the blurring of the line between state and party – which the OSCE also reported on – created a hostile environment for observers, where, in some cases, they were even attacked. As an observer representing an opposition party myself, both of my complaints – written against the observers from the ruling party, who were writing down people's voting numbers and sending them via SMS (an infamous tactic to track down who has come to vote and who still needs to be brought) – were disregarded. The commission members continued to remain on friendly terms with the observers representing the

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ruling party. As one member of the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association put it: "observing elections was like playing a match with a system on its own field, with its own rules and with its own referees."

Moving backwards

In the post-election period, additional questions and doubts arose when the Central Election Commission took more than seven hours to publish the preliminary election results. Once the preliminary results were released, some protocols were found to have been modified without official amendment protocols (that require signature of all commission members). Or, in some cases, fake commission member signatures were used in the amendment protocols.

Recognising the results of this election and entering parliament now would be bringing Georgia back to the pre-2003 period – when citizens' voices and votes simply did not matter.

Given the scale and extent of the violations that could have had a decisive impact on the final results, recognising the results and entering parliament now would be throwing to waste the years of battle for a democratic and free Georgia that the Georgian people have made. Georgia is a country that, already in 2003, refused to tolerate rigged elections and took to the streets on what became known as the Rose Revolution. It is a country that managed to have its first peaceful transition of power through elections in 2012; a country that, having achieved all this, now fought relentlessly to transition to a predominantly proportional election system – where citizens would be better represented and where the Soviet-legacy of one-party rule would be eradicated for once and for all. Consequently, recognising the results of this election and entering parliament now would be bringing the country back to the pre-2003 period – when citizens' voices and votes simply did not matter.

Even if the opposition were to take advice from its international partners and attempt to fight for change from within, it would simply prove useless in Ivanishvili's Georgia that, as Transparency International Georgia's recent report asserted, is a captured state. The opposition would merely serve as window-dressing in a parliament that would help the ruling-party create a perception that pluralism and institutions actually prevail in the country. The reality is that, with the exception of the first peaceful and democratic transition of power in Georgia's 2012 elections, all major change in Georgia has taken the form of street protests and boycotts. The quest for a proportional election system in the past year was not any different.

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The government decided to concede to a full proportional system only after thousands of Georgians took the streets in June 2019 and, together with protesting encroaching Russian presence in the country, demanded a switch to a proportional election system – so that the one-party rule that has dominated the country for the past 30 years would be replaced with a pluralistic, coalition government; and people would be represented more closely by the institutions and change could be made within. Given the growing number of angry Georgians that would not settle until their demand was met, the government had no choice but to give the people what they wanted.

This concession was quickly erased as parliament did not approve of such change. Street protests broke out soon again. This time, however, the opposition joined in by boycotting parliament. This led to negotiations between the government and the opposition with the facilitation of Georgia's international partners (the United States and the European Union). As a result of these negotiations, a predominantly proportional election system was reinstated – where 120 deputies would be elected with a party list and 30 with majoritarian (winner takes all) candidates. In addition, most of the country's political prisoners were released.

As the US State Department spokesperson has stated recently, watching the recent events unfold is like watching the same film over again. However, the reason the film is being replayed is not because the opposition and the people enjoy taking to the streets or boycotting parliament. It is because, in Ivanishvili's Georgia, institutions do not serve the people – they serve a party. Until the regime changes, institutions will remain a useless instrument for change. And street protests and boycotts will dominate. NEE

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Lithuanian elections provide new opportunities and women empowerment

KRISTINA SMOLIJANINOVAITĖ

In October 2020 the election to Lithuanian parliament (the Seimas) took place and brought new political power to Lithuania for the upcoming four years. More women have been empowered in leadership – the three parties that will make up the centre right coalition are led by women. This election marks a change in Lithuania's political culture and gives more assurance for trust, democracy and gender equality.

During the two rounds of elections to the Seimas on October 11th and 25th, 141 parliamentarians were elected to represent Lithuania's parliament for the next four years. The results of the elections show that the Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats won the elections with the most seats (50) in the Seimas. The previous ruling party, the Lithuanian Peasant Popular Party, won 32 seats while the Social Democrats and the Liberal Movement received 13 mandates each. The Freedom Party, founded in 2019, won 11 seats, and the Labour Party won 10 seats. The new ruling coalition was formed by the Homeland Union, the Liberal Movement and the Freedom Party, which together secured a majority of 74 seats.

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More women in power

The European Institute for Gender Equality issued the gender equality index 2020. They use criteria such as work, money, power, knowledge, time and health. The index shows that with 56.3 out of 100 points, Lithuania ranks 22nd in the EU on the Gender Equality Index. Its score is 11.6 points below the EU's average. Since 2010, Lithuania's score has increased by only 1.4 points (+ 0.8 points since 2017). Its ranking has dropped by four places since 2010. To illustrate the gender imbalance in the leading political positions in Lithuania, for instance, out of 60 mayors of towns and regions, only four are women.

A larger number of women in politics is needed to better represent the composition of society. A current overrepresentation of men points to systemic issues in the country's politics. Even liberal parties have difficulties in this area and do not have many female members who could equally participate in party life, the Seimas, or the government. Out of 141 Liberal Movement candidates, 35 are women; out of 74 Freedom Party candidates, 28 are women. Thus, the new parliamentary vote has given some new optimism in terms of gender equality in Lithuania. The new parliament, the Seimas, will have 103 male and 38 female members. Although an increase of five percentage points, women will still make up only 27 per cent of the Seimas.

> With the election results, there is some optimism that Lithuania will be more inclusive and represent a wider spectrum of its citizens.

Yet, the three parties that form the coalition were led by women: Ingrida Šimonytė, who was the lead candidate of the Homeland Union; Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen, the chairwoman of the Liberal Movement; and Aušrinė Armonaitė, the chairwoman of the Freedom Party. In December 2020, Šimonytė was named as prime minister in the new government, and Čmilytė-Nielsen became the speaker of parliament. Since the 1990s, Lithuania has had two female prime ministers for a brief period of time – Kazimiera Prunskienė and Irena Degutienė (who was twice the acting prime minister) – and two female speakers of the Seimas, Loreta Graužinienė and Irena Degutienė.

Meanwhile the outgoing government, led by the Peasant Popular Party, struggled to maintain a gender balance in its government. At one point, men assumed all 14 ministerial positions, making Lithuania the only EU country with an all-male cabinet. Šimonytė, who is now the prime minister, has formed a government made up of at least three-fourths of women. During the elections she contributed to bringing women forward and making them visible on the list of the Homeland Union.

Gender inequality in Lithuania is precarious. There is a tendency of tokenism by putting women in high positions as a pretext to avoid the wider and much deeper

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gender inequality issues to be found in Lithuania. As the runner up in the 2019 presidential elections, Ingrida Šimonytė was significantly defeated in the second round by Gitanas Nausėda, who, unlike Šimonytė, lacked political experience for the job. One of the reasons for her defeat was perhaps due to her gender, as Lithuania's preceding president was another female politician, Dalia Grybauskaitė, who served two terms as president. Moreover, both women are not married and have no children. This aspect was noted and discussed in Lithuanian media and public discourse. Yet, with the election results there is some optimism that Lithuania will be more inclusive and represent a wider spectrum of its citizens, which would empower women into more decision-making positions.

The previous four years

For the previous four years Lithuania was ruled by the Peasant Popular Party. They were greeted in 2016 with great enthusiasm as Lithuanians had been disappointed with the larger and more established parties, and wanted a new political force that would give them hope for economic and social improvements. What started with a democratic feast and 56 mandates soon proved to be something else: the party chairman's (Ramūnas Karbauskis) authoritarian approach of leadership meant that other party members had to submit to him. This style of leadership was also observed when dealing with other parties and partners under the pretext that the Peasant Popular Party's decisions and suggestions for socio-political change and improvement in Lithuania represent a will of the majority of the nation.

The party lost the 2020 election, though they were not crushed. As in previous elections, the Popular Peasant Party electorate was concentrated in areas outside Vilnius and made up predominantly of older and less educated voters. There is still an urban-rural divide that the new Seimas has to overcome in order to reduce the size of this social gap. The Homeland Union, which is historically viewed as not appealing to the more vulnerable voters of society that live in regional Lithuania, needs to work especially hard. In a 2019 report (2019 European Semester: Assessment of progress on structural reforms, prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances, and results of in-depth reviews), the European Commission expressed concerns over large social and economic inequalities in the country's regions, despite stable economic growth. The role of the new minister of finance will be especially important for the ruling party and prime minister.

Additionally, it is evident that public confidence in education and health care has decreased. This is related to COVID-19 and the various measures used to combat it. In regards to the pandemic, the previous government was heavily criticised by the

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Photo: Office of the Prime Minister of Lithuania

Lithuania's new prime minister, Ingrida Šimonytė, participates in a government zoom call.
The new prime minister has formed a new government; at least three-fourths of which are women.

opposition, health care experts, virologists and journalists as non-transparent and for lacking necessary preparations for the second virus wave in the autumn which hit the country harder than the first one in the spring. The Lithuanian health system is poorly funded which made the fight against COVID-19 even more difficult. According to Eurostat Statistics from 2018, total current health care spending was only 6.5 per cent of GDP in 2017. Only a few other countries in the EU spend less on healthcare. The average life expectancy among Lithuanians is the lowest in the EU. The country's mortality rate is one of the highest between men and women, with a gap of 10.5 per cent compared to the EU average of 5.4 per cent (twice as many men die from health problems). The abovementioned report also found that the quality of policies and measures to tackle the problems are too underdeveloped.

Most political parties running in the October elections acknowledged in their programme that the education system requires special attention. In 2018, teachers in Lithuania went on a nation-wide strike. They demanded reforms to address working conditions for teachers across Lithuania. Eventually an agreement was reached on improvements to wage payment procedures, though overall conditions remain challenging.

"We will not essentially change the education system in four years, this is not possible because it is a long-lasting process, the results of which we can see in ten

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years," Šimonytė, the new Lithuanian prime minister, said, adding, "What we have to do in the following four years is to lay the tracks on which education can start rolling, so that in 2024 or 2028 the new government would not decide to dismantle it and lay new tracks for the education system. Our goal is that this train could roll in the direction that we will agree upon. Therefore, we will need a lot of wisdom, patience and trust in discussions with various parties and education experts; think about teachers' training programme."

New challenges await

The new coalition of the Seimas will form a centre-right political discourse. In addition to the Homeland Union, two other liberal parties, the Liberal Movement and the Freedom Party, have produced an incredibly good result by winning 13 and 11 seats, respectively. Does this mean that Lithuania is becoming more liberal and less conservative? Vilmorus, an independent institution for public opinion and market research, conducted a survey in February 2019. According to their findings, 13 per cent of respondents support the proposal to register same-sex partnerships, 11 per cent view it satisfactorily, while the majority of the population, 66 per cent, are against it. The good election performance of the liberal parties does not necessarily mean there are a growing number of convinced liberals in society and it does not explain why people voted for a particular party. Most likely, they were a good alternative for those who did not like the Homeland Union but were also dissatisfied with the Popular Peasant Party. Moreover, the liberal parties proved to be credible and empathetic during the debate, showing special attention to human rights.

The election success of the liberal parties does not necessarily mean there are a growing number of convinced liberals in society.

It is also possible that the Freedom Party as a newcomer helped its chances (as it did for the Popular Peasant Party in 2016) since it stood out from the other parties with a smart advertising campaign and fresh look. The success of the liberal parties, however, does not mean that the whole of Lithuania will now support the legalisation of same-sex marriage and legalising marihuana, which is especially unacceptable in the more conservative parts of society. As a matter of fact, the Popular Peasant Party presented itself as the fighter and safeguard of tradition in the eyes of the public in order to form its own position in the political landscape.

The reality is different. The liberal parties, in their campaign programmes, have called for the decriminalisation of small quantities of certain narcotics. It is also

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important for them to continue the discussion on human rights issues that may lead to a more tolerant society – for instance, with regards to same-sex partnerships. Lithuania is a traditional, Catholic country; it will take time before these topics can be peacefully discussed.

Ingrida Šimonytė summarised the differences she saw between the two Seimas: "The [outgoing] Seimas led by the Peasant Popular Party was more focused on the past, probably not knowing what to offer for the future. I would very much like to believe that the newly elected Seimas will be about the future and not about the past. What happened in the past, that happened – there were good decisions made, there were also things that perhaps should not happen. Some of the decisions taken will naturally need to be modified and amended in the future. We do not come to make a revolution and my goal is not to change everything that the Popular Peasant Party with its leader Ramūnas Karbauskis have done in the last four years, so that they would later come and change everything that I have done. I think this vicious circle has to end".

Apart from that, it will be important to enhance trust between civil society and governmental institutions as well as within the civil society itself. The past four years saw a lot of decision making on important and complex issues – whether on education, health care, or even changing some constitutional clauses – in a hurried fashion, as if those issues were easily solvable. The Peasant Popular Party was often criticised for making reforms in a "bulldozer way", without listening to others and discussing the measures with them.

There are many different interests in society, though there should be an understanding that not all of them can be met and some compromises have to be made. Perhaps not incidentally, the leading Homeland Union party indicated in their campaign that different sides will be heard; that decisions will be made by weighing up all the costs and benefits; and promises will be made cautiously, because political decisions require time and consideration.

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When trust in institutions is lacking, we have a problem

An interview with Henrik Müller, a professor of economic policy journalism at the Institute of Journalism at TU Dortmund University, Germany. Interviewer: Markus Krzoska

MARKUS KRZOSKA: In your book, published last year, you analyse "turbo democratism" which, as you argue, poses a great threat to our social life. What characterises this phenomenon and what distinguishes it from the parliamentary democracy which we have long been used to?

HENRIK MÜLLER: Actually my first idea for the title of my book was "turbo democratism". It was later decided to be called *Kurzschlusspolitik* (a short circuit policy or a quick reaction policy). In the 2000s there was a lot of talk about turbo capitalism, which is an unstable economic system and which, as we now know, reached its peak with the 2008 financial crisis. Today, I argue that the political system, just like financial capitalism, is innately unstable. This instability comes from public opinion and society's tendencies to have knee jerk reactions, which (at least partially) affects the traditional political structures. This was my starting point in the book. I follow it, then, with a question: Why do we even have institutions such as the state? As an economist, I would argue that institutions are an insurance against uncertainty. However, our political systems are now experiencing signs of serious destabilisation. Traditional democratic institutions are becoming diminished and, in some cases, are even becoming partially dissolved. The most illustrative cases of this trend were the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump in the United States, both in 2016. It was hard to believe that things like these could take place in the world's oldest and most influential democracies and that their citizens would favour a choice against their own interests.

In a similar vein, France also almost elected Marine Le Pen as president. As

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a result, the traditional French party system, which existed throughout the Fifth Republic, came to an end with the 2017 election. It was replaced by new movements: Le Pen's Rassemblement National (National Rally) on the right, Emmanuel Macron's En Marche in the centre, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France Insoumise on the left. Modern movements are based on social media; only later some of them stage street protests. However, these groups haven't turned into political parties in the traditional meaning of the term. They are not organisations with long-term commitments, meant to channel interests and unite different groups.

Thankfully in Germany we still have such structures. Parties can be held accountable and that's a major difference. They have programmes; if they get elected, they govern. If they make severe mistakes, they get voted out. As a result, traditional democratic parties think for the long term, an important feature since it tends to their stances. They are designed to stay. In contrast, the new movements, which are based on volatile social media, are very different. As a rule, they rise in opposition to something. In Germany we have had two movements which brought issues to the mainstream political agenda that have generated huge discomfort in the party system. I am talking about Pegida and the anti-TTIP movement (TTIP refers to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, an agreement that was meant to create broader free trade between the United States and the European Union but was never finalised – editor's note). While the former is hard-core right-wing, radically anti-immigration and anti-globalisation, the latter is left-wing, but also anti-globalisation. Both movements emerged from social media; however, they later expanded, especially Pegida, thanks to mainstream media which presented their demonstrations as mass events.

The whole world is now mostly talking about the coronavirus. In Germany, tens of thousands of people have taken to the streets in recent months to demonstrate against the lockdown measures introduced by the government. However, the vast majority of Germans, according to the polls, agree with the steps taken by the government. Why does such a small minority dominate the media's messaging?

We saw similar things in the past. Large demonstrations always attract media attention, especially on television. Just think about the peace demonstrations of the early 1980s. The difference with today's demonstrations is that now we have social media which has a wider reach than traditional demonstrations. The pacifist movement was based on traditional organisations and was linked to left-wing parties or to the churches. Today, these institutions are no longer needed. All you need is a considerable number of followers on Facebook, YouTube or Twitter. It is enough to spread narratives that have nothing to do with truth or facts. Take the

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Photo courtesy of Henrik Müller

QAnon movement, for instance. These abstruse narratives have taken on a life of their own. They are spawned on social media, but traditional media report on them, increasing their exposure and popularity. That's the new dynamic we have to deal with now in a public sphere that remains largely unregulated. While before there were some agents of moderation, today we have these large platforms that have partially captured public debates, those that were once moderated by journalists. Social media operate based on their largely profit-driven logic. More than anything else, they strive for attention. The coronavirus has created an unprecedented situation. The pandemic is a new threat that affects everything, including our civil liberties. This has ignited a counter-movement that has not been initiated by traditional interest groups. We've seen this dynamic several times in recent years: ad hoc groups form mass movements which are bound to disappear after a while. While they exist, though, they can dominate political debates and seduce entire societies.

However, we can also hear the argument that the dream of the democrats has finally come true. Citizens can now directly express themselves and have an impact. People are told that every vote counts. They see no need for intermediaries as anyone with access to the internet and the ability to connect with like-minded people can gain publicity.

Exactly. I am not suggesting that we should get rid of social media. They have the potential of breaking the old oligopolistic opinion leadership and of bringing new perspectives to political discourse. This is a good thing, because people who were earlier unable to get their messages out can now express themselves publicly. What a blessing this can be, we can see in authoritarian countries. The Arab Spring of 2011–2012 was the first social media movement that led to rebellion and change in Arab countries, at least for a while; it was a freedom movement. However, we can only have meaningful political debates when we have a common basis of knowledge, if we agree on the facts, which cannot be taken as given anymore. What if there is no such stable knowledge base? Which issues

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should be prioritised? What solutions should be implemented? In an orderly discourse the facts and the problems are agreed upon, then we can argue about priorities and possible remedies. If facts no longer matter, societies are lost. The awful notion of "alternative facts", that the Trump administration popularised, is destroying our democracy. Think about it: if we are unable to recognise the state of our societies and the world, and instead are only repeating some lies, how are we going to solve problems together?

Insane and crazy things attract attention, that was always the case, but in social media-driven public spheres moderating counter-forces are largely missing. By focusing on dangerous nonsense, such as QAnon, we are not addressing the truly important issues, the ones that really affect people's well-being, such as the quality of healthcare or education. Instead, a lot of people are preoccupied with alternative facts or believe in destructive myths that circulate on the internet, and all this prevents us from dealing with the really important issues.

In this context, we cannot avoid the question why so many people have lost trust in institutions and politics. Maybe the project of the Western Enlightenment and its faith in continuous progress, for example through education, has reached a turning point. Do you think people have changed over the past 10–15 years, or has the model of life, which consists of maximising pleasure at all costs, always existed, but was only inhibited by certain mechanisms?

The problems we face today are complex, abstract and often detached from everyday life. To be able to substantively participate in discussions, you need to know much more today than, say three decades ago. When I think about my youth in the 1980s, I can say that the world was a much simpler place. A case in point are the agendas of the first global economic summit in 1975, which focused on a handful of macroeconomic issues: exchange rates, inflation and economic growth. Today, these meetings deal with many more issues, including social inequality, financial stability, climate change, gender-based discrimination, public health, to name just a few. Citizens in democracies participate in the collective decision-making process, so they need to have at least some basic understanding of the major issues at stake. If you don't know what's going on in this complex world, you can still trust institutions and experts. Trust, therefore, is a fundamental precondition in a society based on the division of knowledge. Scientists, public institutions, private companies, and the media that do not enjoy broad public trust anymore, have a problem. Yet, in many countries, trust in institutions has diminished. This may be less so in Germany, but even here this decay is glaring. We are experiencing a mind-numbing expansion of the virtual sphere. We live in a mediatised world – but unfortunately our media are full of irrelevant nonsense: TikTok videos, streaming, gaming, pictures of cats or our "friend's" meal on Facebook, you

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name it. We are overwhelmed by banality and nonsense. This type of entertainment is time-consuming, but attractive. It is a standard finding in communication science that people often avoid complicated content whenever they can. Even educated people may turn to overly simplistic answers or interpretations. What populists and conspiracy theorists offer, is exciting and easy-to-understand at the same time. They offer simple stories that sometimes contain identity-creating components.

The segmentation of society is probably unstoppable. We should rather think how to counteract it. In your book, you propose some steps that could be taken in this regard, and not limiting your analysis to negative aspects, you present positive solutions. For example, while you defend indirect democracy you also call for its modification…

People want to participate in the media sphere, which is why social media are so popular. People now feel that they have a voice and want to be heard. This is actually a positive trend. Democratic societies should embrace it. However, at the same time, they must ensure that citizens get to decide on matters they are knowledgeable of. In Germany, we now have a nation-wide movement supporting citizens' committees or councils of lay judges. The President of the Bundestag, Wolfgang Schäuble, supports this project. It's actually an interesting proposal. Perhaps the members of such committees would enjoy greater credibility and would come up with better solutions than members of parliament. I also wonder why we do not have more referenda. Obviously, referenda should be organised around the issues people really understand and have stakes in, that is, at the local level. As the Brexit referendum showed us, national or European referenda run the risk that people may not understand the implications of the questions being asked, leading to erratic results.

Citizen councils and referenda are just the two ways that could be used to augment and enhance parliamentary democracy. However, they will not solve the polarisation problem caused by modern media. Let us take the model of citizens' committees mentioned before. They, too, will not operate in complete isolation from the public. In other words, there will be attempts to influence them. And it is probable that some of their members will be leaking internal deliberations on social media. These are not hermetically closed bodies and their members will be confronted with a galaxy of external opinions. Of course, there will be internal confrontations in such committees. For this reason, we also need better management of our democratic public opinion. We cannot leave it to the big social networks. Facebook, Google or Twitter run platforms that are of systemic importance to the functioning of democracy today. As an economist, I'd say these are natural monopolies. And this means that they must be properly regulated, so that filter bubbles

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are pricked and people are exposed to a broader spectrum of opinions.

What can journalists do in these regards?

I worked as a journalist for a long time, and I teach journalism today, so I've been thinking hard about your question. Back in time, journalism was the sole channel to the public sphere. Things that were not written in the newspaper or broadcasted on television did not exist in the public discourse. Whoever wanted to address a wider audience had to be recognized by the media and have access to journalists. They had a powerful position. Back then, the political and media systems could be characterised as a twin-oligopoly, with just a few influential media organisations and a few large parties and mass organisations, such as churches and trade unions, on one side, and public media and a number of large print outlets on the other side. This was how media systems were structured before the 2000s, which is difficult to imagine today.

Journalism is currently looking for a new role. When it comes to online and social media, which today are an important channel for narratives, it is clear that journalists and editorial teams face the risk of adopting the attention-grabbing logic of social media. Look at how much media coverage focussed on Donald Trump ever since he ran for the Republican candidacy. Why? Because Trump aroused emotions. He was a "Twitter president" who masterfully played with such emotions as outrage. Traditional media, which these days feel that they have no choice but to play by the social media book, make a mistake. Journalism is about drawing public attention to important social issues and about establishing an agenda – on the foundation of solid facts. Only then can liberal societies organise lively, but reasonably civil disputes. Yet, this requires adequate competence from media makers, who should focus on their job and not succumb to some internet movements or celebrities. Possibly today, more than ever before, we need independent journalism.

Are you suggesting that journalists should act like the guides who lead public opinion?

The traditional model of the gatekeeper who filters out the really important things from the entire garbage dump and then presents them to the public no longer works. We need journalists who guide citizens through the cracks of diverse public spheres and provide them with orientation – so, yes, they should perform the role of scouts. You need people to explain to the public what is important, what is or what is not a threat.

Do you believe the COVID-19 crisis, which started in early 2020, will change something in this regards on a global scale? Or will we return to the media model that prevailed before?

Actually, the first weeks of the crisis were like a return to the "good old days". People were sitting at home, spending

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time with their families again. Life was like it used to be: you ate three meals a day together and watched the news in the evening, which in our country enjoyed an audience increase by 50 per cent. In a way, it was like going back to the 1980s. The system of public radio and television broadcasters experienced a revival. Trust in scientists and more technocratic politicians increased drastically. In Germany, chancellor Merkel's popularity rose sharply, as well as the support for her Christian Democrats. At first, people believed the government was making the right choices. But this rebound to the past is not here to stay. As of now, we see conspiracy theories spreading again. Social media are reinforcing radical-fundamentalist tendencies. I cannot imagine that we will eventually return to the "good old days". The first phase of the lockdown in spring 2020 was something of a temporary flashback. But this has not lasted for long. The structural changes in public spheres are here to stay. We have to deal with them, or else, our democracies and our livelihoods will suffer great harm.

Translated by Magdalena Grzybecka-Szczepańska (from German to Polish) and Iwona Reichardt (from Polish to English).

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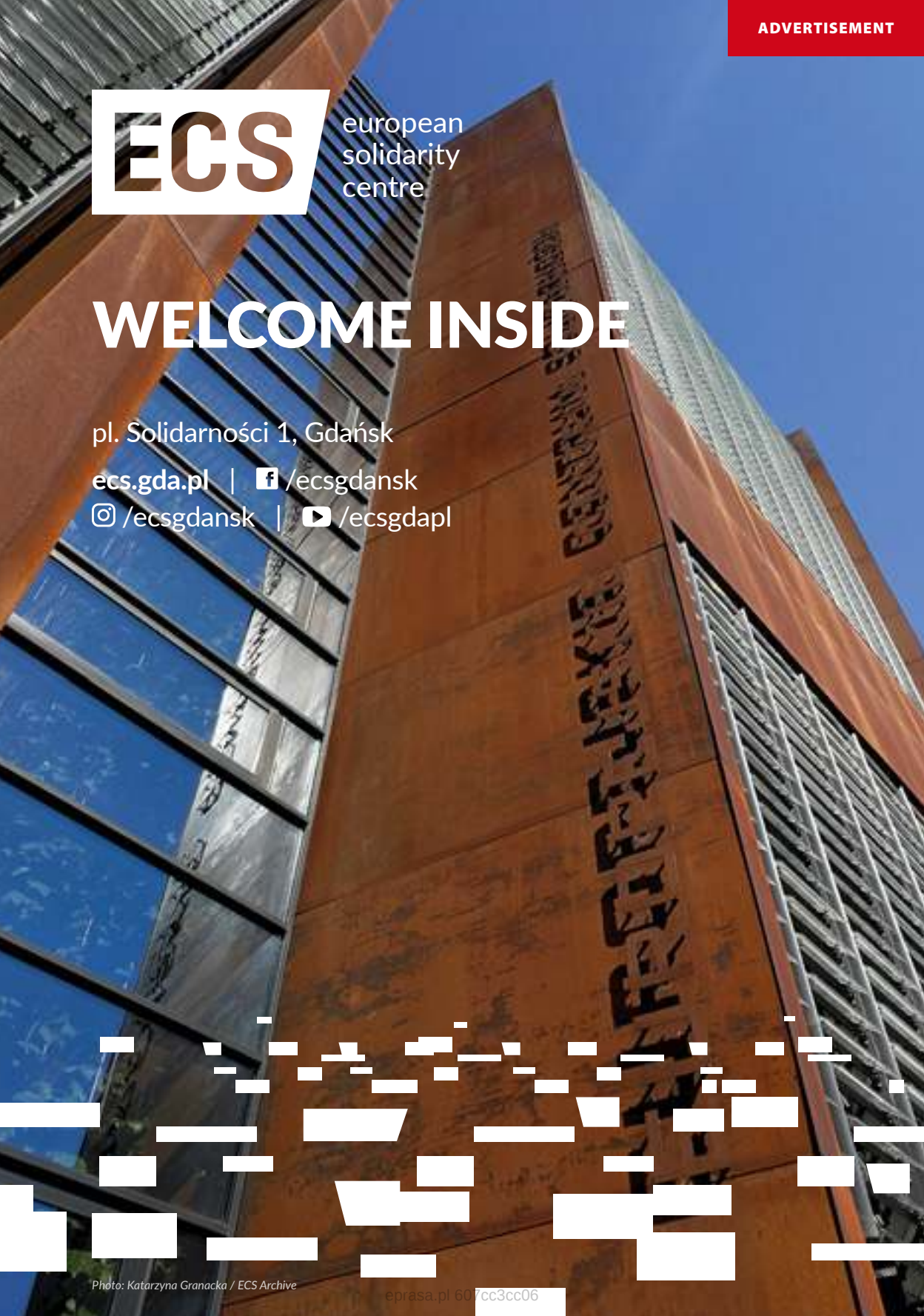

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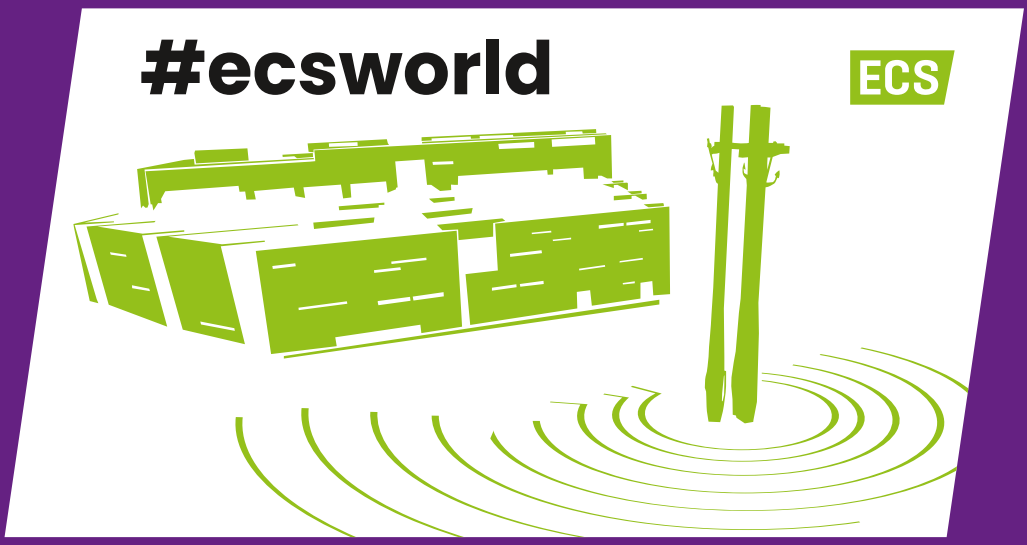

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What 1989 can (and cannot) teach us

SIMONA MERKINAITE

When viewed as the breaking point of conformity, 1989 contains multiple and legitimate meanings. This is the main conclusion that can be made from all the different perspectives gathered throughout our project. Talking about 1989 in a meaningful way, especially about the role of the citizen, it is crucial we resist the temptation to search for a common cause of the revolutions.

In 2020 a research project dedicated to understanding the meaning of 1989 conducted a series of talks with intellectuals and scholars in Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania. It collected witness testimony of these events as well as interviewing the post-1989 generation in order to understand their relationship to the history of the transformation. This essay is based on the outcomes of these discussions, focusing primarily on the role and meaning of citizen actions.*

Go West!

"The was an idealisation of the West, as a land of prosperity and stability, rather than a direct longing for an alternative, democratic regime" – Professor Dariusz Filar, Gdansk University.

* They were conducted in the framework of "Rethinking the Democratic Future: Lessons from the 20th Century" project, implemented by Open Fund Lithuania, ResPublica Foundation and Jan Nowak-Jezioranski College of Eastern Europe with support of Europe for Citizens Program.

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The current turmoil of democracy provokes somewhat nostalgic and idealistic recollections of 1989. It is often made into a sort of teleological narrative. Broadly speaking, 1989 represents a break-away of the entire region of Europe from political oppression and a leap towards democracy. On the other side of this spectrum is the meaning of 1989 as the promise of western standards of living that tipped a resistance movement of intellectuals and dissidents towards a mass protest movement. The later argument reduces the meaning of political action to economic and social motives. In turn, it serves as an at hand explanation of the democratic backsliding, as the democratic practices and institutional/constitutional erosion becomes secondary to the economic/social needs.

