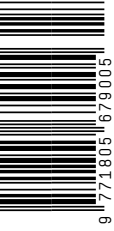


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COVER STORIES Małgorzata Fidelis, Basil Kerski, Daniel Kroupa, Vladislav Zubok, György Schöpflin,
Larry Wolff POLITICS Andrew Wilson ECONOMY Philipp Ther CULTURE Sylwia Siedlecka INTERVIEW Jacob Poushter



The Powerless Are Tired: 1989–2019

Lessons from Patočka

Everyday Ecstasy

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ASPEN
Review
The Powerless
Are Tired:
1989–2019

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30 Years After

Dear Readers,

Thirty years ago, the barbed fences were removed and the walls surrounding the former Eastern bloc were demolished. The Soviet empire collapsed due to both the external determination of the free world and the internal, seemingly powerless, resistance of a handful of those empowered only by mutual solidarity and faithfulness to the values of human rights and dignity. In an interview in this issue, Daniel Kroupa reminds us of the heritage of Jan Patočka, spokesperson of Charter 77, that “there are situations where a philosopher has a duty to put his philosophy into practice and proclaim it in real life”. Most of those powerless people—to whom we should remain grateful to date—are gone, tired or have retired from public life. Hence the title of this issue.

The first decade of freedom in former communist countries was marked by more hopes than fears. The West was wondering how post-communist societies would be—somewhat disoriented as prisoners just released—able to cope with the opportunities and challenges connected with a liberalized economy and pluralistic politics. Surveys later confirmed that only a minority of citizens were engaged actively at that time in the transformation of society while a majority was rather passive in adapting to the new circumstances. Some of those would later see themselves as losers in the transformation.

Political and economic transformation was managed in most of the countries in the second decade to the extent that they became eligible for membership in the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union. Simultaneously, there was a growing realization that the sole institutional umbrella of Euro-Atlantic institutions did not bring about higher standards of governance, and a quick catch-up with the Western living standard. Doubts about the efficiency of “a policy of imitation” (Ivan Krastev) began to surface. As György Schöpflin explains in his article, the first seeds of an illiberal mood were sown with the acceptance of the superiority of Western institutions by the countries joining the club.

The overture to the third decade was marked by the world economic and financial crisis that deepened the existing disappointments, disillusion and divisions, not just in former Eastern bloc countries. Today, the leaders of the past 30 years are gone or leaving and new leaders are either suggesting simple and populist solutions or painting a bleak future. In this atmosphere, the way we see our recent path will frame our perspective for the future. In his article on this issue, Basil Kerski reminds us that our debate about recent history is basically a debate about our future.

I hope the readings in this issue will provide not only a retrospective look at the last 30 years, but will also reflect current challenges. Who are the powerless of today who will shape our future? Are they still those who can draw their strength from solidarity and universal longing for human rights? In Europe or elsewhere, they should not be forgotten.

JÍŘÍ SCHNEIDER

Executive Director, Aspen Institute CE

Returning to the East

Thirty years after the Velvet Revolution, there is no area of international cooperation in which the Visegrad Group could not do something useful together. Unfortunately, there is also no area in which the existence of the V4 would produce anything that we do not already owe to the European Union.

This would not be a major problem were it not for the fact that in 2015 all the countries of the region were for the first time taken over by parties contesting the changes launched in 1989. Their common denominator is the rejection of liberal democracy, of the “Brussels dictatorship” and of what they call blind imitation of the West. They all want to “make Visegrad great again”.

As we remember, the symbol of the new era has been the opposition of the four Visegrad governments to the reception of refugees in line with the European Union's resolution. Former top of the class students in the "Brussels School" took this as an assault on their sovereignty and Christian identity, and jointly engineered a freezing of the European Commission's decision. That is what this was all about, in fact—to curtail the prerogatives of Brussels and shift the center of power to the European Council, that is to say, the Heads of Government of the EU Member States. From now on, governments violating the Copenhagen criteria (the fulfillment of which was a condition for EU accession) go practically unpunished. Hungary and Poland prove this every day.

The refugee crisis was only a perfect excuse to break away from Brussels. After all, over the last four years the Visegrad Group countries have received over a million migrants from all over the world, treating them as a source of cheap labor (one of the few competitive advantages over the West). In 2018, no country in the world received as many economic migrants as Poland.

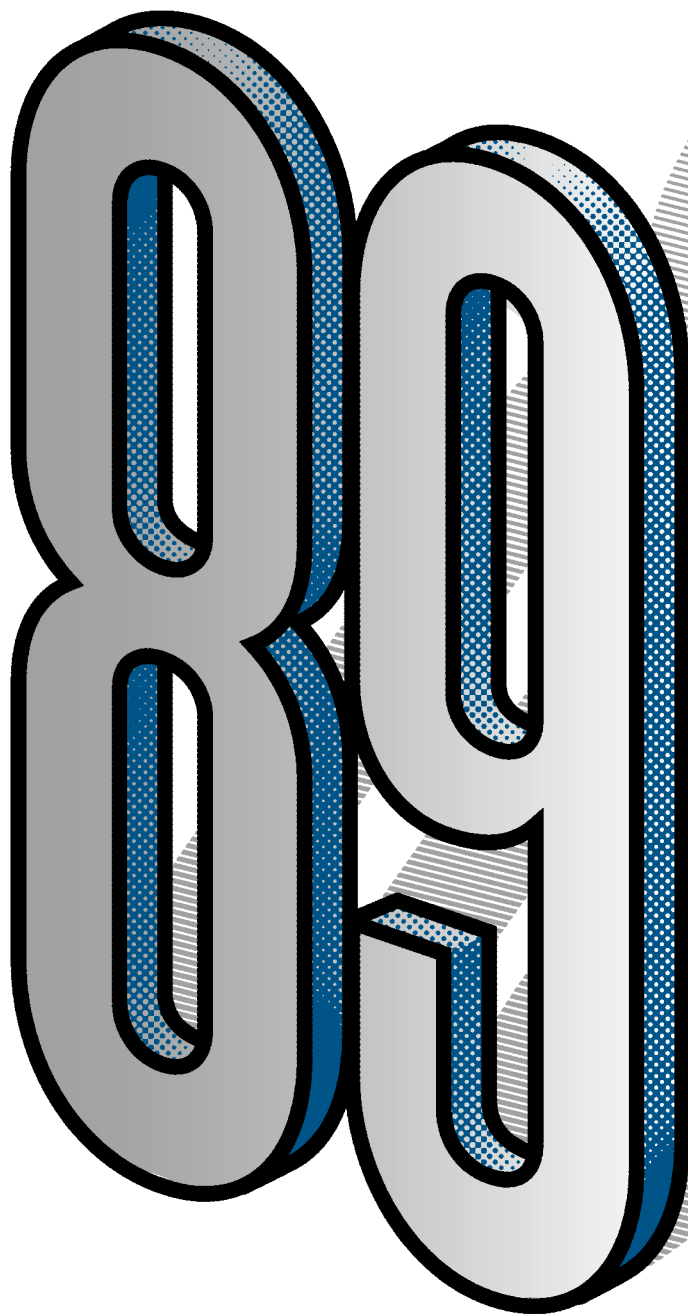
Central European populists, in contrast to Central European liberals, understood that they need each other. The Visegrad Group consequently finally found its purpose and *raison d'être*, namely the dismantling of liberal democracy. In practice, this means the unlimited power of the ruling party, which calls itself democratic because its power comes from elections. In fact, these are governments of an oligarchy that privatize the state for its own needs, offering voters ersatzes of the welfare state and the sense of a national bond, allegedly threatened by the cosmopolitan elites and the "Brussels dictatorship".

There is some irony in the fact that the Visegrad Group, which was created as an image project of several post-communist democracies aspiring to join the Western world, has become a symbol of profound European divisions, including the most important one—the European East and the West. Today, we have returned to the East of our own free will, or we are perceived in this manner, which amounts to the same thing.

ALEKSANDER KACZOROWSKI

Editor in Chief Aspen Review Central Europe

COVER STORY
LIBERALISM
FUKUYAMA
POLAND
FEMINISM



The Long Shadow of 1989

Thirty years after 1989 one might argue that rather than empowering liberalism in Eastern Europe it has proved to weaken liberalism and make societies vulnerable to populist agitation.

The collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 stunned the world. The dominant interpretation of what came to be known as the Autumn of Nations or the Year of Truth proved to be as swift and overwhelming as the events themselves. We immediately began to hear about the triumph of capitalism over socialism, and liberal democracy over dictatorships. All this was cloaked in the rhetoric of inevitability and the incompatibility of socialism with human nature. The historian Martin Malia had argued for the “genetic code” of Marxism that almost naturally doomed that the system would yield to the redeeming qualities of the free market while Francis Fukuyama famously declared “the end of history.”¹ Indeed, a new utopia emerged: not the one about a classless society of communism but about a post-ideological world and universal prosperity to be delivered by the neoliberal global economy.

To say that few experts on the region within and outside Eastern Europe had predicted the collapse of communism prior to 1989 is by now a cliché. In 2019, we can paraphrase that statement by noting that few experts anticipated that the demise of communist regimes in Eastern Europe would eventually help generate a global retreat from democracy. Already in the early 1990s, the Bulgarian intellectual Iyaylo Ditchew warned us against embracing the myth of post-ideological harmony, which in his mind was a way to repress reality. He wrote: “The repressed never does disappear; at one time or another it reemerges in an irrational form; similarly, repressed misery and suffering shall certainly be back one day, the whole problem is under what monstrous shape they will manifest themselves.”²

The recent rise of right-wing authoritarian populism calls for a critical re-assessment of the dominant narrative of capitalism’s triumph and inevitable “democratization” generated by the collapse of communism.

The recent rise of right-wing authoritarian populism in East/Central Europe and around the globe calls for a critical re-assessment of the dominant narrative of capitalism’s triumph and inevitable “democratization” generated by the collapse of communism. What are the stories that have been lost, marginalized, or “repressed” in the euphoria of communism’s demise? How should we interpret 1989 so we can de-mythologize the narrative of “natural” progress towards democracy and begin to understand the collapse of communism on its own terms and in multi-dimensional ways? And finally, what is the best way to recover and use 1989 as the repository of human hopes and desires to live in a better society?

Living through the End of History: A View from Below

How did it feel to live through “the end of history”? Scholars and journalists have produced volumes on the collapse of communism often looking for causes in the complex terrain of foreign policy, American military might, domestic discontent, economic crisis, and the Gorbachev factor. Stephen Kotkin and Jan Tomasz Gross even concluded that it was the Eastern European ruling elites, “the uncivil society,” who were the most instrumental in the collapse as they lost the support of the Kremlin and were unable to address the most pressing economic and political problems facing their

societies.³ These views are instructive, but they place political developments in the realm of impersonal processes or the supposedly all-powerful elites. To understand what happened in 1989, we first need to restore the agency to the diverse social actors. Padraic Kenney was right when he questioned the totalitarian paradigm in the late 1990s by suggesting that the communist system in Eastern Europe was better understood as a process of negotiation between state and society. “Ultimately,” he wrote, “the fall of communism itself was the result of the breakdown of state-society-relations.”⁴

A view from below unmasks the myths of capitalism’s triumph as a system allegedly more compatible with human nature than socialism. Few people in Eastern Europe fought for the free market during the communist era. None of the Eastern European revolts such as the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the Prague Spring of 1968 in Czechoslovakia, or the Solidarity movements in Poland in 1980–81, entailed demands for the return to capitalism. On the contrary, the struggle was primarily for political democratization, material betterment, and more effective state protections for the working people. Few people in Eastern Europe knew much about the workings of the free market. Most of the popular knowledge remained within the idealized realm of the imagined West. Even for political elites, the turn to a full-fledged free-market economy was not pre-ordained, but rather a late decision based on economic calculations and international pressure.

Was 1989 truly a major and unexpected break for individuals in Eastern Europe the way it was for Timothy Garton Ash and other Western audiences who watched the Polish elections of 4 June 1989, or the mass demonstrations against the communist regime in Prague in November and December of that year? Rather, 1989 was primarily a deeply humane moment exemplified in such events as a human chain formed by close to two million people and covering a distance of approximately 420 miles across the Soviet Baltic republics of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in August 1989. And then in the dismantling of the Berlin Wall a few months later.

A Transnational Moment of Inspirations and Hopes

For most people on the ground, 1989 was a turning point in an emotional rather than a strictly political or economic sense. The historian Alicja Kusiak-Brownstein, who conducted interviews with a group of Polish Generation X, captured the mood of many young people at the time by

1) Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989): 3-18.

2) Ivaýlo Dítchev, “Epitaph for Sacrifice, Epitaph for the Left,” in Alexander Kiossev, ed. *Posttheory, Games, and Discursive Resistance: The Bulgarian Case* (New York: SUNY, 1995). Quoted in Balázs Trencsényi, Michal Kopeček, Luka Lisjak Gabrijelčič, Maria Falina, Mónika Baár, and Maciej Janowski, *A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe. Vol. II: Negotiating Modernity in the “Short Twentieth Century” and Beyond, Part II: 1968-2018* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 192.

3) Stephen Kotkin and Jan Tomasz Gross, *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment* (New York: Modern Library, 2010).

4) Padraic Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland: Workers and Communists, 1945-1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 1.

describing the experience of 1989 as “a flow of life” with political events in the background. “1989 was the year of high spirits,” she wrote. “The level of activism among young people was very high. It seemed like we were all involved in something—amateur theater, amateur press, music, politics, religious and self-education groups, free travel without money, fraternization, ‘the first joint and getting high!’”⁵

It was also a transnational moment of humanist bonds, inspirations and hopes. As a teenager in Poland, I remember the smiles in the street and the feelings of solidarity among people from different Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union as they crossed borders more freely and more widely than before, often with the purpose of engaging in the boom of consumer tourism. But the “magic of the moment” went further, beyond Europe.⁶ In July 1989, I found myself together with my mother on a sight-seeing trip to Cairo and Alexandria (since “they” had now eased travel restrictions, we figured, why not see the pyramids?) The Egyptian merchants on every fruit market in Cairo and elsewhere greeted our tour group with a raised thumb, a radiant smile, and an enthusiastic pronouncement: “Lech Wałęsa!” It felt good to be Polish in 1989!

It was not until after 1989 that the impact of the collapse of communism began to take effect on personal lives, often in ways that rarely resembled the exhilarating atmosphere of the Year of Truth.⁷ In January 1990, the Solidarity government in Poland began implementing the program designed by the Minister of Finance, Leszek Balcerowicz, to make a quick and radical transition from central planning to a market economy. The reforms indeed shed state control over the economy and boosted market activity, but they also resulted in the rapid collapse of industrial plants and agricultural collectives leading to skyrocketing unemployment rates and growing poverty. For many, it was the encounter with de-industrialization in the early 1990s that was the turning point to remember and to reinterpret 1989 in a different light. For millions of people who lost their jobs, 1989 acquired an ambivalent meaning. What was democracy worth if it caused one to lose one’s livelihood?