"If we look at intellectuals, for whom it was important to be heard politically, to engage in the political process, for them the build up to transition and the transition was connected to the values of democracy. I think also environmental groups belong to this group, because they were united in their urge to be heard politically. Generally, the workers, people working in the countryside, even now say that they did not 'miss' those intellectual freedoms, because that was not their way of life to begin with. For them the agreement with the Kadar regime [in Hungary] was significant, the sacrifice of personal determination and freedoms for exchange of assurance and consistence of minimum social benefits" – Daniel Oross, research fellow at the Centre for Social Sciences Institute for Political Science of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre of Excellence.

It can be argued that the person who strived for civil liberties and the person who wanted better jeans are not necessarily two different people. What is common to both of them is self-determination, which comes in plural and diverse forms. Thus, 1989 can be viewed as a resistance to endless intervention of politics into the lives of citizens, when governments decide how one can get married, what songs to sing, or how much flour or sugar one can receive. Unsurprisingly the recent protests in Poland, for example, again reached the scale of 1989, when the ruling Law and Justice party attempted to change the abortion law, virtually subjecting a personal decision on reproductive health to total control of the state.

Revolt against a falsified reality

In the post-war world, the establishment of the United Nations and later the European Community were attempts to re-imagine international politics, rooted in shared principles, responsibility and common action. The revolts of the peoples in Central and Eastern Europe, from 1956 to 1968 to 1989, represent the moments of disruption by the people against all odds. Mixed with the post-modern political

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tradition, which sought to undermine any stable or final markers of reality, the idea that everything is possible and recreated through the innovation of language, symbols and rituals was being embraced. Intellectually, it was believed to be a path to avoid the blinding effect of ideologies that monopolise the idea of truth and reality*.

On the other side of the Iron Curtain, the intellectual tradition moved in a radically different direction, unified in an effort to keep a grip on reality against the endless assault by ideology and continuous distortions of reality. In addition to direct criticism of the Soviet regime, dissident writers articulated the loneliness of dissonance, the effects of untruth on daily life, and highlighted the gap between the lived experiences and official speech and rituals.

1989 symbolises the limits of attempting to endlessly reshape and remake society and reattributing the meaning to prosperity, which in reality meant deficiency when a lack of choice meant freedom, military invasion. In 1989, the reality of lived experiences prevailed over ideology and fiction.

Seen in this light, the year 2020 became a point of "1989 reoccurrence", through a new wave of mass revolts against political fictions. The outrage of people in Belarus was sparked by the outrageous lies about the free democratic election and the blunt attempts to conceal the almost universal support for Alyaksandr Lukashenka. The commonality between the workers, students, women, and pensioners' protests is the shared feeling of enough of living a double life – the private life of isolation, repression and shortage versus the performative public life of happiness, freedom and community.

"The reassurance of politics by mass support was the key to such a regime as Stalin's regime of terror. And yet, despite being always at the centre of politics, people lived in constant change, constant race from 'darkness to light', without changing a thing. The same now is happening in Belarus, where the voting, the procedure itself, does not move or changes things" – *Yevhenii Monastyrskyi, PhD Candidate in Soviet history, Luhansk native, Ukraine.*

Anti-utopian and anti-ideological nature of revolutions

When viewed as the breaking point of conformity with all the lies, 1989 contains multiple and legitimate meanings. This is the main conclusion that can be made from all the different perspectives gathered throughout the project. Talking

* For more in-depth analysis on the intellectual origins of post-truth, please see Marci Shore, *A Pre-history of Post-truth. East and West* in Public Seminar, Sept 1, 2017 at https://publicseminar.org/2017/09/a-pre-history-of-post-truth/.

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about 1989 in a meaningful way, especially about the role of citizen's actions, it is crucial we resist the temptation to search for a common cause of the revolutions. Viewed in a diverse and plural way, 1989 emerges as an anti-ideological and self-limiting revolution where the resistance to the simulated reality came in the form of self-determination.

Writing in 1978, a decade after the Prague Spring and over a decade prior to the fall of the Soviet empire, Václav Havel in *The Power of the Powerless* noted that no one believed the socialist fairytales, rather it was the dull repetition of conformity through mundane acts as hanging a socialist slogan poster in the shop every single day that sustained the illusion of the regime order. A resistance that is un-ideological came in many forms of civil engagement and disobedience. The self-organisation into a human chain across all three Baltic states, the gathering at the reburial of Imre Nagy on the anniversary of his execution in Budapest, or the series of peaceful gatherings in Prague on the anniversary of Jan Palach's death, all took place in 1989; they are examples of non-violent civil disobedience and solidarity.

1989 presents a case of political plurality and action over ideological monism. It roots political action outside the ideological consensus.

Politically organised lies affected different groups – the workers, the scientists and academics. They also affected people in their everyday life. Subsequently, resistance acquired plurality of form: ecology groups, workers' unions, women's rights groups, intellectuals, etc. The resistance grew on a massive scale precisely because it did not require conformity to an overarching vision of the future and did not have an ideological rationalisation. 1989 presents a case of political plurality and action over ideological monism – it roots political action outside the ideological consensus. As such it also does not make democratic or liberal future inevitable.

"In the 1980s in Poland, if you asked people why they are engaged in civil movements – they would not answer that they are fighting for liberal democracy. I personally do not recall any debates about liberal democracy as a model … It was pluralism, that was a remedy against ideology in the 80s and the real power of the democratic movements in 80–81 and then 1989, the intrinsic belief in pluralism; but, as it turns out, it is not an easy lesson to learn. I would say that pluralism is the challenge of our time – it is hard to imagine the West without pluralism" – *Professor Marek Aleksander Cichocki, College of Europe, Natolin, philosopher, editor-in-chief of Teologia Polityczna.*

What unites 1989 across different countries is the snowball effect of such acts of civil disobedience. The resistance first and foremost took the form of authentic and genuine action, against irresponsibility, unaccountability and corruption. The

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origins of mass and diverse disobedience came in the form of reclaiming responsibility for one's own surroundings, which sparked the self-organisation of ecologists, workers, farmers' groups through underground publications and the establishment of local committees and groups, like the ones helping political prisoners and detained after the workers strikes.

"Solidarity, even during the period of martial law, remained diversified. In 1989, Solidarity, the largest social movement in the history of Poland, was allowed to thrive via the citizens' committees ... It was the Solidarity-fostered sense of the sovereign presence in Wrocław that led to the ultimate openness of the complex and multicultural past of the city. For when you really feel at home, when you feel the true sense of ownership, the past, no matter if it is your past or the past of the place, will never prevail in taking that feeling or ownership away from you" – Rafał Dutkiewicz, former Mayor of Wrocław and former Solidarity organizer in Wrocław.

"The memory of the Baltic way in 1989 and the tragic events of January 13th 1991 in Lithuania have shifted dramatically. Let's say 20, 15 years ago, the Baltic way, originally held on the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, signified an event of mourning and loss. In the past 10 years and today we see that these events are transformed into positive events, they are an integral part of the narrative of freedom and this change signifies the increased capacity for self-determination" – Professor Alvydas Nikžentaitis, director of the Lithuanian Institute of History and president of Lithuanian National Historians.

While history can hardly be a good teacher, it does offer some valuable insights. Today, the way out of disintegration we are experiencing may lie in our readiness and ability to refocus on political actions beyond ideological labels and the oversimplified right/left divide. Ideological polarisation facilitates the dehumanisation of the "other side", prevents democratic societies from engaging in meaningful dialogue, reducing self-determination to pre-formulated judgements.

Locked in the ideology wars, citizens with strong convictions are willing to overlook assaults on democratic institutions or the rule of law, as long as their ideological agenda advances in the process. In addition, the history of civil action and disobedience – of 1989, 2013 in Ukraine or 2020 in Belarus – suggests that more focus needs to be diverted towards the dynamics between the personal experiences and political visions. Different myths aim to change our everyday lives, but their effects on us may become a point of resistance.

Simona Merkinaite is a Rethinking Europe progamme expert with the Open Lithuania Foundation and is doing a PhD focusing on Hannah Arendt at Vilnius University.

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The failure in binary thinking about Belarus

IWONA REICHARDT AND MAXIM RUST

For the last 25 years Belarus has been the greatest victim to stereotypes. This "last dictatorship in Europe" has been often presented vis-à-vis other "democraticising" post-Soviet states. This optic of presenting Belarus based on black and white; or good and bad terms failed to explain what was really taking place within this country's borders. Yet, it explains why so many western analysts did not predict the social changes that we are now witnessing in Belarus.

In recent months we have seen numerous conferences, articles and discussions with a variation of the title "Belarus. An unexpected revolution". Through them western analysts and policy-makers who were once calling Belarus the last dictatorship in Europe, are now looking for answers on whether and when the people's revolution will succeed. They typically start their analysis with questions such as "Why now?" or "Where did this sudden awakening of the Belarusian society come from?"

In their search for answers they often omit what is really of essence. While first overstressing the regime by limiting the analysis to the power of the president and now desperately trying to predict its final collapse, they fail to notice the core of the changes. That, however, requires much more intellectual effort, one that might require getting out of our comfort zone of binary thinking. In our view, such an effort is worth undertaking, even though it may not lead us to simple answers, or even show that some questions may for long remain unanswered. And this is fine, too.

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Social changes

The social phenomena that best explain today's Belarus and should be more deeply analysed by both social scientists and policy-makers as well as covered by journalists include: the unprecedented sense of solidarity which can be seen among the protesters and public at large; the growing desire for fairness and justice in political life; creativity, entrepreneurship and self-organisation; as well as the tiredness with the style of politics that has been observed for the last few years and that goes beyond the typical western headlines that proclaim the emergence of a "new Belarusian national pride" and "rediscovered identity".

These phenomena are a result of the changes that have been taking place within the Belarusian society for quite some time already. However, they also vary depending upon many factors. Among them, the easiest to see and analyse are the number and creativity of IT and other start-ups as well as the number of young Belarusians travelling to European and other western states to study or simply visit. As a result of these experiences the Belarusian society in the early 2020 was no longer fitting the label of the unfree Soviet people. Many of them, especially in the younger generation, resemble their peers in other states, also those living in Western Europe. They listen to similar music, follow similar fashion trends and adopt similar lifestyles. However, it is also true that they also indeed still live in a reality (political and economic) that has not cut off from its Soviet heritage and Soviet elements are still widely present in the public space.

These social changes have yet remained almost unnoticed outside Belarus. As a result, until recent protests the country was covered by the dust of the old thinking which is based on such simplified dichotomies as "Soviet vs European", "democratic vs authoritarian" "free market vs command economy". The luring advantage of such mental short-cuts is that they easily convey elements of a very complex reality. For those who do not want to apply intellectual curiosity they are a perfect, simplifying tool. Yet one that also does not fully explain the ongoing protests that should neither be called as pro-West nor anti-East. Or more precisely, when we take a closer look at what the demonstrators are expressing from the very first moments of the protests, we see that their demands are truly pro-Belarusian. As of now, the future of the Belarusian state has not been decided upon. Its final shape is still under way and will depend on many factors. It may take the form of a western-style liberal democracy, but it may also take a form of a strictly Belarusian system, one that will combine some elements of the old with the new.

For sure it will not be a product of the old opposition. The truth is that the protests which we have been observing only now confirm the old dichotomy between the democratic (read: opposition) and the authoritarian (read: the regime) side

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also failed and is of no explanatory value. This issue was discussed by Maxim Rust on the pages of this magazine many times. It also demonstrates another serious problem in international relations discourse. Namely, too much emphasis is put on geopolitics and formal institutions. As much as these factors play a role in political developments, which we do not question at all, focusing only on them, can overshadow other equally important elements of social change. Including those which actually lead to non-violent protests and revolutions.

For this reason, we propose that the thinking about Belarusian political change, which is underway now, should be removed from this binary trap. Even categories such as the division between the opposition and the authorities should be placed on a wider spectrum and not just shown as "authoritarian and brutal" versus "democratic and peaceful". Experience from other countries in the region shows that once political change is achieved, new information can also emerge about the behaviour of some individuals and their actions during the revolution, which can significantly disturb the image of both sides.

No ready answers

These processes are also at play in other post-Soviet states. The division between national language and Russian, for example, explains, or gives hope to, the process of nation-building. Consider Ukraine, where there are many Russian-speaking Ukrainians who feel Ukrainian. In Belarus, speaking Russian does not necessarily prevent many protesters from feeling Belarusian. Many of them have opted for the white-red-white flag, recognise the need for their state's independence and disagree with the forged elections. They also want to live in a country that will not limit their freedom and allow them to economically prosper. Just like the protesters in Ukraine in 2014, Belarusians "want to live in Europe, or like in Europe". If the Ukrainian lesson teaches us anything, it is actually that there is a need to abandon this binary thinking. The country's latest democratic choice is a perfect example of this. Yet trapped in the dichotomy of "Maidan vs anti-Maidan" many western analysts are still failing to understand why as many as 70 per cent gave a chance to Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

There is, thus, a need to abandon this approach also in the scenarios of what is next for Belarus. As mentioned earlier, while it is too early to tell whether the statehood of this nation will take the form of liberal democracy or something else, any speculations or scenarios can be proven wrong as long as we obsess with obtaining ready answers for the here and now. Here too the thinking in terms of "before" (the elections) and "after" (the revolution), which is binary and – as we argue – wrong

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and misleading, is a useless mental exercise. Belarus will most likely choose a path that we may not have seen in other post-Soviet states. It might be a form of a hybrid system with heavy elements of democracy, but also some remnants of Lukashenka's times. As we learnt from history, neither people nor their states change overnight. That is why imposing any form of system on Belarus that is not rooted in its history and contemporary experiences may end up as disastrous as was the "introduction of democracy" in Iraq by the United States in the early 2000s. The truth is that the process that is now under way in Belarus is unique. After over five months of protests we have no illusions that this social expression of discontent is something not seen in the region before.

Imposing any form of system on Belarus that is not rooted in its history and contemporary experiences may end up as disastrous.

In terms of the slogan of "unexpected revolution", mentioned at the beginning of this piece, both of its elements can actually be questioned and maybe replaced. We have already explained the problem with the "unexpected" but also the word "revolution" requires some clarification. It was used again as a useful phrase to describe the upheaval, massive in its scale, that started in the early summer of 2020 on the streets of Belarus. Without a doubt, the mental change of the Belarusian society as a whole is revolutionary, especially in the context of the last 26 years of political life in this state. However, can we call it a revolution of the Belarusian people? This issue is more complex and ambiguous. Looking at the discourse of both of researchers and analysts, we see that some of them who not that long ago would willingly use this term in regards to the protests are now more critical and careful in its application. Indeed, we still need to wait some time before we get an answer to the question as to whether the real revolution, in an institutional and systemic sense, is taking place.

Values

The expectations of many casual observers that these protests will soon change the face of all of Belarus have not yet been realised. Right now the protests, which are still ongoing and will most likely continue, are quite different from what we saw two or three months ago. In a sense this can be explained by the fact that in the late summer and early autumn, Belarus suddenly jumped from the period of obsolete post-Soviet political life to post-politics with its post-truth and other elements that may not have existed in the ideologically-shaped epoch of omnipresent state propaganda. What results can this change bring? At the moment, no-

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body can be sure; just as much as not many could predict the changes that started to take place in Belarus in 2020.

A separate analysis should be undertaken in regards to some journalistic clichés, including that of a "Belarusian national awakening". It is clear that for the western audience, but also those who live in Central and Eastern Europe, this is a highly clickable headline. Does it yet reflect the truth? Does it reflect the understanding of this term among the Belarusian people and the wider society? In our view, overusing this term in reference to Belarus is superficial. The issue of Belarusian national and state identity, the sense of belonging to an ethnic community, requires a separate study. However, it is clear that what the 2020 protests have also revealed is that values such as "society" or "political nation" seem higher for the Belarusians, than "ethnicity" and "ethnic nation". This of course does not mean that the now emerging national identity, which is based on social solidarity, will not have an impact on people's understanding what does "Belarusian" mean. Most likely, it will drift in a direction of modern European political nation, and not ethnic nation.

The protests reveal that values such as "society" or "political nation" are higher than "ethnicity" and "ethnic nation" in Belarus.

Returning one more time to the issue of how "unexpected" the revolution was, we should yet ask a serious question: would people really come to the streets in Belarus had the authorities not ignored the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic? Had the regime been more responsible and took the health of citizens more seriously, would such large-scale social mobilisation have taken place? And the unprecedented political activism? Or even later – had Lukashenka been more responsive to social moods and not make the official results of the elections 80 per cent but rather 50–60 per cent, which could have been more difficult to call an "outright lie" – would there have been a "revolution" and "national awakening"?

Looking at these events from the perspective of January 2021 we believe that the answers to these questions are not so easy either. Instead, we ask a new one: Did the Belarusian society simply get tired of what it had for too long and the combination of election farce and mismanagement of the corona-crisis only added a new face to this popular discontent?

We do not claim that this is the case. We just want to show, based on the examples above, that the binary thinking in regards to Belarus is not as much incorrect as it is limited. The same can be said in regards to other post-Soviet states, including Russia, Ukraine or Moldova. By focusing solely on one dimension, that is political structures and geopolitics, we really miss the role played by other ones: social, cultural and economic. And, as we can see in many cases throughout the

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region, they play a key role in the ongoing transformation processes. The latter too requires a new analytical approach, one that would include an adjustment for the generational change that has clearly taken place. We are no longer in the early 1990s, the Soviet Union did not collapse yesterday (as a matter of fact, this year we will be commemorating 30 years of that event). In sociological terms, this is already a whole new generation.

All said, it is worth stressing that one of the results of binary thinking is a lack of critical thinking about the essence of changes taking place during "revolutions". This is a result of the earlier noted dichotomy of "good" and "bad" and the black and white optic applied to the process of social changes. Yet an obsessive attachment to the "end justifies the means" approach can become quite problematic as well. Think of Ukraine's inability to tackle corruption, even six years after the Maidan. Thus in regards to Belarus we should also apply criticism. As of today, there are already some signs that should raise a red flag. One of them is the protection of personal information, which was broken by the cyber guerrillas who revealed data of special services personnel, or the huge wave of hate speech and calls for violence that can be observed also in "pro-democratic" opposition chat rooms. We do not want to say that we do not understand the causes of such behaviour, but we also believe that problems of this nature should, in the end, be solved through peaceful means. Those who break the law have to be held accountable. And even if the end justifies the means, cases of self-inflicted justice, even at the time of a revolution, are not a good sign for a future democracy.

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Belarus

Fighting for the future or the past?

WIM VAN MEURS AND OLGA MOROZOVA

Despite the historical parallels, the differences in memory politics and more recent national developments explain why Belarus never turned to Ukraine for guidance, symbols or role models. The marches in the streets of Minsk and other major cities typically brandish the white-red-white flag which is about the only historical reference. The flag clearly has become the symbol of protest, similar to the colour orange in Ukraine almost two decades ago.

In the 2004 Orange Revolution as well as during the EuroMaidan uprising a decade later, Ukraine's future orientation was at stake. In both cases, pro-European citizens confronted pro-Russian state authorities on Kyiv's main square, the *Maidan Nezalezhnosti* or Independence Square. Not only did the views of Ukraine's future and the principles of democracy clash, but events and heroes from the nation's past were fielded as arguments.

Over the past 30 years, in most post-Soviet nations' struggle for independent statehood and regime change, the past has been used by all contenders as a powerful argument and weapon. Inevitably, some events and heroes (or villains) from one contender's historical repertoire are also featured in the narrative of others. Early-modern state builders, the post-1917 independent republics and those emerging after the Second World War, are all recurring cases in point. Belatedly, Belarus is, for once, no exception.

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Belated revolution

Ever since the August 2020 presidential elections, Belarus has been in turmoil. According to the official result, Alyaksandr Lukashenka secured his sixth term in office with a landslide victory. The opposition in the "last dictatorship in Europe", however, begged to differ and accused the regime of election rigging and the harassment of opposition leaders. The opposition's female leadership has successfully mobilised tens of thousands of Belarusians on a regular basis since, despite arrests and the brutal police violence. In an unprecedented reaction, Washington and Brussels have refused to accept the outcome because of electoral fraud.

It is noteworthy, however, that the authoritarian incumbent, on the one hand, and opposition leaders such as Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, on the other, agree with the need for good relations with Russia, unlike the Ukrainian standoff. The opposition's Coordination Council demands fair elections, civil freedoms, the release of political prisoners and democratic government, but not a radical geopolitical reorientation towards Europe.

The Coordination Council was created by Tsikhanouskaya following the presidential elections as a means of setting a general direction for the protesters. However, according to the opinion poll held by Chatham House, it remains largely obscure to the general population. Likewise, there is no clarity about the opposition's political programme. The progamme of Tsikhanouskaya has been deleted shortly after its publication. She is known to take no fixed standpoint on foreign policy as the focus is now primarily on the current domestic crisis of democracy. According to her: "Belarus wants to be friends with everyone, but solely in the own interests of the country"; and thus will try to avoid financial and energy dependence. This moderate view is widely shared by the majority of Belarusians.

At first glance, historical symbols and references have been nearly absent from the Belarusian protests and its leaders' rhetoric.

At first glance, historical symbols and references have been nearly absent from the Belarusian protests and its leaders' rhetoric. Moreover, since acquiring independent statehood in 1991 almost unwillingly, the Belarusian state authorities have not capitalised too much on history, national or other. Arguably, in this case such a reluctance or near-absence of historical claims is as telling as any historical falsehoods, incendiary grandstanding or banner waving in the street. The marginalisation of the Belarusian language has continued unabated after the end of communism and the third East Slavic republic lacks the Baltic states' or Ukraine's ethnopolitically charged regional divides and urban-rural polarisation.

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Lukashenka's historical recipe over the past quarter of a century has been a continuation of Soviet traditions, with a quantum of Belarus national pride and identity. Victory Day on May 9th, for example, still holds pride of place in the Belarusian national calendar. Unlike his Moscow rival Vladimir Putin, Lukashenka refused to let COVID-19 interfere with parades and festivities on the 75th anniversary.

According to Belarusian journalist Ihar Tyshkevich, Lukashenka used the Victory Day parade as a means to fight Russian propaganda by its own means. As Lukashenka stated to the Belarusian Telegraph Agency: "We cannot cancel the parade. We simply cannot. I have thought about this for a long time. Of course, it is an emotional, deeply ideological thing. We need to remember that these people were dying, maybe also from viruses or other illnesses. But they did not care about that. They died for us … Think what people will say. Maybe not immediately, but in a day or two after this, they will say we were afraid."

His historical narrative is a carbon copy of the old Soviet textbook, focusing on the relentless advances of communism since the October Revolution in general, and the heroism of the Red Army and the Soviet citizens during the Great Patriotic War in particular. Lukashenka, like Putin, fails to mention the purges of the 1930s and the atrocities of the Stalinist era. The thousands of Belarusian victims of Stalinism do not prevent him, in hindsight, from making decades of Soviet progress and the wartime victory more and more a Belarusian achievement. Instead, the intense Soviet tradition of propaganda around veterans and military triumph had faltered since the 1970s, but has been reinvigorated under Lukashenka with new monuments and publications.

By default, Independence Day in the former Soviet republics highlights national events following the demise of the Soviet Union, usually the new democratic constitution: July 27, 1990, and the declaration of state sovereignty in the Belarusian case. Lukashenka, however, abolished this tradition in 1995 and returned to July 3rd. Thus, Independence Day as a national holiday in Belarus again refers to the liberation of Minsk by the Red Army on July 3rd 1944, like in the old communist days. In the Baltic states, independence commemorates the first republic of 1918. In Belarus that would have been the founding of the Belarusian National Republic on March 25th 1918. This national holiday was chosen by the first moderately national post-communist regime in Minsk until Lukashenka came to power.

Foundational myth

Belarus's erstwhile national opposition, the Belarusian Popular Front led by Zianon Pazniak, made an alternative historical repertoire an important prop of its

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political agenda. Its leaders as well as the country's first post-communist head of state, Stanislau Shushkevich (1991–1994), have been mostly members of the pre-war generation of the Soviet *nomenclature*. Their foundational myth concerns the Polish-Lithuanian (and Belarusian) Commonwealth, established by the Union of Lublin in 1569. This early-modern state to them signifies the historical importance and Western orientation of Belarus and sets its national identity apart from its East Slavic neighbours.

Independence Day as a national holiday in Belarus refers to the liberation of Minsk by the Red Army, like in the Soviet times.

Its key symbol is the "Pahonia" – the Medieval icon of a charging knight on horseback. The iconic figure was part of the coat of arms of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, apart from serving as an emblem for many other local and regional rulers and states since the Middle Ages. Today, it appears in the coat of arms of Lithuania, but its use by the 1918 republic and again in the first post-communist years has established its status as the national identifier of Belarusians. It is a cherished symbol for the exile community and, as ultimate proof of its emotional appeal, even Lukashenka's state authorities declared the Pahonia a part of national cultural heritage. Arguably this act as late as 2007, indicates the demise of Belarusian nationalist opposition – the Pahonia had become a harmless cultural logo, referring to a time long gone.

To the national democratic movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the fateful years under communist dictatorship from 1917 until 1991 constitute a deviation from the true destiny of the Belarusian nation. They mobilised the general public by revealing the truth about the mass graves in Kuropaty Forest, (sometimes called the Belarusian Katyń). Having weathered Stalinist repressions, the onslaught of two totalitarian regimes since the Second World War and another half-century of communist denationalisation and exploitation, which included the Chernobyl disaster, independence and unity were eventually restored in 1991. Belarusian became the sole state language by law in 1990. Over the next few years, quite drastic or desperate measures were undertaken, as only a minority of the population still spoke Belarusian at home. Yet, contrary to the Baltic states, popular support for a course of Belarusification and defiant national independence remained lukewarm. Before long, many of those championing restorative nation-building ended up as disillusioned exiles in neighbouring Lithuania, much like their predecessors in 1919.

The three female leaders of today's opposition belong to a quite different generation from these octogenarians. Tsikhanouskaya, Maria Kalesnikava and Veronika Tsepkalo were in their teens when the USSR ceased to exist. The protest marches by their followers in the streets of Minsk and other major cities typically bran-

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dish white-red-white flags, about their only historical reference. This flag harkens back to the Belarusian National Republic that existed from 1918 until the communist takeover of 1919. The Pahonia is occasionally seen as well, but the historical flag clearly has become the symbol of the protest, similar to the colour orange in Ukraine almost two decades ago.

The Popular Front of the late 1980s has argued that the white-red-white flag resembles not so much (or not only) the flag from 1918, but rather the (red-white-red) flag of the 16th century Commonwealth, as the heyday of Belarusian state building. Once in power, however, Lukashenka, who was at the time actively exploiting nostalgia for the USSR and saw nationalism as the main threat to his regime, reintroduced the red-green flag of Soviet Belarus (minus the hammer and sickle) and banned the red-and-white one. Even though the red-and-white flag is tainted as it was also used by the Nazi occupational regime and their local collaborationist minions during the war, after 1995 it has primarily become the symbol of Belarusian political opposition to Lukashenka.

The historical white-red-white flag clearly has become the symbol of the protest.

As a result, four different memory repertoires compete for the approval of the citizens. First, a traditional communist narrative centred on the Great Patriotic War and second a slightly modified version championed by Lukashenka, highlighting the Belarusians' contribution to the Soviet victory. Third, a national and anti-communist canon based on the long tradition of Belarusian statehood, before and after foreign communist rule. And last, but not least, the 2020 protest leaders have their own take on history and its symbols, while steering clear of all the established repertoires.

Revolutions of colours and squares

Making sense of the historical symbols and references used by an authoritarian post-communist regime and its adversaries from civil society and political challengers, however, requires more than only intimate knowledge of Belarusian history. Both for the political actors in Minsk and for their audiences and for foreign observers, national history provides more than just telling symbols and references. There are, for instance, many parallels between Belarus and Ukraine – in the past and the present. They both experienced a brief, convoluted and violent bout of independence after the First World War. Thereafter, the eastern half of each state became part of the Soviet Union, whereas the western half was incorporated in the newly created Polish state. In 1940, the Soviet occupation resulted in national

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reunification for both of them as well as Stalinist terror and, in the second half of the 20th century, Russification became a serious threat to the survival of both the Ukrainian and Belarusian national cultures and identities.

Historically, both nations were among the prime victims of Stalinism. Yet, both Belarusians and Ukrainians also held their fair share of nomenklatura positions throughout the Soviet Union. In Ukraine, however, mining and heavy industry created a divide between the eastern and the western halves of the republic. The manufacturing industries in Belarus were better able to cope with the transition to a market economy and continued to provide relative prosperity by the end of the century. Belarus was saved from the ordeals of an east-west divide and post-Soviet separatism. Since the abortive Belarusification boost of the early 1990s, the cause of Belarusian as a national identity and language in its own right seems to have subsided. In Ukraine, nationalism is a major mobiliser for the opposition, next to democracy and political rights. In the current protests in Belarus, this mobilising factor is far less prominent.

Even today the Second World War holds pride of place in the memory politics of both states. In the Belarusian case, the heroic partisan movement is a unifying myth like no other, whereas the memory is contested in Ukraine: The Red Army and partisans versus the pro-fascist "traitors" from the western provinces – now adorned by some Ukrainian nationalists.

Despite the historical parallels, the differences in memory politics and more recent national developments explain why Belarus never turned to Ukraine for guidance, symbols and role models. The two successful Ukrainian popular revolts (of 2004 and 2014) against electoral fraud and authoritarian pro-Russian rulers must have unnerved Lukashenka. A lesson not learnt: in 2004 Viktor Yanukovych thought he could claim victory in the presidential elections, but popular outcry forced him to resign. Against similar odds, in 2020, Lukashenka claimed an 80 per cent landslide, probably simply not to be outdone by his rival Vladimir Putin who won his constitutional referendum this summer with a 77 per cent victory.

The Ukrainian democratic opposition opted for a pro-western course and embraced the historical examples of the short-lived 1918 republic and the controversial war-time militant, Stepan Bandera. Sensibly, the Belarusian opposition in 2020 only uses the 1918 flag and steers clear of tainted figures from the Second World War that allowed pro-Russian forces in Ukraine to brand the entire new Kyiv regime as fascists. Similarly, they have avoided any reference to the symbols and rituals of their contemporary Ukrainian counterparts: the colour orange and the "square revolution". Ultimately, the alternative flag is probably more of a rallying symbol of collective identity rather than a purposive historical reference revealing a political programme.

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The partisans, again

When the protesters took to the streets for the eleventh time on Sunday October 17th, the Coordination Council made a surprising announcement. It declared the day's demonstration as the "Partisan March". Marching along Partisan Prospect in Minsk they thereby claimed to be the successors to the tens of thousands of brave fighters of the Belarus underground during the war. Paradoxically, the dictator himself has prepared the ground for this move. Over the years, he has purposely rebranded Stalin's partisans into Belarusian patriots. Ever since the liberation, and again under Lukashenka, the memory of these partisans had been celebrated excessively in monuments, festivities, history books and propaganda. They had been used to give the generic memory of the glorious Soviet victory in the Second World War as a founding myth in its Belarusian manifestation. And now the opposition has decided to steal this trusted propaganda weapon from the regime, to compete with the dictator for the approval of these legendary diehards.

The hard-pressed dictator habitually associates any opposition and critical assessment of his regime with war-time collaborationism, fascism and treason. At the beginning of his reign, he successfully accused his adversaries of corruption and ideological ties to wartime traitors and fascists. In 2020, at the end of his reign, his strategy remains unchanged. The new opposition and its white-red-white flag, according to the president, are stooges of foreign powers and the flag proves their affiliation with Nazi collaborators.

Despite their 21st-century political agenda and outlook, the current Belarusian opposition leaders feel compelled to target Lukashenka's Achilles' heel, his total reliance on the Great Patriotic War and, most of all, the Belarusian partisan movement for legitimacy. With his regime more and more out of sync with the civil and economic expectations of the people, the partisans' potent amalgam of Belarusian patriotism and Soviet tradition is his last resort. And yet, the Belarusian partisans in 2020 return from their native forests and marshes with vengeance. NEE

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Bulgaria's veto for North Macedonia's European hopes spells trouble for the region

BOJAN STOJKOVSKI

Bulgaria's veto for neighbouring North Macedonia's accession talks to the European Union late last year could spell trouble in the long run for the rest of the region. By blocking Skopje's European path, the decision taken by Bulgarian authorities goes to show how historical feuds in the region are still threatening to disrupt its already fragile and patchy path towards the EU.

The conditions that Bulgaria has set ahead for its much smaller neighbour include an official acknowledgement of having a common history, a change in the formulation describing the official language (Macedonian) which is being used in North Macedonia, and a roadmap for the implementation of a friendship treaty that the two countries signed in 2017. Bulgaria has also requested that the agreement includes Skopje's renunciation of claims to the existence of a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. Sofia often argues that Macedonian historical figures and landmarks are actually Bulgarian and that North Macedonia's authorities should accept this as historical truth.

Put in a similar position to one that the Balkan nation previously had with another neighbour – Greece – North Macedonia's EU struggle shows just how exceptionally difficult and complicated the process can be. At this moment EU ac-

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cession requires a lot more than a strong, determined political will to be resolved. The concessions that the Macedonian side would have to make in order to please Bulgarian demands will be a bitter pill to swallow should North Macedonia's authorities choose to do so.

Hurdles

North Macedonia has already been in a similar situation before – in 2019 when it ended the three-decades-long naming dispute with Greece. After North Macedonia (back then called Macedonia) declared its independence in 1991, Greece strongly opposed the use of the term "Macedonia" since it also had a bordering region named Macedonia. The long-standing dispute finally resulted in the 2018 agreement under which Macedonia changed its name to North Macedonia, making a clear geographical distinction between the country and the Greek region.

Just prior to that, a friendship agreement was signed in 2017 with Bulgaria and it was seen as a significant step in the right direction in relation to troubled bilateral relations in the Balkans. It showed a fresh approach and one where conflicts and bilateral disputes were not, as usual, swept under the rug but directly addressed. Back then, both sides boldly claimed that history should be left to the historians and that politics and politicians should not interfere in this process. Under the deal, Sofia and Skopje also agreed to establish a joint history commission which would work on issues relating to important historical events and personalities.

However, over three years later, the lack of progress on this friendship treaty, as claimed by Bulgaria, came back to haunt North Macedonia in its pursuit of opening the much anticipated EU negotiations framework. The latest salvo between the two sides quickly spread, with high officials from both countries trading blows over their different historical interpretations and each accusing the other of not respecting the treaty and endangering bilateral relations in the process.

While Macedonian officials acknowledged that they are ready to make additional explanations regarding the implementation of the friendship treaty in order to ease Bulgarian concerns, they are not willing to discuss the identity attributes that have been raised by its neighbour.

In an attempt to calm the nerves between the two sides, North Macedonia's prime minister, Zoran Zaev, gave an interview to Bulgarian media where he addressed another thorny issue – the role of Bulgaria during the Second World War and its military presence on the territory of today's North Macedonia. Zaev suggested that Bulgaria was not in fact an occupying force and that Bulgarian forces were only administering the region.

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Photo: Alexandros Michailidis/Shutterstock

For North Macedonia, the decision to delay the start of its EU accession negotiations would be the third consecutive time that the country is stopped in its European track.

Seeking trust

Back home, Zaev's interview was condemned and labelled by many as a desperate attempt to throw off Bulgaria in its intention to block its neighbour. The prime minister faced heavy criticism from the public and by prominent historians, politicians, as well within his own Social Democratic party. Subsequently, the government appointed another former high official and former prime minister from 2004–2006, Vlado Buchkovski, as a special envoy to Bulgaria in an effort to continue dialogue with Sofia. Known for his past efforts to bring Skopje and Sofia closer together while in power, Buchkovski stated that while he is not a miracle worker, he will "try to use his credibility to restore the trust between the two countries."

In an interview for German media, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov claimed that the only county that actually wants North Macedonia to finally begin the EU accession process more than Germany, which is currently presiding with the EU, is in fact Bulgaria. However, he also stressed that the biggest problem for finding a way out of this situation is Skopje's claim for the official recognition of Macedonian minorities in Bulgaria.

In a separate interview, Bulgarian foreign minister, Ekaterina Zaharieva, went as far to suggest that relations between Bulgaria and North Macedonia should mirror that of Spain and Latin America, claiming that "the fact that Argentines

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and Chileans speak Spanish does not make them any less Argentine and Chilean," and that this could also be the case with the Macedonian people and Macedonian language. Zaharieva also accused Macedonian political elites of "spending the past 30 years of its [Macedonian] independence from Yugoslavia to stimulate and tolerate hate speech towards Bulgaria".

In Bulgaria, some were not exactly thrilled by the decision to block North Macedonia. Many contested it, arguing that it was purely made as an electoral ploy ahead of the spring elections in the country. Others questioned the policy itself, warning that it could backfire and create an even bigger anti-Bulgarian sentiment in North Macedonia. Several Bulgarian news outlets also wrote that this decision risked isolating Bulgaria within the EU since Bulgaria's actions were not backed by any other member state. As one outlet pointed out: "Bulgaria's European partners do not understand the reasons behind this veto". Academic scholars in both countries also warned that the veto is a lose-lose and threatens relations between Sofia and Skopje.

The veto also puts into the question the credibility of the EU's enlargement process. In the case of North Macedonia, the decision to delay the start of the negotiations would be for the third consecutive time that the country is stopped in its European track since it signed the agreements with Greece and Bulgaria. In terms of the message the EU is sending to the rest of the region about the enlargement process, it is not a promising one.

Dangerous precedent

While Germany's push for the opening of talks with both North Macedonia and Albania is an encouraging sign, it could still amount to nothing, as Bulgaria insists on the conditions that it has set for Skopje. Moreover, such situations could potentially lead to the rise of an anti-European sentiment and a return to nationalism in the country.

North Macedonia has also been here before with the decision that Greece took in 2008 to block its neighbour from joining NATO (and a year later the EU), which led to the rise of the right-wing government led by former Nikola Gruevski. Now a convicted felon and living in exile in Hungary, Gruevski established an illiberal regime that lasted for eight years, strained relations with almost all of its neighbours and seriously undermined North Macedonia's European hopes.

Last year, France was the EU country that vetoed the start of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania on the grounds that the accession negotiations had not an efficient framework. Even though amendments were made, the opening of

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the negotiation process remains on hold. Neighbouring Serbia has also made little progress in its accession negotiations during 2020 with Kosovo – still leaving the country and its European path in limbo. Based on these outcomes, the situation puts tiny Montenegro as the frontrunner in the region of becoming the next EU member, although without any definitive dates being set as of yet.

The dispute between Sofia and Skopje could also set a dangerous precedent regarding member states and candidate states when it comes to the enlargement process itself. Such a policy could mean favouring member states in various disputes with candidate countries. This would mean that these issues could be set as requirements, instead of important European standards such as rule of law and the fight against corruption. Neighbourly disputes in the Balkans are abundant and disputes range from different historical perspectives to maritime and border quarrels, and minority rights.

Rocky path ahead

Today, North Macedonia and Bulgaria are in the spotlight, but tomorrow this could be Serbia and Croatia (which also have different historical interpretations and disputes). Greece might object to Albania's path towards the EU over minority rights, the list goes on. Hence actions such as those taken by Bulgaria could set a rocky path ahead for the region towards the EU. Tough calls and decisions need to be made in this pursuit, and as recent examples have shown, this will not be an easy task.

Joining the EU is a strategic goal for most of these countries, and all the efforts they have made during the last decade towards establishing a functional democratic society, an efficient rule of law and a free market economy, have been important steps in this direction. However as the North Macedonia's case illustrates, sometimes these countries face even bigger external challenges in their pursuit of becoming EU members.

There is a positive side to this, however. Should these countries be willing to make difficult decisions and resolve such disputes, for the first time in their histories, they will have an opportunity to be finally sitting at the decision-making table themselves.

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Turkey, Russia and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

NATALIA KONARZEWSKA

Irrelevance of the West in the recent war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh has turned the conflict into Turkey's and Russia's domain. Yet, despite far-reaching ambitions and unprecedented assistance which Turkey gave Azerbaijan during the last round of the conflict, it has been side-lined by Russia's ambition to dominate the peacekeeping process in the break-away region.

Despite the fact that western governments – those of the United States and France – are co-responsible for supervising the resolution process of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, their response to the recent outbreak of hostilities had been, at best, ineffective. This vacuum has been filled by Russia, which has long sought to play the role of a major mediator in the conflict, and Turkey, a new entrant to the region that recently became determined to get more involved in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The simultaneous involvement of the two regional powers in the South Caucasus is reminiscent of the situation in Syria and Libya where Turkey and Russia have had conflicting interests but attempted to negotiate them. This time, however, Russia strives to dominate the peacekeeping process in Nagorno-Karabakh to reinforce its traditional sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space.

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The diplomatic Gordian knot

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which is a part of Azerbaijan's internationally recognised territory and inhabited by an Armenian majority, has been one of the longest unresolved conflicts in the post-Soviet area. The last major war over the break-away region ended in 1994 with an uneasy status quo, frequently disrupted by skirmishes along the frontlines. The 1994 ceasefire actually cemented Armenian territorial gains at the expense of Azerbaijan, as the Armenians not only captured the majority of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), but also seven regions which belonged to Azerbaijan proper. These territories were treated as a buffer zone for the newly established separatist quasi-state, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, and a possible bargaining chip in peace negotiations with Azerbaijan.

The resolution of the conflict has fallen under the auspices of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Minsk Group – co-chaired by Russia, France and the United States – which failed to produce any breakthrough for decades. This situation has become increasingly frustrating for Baku, as it hoped to regain control over at least seven occupied districts formerly inhabited by an Azerbaijani majority, which was forced to flee during the first Nagorno-Karabakh war in the 1990s.

As a result, the conflict has been simmering for decades and it was only a matter of time when it would flare up again. All the more so, Azerbaijan has been preparing for this for a long time, utilising its hydrocarbon wealth to buy technologically-advanced weapons. The so-called Four Day War, which took place in April 2016, appeared to be Baku's first serious attempt to recapture part of the occupied territories. This operation ended quickly with modest territorial gains, yet the sheer scale of it, the number of forces and military equipment involved suggests that these were not the usual skirmishes on the contact line, but a well-prepared military action. The April war seemed to be a prelude for the 2020 war. It signalled that Baku has been growing frustrated by the stalled peace process and sought to resolve the conflict by other means.

The most recent war in Nagorno-Karabakh started on September 27th 2020 and ended on November 9th with an armistice. This relatively short war, which lasted for about six weeks, took a large human toll as it claimed the lives of more than 6,000 soldiers and approximately 150 civilians on both sides. These numbers are likely to rise, since at the time of writing there are still dozens of soldiers missing in action. What is worse, the attacks spread outside the frontlines, as cities in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh had been targeted by long-range missiles that have killed civilians and destroyed civilian infrastructure.

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Photo: website of the President of the Russian Federation (CC) http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64877

Russian president, Vladimir Putin, hosts a meeting with the president of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev and the prime minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan in early 2021.

In the recent years Baku purchased technically advanced weaponry, including unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which played a crucial role in the current round of hostilities. Technological superiority and an innovative fighting strategy were behind Azerbaijan's fast territorial gains in Nagorno-Karabakh and beyond. These rapid successes in the battlefield resulted in the recapturing of roughly four out of seven districts adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh and a large chunk of the former NKAO, including the strategically and symbolically important city of Shusha.

Old hegemon losing power?

During the recent war in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia remained ostensibly passive, which prompted many observers to conclude that it has been outplayed in its own backyard by the far more active Turkey. This could not have been further from the truth, as it soon turned out that Moscow worked behind the scenes to assemble a ceasefire deal which not only ended the bloody six-weeks war, but also allowed Russia to place a peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh. Inserting peacekeeping forces into the conflict was Moscow's long-standing goal, outlined in the so-called Lavrov plan. This informal proposal also envisaged Armenia's unconditional withdrawal from five out of the seven occupied territories and delayed settling the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which has long been an issue of contention between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

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The implementation of this plan, as was proposed several years ago, would give Moscow greater influence over all the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space. Although the proposal was rejected at the time, the security arrangements, which are now being applied in post-war Nagorno-Karabakh, bear some resemblance to the Lavrov plan. This time, however, the terms are less favourable for Armenia, which was forced to hand over seven regions to Azerbaijan within a very tight timeframe and lost a substantial part of Nagorno-Karabakh, including Shusha.

According to the November armistice, Russia has deployed 1,960 troops from its 15th Motorised Rifle Brigade to the Armenian-controlled parts of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin corridor, which will link Armenia proper with the breakaway region. Russian border guards will additionally oversee the future land route between Azerbaijan and its exclave Nakhchivan. Russia has also provided humanitarian assistance for the region's residents and spearheaded post-conflict reconstruction in Nagorno-Karabakh.

For years Russia maintained a consistent position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and preferred to play a mediatory role rather than being directly involved. This is despite the fact that Moscow is a security guarantor for Armenia within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Russian-led military alliance. Russia has also kept a military base on Armenia's territory and frequently supplied the country with arms on beneficial terms. However, Moscow has firmly rejected Armenia's calls to send troops or equipment to Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh and underlined that security guarantees are valid only for Armenia's internationally-recognised borders. Liliya Yapparova from the news portal *Meduza* found out that Russia might have even prevented private efforts aimed at backing Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh. Reportedly, Russian security services prevented mercenaries paid by the Armenian diaspora in Russia to board a plane to Yerevan in order to be deployed there.*

The desire to keep positive ties with Baku is one of the likely reasons for Moscow's ambition to maintain a balance in relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. In recent years Russia and Azerbaijan developed stronger political and economic ties. Russia has also remained the largest arms exporter to Azerbaijan. Moscow even tried to lure Azerbaijan into membership of the Eurasian Economic Union, but Baku preferred to remain non-aligned.

After the 2018 Velvet Revolution, which brought Nikol Pashinyan to power, the balance of power shifted further in favour of Azerbaijan. From the outset, Moscow's relations with Pashinyan were uneasy. Having come to power as a result of a peaceful street revolution, the sort the Kremlin is inherently mistrustful

* Liliya Yapparova, "We were desperate, get it?", *Meduza*, December 7th 2020.

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of, Pashinyan embarked on democratic reforms and resolved to do away with corruption. The new government has also sought to prosecute members of the former ruling regime for human rights violations, many of whom have had very good relations with Moscow.

The current government in Yerevan might be another reason for Moscow's reluctance to intervene on Armenia's behalf, but not the most decisive one. Even prior to that, Russia has maintained a position that the territorial gains of Armenia, particularly the seven occupied Azerbaijani districts around Nagorno-Karabakh, were unsustainable and Yerevan's negotiating position was uncompromising. According to Alexander Gabuev, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Center, Moscow was convinced that a war in the region was inevitable, given the lack of progress in the negotiations and Azerbaijan's growing military edge. According to Russia, Pashinyan's position on the conflict and relations with Azerbaijan only added fuel to the fire, as it was too harsh and populist.*

A new entrant to the conflict

The eruption of the recent war coincided with Turkey's increasingly assertive foreign policy: over the last number of years, it has sought to project its power across the Middle East, North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean. Recently, Turkey also strived to increase influence in the Black Sea region and the South Caucasus. Such an increasingly dominating posture reflects not only the country's growing capabilities, especially in the military and technical field, but also fuels the nationalist agenda at home to boost ratings of the incumbent President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The current government in Yerevan might be a reason for Moscow's reluctance to intervene on Armenia's behalf.

Following this logic, Ankara has recently aspired to upgrade its ties with Georgia and Ukraine, particularly in the military sphere. Turkey has also demonstrated its growing interest in shaping the outcome of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which prompted Ankara to give Azerbaijan military and political assistance during the recent round of hostilities. This level of Turkish assistance to Azerbaijan is unprecedented, even though both countries have maintained very close strategic relations based on cultural and ethnic kinship and maintain a bilateral military alliance.

* Michael Young, "Playing Great Games in the South Caucasus. Interview with Alexander Gabuev". Diwan. Middle East Insights from Carnegie, November 12th 2020.

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The assistance that Turkey offered to Baku to break the long-lasting stalemate in Nagorno-Karabakh was manifold, but it was the transfer of advanced military hardware and relatively innovative strategy that has given Azerbaijan a significant edge on the battlefield. According to Can Kasapoğlu, a military expert at the Turkish EDAM think-tank, Ankara transferred to Azerbaijan its domestically-produced unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and a complete drone warfare strategy, used by Turkey during Operation Spring Shield in Syria in early 2020. The rapidly expanding Turkish drone industry alongside Russian, Israeli and domestically-produced UAVs gave Azerbaijan superiority over Armenian forces, when precise drone strikes have quickly overwhelmed their Russian-made air defence systems, artillery and armoured forces.

Engagement in the conflict has already yielded some beneficial results for Turkey.

Engagement in the conflict has already yielded some beneficial results for Turkey. Several countries, such as Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Serbia, have announced their plans to purchase Turkey's famed Bayraktar TB2 tactical long endurance UAVs due to its impressive performance in Nagorno-Karabakh and Libya, as well as the advantage it proved to have over certain types of Russian-produced air defence systems. In line with the November ceasefire agreement, Turkey has also gained a direct land connection with Azerbaijan through its exclave Nakhchivan, which is now expected to invigorate economic ties and foster people-to-people connections. The latter will be facilitated by a passport-free regime to be introduced between Azerbaijan and Turkey, according to the agreement signed by Turkish and Azerbaijani presidents on December 10th 2020.

However, Turkey seems to have eyed for more substantial gains. Ankara signalled that it seeks to be part of the peace process in Nagorno-Karabakh and to deploy its peacekeeping contingent there on par with Russia, which could be modelled after the joint mission with Russia in Syria. Nevertheless, Moscow put a damper on these ambitious plans and only agreed to establish a joint monitoring centre with Turkey. The centre tasked with overseeing the armistice will be located in Azerbaijan's Ağdam district, which was recently handed over to Baku by Armenia in line with armistice agreement. 36 Turkish officers including one general are expected to take part in the monitoring mission, which is a far smaller number in comparison with Russian troops deployed to Nagorno-Karabakh.

Such a move was likely caused by the fact that Russia has realized its longstanding goal of inserting its peacekeepers into another post-Soviet frozen conflict and does not want to share power in its traditional region of influence. What is more, Moscow has been particularly explicit in not allowing Turkish soldiers into Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkish military near the Armenian settlements would definite-

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ly cause uproar in Armenia, which Russia likely wants to avoid to ensure stability in the country that has already been affected by serious post-war political and humanitarian crises.

New leverage

The November 9th ceasefire has forged a new security framework for Nagorno-Karabakh and was shaped almost exclusively by Russia and Turkey. The West, especially the US amid the presidential election campaign, was either passive or lacked adequate clout to effectively engage with the conflicted sides to cease the fighting. In fact, western powers were side-lined for the benefit of Moscow and Ankara and played no role in reaching the ceasefire agreement.

As a result, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict became entangled in the Turkish-Russian dynamics, which has been already seen in Syria and Libya and might likely be underway in the Black Sea region and the South Caucasus: Russia and Turkey have conflicted interests in these theatres but prefer to put the differences aside to reach mutually beneficial goals.

Yet this time might be different since Russia has visibly gained an upper hand, reinforcing its position in the region as the most successful mediating and peacekeeping power. Moscow has gained a new leverage over both Armenia and Azerbaijan since it took control over Armenia's most important security concern and placed its troops on the internationally-recognised territory of Azerbaijan. It has also ostensibly side-lined Turkey by relegating it to the secondary role in the peacekeeping process.

Be that as it may, Turkey has established a military foothold in the region and cemented its military and political links with Baku, whereas the future land route between both countries will likely invigorate their economic and people-to people ties. Given the fact that Ankara has been simultaneously strengthening its relations with Georgia, these developments, in the long run, might undermine Russia's position in Azerbaijan and in the whole region at the benefit of Turkey. NEE

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Far from being over

Injustice, revenge and suffering in Nagorno-Karabakh

BARTŁOMIEJ KRZYSZTAN

The history of inter-ethnic hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan is a long series of repeating pogroms, massacres and violence. The recent war in Nagorno-Karabakh, which has ended with a Russian-led ceasefire agreement, constitutes just one more chapter in this never-ending conflict.

Almost 30 years ago, on May 9th 1992, Armenian forces captured the Azerbaijan city of Shusha after a spectacular offensive. In a world without Twitter, the narrative about liberation and escaping the Azerbaijani army spread instantly. The story of the restoration of historical justice for Armenians deprived of their ancient lands for years covered the catastrophe of thousands of Azerbaijani families forced to flee the Nagorno-Karabakh. Two years later, a ceasefire was signed in Bishkek, yet the war did not end for good.

On November 7th 2020 media outlets covering the second war in Nagorno-Karabakh were busy with reports that Azerbaijani soldiers allegedly entered Shusha. Authorities of the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and Armenia denied these assertions. Finally, after two days of a propaganda battle full of contrasting information, the Armenian side had acknowledged its loss. In Azerbaijan, euphoria and enthusiasm took over the streets and social media. Even those Azerbaijanis quite distant from, if not critical towards, Ilham Aliyev's regime caught on to the narrative of sacred revenge and the return of ancestral land. This time, the trag-

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edies of Armenians losing their homes were marginalised. A day later, in Moscow, another ceasefire agreement was signed. This time, the Azerbaijanis should be considered the undisputable winner.

Foundation of rivalry

Before 2020 and 1992 there was 1988 – when all Armenians were expelled from the city of Shusha. Earlier there was 1920, when Armenians were slaughtered and the majority of the Armenian districts in Shusha were destroyed. In 1905–1907, during the Armenian-Tatar War, as Russian sources call it, ethnic tensions, abused for years by the imperial power, led to massacres of both Christians and Muslims. The story of Shusha/Shushi is symbolic for the destiny of Karabakh. Yet, it is not only an example of the process of how neighbours become enemies, but also the symbol of the longevity and complexity of the conflict.

In both Armenia and Azerbaijan, contemporary ethno-national identities are inextricably related to the existence of the conflict. The creation of these modern nations and their self-perceptions based on imagined communities appeared simultaneously with the moment the Russian Empire began slowly disintegrating. That opened up national discussions about space, territoriality, and borders. In effect, the inter-ethnic tensions were strengthened by political discourse. From the very beginning of modern nationalism, Nagorno-Karabakh was the centrepiece of the Azerbaijani and Armenian identities. It was also the foundation of rivalry – both narrative and physical. In other words, there is no Armenia without Karabakh, and there is no Azerbaijan without it either. Consequently, it is hard to imagine Azerbaijani-Armenian relations without reference to Nagorno-Karabakh. To consolidate imagined communities a fitting mythology is required. To build one up, the ancient figures have to be translated into historical, objective forms. In consequence, the mythologies and instrumentalisations of history and memory surrounding the conflict stand as the inevitable obstacle for the reconciliation and final determination of Karabakh fate.

A first component of the past, which stands against the potential settlement, is the feeling of historical injustice. In both Armenia and Azerbaijan discourse, returning to historical events is common. It is possible to mention multiples of "historical injustices" emphasised in the discourses in both countries. In Azerbaijan, the first injustice is the "ethnic" loss deeply mythologised in cultural memory. Most scholars agree that ethnic and religious composition in the region has altered in the first half of the 19th century. The Russo-Persian Wars determined the dominant role of Tsarist Russia in the Caucasus and allowed the introduction of ethnic policies aimed

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at solidifying imperial rule. The Russians supported Christian Armenians against "untrustworthy" Muslim inhabitants. The ethnic policy in Eastern Transcaucasia has caused a massive exodus of Azerbaijanis to Persia and Armenians moving in the other direction. The approach of the Russian Empire transformed in the late 19th century after Grigory Golitsyn was appointed the viceroy of the Caucasus. He was responsible for the confiscation of the Armenian Church properties and the endorsement of the Muslims against predominantly loyal Armenians. That led to further intensification of ethnic tensions which reached their peak during the 1905 Revolution with the so-called Armenian-Tatar War.

However, frequently highlighted in the Armenian discourse, this issue is secondary to historical injustices related to the feeling of the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh in July 1921. After the Soviet annexation of the Caucasus, the Caucasus Bureau was the body responsible for the decision of the region's destiny. A resolution from July 4th went along the expectations of Armenians. The next 24 hours were ambiguous – it is uncertain what exactly happened. On July 5th the Caucasus Bureau decided that Nagorno-Karabakh was to rather remain a part of Azerbaijan, with the Armenians there receiving broad autonomy. Historians interpret this switch differently. Some support the thesis that it was a decision of Joseph Stalin, who wanted to satisfy Turkish nationalists and regulate relations with Turkey. Some believe that the decision was a result of the liquidation of the Armenian Mountainous Republic in Zangezur. At the same time, the struggle of the Azerbaijan Bolshevik leader, Nariman Narimanov, should be mentioned, along with the restraint of the Armenian Bolsheviks.

Yet, these are only speculations, as there is no source material on which to base firm conclusions. Despite the true nature of events, their consequences somehow have determined the Armenian narrative until today. Since the late 1980s, the Armenian side has been constructing a narrative about Nagorno-Karabakh as the historical injustice of the abovementioned decision. It was combined with an emphasis on the lack of respect for the right of people to self-determination. This element was the core of the agenda of the Nagorno-Karabakh Movement. It also had a continuation after the end of the first war, when the Armenians considered the lack of international recognition of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic as discrimination. The sense of injustice, historical and political, intensified after the recognition of Kosovo by the majority of western countries. It was seen as an example of western dual standards. Perhaps even more painful was the 2008 Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Os-

Since the late 1980s, the Armenian side has been constructing a narrative about Nagorno-Karabakh as a historical injustice.

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setia (breakaway republics from Georgia) – Moscow, it is worth noting, is considered the closest ally of Yerevan.

Understandably, this narrative has been juxtaposed with yet another historical injustice perception in Azerbaijan. This is the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh in the 1990s and the occupation of the seven regions surrounding the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast. Unfairness has been expressed towards two main issues. First, the lack of support from the international community for the Azerbaijani territorial integrity based on the practice of *uti possidetis iuris* – that newly formed states should retain territory within the borders from the period of dependency. Second, are the absence of any reaction towards the occupation and the fate of the thousands of internally displaced persons. This led to the narrative of Armenian state terrorism violating Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and human rights. In Armenia, the religious argument became even more propagated during the second war, even though the conflict always had, and still has, an ethno-political character. In this perception, the "first Christian nation" is being attacked by Muslim aggression and was betrayed by Christian Europe. Unsurprisingly, in secular Europe, this argument does not resonate. Taking into account these elements, it is difficult to believe that either side will easily stop using historical injustice arguments in their official discourse. Thus, injustice continues, despite the outcomes of the Moscow-led ceasefire agreement.

It is difficult to believe that either side will stop using historical injustice arguments in their official discourse.

Suffering

All these stories from the past are misused for particular political goals. One can call this mechanism, equally exploited by both sides, as the monopolisation of suffering. In Armenia, the memory of Nagorno-Karabakh is associated with the memory of the Armenian Genocide. The Armenian discourse is based on the logical continuity between the events of 1915, the 1988 Sumgait massacre, and any consequent approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This creates an imagination of a complete version of Armenian history. If the Armenian fate and struggle with "Turks" is understood as continuous and Azerbaijani-made pogroms are a logical consequence of the events from 1915, then recognition must also be made of history as a whole. In this discourse, there is no place for a partial agreement – the recognition of Genocide requires the approval of the Armenian version of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. Suffering is the centrepiece of collective memory, which

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includes a certain lack of compassion and the rejection of the other side's right to sorrow and grief. In this vision, only the Armenians have a right to suffer.

This scheme is juxtaposed with a similar pattern in Azerbaijan, often based on contradictory argumentation. The first step is rejecting the rights of Armenians to seek recognition for genocide. In Azerbaijan, the Armenian Genocide is labelled as an "Armenian myth" and the victims depicted as the traitors of the Ottoman Empire who deserved punishment. In some occurrences, the Azerbaijani narratives are more radical than official Turkish standpoints. The second is a narrative in which Azerbaijanis are the victims of genocide. The most frequently used historical references are the March Days in Baku in 1918 and the Khojaly Massacre from February 1992. On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Khojaly massacre, for example, then President Heydar Aliyev said: "The Khojaly massacre is [a] continuation and the bloodiest page of the policy of ethnic cleansing and genocide continuously conducted by the Armenian chauvinists and nationalists against the Azerbaijanis over around 200 years." In this narrative, the only events which deserve compassion of the international community are the atrocities against Azerbaijanis. Only one side has a right to suffer, and only the suffering of one side can be recognised.

These narratives were translated into the current war, demeaning the human tragedies. On October 27th and 28th, the Armenian military held the missile attack on the Azerbaijani city of Barda using Russian BM-30 Smerch cluster munitions. The attack left at least 26 civilians dead. Despite harsh criticism from the international community, the answer from the majority of Armenian commentators was that they were justified by the action. On December 2nd, Human Rights Watch published a report in which the mistreatment of the Armenian prisoners of war was severely criticised. Physical abuse, humiliation and beatings were among the violations of international law mentioned. Since the very beginning of the war, brutal videos depicting torture and beheadings were circulating on social media. Notably, these also included attacks on civilians, not mentioning the destruction of Armenian cultural heritage sites. The response from Azerbaijan was as expected. After so many years of trauma and suffering, the "spontaneous" reactions of soldiers "liberating" the Nagorno-Karabakh are understandable, and, to some extent, justified. In the end, a lack of compassion towards the enemy is a double-edged sword.

Settlement or revenge

The history of inter-ethnic hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan is a long series of repeating pogroms, massacres, and violence. The plot of the escala-

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tion is always built on the same structure. The first step is minor violence, rather among neighbours than members of an ethnic group. Then gossip spreads, with the usual dynamism of rumours embellishing and dramatising the event. After that, there is a response, which already includes an ethnic factor. Next, the escalation is stopped, but the politicisation of the issue begins: Baku in 1918; Shusha and Ganja in 1920; Sumgait, Stepanakert, and Kirovabad (today Ganja) in 1988; Baku 1990; the first war; the 2016 April War, etc. All of these events were constructed around revenge. Afterwards, the whole process is recurring, repeating itself until the tension builds too high.

Currently, a discussion regarding the Armenian response is taking place on social media. Voices calling for peace and reconciliation are needed, but sadly rare. Most online comments are rather emphasising the need for revenge. They call for patience and that payback will come not tomorrow but in a couple of years after a thorough and efficient preparation – in other words, the professionalization of the army and a redefinition of alliances.

In Azerbaijan, the narrative of "unfinished business" is gaining by the day. The first step was made, and another is to be taken soon. First, retaking back whole Nagorno-Karabakh or what is left of it. Second, is removing all the Armenians from Azerbaijan and its proximity. Sadly, these narratives are used not only by radical nationalists on both sides, they are becoming mainstream deliberations. There is little space for reconciliation, just the act of revenge. For the moment, it is difficult to imagine that the second Nagorno-Karabakh war is nothing more than another stage in a never-ending conflict.

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A renewed focus on Ukraine's nuclear power sector

MYKOLA VOYTIV

Ukraine is the eighth country in the world in terms of nuclear power plant capacity. The country is now in the process of repairing, modernising and finding new technologies to meet the electricity demand. However, a focus on management and transparency is still necessary in order to have a safe, effective and publically profitable nuclear power sector.

Nuclear energy began to develop actively and significantly in the second half of the 20th century. This boom was primarily due to the dynamism felt in all sectors of industry which was based on large numbers of labour and massive electricity demands. Yet, the beginning of the 21st century started to see a decline in this sector. Today competition in the energy sector contributes to the fact that energy markets are developing very rapidly and energy resources are becoming more affordable. According to the *World Nuclear Industry Status Report 2020*, for the first time in history (in 2019), non-hydro renewables such as solar, wind and biomass generated more electricity than nuclear power plants – 2.4 gigawatts of new nuclear plants installed compared to 98 gigawatts of solar and 59.2 gigawatts of wind. The world's operational nuclear power capacity has declined by 2.1 per cent by the middle of 2020. The stagnation of the sector continues.