The implementation of free-market reforms and the dismantling of the communist economy based on industrial production shocked the population everywhere in Eastern Europe, now affected by unemployment and a lack of social security mechanisms that were the norm under communism.

At the same time, corruption among new political classes and fraudulent investment schemes contributed to the growing gap between the new political elites and ordinary citizens. 1989 cast a long shadow over people's lives.

5) Alicja Kusiak-Brownstein, "Gen X and 1989 in Poland," Nanovic Institute for European Studies, 21 November 2014 nanovic.nd.edu/news/gen-x-and-1989-in-poland-2/ accessed 24 September 2019

A Feeling of Powerlessness Towards the New Economic Conditions

When I conducted interviews for my dissertation on female workers in Poland in 2002, the memory of the economic transition was still fresh. I was interested in women's experiences of their work in the late 1940s and 1950s, but the women's responses tended to circle back to the present. "There was injustice and hardship then as there is now," one former female textile worker, Teresa, told me. "But in the old days, if one had a problem one went to the Party chapter to complain. The Party helped. If a single mother could not make her ends meet, the Party would help her. Now, no one knows where to go. The only difference is that nowadays one can openly speak one's mind about all this. But who knows for how long..."

6) The phrase "magic of the moment" comes from the popular song by the Scorpions, *Wind of Change*, released in 1990.

7) The term "Year of Truth" comes from Timothy Garton Ash, *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Prague, and Berlin* (New York: Random House, 1990).

For millions of people who lost their jobs, 1989 acquired an ambivalent meaning. What was democracy worth if it caused one to lose one's livelihood?

The statement revealed a feeling of powerlessness towards the new economic conditions that seemed beyond the control of ordinary individuals. At the same time, Teresa appreciated the political freedoms such as the right to free expression. Yet, it is clear that Teresa did not share the belief in inevitable democratization that many scholars were writing about at the time. In 2002, after all, Poland was only two years away from joining the EU. For my interviewees, however, neither economic security nor political freedoms were a given. The experience of 1989 taught Teresa that they can be taken away at any time. It is such perspectives from below, including the diverse understandings of democracy, that need to be explored to fully understand the legacy of 1989.

Contested Languages of 1989

The meaning of 1989 was also shaped by the battles over rhetorical control and the desire to win potential citizen-voters like Teresa on the part of the new political elites. These battles entailed contested mem-

ories of communism and its demise. In 2014, Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik found the complex memory of 1989 to be critical to understanding the contemporary political and cultural landscape of the region. Numerous authors, who contributed to the volume on *Twenty Years After Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, edited by Bernhard and Kubik, demonstrated how 1989 was interpreted in divergent and often opposite terms from the year of liberation to the year of “betrayal” and a secret pact between the elites. These authors pointed to the political utility of 1989 for Eastern European elites to evoke specific emotions and generate support for a particular political platform.⁸

Such battles entailed more than manipulating the memory of 1989. They distorted the intellectual traditions essential to the development of democracy. The collapse of communism opened a new way for the post-1989 political elites and the media to de-historicize and distort such fundamental concepts of democracy as liberalism, feminism, socialism and human rights. While liberalism was typically reduced to the free market ideology in public discourses and practices, any progressive ideas, such as the welfare state or the equality of the sexes, which were ironically often derived from nineteenth-century liberal thought, were deemed as “communist” and therefore illegitimate. In that sense, another marginalized story of 1989 is how the oversimplified interpretation of capitalism’s triumph limited democratic freedoms and the individual empowerment that so many people felt in 1989. Freedom of speech allowed for multiple perspectives to come to surface, but the dominant anti-communist paradigm established new boundaries. One could indeed speak one’s mind, as Teresa noted in 2002, but not all thoughts and feelings were equally legitimate.

Thirty years after 1989, one can begin to examine how 1989 instead of “returning” Eastern Europe to Europe, as many had hoped, contributed to distorting the European intellectual tradition, including the concepts of liberalism and communism. One could argue that 1989 rather than empowering liberalism in Eastern Europe, proved to weaken liberalism and make societies vulnerable to populist agitation.

Stigmatizing any Ideas of Social Justice

The danger of distorting intellectual traditions for political gain was noted by historian Andrzej Walicki in the early 2000s. Walicki criticized the

distinct use of “communism” in post-1989 Polish public culture as a term exclusively associated with Soviet control rather than with the rich and complex intellectual tradition that had shaped modern European and global history. In addition, the anti-communist rhetoric was accompanied by an unabashed rejection of any Polish leftist tradition as illegitimate and “un-Polish.” For Walicki, this was a deliberate strategy on the part of ruling elites aimed at evoking negative feelings towards the welfare state and workers’ rights, all of which did not fit the neoliberal model of post-communist transition. Walicki also warned about the danger of separating liberalism from individual freedoms not limited to the economic sphere, which are essential to human rights.⁹

These statements ring particularly true today. Stigmatizing any ideas of social justice as “communism” has hampered public debates over real inequalities eventually opening up a new field for populists such as the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland, who have labelled the welfare state not as a universal human right but as part of elevating the “nation” understood in exclusionary terms.

Freedom of speech allowed for multiple perspectives to come to surface, but the dominant anti-communist paradigm established new boundaries.

At the same time, 1989 was not all about de-legitimizing leftist politics and stifling voices from below. The collapse of communism also gave us new languages to speak about the limits of democracy in post-communist Eastern Europe. Some of the first critiques of the post-communist political and social environment in Eastern Europe came from feminist activists. In contrast to other scholars and journalists, who focused on applauding parliamentary democracy, market reforms, and civil society, feminists pointed to backtracking on women’s rights. These included the resurgence of conservative gender ideology, employment discrimination, and the attack on reproductive rights. In the early 1990s, while criticizing the restrictions on abortion rights in Poland enacted in 1993, Wanda Nowicka noted a “positive side effect.” She wrote: “Women have become aware of the need to organize and to be more conscious about their own issues. We were given liberal regulations much earlier and easier than many other women in the world. ... Many of us did not perceive a danger until recently. But

8) Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, eds. *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

9) Andrzej Walicki, *Od projektu komunistycznego do neoliberalnej utopii* (Warszawa: Universitas, 2013).

what is given can be easily taken away. Now, it is our turn to struggle for our rights.”¹⁰ At that time, Nowicka could not have known how powerful the language of feminist resistance would become in the second decade of the 2000s.

Feminist Protests as an Effective Strategy against Populists

Remarkably, decades later, the feminist struggles acquired a new meaning and became an effective strategy of resistance against the global populist turn while also providing a source of inspiration for deepening democracy. In a sense, Eastern European feminists, who had noted the backtracking on democratic values and protested against the denial of full citizenship to women shortly after 1989 were better prepared than others to fight for democracy three decades later. Indeed, one can look to 1989 as marking the beginning of the shift in the language of democratization and inclusion from the Marxist critique focused on labor and class to the feminist quest for women’s rights as human rights. The Black Protests in Poland against the government’s attempts to enact a total ban on abortion in 2016-18, serve as a powerful example of this trend. The demonstrations mobilized women from all social backgrounds and political orientations, large cities and small towns. They also generated sister demonstrations across the globe.

The time has come to examine 1989 not only as the end of something: communism, Marxist illusions, “history,” but also as a new beginning.

Feminist language has a good chance to continue to exert its influence because it offers an alternative conceptualization of the “people” to the one promoted by authoritarian nationalists. Studying contemporary women’s protests in Latin America and Poland, Jenny Gunnarson Payne wrote: “The Black Protests are one of the most powerful movements against neoliberal populism—not only in Poland, but also globally. The success of the Black Protests primarily lies in the fact that the participants first clearly opposed the exclusionary definition of ‘people’ proposed by the neoliberal regime and conservative Christian movements, and then showed an alternative kind of collective identity—a different one, a feminist and supra-national version of the ‘people’—who began to effectively organize at the national and transnational level on behalf of broadly understood democratic demands, far beyond the realm of gender and reproduction.”¹¹

The time has come to examine 1989 not only as the end of something: communism, Marxist illusions, “history,” but also as a new beginning. 1989 was a deeply humanist moment that cannot be reduced to oversimplified ideological categories of capitalism’s victory over socialism. The departure from the neoliberal narrative allows us to recover the personalized and emotional experiences of 1989 and its long shadow. This requires an honest and critical assessment of the collapse of communism in terms of the human cost. At the same time, 1989 can still serve as inspiration for human cooperation and resistance against authoritarianism. 1989 allowed for politicizing discourses and distorting intellectual traditions in a particular way to eliminate leftist sentiments. It also provided, however, material to make new tools to confront the populist regimes that threaten democracy. 1989 opened a new chapter in global history that is still being written. The content of that chapter depends on bringing to light the “repressed” stories and on the lessons we learn from them.

10) Wanda Nowicka, “Ban on Abortion in Poland. Why?” in Tanya Renee, ed., *Ana’s Land: Sisterhood in Eastern Europe* (New York: Westview Press, 19997), 42-46, 46.

11) Jenny Gunnarsoon Payne, “Kobiety jako ‘lud.’ Czarne protesty jako sprzeciw wobec autorytarnego populizmu w perspektywie międzynarodowej,” in Elżbieta Korolczuk, Beata Kowalska, Jennifer Ramme, Claudia Snochowska-Gonzales, eds. *Bunt kobiet. Czarne protest i strajki kobiet* (Gdańsk: Europejskie Centrum Solidarności, 2019), 157-183, 159.

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ASPEN REVIEW
GYÖRGY SCHÖPFLIN

COVER STORY
EU ENLARGEMENT
CENTRAL EUROPE
WICKED PROBLEM



Europe after Thirty Years, a Long Chapter of Misperceptions?

The EU acquired 11 new member states and never really took the trouble to understand what these new member states were about. Indeed, there was a lingering suspicion that they were deviant in some way.

What actually happened in 1989? Obviously, it was the end of the Soviet-type system, the political monopoly of the party, the nomenklatura and the formal language of Marxism-Leninism. For many, especially in the West, the story almost ends there. The one addition in the Western version is that communism ended because the West, the US above all, overthrew it. So, in the eyes of some to the west of the Elbe, Central Europe owes the West a debt of gratitude. And this justifies the moral and political superiority with which the West has tended to treat its newly acquired East.

There is much that is questionable about this narrative, notably that it entirely screens out the local actors. Some will grudgingly accept that Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika may have had something of a role, but the Polish Round Table, the Velvet and Singing Revolutions, the Hungarian insistence that 1956 was not a counter-revolution (as the communists insisted), but a national uprising, the demonstrations in Leipzig, in Prague, and the events in Romania in December 1989 are screened out as marginal or irrelevant. They certainly disturb the Western narrative.

So, can we agree that perestroika was a necessary condition of 1989, the role of the West as an alternative was a helpful condition, but what the Central Europeans themselves did was a sufficient condition?

The Central European narrative, that the end of the Soviet-type system was largely—not entirely—endogenous has performed a lower status in the Western hierarchy of events. This lower status tends to obscure two processes. One of these is the agency of the Central Europeans and the other is that what happened was a national emancipation—the nation in question very much with an ethnic content. “Let Poland be Poland” or some of the Estonian texts sung in 1989 illustrate this proposition, as does the Hungarian concern for the ethnic Magyars in the neighboring states (cf. József Antall's statement that he was the Prime Minister of 15 million Hungarians “in his soul”). This did not go down well.

The Central European narrative, that the end of the Soviet-type system was largely—not entirely—endogenous has performed a lower status in the Western hierarchy of events.

The Central European Dilemma:

How Much do we Absorb from the West?

The trouble was and is that the West assumed a moral and political superiority over its East and laid down various non-negotiable conditions for acceptance into the European “club”. Some of the problems that disturb the relationship today stem from this inauspicious beginning. Was there really nothing positive in the Central European cultural capital? Was there anything to be said for a westward enlargement of Central Europe? Not really, was the answer.

So in 2004 and thereafter, the EU acquired 11 new member states and never really took the trouble to understand what these new member states were about. Indeed, there was a lingering suspicion that they were deviant in some way. After all, the Copenhagen conditions were never thought to apply to the EU-15, only to the recruits; “apprentice Europeans” may be a better term.

The EU acquired 11 new member states and never really took the trouble to understand what these new member states were about. Indeed, there was a lingering suspicion that they were deviant in some way.

Apprentices are expected to absorb what the master instructs and the instructions were, “imitate us”, change your institutions, your procedures, your legislation. But imitation is never complete. Imported ideas change when they cross a cultural boundary and can give rise to “forms without content”, *formele fără fond*, as Romanian puts it. In this somewhat paradoxical way, 1989 and then EU membership revived the age-old Central European dilemma: how much do we absorb from the West? Is the West really superior? Are there local qualities that take priority? How much mimesis? Are we engaging in a process of self-colonization? There is no answer to this, other than the observation that the West policed its East carefully and was backed up in this by the local *zapadniki*. Nothing new there, of course.

But this very questioning, which only emerged slowly after 2004, encoded a certain danger for the West. Not such a long time ago, democracy was defined as government by the consent of the governed. Such systems were democratic as such, without being liberal. There was a separation of powers of course and the judiciary was expected to uphold rule of law. The political field was mostly inhabited, however, by the voters and their elected representatives. What was absent were the burgeoning intermediary institutions—civil society, NGOs, think tanks, lobbies, advocacies—which were in the business of acquiring ever more power over political decision-making. As were the newly instituted Constitutional Courts.

Central Europe adopted some of this, but with their very recent national emancipation in mind, coupled with the West’s condemnation of their ethnic identities, the dislike of the moral superiority of their local

Westernizers, political forces began to build on this multifaceted *ressentiment*. The outcome was a political realignment, the rise of parties that built on nationhood and rejected some of the liberal package—only some, far from all.

Yes, GDP per capita has gone up markedly in the EU-11, but there has been no catching up, so one of the implicit promises of 1989, that Central Europe would be on equal terms with the developed West, has not come about.

But this was quite enough to bring down the wrath of the liberals on their collective heads. These forces were thoroughly deplored as “populists” and this is where we stand today. Central Europe is demonstrating that liberalism is not a necessary condition of democracy. No wonder the West is fulminating.

The Region is Caught in the Middle Income Trap

There is still more to it however. EU membership has had its drawbacks, even if these are seldom admitted in the hallowed corridors of Brussels. Yes, GDP per capita has gone up markedly in the EU-11, but there has been no catching up, so one of the implicit promises of 1989, that Central Europe would be on equal terms with the developed West, has not come about. Instead, there is mounting evidence that the region is caught in the middle income trap; we run very hard to be able to stay in the same place. To make matters worse, the level of capital exports is uncomfortably high—about six percent of GDP in the case of the Czech Republic and Hungary, over four percent for Poland and Slovakia. To these should be added the immense export of human capital. According to IMF figures, about 20 million people have left the EU-11 and thereby presented the West with a subsidy of c.€200 billion.