The share of nuclear energy in global electricity production has fallen from 17 per cent in 2000 to 10 per cent in 2020. It cannot, therefore, be viewed with optimism. The International Energy Agency (IEA) foresees a huge decline of ener-

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gy investments globally due to the coronavirus pandemic. The IEA forecasts a decrease of 20 per cent (nearly $400 billion) in 2020. While some of the world's leading economies (the United States, France, Japan, and Canada) are actively using nuclear generation, others like Germany, Italy, Switzerland are beginning to abandon it by developing and investing in renewable sources. Even in Australia, which ranks first in the world with uranium reserves (the main material for nuclear fuel production) and possesses around 30 per cent of the world's known reserves with tremendous potential for nuclear power generation, with public support of almost 50 per cent, the government is still postponing the construction of the first nuclear power plant.

European context

In Europe, France has the biggest nuclear energy sector, around 70–73 per cent of its electricity is generated by nuclear power. Yet, Électricité de France S.A. (EDF) announced a reduction of its 2020 nuclear outlook to 300 terawatt hours due to a disruption of the maintenance schedules caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the reduced power demand. The EDF estimated that for 2021 and 2022, the range of usage will be between 330 TWhs and 360 TWhs annually. In its quarterly financial report published in March 2020, the EDF noted a "slowdown of projects under construction" due to the pandemic.

The International Energy Agency (IEA) foresees a huge decline of energy investments globally due to coronavirus pandemic.

Poland has announced intentions to start building its first nuclear plant. According to Stefan Taczanowski, a leading energy expert from Kraków's University of Science and Technology: "The plan to build six power plants/reactors with a total capacity of six gigawatts can be considered. In addition, it must not be forgotten that the consequences of this choice will last for at least 80 years and, given the construction and decommissioning time of power plants, may exceed the mid-22nd century."

In the United Kingdom, the issue of building new nuclear plants is periodically raised as a counterbalance, first of all, to the significant reduction in pollution and smog reduction. However, according to their experts, the nuclear infrastructure, in the process of operation and utilisation of spent nuclear fuel, can still have a negative impact on the environment.

In Ukraine, meanwhile, the forecast balance of electricity of the United Energy System of Ukraine (UES) for 2021 was presented at the ministry of energy. The

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president of the state enterprise National Nuclear Energy Generating Company Energoatom (Energoatom) confirmed that the expected production will be on the level of 75.233 billion kilowatt hours. This is exactly 50 per cent of all electricity generation of which is planned for 2021. The then acting minister of energy, Olha Buslavets, had directed an optimisation of the schedules of the 2020–2021 repair campaign. This increased the expected volume of electricity production by Ukraine's nuclear power plants by 2.9 billion kilowatt hours (from 72.3 to 75.2 billion kWh). This will improve the financial condition of the state energy generating enterprise and will help ensure a sustainable operation during the heating season.

Energoatom is in fact the most important player on the electricity generation market, though legally it is not. The main problems of the market in Ukraine have been accumulated over the past 25 years: cross-subsidisation, growth of debt, low investment attractiveness, high regulation, and a monopoly in generation and supply markets. However, Ukraine has recently adopted a new law on the electricity market (in 2017), which changed the market formation mechanism and introduced new mechanisms. In particular, it makes Energoatom an independent player in the electricity generation and trading sector. Energoatom operates four nuclear power plants: Zaporizhzhya, Rivne, South-Ukraine, Khmelnytsky with 15 power units (as of December 30th, eleven units are operating and four are under reconstruction). All reactors are Russian VVER types. The total installed capacity is 13,835 megawatts.

Modernisation and new technologies

Ukraine is the eighth country in the world in terms of nuclear power plant capacity. Energoatom provides about an average of 55 per cent of Ukraine's need for electricity, and during the autumn-winter periods this figure reaches up to 70 per cent. In the first half of 2020, the installed capacity utilisation rate of the plants was 65.2 per cent, which is 5.8 per cent less than the same time period in 2019. At the same time, the coefficient of readiness to carry a nominal electric load of Ukrainian nuclear plants in the first half of 2020 amounted to 74.6 per cent – 9.4 points higher than the installed capacity utilization rate. In other words, the nuclear power plants' capacity was not limited administratively and electricity production in the first half of 2020 could have increased by 5.3 billion kWhs.

In August 2019, Energoatom embarked on a significant modernisation programme for all 15 reactors to be completed over the years 2020–2024. The programme involves the replacement of turbine capacitors as well as turbine upgrade work. As the managing director of Westinghouse Electric Sweden AB recently

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stated in Kyiv: "We are convinced that nuclear generation should continue to be an important component of the global energy industry in general and the Ukrainian energy mix in particular in the future." At the same time, he noted that the power units of Ukraine's plants "are gradually aging, and the time will come when they will have to be decommissioned."

Small modular reactors (SMRs), which generate nuclear power on a smaller scale, are gaining popularity today. However, to construct small modular reactors, a detailed analysis and time is needed. In June 2019, the Ukrainian Module Consortium – a consortium between the American company Holtec, Energoatom, and the State Scientific and Technical Centre for Nuclear and Radiation Safety (SSTC NRS) – announced intentions to build six small modular reactors at the Rivne nuclear power station site. Energoatom has considered deploying such units more widely to complement intermittent renewables. In February 2020, SSTC NRS and NuScale Power, an American private company that designs and markets SMRs, signed a memorandum of understanding regarding collaboration on the regulatory and design gaps between the US and Ukrainian processes for the licensing, construction and operation of a NuScale power plant in Ukraine.

However, as of November no SMR with a capacity of 100 MWs or more has been commissioned in the world. Most of them are still in the planning, development or study stages, in the US, Canada, Japan, South Korea, Denmark, France, the Czech Republic and the UK. The exceptions are the Chinese SMR ACP100 with a capacity of 125MWs (the construction of which began in 2019) and the Canadian SMR ARC-100 with a capacity of 100MWs, the previous phase of construction which was approved in December 2019.

Nevertheless, the advantages of small modular reactors are that they require less investment and the probability of an accident is several times less, and they have a smaller impact on the environment. The disadvantage is that they can meet only the needs of small individual settlements and the operation of a small production infrastructure.

Diversification

Ukrainian nuclear power units operate fuel from two different manufacturers: Westinghouse (Sweden) and the Russian-based TVEL. The process of diversifying sources of nuclear fuel supply for Ukrainian plants has been taking place over 20 years now, but very slowly. Although Russia's aggression in Ukraine has been going on for almost seven years, the real diversification has only started a few years ago. The procedure of "validation", which does not allow Ukraine to switch from Rus-

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sian nuclear fuel immediately, has been the biggest barrier. It should be gradually replaced. As representatives of Energoatom reported: "In the next five to seven years, TVEL can be completely replaced by Westinghouse fuel."

Generally speaking, Ukrainian uranium concentrate is sent to the Russian Federation to produce nuclear fuel. The Russian company undertakes a procedure of fabrication, conversion and enrichment of this concentrate, and after this cycle, nuclear fuel is imported to Ukraine as Russian produced. In 2019, Ukraine purchased nuclear fuel for a total of 396 million US dollars, which is 24.1 per cent more than in 2018. Russian-made fuel was bought for $240 million (60.7 per cent) and Swedish fuel for $156 million (39.3 per cent). In January 2018, Energoatom extended its contract with Westinghouse to 2025. The company stated that seven of the country's 15 nuclear reactors will use Westinghouse fuel by 2025.

The process of diversifying the sources of Ukraine's nuclear fuel supply has been slowly taking place over 20 years.

Ukraine still spends about $200 million each year to its aggressive neighbour for the storage of spent nuclear fuel service as the Central Spent Fuel Storage Facility (CSFSF) for Ukrainian NPPs is still under construction. In his investigation on the construction of this extremely important facility, Ukrainian journalist Oleksandr Chornovalov found that "the CSFSF, which has already cost Energoatom almost $53 million, needs more money to complete its construction. Energoatom has announced a new tender for the completion of construction for $23.5 million".

Corporatisation and transparency

Energoatom has attracted financing from European institutions including the European Reconstruction Bank and Development (EBRD) and Euroatom. According to agreements signed back in 2013, the EBRD has provided a 300 million-euro loan to Energoatom. Another loan agreement for 300 million euro was signed with Euroatom (also in 2013). All the agreements were ratified by the relevant laws of Ukraine.

The goal of the financing consists of two pillars: First, the implementation of the complex (consolidated) safety upgrade programme with the purpose of the further improvement of nuclear safety, ensuring efficient and reliable performance in the energy branch, bringing safety of Ukrainian nuclear power plants to the level that meets international standards; and second, the corporatisation of Energoatom in compliance with the roadmap developed by the corporatisation consultant in compliance with best international practice.

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According to the agreements, corporatisation is defined as "the transformation of the Borrower [*Energoatom*] into a fully state-owned joint-stock company, including the creation of a management structure that is suitable for such a company. For the avoidance of doubt, the term 'corporatisation' does not mean the privatisation of the borrower." It was important to stress the definition as the issue of Energoatom's corporatisation in political and professional environment is very sensitive.

Despite the fact that the Energoatom's corporatisation is still being discussed in Ukrainian society, such a process should take place as soon and as transparently as possible. Messages that corporatisation will contribute to the privatisation of Energoatom are weak as counter-arguments, as the Ukrainian people, represented by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, will be the sole owners of the newly created state joint-stock company (probable as public joint-stock company).

As for transparency, the supervisory board of Energoatom should be created with the most meticulous approach to its members, as it involves an army of 34,000 professional and highly skilled workers who need to be protected and always motivated by market wages, it is also one of the pillars of energy independence and security in Ukraine and one of the main budget-forming enterprises of the domestic economy.

The criterion of many years of experience in the nuclear energy sector should not be the main one when selecting candidates. First, it is necessary to pay attention to which private or state-owned companies, and in what countries, potential candidates have worked in. Under no circumstances should people be allowed to covertly lobby the interests of influential owners of private companies or countries that are in open, or hidden, unfriendly relations with Ukraine. This should be the basis for selection.

A preference should be given to Ukrainian citizens (with detailed verification of the person, place of birth, acquisition of citizenship and jobs), who will be able to justify the importance of their mission to the supervisory board. All this will help to form an appropriate controlling collegial body that will contribute to the sustainable development of the nuclear sector of Ukraine and will clearly comply with the legislation and specific the interests of Ukraine. NEE

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Biden and the East: Implications of a new US administration

What the incoming Biden administration means for Central and Eastern Europe

GEORGE SOROKA

Photo courtesy of George Soroka

Democracies are defined by the holding of regular elections that are free and fair, resulting in an alternation of leaders and the orderly transition of power. A central characteristic of this process is that while electoral outcomes are unpredictable, the manner in which politicians are replaced is highly routinised. Donald Trump, however, is a maverick and rule-breaker the likes of which the United States has never seen before. Trump has challenged the results of the 2020 US presidential election via the legal system and in the court of public opinion, his actions culminating in the deadly riot that took place on January 6th 2021 at the US Capitol Building. But while planting seeds of doubt concerning the veracity of the vote in the minds of his followers may well cause long-lasting damage to the institutions of American democracy and sully the country's image abroad, it will not change the reality that Joseph Biden was sworn in as the 46th president of the United States on January 20th 2021.

Biden certainly has his job cut out for him. Domestically, he will inherit a country more polarised than it has been since at least the time of the Vietnam War and the 1960s civil rights movement. On the international front, meanwhile, Biden will face the need to rebuild partnerships with key European allies such as France and Germany

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that have been heavily strained over the course of the last four years. Moreover, despite Democrats eking out control of the Senate by the narrowest of margins as a result of the January 2021 runoff elections in Georgia, Biden's party actually lost seats in the House of Representatives this electoral cycle (though it still controls the lower chamber). The extent to which the incoming president's plans will be opposed by Republican legislators remains to be seen, but it is surely not a good sign that vocal elements in both parties have espoused increasingly radicalized and uncompromising stances.

Therefore, while we should expect to see meaningful shifts in Washington's foreign policy positions with the new Biden administration, there will be limits as to what it can accomplish given an extremely partisan political landscape. It is likewise worth noting that President Biden may find it expedient to keep certain policies that Trump implemented, such as insisting Europe assume more responsibility for its own security, which would include pressuring Germany and other NATO member states to shoulder a greater financial burden for the continent's defence.

Nevertheless, Biden is clearly and emphatically not Trump, which no doubt has European leaders like Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron breathing a sigh of relief. Unlike his mercurial predecessor, who proved himself both incurious and intemperate when it came to foreign policy, Biden is an experienced politician, well-versed in the diplomatic arts. He is also much more of an internationalist than Trump, who unapologetically built his brand on the slogan "America first".

What specifically will the Biden presidency mean for the members of the Visegrád Group (known as the V4, its members include the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) and its immediate neighbours? Much, of course, remains uncertain, particularly in the midst of a global pandemic the end of which is still not in sight. Outlined below, however, are the four main arenas that the Biden administration is expected to prioritise when it comes to this region. In large measure, the attendant policy preferences will not mark a novel reset in thinking so much as a reversion to an Obama-era paradigm, although conditions have obviously changed since 2016 and will require adjustments to match.

Liberal democratic ideals

During his first address as president elect on November 7th 2020, Biden emphasised a United States that "would lead not only by the example of our power, but by the power of our example." To this end, he promised to convene a global Summit for Democracy soon after his inauguration, signalling that, for him, rebuilding America's international standing is significantly predicat-

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ed on regaining its moral authority on the global stage. While such a didactic position will undoubtedly be tested by the vicissitudes of high politics, Biden's rhetoric unambiguously links the status of the United States to Washington's support for human rights and peoples' self-determination (and, by extension, anti-corruption initiatives) around the world.

Placing renewed emphasis on the above principles will deal a blow to relations with right-wing populists such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Andrzej Duda in Poland. Relatedly, while the Czech Republic and Slovakia have not experienced the same level of illiberal politics as the other two V4 states (though they have hardly been immune to manifestations of assertive ethno-nationalism), they have long been mired in corruption scandals. Biden's administration will certainly be less reticent than that of his predecessor to call out such violations of democratic norms and to hold violators accountable. The same applies to Russia's wide-ranging disinformation campaigns and the Kremlin's meddling in the electoral processes of other states. Indicative of this, Biden supports the Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity, a multilateral initiative founded in 2018 (it is co-chaired by former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and former US Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff) to address external interference in western elections.

European co-operation

We can also expect the new Biden administration to recommit the US to supporting the European Union and to push for reinvigorating co-operation across the continent. In this regard, Germany will once again become central to US policy, which will have implications for internal relations within the EU, especially as this pertains to the animosity evinced between Warsaw and Berlin. Given such episodes as Hungary and Poland attempting to block the adoption of the EU's budget for 2021–2027 – along with the disbursal of 750 billion euros earmarked for pandemic relief and stimulus – due to disagreements the governments of these two states have with Brussels over the implementation of stricter rule of law criteria, Washington will assuredly pressure the politicians of Law and Justice and Fidesz to respect democratic principles and safeguard the project of European integration, from which the economies of Hungary and Poland have benefitted greatly in the last two decades.

However, while the United States has more leverage over Poland than Hungary, Biden would be well advised to not disengage from either Warsaw or Budapest. Instead, Washington should express its concern over the xenophobic

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and anti-liberal tendencies exhibited by Polish and Hungarian leaders but leave room for substantive and constructive engagement. One avenue might be to reiterate Washington's support for the Three Seas Initiative, which seeks to complement the EU's presence in Central and Eastern Europe by deepening economic and transportation ties along a north-south axis.

More broadly, the US can resume acting as an honest broker in the region, incentivising European states and the EU to formulate a more coherent and unified response to geopolitical challenges like the ongoing anti-Lukashenko protests in Belarus and the fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan that broke out last year in Nagorno-Karabakh. This would fulfil a much-needed mediatory function, as Europe as a whole has thus far been slow and scattered in its response to such crises.

Geopolitical security

In June 2019, Biden referred to NATO as "the single most consequential alliance in the history of the United States". The president elect has also been a consistent and vocal critic of Vladimir Putin, chiding him for both Russian interference in US domestic matters and the Kremlin's aggressive foreign policy, including as it pertains to the post-communist space. In this respect, the new administration will be a staunch ally to Poland and other erstwhile Warsaw Pact polities that oppose Moscow's pretension to a sphere of privileged regional influence. At the same time, given Biden's expected reorientation to Germany, the US is unlikely to increase troop levels in Poland, a measure that both the Trump administration and the current government in Warsaw supported. On the contrary, the Biden camp has pledged to review Trump's decision to withdraw 12,000 troops from Germany.

Consequently, we should anticipate that political and ideological lines of confrontation between the US and EU, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other, will harden in the coming years, with the fate of states like Belarus and Ukraine hanging in the balance. But the opportunity to achieve at least a "cold peace" between Moscow and a rejuvenated transatlantic alliance will remain. A significant step in this direction could be the renewal of the New Start Treaty, which both Putin and Biden support. Originally implemented on February 5th 2011, this US-Russian agreement, which limits the number of deployed nuclear warheads as well as their delivery systems, is set to expire in early 2021. Renewing it for another ten-year term would send a positive signal that wary co-operation is still possible with Moscow despite all the geopolitical drama of the last decade. Howev-

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er, whether such efforts can be extended to address other problematic issues, like Russia's dissemination of malignant propaganda in the region via television and social media channels, remains to be seen.

Energy policy

Dating back to his time as Vice President in the Obama administration, Biden has championed the diversification of Europe's energy sources as a means by which to promote energy security and curb Moscow's influence. More recently, he has come out against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline being laid underneath the Baltic Sea to supply Russian gas to Germany, labelling it a "fundamentally bad deal for Europe". Instead, the new US president will support such projects as the development of the Southern Gas Corridor, intended to reduce Europe's energy dependence on the Russian Federation by supplying natural gas from the Caspian basin and Middle East.

Biden has likewise indicated that he takes climate change seriously, pledging to re-authorise America's participation in the Paris Agreement on his first day in office. This policy position will also impact Central and Eastern Europe, which has had trouble weaning itself away from coal. Although proposals to ship American-produced LNG to the region on a commercial scale are logistically farfetched and economically impractical, there is little doubt that during Biden's tenure Washington will be sympathetic to various green and alternative energy proposals.

In conclusion, the incoming Biden administration will, in all probability, have several significant implications for the V4 states and Central and Eastern Europe more generally. First, bilateral relations with Washington of the sort enjoyed by Warsaw during the Trump years will be downplayed in favour of more concerted and comprehensive Europe-wide policies. Second, US relations with France and especially Germany will be prioritised, providing incentives for the V4 states to follow suit. Third, the need to support and strengthen NATO will be foregrounded, as the US will take a hardline stance against Moscow and its growing geopolitical ambitions. Finally, containing Russia and encouraging a deepening of European solidarity will not only have strategic military implications, but will also affect other sectors, such as those related to energy and communications.

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Whither US-Ukraine relations during a Biden presidency?

NADIIA BUREIKO

Photo courtesy of Nadiia Bureiko

The United States is among Ukraine's key foreign partners and one of the main providers of substantial political, economic and military aid. Ever since Russia's aggression in 2014, the US has been a staunch supporter, both in word and deed, of Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity and security, as well as the implementation of democratic reforms. This is constantly mentioned in the main strategic national documents of Ukraine, including the most recent Strategy of National Security, adopted in 2020, where relations with the US have been dedicated a special status.

Nevertheless, the bilateral dialogue hit a bump in 2019 when Ukraine was dragged into the centre of a US domestic political battle. Then President Donald Trump faced impeachment charges following a phone conversation with Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, in which Trump urged the Ukrainian leader to investigate corruption-related allegations against the Biden family. After this awkward episode, the victory of Joe Biden in November 2020 was welcomed in Ukraine as a turning point to more predictable diplomatic ties and a good omen for strengthening the bilateral relationship.

Biden is considered a highly experienced diplomat and very knowledgeable on Ukraine, taking into account that he served eight years as vice president during the Obama administration. During that tenure Biden was the point person on Eastern Europe and particularly on Ukraine. Back then he largely focused on the reform agenda in Ukraine, including the establishment of an independent anti-corruption bureau. Moreover, since 2014, Biden has been committed to Ukraine's defence against Russia. Externally, he has pushed for firm support in consolidating international opposition to Russia's annexation of Crimea and the military intervention in Donbas. Consequently, Biden knows Ukraine better than any of his predecessors in the Oval Office.

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Although most diplomacy hinges on the US State Department and on chief appointments of those responsible for Ukraine's policy (including the position of the US ambassador to Ukraine that is currently vacant), a Biden presidency is generally anticipated to be much more active with regards to Ukraine and regional affairs. First and foremost, we should expect Biden presidency to be much more vocal in relation to Russia and in condemning the Kremlin's aggressive actions in Ukraine. Biden already pinpointed Russia as "the biggest threat" to the US. In contrast to Trump, Biden shares no sympathy towards Vladimir Putin, has no illusion of any change in Russian behaviour and clearly understands the challenges posed by the Russian activities in the broader region.

Thus, it is highly expected that Biden will maintain the US's military support to Ukraine. The US Senate has already voted to overturn Trump's veto of the annual defence bill that followed a House vote earlier in late December 2020. The bill grants 250 million US dollars for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, including $75 million for lethal assistance to support Ukraine against Russia's aggression. According to Biden's statements during the election campaign, military support will continue to include weapons, although numerous sceptics pointed to Obama's reluctance to provide Ukraine with significant military assistance during the time Biden was vice president.

The military backing might even be increased during Biden's presidency alongside a tougher stance against Moscow. As one of the initiators of the US sanctions against Russia, Biden could seek to further deter Russian behaviour in Ukraine and in the wider region (including Belarus, Moldova and the Black Sea region). Thus, the incoming president might be a harbinger of improved US-Ukraine co-operation which, in turn, could contribute to cementing regional security. This would persuade Ukraine's political landscape and citizens to commit more to transatlantic structures and continue its alignment with the West.

In addition, Biden is known for his track record of promoting the US's role in Eastern Europe and his overt support for NATO's enlargement. Yet, with respect to Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO, Biden's stance is likely to remain in line with the former Obama administration, which was characterised by caution and restraint. Against this backdrop, strengthening the US-Ukraine Charter on the Strategic Partnership should become, at least for the near future, one of the cornerstones of the bilateral relationship.

Furthermore, Ukraine expects to have more solid institutional co-operation between the two countries at other levels as well (namely, in economic and political spheres). Yet, this co-operation will largely depend on Ukraine's commitment to reforms. Delaying the fight against corruption will probably

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During his time as Vice President, Joe Biden was the point person on Eastern Europe and particularly on Ukraine.

face "zero tolerance" in Washington, which will antagonize some of the political actors in Ukraine seeking to reverse anti-corruption initiatives or hinder juridical reforms. Failure to address these pressing issues might bear high cost for Ukraine, and this time – recalling Biden's remarks to the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada in 2015 – Ukraine cannot afford "to lose hope again".

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Andrei Gromyko congratulates Joe Biden

KUBA BENEDYCZAK

Photo by the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)

In 2011 Joe Biden, as the US vice president during his visit to Moscow, said to Vladimir Putin: "Mr Prime Minister, I'm looking into your eyes, and I don't think you have a soul." Putin replied: "We understand one another". This anecdote seems to be a prophecy of a rough co-existence without any signs of fondness. Clearly Putin and most of the current Russian political elite are very sceptical towards Biden. The Russian president was one of the last national leaders who congratulated Biden on his victory over Donald Trump. While Angela Merkel had sent her congratulatory message on November 9th, Putin sent his one month later. Even China's Xi Jinping was ahead of him. It was no coincidence, but a very clear signal that Russia has been preparing itself for a much more intense confrontation with the US with the Biden presidency. And if truth be told, Russians have their own reason to wear thick protective armour for the next four years.

Joe Biden is not an "a riddle wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma" for the Russian authorities, but rather a good old fellow. From the moment he was elected, an old and symptomatic photo began to circulate on Russian social media and gained huge popularity. In January 1988, during consultations for the ratification of the Treaty on Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF Treaty), then Senator Joe Biden is standing next to Andrei Gromyko, the chairman of the presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. Gromyko, who passed away in 1989 and was a member of the communist party since 1931, was a legend in Soviet diplomacy. The photo immediately became a meme stamped with "The first person to congratulate Joe Biden on his electoral victory was Andrei Andreevich Gromyko".

However, the history of the Biden-Russia romance is even longer. As senator, Biden visited Moscow for the first time in 1979, when the ill-starred SALT-2 treaty was signed. In other words, the current American president survived Gorbachev and Yeltsin, and he went through all the ups and downs of the Russian-American toxic love/hate relationship. Biden also met and spoke

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with Putin on many occasions. It would be ironic, indeed, if Biden also survived Putin, who might step down in 2024.

In Biden's article on US foreign policy, published early last year in *Foreign Affairs* ("Why America Must Lead Again"), he defined the Putin regime as a "kleptocratic authoritarian system". He also stressed that the US shall "stand with Russian civil society, which has bravely stood up time and again against" Putin's kleptocracy. This tone immediately set off alarm bells in the Kremlin. During Biden's vice presidency, especially between 2011 and 2012, Putin experienced huge social protests. The Obama administration welcomed Russia's attempt at a colour revolution (the most hated phrase by the Kremlin), and then American ambassador Michael McFaul, sent to Moscow in January 2012, actively supported the protests and often met with opposition leaders. Putin obviously accused the US and McFaul of stirring up the protests and for spending millions of dollars to influence Russian elections.

The rhetoric from that article resembles that which has traditionally been used by the Americans – also by Trump and Mike Pompeo – towards other authoritarian regimes that have thrown down the gauntlet to American hegemon. In other words, it goes like this: "Chinese, Venezuelans, Iranians and Russians are wonderful people who deserve freedom, wealth and normal politicians, but unfortunately they are ruled by tyrants and gangsters, whose only concern is to maintain power". No matter how true this is, to the Russian or Chinese authorities it is like a red cape to a bull, all the more considering that Biden promises to emphasise human rights, including LBGT+ rights, in his foreign policy.

In practice, Biden's declarations will translate into greater pressure being put on Russian civil society organisations by state institutions. A good example is the week after the American election when the State Duma started preparing a bill imposing new restrictions on NGOs and created additional grounds for closing them down, especially those with "foreign financing". One can only imagine what will happen if the Biden administration starts openly and actively supporting Russian NGOs. This is one of the reasons why the Kremlin does not believe that Biden and the officials he brings into the White House are cured of American exceptionalism, democratic messianism or a belief in their global leadership. Despite Biden's criticism towards the American-led invasion of Iraq or intervention in Libya, during his vice presidency the US took military action in Libya, Syria, Nigeria, Somalia, Yemen and Pakistan, as well as supported the Arab Spring which later turned out to be more of a catastrophe.

In *Foreign Affairs* he accused Donald Trump of having "abdicated American leadership in mobilising collective action to meet new threats, especially those unique to this century … and that he has turned away from the democratic values

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that give strength to our nation and unify us as people". In Biden's view, democracy "strengthens and amplifies our leadership to keep us safe in the world".

Putin certainly sees trouble on the horizon. Yes, Biden declares that his administration is going to turn American foreign policy back to democratic values and global leadership via co-operation with democratic allies and international institutions, and not by force. Yes, Biden has gone through all the American failures in "exporting democracy". Yes, Biden theoretically rejects military interventions, the same as Obama did. Yes, all of the above is true, but the Kremlin is hyper realistic and does not believe in a peaceful Biden agenda. For Moscow, his accusations levelled against Trump are veiled references to American interventions in Asia and Africa made in the name of democracy and human rights. Obviously, Russians would not oppose American interventions so strongly if they were consulted beforehand and received some of the spoils. But they are not, and taking into consideration the Kremlin's obsession with colour revolutions, Biden's declarations mean also support for the Belarusian and Russian opposition, never acceptable for the Russian authorities.

Biden's rhetoric towards Russia has been assertive and confrontational from the beginning. Unlike Trump four years ago, Biden does not promise he will get along with "tough guy Putin". Biden has declared facing Russian aggression (disinformation, cyberattacks, meddling in American election process) and increasing the costs Russia are to pay for violating international regulations. In this case, Moscow believes the new American president and most of his administration (for example his secretary of state, Antony Blinken, and secretary of defence, Lloyd Austin) are representatives of the American "deep state" which is against a reset with Russia or softening policy or sanctions towards Moscow, especially in terms of the annexation of Crimea or the war in Donbas.

Hence, in the Kremlin's eyes, the most serious defect of Biden lays in the fact that he is not Donald Trump. No one within the Russian elite believes in a new Russian-American reset, or even a détente proposal. Yet Trump at least played the game that Moscow likes the most. In Trump's vocabulary, it is called "America first". For Putin, this means "defending of national interests". Both of them mean extreme assertiveness, priority on business and a re-definition of international architecture to some extent. Trump, in fact, tried to change the position of the US within the international environment, as well as reshaping traditional US alliances, which he sees as very unfair. Therefore, he criticised and jeopardised NATO and relations with the EU, both being the foundation of the Euro-Atlantic community. Trump also criticised and jeopardised relations with America's most important allies in Asia (i.e. South Korea and Japan). In a sense, Trump's America had become revisionist power, next to China, Russia

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and Turkey. However, Biden will put an end to that and strengthen traditional US co-operation with democratic countries and institutions, especially when it comes to NATO and the EU.

Moscow found one small benefit in Trump's aggressive rhetoric and policy towards America's competitors (e.g. Iran) and allies (e.g. Germany). It gave Russia (and China) opportunities to develop their own soft power in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Russia was able to present itself as a reasonable and conciliatory partner, ready to redeem loans or grant credits, as well as sending high-qualified engineers, military advisers and medical staff for free. This gave Russia an opportunity to create an image completely different to Trump, who regularly shouted or tweeted that the United States should be paid for any support they provide. Biden, probably, will be able to play out such sensitive issues in a much more diplomatic manner.

Obviously, there are some areas where Biden will be willing, or forced, to cooperate with Russia. For example, Russia's strong presence in the Middle East/North Africa region and Venezuela, the extension of the New START treaty, realising the Paris Agreement on climate change, and restoring the international nuclear deal with Iran. Yet, despite professional diplomatic contacts, relations between Moscow and Washington will not improve. In fact, it will likely be the opposite. They will become tenser and the world will not be any safer.

Is there any good news then? Yes, but nothing significant. However, as the director of the Moscow Carnegie centre, Dmitri Trenin, wrote: "It is good that the master of the Kremlin understands whom he will be facing in the White House". NEE

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International law and the Soviet wild-goose chase

GRZEGORZ SZYMBORSKI

Soviet political proposals from before the war and the legacy of the United Nations established as a result of the Soviet victory over Nazism are often recalled in the Kremlin's contemporary narratives. Yet, a look at the historical development of the Soviet understanding of international law reveals a chaotic and political, rather than legal, approach.

The 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War and the proclamation of the United Nations was a topic intensively exploited by Russian diplomacy which attempted to highlight the Soviet input into the triumph over the Nazis and the creation of an international organisation. The Kremlin's rhetoric was expressed directly by Vladimir Putin twice last year – once thanks to an article published in *The National Interest* in June and then, via a speech delivered virtually during the annual summit of the United Nations, in September. During both occasions Putin stressed the significance of the Soviet Union in creating and developing the post-1945 international order, fixed after the failure of the League of Nations (described by Putin as "a cautionary tale"). He noted the decisive role in sentencing war criminals and Russian allegiance to international law, of which the UN Charter appears to be the primary source.

Putin praised the advantage of the veto mechanism within the United Nations and the role of the five main leading powers responsible for protection and execu-

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tion of international law. He elaborated significantly on co-operation within the organisation, its legal heritage grounded in multilateral conventions and protocols which should be respected. Putin openly accused the world of turning a deaf ear "to the repeated calls of the Soviet Union to establish an equitable collective security system and sign an Eastern European pact and a Pacific pact to prevent aggression". He wrote that "these proposals were disregarded".

Rewriting… the history of law?

Soviet political proposals from before the war, and the legacy of the United Nations established as a result of the Soviet victory over Nazism, are often recalled in the Kremlin's contemporary narratives. From the Russian point of view, they remain one of the greatest and undisputable achievements of the USSR. When examining political facts rooted in the concept of international law and order, this legal grounding appears to be a reasonable (and necessary) starting point for revealing the true intentions behind the mask of rule of law. Indeed, how did the Soviets perceive the League of Nations and international law at that time? Were they so eager to co-operate with the world with the set of common rules? The 75th anniversary of the establishment of the United Nations and Russia's unfading pride of the Soviet legacy are good reasons to give the floor to Hans Kelsen, a scholar who was able to reveal the weaknesses of the communist approach from the point of view of law and international law in particular.

Kelsen, an Austrian lawyer, may be known to some readers as the author of the idea of constitutional court and co-author of the Austrian constitution. After he fled Europe and moved to the United States, he focused on Bolshevism and contributed some academic works to the rising East-West conflict. In 1955 he published *The Communist Theory of Law*, a somewhat forgotten volume. The study was not complete at that time since Grigory Tunkin's most famous and profound book, *Theory of International Law*, was not released until 1970. Nevertheless, since the 1950s, Kelsen and his work were recognised even by Soviet and other Marxian authors. Reginald Parker, who reviewed the study shortly after its publication, wrote that the Austrian lawyer "spares no effort to show the fallacies and inherent impossibilities in all these pseudo-scientific writings".

The book itself elaborates on many different authors, including the theory of law and state as expressed by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, and lesser known authors such as Soviet lawyers Pēteris Stučka and Evgeny Pashukanis. Almost a quarter of the volume was dedicated to the issue of international law and the ambiguities of the Soviet jurists which were based on shaky legal understandings.

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Kelsen debunked many thoughts on international law, pointing to the internal and ideological incoherence of legal concepts. The Soviet leaders were trapped by their own masters, as Marx and Engels's understanding of law in general was not easily adoptable to the international context. Their simplified picture of the legal order was presented as an instrument of oppression of one class over another and simultaneously leading to the intensification of the contradictions within society. In fact, law became a tool of domination and exploitation directly connected with the state. For the fathers of communism, it was an expression of the economic reality. As Kelsen points out, that was not the case for international law, completely decentralised, without special organs for the implementation of sanctions. Most of all, the international community remained classless. This is why the Marxian theory of law stood on a minefield.

Early Soviet leaders were trapped as Marx and Engels's understanding of law was not easily adoptable to the international context.

Apparently, Kelsen also noticed that international law advocated for the value most praised by communists – equality – and the principle of sovereignty of states – as one of the cornerstones of contemporary international law. This was something that could have been useful for a worldwide revolution as every struggle between two capitalist states could have weakened the oppressive government and bourgeoisie, strengthening the proletariat respectively. It was also a good example that international law might not have been perceived as class law, because the internal struggle between dominant and oppressed classes was something incomparable to the duel between two "equal" imperialist states.

Kelsen admitted that the general perception of law through class struggle, however, was not fertile ground for any discussion on international law for the communists. Their dogmatic concept failed rapidly. As he claimed: "just because international law is no class law in any sense of this term, the Soviet government – and, following their government the Soviet legal scientists, finally recognised the existing international law as a normative order binding upon the Soviet Union in its relation to all the other states … Hence there exists an insoluble conflict within the Soviet theory of international law."

In fact, coming back to Marx himself, international law was not law at all, and the newly created Soviet state had been ignoring international law for the first five years after the October Revolution. Yet, according to Kelsen's explanation: "political interest forces the Soviet government to recognise this law as a set of legally binding norms regulating its relationships with the other states, and the Soviet legal theorists to make the futile attempt to interpret this set of norms as law in conformity with the Marxian definition". International law was a real trap for So-

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viet fundamentalists wriggling among ideology, law and political aims. And this is where the reality and needs challenged the blurred theory.

A hard nut to crack

For the Austrian lawyer, the Soviet legal theorists were unsuccessful in explaining the phenomena. According to Kelsen, Evgeny Korovin, future member of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, was the first Soviet scholar to express that "it is impossible to reject international law by simply denying its existence and to dispatch the entire set of international legal norms of the present time as a bourgeois remainder by a stroke of the pen".

Soviet Commissioner of Justice, Pēteris Stučka, fully accepted the Marxian theory: if law exists, it means we still face social inequality and the division of mankind into classes with one superior over the other. What are the classes within the international community? According to Kelsen, Stučka unintentionally proves there is no "international class unification" as capitalist states team up temporarily, being unable to become a dominant class in a long run. He also claims international law is actually "nothing more than relationships de facto", whatever that means, surely being far from explaining the phenomena of international law. Sergey Krylov, a Soviet member of the International Court of Justice, introduced a very clumsy definition of this branch of law: "the international or interstate law must therefore be defined as a juridical superstructure set up on the world economy, representing the results of the competition and co-operation of the dominant classes of the various states in the external international relations".

In 1926 Evgeny Pashukanis attempted to deal with the problem, writing: "international law owes its existence to the fact that the bourgeoisie exercises its domination over the proletariat and the colonies by organising itself in several trusts, separated from one another and in competition with one another". Yet, he escapes the challenge of a deep discussion on that. Pashukanis shared his thoughts on the effectiveness and the normative character of the international legal order, but did not explain its origins and meaning. Still, Pashukanis delivers an interesting remark on international law, that it is "a form of temporary compromises between two antagonistic class-systems". For Kelsen such a statement somehow resembles the Marxian concept of "the transition period" – the phase when the Soviets temporarily have to acknowledge some rules, getting ready to strike in the future in order to achieve complete domination.

In 1930 Pashukanis tried to make use of the Marxian understanding of law, but again the concept of international law did not fit into Lenin's ideas for which it

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should not have been perceived as law at all. Pashukanis, indeed gave up, claiming: "the problem of international law remains without a solution. Does international law exist? Can we regard it as a real fact in the mutual relationships between the Soviet Union and capitalist encirclement? … All this is subject to further consideration." But Kelsen took note that the Soviet textbook on international law, issued in 1935, did not determine the class character of international law parallel to the idea of domestic law of the capitalist states.

Pluralistic doctrine of law

The idea of international law and a transition period was developed in 1924 by Evgeny Korovin. The Soviet scholar introduced his own theory on international law claiming there are several different systems co-existing at once. He advocated for a special international law regulating and binding the Soviet Union in its relations with the other states. Korovin maintained that norms of international law based on solidarity of ideas shared by capitalist states cannot be applied to the relationships between bourgeois and socialist states. As for Kelsen, who spent much time researching relations between international and domestic legal orders, Korovin's statement indicated superiority of the state's will, justified by its domestic law. Kelsen elaborated on pluralistic theory of law and reached the conclusion that Soviets represented the so-called monistic concept of international law: "The so-called international law can be considered as valid for the state only if recognised as such by the states and, hence, only as part of its national law. There are as many international laws as there are national laws." Still, Korovin's concept was really not that "socialist", as many bourgeoisie jurists shared this point of view.

In spite of ideological issues, the Soviet lawyer acknowledged that there are common topics that shall be the object of international relations. He specified three categories of broader co-operation. The first consisted of "humanitarian interests" free from politics, such as the common struggle against epidemics or the protection of cultural heritage. The second area regarded economic interests of strictly technical origin. Connections via postal service, telegraph, or railway were essential for communists to progress and spread communist values worldwide. Finally, Korovin spoke of some political compromises between capitalist and socialist states.

Like many Soviet scholars, he also advocated for the principle of unlimited sovereignty of the state as a cornerstone in international relations. Korovin perceived the Soviet Union as "the world master of the classical doctrine of sovereignty". From the very beginning the Bolsheviks declared support for the idea of

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self-determination, no matter how fake it was in reality. Still, the attachment to declared self-determination was not only broken by the Soviets politically through their interventions in the satellite states, but they invented legal concepts or remarks contradicting the general rule. The Communist lawyer himself claimed in 1946 that under certain circumstances, restrictions upon sovereignty were justifiable. He insisted that only peace-loving states could enjoy the privilege of unlimited sovereignty.

Korovin also tried to prove that the sources of socialist international law were different from the sources of capitalist ones. Contrary to "bourgeoisie law", he (and then Sergey Krylov) attempted to underestimate the role of custom, indicating treaties as the primary source. Other Soviet jurists did not share such views, claiming the equal footing of treaties and customs. It is therefore worth mentioning that the Soviet lawyer Grigory Tunkin perceived the Brezhnev Doctrine as a local customary law accepted only within the Eastern Bloc. Again, Kelsen counters Korovin's reservation of custom, claiming that maybe he was afraid of the need of being bound to a custom not necessarily invented in co-operation with the USSR. Taking into account that customs were developing for ages, capitalist international law was superior at this point in its relation to the newly "invented" concept of "socialist international law".

Korovin also explained the communist approach to the *rebus sic stantibus* clause which referred to the possibility of switching the conditions of the international agreement under an extraordinary change of circumstances. The Soviets accepted its existence, but exclusively in case of a reversal of the legal order and exchange of basic principles the state was built upon. It was therefore double-tongued as neither Korovin nor other Soviet scholars rejected the state succession between Russia and the Soviet Union. And they maintained that for political purposes. Nevertheless, in respect to succession, Korovin's Marxian thoughts on who is in charge of the state were completely irrelevant for international law.

Grim warning

Elaborating on Korovin's idea of a "socialist international law", Kelsen noticed the main mistake the Soviet scholar made: many concepts did not constitute any sort of new "socialist international law", but rather an international policy differing from the bourgeois one. The bones of contention were, among others, a Soviet unwillingness to conclude treaties with half-colonial states, the rejection of the majority voting in favour of unanimity in international organisations and tribunals, or the reinterpretation of the *rebus sic stantibus* mechanism. One of Kelsen's primary

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accusations regarding the Marxian theory of law was in fact misleading the law with the theory of law, which is in essence a subjective interpretation.

Austrian lawyer argued that the communists did not invent a new international law but reinterpreted the existing one and that the Soviet study on it was spoiled by politics. Korovin appeared to be quite progressive as he advocated for the acknowledgement of international organisations as the subjects of international law along with states. Of course he did so for political, and not strictly legal, reasons; he mentioned, for instance, vague entities such as the communist international and international associations of workers. At times, the Soviets were trapped by their own contradicting political and ideological goals – Kelsen pointed out that the USSR both accepted the mandate system under the framework of the League of Nations and then UN trusteeship system of which Moscow heavily criticised.

Kelsen summarised his studies claiming the Soviet belief that a socialist international law could have existed independently was based on biased assumptions and the confusion of law and politics, characteristic of Soviet academic discussions on law in general. As he maintained in his conclusions: "The deplorable status of Soviet legal theory, degraded to a handmaid of the Soviet government, should be a grim warning to social scientists that true social science is possible only under the condition that it is independent of politics." As the reviewer of Kelsen's book, Reginald Parker, noted: "the present book is valuable, not because it helps in a battle against communism … but rather because it furnishes a tool in what ought to be our ever-lasting war against bemuddled thinking and wishdreams pretending to be reality".

Putin praised the United Nations for the equality of states, self-determination, the balance of powers, and solutions through compromise within the framework of international law. The same can be said about the Soviet international lawyers, but thanks to Kelsen we know that what they claimed, how they tried to justify their unfortunate findings, what was the ideology behind the political reality, and how incoherent their motives or jurisprudence were.

The next time we hear applause for the Soviet contribution to the international order, I suggest we listen to the echo of the Marxian true colours, and the parallels between Russian contemporary rhetoric and sly Soviet attempts to co-exist in order to achieve their goals. Or, at least, read Kelsen's book carefully.

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Women's face of the opposition

YULIA GALIAMINA

The topic of women in protests has not been on the agenda in Russia until the election campaign in Belarus. And then we suddenly saw them – strong, stylish, beautiful, and, most importantly, exuding love not hate.

This feeling of love, humanity, optimism instead of aggression, sarcasm, brutality is what distinguishes the opposition with a woman's face. Whatever events take place in Belarus, the leaders of the protest, even from prison, send signals of calm courage, benevolence and optimism. And that inspires many people.

In Russia, women in opposition play a much more modest role. And although there are quite a few women in the opposition, especially among grassroots activists or local deputies, the media tone is still set by men – with their endless competition, frequent aggression not only towards their counterparts but also towards strategic allies, and, in some sense, with their sexism.

Challenge for women

For many years, the opposition discourse has been built on provoking negative emotions – envy and hatred, feelings of insecurity and helplessness. "We will not forget, we will not forgive", "lustration", "not to lie and not to steal", "victims of the regime". Everything positive was related to the future, and the present remained just the preparatory period.

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How does this relate to gender? It seems that there is no direct relation. Yet, after the events in Belarus, the demand for an optimistic and positive and, at the same time, oppositional view, for soft power, solidarity, coalitions in the minds of many people is associated with women in politics. And interest in female politicians in Russia suddenly grew.

The Kremlin's paranoia also brings female figures to the fore. After all, the opposition of an aging, closed, violence-based dictator and a young, open, optimistic and kind woman is quite a cultural stereotype: Koschei the Immortal and Maria Morevna, Ivan the Third and Martha the Mayoress (Marfa Boretskaya). Death and Captivity against Life and Love.

And this is a certain challenge for women – independent politicians in Russia. Will we be able to find the right tone? Will we be able to start a conversation not only with the traditionally protest part of the society and to find the right words for everyone? Will we be able to show Russian citizens a different way than the way of learnt helplessness, which every time ends up in violence?

What women can offer

As a female politician, I have recently thought of what we can and should offer to the people:

- Success stories. Around us, we see many examples how people, civil society, local communities, independent deputies achieve a better life for ordinary people. These examples can help in fighting learnt helplessness.
- Solidarity, coalitions, distributed leadership instead of an inappropriate competition and the "king of the hill" game. Unselfishly sharing resources, from knowledge to money, means increasing them. People are tired of endlessly competing. They want to feel that they are not alone and that no one is manipulating them.
- Respect and attention instead of aggression and squabbles. A gentle, welcoming style reduces aggression in society and even heals historical trauma.
- Dialogue, humanity and acceptance instead of hatred and blame. The division of people into friends and foes, the search for enemies and calls for punishments for them leads to an increased confrontation and the impossibility of a peaceful transition.
- Family, local community, small homeland, diversity instead of soulless centralisation. Russia will be able to live only if every place in Russia has the potential and opportunities for this.

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- Simple, clear goals and vision of the future: a normal life, high income, good education and medicine, opportunities for families with children and security instead of abstract slogans. This will allow the public to understand what alternative politicians want.

By changing the face of the opposition to female, we can change its reputation in the eyes of society, clearing it of all negativity with which it is now associated. Now we have the opportunity to make a female turn in independent politics. However, this turn is connected not only with gender, it is associated with a new image of independent politics as a humane, kind, attentive to the needs of ordinary people, which is understandable to everyone, and not just ideological values. In one word, of a lively politics.

This commentary was originally published on the website of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum. We are grateful for their permission to republish it here.

Yulia Galiamina is a Russian public figure, local deputy in Moscow, a journalist and linguist.

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Equilibrium

A project by Yulia Portyshyn,
a young generation Ukrainian artist

Equilibrium is an artistic project that combines the concepts of algorithms and metaphysics. The approach features geometric structure within architectural concepts. All compositions contain four essential elements: structure, ratio, form and contrast. They are simple and complex at the same time. This approached it aimed at providing order, strategic vision and an inner sense of harmony. All in all, this is what – in the artist's view – creates the meaning of "EQUILIBRIUM".

Yulia Protsyshyn was born in Ternopil (Ukraine). At a young age she became fascinated by Picasso and Kandinsky and created abstract compositions. She pursued a degree in Fine Arts and Graphics at the Ukrainian Academy of Printing in Lviv. She has participated in exhibitions worldwide and received many distinctions and awards.

Whilst studying at the university, she also worked for leading Ukrainian publishing houses where she did book design projects. She continued to work with illustrations, graphic design and typography from 2009 to 2016 when she was also involved in international projects.

In 2020 Yulia was award the Gaude Polonia scholarship by the Polish Minister of Culture and National Heritage. She then spent six months in Wrocław, co-operating with the Geppert Academy of Art. There she completed her "Equilibrium" collection which consisted of five large-format graphics in etching technique.

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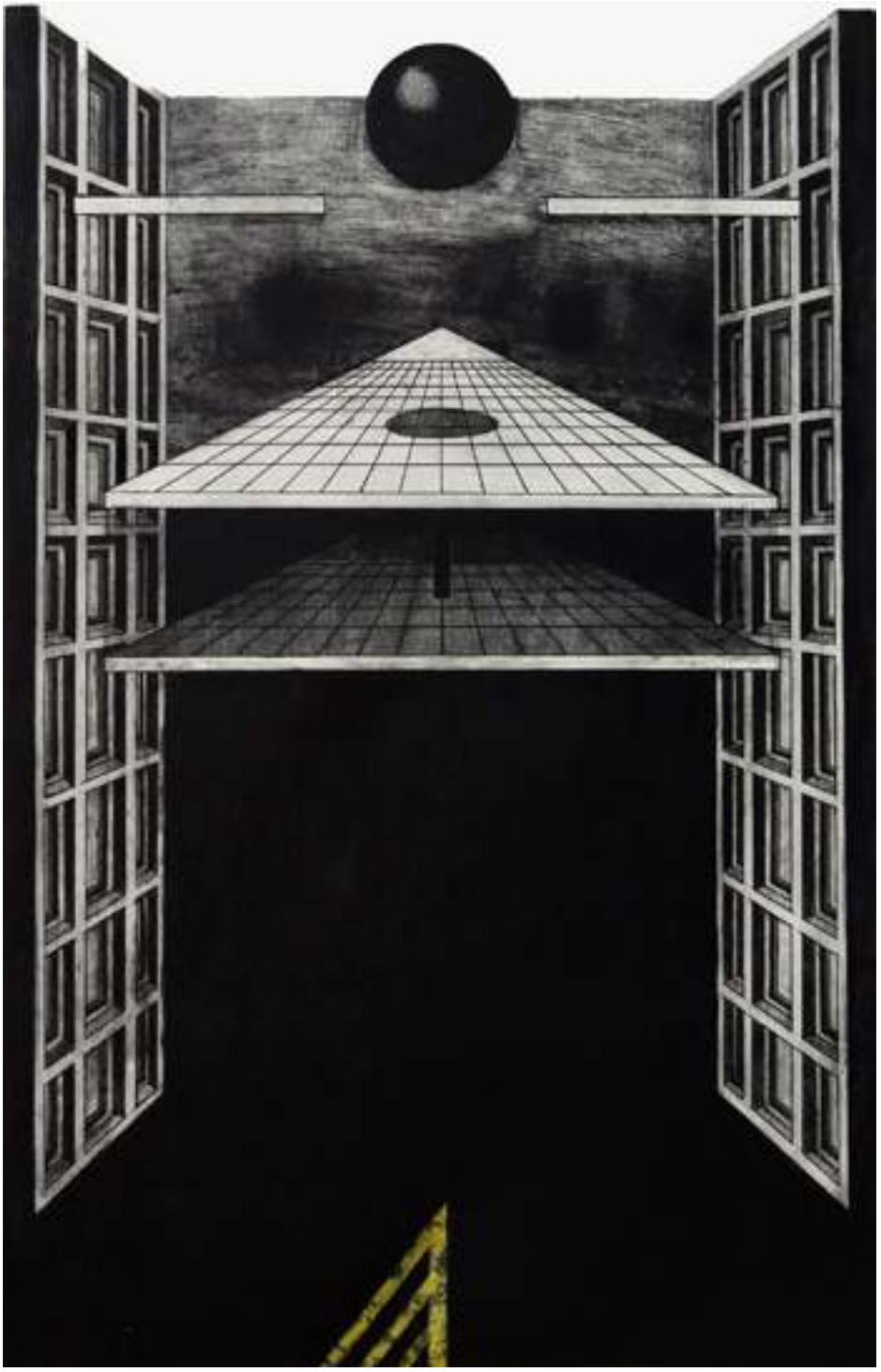

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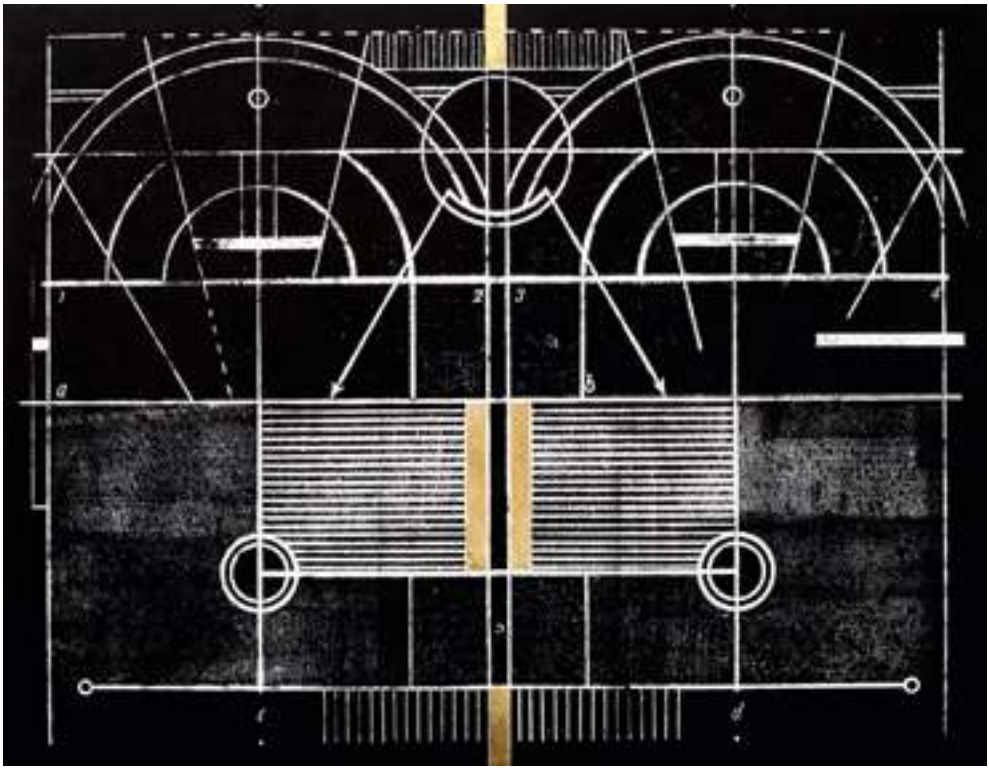

On the left "Gravitation" 386×600 mm (intaglio);
on the right "Structure" 500×650 mm (intaglio)

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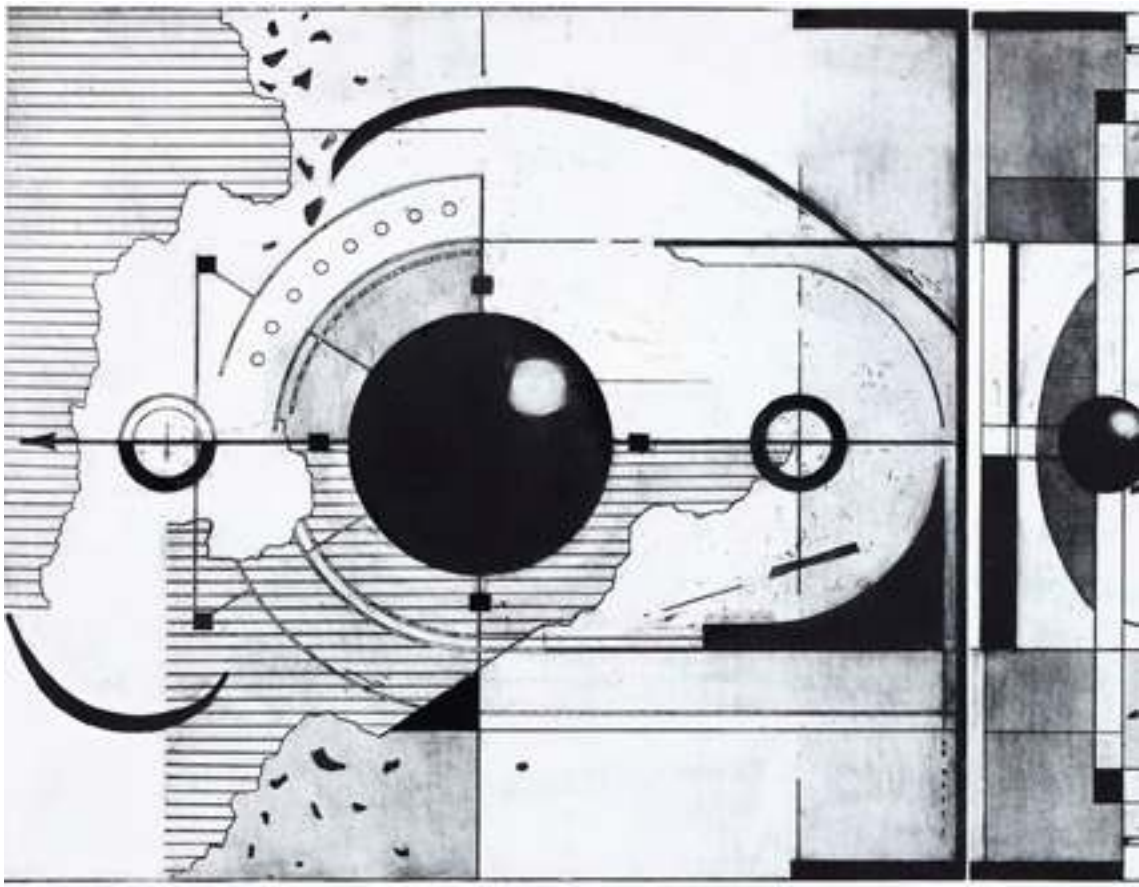

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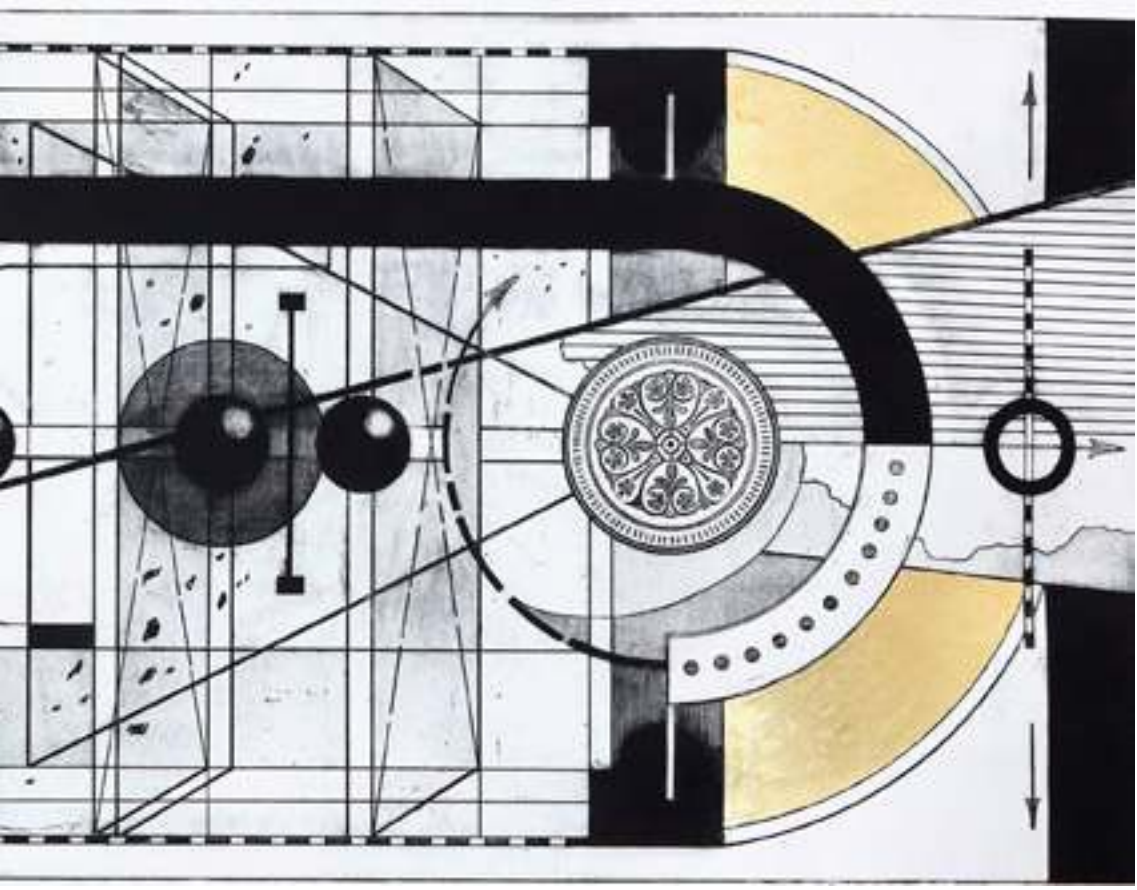

"Architector" 545×1420 mm (intaglio)

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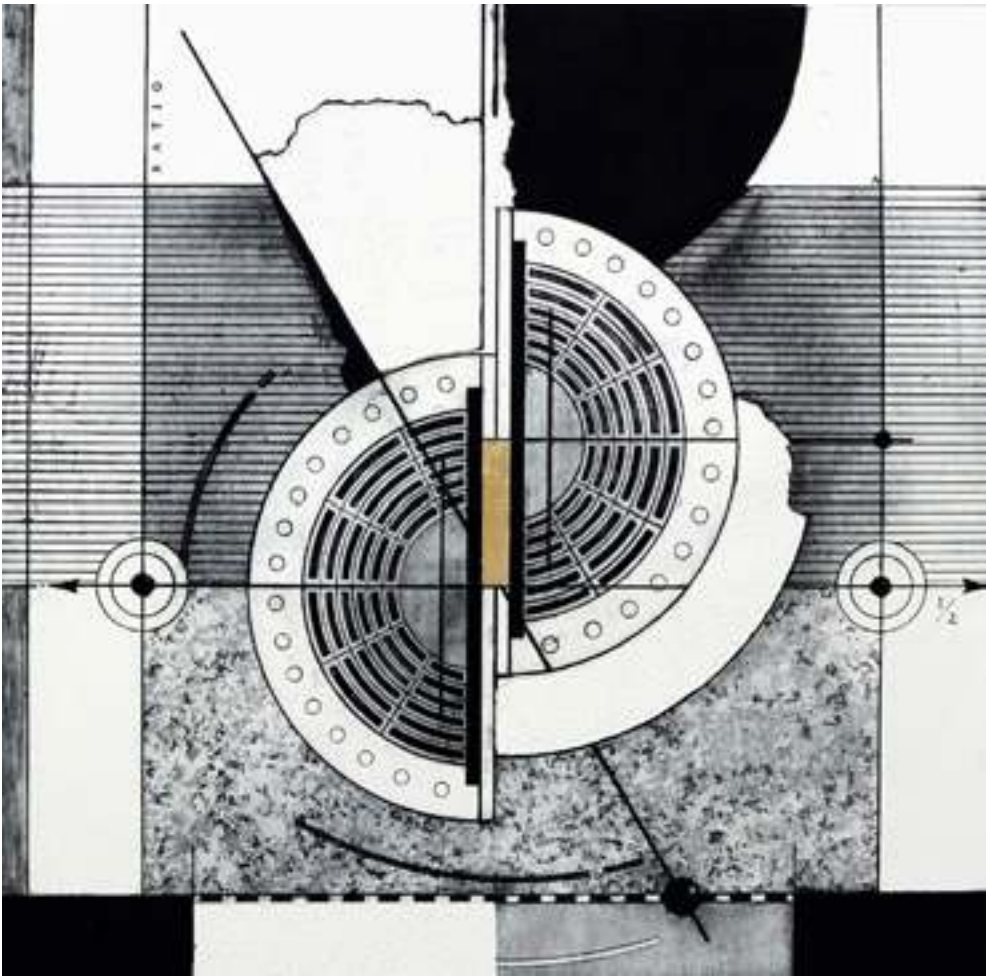

"Ratio" 500×507 mm (intaglio)

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"Equilibrium" 545×500 mm (intaglio)

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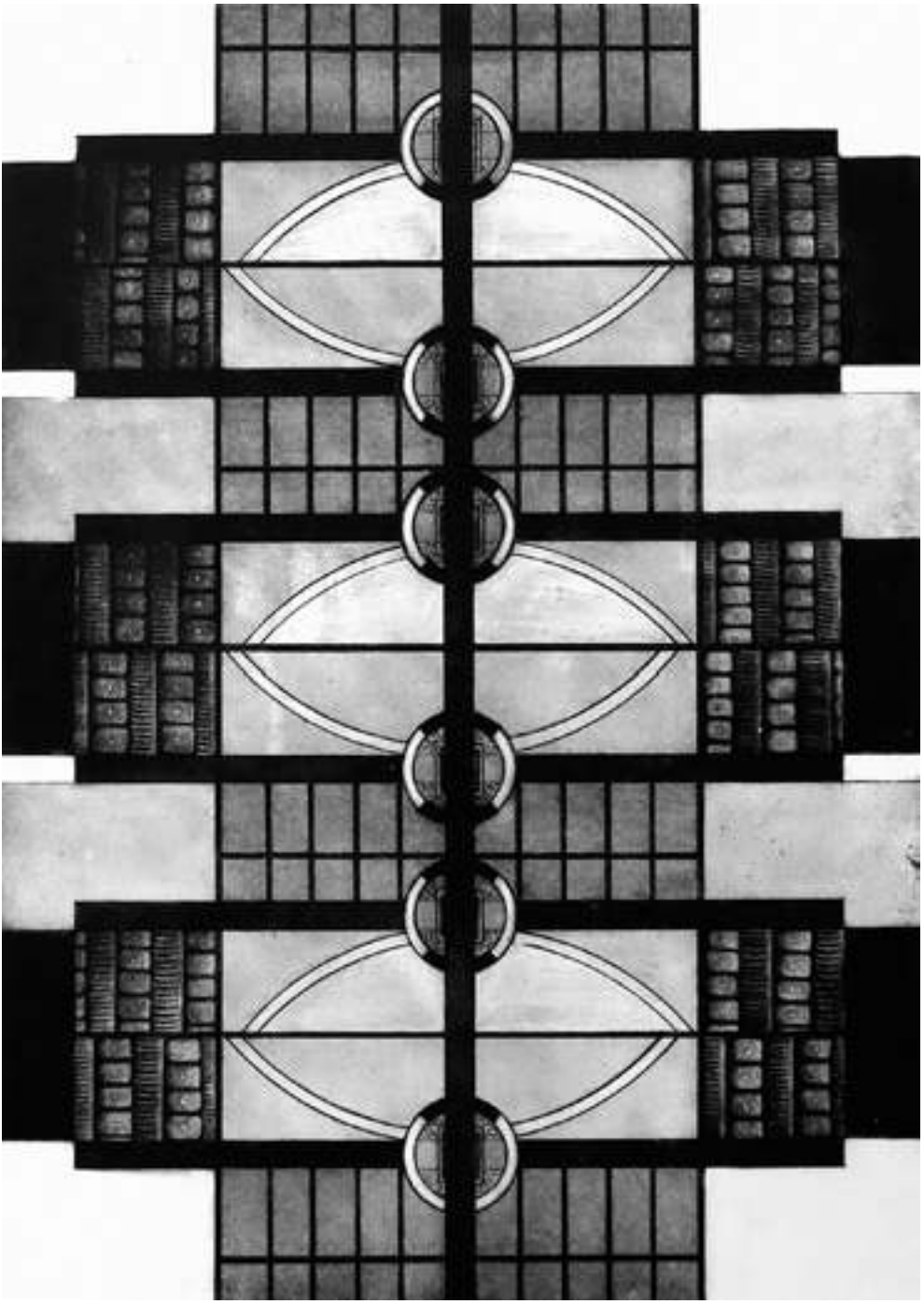

"Rhythm" 400×560 mm (intaglio)

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An unambiguous legacy

Women and Solidarity

SHANA PENN

During the 1980s, I witnessed the momentous events in Poland from afar and worked with human rights groups to lend support to pro-democracy activists. By 1988, I prepared for my first research visit to Poland to examine Solidarity's gender dynamics. What stood out was that Solidarity was a democratic movement that did not advocate gender equality.