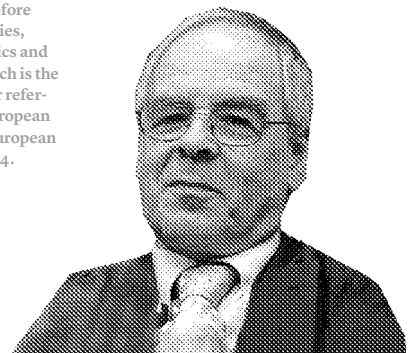
If the West, as argued, has never really bothered to learn about Central Europe, the reverse is also true. Central Europeans have constructed two imagined Wests. One is positive, the source of progress, moral and technological superiority and is “on the right side of history” (wherever that may be). The other is the reverse of this, the dismissal of a dubious, culturally colonizing West that has never really abandoned its imperial dreams and while it may be captive to post-colonial guilt for its

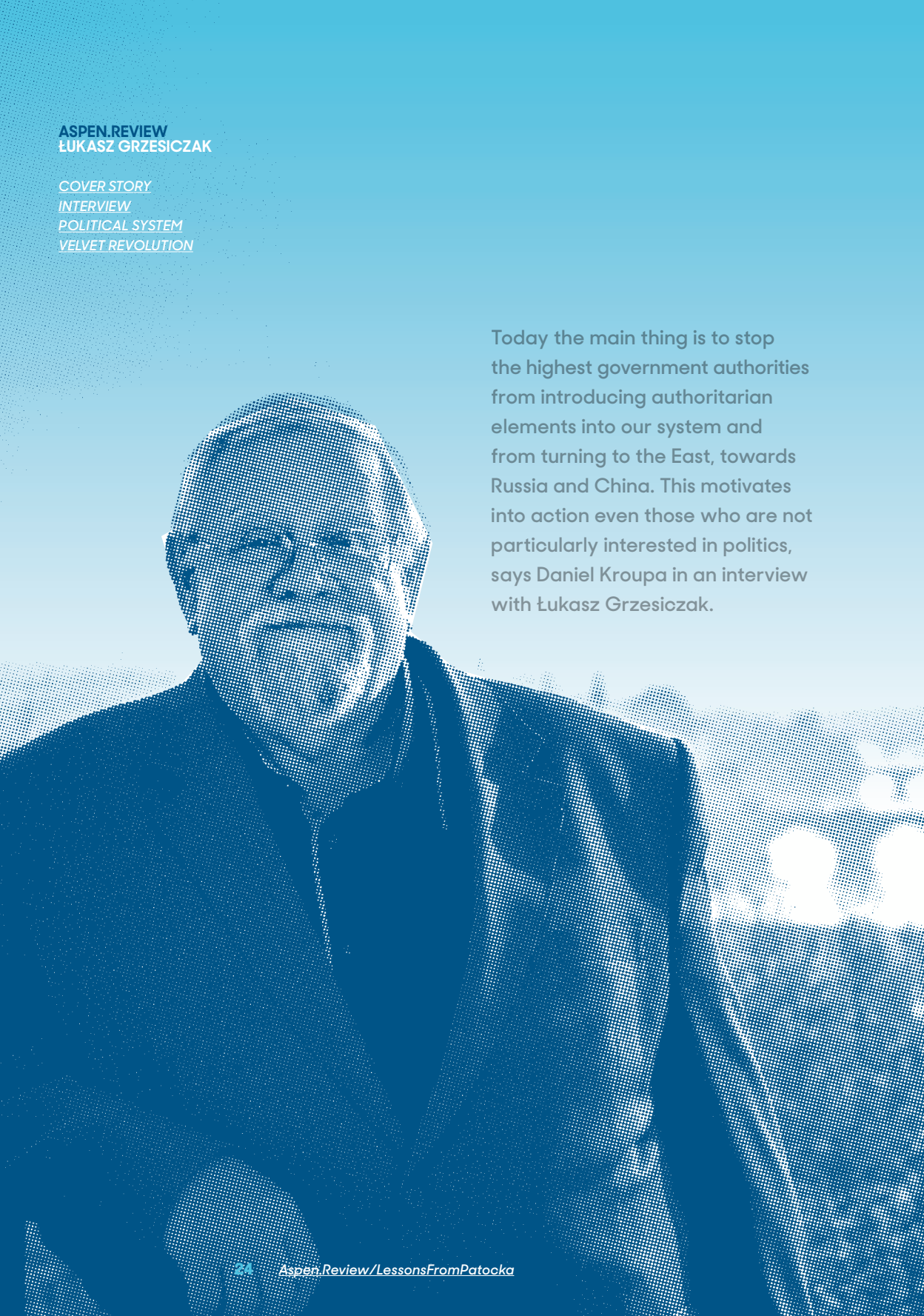
extra-European past, it treats its eastern half in much the same way as it did its colonies, as the target of a civilizing mission; although there are no massacres of the “natives”. Both of these are caricatures, of course, but they contain a kernel of truth or more.

Looking at the West-East relationship today, it is best understood as a so-called “wicked” problem (no moral condemnation)—a problem with no ready solution. Strictly speaking, these should not exist in the world of Enlightenment rationality, but in the real world, they do. Is there a way out? Yes, but that would demand a great deal of rethinking and reappraisal, by all the parties. Will this happen? Maybe, but best not hold your breath.

GYÖRGY SCHÖPFLIN

was born in Budapest in 1939 and lived in the UK from 1950 to 2004. He worked at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (1963-1967) and the BBC (1967-1976) before taking up university lecturing at the school of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London (1976-2004), including as Jean Monnet Professor of Politics and Director of the Centre for the Study of Nationalism. His principal area of research is the relationship between ethnicity, nationhood and political power, with particular reference to post-communism. Professor Schöpflin was elected a Member of the European Parliament for Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union, a member of the Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) in 2004 and re-elected in 2009 and in 2014.





Today the main thing is to stop the highest government authorities from introducing authoritarian elements into our system and from turning to the East, towards Russia and China. This motivates into action even those who are not particularly interested in politics, says Daniel Kroupa in an interview with Łukasz Grzesiczak.

Daniel Kroupa: Lessons from Patočka

ŁUKASZ GRZESICZAK: You were an MP and a senator, today you are an academic lecturer. Don't you miss big politics?

DANIEL KROUPA: No, I really don't miss "big politics", as you call it. I experienced it during the Velvet Revolution and shortly after the transition, when it was important to re-build the constitution, regulations, the law as such. Today, politics is not "big", but deals with small things and is largely governed by routine, and a parliamentarian as an individual has no influence over it. So it is quite tiring for creative people working in the parliament or even in the government. You have to spend long hours in meetings about things you have to deal with, but you don't relate to them personally. At one meeting we talked about building regulations, then about kindergartens, then about international agreements. You jump from one topic to another, it's confusing for you, you are drowning in paperwork. And

there is no energy left for reading and writing. So for me the departure from "big politics" was a kind of liberation.

Are you saying that politics used to be different, or did you just find yourself in it at a very special time?

I am still very interested in politics, in its theoretical aspect. I of course focus on political philosophy, but I also observe politics in practice. After the revolution, during the transition from a totalitarian to a democratic system, many things had to be thought through. You had to work from morning to night. In the first year I sat in parliament from eight o'clock in the morning to past midnight almost every day. After a few months I was completely exhausted, on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Today it is easy to push work on someone else, but at that time anyone who felt even a little bit of responsibility worked very hard.

But once politics starts to settle down, other forces come to the fore. At the beginning they have no impact. I mean here, for example, lobbying for certain regulations, and then lobbying becomes less and less political and more economic. This is when corruption appears. Then we entered the stage of clientelism, when large groups formed in the economy and planted their people in politics. Politics ceased to be politics, but became a kind of business. Finally, we entered the oligarchic stage, in which the “bosses” are not satisfied with filling government positions with their own people, but end up entering politics themselves, trying to take control not only of the political scene, but also of the media and other areas.

November marks the thirtieth anniversary of the Velvet Revolution. Could you list a few things that were achieved, which you consider to be a success, and a few things that were not?

I will start at the end—that is a fundamental theme for me. It is interesting, but it is also very sad to see how things that were of no interest to anyone at the beginning suddenly developed in such a way that they are beginning to destroy the democratic system in the country.

One achievement was that the totalitarian tools that the communist authorities employed to control society were removed. In our country these democratic changes

took place very quickly, in just a few months or even weeks. After the first two years, the system was already well-formed. In the economic area it took longer, a few years.

It is a great success that a stable framework for the Czech Republic was created so quickly. But it was impossible to fill it with content, it was impossible to create strong political parties, such as in Germany. Our political parties are weak, the strongest have 10-15 thousand members. At present, the ruling party is said to have only 3,5 thousand members. Looking from the West to the East, it is apparent that the number of people willing to get involved in governing the state is decreasing. This is the cause of political instability.

We also failed to create conditions for small and medium-sized companies.

The scene was quickly taken over by big players, we did not manage to separate business from politics and media.

There is a great deal of talk today about the crisis in the Czech media...

It was a success that it was possible to transform the state media into public media, which form a quite solid structure now. But the private media were simply “unleashed”. Initially, there was a ban on interrupting programs with advertising, but this was financially disadvantageous for certain companies, so lobbyists used several corrupt parliamentarians to instigate a change in the law. In this way, private media gained a lot of power, but

this does not mean that public media were significantly weakened—they are still functioning quite vigorously in the Czech Republic.

Education reform: the previously top-down and state-run education system was decentralized. Consequently, at the level of elementary schools the decisive voice belongs now to municipalities, and at the level of secondary schools to regions, while universities are public, with private universities functioning alongside them. As far as legal and formal reforms are concerned, the transition from a totalitarian to a democratic system was quite successful.

But once politics starts to settle down, other forces come to the fore. At the beginning they have no impact. I mean here, for example, lobbying for certain regulations. This is when corruption appears.

There is a lot of optimism in you...

But I do not have any problem with talking about what we did not manage to achieve. I think that we lacked a policy on higher education. Admittedly, we boosted the percentage of people with university, but at the same time the overall level of education did not increase very much. Education is in crisis in terms of what should be taught and how. I see it as a lecturer, in the entrance exams at the university—the candidates are less and less knowledgeable from year to year.

What we also failed to change is the Marxist vision of an economic base and a cultural, scientific and spiritual superstructure.

The point is that in this vision economics is still the foundation of everything, and the rest—cultural, spiritual, educational values—is only an addition. This is a misconception of modern society, because it must be based on education and culture, creativity and entrepreneurship. It is these features that drive the economy, not the other way round.

The organization Million Moments for Democracy wants to hold another major demonstration in Prague in November. In June it attracted about 300,000 people. Many people compared this demonstration to the events of November 1989. As a witness to the Velvet Revolution, do you believe that these comparisons are justified?

Of course, they are not justified in the sense that at present it is not a question of changing the regime from totalitarian to democratic. Today the main thing is to stop the highest government authorities from introducing authoritarian elements into our system and from turning to the East, towards Russia and China. This motivates into action even those who are not particularly interested in politics.

In Slovakia, the government collapsed after similar demonstrations.

Why is it different in the Czech Republic, why don't the demonstrations change anything?

Because the demonstrations failed to change the mindset of the people, they did not make them stop voting for the ruling parties. When the Czech Prime minister Andrej Babiš realized that he still had 30% support, he concluded that he did not have to worry about the demonstrations, that he could ignore them. And the President has already been elected for a second term and will not be able to run for office again, so he focuses on his allies—he rewards them and punishes his opponents.

When did you realize that the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia could finally collapse? At what point did this become clear to you?

On 17 November. It was then that I understood that the Communist Party could not go on like this, that the moment had come to make a decision. It became clear to me at the beginning of December, during the talks between Václav Havel and the new Secretary-General of the Communist Party, Karel Urbánek, that the Civic Forum would win. The entire nation was then waiting in suspense to see how these talks played out. I met Havel on Wenceslas Square, he was running towards me and laughing. I asked him what had happened and he said: "Urbánek wanted me to sign books for him." I asked him what kind of books he said that his own. I say to this:

"All right, but what happens next?" And Havel goes: "Well, they are in deep shit." That was the moment when I realized that changes were inevitable.

Were the events in Poland at that time also important for the Czech Republic?

Of course, it was hugely important. The moment when Karol Wojtyła was elected Pope was extremely important for us. We met with friends and celebrated—we studied phenomenology, so the Pope, who studied Max Scheller and his ethics and actually was also a phenomenologist, was "our man". His election as Pope was unbelievable, it was the first harbinger of better times.

It is a great success that a stable framework for the Czech Republic was created so quickly. But it was impossible to fill it with content, it was impossible to create strong political parties, such as in Germany.

I learned Polish then, I read the works of Western contemporary literature mostly in Polish, because they were not available in Czech. I had a subscription to the Catholic monthly *Znak*, I bought books in a Polish bookstore at the corner of Wenceslas Square and Jindřišská Street. Then I discovered that in my district in Prague one could watch Polish television. I also

listened to Radio Free Europe in Polish. So Poland had a huge significance for me. We followed what was happening there with huge interest.

Which events before 1989 were, in your opinion, the most important for the fall of communism? Would you mention Charter 77 in this context?

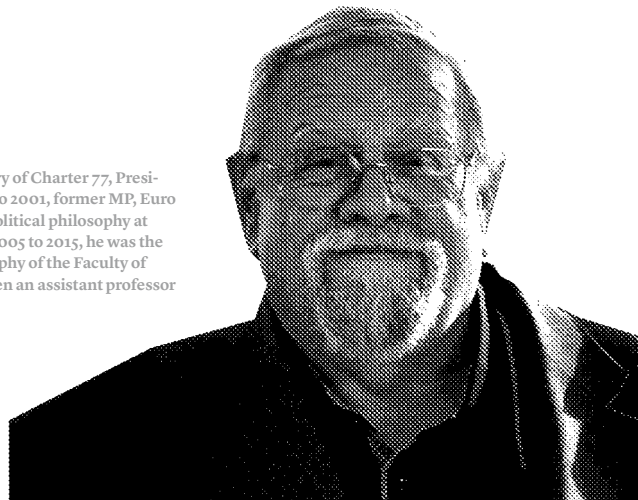
Yes, but not only that. I organized philosophical seminars in Prague, attended by the most important philosophers of the day, such as Charles Taylor. They brought us out of isolation and made it possible for us to catch up at least a little bit with the development of Western thought. In the second half of the 1980s we were very much involved in political philosophy and economics, we were visited by August von Hayek's students, they brought us books and gave us lectures. Thanks to this, many people later knew what to strive for, how to act politically in practice.

You were a student of Professor Jan Patočka. How do you assess his influence on the fight against communism? How do you remember him as a human being?

Patočka played a crucial role because he offered us an alternative to the official Marxist line of thought. In terms of erudition and general knowledge, he was far superior to the stars of Western neo-Marxism of the 1960s. He thought very intensively about the fate of Europe, he made us seek out contacts in countries that were in a similar position as ours, such as Poland and Hungary. Finally, although he spent his entire life trying to stay out of politics, he took a stand on human rights and entered politics after the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. He thus showed that philosophy is not just about sitting at home and thinking, but that there are situations where a philosopher has a duty to put his philosophy into practice and proclaim it in real life.