In mid-November of 2020 I participated in a roundtable at the annual conference of the Association of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) on the theme, "Polish Solidarity: A Glorious Revolution and its Unexpectedly Tortuous Aftermath." Joining me virtually were Timothy Garton Ash, Ireneusz Krzeminski, Jan Kubik, and David Ost. We were to reflect on the trajectory of this once enormous social movement in the post-communist reality. I, in particular, was invited to reflect on my work initiated by *Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland*, which I had published in 2005 and again in 2014. By the time of the academic roundtable, the world was riveted on the third, exhilarating week of wildly audacious, feminist-initiated, grassroots nationwide demonstrations across Poland in support of reproductive rights, democratic rule of law and separation of state and church. The euphoria of revolution was palpable.

At the ASEEES conference and on various social media forums since the Women's Strike began on October 22nd, colleagues who lived during, participated in, and/or studied the Solidarity movement were comparing the current day mass mobilisation's similarities and disparities to Solidarity. For me the differences were

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more pronounced than the commonalities, which I will discuss further on. Suffice to say at the outset that although Solidarity aspired to be democratic, it was not, which is evident in its treatment of and policies regarding women.

Time of loss?

While some believe that Solidarity abandoned women in 1989 when the new democratic parliament proposed to curtail abortion, others assert that Solidarity had forsaken women from its inception in 1980. The feminist ferment animating Polish society this past autumn 2020 impelled me to discuss these revolutionary events and their origins, not through the lens of Solidarity, but rather, to write about Solidarity and its aftermath through the lens of this watershed moment in Polish and feminist history, which came into existence partly in spite of Solidarity's legacy.

During the 1980s, I witnessed the momentous events in Poland from afar and worked with human rights groups to lend support to pro-democracy activists. By 1988, I prepared for my first research visit to Poland to examine Solidarity's gender dynamics. I was struck by the seeming lack of a feminist consciousness in Solidarity as well as in the Hungarian and Czechoslovakian dissident movements, which I also studied. What stood out was that Solidarity was a democratic movement that did not advocate gender equality. Hungarian and Czechoslovak opposition groups also did not espouse gender equality, but they were not mass-based workers movements, as was Solidarity, with intellectual advisors, many of whom espoused leftist leanings. How did the provocative contradiction within Solidarity's stated democratic principles impact the movement's life and afterlife, as well as women's lives?

I would like to reflect briefly on those impacts, taking my lead from the work of historian Joan Kelly, who wrote an essay in 1977, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in which she argued that for women what we call the Renaissance was a time of loss. As the bourgeois family came into being, women lost property privileges and became themselves private property. Her point was that if you look at what she called "Women's Time," you would have to re-periodise much if not all of history. This aspect is common to marginalised groups – African Americans in the US, Jews in Europe, like women, often do not share the same experiential ebbs and flows with the dominant groups in society. In Solidarity history, the key seminal events are routinely considered to be the August 1980 strikes and the 1989 political changeover; in these events, men take centre stage. However, Polish women's testimonies reveal that the most meaningful period for women starts with the imposition of martial law in 1981 through 1988. This is when women were able to act with more personal and political agency than before or afterward.

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Poland's Communist Party claimed to be both the workers' party and the party that liberated women. Solidarity co-opted socialist rhetoric to assert itself as the authentic workers' movement. In crucial ways, argues David Ost, Solidarity was a leftist democratic movement and an independent trade union movement. It might logically follow that Solidarity would also expose the hypocrisy in the state's claims to female emancipation by similarly strategizing to empower women as citizens and workers and ensure gender equality in all facets of public and private life.

However, Solidarity's intellectually progressive bent was undercut by traditional and religious norms that cast women as secondary wage earners, whose primary domain was the household, not the workplace, whose primary identity was *Matka Polka* (Polish Mother), not citizen. The literary scholar Izabela Morska was the first to point my gaze past socialist theory and state socialist praxis towards the patriarchal substructure of Polish society that predetermined Solidarity's gender dynamics, which, during much of the 1980s, neither men nor women challenged.

Solidarity's patriarchism was informed by Catholic-embedded, romantic constructions of the Polish nation and further shaped by the central institutional role of the Catholic church and Pope John Paul II in anti-communist opposition. Catholic symbolism became an integral part of Solidarity's iconography and ritual, from the strikes through martial law: strikers kneeling in prayer, graffiti of the Black Madonna waving a "V" for Victory sign. Solidarity also became structurally intertwined with the church, a relationship that strengthened during martial law and far beyond. Catholic notions of good and evil gave the opposition's struggle a binary typology of "us vs them", which was critical to sustaining unity, but obscured discourse on gender, ethnicity and class. According to scholars, the typology pitted "a unitarily conceived state against an equally undifferentiated society, which left little space conceptually or organisationally for a gender consciousness or voice".

Was Solidarity democratic?

In the transition from the luminous liminal bonding experienced by all in the August 1980 strikes, to union organisation and decision-making structures, Solidarity put in place policy precedents that constrained women's rights. Through a gender lens, Solidarity's leadership organising structure and policy platform were not democratic. Women comprised half of the labour force and half of Solidarity's membership, yet they were distinctly underrepresented in leadership entities: eight per cent of delegates to the National Commission were female union officials; on the National Commission's decision-making bodies, 1 of 19 members on the Conciliation Commission was female. One of 82 on the National Commission, and 3

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of 21 on the Auditing Commission. Solidarity bequeathed to women an ambiguous democratic legacy. In the Gdańsk Accords, postulate number 17 addressed the needs of working mothers, through family and maternal protection policies. Yet, it neglected the realities of working women who did not have children or who were not living for their families alone. Scholars assert that the Accords shifted the emphasis from the socialist ideal of labour participation to the patriarchal ideal of women's family role. This framing served as a precursor of what was to come after 1989, which began with assaults on reproductive rights and media campaigns pressing women to turn their jobs over to men and go back to the home.

In research on women's hidden leadership role in the Solidarity underground during martial law, I focused on a group of women editors who published the most important newsweekly of the underground, that became the voice of Solidarity. These women helped engineer what British historian Timothy Garton Ash aptly called a tele-revolution. The women acted in the shadows, so they would not get caught. Their political agency in response to martial law illustrates Women's Time. In the absence of men, who were imprisoned or in hiding, martial law empowered women to act and lead. However, their extraordinary organising remained invisible, even after there was no longer a need for secrecy. During and after Solidarity's victory in 1989, they were not duly recognised, in part due to gender discrimination, and partly due to an absence of collective reckoning.

No ritual or moral closure

As sociologists Jan Kubik and Ireneusz Krzeminski have each argued, Poland needed a national ceremonial rite of passage from communism to post-communism. Its absence has had serious consequences for public life. Instead of a cathartic reckoning, the end of the old order and the beginning of the new were marked by two traumatic events for both women and men: capitalism's undoing of labour, unions, state-owned factories and shipyards, which David Ost examines, and the parliament's legislative effort to restrict abortion. Warsaw activist Agnieszka Maciejowska told me in 1990: "It will be harder to restrain the Catholic Church than it was to overthrow Communism."

You may recall that at the time of the changeover, the international media examined whether women would lose the rights and benefits that communism had provided. The media asked: "What costs do women pay, and what costs does a society pay when gender justice is not fundamental to the building and safeguarding of democracy?" The question is still not resolved, but it is certainly on the table today!

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Between 1989 and 2016, feminism grew increasingly visible, vocal and influential within each new generation, through gender studies programs, NGOs, leftist happenings, coalition building, and the liberal Women's Congress. The crux of feminist critique has consistently targeted the separation of church and state.

Between 2016 and 2018, women demonstrated nationwide to stop the government's newest legislative restrictions on abortion, already one of the strictest abortion laws in the European Union. The new proposed law would cause a near total ban on abortion, The Black Protest, Women's Strike and Black Monday exceeded expectations: the government withdrew the legislation. "2016 will go down in history as the birth of the mass women's movement in Poland," declared Warsaw feminist scholar and activist Agnieszka Graff. The late Ann Snitow saw in this unprecedented rise of a grassroots feminism in Poland, a celebratory moment in Women's Time. She called it "the defeat of shame". Clearly, there is no evidence of shame in the recent, unabashedly feminist dissent.

There are certainly connections to be explored between the Solidarity past and the feminist present, particularly in gaining insight into Poland's future: we can observe two nationwide mass mobilisations of historic proportion; the exultant sense of communitas, of power and possibility; a passionate activism dominated by young people who have had enough; a red lightning bolt to the power structure that marks the beginning of its end. At the same time, today's women demonstrations might also represent a repudiation of Solidarity's inability to dignify women's citizenship or to prevent religion from dominating democratic governance. As the pioneering feminist historian Joan Scott wrote in the 1970s: "The point of looking to the past is to destabilise the present, to challenge patriarchal ways of thinking that legitimated themselves as natural."

One thing seems clear: Women can no longer be marginalised; they're now central to democratic activism in Poland. "The real stake is our perception of ourselves as a society … The protests will probably expire soon, PiS will do what it wants about abortion, but the cultural change will be irreversible," Graff wrote in *OKO Press* last November. It is a civilisational change, underscored Olga Tokarczuk, recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, in the *New Yorker*. "Yes, it is revolution. In a very painful and dramatic (sometimes also funny) way, the old world is melting now and a new one is crystallising." NEE

Shana Penn is the executive director of the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture. In 2013 she was awarded Poland's Commander Cross of the Order of Merit for her contribution to the development of Polish-Jewish dialogue and Polish gender studies. She is the author of *Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland*.

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The shame of Dagestan

ANNA EFIMOVA

Women's rights is probably the most controversial topic in Dagestan, Russian's North Caucasus republic. Svetlana Anokhina, a women's rights activist and journalist, who had fled the republic after receiving a death threat, now carries on with her work from far away.

In July 2020 Svetlana Anokhnina a women's rights activist and journalist based in Dagestan, received a telephone death threat as part of a wider "sorting out the feminists" campaign taking place in the republic. This was not the first threat issued to Svetlana but, unlike before, this time the caller tried to reach her by phone several times, making sure she received his message. And he took no effort to hide his own identification. Svetlana tracked the cell phone number and established the name of its owner. She passed this information to the police. After the investigation had been completed, Svetlana hoped that justice would be fast. Yet, soon after the detective set a meeting with the caller, the local police abruptly stopped providing updates on her case.

Svetlana spent a month in suspense. However, once the situation started to get tenser, without any help from the authorities, she decided to flee Russia, at least for some time. She later learnt that the police refused to initiate any proceedings against the perpetrator, as they did not see any grounds for it. No official statement explaining the refusal was ever sent to her. Indicatively her perpetrator bragged about his family connections with the head of the local police. Svetlana believes it could have been the reason for her case not being investigated.

Having spent six months abroad, she is still upset that her large personal and professional connections proved useless in pushing this investigation further. "Do not get me started on the thousands of women who suffer from domestic violence and abuse and cannot count on the police for help," she said to me.

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Feminists

Anokhnina was born in Dagestan and spent most of her life in Makhachkala, its capital city. She is the editor in chief of *Daptar*, the only online media outlet in the North Caucasus that focuses on women and women's rights. In 2020, along with other female activists, she founded Marem, a group which offers legal and psychological assistance to women in difficult life situations.

It is no surprise that her offender wanted to "sort out the situation with the feminists". In the interpretation of traditional and conservative representatives of the local community, the word "feminism" does not resemble its western meaning: "In Dagestan, feminists are seen as ugly and unappealing women. They are said to be either lesbians or neglected by men. This makes them incredibly jealous of others. Consequently, they want to mess up the good life of men and deprive them of their natural rights," she explains.

Women's rights is one of the most controversial topics in Dagestan, which makes every activist prone to threats and violence.

Women's rights is one of the most controversial topics in Dagestan, which makes every activist and journalist working on it prone to threats and even violence. Her opponents are unhappy about two things. First, they believe that women do not want their rights to be protected claiming that in Dagestan they are perfectly respected by their families and traditions. Second, even in cases of family conflict and disputes, mediation by external organisations is regarded as unacceptable. It is said to be meddling in people's private lives and is presented as a norm that is not accepted in Dagestan. These arguments are also used in more extreme situations such as domestic violence, abuse, and even killing.

Together with other activists Anokhnina fights for women to have control of their own bodies, and to receive adequate social assistance if necessary. "Is it still somebody else's family if the whole street can hear a wife screaming and her child crying as the husband beats them up? In my opinion, that is a crime taking place there", she exclaims. For such views, which Anokhnina expresses openly, her opponents labelled her "the shame of Dagestan".

Silent despair

According to the OSCE data, Russia in 2019 was in the lowest position on the women's rights protection index recorded for the G20 countries. There are no official state statistics on cases of domestic violence and domestic sex-based abuse.

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However, Human Rights Watch activists estimate that around 65 per cent of victims in household conflicts, recorded in 2016 and 2017, were women; while in 2012, one in five women in Russia experienced domestic abuse from a partner or spouse.

In 2017 President Vladimir Putin signed a law decriminalising domestic violence that made many women lose hope. Based on this new law, only the second case, or subsequent cases, of family domestic violence are considered a crime. In most of the cases, punishment for battery is just a fine – and even this is a best-case scenario as the Russian police reluctantly pursue cases of domestic violence. In December 2020, the Russian parliament approved a law introducing up to a five-year jail term for making slanderous comments on the media or internet. They include accusations of rape and domestic abuse. The makes the discussion or reporting of such cases to be more difficult for victims, journalists and activists. Another issue, common throughout the country, is the tendency to cover up domestic abuse by patriarchal and traditional values. However, unlike the rest of Russia, where women can normally rely on the support of relatives and friends, the situation in the Muslim republics is more complex.

"In Dagestan, you cannot run out of the house because this will dishonour your family and cause even more abuse and threats. Discussing domestic abuse in public or even within one's family is not the way here. Most parents will not accept their daughter who escaped from her abusive husband. They will send her back, promising that her partner will change. But once she is home, everything repeats itself or causes even stronger persecution," Anokhnina explains.

She shares stories about those who managed to escape and those who faced further violence. All of them are shockingly similar because of the amount of violence that goes unpunished and the helplessness of women who has had no recourse. The only people who are there for them are women's rights activists, who treat the women in a supportive way.

Marem

In 2019 the European Court for Human Rights, for the first time in its history, examined a case of domestic abuse that led to a murder of a victim, which originated in Russia. It was the case of Marem Alieva from Ingushetia, a republic in Russian North Caucasus. She disappeared in 2015 under life threatening circumstances. She suffered from physical and psychological abuse from her husband when local human rights activists helped her leave him. However, after she had been told that her husband swore on the Quran that he would not touch her, she returned to him.

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After she came home, one day Marem saw a group of men gathering in her yard. She informed her sister about it. But by the time her sister got over to her, the only things she could find were a hair dryer, some pieces of bloodstained hair, and a rope. There was no sign of Marem. She was never found.

The women rights group which Anokhnina created in the summer of 2020 bears Marem's name. The organisation aims to help women from Dagestan and other North Caucasus republics who face the threat of domestic violence or death. Marem helps them organise an evacuation, find temporary accommodation or to pay for taxis.

Marem volunteers receive dozens of daily calls. Women reach out when they are in a difficult situation and are searching for help with legal and psychological matters. Many women do not ask for help, but look for a person who would listen to them in a supportive way. Anokhnina stresses that Marem volunteers never convince anybody to leave or stay home – the final decision is up to the women themselves: "We only provide assistance but the choice is theirs. Metaphorically speaking, if they jump, we will help them not fall," the activist says.

Even women who ask Marem activists to organise an escape for them almost always hesitate and are confused by their decision. One of the girls who reached out to Anokhnina was punched in her face by her father. The reason for the abuse was her complaint that her husband had been beating her. Her mother forbade her to divorce, claiming it would dishonour the family. One of her aunts had her teeth knocked out by her husband, but did not separate from him. "Many girls have changed their decision to leave home because of such examples in their families," Anokhnina explains.

Marem's work resembles the activities of an NGO, but it is a fully volunteer-based initiative. There are around a dozen activists involved – including those answering phone calls, lawyers, and psychologists. The group has no office, while communication with women in need is managed in the simplest possible way – through direct messages on the group's Instagram page or on WhatsApp.

The activists stopped counting the number of women they have helped once they reached several hundreds. There was only one day when the group did not receive any phone calls for help. It was July 6th 2020. "What a happy day it was – no one was beaten or persecuted; no one had to escape from their home in a rush or fear being killed," Anokhnina says.

When financial assistance is needed, the organisation counts on money transfers made by its supporters, donations and, in most cases, their own personal savings. One of the group's founders, a Dagestani Instagram blogger named Mariam Alieva, used to direct the earnings she made on advertising through her blog to Marem. In December 2020 this source of income was jeopardised, however. Alieva's

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blog was blocked after she posted about a man who was supposedly sexually abusing underaged girls for years. Anokhnina believes the real reason of her blocking could be Alieva's human rights activities. There are many people frustrated over the fact that this kind of activism is conducted by a Muslim and from the Caucasus.

Underestimated ban

The most horrid example of oppression and control present in Dagestan is female genital mutilation. Also known as female cutting, this practice was banned by the United Nations which recognised it as health-damaging and violating women's rights. However, this practice is still carried out on young Muslim girls living in the highlands and resettlement areas of Dagestan.

According to the 2018 survey of the Russian NGO, Legal Initiative, more than 1,000 girls in the republic undergo this procedure each year. There is evidence that the minorities who resettled from Dagestan to Georgia also practice it. In the view of its proponents, this procedure is good for a woman's moral health. As a result of cutting, a woman's sexual desires decrease which is a "guarantee" she will be a faithful, obedient wife.

Overall, the decision to perform the procedure is made by women. It is usually performed on girls between the age of 5 and 12. While for many this practice is inevitable due to its religious meaning and ritualistic character, there are some Muslims who regard it as voluntary. Human rights activists distinguish five types of mutilation, starting with the puncturing of the clitoris to a complete disposal of its tip. In August 2020 the muftiat of Dagestan made the unprecedented decision to ban the practice of completely removing the clitoris.

The activists stopped counting the number of women they have helped once they reached several hundreds.

This decision was preceded by a four-year public outcry by journalists and human rights activists. In August 2016, Anokhina published the first ever article in Russia on the issue of female cutting in Dagestan. She was assisted by two colleagues, one of whom managed to collect real-life stories of women who underwent the practice but preferred to stay anonymous. Two weeks later, Legal Initiative coincidently issued the first report of the problem in Russia. For many in Dagestan it looked like an attack on their religious and cultural values, and the publication immediately drew public attention.

Unfortunately, the 2020 decision of the muftiat went largely unnoticed. "People in Russia thought this regulation does not make sense if it does not completely ban

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female cutting. But there is such a huge difference. It is like a difference between being decapitated or just getting an incision on your neck," explains Anokhina. While temporarily in exile, she runs Marem from her new remote location. From here she also works as editor-in-chief for *Daptar*, which is the only online media reporting on the situation of women in the North Caucasus. This publication has certainly troubled Anokhina's enemies. This is not surprising as it covers topics like female genital cutting, selective abortions, early marriages, honour murders, and an education ban for women.

Daptar also educates its readers by publishing pieces on Islamic feminism, empowering stories about Caucasus women, and folk culture. However, these articles often go unnoticed, mainly because of the criticism that women rights issues receive in the region. *Daptar* does not receive any funding and its writers and contributors submit materials for free.

Anokhina believes that if she returns home, the threats against her will continue. "These are the circumstances in which we live. My friends in Moscow attend picket lines knowing that the police can pick them up and put them in jail or at least impose a large fine on them. They carry on because they know that the work needs to be done." NEE

Anna Efimova is a Russian journalist and an editorial intern with *New Eastern Europe*. She is currently finishing her master degree in Central and Eastern European, Russian and Eurasian Studies from the University of Glasgow.

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Why do they stay?

KEVIN LE MERLE

What motivates state security officers to remain in the service of a tyrant, and end up in a situation where the people they beat, torture and kill, their fellow countrymen? The story of Andrei Ostapovich provides some insight to this key question in understanding the overlapping borders of morality and immorality, democracy and authoritarianism.

If you listen to some philosophers, they would have you believe that borders can be everything and anything. There is talk of geopolitical borders, the thin line between good and evil, the border between the conscious and unconscious mind, or between inside and outside. With this thinking come the concepts of liminality and thresholds: the idea of an in-between that cannot be fully fathomed. The concept of borders is polymorphous. It takes any number of convenient shapes in public discourse to accommodate the whims of different speakers. Sometimes these borders overlap. And it is by looking at this overlap that thinkers can pierce through to the hearts of people.

The Polish-Belarusian border carries the full symbolic weight of overlapping borders in the public's eye. Western Europeans are prone to view it as a border between democracy and authoritarianism, often overlooking the anti-democratic movements eating away at their own institutions from within. Belarus becomes stuck in a process of mystification and ostracisation; an "us" and "them" dichotomy. Fear of political upheavals drives foreign audiences to say that what happens there would not happen here.

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Overlapping borders

This is, of course, erroneous to say the least. This imagined border between democracy and authoritarianism manifests itself even more strongly due to the hard geopolitical border set in place by Alyaksandr Lukashenka in an attempt to reduce potential foreign interventions. The forest rangers of the Białowieża National Park (which is near the border with Belarus) point and say "we are four kilometres away from the border". They then point again and say "the border is two kilometres away". That proximity carries a certain power, and the impending approach creates a crescendo of tension. And for good reason. To the foreign traveller Belarus has become stained with blood. Tales of detention, torture and violent repression have made it out of the country. One such story is that of Andrei Ostapovich, who hid in the Polish woods similar to those at the Białowieża National Park.

As reported by the *Moscow Times*, after beholding the lawlessness of the Belarusian police from the inside, Ostapovich decided to resign from his position as a security service official. He fled to Russia then to be apprehended by seven men from the Russian Federal Security Service. After being blindfolded and handcuffed to a 30-kilogram kettlebell, he was dropped off at the Belarusian border where the Belarusian authorities nearly captured him. Ostapovich survived for five days in the Polish borderland forest with nothing but a bag of Snickers chocolate bars. He spent the first days evading police, who were searching the woods with flashlights. After a close encounter with a wild boar and walking 70 km daily, he was able to tell his story.

It is extremely rare for state officials to dissent, as such the integrity Ostapovich displayed in refusing to continue to mistreat fellow citizens is nothing short of heroic. However, this story of overlapping borders also unearths age-old questions about human nature. That one man did the right thing raises the question: What motivates state security officers to remain in the service of a tyrant, and end up where they beat, torture and kill family members? Ostapovich had an answer to this in understanding the overlapping borders between morality and immorality, democracy and authoritarianism. Ironically, after he fled to the West, he addressed this question during a panel in the Sybir Museum in Białystok, a place of memory concerned with retelling the lives of those deported to the East. He spoke of this seminal topic, evocative of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. It was with powerful empathy that he revealed the mechanisms by which people continue to serve an immoral system.

> The security service in Belarus regularly recruits young, uneducated people from the countryside in order to brainwash them.

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According to Ostapovich, the security service regularly recruits young, uneducated people from the countryside in order to brainwash them. The riot police are especially made up of recruits originally from rural areas which facilitates the use of force against mostly urban dissenters. The way in which recruits are trained leads to a security service convinced of the righteousness of their immoral and violent actions. They view their actions as necessary to keep the peace, and view more urban and educated populations as "the other". They are legitimised by an entire system whose ideology they have incorporated. They are the embodiment of state violence.

Although the pay might not be high enough to warrant staying with the security service, the economic repercussions of leaving certainly provide a negative incentive. If a recruit decides to leave, they relinquish their right to a retirement pension. More importantly, they risk being blacklisted and would therefore struggle to find further employment. This reinforces the ideology that they have internalised: the cost of thinking differently is too high when their livelihood is at stake.

Shared issues

Before these dystopian depictions become assimilated to the East, as opposed to the West, it would do good to remind ourselves that the recruiting processes of police forces operate along similar lines in some other democracies. Although poorly documented, in France, the divide between the rural and urban centres drove the recruiting process of the riot police in the 1950s and 1960s. When interviewed, a jubilant former French riot police chief, recruited from the Breton countryside, best depicted this unfortunate reality by criticising city-dwellers as "unwashed scum". What is more, the vast majority of his colleagues were recruited in the poorest or most remote areas of the Breton countryside.

Whistle-blowers like Andrei Ostapovich play a fundamental role in showing their counterparts and colleagues a way forward.

Whistle-blowers like Andrei Ostapovich play a fundamental role in not only revealing the vicissitudes of corrupt systems, but in showing their counterparts and colleagues a way forward. It is often only by pointing out the unacceptable flaws of institutions and placing individual ethics above "due process", that we can hope to avoid becoming part of immoral bureaucratic structures.

This comparison between French and Belarusian security systems brings to mind the permeability of some borders, and the fact that fundamental questions

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have the potential to highlight issues that humanity shares. What is happening on the other side of that "hard" border matters just as much as what is happening at home. And it is only by taking a closer look at these shared issues, which somehow transcend borders of all kinds, that we can hope to find collective solutions.

This essay received the top prize in the recent writing competition titled "Dispatches from the Borderlands" organised for students of the College of Europe in Natolin (Poland).

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A prayer for peace in Belarus

IRIS KEMPE

On December 13th 2020 an ecumenical service was held in Berlin Cathedral to pay tribute to the protesters in Belarus. It was followed by a political debate, which focused on a new European Eastern policy, a new *Ostpolitik*. Through the organisation of these two events, the churches showed, once again, their eagerness to engage in building bridges for the way to peace and democracy.

Since the elections in Belarus on August 9th 2020, both the image of this country once portrayed as "the most severe dictatorship in Europe" and its people have significantly changed. International audiences can now see that every weekend – sometimes even on weekdays – large crowds come to the streets of Belarusian cities to express their discontent with the forged election results. The people have been demanding freedom and fair elections, thereby showing their attachment to common European values. Citizens in Belarus have finally awakened and are working towards change.

This awakening has implications for Europe's eastern policy, or as we say in German its *Ostpolitik*. In its modern sense, Ostpolitik was first formulated at the Protestant Academy in Tutzing (Germany) during a meeting, which on July 5th 1963, was organised upon the initiative of Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr. Their policy recognised the realities of Europe's eastern half and proposed ways towards their improvement. The seeds planted by Brandt and Bahr back then later bloomed during the peaceful changes which started in the region in 1989. They continue to bear fruit whenever the people of Central and Eastern Europe assert their freedom to choose their own governments and their countries' alliances.

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Following many different paths of national reform in the 1990s and early 2000s, the societies in eastern parts of Europe made their governments more responsible to the people. In nearly every case, this was accompanied by a desire to join the institutions that had brought peace and prosperity to Europe's western parts. From 2004–2013, 13 states from Central and Eastern Europe joined the European Union, and practically every eastern neighbour was engaged in a process of deepening relations with the EU.

Desire to live in a common European house

All these changes have been built on the foundation of the desires of people across Europe to live in a common house, one that is whole and free. Since August 2020 the same desires are being expressed with great courage by the people who are protesting on the streets of Minsk and other towns and cities in Belarus. To pay respect to their struggle, on December 13th 2020, the Berlin Cathedral hosted an ecumenical service. This religious gathering allowed people living outside of Belarus to safely gather and express solidarity with the protesters, and to hear from political leaders and sympathizers on what can be done to bring about change.

Within Belarus, the population has shown that they can draw from the talent and creativity of its Nobel Prize winner in literature, Svetlana Alexievich, as well as the burgeoning IT industry. At the same time, it is clear that the people are living in economic hardship and fear, which has been more felt amid the mismanaged pandemic. People still remember the infamous words of Alyaksandr Lukashenka when he suggested, as absurd as it was, that the best remedy for COVID-19 was to drink vodka, go to the sauna and drive a tractor. The fear also increased after the government started introducing violent measures to stop demonstrations. Beatings and arrests became common and systematically applied against the protestors for months now.

The spirit of protesters

The experience of 1989 and the period of democratisation that followed, teaches us that regime changes in Eastern Europe took place thanks to the work of organisations and individual actors. However, contrary to East Germany or Poland, civil society in Belarus lacked influential church congregations, trade unions or youth organisations to provide it with a path to democracy. It is the ordinary people of Belarus who are persisting in resistance.

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Filled with fear and anxiety, these people have been venturing out, week by week, paving their country on the road to democracy. They have been marching, demonstrating, and sharing leaflets on the streets and squares still named after old Soviet heroes and victories. Meanwhile, Lukashenka's autocratic regime remains in its palaces. Those in power do not communicate with the people.

The 26 years of Lukashenka's time in office have been a long time. The damage it has made is deep and has long-term consequences. It also explains why neither the churches nor independent trade unions have been able to become bearers of change. Consequently, for too long Belarus operated as if they still lived in the old Soviet world. The language the majority of the population speaks is Russian, which is also the official language of the state. Because of that, the Belarusian language was not allowed to develop as it naturally would. However, this phenomenon is also rooted in the Soviet period. During that time, when the libraries of other former Soviet republics always had a copy of *Bolshaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya* (*Great Soviet Encyclopedia*) in their national language, Belarus only had Russian editions. With factors like that playing a role, the national identity of the Belarusian people remained underdeveloped, and it holds true even a quarter of a century after the fall of the USSR.

The spirit of protest, which is ongoing since election day in August 2020, has its reflection in the national flags. The protesters have been using the white-red-white flag, which comes from Belarusian independence in 1918 and the first years of its post-Soviet statehood. Also, given the nature of the protests, which are mainly led by women and creative artists, it is not surprising that once there was a shortage of the fabric to make flags for demonstrations, people started improvising and made ones out of clothing they had at home. They made sure that the colours of independent Belarus were widely present in the public space.

In a similar way, once the regime banned the white-red-white flag, seeing it as a symbol of historical Belarusian statehood and now the democratic protest, people started hanging clothes in white-red-white patterns on their balconies, while students were wearing clothes and pins in such colours at schools and universities. These gestures of protest show how the symbols of democratic statehood can arise from popular actions, and how civil society has been strengthening its position in recent months.

A contested election and its aftermath

The independent female trio in last year's Belarusian presidential election – Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, as the candidate running, supported by Maria Kalesnikava

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and Veranika Tsapkala – gave hope to the Belarusian people. Belarusians, in turn, supported the democratic candidate. Lukashenka, meanwhile, did not see any threat coming from these women, after the initial arrest of the male opposition candidates allowed them to run in the elections. He underestimated their power, which was most evident during a public debate he had with Tsikhanouskaya. He then said she should concentrate on frying cutlets and feeding children.

As expected, the regime did not allow independent election observers to do their job. Instead, the results were established based on official government-issued data. It stated that 80.2 per cent of the vote went to Lukashenka. Based on the same count, Tsikhanouskaya received 9.9 per cent, while other democratic candidates, together, got around 10 per cent. The forged results could not be recognised by citizens or the international community. Thus, the people of Belarus and most of the international community reacted accordingly. Lukashenka celebrated the election victory he claimed, but popular protests began soon afterwards. They rapidly grew to more than 100,00 citizens in Minsk, as well as insubstantial numbers in regional centres such as Grodna, Brest, Pinsk and dozens of other small towns. There were strikes in key businesses and dismissals in state and cultural institutions.

The next steps

The problem for the democratic opposition, from the very beginning, was that it lacked concepts and strategies to shape democratic development. To improve the situation, the Coordinating Council was established. Its members include Svetlana Alexievich, who holds a leadership position. The members of the council, just like the protesters, came under increasing pressure in late summer and autumn. It included arrests and some other violent measures. Thus, for some, the only way out was to flee the country and relocate to Lithuania and Poland. Unfortunately, with this flee Belarus is now losing important actors who could steer its path towards democracy.

Dialogue with representatives of a renewed and expanded civil society in Belarus is much more important than sanctions.

International players such as the EU and its member states have reacted with sanctions. In practice, the sanctions mean that the regime's decision-makers are not recognised in their position. Visits by members of the regime to the European Union and its member states are no longer possible because of the sanctions. This approach, however, is reaching the limits of effectiveness. Because of the special interests in co-operation with Russia, there have been delays on behalf of Germany, France, Italy and Cyprus to impose

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sanctions against the regime. Therefore, it seems that dialogue with representatives of a renewed and expanded civil society is much more important than sanctions.

For the Protestant Church in Germany, this brings back the memory of the peace prayers that were held in 1989. However, these experiences cannot be simply transferred to Belarus today. Nevertheless, the spirit of dialogue and co-operation in and with Belarus should continue, anchoring democracy and peace in the long term.

In a recorded message, played following the service in Berlin's Cathedral, former president of Poland and Nobel Peace laureate, Lech Wałęsa, said the following words about his experience on the path to democracy and Europe: "I have great admiration for the women of Belarus. I am watching your struggle very closely. We had the will to fight. We were numerous. You need people who can negotiate. I will ask that the Nobel Peace Prize be awarded to the women of Belarus." The church was filled with applause.

Beyond the cathedral walls

As I am writing this, the weather is getting colder, but the protests have not stopped, despite increasing pressure from the regime. However, it is getting more and more difficult for people to gather around with white-red-white flags and keep the movement going. Nevertheless, Belarusians are showing that they do not want to abandon their road to freedom and self-determination.

Throughout winter, Belarusians have shown that they do not want to abandon their road to freedom and self-determination.

In this plight, they need Western support. With this goal in mind, the service that was organised in Berlin Cathedral on December 13th 2020 was followed by a political debate. It focused on a new European Eastern policy, a new *Ostpolitik*. Through the organisation of these two events, the churches wanted to once again engage in building bridges as the way to bring about peace and democracy.

An active role of bridge building has been taken by civil society of Lithuania. The most illustrative gesture of solidarity it showed was the human chain it organised on August 23rd 2020. In this way, the people and the government of Lithuania continued the tradition of the Baltic Way. Namely, the human chain that 1.2 million Lithuanians, Estonians and Lithuanians, still under Soviet rule, formed in 1989 to mark the 50th anniversary of the Hitler-Stalin Pact.

The event at the Berlin Cathedral brought together actors from churches and organisations in their role as architects of bridge building. In 1989, supported by

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the weekly Monday prayers, Christians in East Germany sparked a large movement that succeeded in overcoming walls and borders. With prayer and peace, European unity was extended. In the same year, the citizens of the three Baltic republics were awakened by church bells to follow a path toward a common Europe. The service in Berlin mixed external and internal support, ideals and practice, veterans, and newcomers. More than almost any other actor, the women of Belarus are currently showing us lessons in social protest. Although they lack social role models and strategic goals, for months they have been following a path that will lead to a peaceful and democratic future.

In this century, *Ostpolitik* has been characterised by different social paths to peace and co-operation. The elephant in the room, namely Russia, could also be an important partner in this process. However, its political elite favours dominance and, in its interest, restricts social dialogue and tries to assert control over democratic developments in neighbouring states. One goal of a European *Ostpolitik* should therefore be to get Russia to start respecting international norms. The churches could continue to develop as contributors to the European *Ostpolitik*. To this end, the event in Berlin was the basis for building bridges based on dialogue between democracy and peace in Europe as a whole. With the ecumenical project "Reconciliation in Eastern Europe", there is a promising structure that can create a network of partners from civil society and politics.

The worship service and the debate that followed should be seen as pieces of a democratic bridge. One that is based on European values, the rule of law, and resistance to international threats. In this spirit, Petra Bosse-Huber, Bishop and Vice President of the Church Office, underlined that the churches should continue their support to the people of Belarus. A positive change that can come from this engagement can be dialogue and co-operation, which will hopefully go beyond the cathedral's walls. On the building site of conflict and concern, the churches collectively are an important buttress.

It is crucial to fill the questions of remembrance and reconciliation with answers. These can be only European and ecumenical. The event in the Berlin Cathedral, once again, presented the spirit of dialogue for the new *Ostpolitik*.

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Critically uncritical

Reforming education in Central and Eastern Europe

DARYA PODGORETSKAYA AND ANNA THEODOULIDES

The communist legacy has left a crucial critical thinking gap in the educational curricula throughout the region. Yet, skills are of utmost importance in today's globalised world. A pioneering critical thinking course at Matej Bel University in Slovakia aims to change this trend.

Anyone who has done due diligence research into higher education options is painfully familiar with university ranking tables. Based on several criteria, including teaching, research, citations, international outlook and graduate employability, these tables are a popular education quality measurement amongst prospective students and employers alike. Yet, scrolling through these listings, such as the *Times Higher Education Ranking*, no institution from Central and Eastern European is found in the top 400. Most CEE universities are positioned somewhere between the 1000 and 2000.

Clearly, higher education in the region has a not-so-subtle competitiveness issue. Why is this? The first reason could be poor funding. Yet, university funding and fees structures are comparable within the EU despite large discrepancies of education quality. While many CEE institutions, including those in Slovakia, experienced funding cuts after the 2008 recession, so did the rest of European universities. One could also argue that the leading, most prestigious institutions are older and more established than those in Eastern Europe and hence, have a better reputation. However, this assumption is incorrect. The top-rated Charles Univer-

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sity in Prague, for example, was established in 1348. The Jagiellonian University in Poland dates back to 1364, while Slovakia's Comenius University was founded in 1919, the same year as UCLA. So, if this is not about money or heritage, then what are CEE universities missing? And more importantly, how can it be fixed? According to one new innovative project launched at Bel Matej University, the answer is critical thinking.

Four key skills

Critical thinking has become somewhat of a catchphrase in the field of education. It has infiltrated many spheres of life. It can be found in work, school, or everyday conversations about politics. Nevertheless, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what this broad and rich skill is. On the one hand, it demands accurate and unbiased analysis of information while, on the other, it involves gathering accurate and diverse observations about the world. It becomes even more complicated if you consider all the sub-skills it encompasses, ranging from communications to creativity.

Thus, in developing a new project at Bel Matej University focused on critical thinking, we drafted a framework which identifies four key target skills for critical thinking. The first skill – analysis – describes the essential element of interpreting information, evaluating its validity and understanding information manipulation. Second is dialogue, which enables students to have open conversations and hear other points of view. The third category is understanding self-biases, which describes the skill of critically evaluating one's own views for hidden prejudices. Finally, praxis describes the willingness to take action to improve the world around us and participate in civil society building. In our definition, critical thinking combines all four of these elements to enable us to make better decisions.

Critical thinking has become somewhat of a catchphrase in the field of education, infiltrating many spheres of life.

As these skills demonstrate, critical thinking is crucial far beyond academia and the corporate sector. Even if we ignore multiple individual-level benefits of this skill in our daily lives, there is still much to discuss. For instance, from a sociological point of view, critical thinking helps us adapt to the ever-changing modern world. Recent research focuses on the importance of critical thinking for functioning in today's world, which is characterised by sociologist Anthony Giddens' call "a society in flux". The traditional societal values and the dominant narratives, which many of us might have been born and raised into, are disappearing as the world is becoming more diverse than ever.

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Abilities like deconstructing arguments, re-thinking concepts and approaches are of the utmost importance in navigating everyday life, avoiding misinformation and interacting with other cultures.

On a more practical level, however, critical thinkers are the ultimate defence against political ills. Critical citizens foster democratic development through monitoring government measures, rejecting manipulation and xenophobic narratives, challenging any unjust actions and engaging in healthy dialogue, something that is needed now more than ever. Democratic backsliding, for example, is very much a concern within the region as countries experience erosion of institutions, suppression of civil society, political polarisation and susceptibility to misinformation. Critical citizens are less prone to populism and political manipulation that often brings and keeps autocrats in power. They have a deeper understanding of democratic principles, are willing to question authorities and are more active in the lives of their communities. Without critical citizens many countries risk a similar fate to what is unfolding in Hungary and Poland, especially in the aftermath of the economic downturn as a result of COVID-19. Critical thinking may as well be one of the most crucial aspects of global and democratic citizenship. Yet, the vast majority of schools and universities in the region fail to recognise this simple fact.

Critical citizens are less prone to populism and political manipulation that often brings and keeps autocrats in power.

Soviet legacy

The problem of education in Central and Eastern Europe has deep historical roots that date back to Soviet times. While it is, of course, important to avoid any sweeping generalisations when assessing the Soviet legacy, it is impossible to dismiss path dependency responsible for issues with the current curricula. Yet, the case of Soviet education is rather puzzling. On the one hand, the system formulated through the maths and sciences curriculum trained leading scientists and engineers and almost eradicated illiteracy. On the other hand, it severely undermined free-thinking humanities, limited academic freedom, promoted propaganda and ultimately failed to develop critical thinking and analysis amongst pupils.

The philosophy behind Soviet education pushed for functionality, uniformity and the memorisation of information at the expense of individualism, self-expression and critical thinking. To this day, post-communist Eastern Europe leads in literacy, maths and sciences in various international student assessments. Yet, the

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region underperforms in reading comprehension, defined as reading and critically-engaging with material.

Slovakia is one of the countries where this legacy is especially noticeable. The communist philosophy of memorisation over critical thinking shaped how teaching is done in the country. From primary school to university, students come to class to take notes and listen to the teacher. Assessments are aimed to test how well students memorised and understood the material rather than encouraging them to interact with it and apply to the real world.

This approach is not much different at higher education level. While materials are more complex there, classes still follow the same listen-memorize-reiterate pattern. The effects of this are found in student satisfaction rates. One 2014 survey, for example, notes that the most frequent complaints about Slovak higher education were the lack of space for discussion, a non-engaging and overly theoretic curriculum, and "superior-subordinate" relationship between lecturers and students. More recently, Comenius University's questionnaire returned some worrying results indicating that nearly 41 per cent of current students would transfer to a university abroad if given the chance. The main complaint was the emphasis on pointless theory over practical applications and critical skills. Perhaps the memorisation approach worked well back in the pre-Google days when knowledge directly impacted one's productivity. Yet, the human-encyclopaedia ideal of the post-Soviet education system can now hardly compete with Wikipedia. The obsolete system fails to prepare students for the constantly changing contemporary world.

While Eastern European students train to compete with encyclopaedias, many western schools have adopted a different approach. Since the 1970s, a new approach to education, critical pedagogy, became a powerful force in shaping school and university curricula. In a nutshell, the technique aims to develop efficient ways of teaching critical thinking to students. Pioneered by Paulo Freire, a Brazilian philosopher and educator, in 1968, critical pedagogy aims to promote deep reflection on modern society. It encourages students to interact with teaching materials, question them and apply their knowledge to the betterment of the real world. In recent years, critical pedagogy developed to include more methods and aims. Alongside the traditional focus on power and structure, the discipline now aims to teach students to identify misinformation and propaganda, bolster dialogue skills and encourage them to become active members of their communities.

In one sense, educators in Central and Eastern Europe are lucky to have a massive body of literature already developed on critical pedagogy to build upon. Ultimately, filling the gap between post-Soviet and western education systems is by no means an impossible task. Catching up will require structural curriculum changes on the part of CEE policymakers, experience shows that a little effort can go a long way.

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Promising beginnings

One critical pedagogy pioneer institution in Slovakia is the Matej Bel University, which recently launched a critical thinking course for a cohort of MA students. As a part of their project titled "Developing critical thinking in higher education through a coaching approach", we designed and tested a pilot project for critical thinking and critical citizenship for one class of university students. The pilot aimed to foster critical thinking as defined by the four-part model outlined above. The overarching goal was, however, to address the wider socio-political implications of critical thinking and educate critical citizens. Going back to the model of critical thinking, the course focused on the skills of analysis, dialogue, self-evaluation and praxis. Ranging from analysing two polarising articles on migration and debating policy proposals, to testing for benevolent sexism and self-analysing biases, the teaching methods were creative and engaging. For other classes, the goal was to initiate discussion so that the students would have to debate each other. Throughout the course, we worked with both written and spoken texts to address two channels of opinion-forming: the ever more prevalent internet and social circles like family and friends.

We could not, however, simply adopt the critical pedagogy models without making adjustments to the Slovak context. We wanted to break with the outdated trend to force the East to imitate the West as much as we wanted to break away from Soviet-style education. The chosen topics for the course, for example, mirrored contested societal issues in Central and Eastern Europe. We relied on sociological studies of societies in the region and current political developments, which frame the dominant narratives on culturally-contested issues as well as statistical data from polls like the European Social Survey (ESS).

The testing during the first class on migration uncovered positive internalised biases towards migrants. The students, however, failed to provide arguments for their opinions. They were also reluctant to alter their attitudes after reading opposing views. This suggests that their opinions widely stemmed from social circles and personal milieu, not from reflection and structural analysis. We focused on argument analysis in later classes. We also attempted to deconstruct claims, conclusions and identify the origins of stigmas and biases.

Our students were later challenged to reflect on their arguments and encouraged to challenge each other's claims. They were more comfortable doing this as classes progressed. For instance, one of our students – who self-identified as somewhat conservative – reflected on his perception of trans-gendered people through the dominant societal narrative. Even though he was not open to having his beliefs fully challenged, they were able to trace back their origins and identify the root of

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the problem. We consider this a significant leap in the student's critical thinking abilities and a move closer towards becoming a critical citizen.

Progress starts somewhere

The pilot study has shown considerable progress in our students' ability to reflect on their worldview, as well as their ability to challenge and deconstruct opposing views. We were surprised by the significant transformation and development they made and were encouraged to see a constructive, reflective discussion forming. The course also received overly positive feedback. Our students felt challenged and heard. Yet, we were also surprised to hear, quite explicitly, that some of our students did not feel ready to change their opinions despite recognising societal and family biases. This taught us a lesson as well. As educators, we should not instil one opinion among our students. Quite the contrary. As our students demonstrated a willingness to reflect on their worldviews, educators ought to provide guidance and space for such reflections.

Seeing the progress of our framework, we are staying true to our belief that critical citizenship can contribute to positive social changes in Eastern Europe. We aspire to expand this initiative to other countries in the region. If we were able to see this progress in only two months, imagine what can be accomplished within an academic year. Critical thinking is an essential part of modern education whether CEE policy-makers agree or not. Through educating the next generation of active, open, analytical, self-aware citizens, we can insure ourselves against multiple political and social risks.

Critical thinking courses are certainly only a small step towards reforming the entire Slovak system. Yet, it is a good place to start. Let it thus serve as an inspiration to educators and policy-makers. After all, with more initiatives like this, the region may soon get to take part in the exciting business of university ranking snobbery. NEE

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EASTERN CAFÉ

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An exemplary 20th century Eastern European life

GABRIEL PALETZ

One Hundred Miracles: A Memoir of Music and Survival. By: Zuzana Růžičková with Wendy Holden. Publisher: Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2019.

One Hundred Miracles: the title is factual and accurate. In just over two pages of her memoirs, the great Czech musician Zuzana Růžičková describes three. In the selection for death or work at the woman's camp in Auschwitz, her mother is told to go left for the gas chambers and Růžičková to the right, to work in Germany. With the courage of the desperate, she confronts the drunken *Obersturmführer* and gets him to shrug and save both her mother and herself. This initial miracle seemed to be for nothing, however, after the infamous Dr Josef Mengele visits the woman's camp to decree that he makes the selections. Again, Růžičková stands in line awaiting life or death. But before Mengele can decide her fate, a downpour and thunderstorm scatter the SS guards and allow Růžičková and her fellow prisoners to hide. However, even this second miracle does not prevent her small, frail mother from getting in line and being selected another time. Růžičková finds her mother, certain the gas chamber will again separate them. But in the third miracle, her mother grins as she says she was chosen to work: "For some reason I have never been able to fathom, Dr Mengele sent her to the right." The whims of a drunken Nazi, a sudden thunderstorm and an inexplicable decision to spare her adored mother: the miracles accumulated in the life of Zuzana Růžičková as a teenager, who sur-

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vived the concentration camps of the Second World War and who persevered as a pianist and harpsichordist in communist Czechoslovakia, to become the first musician to record all of the keyboard works of Johann Sebastian Bach.

A modern lesson

Růžičková built exemplary achievements in her life despite suffering the worst that Eastern Europe had to offer in the 20th century. As a middle-class Jewish woman, she survived physical and moral extermination by fascism in Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia, and the professional and spiritual privations of communism behind the Iron Curtain. What she accomplished against the tide of 20th-century Eastern European history brings clarity as well as inspiration for maintaining values in our own challenging times. Reading Růžičková's book in a Europe afflicted by the coronavirus illuminates the details of her narrative. Like the pandemic, the details of Růžičková's life in the concentration camps seem incredible. She writes of the camps that, "When there is nobody left who lived through this and can be asked about the details, it will be easy to believe that it was not possible. Because it's unbelievable, it sounds impossible. And yet, it happened…"

Disbelief is a modern lesson, as healthy people cannot imagine how easily they could end up in the hospital with the coronavirus through simple social acts we take for granted and to which we feel entitled. We can also project our current situation back to Růžičková's time: imagine the spread of epidemics behind the façade of the "model" Nazi camp of Terezín, the first camp in which she was interned, whose social distancing gave each inmate just 1.5 square meters of space.

What Růžičková accomplished against the tide of 20th-century Eastern European history brings inspiration for maintaining values in our own challenging times.

The inspiration from Růžičková's book at first seems harder to come by, from her youth as a Czech Jewess under the Nazis to her adulthood in communist Czechoslovakia: "I couldn't believe that there was another regime like the Nazis – so cruel, so stupid, so anti-Semitic." Each regime used reason to torture, both physically and psychologically. Under the Nazis, Jewish teenagers had to deliver the notices of transport to Terezín to Jewish households. In Terezín, the Jewish council of elders had to decide who would stay in the ghetto-

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camp and who would leave for the work and death camps on the next transport. In Auschwitz, mothers had to choose whether or not to go with their young children to the gas chambers.

The decades of communism, whether in the Stalinist period of the 1950s or the "normalisation" following the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion, was less outwardly brutal but as insidious as the Nazism that infested Czechoslovakia during the war. Růžičková lists the "more sophisticated ways of torture," the merciless harassment, spying as a compulsion of citizenship, threats to one's nearest and dearest to ensure compliance and the stymieing of careers: "all of us lost not only the best years of our careers, but also the best society could have got from us". Her last comment makes perhaps the greatest irony of the ideology that was supposed to realise the potential of people oppressed by capitalism. In fulfilling her musical abilities, Růžičková faced seemingly insuperable odds.

The structure of the book affords neither Růžičková nor her readers much relief.* The organisation parallels her childhood in peacetime and adolescence under the Nazi occupation as a young music student, to an internationally recognised pianist and harpsichordist. The miracles build up under the "terrible symmetry" of the Nazi and Communist regimes. The lowest point in the book adjoins the chapter on the 1968 invasion of her country with a chapter on her time in Bergen-Belsen, the last concentration camp to which Růžičková and her mother were sent, and the one from which they were never meant to return. The structure of Růžičková's memoirs illustrates what she reiterates as the pattern of her life: "As with everything in my life … there was hope and then there was a loss of hope … As always, though, hope was crushed [in being sent from Hamburg to Belsen] … We learned not to hope [following the end of the Prague Spring]".

It is hard to argue with Růžičková and the lessons of her Eastern European life, with flashes of uplift followed by voids of hope. She lost all of her Czech relatives in the camps, among them her father in Terezín and her cousin, whom she loved as a sister, in Belsen. Following her return from the camps, she lost her mother to dementia and her husband, the composer Viktor Kalabnis, to cancer. Yet her mother witnessed the success of her daughter as the first musician to record all of the keyboard works of Bach, to whom Růžičková's memoirs are dedicated. Růžičková also witnessed the Velvet Revolution of 1989 with her husband that freed their homeland from communism. Even after losing her mother and husband and her ability to play music, Růžičková only left us in 2017. She was more than a survivor, as the hard-won inspiration of her memoirs testifies.

* I attribute the structure of the book to Růžičková's co-author Wendy Holden. Holden did more than amass Růžičková's recollections: she checked, supplemented and organised Růžičková's often-told narratives without the final oversight of the musician who died a week after their last meeting

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Spirit of morality

Růžičková had three great allies in the endurance and maintenance of her values. First, she was able, even in the concentration camps, to maintain a sense of dignity and continuity of her life before the war. Although she struggled to maintain this sense of connection, she never became wholly brutalised by the criminal regime. Růžičková lists the ways she kept up the vestiges of her past daily life in the camps. "You recite poems. You sing … you fall in love and have a boyfriend, even though either of you may leave at any moment on a transport". If her book has a hero, it is Alfred "Fredy" Hirsch, the homosexual son of Orthodox Jews, who showed her how to keep her dignity where every detail mitigated against it. Hirsch practiced his principles with miraculous dexterity in the camps, creating a whitewashed, painted home for the children of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Růžičková remembers and honours Hirsch as "the spirit of morality" in Auschwitz, "who kept us in another world … where humanity and decency were still important".

Secondly, even in the miserable conditions of the death camps, Růžičková found pleasures that, although seemingly meagre, nourished her as much as the ones of her past life. In Belsen, it was impossible to keep up the semblances of normality: "there was no room for support, humour or friendship. We were all just fighting for survival". But even there, Růžičková found unexpected comforts in conditions designed for extinction. There, "an extra crust of bread, a different soup, or a warmer spot out of the wind … gave you the same feeling of satisfaction that a normal person feels when he has a successful love affair, is lucky, or wins the lottery". Růžičková's daily survival depended on gleaning from the most dispiriting conditions, a sustaining sense of satisfaction.

Thirdly, Růžičková faced the systematic depravity of the political systems that ruled her with the love of her mother and husband and an unquenchable dedication to music. Her ability to practice it was interrupted and seemingly terminated by the forced labour she performed in the war. The harsh work of passing wet bricks and rubble made her fingers split, crack and bleed. After the war, she received regular discouragement from teachers in her attempts to resume her music. But she never surrendered her love of it and her determination to make a career out of it. As she writes in her memoirs as her unofficial motto: "Music was my defiance". Bach, in particular, proved to be her brother and saviour. Like Růžičková's life, Bach's had music and death as its interweaving themes.

Thus, Růžičková never succumbed to what she and other inmates of the camps called "the Auschwitz disease" in which "the whole expression and especially the eyes would be dead …[in] a complete physical shutdown – the collapse of a principle". Even when Růžičková at-

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tempted suicide after the war, in despair over the obstacles to return to music, she was never completely vanquished. As she writes of her time in the camps: "I badly wanted to live. I had so much love of life."

Unexpected optimism

The three qualities that enabled Růžičková to survive matured into a very Eastern European combination of suppleness and stubbornness, flexibility and determination. By keeping alive the sense of a normal life, she helped to revive it in her homeland after both 1945 and 1989. By adapting her sense of pleasure, she never fully surrendered her feelings of freedom. And by persevering in her music, she gave her life a purpose through the bleakest circumstances. The other great duality of Růžičková's life reflects both the weight of Eastern European history and the region's sometimes lighter fate. To Aleš Březina, director of the Bohuslav Martinů Institute founded by Růžičková's husband, she matched a "long life of acquired scepticism" with "an innate optimism".

Růžičková's scepticism derived from the extremes of morality and immorality she witnessed throughout her life. During the war, she faints at hearing Chopin in a factory canteen – the first classical music she has heard since her internment. A German foreman takes her to his office. Examining her, he remarks with shock: "That looks like a human!" as if suddenly recognising her as a fellow human being. His reaction, like the horror of the Wehrmacht soldiers on seeing the female inmates from Auschwitz, shows how successfully but not utterly the Nazis dehumanised their victims. Surviving Belsen, both Růžičková and her readers believe the worst is past. But on the first night that she and her mother return from the death camp to their native Pilsen (Plzeň), they find no welcome or shelter. The extremes of selfishness and generosity, cowardice and sacrifice, crushing refusals and surprising succour that she experienced, leave Růžičková undecided by the end of her memoirs whether "everyone is potentially a criminal, or…everyone is potentially decent".

Růžičková's uncertainty fed her optimism. To Březina, she always had more than survival as her goal: "To her, much more important than mere surviving was the quality that a person gives to their life every day". Růžičková's ability to elevate the quality of lives around her is why friends still recall her affectionately by the Czech diminutive of her given name, Zuzanka. Růžičková's optimism grew from her ability to weather the most disheartening circumstances to excel at the national musical tradition. It likely felt natural for her as a Czech to devote herself to classical

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music, which receives popular appreciation in Czech culture unsurpassed by any other in Europe. Růžičková tells the story of one year at the Concertino Praga International Music Competition for Children, where competitors were asked what they would do if their government banned classical music. The children from the West said they would consider other professions, while the Czech quartet responded: "We would do something to make the government fall."

Incredible endurance

Růžičková's optimism was rewarded as her dedication to the harpsichord came in just the right period. Her last pupil, Mahan Esfahani, notes that when he studied the instrument with her in the 1990s and early 2000s, his colleagues considered her "terribly passé, a relic of an earlier age". Equally, at the start of her career in the 1950s, Růžičková decided on her instrument as a professional musician when, as she notes, "a career as a harpsichordist…was considered a joke". But she displayed her determination at the best possible moment, as she entered the 1956 ARD International Music Competition for Young Musicians in the first year the contest had a harpsichord category. As Růžičková states, winning this award "changed everything" for her career. She then became part of the "new fashion for early music in Czechoslovakia" in the early 1960s and "the baroque music revolution" during the decade that brought her trips abroad and friendships with western musicians, including Christopher Hogwood as well as her long collaboration with the Czech violinist Josef Suk. Růžičková's husband promised her after the 1968 invasion and collapse of the Prague Spring: "You can't be a slave for ever". Her dogged and well-timed cultivation of her talents granted her exceptional opportunities to part the Iron Curtain.

Růžičková's endurance seems as incredible as the current global pandemic. She left us her memoirs to extrapolate the lessons of her perseverance. We might heed the story of this Czech musician who survived tuberculosis, pneumonia, pleurisy, encephalitis, typhus, malaria, Nazism and Communism in the Eastern Europe of the 20th century. Learning from her lifelong commitments, we might fix on what can carry us through the current crises as well as ones to come. It may be a relationship, a profession, a vocation – or, as for Zuzana Růžičková, all three through her music, that let her accrue her sum of miracles.

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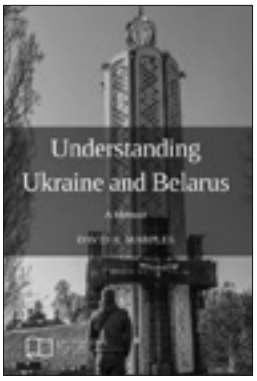
History of facts

Dispassionate and detached

ANASTASIIA STARCHENKO

A review of *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir*. By: David R. Marples. Publisher: E-International Relations, 2020.



When a young student of Shirebrook Grammar School in Chesterfield, England, developed a keen interest in the translated classics of Russian literature, he relished, above all, the works of Dostoevsky, albeit without much understanding of the author's contemporary world. Following the call of life circumstances, the young man enrolled as a university student in history without giving it much thought to a permanent career. Politically, he seemed to lean left, primarily as a reaction to the political environment prevailing at Keele University. He took on intense Russian language classes and spent many hours at the Russian bookstore on Charing Cross Road, immersed in the works of Lenin and Trotsky – an illusion he had yet to dispel.

By dint of thorough academic guidance, he added lessons of Ukrainian to his schedule and resolved to research events of Soviet collectivisation in western Ukraine – a task seemingly impossible to someone without a barrier-free access to the Soviet archives. Yet before long, in a twist of fate, and by virtue of good fortune, he became friends and a colleague of the Ukrainian diaspora and the first PhD candidate in Ukrainian history at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies (CIUS) in Edmonton, Alberta. The foreigner, who wished to study Ukraine's recent past, a rarity at that time, was none other than David

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R. Marples, a Canadian historian, Distinguished University Professor at the Department of History and Classics at the University of Alberta, and the author of 16 books. His latest, *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir*, reveals a deeply personal, honest and often comical autobiographical recollection of a scholarly journey from an undergraduate student to a prominent contemporary historian across the nations he knows best – Ukraine and Belarus.

Cracks in the marble

While in Alberta, the career of Marples, as a young scholar, began to thrive despite the demanding time when "beyond the narrow world of Ukrainian studies" Ukraine appeared to be "a distant, alien world". While the book offers a unique insight into the evolution of "Ukrainology" in Canada and the western world, it also gives an insider's glimpse into the world behind the Iron Curtain in the age of *perestroika*. In 1985, Marples switched from an arduous editing job in Alberta to a Ukraine Research Analyst position at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Munich, Germany. It soon became evident that nuclear power was the "wave of the future", particularly in the case of Chernobyl – the first nuclear power station in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and the only nuclear power plant with graphite-moderated reactors. The same year, having compiled several files on Soviet nuclear stations in Ukraine, Marples moved back to Canada and became a research associate at CIUS. In 1986, his choice of research proved to be significant, accurately and realistically unveiling the cause and effects of the Chernobyl disaster from the most objective standpoint possible, since so little was known about it at the time.