DANIEL KROUPA

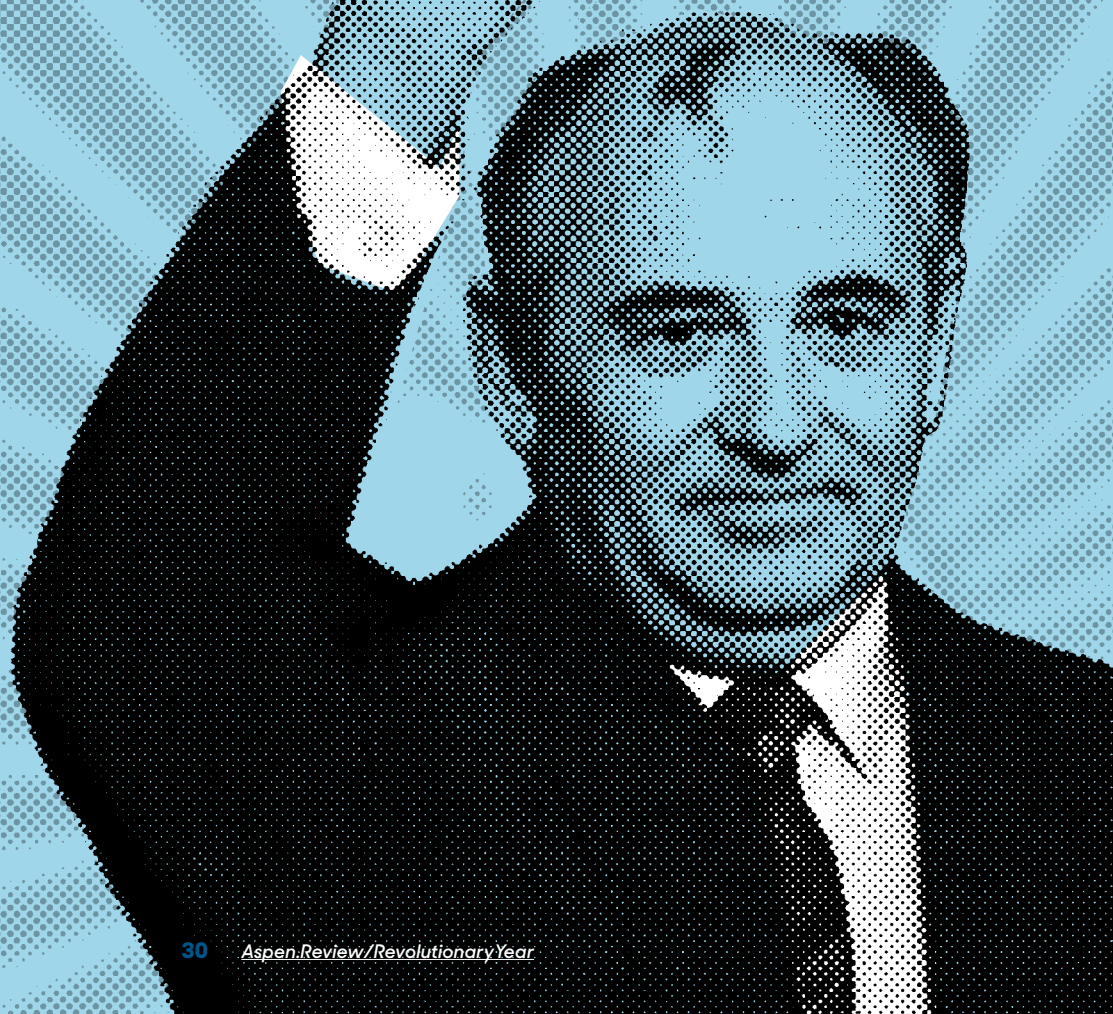
is a Czech politician and philosopher, dissident, signatory of Charter 77, President of the Civic Democratic Alliance (ODA) from 1998 to 2001, former MP, Euro MP and senator. After the Velvet Revolution he taught political philosophy at several faculties of Charles University in Prague. From 2005 to 2015, he was the Head of the Department of Political Science and Philosophy of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ústí nad Labem. Since 2015 he has been an assistant professor at this department.



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ПЕРЕСТРОЙКА



Epoch-making Change: Reflections on the Significance of the Revolutionary Year 1989

The year 1989 was the birth of the political Europe in which we live today. Thirty years ago, revolutions started by ordinary citizens not only led to the collapse of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, but also, and above all, changed the face of the entire continent.

In Germany, this revolutionary upheaval was mainly attributable to the reform policy initiated by the Soviet head of state Mikhail Gorbachev, the policy of glasnost and perestroika. The role played by civil society in this process of renewal, especially the Solidarity movement, is, however, usually underestimated. This forgotten, mutual interaction between Solidarity's struggle for freedom and Gorbachev's reforms was aptly summed up by the Polish historian Jerzy Holzer: according to him the birth of Solidarity in August 1980 and its political consequences after Gorbachev took power in 1985 became the actual catalyst for perestroika, which in turn accelerated further changes in Poland. Solidarity's leaders, gathered around Lech Wałęsa, used Gorbachev's reformist zeal to bring about the Round Table talks that began already in February 1989. Their conclusion at the beginning of April opened the door to the democratisation of Poland.

The re-legalization of Solidarity in April and the first partially free elections in Poland on 4 June 1989 triggered a chain reaction that led to the Round Table discussions in Hungary at the end of the spring of the same year and to the mass protests in East Germany and Czechoslovakia in the autumn. The last link in this revolutionary chain of events was the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989. This was the symbolic climax of the European revolution, in which it was Solidarity that formed the vanguard, led to the collapse of the communist regime and extended the scope of freedom.

The victory of the civil revolutions in Central Europe in 1989 offered Germany an unexpected opportunity for unification, which took place only a year later, on 3 October 1990.

The victory of the civil revolutions in Central Europe in 1989 offered Germany an unexpected opportunity for unification, which took place only a year later, on 3 October 1990. German reunification would not have been possible, however, without the Allies' agreement, but also without the acceptance of the neighbors. The basic condition for reunification was reconciliation not only with Germany's western neighbors, but also, to an equal extent, with Poland. Thanks to Germany being united and integrated with Western structures, Poland had the West right at its doorstep. Solidarity leaders looked favorably on these geopolitical changes.

The reunification of Germany resulted in the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Central Europe. Moscow thus lost its military control over Central and Eastern Europe. The former colonies of the Soviet empire were transformed into sovereign nations. Civic revolutions in Poland, Hungary, East Germany and Czechoslovakia also strengthened the desire for freedom among the peoples of the Soviet Union itself. In addition to the Baltic nations, a return to national sovereignty and independence from Moscow was also demanded by Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians and Belarusians.

In 1989, Moscow could not and would not use tanks to suppress the revolution in Poland, the GDR or Hungary. In the face of mass protests by the citizens of these countries, the risk of an uncontrolled political crisis was too great. From the point of view of Soviet authorities, the peaceful change was to help alleviate the crises that broke out in the Soviet domain, and thus strengthen the center of power in Moscow. This calculation was doomed to failure when confronted with reality, however, as the Central European

revolution of 1989 had already spread to the entire empire. In this situation, the communists in the USSR itself partly opted for a force-based solution, which was supposed to stop the uncontrolled changes. Gorbachev sent troops to the Baltic republics.

Meanwhile, in the summer of 1991, the “hardliners” of the communist regime sought to overthrow Gorbachev, thereby only accelerating the collapse of the Soviet empire. The Russian Federation was born on the ruins of the “Red Empire”. The Baltic States regained their sovereignty, and the Ukrainians, after many unsuccessful attempts in the twentieth century, were finally able to create their own state. The newly emerged Ukraine gave up its nuclear arsenal. In return, Russia guaranteed the inviolability of Ukraine’s borders under the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances of 1994, with this involving the territorial integrity of Ukraine in exchange for Russia’s nuclear monopoly in Eastern Europe—that was the gist of the agreement. It was an important element of the European political order after 1989, an order which Russian President Vladimir Putin questioned by starting a war in Eastern Ukraine.

The fall of the communist rule in the early 1990s gave a new impulse to the idea of political integration of Europe. In 1993, the countries of the West transformed the European Economic Community into the European Union, emphasizing the political foundations of integration and strengthening economic ties. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 deepened financial integration and set the goal of introducing a common European currency. Countries that had been neutral during the Cold War, such as Austria, Sweden and Finland, joined the European Union in 1995 and strengthened both the economic and political attractiveness of the Union.

A Faded Memory of 1989

The revolutions of 1989 fundamentally changed the face of Europe. But these events of 30 years ago are deeply buried in the memory of today’s Europeans, and their significance has diminished. The peoples of Europe have firmly entrenched themselves in their identities, traditions and cultures, enclosing themselves in a narrow circle of their own problems. Moreover, it is becoming clear this year that we still do not know how to use the European anniversary of 1989-2019 to create positive ties between European societies in order to cultivate a common political awareness of the traditions that

unite us. This can be seen very clearly as of the early months of this year. The thirtieth anniversary of the Polish Round Table and the first partially free parliamentary elections on 4 June or the Hungarian Round Table—all these events have hardly been registered in the European media or on the European political scene.

And yet 4 June 1989 is a date of crucial importance for world history. On that day, Solidarity won partially free elections, the citizens deprived the communists of their political legitimacy at the ballot box, and in China tanks were used to bloodily suppress the democratic, peaceful civil movement. While Poland paved the way to democracy and a market economy, the Chinese leaders of the Communist Party decided to defend a one-party dictatorship by choosing the path of capitalism without an open civil society.

Solidarity and perestroika were on the opposite poles of these two events. The Round Table in Poland, the legalization of Solidarity and the reform policy initiated by Gorbachev inspired the Chinese youth in spring 1989 to peacefully press for the reform of Chinese communism. When, at the end of May, workers joined the students to form Beijing's Free Trade Union, the Politburo of the CCP realized that a dangerous political mixture was in the pipeline that could lead to the birth of a Chinese Solidarity. In the light of the Polish experience, the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party decided to stop this process by force.

Communist "old-timers", such as Erich Honecker and Gustáv Husák, who were reluctant to pursue reforms, were fascinated with the Chinese solution. After the events of 4 June 1989, East German television showed shots of the bloody events at the Heavenly Peace Square in Beijing. This was a warning, of course recognized as such by the group of Solidarity leaders gathered around Lech Wałęsa. They had to continue Polish reforms and negotiate further compromises with Wojciech Jaruzelski and Czesław Kiszczak in such a way as to minimize the risk of a violent escalation.

The forgotten significance of the European and even global political dimension of 1989 is particularly surprising in Germany. After all, United Germany or the Berlin Republic is the child of this revolution. Germany has definitely benefited from the pioneering role played by Polish and Hungarians societies, but today this fact is largely forgotten in the Federal Republic. In the major German museums or school textbooks, the European context, mainly Polish-German, of the watershed epoch of 1989 is almost absent.

An Underestimated Breakthrough in 1989

The civil heritage of the revolution is little known in Europe and many factors have contributed to that. Here I can only attempt to outline a few of them. Quite soon after 1989 I was under the impression that Western Europe had underestimated the great impact of the political revolutions in Central Europe on the whole continent. The year 1989 was an epoch-making event, but for most Western Europeans it meant only the final collapse of inefficient political and economic systems on the periphery of the continent. Transition and democratisation were concepts that only concerned Europeans living east of the Elbe rather than those in the West. Also underestimated was the fact that Eastern Europeans contributed something important, something new—their own political experience of living under dictatorships, cultural skills, good education in all areas of knowledge and the ambitions of new citizens and new Europeans.

The year 1989 was an epoch-making event, but for most Western Europeans it meant only the final collapse of inefficient political and economic systems on the periphery of the continent.

In Germany, this underestimation of the East was clearly evident. Thus, after German reunification, I felt that most Germans thought that the old Bonn Republic would continue to exist after 3 October 1990, but in an extended form to include the new Länder. It was believed that profound changes would only affect Berlin and the eastern Länder. This was the attitude and atmosphere of the time. It was often said at the time that the eastern Länder were waiting to catch up on the modernization work. It was now up to the East, after 1989, to adopt the democratic models that had been tried and tested in the West and adapt them to local conditions. This vision of change was shared not only by Western Germans and Europeans in the West, but also by many post-communist citizens who initially saw their own transition as “catching up on modernization”. The fall of communism was generally interpreted as a triumph for the West. It has only been in recent years that many people began to understand that after 1989 a completely different European community and, in the case of Germany, a completely new republic had been established.

It seems that in Western Europe this awareness of the fundamental dimension of the revival of Europe after 1989 took a very long time to emerge. And probably not everyone has yet accepted the far-reaching consequences of this process, especially the enlargement of the EU to the east in 2004. We can

even hear some verbal resistance to this new, larger Europe. An example is the anti-Eastern European and, above all, anti-Polish resentment that has been apparent during the referendum on Brexit. These are all testimonies to the lack of acceptance of the new Europe enriched with new regions and cultures. Such resentment is not limited to the British Isles.

The political integration of Europe is hindered on the one hand by the lack of knowledge about democratic traditions and on the other hand by the lack of a European narrative embracing all parts of the continent.

It is not only xenophobia, ignorance of Central and Eastern Europe or fear of new competition that is the basis, however, for the negative moods in the West. The spirit of the times critical of Europe, with a fascination with closer political identities or new nationalism are rooted in another revolution of 1989. It was then that another dramatic, cultural change took place, the effects and consequences of which can only be seen today. I am thinking here of the digital revolution. 1989 is, on the one hand, the year of the fall of the Iron Curtain and, on the other hand, the beginning of a global information network, a digital opening and glottalization in its present form. On 12 March 1989, British IT specialist Timothy John Berners-Lee presented the concept of a new form of data processing and data mediation to the European Organization for Nuclear Research CERN. He then developed World Wide Web tools such as the page description language, the first browser and the first web server.

Three decades ago, political and economic systems in the East and national borders changed almost instantly. In addition, the technological revolution affected all areas of our lives: private and public communication, our professional life, running businesses, the world of media and culture, the public sphere as a whole and the way democracy functions. Digital communication have revolutionized all areas of our lives. After 1989, we were focused on the post-communist transformation of Europe—deepening European integration and “catching up on modernization” in the eastern part of the continent. In the meantime, an epoch-making cultural revolution embracing all Europeans took place.

This profound process of change proved particularly difficult for the inhabitants of post-communist Europe. They had to find their own way in the realities of democracy and the capitalist economy, while at the same time the

new world, which had not yet been tamed, was undergoing a fundamental change. One can talk about an unexpected scale of effort or even stress as a result of the double transformation. In the light of this coincidence of political and cultural revolutions, the epoch-making changes of 1989 resemble the period after 1789, i.e. the time of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the great technological changes that led to nineteenth century industrialization.

1989 is a crucial date in the history of the world, and therefore it is deeply astonishing that Europeans approach this peculiar place of remembrance so indifferently. Perhaps this attitude should not be regarded as disdainful, but as a deliberate escape from the memory of the extent of epoch-making changes after 1989, the consequences of which are increasingly perceived as a threat. This distanced and critical approach to the consequences of 1989 can be seen throughout Europe, including at the source of that revolution. What generates the anti-democratic, right-wing-populist and xenophobic sentiments today is only to a limited extent due to dissatisfaction with the economic and social consequences of the post-communist transition.

Extreme political attitudes provoke a desire to protect yourself against cultural changes, which turned out to be more radical than expected. In the West, the distanced view of the new Europeans, the longing for the old, smaller Western Europe, fuels the new political radicalism. And in the East its source is the hostility of right-wing populists to the multicultural and cosmopolitan part of Europe, that is the supposedly “politically naive” Western Europe, which promotes the attitudes of tolerance and at the same time ignores the cultural traditions of the eastern part of the continent. And finally this nationalism confirms the belief of many Western Europeans that there is a natural borderline for democracy and political rationality in Europe and that it traditionally runs along the Elbe River, that is the former Iron Curtain.

This image serves the autocrats and nationalists to legitimize their isolationist policies and emphasize the distance from their neighbors. The lines of political and cultural divisions and conflicts, however, that dominate today do not run along any borders, but across societies. Poland is a good example of this. Using nationalist rhetoric and arguments emphasizing distance towards neighbors and criticism of Western values, the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) intends to continue the process of “Orbánisation” of Poland. Its policy enjoys an unexpectedly high social support. The Catholic Church, fearing the erosion of its institutional authority as a result of the cultural opening

of Polish society, supports the right-wing and populist policy of the Law and Justice party. It is possible that this alliance will help the party to keep power in the short term, but in the long term it will poison the social and cultural climate in Poland. This will happen because resistance to the “Orbánisation” of Poland is intense. It is particularly strong in urban areas and in western Poland. This part of Polish society does not want to turn its back on Europe and the ideals of the 1989 revolution. It is very difficult, however, to unite the political efforts of this camp, because it is extremely pluralistic and ranges from leftists critical of capitalism to conservative Christians. This means that it is difficult to agree upon a common political agenda.

There is a heated dispute between the Law and Justice party and its opponents over the interpretation of political traditions. In order to legitimize the right-wing, anti-liberal revolution, the Law and Justice party questions the credibility of Solidarity’s authorities—Lech Wałęsa, Bronisław Geremek, Władysław Frasyniuk, Bogdan Borusewicz and Tadeusz Mazowiecki—by criticizing the 1989 policy of compromise. PiS discredits the Round Table’s achievements, describing these talks as a meeting between the rulers and their own secret agents. It is not surprising that this questioning of the values of the 1989 revolution also has a negative impact on the perception of Polish affairs abroad. The trust of many Europeans in Central European countries ruled by right-wing populists has weakened as much as their identification with the political traditions of those countries.

A Dispute over History is a Dispute over Democracy

“Whoever controls the past controls the future,” wrote George Orwell in his novel *1984*. The dispute over the interpretation of the revolutionary year 1989 is also a dispute over the future of democracy. This became apparent this year in Gdańsk, when on the first days of June around 220,000 people arrived in the Baltic metropolis to commemorate the first partially free elections in Poland. It was a social movement that had been formed as a sign of resistance to the government’s policy of discrediting the peaceful changes of 1989. At the same time, it was an expression of support for a cosmopolitan, tolerant and democratic Poland.

This mechanism can also be observed on the European level, that when interpreting history, we decide about the future of the continent. The political integration of Europe is hindered on the one hand by the lack of knowledge

about democratic traditions and on the other hand by the lack of a European narrative embracing all parts of the continent. Western Europe is still dominated by the narrative of European integration in the post-war period, based on German-French reconciliation and the 1957 Treaties of Rome. The cultures and civil societies of Central and Eastern Europe, which led to the revolution in 1989, are almost absent from this European narrative.

Aleida Assmann has analyzed this significant rift in European identity very well. In her latest book *Der europäische Traum* (The European Dream), the researcher broadens the perception of the post-war history of the continent by creating a pan-European narrative. In my opinion, the author proposes an accurate interpretation of European integration as a process marked by two fundamental dates—1945 and 1989. Assmann even speaks of the dual founding of Europe in those years. After 1945, in reaction to the Second World War and the mass murder of the Jews, a new foundation of values and a new anti-nationalist vision of Europe were built. After 1989, the societies of Eastern Europe added to this the experience of 40 years of Soviet dictatorship. “Without a common awareness of the dual founding of Europe,” writes Assmann, “(...) Europe cannot exist, cannot overcome the crises that afflict it, and cannot renew itself. Without a European agreement on this history and its continuing consequences, it is impossible to work out a common course of action—because the sense of orientation is just that—to overcome the current crisis and take a course towards a common future. Awareness of European traditions and overcoming European crises are two closely related skills, as it were, two sides of the same coin. Without a European historical consciousness, there will be no democratic future for Europe.”

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Vladislav Zubok: To Realize You Lose an Empire, You Have to Be a Conscious Imperialist

Nobody in Russia thought about Eastern Europe as a Soviet colony. This explains why public opinion in Moscow took the so-called loss of Central Europe with a remarkable equanimity—says Vladislav Zubok in an interview by Zbigniew Rokita.

ZBIGNIEW ROKITA: Why did Moscow let the round table in Poland happen in 1989 and subsequently agree to the partially free elections?

VLADISLAV ZUBOK: It was part of Mikhail Gorbachev's wider plan: to return the Soviet Union to Europe for security, economic, cultural and geopolitical reasons. He gradually formulated a new course between 1985 and 1989 based on the assumption, that the old course was inadequate and leading in the worst scenario to nuclear disaster and at best to continuing international escalation and ongoing economic decline, etc.

He wanted to end the cold war and open up the Soviet Union mostly to Europe in the field of technology, economics, know-how, in other words, all things necessary for future Soviet economic development. He knew that the ongoing Cold War affected negatively clearly everything: from science to the well-being of citizens.

Moscow was speaking about the New Europe from Vancouver to Vladivostok, even if many people in the West were extremely suspicious, viewing it a Soviet plan to undermine NATO. Their suspicions proved to be wrong, because Gorbachev sincerely wanted to end the Cold War and reform the Soviet Union.

So what is the place of Eastern Europe in Soviet plans?

This region earlier had a crucial strategic position because of its location between NATO and the Soviet Union, but this position lost its meaning with the new project of Perestroika. Gorbachev began to view Eastern Europe as a liability, not an asset for the USSR, as a symbol of the division of Europe. He did not quite know how to proceed about it. They were communist countries ruled mostly by pro-Soviet communist leaders, in the style of the Brezhnev era. Gorbachev did not know how to speak to those people. The situation was better, however, in Warsaw.

In what sense better?

The Soviets did not invade Poland in 1980-81 when Solidarity was on the verge of turning Poland into a non-communist country. Instead they helped Jaruzelski become the military dictator of Poland and cracked down on Solidarity. Also General Jaruzelski was not a typical communist leader, he was rather a military leader, with whom it was easier for Gorbachev to talk than with somebody like Gustáv Husák in Czechoslovakia or Erich Honecker in East Germany.

Gorbachev gave the green light to the round table. He did this even though Poland was a corner stone for the Warsaw Pact, the country that was a strategic corridor connecting the Soviet Union to East Germany, where the largest group of forces outside the USSR

was located. So it was a risky step but Gorbachev assumed that Jaruzelski would be pragmatic, and he trusted his judgment.

So Gorbachev trusted Jaruzelski a great deal.

Gorbachev trusted him more than he trusted other leaders of Eastern European communist countries. At the same time he warned Jaruzelski that the round-table would be his experiment, his responsibility, that Moscow would not be involved and that Poland could not count on Soviet intervention whatever happened.

Wasn't it extremely risky for Moscow to give Jaruzelski that much freedom? Poland could turn—as it happened—into a non-communist state and Moscow could lose its crucial satellite within the Eastern Bloc.

Historians still discuss why Gorbachev took such a big gamble. Some historians connect it with his romanticism and naiveté. They say that the Soviet leader simply did not realize what risks he was taking. They also say that Gorbachev expected that instead of the old communist leaders, Eastern Europeans would choose somebody younger who would become “Eastern European Gorbachevs”. Another interpretation is based on the domestic situation in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev’s decisions were risky, but what were the other options? To keep on imposing Soviet will on Poland, which meant that the Soviet Union would

be responsible for the plight of the Polish economy and a new political explosion in Poland? The last option also meant that the Soviets would have to bail out Poland financially. By 1989, Poland was dozens of billions of dollars in debt to Western banks. Even Leonid Brezhnev did not want to take responsibility for this debt.

Historians still discuss why Gorbachev took such a big gamble. Some historians connect it with his romanticism and naiveté.

Why didn't they pay more attention to what was happening in Poland?

If you follow the documentation, you will see that they stopped paying attention to Poland in 1989. They were focused on other crises. The process of the dissolution of the Soviet Union had already begun a year earlier, in 1988, in the South Caucasus. But even before, I don't think that Gorbachev paid all that much attention to Eastern Europe.

Really? I was just going to ask you, is 1989 the only moment in history, when this region held a central place in Moscow's foreign policy.

It didn't hold a central place, not at all. Eastern Europe preoccupied the Soviet leadership for decades, one need only recall the Brezhnev doctrine. Any problem in the region could be a potential crisis for the

Kremlin. Any small disturbance could result in a serious Soviet reaction. And then under Gorbachev this obsession came to an end.

So what was Moscow focused on?

Firstly, the Gorbachev leadership refocused its attention on another task: rapidly improving relations with the Americans. They were searching for a new model of cooperation with Washington. 1986-88 was the time of the Soviet-Western summits, between Gorbachev and Reagan, then German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, etc. Secondly, the Soviet leadership became preoccupied by domestic issues. The crisis of Perestroika became visible already in 1988, and led to serious problems with political and economical governance. We should recall that the first semi-free elections in the Eastern Bloc took place not in Poland but in the Soviet Union—in the spring of 1989. It started even before the Polish round table. In May-June 1989, the first Congress of People's Deputies took place and it had a mind-blowing effect on the entire country: not only on the intelligentsia but on everyone. That was a political revolution.

Then there were ethnic conflicts. There was fighting between Azeris and Armenians and many other unrests. On 9 April 1989, the Soviets used force in Georgia and it led to bloodshed. Soviet control over Georgia was gone. Then the three Baltic republics revolted peacefully against Soviet rule. What was the place of Eastern Europe in

Soviet priorities at this time? It was probably number twelve for Gorbachev, after many other regions.

You mentioned Georgia and the Baltic states that were at the forefront. But Moscow wasn't worried that the example of a peaceful revolution in Poland might inspire some nations within the Soviet Union like the Armenians or Ukrainians?

Let me provide you with one interesting episode that took place in Beijing. Gorbachev normalized relations with China and he happened to be there during the student revolution. He left shortly before the Tiananmen massacre, because the Chinese officials were too embarrassed to do anything in his presence. When he then watched the Tiananmen massacre on CNN, he turned to one of his advisors and said: "Look what happened there—you want me to follow the Chinese path? I don't want what happened there to happen on Red Square".

Of importance in that story is the chronology. Already before the Polish elections, Gorbachev was determined not to use force any longer.

Speaking of 1989, did Moscow have any idea how to renew its relations with countries like Poland, Hungary or Czechoslovakia, how to build it on a new basis? Many people, who were active political figures at that time, have been saying that

Finlandization was the maximum, what the Polish or Hungarian opposition was counting on.

You touched on something very important. Gorbachev was expecting that the Soviet Union would become a pillar—together with the West—of a new world order. And that was, in a sense, out of hubris, because he overlooked the special role in Eastern Europe in all this. When Gorbachev was trying to reach to western partners like Reagan, Bush, Mitterrand or Kohl, he ignored the fact, that Eastern European countries would do the same. They would try to become members of NATO, they would join the European Union. And of course, the Soviet Union began to fail and collapse, instead of becoming a pillar of the new order.

What I also found strange was the absence of an alternative economic strategy. What would happen with the economic relations between the countries within the Eastern Bloc and the Moscow if they established a new world order? Will we lose it? Yes, that is exactly what happened at the end of 1989. The trade between the USSR and Eastern Europe just collapsed, because in January 1990 the Soviet government demanded that all trade should be denominated in dollars, at world prices. It was madness: nobody in Eastern Europe had enough money to pay for Soviet oil and other goods. And the Soviet Union as well, instead of obtaining trade profits, ended up with a trade deficit. It tells us something important about

this time: a lack of background planning. What a remarkably myopic idea: let's skip relations with Eastern Europe and trade directly with Western Europe, Germany or the United States!

In the late nineties most of the Central European states became members of NATO. Do you think that that scenario crossed anyone's mind in the Kremlin in 1989 when they let Poland or Hungary go? Was it unimaginable that the geopolitical situation might change that drastically?

Of course it crossed their mind. That was a standing geopolitical fear, especially among the military and people of old-thinking (Gorbachev and his crew were called "new-thinkers"). The justification for the Warsaw Pact and for the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 was exactly that: "We cannot lose the Czechoslovak strategic corridor between our borders and West Germany." It was openly and publicly discussed. Hardliners raised the issue: "What if we give freedom to the Eastern European states and NATO will consequently come to our borders?". But it was dismissed.

In 1988-1989 period, however, that kind of thinking was utterly discredited and dismissed in the Soviet Union. It was the peak of Gorbachev's Perestroika and the rise of democratic pro-western movements among the Moscow intelligentsia. Those movements had a pro-Western and anti-communist character. People who joined

those movements believed that NATO was no longer an enemy. Those people believed that the Soviet Union should become part of Europe, taking up Gorbachev's idea of Europe and lauding it to the skies.

In 1990, the Warsaw Pact still existed but everyone understood that Gorbachev was not going to use force. Even among the military in Moscow, there were people who began to believe that Soviet security interests did not require the preservation of the Warsaw Pact. But they were quite shocked in 1991, when they began to see that their former colleagues, the Eastern European militaries, began to distance themselves from them and made approaches towards NATO.

Gorbachev accepted it fully?

He wanted to create a new security architecture of Europe, where the Soviet Union would be a major sponsor and a pillar. In other words, he believed that NATO would start disappearing after the end of the Cold War, just like the Warsaw Pact. He did not believe that NATO would invite Eastern Europeans to join.

At the time the Bush administration was extremely cautious, because the last thing they wanted to do was to provoke Soviet security fears. They didn't want an invasion of Hungary or Czechoslovakia to be repeated. Later on, directly after the peaceful revolutions in Eastern Europe, they even began to say that NATO was changing its nature, it was no

longer a military pact but was becoming a political association.

So Gorbachev believed that the Central European countries and the Soviet Union would actually remain allies within one camp, but that this would be just a bigger camp from Vancouver to Vladivostok...

But what Gorbachev didn't expect was that Americans didn't fully share this New Global Order idea. The Bush administration wanted to lock American gains in. President Bush never said publicly that the United States won the Cold War—until January 1992—but he meant it. The most important thing was to keep Eastern Europeans in the western sphere of influence.