The spring of 1989 marked a pivotal moment in the history of the Chernobyl disaster, when the Soviet *Pravda* and other newspapers published the first detailed maps of the radioactive fallout, extending well beyond the officially designated 30-kilometre zone around the reactor. In May, Marples arrived in Kyiv as a guest of Ukraine's foreign ministry and the second Canadian allowed at the Chernobyl site. As he was ascending the marble staircase of the power plant past a ubiquitous bust of Vladimir Lenin, Marples felt a growing sense of unreality: "After three years of studying Chernobyl, surely as one of the most critical observers of the situation, here I was sitting opposite a man who had been featured in my two books" – Mikhail Umanets, head of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, a tired man sitting behind the desk of his office despite the nightmare of the past three years. "For the first time I noticed a clear discrepancy between a statement and the apparent reality," Marples writes about his subsequent interview with staff of the

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Institute of Clinical Radiology, affiliated with the Soviet Academy of Medical Sciences, where he encountered the human costs of the catastrophe: "The patients brought home to me more than ever the horror of the event."

Gone, but still collapsing

In 1991, one month after Marples began his new career as Associate Professor at the University of Alberta, the world was watching three men standing shoulder to shoulder on top of a tank in defiance of the attempted hardline communist coup in Moscow. One of those men was Boris Yeltsin, and in the critical hours of Russian democracy and a disillusioned society it appeared that the era of *glasnost* and *perestroika* had come to an end. Although the principal focus of Marples's research has been directed at Ukraine and Belarus, he never lost track of Russia, where he spent a lot of time in the 1990s, mostly in Moscow. In 1997, he embarked on a research project on the indigenous population of Siberian Northeast and made two bewildering but fruitful trips to Yakutsk, the capital city of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) and the largest part of the Russian Federation. In the summer of 1998, he witnessed local gold miners striking for improved wages and working conditions in the central square. Ironically, the event took place at the foot of Lenin's statue – the revolutionary leader who pledged the conquest of political power by the working class.

In 1992 Marples began to study the questions of the Chernobyl disaster from the perspective of Belarus, which at the time was receiving little international attention, unlike Ukraine. In the spring he flew to Minsk for the first time – a city seemingly "spartan and Stalinist, with very wide streets and little traffic", a rare place for western scholars to visit. Making sense of the Belarusian transition towards an independent nation-state in the 1990s, the environment of repression and arbitrary rule, and, above all, the fundamental issue of health consequences from the Chernobyl disaster, all presented a gloomy picture and provoked broader questions about democracy in the former Soviet space. After Alyaksandr Lukashenka took power in 1994, the (re)closure of the KGB archives rendered historical research nearly impossible. Marples also recalls numerous anecdotes of his comical encounters with the post-Soviet reality of the 1990s – routine in the eyes of the natives but terrifying and baffling to the western observer – and the ever-present agents of KGB alongside *Intourist*, the bureaucratic Soviet tourist agency that promoted the Soviet Union abroad and provided dogmatic "guides" for foreign visitors.

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Heroes and villains

In the second part of the memoir, Marples unveils persisting East-West divisions in the collective memory of Ukraine, which provoke interchangeably negative sentiments in both parts of the country – as became apparent with moves towards identity politics heralded by Viktor Yushchenko. Already then it was clear to many that the debate should have been transferred to historians – official narratives and commemorations of the past never exist in isolation from contemporary politics. Aside from the tragedy of Holodomor, Marples touches upon the question of Ukrainian nationalism, manifested by the uncritical myths of heroism and valour of the OUN – the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists – and UPA – the Ukrainian Insurgent Army – as well as the revered leadership of Stepan Bandera. In the early 2000s, Ukraine's academic community was engaged in lengthy discussions about the history of these organisations. Years later, however, at a time critical for Ukrainian identity-building, the prevailing diaspora narrative of the OUN and UPA – that is, fighting an unequal war against the totalitarian powers of Germany and the Soviet Union – began to permeate Ukraine. Politically, right-wing nationalism never received broad social support, yet this narrative was misleading in terms of highlighting some crimes and concealing others.

Equally, Marples critically assesses the reports from Ukraine that began to make international headlines since late 2013. Earlier that summer, by then a Distinguished University Professor, Marples had been accepted as a Visiting Scholar with the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center at Hokkaido University in Japan. "Following the events in Maidan from Hokkaido certainly allowed one the advantage of distance", he admits, "without being caught up in the emotion of events". In 2015, international scholars of Ukraine, including Marples, warned against the potential consequences of one of Petro Poroshenko's "Memory Laws" for restricting scholars from critiquing the historical records of the OUN and UPA. Scholarly criticism of the official narrative, based on unconditional appraisals of the Ukrainian past, did not go unnoticed among the Ukrainian diaspora and seemed to have overshadowed academic achievement and long-standing support of the country's progress.

Future dilemmas

In 2009 Marples received a grant to research the memorialisation of the Second World War in Belarus, a key subject of Belarusian historical memory and post-memory in the form of the Great Patriotic War, and anticipated at least

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three years of study. The election year of 2010, however, marked one of the most significant chapters in the short history of independent Belarus and witnessed the tightening grip of Lukashenka's regime. Before long, foreign critics of the government faced a ban on entry to Belarus, and Marples's passport was adorned with three grim stamps that stated: "*admovleno*" (rejected). It was only in 2017 that he returned to Belarus, and the city of Minsk seemed to have changed quite dramatically.

The period from 1937 to 1941 still appeared to be the most obvious blank spot in the history of Belarus, and Marples undertook a scrupulous investigation into Stalinist rule in the Belarusian SSR. He was shaken by the sheer scale of mass executions beyond the discovery in the Kurapaty forest – the burial site of NKVD mass killings from 1937 to 1941– and the lack of commemorative recognition by the official authorities. In a place where Stalinism committed horrendous crimes, the myths of Stalin remained intact. While Ukraine has shown more success in eliminating the last vestiges of Soviet narratives – although it remains unclear what to replace it with without running the risk of narrow-minded nationalism – the authoritarian Belarusian government has instead impeded historical discussion and used it to heal the wounds of the collapsed Soviet empire. Although at the time of writing, the Belarusian democratic voice continued to struggle beyond the borders of the country, Marples writes what almost appears to be a prediction: "The future of one's books – or articles – can never be determined in advance." Belarusians, he adds optimistically, appear fairly free of Ukraine's more radical forms of nationalism, many among the younger generation speak Belarusian on a daily basis and try to assign for Kurapaty equal symbolic importance as the one attached to the Holodomor in Ukraine. It is a positive outlook that raises even more hope in light of current events.

When the past persists in the present and becomes part of the official historical narrative of what should take place of pride and what should be omitted, Marples concludes, it is the job of historians to remain "detached and dispassionate", reveal the facts and be willing to question every tenet of the presented narrative, free from interference of petty politics. Only then is it that societies, notably those of the former Soviet space, can confront hard historical truths and redefine what they are. *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir* is a highly recommended, intimate inside story and reflection on the development of two countries the world knew little about.

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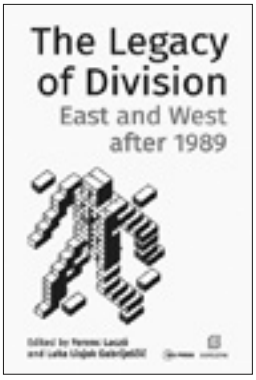
The journey of revisiting 1989

KINGA ANNA GAJDA

The Legacy of Division: East and West after 1989. Edited by: Ferenc Laczó and Luka Lisjak Gabrijelčič. Publisher: Central European University Press / Eurozine, Budapest/Vienna, 2020.



Regional divisions based on geographical foundations are an unavoidable tool for studying geopolitical, cultural and discursive dependencies. The example of one such division is the idea of Eastern Europe, which can be treated as a socio-economic or political construct. As a result, the term Eastern Europe has not only been used in reference to geographical area, but also as a theoretical concept in academic, social and political debates. The most well-known was William Hagen's conception of the East-West cultural/historical divide within Europe. In addition, there have also been attempts to divide the continent between North and South. Or, four parts: West, North, East (d'Orient) and South as was proposed by Larry Wolff, a history professor with the University of New York.

The East-West division, however, proved to be the most permanent. In the view of Walter D. Connor, a professor of international relations at Boston University, this is nothing new as he argues in his article "Europe West and East: Thoughts on History, Culture, and Kosovo": "Historians have insisted on the difference between Eastern and Central Europe, careful to stake out the latter turf as theirs, or to use the term East Central Europe – sometimes without real specification of what West Central Europe might be."

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A gap to be filled

The authors of the essays in a collective publication entitled *The Legacy of Division. East and West after 1989*, edited by Ference Laczó and Luka Lisjak Gabrijelčič, try to answer the question on whether and how this division of Europe into East and West changed after the political transformation in 1989. Did the lifting of the Iron Curtain also bring down the wall between East and West? Have the accession of some Central and Eastern European countries to the European Union and the efforts of others blurred this old division? How has the perception and misconception of differences between the two halves of the continent changed since 1989? Over the past three decades, have the hopes of overcoming this division been fulfilled?

These questions seem all the more justified as they were asked on the 30th anniversary of the fall of the communist regime in Europe. The researchers agree that 1989 can be considered a key moment in the history of both Europe and the world, as well as the history of individuals on both sides of the wall. We constantly return to this date and the division into the world from before and after the symbolic moment of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Some do it to negate the communist order and point to its negative consequences, others set off on a nostalgic journey to the past, the period of their youth. Others, especially the younger generation who do not remember much or almost anything, believe that communism is "an epoch that is finally closed". Treating it like an open-air museum, they want to get to know it, guided by fashion, a kind of fascination with ugliness or kitsch. Characteristically, the discussion over the memory of communism and the time of the transformation has been taking place more outside the academic field than inside it. To fill this gap, and bring academic answers to some of these pressing questions, the editors of the *The Legacy of Division* invited a group of outstanding specialists from around the world, representing different disciplines within the social sciences. Among them are Aleida Assmann, Jan Zielonka, Florian Bieber, Richard Sakwa, and Karl Schlögel, to name just the few.

More divided than ever before

After all, the differences in the narratives about 1989 are not only a reflection of generational differences or resulting from an emotional approach to the past, but also the intimate experiences and subjective interpretations of the world, as well as – or perhaps most of all – cultural differences overlapped by collective memory, ideology and aspirations of the political elite. In the same

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vein, the authors of this collection represent different approaches in their respective areas of academia. They base their analyses on different arguments, deconstruct their different narratives, undertaking them in the realm of their respective fields of research.

The starting point for the debate are the differences between the continent's East and West, and a discussion on what today constitutes Europeanness at a time of the revival of xenophobia and populism in some parts of the continent. Indeed 30 years after the fall of communism we can see that not only have the last decades been a time of building democracy and capitalism and expanding EU borders into the East, but a time of many difficulties, including the 2008 financial crisis and the 2015 refugee crisis. It has been a time of intense globalisation and the era of Brexit; as well as that of rapidly expanding online technologies.

However, it was in recent years that we have seen dissatisfied citizens come to the streets of many cities throughout the continent to defend or oppose European values. There is no doubt that today's Europe is more divided than before. The European states are now homes to EU supporters and opponents. And, moreover, the division of the continent into East and West has become more expressed. Recognising this, the editors write, in the introduction, the following: "In western Europe, voices regretting the EU's supposedly careless and premature expansion eastwards began to appear on both sides of the left-right and liberal-conservative divides. In eastern Europe, nationalist forces continued to assert their "Europeaness".

Overtaken by western investors

However, the volume does not offer any answers to the question of where Europe has come three decades after the transformation or where it is going. Rather, it invites you to a debate and to consider the many different arguments the authors have with each other. As a result, we do not get a clear answer as to whether there will be a convergence of the two parts of Europe, or what such convergence could mean to the European project. Instead, we are offered a range of answers. It is thus the reader who must decide which arguments sound most persuasive. The editors defend this decision through the metaphor of a journey – one that takes readers to the different corners of Europe and through the different fields of knowledge. The proposed paths may seem mistaken to some, while others might find them worth discovering; while other readers might say that these paths are already well-trodden.

This journey, however, goes along the border between the eastern and western parts of Europe. Thereby it is evidence that the divide between these two halves

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is being recreated or even deepened. At the same time, the global success of the liberal democratic West has proved illusory. As some of the authors note, the accession of many Eastern European countries to the EU was supposed to blur the divide between East and West. However, it overlooked that the collapse of socialism overlapped with the transformation of capitalism in the West. Thus, the opening of borders and the freedom of movement also meant that many multinational corporations moved into eastern markets in search of cheaper labour. In the end, Eastern European capitalism became heavily dependent on Western investors.

As a consequence, it inhibited or marginalised the emergence of entrepreneurship in eastern countries. Many of its workforces left in search for a better life in the West, thereby weakening their domestic labour markets. Initially delighted with western capitalism, Eastern European states tried to imitate the West. With time, this so-called policy of imitation, gave way to rebellion, bringing on new political and social challenges. It became humiliating to be an imitator in a world that affirmed originality. In consequence, the earlier demarcation lines of division began to become clearer – the separation between democracy and communism, between freedom and totalitarianism (typical of the Cold War era), has been replaced by the division between societies that are democracies and those aspiring to be one.

The division of two labour markets has not changed in any way. The migration of professionals and skilled workers continues from East to West, with the difference that after some eastern countries joined the EU, they also became places where eastern neighbours came in search of employment and better living conditions. Moreover, as we can gather from the voices in the volume, the fall of the Iron Curtain changed not only the East, but the West. However, this topic is rarely raised in a wider public debate where the main emphasis is still put on the East's willingness to catch up with the West. Even today, there is still little recognition of how much the East has to offer.

Stigma

The second journey set out in this volume meanders between the East and the West, proving evidence that this division is a stereotype maintained through duplication. The various contributors emphasise that, despite the fall of the Iron Curtain, Eastern Europe is still a part of the common European narrative, although it is not clear where it begins and where it ends. They also point out that the language used to describe post-communist countries and their reality bears the hallmarks of stigma: it is full of stereotypes and shows how old hab-

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its die hard. The most poignant in this regard is the testimony of Jan Zielonka, who rightly observes: "I was never a member of the communist party, yet I am destined to die as a post-communist according to the East-West narrative. I have several Italian colleagues who were members of *Partito Comunista*, but they would not see themselves or their country as carrying the stigma of post-communism, which is attached to the eastern part of Europe."

Zielonka goes on to argue that there are many other simplifications which are unfair or untrue, yet exist. The assumption, for example, that Eastern European states have weaker economic development than Western ones despite the fact that the Polish economy is developing at least twice as fast as the Greek one. Zielonka also points out that Eastern European states have more in common with western states than with other states in their region. Here he mentions Poland again arguing that when it comes to family policy it is more similar to Italy or Spain than the Czech Republic. Therefore, a search for similarities between Eastern and Central European countries is an oversimplification – as Zielonka rightly argues they do not even have the same eating or drinking traditions.

The various contributors emphasise that Eastern Europe is still a part of the common European narrative, although it is not clear where it begins and where it ends.

Not a whole

Zielonka ultimately concludes that Europe is a complex maze with many dividing lines – not just between East and West. The journey through the meanders of borders that he and other contributors navigate does not run along the border between the East and the West. It goes along the many borders between countries where right-wing parties are strong (including Austria, the Netherlands, Denmark or Sweden) and where left-wing parties are dominant; between countries ruled by illiberal parties and those where populists have little appeal, between countries that accept refugees and those that do not, between countries where, due to their geographic location, there are many refugees and those where they are not, between creditors and debtors, and between religious boundaries.

It seems that the journey ends in a multicultural and multi-directional Europe, where borders are interpreted and discussed each time, and the demarca-

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tion is shifted according to differences. After all, the differences between countries can be defined on the basis of differences in political doctrine, their sense of national pride, adherence to human rights and gender equality. It can also depend on their approach to multiculturalism and tolerance or to cultural heritage. As we can gather from this volume of essay, one thing is certain and not encouraging: The European Union is still not whole and the term "European" still has many definitions.

Although the various authors give different answers to these questions, the purpose of their journey seems to be the same and it leads to an important conclusion. When talking about the last three decades, no one wanted to point out what went wrong. Instead, there is still a focus on what can be done to make today's Europe different. There are ideas of replacing hegemony with pluralism and solidarity. The contributors note that there are new opportunities to rediscover pluralism and they emphasise that normalcy in the EU is not about the pressure of mass westernisation and individualisation, but about recognising the importance of cultural heritage across so many different cities and regions.

Finally, they emphasize that we now have a new political generation. Its representatives will go their own way and set on their own journey. For this new generation, *The Legacy of Division. East and West after 1989* will be an excellent resource. One that not only can teach them about the roads already travelled, but allow them to find themselves in the labyrinth of today's Europe and to reflect on how to answer the question: What is our future? NEE

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The sword of Damocles and the mirror

ANNA FEDAS

A review of *Protest*, a play directed by Aldona Figura. Written by Václav Havel, staged by Teatr Dramaryczny in Warsaw, premiered February 2020.

What kind of dilemmas and challenges do civic and human rights activists face today? Where can independent minded people find understanding, consolation and relief? Who can put into words the experiences of public intellectuals, human and civil rights activists not being heard? How can they deal with the anger and envy of those who try to conceal their fear and cowardice behind a wall of judgement against the steadfast ideals of activism? Are individuals guided by values in their civic life destined to cause remorse in others? Finally, how can they preserve integrity in the age of opportunism? Thankfully, Václav Havel and his plays are here to help. One good example is *Protest*, recently staged at Teatr Dramatyczny (The Dramatic Theatre of the Capital City of Warsaw), directed by Aldona Figura, which I highly recommend to those who want to watch their own experience on the stage (once it will be possible again).

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Divisions

Those who are not so familiar with Havel as a playwright should know that theatre writing was his personal way in dealing with the political and social reality during communist Czechoslovakia. Aleksander Kaczorowski, a Havel biographer, has called it Havel's specific type of auto-therapy. Havel wrote 25 plays, many of which were based on his personal experiences. Some of his plays were staged before they were censored. Writing and then presenting the political and social issues of Czechoslovakia was a perfect way for Havel, as a public intellectual, to take advantage of what he experienced not only with his contacts with authorities but with co-workers, other dissidents and friends.

Protest, directed by Figura, is based on three of Havel's one-act plays: *Audience*, *Vernissage* and *Protest* – all three written in the 1970s. There are three different parts, contexts, characters and attitudes. Only one character, the main hero of the play called Ferdynand Waniek – not surprisingly identified with Havel himself, although it has been denied by him many times – remains in all three parts, treating his interlocutors with patience, calmness and composure.

The first scene takes us to a brewery, where we are observers of a workplace misunderstanding between an older, experienced foreman, representing the community of workers, and Waniek, a younger intellectual, forced by the authorities to work at the brewery as punishment. Although the older worker does not hide his sense of advantage over the younger one, he loses it pretty quickly when he realises that the younger one refuses – justifying it with his moral principles – to participate in the denunciation system. Angry at Ferdynand's attitude, he argues that intellectuals are in a better situation compared to the workers because they can always put into words the experience of oppression and then take advantage of it. The foreman, as an ordinary worker, can only be left behind in this system. He is doomed to be forgotten: "One day you will go back to your actresses and show off how you rolled barrels in a brewery – you will be a hero. And me? Where can I go back? Who will notice me? Who will appreciate me?"

In his latest book, *A People's History of Poland*, the Polish historian and journalist Adam Leszczyński writes about tensions between social classes in Poland. The intellectuals were in a more privileged position compared to unskilled workers, who were not supported by international organisations and had no opportunity to describe their experiences. To this day, public intellectuals seem to forget about this and tend to isolate themselves from the working class, a fact that populist politicians commonly refer to. Of course, such inequality does not morally justify the actions of the brewery's foreman. He knows this perfectly well; it is for this reason that

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he reacts with anger. In order to solve the situation and ease the tension, he asks Waniek to invite a well-known actress to visit their workplace using his social connections – a resource unavailable to the working class, which only seems to highlight the dramatic effect of the scene.

Tragedy and protest

In the second scene, Waniek pays a visit to the flat of an affluent couple. The friends unsuccessfully try to impress their guest but instead make him feel envious. They show off by telling stories about foreign travel, presenting expensive furniture and serving extravagant appetisers (in a very exalted way; applause for Anna Gorajska – the actress playing the role of the wife). They boast about their happiness and lavish lifestyle. When it does not seem to make an impression on Waniek, the couple start getting angry – without his jealousy, their way of life and accumulated wealth brings them no pleasure. If this were not enough, they try to force Waniek to admit that his life, marriage, work and civic involvement do not satisfy him and he would secretly dream of leading a life according to their model. When nothing comes out of it, the couple continue to feel enraged. In line with William B. Irvine's concept, this scene perfectly reflects the "hedonistic treadmill" – in a consumerist society, it is easy to lose oneself in an unceasing chase for fulfilment, satisfaction and jealousy of the people whom one calls friends. What Havel portrayed in the second act is the tragedy of the wealthy middle class.

The third scene is an unusual dialogue between Waniek and his colleague – also a writer who has been named a dissident despite maintaining various arrangements with the authorities. Waniek, in an extremely cultured way, asks his interlocutor to sign a letter of protest against a detained oppositionist. His colleague, rather nervously, presents a long argument to why he cannot sign and ultimately does not. In what appears to be an incompetent attempt to camouflage his opportunism, the writer discloses a broader settlement among the intellectuals themselves. What is more, the frustrated writer begins to attack the main character, undermining the meaning and the chosen ways of his activism.

It is unsurprising that the stoic attitude of the main character evokes a mixture of strong and unobvious emotions in the other characters.

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The third scene is reminiscent of a contemporary discussion among Polish activists and pundits which took place in August 2020 after the arrest of Margot, a non-binary LGBT+ activist. There were many official comments from people who were angry with Margot for not saying or doing what they thought should be done. An activist was cast in their script; and they did not want to acknowledge that Margot was entitled to their own script. Many commentators and politicians, including those on the opposition, were outraged at the vulgar slogans in protest against the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal in Poland. They did not want to recognise the right of the protesters to their own expression.

Natalia Sarata from the RegenerAction (Polish name: RegenerAkcja) Foundation, which has been supporting the burnt-out activists and observing their struggle for many years, comments on this tendency to review the activities and statements of civic activists: "Every activity is reviewed. Sometimes the review is silent, when most people do not want to listen or see a problem. When measures are non-standard and a person starts to be treated as a representative of a group, the activity will always be reviewed with great intensity. Especially if this group is a minority and has not yet been heard by the mainstream with due attention. Silent and polite 'reviews' are the so-called 'tone policing' used by majority groups and people in privileged positions towards people from minorities. It means 'we will listen to you, if you are politer, you will speak as we want, you will act nicer, quieter' – cutting to the needs of people who, in any case, have never been ready to listen before … Anger is an obvious activist tool. The current women's protests are a powerful demonstration of this."

Tomasz Markiewka, a philosopher and columnist, also wrote about social and activist anger in *Gniew* (*Anger*). In his book, he quotes Martin Luther King Jr, who has faced voices of criticism for his activities by the so-called "moderate whites": "They seem to support the rights of the blacks, King complains, but they are constantly disgusted that they are fighting for themselves? Too loudly, too insistently, too aggressively."

A look into the mirror

In order to understand why someone arouses our anger, momentary reflection is required. It is remarkable that the more reflection we have, the more we can see. This problem was already outlined by Carl Jung with his shadow theory. We see ourselves through the relationships we have with others, it is thanks to them that we are able to determine what we are running away from, what we are attracted to, what pushes us away, what fascinates us, and what we know about

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ourselves. As Jung outlined: there is our dark side and our bright side. The dark side, the parts we do not like about ourselves, is sometimes hidden from us and if it was not for the phenomenon of projection, we would never know about it. When we project onto others, we have a chance to get to know ourselves.

From this perspective, it is unsurprising that the stoic attitude of the main character evokes a mixture of strong and unobvious emotions in the other characters – from a sense of superiority, through anger, hatred, aggression, to sadness, shame, loneliness and resignation. What causes such a roller coaster of emotions? The other characters look through Waniek – a writer, a dissident, and an activist – like a mirror. Each of them discovers something uncomfortable, so they discard them with feelings of shame and guilt. They try to quickly blame Waniek, who remains untouched, unbroken, unshakeable. And he rejects this blame. That is why we observe this anger and aggression against the main character. It is as if the Jungian shadow was activated and so the result is a battle against his consciences – a struggle for his own humanity.

In the end, each of Waniek's interlocutors realises that they are unable to pass the blame on to him. They cannot change him, they can only change themselves, but seem unable. They recognise the nonsense and hopelessness in which they are stuck. They return to the initial position of being moderately warm, cordial and polite to the main character. However, the emotions and strong words that have been expressed are in the air and remain hanging like the sword of Damocles. They can reverberate at any time; the problem remains unsolved.

Audience, *Vernissage* and *Protest* were first staged in Poland by the Zygmunt Hübner Powszechny Theatre in November 1981 and directed by Felix Falk. It was a revolutionary decision. In the Polish People's Republic, this was the truth at the apogee of the Solidarity carnival, a performance that spoke outright about the repression of the opposition and its closure. A few weeks later, martial law was introduced and the performance ceased. Havel's plays returned to Polish theatres in 1989, but with just two of the one-act plays (without *Vernissage*).

The past year has brought about some historical milestones which have included some difficult dilemmas for us to reflect upon. Thankfully Havel's plays are still an inspiration for all those trying to understand these dilemmas accurately.

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An underappreciated contribution to European history

ZBIGNIEW ROKITA

Przegrane Zwycięstwo. Wojna Polsko-Bolszewicka 1918–1920.
(Lost Victory. The Polish-Bolshevik War of 1918–1920).
By: Andrzej Chawlba. Publisher: Wydawnictwo Czarne,
Wołowiec, Poland, 2020.

In 2020 Poland was expected to unveil a monumental arch that would commemorate the triumph of the Polish military over the Red Army on the outskirts of Warsaw one hundred years ago. If erected it would be the greatest commemorative structure of the Law and Justice government, which never fails when it comes to European *memory Reconquista*. "I wholeheartedly support the construction of the triumphal arch as soon as possible. I've contributed myself," said Mateusz Morawiecki, Poland's prime minister. In the end the arch was not erected but nevertheless the 1920 Poland-Bolshevik war constitutes a key pillar in the Polish national mythology, as well as one of two memorable events when the Polish military defeated its Russian counterpart (the other was Poland capturing Moscow in the 17th century). Andrzej Chwalba, a Jagiellonian University professor and one of the most renowned contemporary Polish historians, became deeply interested in the Polish-Soviet war. This work resulted in a recent book entitled *Lost Victory. The Polish-Bolshevik War of 1918–1920*.

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Underestimated achievement

This recently-released book is on the period of 1918 to 1921, which includes the time when Poland was fighting the advancing Red Army for independence and regional power. Under Marshal Józef Piłsudski, Poland aspired to take a position of dominance in Central and Eastern Europe, weakening Russia's presence. It sought to enter into some form of federation with the newly created Ukraine and Lithuania. The Polish army moved east as far as Kyiv and Minsk, which they captured. They were later pushed back to Warsaw, only to finally fend off the Soviets during the famous Battle of Warsaw, and hence defend Poland's independence (and that of Finland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia).

Two worn out armies were unable to continue the war. The so-called treaty of Riga, signed in 1921, outlined the interwar border between Soviet Russia and Poland. This treaty cemented the agreements of the First World War peace conference of the Allied powers and created the Riga-Versailles order, but it also led to a cold war between Poland and the Soviets. From today's perspective, under the treaty of Riga, Belarus and Ukraine were to be partitioned (a fact Ukraine still cannot forget) and Poland recognised the puppet states of the Ukrainian and Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republics which had been incorporated into the USSR. The Soviets treated the Treaty of Riga the same way as the Treaty of Brest they signed three years before with the Kaiser's Germany (i.e. as a strategic pause, temporarily surrendering a substantial piece of land). And it was in 1939 when they claimed the land back, and remained under Soviet control until 1991.

Today, many Poles feel that the West underestimates their achievements in history, which includes defeating the Red Army in 1920. Poles are happy to quote Edgar Vincent D'Abernon, a British diplomat, who ranked the conclusive battle of that war (which the Poles call "the Miracle on the Vistula" to indicate a divine intervention granted against the Bolsheviks) as the 18th most significant in world history. It is, however, an isolated and probably far-fetched opinion.

Generally, the world remembers two victories of the Polish military: vanquishing the Teutonic Knights in 1410 and defeating the Turks in 1683. The problem is that Poles themselves somehow have a different perception of their own contribution to history. The Polish History Museum conducted a survey in which it asked Polish citizens on what was the greatest military victory of Poland? The answers leave little room for speculation. Forty per cent voted for the 1920 Battle of Warsaw. Remaining events included the aforementioned battles of Grunwald in 1410 (28 per cent) and Vienna in 1683 (17 per cent), the conquering of Moscow in 1610 (8 per cent), and the capture of Monte Cassino in 1944 (7 per cent).

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In his book, Chwalba stresses that Poles failed to persuade western politicians and researchers that it was in fact Poland that stopped the Bolsheviks. The book's title directly refers to the fact that while Poland won the war in the military sense it lost in terms of propaganda. In an interview with *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Chwalba said: "the Piłsudskiite lost their global fight for the Battle of Warsaw. Poland's means were too humble for effective PR policies. Politicians and writers around the world found it difficult to believe that a nation from nowhere and a state out of nowhere, a country of poor and the illiterate managed to beat the Red Army and stop the speeding global revolution." The victory was generally attributed to General Maxime Weygnard, the French leader and chief of the military mission in Poland. For that reason and others Chwalba insists that "although Piłsudski won the war, he lost peace".

Saviour of Europe

During the interwar period Poland was regarded as an unruly, imperial state, Chwalba claims; and once it gained independence it reached for non-Polish lands in the east (there is some truth to this as Poland benefitted from the right for self-determination, but denied the same right to, for example, Ukrainians). Even today Poland has not managed to shred this brash and aggressive image, and it still lingers in western historiography and continues to be promoted by Kremlin propaganda.

In Poland, it is commonly believed the world does not understand that it was Poland that saved Europe from the Soviets. Even history enthusiasts tend to promote these claims. A popular Polish history web portal *Histmag* conducted a survey and asked 1,600 readers the following question: "If Poland hadn't won the Battle of Warsaw, would the Bolshevik revolution have spread all over Europe?" Sixty per cent of respondents said that it would and 23 per cent disagreed. Yet, according to Chwalba, no documents exist to confirm that the decimated Bolsheviks were planning further expansions into the West. What they wanted, instead, was to restore the German-Russian border from 1913 and undermine the Treaty of Versailles.

The Bolsheviks considered assisting revolutionists in the West if any revolutions were to break out. However, the Battle of Warsaw took place in the second half of 1920 when the revolutionary dust in Western Europe was settling. Its peak was in 1919 when republics of councils were proclaimed in Bavaria and Hungary; and revolutionary unrest stretched across a great part of Germany, Italy and Spain. In Poland there are certain groups welcoming the narrative of a potential alliance between Piłsudski and the white generals-royalists. This

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narrative is fuelled by Piotr Zychowicz, a right-wing historian and journalist, who published a book in 2015 titled *The Piłsudski-Lenin Pact. A tale of how Poles saved Bolshevism and wasted a chance to build an empire*. His thesis is patchy, yet it impacts the imagination of many and provokes lively discussions.

Suffering

Generally speaking, nations build their collective memory on the narrative of martyrdom or heroism. Poles are successful at mixing both. We like to think of ourselves as both Europe's defenders and victims. In 2019 the liberal *Oko Press* asked its readers the following: "Do you think that Poles have experienced more evil and suffering in their history than other nations?" 74 per cent of responses agreed and 22 per cent did not. This rough sketch of the Polish national character corresponds to the Polish experiences with the Soviets during the 20th century. The fact that the West underestimated the 1920 Polish military victory left Poland feeling underappreciated, especially since this was the only victorious moment of Poland moment over Russia; later, of course, was the Soviet invasion in 1939 and subsequent decades of domination.

At the same time, the feeling of alienation from European history has more elements and not only Poles are troubled about it. While it is western researchers who often set the tone of European historiography, in the West some 20th-century events and processes – including communism, the Holocaust and the German occupation – are perceived in a completely different way. Some historians, such as Timothy Snyder and Tony Judt, tried to glue together two parts of the same continent. Yet, Eastern and Central Europe remains underrepresented in these central narratives.

The Polish sense of being ignored is part of this broader issue. This is perhaps why so many Poles desire a triumphal arch and the showcasing of the achievements of their predecessors, be it real or exaggerated.

Zbigniew Rokita is a Polish journalist and writer specialising in Central and Eastern Europe. He is the author of a recent book edtitled *Kajś. Opowieść o Górnym Śląsku* (*Kajś. A tale of Upper Silesia*).

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