And they succeeded.

Yes, they did. But of course they couldn't use that language at the time. Instead they kept saying that they had no plans to move NATO eastward of West Germany. It was not a formal commitment not to expand NATO, but a kind of gentleman's understanding.

The official version was that Central Europe would remain neutral?

There was no language of neutrality. You mentioned Finlandization, but if you read the Soviet documents at that time, you won't find any usage of that term applied to Poland, Hungary or Czechoslovakia. There was only one Soviet attempt to impose the principle of non-alignment. That policy

was as follows: we will not sign any bilateral treaties with Prague, Budapest or Warsaw until they pledge not to join any hostile alliances. But Eastern Europeans rejected that idea saying that it would be a limitation of their freedom to choose alliances. The Soviets did not push them further.

You have underlined numerous times that Gorbachev was convinced not to use force and keep things as they were. But let me ask once again: had he ever at least hesitated?

Gorbachev faced a choice many times to do something drastic that might be highly damaging to his political international image or not do anything at all. And almost every time—he ended up doing nothing. He did nothing not only about Central Europe in 1989, but also nothing in 1990 about a much more important thing, which was the future of Germany.

In Lithuania in January 1991 he decided to use force.

Yes, the same was in Georgia in 1989 or in Azerbaijan in 1990. And every time Gorbachev refused to take responsibility for the bloodshed. Every time he said: it was not my decision. Which in the end cost him the support of the army.

Speaking of the army and the hardliners—what could have happened to Central Europe if the Yanayev coup in August 1991 had prevailed?

It is remarkable that those guys did everything imaginable to lose. President Bush learned about the putsch during the night. He woke up and made a few phone calls: one of the first was to Warsaw. He warned him not to provoke the Soviet troops that were stationed in the Polish territory. But today we know that those fears were greatly exaggerated.

Nobody in Moscow thought about Eastern Europe as a Soviet colony. We were rather envious that they, the Poles, the Czechs, the Hungarians, had more freedom and higher living standards.

The Yanayev government, even if had survived for a little bit longer than it did (not just 3 days), probably would not have done anything about Eastern Europe. And this not because they were nice people, but because they were sitting on a volcano in their own country: a considerable part of Muscovites were against them, the republics had already declared sovereignty, and the President of the Russian Federation, the largest of the fifteen Soviet republics,

opposed them. Also they needed Western credit and had no idea what to do about the economic crisis.

So in retrospect we see no reasons for fear for Eastern Europe, but again people in Prague, Warsaw or Budapest didn't know what we know today.

Do Russians consider Central European countries former Russian colonies?

This language did not exist in Soviet discourse. Nobody in Moscow thought about Eastern Europe as a Soviet colony. We were rather envious that they, the Poles, the Czechs, the Hungarians, had more freedom and higher living standards. And that explains why public opinion in Moscow took the so-called loss of Central Europe and the so-called external empire with a remarkable equanimity. Because to realize you have lost an empire, you have to be a conscious imperialist and be aware that you have colonies. Stalin built an empire and he was an imperialist but he sold this to the Soviet people as an expansion of the great socialist experiment, not the territorial expansion of the Soviet Union.

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Everyday Ecstasy: Remembering 1989 in Sober Perspective and Double Exposure

What does it mean to live through certain historical events while simultaneously commemorating historical events from the past? In the case of 1989/1789, the effect was particularly powerful.

Ever since the nineteenth century, we have been living in an age of historical anniversaries and commemorations. The British Victorians marked the tricentennial of the Spanish Armada in 1888; the Columbus quadricentennial of 1892 was celebrated in the United States and then led to the spectacular Chicago “World’s Columbian Exposition” of 1893; and Polish centennials, like that of the *Kościuszko* Insurrection in 1894, followed soon after by the hundredth birthday of Adam Mickiewicz in 1898, were important occasions for the crystallization of Polish national sentiment in the age of the partitions. The centennial of the French Revolution, Bastille Day 1889, became the occasion for the founding of the socialist Second International.

The socialists of 1889 relived vicariously the revolutionary moment of 1789, and today, thirty years after the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989, we may recall that the tremendous events of that year coincided with one of the great historical commemorations of the late twentieth century, the bicentennial of the French Revolution. In photography the process of “double exposure” superimposes images to create a kind of aesthetic collage, and this concept of double exposure may also be useful for thinking about what it means for us to live through certain historical events while simultaneously commemorating historical events from the past. In the case of 1989/1789, the effect was particularly powerful, as the revolutionary character of the two years suggested linked interpretations in which the historically momentous events, across two centuries, seemed to offer reciprocal insights and suggest illuminating analogies.

A Long Hangover after Attainment of the Zenith

Karl Marx, who lived through the revolutions of 1848, wrote with some irony about the ecstasy of the revolutionary moment, with an eye to the French Revolution of 1789: “Bourgeois revolutions, like those of the eighteenth century, storm swiftly from success to success, their dramatic effects outdo each other; men and things seem set in sparkling brilliance (*in Feuerbrillanten gefasst*); ecstasy is the everyday spirit (*die Ekstase ist der Geist jedes Tages*); but they are short-lived; soon they have attained the zenith and a long hangover (*Katzenjammer*) lays hold.” Marx was thinking of 1848 and 1789, but his account would certainly have described some aspects of our experience of 1989 as well. If the revolution of 1789 helped to illuminate Marx’s understanding of 1848, one might also suspect that the notable bicentennial revisiting of the French Revolution shaped our understanding of 1989, as we lived through that year. Certainly the spirit of ecstasy of 14 July 1989—which featured African American soprano Jessye Norman draped in the French tricolor and singing the Marseillaise in the Place de la Concorde—allowed some of the excitement of storming the Bastille to color eventually, on 9 November, the storming of the Berlin Wall. Jessye Norman died in 2019, and if we are now living through a long hangover, thirty years later, it may be partly because the French Revolution bicentennial accentuated the everyday ecstasy of the political moment in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989.

Certain Concessions Lead to Dramatic Transformations

From the beginning of 1989, there were interesting parallels to be noted between the events of that year and the events that were being commemorated from 1789. In early February, for instance, when the Polish Round Table met in Warsaw to discuss the possibility for multi-party elections, historians of the French Revolution were recalling the summoning of the Estates General by King Louis XVI in late January 1789. The events were interestingly analogous since both involved unprecedented discussions of representative government: the Estates General had not met in France since 1614, as royal absolutism refused all consultation, while multi-party elections in Poland (or indeed anywhere else in Eastern Europe) had not been seriously contemplated since the immediate postwar years in the 1940s, before the consolidation of strictly Stalinist communist party states.

If the revolution of 1789 helped to illuminate Marx's understanding of 1848, one might also suspect that the notable bicentennial revisiting of the French Revolution shaped our understanding of 1989.

In both cases, what was interesting to reflect upon for historians of the eighteenth century and Cold War political commentators was the way that the germs of revolutionary transformation emerged from within the structures of the *ancien régime*: the Estates General summoned reluctantly by Louis XVI, the Round Table conceded reluctantly by General Jaruzelski. Indeed, the analogy made it more clearly understandable that the communist party states of Eastern Europe, in early 1989, did indeed constitute a sort of “*ancien régime*”—in which certain concessions might lead to dramatic transformations. The details of who sat at the round table and how elections would be structured corresponded intriguingly to the details of representation in the summoning of the Estates General, with its precisely allocated places for the Clergy, the Nobility, and the Third Estate.

Moments of No-turning-back

In June 1989 historians commemorated one of the crucial turning points of the French Revolution, the Tennis Court Oath, in which the Third Estate gathering at the Versailles tennis court on 20 June 1789, constituted themselves as a national assembly, and vowed never to disband until they had put

an end to royal absolutism by writing a modern constitution for France. They were partly inspired by the American constitution of the 1780s, and a painting by Jacques-Louis David represents the political fervor of the deputies as they took their solemn oath at the tennis court. It was a do-or-die moment for the Third Estate, a moment of no-turning-back, and one which might conceivably have led to the closing down of the Estates General and the premature demise of the French Revolution before it had really begun. Strangely, it echoed across two centuries with the do-or-die High Noon poster for the Polish elections on 4 June: *W samo południe, 4 czerwca 1989*.

The communist party states of Eastern Europe, in early 1989, did indeed constitute a sort of “ancien régime”—in which certain concessions might lead to dramatic transformations.

The poster, referencing the 1952 American film *High Noon*, showed Gary Cooper prepared for a showdown and gunfight, below the logos of “*Solidarność*”—thus urging a vote for the Solidarity candidates and against the communists. 4 June was also High Noon for the student protesters at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, many shot dead in the square, to mark the end of the democracy movement in China, a revolution over before it began. In fact, the Chinese student protesters even carried with them a ten-meter *papier-mâché* goddess of democracy, her arm held high, in conscious imitation of the French figure of liberty leading the people. Here was a case of double exposure that actually allowed for historical insight into the French revolutionary past: when we juxtapose the unexpectedly positive outcome of the Polish elections and the disastrous consequences for democracy in China, we can begin to comprehend how extremely uncertain the moment must have seemed, two hundred years earlier, when the Third Estate gathered at the tennis court. Did we really believe in 1989, on the eve of the Polish elections, that those elections would be free and that the communist government would respect the outcome? Would a knowledgeable observer in 1789 have been really persuaded that the Tennis Court Oath would lead to the end of royal absolutism?

The Iron Curtain was no longer Impassable

The storming of the Bastille took place on 14 July 1789, and the obvious analogue in 1989 was the storming of the Berlin Wall on 9 November, two physical monuments representing their respective *ancien régimes*, the objects of

revolutionary onslaught. Yet, the events of July 1989 in Warsaw were also interesting as an instance of double exposure: President George Bush (senior) was in Warsaw on 10 July 1989, probing the new dimensions of politics in Eastern Europe by promising American assistance to the new Polish government. He was in Warsaw, however, on his way to the meeting of the G7 which began in Paris on 14 July, the day that Jessye Norman sang the Marseillaise at the Place de la Concorde. It is strange to recall such conservative figures as George Bush and Margaret Thatcher participating in a revolutionary bicentennial celebration, but, in the case of Bush, his presence in Paris was directly linked to his presence in Warsaw a few days earlier, linking Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 to the commemoration of the French Revolution of 1789.

One might also think about the revolutionary amazement at the fall of the Bastille—a triumph of mass politics that would have seemed unthinkable one month earlier at the time of the Tennis Court Oath—in relation to the astonishing opening of the Hungarian border at the so-called “Pan-European Picnic” at Sopron in August 1989, allowing hundreds of traveling East Germans to simply cross into Austria, as if the Iron Curtain had suddenly ceased to exist. These were revolutionary moments when the previously unthinkable became casually achievable: the Bastille fortress no longer unassailable, the Iron Curtain no longer impassable.

There were grandly programmatic moments in August 1789, like the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen—which seemed to speak directly to the values and ideals of the activists of 1989 in Eastern Europe.

There were grandly programmatic moments in August 1789, like the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen—which seemed to speak directly to the values and ideals of the activists of 1989 in Eastern Europe—while the abolition of feudalism in the French National Assembly on 4 August 1789, revealed a revolutionary commitment to the complete social and economic dismantling of the ancien régime. The abolition of feudalism was oddly echoed across the centuries in September 1989, when Leszek Balcerowicz began to meet with the committee that would eventually, by the end of the year, produce the program for the “shock therapy” that would radically dismantle the economic structures of state socialism in Poland.

The Peaceful and the Violent Aspects of Revolutionary Politics

The October Days of 1789, featuring the women's march on Versailles, the storming of the royal palace, the murder of the guards, the seizing of the king and queen and their forced relocation to Paris—all this resonated strangely through the final months of 1989, from the November days that marked the beginning of the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia to the Christmas capture and execution of Nicolae and Elena *Ceaușescu* in Romania. In November and December both the peaceful and the violent aspects of revolutionary politics were alternatively on display, with the French bicentennial as the historical reminder of how easily those aspects might commingle.

When we juxtapose the unexpectedly positive outcome of the Polish elections and the disastrous consequences for democracy in China, we can begin to comprehend how extremely uncertain the moment must have seemed.

On Christmas Day 1989, the day that the *Ceaușescus* were executed by firing squad in Romania, Leonard Bernstein ecstatically conducted Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in Berlin to celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall. Schiller's "Ode to Joy (*Freude*)"—the text for the final movement—was slightly adapted to make it into an Ode to Freedom (*Freiheit*). The performance brought together musicians from East and West Germany, and the chorus sang, "*Alle Menschen werden Brüder*," all men will become brothers, echoing the French revolutionary slogan of "fraternity." Schiller, like Beethoven, had lived through the age of the French Revolution, and Beethoven's Ninth was an apt cultural icon for concluding 1989, as a year of ecstatic and revolutionary double exposure.

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The Real Tragedy of Central Europe

The understanding of Central Europe from over thirty years ago—as part of the West captured by the Byzantine East and represented geographically by Europe behind the Iron Curtain—has been fading away over the three decades of successful transformation. The nations of Central Europe have regained independence and restored their place in the West mostly by following prescribed directions. This was not an imitation game, yet the pace at which authoritarian rule was replaced by rule of law and democratic institutions left many, like Ralf Dahrendorf, wondering whether a consolidation of democracy will not require a few more generations. The long list of success stories that followed in all dimensions of political, social and economic performance would take up a great deal of space.

At the peak of this continuum, the region has become so successful that even the first signs of democratic backsliding, corrupt schemes and centrally exploited social polarization were not considered as serious new trends but merely as hick-ups. Democracy was being feted around the world and Central Europe was enjoying the limelight. But where there is hubris, there is imprudence.

Central Europe is not, of global significance in and of itself. In any global turmoil, its prosperity is tied to Europe and its security framework depends on NATO.

The political position of the Visegrad Group in Europe, by now the most prominent regional club within the EU, has become the real tragedy of Central Europe. Although it was meant to strengthen and amplify the drive of belonging to the core of European integration, it has eventually come to represent a political backlash with a militant negotiating position. This untenable position has entrenched the region on the front-lines between their partners in the West and pressures from the East. There is a very real risk that the nations of Central Europe could succumb to the influence of Russia and China—the most revisionist powers in the world.

Central Europe is Currently at a Critical Juncture

To be fair, it should be acknowledged that many partners in the transatlantic space have not been performing all that marvelously either and several major military, economic, diplomatic or political mistakes have been made elsewhere that undercut the democratic norms and values in the region. There was, for example, Iraq. There were greedy and poor decisions that eventually led to the last financial crisis. There was the backseat steering of the EU when decision-making, concerning how to respond to this crisis, stalled. And there was this fantastic idea of the Brexit referendum. Indeed, from a larger perspective more serious mistakes were made.

Central Europe is not, however, of global significance in and of itself. In any global turmoil, its prosperity is tied to Europe and its security framework depends on NATO. It is part of a bigger whole, which also means that trouble in the region is trouble for everyone involved.

The region is currently at a critical juncture and this undefinable feeling is tangible in the societies. A recent poll by YouGov for the European Council of Foreign Relations named three distinctively different emotions expressed across the EU about the Union in the world: optimism, fear and stress. Interestingly, one can draw dividing lines between each of the Central European nations: Poland—positive, Czechia and Slovakia on alert, while Hungary—along with Greece and Italy—stressed and insecure. If Dominique Moïsi was right about replacing Huntington’s vision of a clash of cultures with the idea that emotions are the driving factors of politics, it would be reflective of the present age. The sentiments in the region are certainly not as united and hopeful as they were at the end of 1989.

The Region Never had a Genuine Debate about its Future

Therefore, instead of recollecting the unquestionable achievements of the last thirty years, ranging from the indicators of human development to flourishing prosperity, let us consider the global trends which the region has depended upon thus far and what might be its prospects for the future.

The recent scenario-based report by Visegrad Insight and the German Marshall Fund of the U.S. “Central European Futures” presented an extensive number of plausible political directions that the Visegrad Group might take in the future. Since the report was published (November, 2018), it serves as the best mental map to discuss the mostly gloomy prospects already rooted in the present day. It also serves as a loud call in the public sphere to avoid another disaster and secure past achievement.

The liberal paradigm encapsulated in Fukuyama’s beliefs helped to drive many of the reforms but, in the process, alienated democratic constituencies in whose name the reforms were carried out.

Central Europe never had a genuine debate about its future. Even in 1989, the region followed along with the zeitgeist, but the time had served it well. The liberal paradigm encapsulated in Fukuyama’s beliefs helped to drive many of the reforms but, in the process, alienated democratic constituencies in whose name the reforms were carried out.

In 2014, Marcin Król, a renowned Polish philosopher, explained this idea in his book “We Were stupid” which focused on the case of the Solidarity movement. It was a labor union which eventually led to the country’s liberation from Moscow-controlled communism to independence and later democracy (importantly in that order). The political decisions, often urgent and almost always necessary, which allowed Poland to start catching up, often resulted in the restructuring of factories and firing of those workers who were on the front-lines from the very beginning.

The region has serious challenges ahead and this time no guidance on the directions. All the choices are acceptable, except those proposed by illiberal charlatans whose common features are counter-factual narratives.

Although everyone became better off in the end, there was often insufficient effort to secure more public support for the directions set out on and even more importantly, to afterwards consolidate these achievements across critical constituencies. Where the traditional left wing agenda abandoned its people, the new right-wing populism found a new home; not uniquely in Central Europe.

The Return of Geopolitics

Today’s illiberal manifestations are therefore part of a larger global trend in which the liberal world order is being questioned and trust in the pillar institutions undermined. These undemocratic movements also, however, have their local roots. New regimes—even those democratic in nature—always need time to mature through successive generations or else risk falling back due to the historical inertia lingering around every corner.

Additionally, an important trend that altered and now bodes for uncertainty in Europe—and especially in the V4—is the economic model challenged by demographic and technological changes. The region’s prosperity was built in short on good-quality, cheap labor. As the demographic decline is endangering those nations, the economic models have not yet upgraded enough in efficiency or innovation, and the future of prosperity is at risk.

Finally, the return of geopolitics is worth mentioning. This is an ideology of Russia that links politics not to rules-based order but to forceful land-grabs and subversive tactics. Insecurity related to the control over

borders has been a major factor in the course taken by the Visegrad Group. This overlaps with the politically exploited fear of the arrival of migrants.

Along with many trigger factors, the region will be super sensitive to the above-mentioned trends over the course of the next ten years or so. As explained in detail in the report, it may split over the sentiments concerning the version of European integration if the factors pulling it apart grow in strength or if Brexit becomes a British success instead of a failure. The region may be forced into integrating more, giving up further elements of national sovereignty but gaining influence in the collective decision-making of the Union.

It usually takes a major crisis before politicians take braver steps. There is the possibility that the Union itself may break apart because of different visions regarding the security framework—with some countries preferring to keep a low profile while others more likely to pursue more experimental bilateral relations. Should it once more revolt in a peaceful desire to upgrade its democratic standards? It is also plausible as this trend has already been witnessed in the new political culture represented by the digital political groupings in Slovakia.

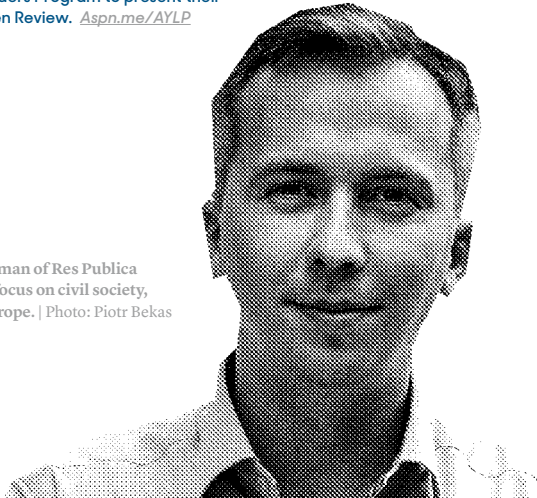
In any case, the region has serious challenges ahead and this time no guidance on the directions. All the choices are acceptable, except those proposed by illiberal charlatans whose common features are counter-factual narratives and a drive to centralize more power. The region will surely not be the same over the coming decades, and whether it continues to perform admirably will largely depend on the ability of its leaders to lead an open, democratic and critical debate about its future prospects, in a style and language that will not polarize but unite the people of the countries.



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Thirty Years After: Invasion of Mob Sensibility

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We are confronted with the kind of public instinct that the ancient Greeks feared. It made them wary of democracy.

Tomáš Klvaňa Thirty years is a long time. It is an entire third of a century.

Thirty years is also quite a short time. If you think about it, the founding of America only amounts to three 80-year lives. So how is the Czech Republic, and indeed Central Europe, doing after three decades of freedom? It depends on whom you ask. We are experiencing an unprecedented period of prosperity and geopolitical stability. Lives are getting longer and healthier. The environment has improved dramatically. We are not at the forefront of scientific-technological breakthroughs but are their front-row beneficiaries. Nevertheless, there is a distinct feeling among chattering classes that something has gone badly wrong.

The very institutions that guarantee our security, prosperity and freedom are under attack. The President of the United States is no fan of NATO. European integration has gone into reverse. The free press is under siege. We are experiencing the largest democratic uprising against liberal democracy ever. It is a post-modern kind of uprising. Although pessimists have seen it coming, there is no actual shooting in the streets. Instead its agents use social and alternative media to spread disinformation, organize and with a great deal of help from their Eastern friends in the Kremlin, charge the ballot box. They are energized, and their wrath is aimed at the cosmopolitan elites.

This is the kind of mob instinct that the ancient Greeks feared and which made them wary of democracy. Plato's bet was on the philosopher-king and a class of stellar minds and bodies fit to govern. The Roman Republic gave limited voice to tribunes but devoted itself to what would later become known as divided powers and checks and balances. Tocqueville and Mill were greatly concerned with the tyranny of the majority. The former favored the American experiment of a mixture of democratic and republican institutions as a good compromise for modern government.

Modern egalitarian society has empowered ordinary people, their tastes and predilections. It has given them self-awareness, self-confidence and access to the public space. They have realized that they are the majority.

We no longer live in direct democracy and the levels of political representation make people uneasy. They call for referenda to push through silly, unexamined ideas faster. Parliaments are a nuisance. The judiciary is unelected and therefore "undemocratic". The senate costs too much money and should be abolished. Public service media are elitist and should be controlled. In a way the spirit of direct democracy is back by way of electronic social networks that in turn feed populist politics.

Why? The answer is complex. It is apparent that many people feel with some justification that the elites despise them. This has always been true, however, so what *has* changed? Modern egalitarian society has empowered ordinary people, their tastes and predilections. It has given them self-awareness, self-confidence and access to the public space. They are on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and have realized that they are the majority.

No longer will the elites upbraid them for misconduct—Look how many people are like us! Andrej Babiš, Jaroslaw Kaczyński and Matteo Salvini were bound to happen. Václav Klaus and Viktor Orbán were bound to be turncoats. The technology and mass consumption has made ordinary taste screamingly visible to everyone. The elites noticed. They began to despise the regular Joe's reality shows, pop music and TV entertainment a bit too loudly and a bit too too conspicuously for their own safety. Envy, jealousy and resentment are a mighty motivation.

A corollary to the invasion of the public square by the mob sensibility is its ability to talk politics in that very public space. In the past, discussion of

public issues took place in regulated public forums, which guaranteed at least some level of quality of content. Rabble talk was confined to pubs. It currently directly affects politics at the highest levels. The purest expression of mob language is Donald Trump's tortured syntax, limited vocabulary and lack of any real content, as far as policy or, God forbid, even a governing philosophy is concerned. Another important element of the current political equation is that most of the people who determine election results and many politicians do not understand the key assumptions behind representative democracy. They misunderstand that our republican form of representative democracy is not built to make speedy decisions. It is bound to be clumsy in crises.

While our technological age makes everything "real time", our institutions are not supposed to function in "real time". Reflection is valuable. It is more important to prevent the abuse of power than to give the powerful too much of it to supposedly run the government as they run their commercial firms. Most people do not think of this; they see the twenty-eight governments and EU Commission as powerless to quickly solve the immigration crisis, or sovereign debt. Democracy has no quick and simple answers and the proper sensibility is reflection and patience. Populism on the other hand charges ahead. Let's turn the EU into a loose group of nation-states, or, even better, let's outright abolish it. We should govern ourselves with no meddling from Brussels!

That is why those who argue that mainstream politicians should listen more to ordinary people and their concerns—lest they be taken over by populists—are wrong. Decent politics cannot grow too close to illiberal populism without losing decency. And let's be brutally honest: the concerns of ordinary people are more often than not fuelled by prejudice, xenophobia, racism and debased taste. Therefore what I am suggesting is not a naïve road to self-defeat, but on the contrary it is the only way to preserve and rehabilitate genuine politics.

Mainstream politics should find novel and persuasive ways to explain to people why populists are wrong, why we need checks and balances, and why European integration and not state sovereignty is the right answer. It should also look back and analyze its errors. In Central Europe the misjudgments are more relevant than in the West, as they relate to the post-communist past.

Perhaps more than in other Central European countries the revanchism of the past few years in the Czech Republic has taken on the face of neo-normalization. Normalization was the Czechoslovak communist policy

of the 1970s and 1980s involving a return to totalitarian “normalcy” after the “aberration” of the Prague Spring of 1968 with its half-measures and semi-reforms. Nearly the entire twenty-one years of normalization were characterized by partly cynical, partly opportunistic and partly intimidated resignation on the part of the majority. It was a time of widespread snitching and ratting on neighbors to the communist political police (today’s Prime Minister Babiš was one of those many secret police snitches). To avoid trouble, everyone parroted ideological nonsense in return for a regular supply of subpar meals, clothing and weekend trips to modest country cabins.

The new regime of the early 1990s did almost nothing to signal a clear, decisive moral break from normalization. It felt it did not have to do so. People were suddenly drunk on the new freedoms that they acquired on the cheap: most did not have to do anything to get it and consequently did not value it. At that time in the first years after the Velvet Revolution, people were hungry for the formerly banned exile literature and music. It seemed as if the communist regime-sanctioned celebrities were done for, their era expired and their careers essentially dead.

While our technological age makes everything “real time”, our institutions are not supposed to function in “real time”.

But within ten years, all of them, even the schlockiest ones, perhaps primarily the schlockiest, staged a comeback. They were a telling backdrop to the fact that almost no communists went to prison for obvious crimes. There was no political retribution, the communist party itself was never disbanded and former high ranking party members and secret police agents went into business. Some of them became fabulously wealthy. Among today’s oligarchs who control much of the Czech media and a chunk of Czech foreign policy, several ex-communists and secret police agents can be found, and perhaps even agents of the Soviet KGB.

Babiš himself is a fitting avatar of the revanche. He has been a successful constant in Czech politics since 2011 when he founded his party, which he runs as a family business with no interference from the outside. When in early October, Karel Gott, pop-singer and the most visible symbol of the officially sanctioned culture during normalization, died, Babiš in an attempt to swim in the stream of the singer’s popularity, attempted to stage a state funeral with all the pomp and circumstance.

Over the past decade, dozens of real heroes of anti-Nazi and anti-communist resistance, important scientists or real personalities of culture died, and none of them was awarded a state funeral. This honor was now being bestowed on an acolyte of weird conspiracy theories who in 1977 led the charge against Charter 77 and never publicly apologized. Most Czechs could not care less. The ethos of normalization has returned with a postmodern twist. You can now shout against it in public provided you are ready to sustain the swamp of invectives directed at you on social and alternative media by the mob.

The new regime of the early 1990s did almost nothing to signal a clear, decisive moral break from normalization. It felt it did not have to do so. People were suddenly drunk on the new freedoms.

Populism would have happened anyway even without Babiš and the cadre of former communists and secret police rats (cf. Salvini, LePen and others). But the stench of neo-normalization was not necessary. It is an entirely self-inflicted wound that is not evident in Poland and Hungary despite their odious governments. It is a special Czech way to an illiberal tomorrow.

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ASPEN.REVIEW
ROBERT ANDERSON

INTERVIEW
EASTERN EUROPE
SURVEY



Jacob Poushter: Redefining the East-West Divide

Pew Research Center, a US non-partisan 'fact tank', released a report* in October "European public opinion three decades after the fall of Communism" based on a survey in 17 European countries. Aspen Central Europe interviewed Jacob Poushter, one of the main researchers behind the report.

ROBERT ANDERSON: *Pew did a similar survey in 1991 and 2009. What are the biggest changes you can see—and the most surprising ones—over that period?*

JACOB POUSHTER: Overall one of the biggest changes we see is that people are much more confident that the changes in 1989 and 1991 led to an increase in standards of living in their countries. The

economic situation of the changeover is much more positively seen than it was in 1991 when we did the initial survey. In addition, we also saw a pretty big jump in overall life satisfaction—those saying on a 10-point scale 7 to 10, that their life is doing well. We saw a significant jump in most of the Central and Eastern European countries from the teens in percentages up to 40% or 50% saying

'life is good' in those countries. We saw rises in Western Europe as well but it was not as substantial as in Central and Eastern European countries where there was a changeover in terms of the system in government and economics.

What's got worse over the last 10 years or the last 30 years?

There was a bit of a negative decline in the approval of the changeover in 2009 from the 1991 survey in a couple of countries in Central and Eastern Europe. That's actually bounced back up in 2019. In 2009 the economic situation was starting to deteriorate across Europe and we saw people responding by being a little less approving of the movement to capitalism and a market economy, and that's picked up a bit since. You also see economic conditions have improved in Europe in the last three or four years much more than what we saw in the Euro crisis and the immigration crisis. Still there are some countries that aren't as keen on EU membership or as likely to say that EU membership has been a good thing for their country—only 40% of Czechs say that it has been a good thing for their country. But that's even more so in places like Bulgaria, there's just not a lot of economic confidence or confidence overall.

In terms of looking at the differences between Central and Eastern Europe and Western Europe, how marked are the differences? Does

it still make sense to talk about the 'East-West split' or is this an outdated comparison now?

It really depends on the data. There are some questions where there are pretty large gaps between those in the West and those in the East. One of the starkest ones is views on the acceptance of homosexuality. There those in Western Europe are much more accepting than those in

On the other hand there's actually more economic optimism about the future in the Eastern half of the continent than in the West.

the East. That also applies to the view of Muslims. Those with favorable views of Muslims tend to be located more in Western Europe than in the East, with the exception of Russia and Bulgaria where there are more Muslims in the population. That separation also exists to some extent in views of Roma, where those in the West are a little bit more accepting than people in the East.

On the other hand, there's actually more economic optimism about the future in the Eastern half of the continent than in the West. We asked a question, 'will children be better off than their parents?' On that question majorities in Ukraine and Lithuania say they will be but in Western Europe—especially in France, where only 16% say children will be better off in the future—there's less optimism about children's financial future.

**What were the outliers in this region?
Which were the countries that
were more Western than Eastern,
so to say, those that didn't fit this
picture of a divided Europe?**

People in Poland are quite satisfied with how the country's doing and the economic situation, with democracy, similar to that in Germany and more so than many of the Western and Southern European countries, so that's definitely a country that stands out in many cases as being much more positive and closer to its Northern European counterparts.

The Czech Republic stands out for being a country that is less positive on the EU. In fact they are similar to France in many cases in terms of their not overwhelming favorability to the EU or not feeling that being in the EU has strengthened their economy.

**Looking at the countries in Central
and Eastern Europe, is it fair to
say that Russia and Ukraine are a
world apart, very different from
what you see in this region?**

Certainly they are much less happy with the changeover to a multi-party system, to a market economy. Less than 40% of those in Russia are happy with that changeover. They are also economically not doing as well and that shows in their satisfaction towards democracy, which is pretty low. Even in Ukraine—which actually has seen an increase in those satisfied with democracy since the presidential election—they

are still on balance not happy with what is going on in that country and in terms of satisfaction with the democratic system. Russians are also unhappy and they also have a really poor view of the EU, which wasn't always the case—they actually had an on balance favourable view of the EU until 2013–14—while Ukrainians actually have a very positive view of the EU, though there are obviously differences within Ukraine by language, with those who speak Russian being a little more pro on the Russian side, versus the European side.

We also asked in Russia whether it was a great misfortune that the Soviet Union no longer existed and about 60% there say that's the case. So there is a bit of nostalgia for the past in Russia, where you don't see that so much in many of the other countries.

**One thing that struck me from the
survey is that Bulgaria seems to
be very much part of the Russian-
Ukrainian attitude that you have
described, rather than the Central
European picture. Is that fair?**

Yes, in many aspects Bulgaria is much more pessimistic, much more along with Russia, Ukraine on the state of democracy, the economy. They are much less accepting of homosexuality. They are positive about Muslims actually; relative to many of the other Central and European nations they are actually more favourable to Muslims. There are a lot of Muslim Bulgarians

who live in the country and, as we know from our other research, when you have an association with Muslims, when you know a Muslim personally, you are much more likely to have a favourable view overall.

Let's talk about the generational divide. We have read a lot about how the older generation is nostalgic for the former regime—even in this country [Czechia], which is obviously one of the more successful since 1989, let alone in the former Soviet Union, where the picture is very different. But the argument is often that the younger generation have a completely different view, and that in time societies' attitudes to the past will be completely transformed. What does your survey show on this?

Older people are nostalgic for the past, in the way that those who are 60 plus are less likely to say that ordinary people have benefited from the changes of society. Younger people in the survey are also more positive towards the EU—when we asked about their favourable feelings towards the EU, in the Czech Republic there is a 20-point difference between young and old people. So they are more pro EU and they are a little less likely to say that people haven't benefited from the changeover in the past. They also tend to be a little more optimistic about children's future, what will happen when children grow up, will they be better off financially.

That seems to be something that is very different from Western Europe, where of course we read a lot about how the young are quite negative about their future. They obviously have problems with buying a house, with paying for education, in Southern Europe especially with getting a permanent job. Is there a big East-West split on this, that as Western youth turns pessimistic, Eastern youth are resolutely positive?

There are still more positive young people than old people in most of the countries. The differences are more across countries than within on most of these questions. In other words, the overall sentiment of the country is a better indicator of how young people feel. So when you look at the overall number of people in France who are optimistic about their children's future, the young might be slightly more optimistic but in the end everyone is fairly pessimistic.

That's pretty much true of all the questions we asked. The thing that people are really pessimistic about is inequality. It's a fact that reducing the income gap between rich and poor is something that worries a lot of people and they are pessimistic about it, regardless of whether they are young or old, in all the countries we surveyed.

Let's focus on populism, which seems to be the topic of the moment. Can you detect a 'populist mentality', and

in which countries do you see this, in what kind of people do you see this?

Generally those who support right-wing populist parties tend to be more anti-Muslim, that's something that's clear across the surveys that we do. In many cases they also tend to be more anti-EU. Those are

There are some countries that aren't as keen on EU membership—only 40% of Czechs say that it has been a good thing for their country. But that's even more so in places like Bulgaria.

two areas where it's clear that the populist divide exists. It's not so clear that on many of the other issues we talk about it's the same. A lot of these populist parties are less unified and pan European, they're more about that specific country and the issues within that country. So it's hard to actually look at it in totality and I think we are going to have to look at it a little deeper as we go through the survey.

Which of the countries you surveyed are the most hostile to the EU?

When you look at it overall actually half or more in all the countries we survey have a favourable view of the EU. So there's not a lot of overwhelming unfavorability towards the organization. There's a little bit more variety when it comes to whether a country's membership is a good thing. In the Czech Republic only 40% say that it's been a good thing—that's the lowest in

the survey. But when it comes to whether the economic integration of Europe has strengthened their economy, we see more negative sentiments in Italy, in Bulgaria, in Greece, places where the economy really has done pretty poorly in recent years and that association is pretty clear.

When we ask about the issues on what the EU does, people will say—this is from our 2018 survey—that it promotes peace, they are very positive on that aspect of it but they are less positive on some of the other issues that the EU handles. They are pretty negative about how it handled the refugee issue and the Brexit issue. These kind of things make the EU a little less positive.

Your survey came out with some quite worrying findings about disillusionment with democracy and willingness to embrace authoritarianism. In which countries are you seeing this phenomenon?

We asked about satisfaction with democracy and there is variation across the countries we survey in terms of dissatisfaction. For example in Sweden, Germany, the Northern European countries, Poland as well, people are more satisfied with democracy than a lot of the other countries we survey. The countries that are more dissatisfied with democracy are Greece, Bulgaria, the UK, Italy, Spain. Our prior research on this shows that the two biggest factors that go into views of democracy and satisfaction are economic attitudes—if

the economy is doing well, people tend to be more satisfied with democracy—and the other factor is whether the party that they like is in power.

Another thing we found was that people are likely to say that democracy gives them a say but that politicians don't really care what ordinary people think. When we ask them, a majority say that politicians don't care about people like them. But when it comes to democratic rights, people are clear that having a fair judiciary is very important to them, being able to have free speech, a free media are all things that people find very important in their lives. It's less so when it comes to civil society, allowing human rights organizations to operate—in the Czech Republic only 46% says it's very important, and in Italy 35%.

What does your survey show you about how people in this region have

become skeptical of political elites, as well as economic elites? Have people become much more disillusioned with their political masters?

We ask who has benefited from the changes in 1989/91 and here people are more likely to say that politicians and business people have benefited and fewer people say that ordinary people have benefited from these changes. But in fact since 2009 more people say that ordinary people have benefited. So even though that gap still exists, it has narrowed a bit.

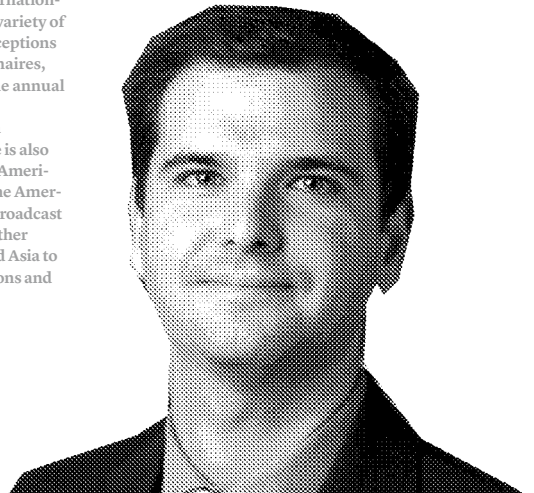
When we ask whether politicians listen to ordinary people, most people disagree, and that's true about attitudes to the EU as well, people think they are not listening.

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Zelensky Plunders the Populist Playbook

ASPEN.REVIEW
ANDREW WILSON

POLITICS
POPULISM
ZELENSKY
JOHNSON

The key to Zelensky's success was capturing the zeitgeist media narrative of #zrada or 'betrayal', the old elite making money from war. Whoever latched on to the mood of distrust and disgust best was likely to win the election. But Zelensky did it perfectly.

Some commentators have written about Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's new comedian president, as if he were the ultimate post-modern, shape-shifting, micro-targeting palimpsest. He is indeed supremely post-modern, but has resolutely stayed in character; not just reflecting or exploiting the part of the ordinary hero-schoolteacher Vasyl Holoborodko from his TV series *Servant of the People*, but effectively campaigning and even governing as him. According to the Ukrainian philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko, "this is the logic of TV tuned upside down. An actor plays a real person. Zelensky is a real person playing an actor".¹ This seems absurd, but is far from unique. According to his cheerleaders, "Zelensky doesn't copy anybody";² but he is in fact only the latest outsider-insurgent politician to plunder the populist playbook of Donald Trump and Boris Johnson; although he may be more radical than them all. Here is my definition of the rules of that playbook.

Rule Number One: Define Yourself

Don't let others define you. A failed New York tycoon, a bumbling Etonian fond of quoting Latin, and a Ukrainian comedian would all have been excluded by gate-keepers in the old era of professionalised politics. But the idea of politics as a profession is precisely what has alienated voters in the social media age. Political entrepreneurs, who are not necessarily outsiders by any means, now play the cult of outsider authenticity to build support; and just as crucially to hold up a mirror to validate their audience's own 'authenticity'. It is common place to say that such politicians are blank canvases for voters to project onto. Micro-targeting is all the rage. But at the core of so many different messages is the use of the candidate's own 'authentic' personality to send a message to voters that "it's OK to be yourself". "You, the ordinary voters, have the right to laugh", or to express opinions that elites may disdain. "The elites hate you", but what they call inappropriate or populist or racist is actually OK.³

Rule Number Two: Play a Part

Ironically, authenticity requires playing a part. Donald Trump was a reality TV star before he 'became a politician'—without ever really becoming a politician. But even on *The Apprentice* he was playing a part, writing his own myth of a successful businessman and deal-maker supreme. In the UK, new Prime Minister Boris Johnston is also playing a part. His real full name is Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson. He is 'Al' to his family. 'Boris Johnston', a first name that is both posh and plebeian, a character somehow apparently liberated by privilege to be a truth-teller, is also a construct.

Zelensky is playing the role of president as much as being the actual president. His early moves are messages clearly designed to remind voters of the TV series.

So the election in Ukraine, not of a politician who used to be a comedian, but of a comedian who remains a comedian, is not unprecedented. Zelensky is playing the role of president as much as being the actual president. His early moves are messages clearly designed to remind voters of the TV series. You can almost hear his advisers saying "we did this already in series one, episode two". Zelensky's travels are shot on social media like a mini-series. It's not so important where he goes; it's more important that he takes a selfie of him eating *shawarma*, a popular street food at a gas station on the way.

Rule Number Three: Use a Loud, Repetitive Voice

Sell the voice, sell the brand, not the policies—if they are any. The loudest voice, the most extreme point of view, the simplest message is normally the one to dominate on social media. Zelensky pre-dominated: he debuted in the opinion polls in the lead with 22%, before he had really done anything; only 10% of his supporters were familiar with any of his policies.⁴ His pop-up party ‘Servant of the People’ started polling at 40%, even before it had announced its platform or its list of candidates (it eventually won 43.2%). Zelensky was lucky in that he had no similar opponents—rock star Svyatoslav Vakarchuk having decided not to run. Old style TV populists like Yuliya Tymoshenko and Oleh Lyashko looked decidedly old. Zelensky might not be so lucky in the future, but he has promised only to serve one term. But others may try and steal, or develop, his act.

It is a myth that post-modern social media had done away with meta-narratives. The opposite is also the case. Your disparate supporters need an overarching idea to latch onto, one that is both capacious and fuzzily-defined.

Like Trump, Zelensky’s voice was comic, but his humour can be mocking, sexist and cruel. He also broke with the traditions of the old political class by openly dis-respecting Poroshenko. But most importantly, it is a myth that post-modern social media had done away with meta-narratives. The opposite is also the case. Your disparate supporters need an overarching idea to latch onto, one that is both capacious and fuzzily-defined. In Johnson’s case this was first Brexit, then Brexit betrayal, then hard Brexit. In Trump’s case this was leaks, ‘Crooked Hillary’, immigration and the Washington ‘swamp’. The key to Zelensky’s success was capturing the zeitgeist media narrative of *#zrada* or ‘betrayal’, *#torgivlya na krovi*, the old elite making money from war and ordinary people’s sacrifices, while the masses were left with *#zubozhinnya*, ‘impoverishment’. This narrative has been building for years. Whoever latched on to the mood of distrust and disgust best was likely to win the election. But Zelensky did it perfectly.

Rule Number Four: Stay Off Other Media

Your image is your property. Mainstream media will challenge your self-definition and your ‘authenticity’ if you allow them too. Nobody likes a

- 1) Interview with Volodymyr Yermolenko, 26 June 2019.
- 2) Interview with Viktor Andrusiv, Executive Director of the Ukrainian Institute of the Future, 25 June 2019.
- 3) Interview with Yermolenko. See also Yermolenko, ‘Zelenskiy’s Populism 2.0: What it Means for Ukraine’, *New Eastern Europe*, 24 April 2019; <http://neweasterneurope.eu/2019/04/24/zelenskiys-populism-2-0-what-it-means-for-ukraine/>

counter-narrative in social media, because it is supposed to be social. So stay away. Johnson gave only one press conference during his leadership campaign. Trump was not exactly silent during the 2016 election; he leveraged extraordinary coverage in the mainstream media. But then he excluded big parts of it from increasingly rare White House Press Conferences and interviews to anyone other than Fox.

Zelensky only did two campaign interviews that were not for his home channel 1+1. He met journalists after his victory, but in private, urging them to go easy on the candidate 'of the people'. When he has meetings or travels the country, the presentation is stage-managed on video or vlog.

Rule Number Five: Use Your Own Media

'Boris Johnson', the media personality, has been in the making since he appeared on TV comedy shows in the late 1990s. Now he mainly relies on the Daily Telegraph as his own mini-Fox, the UK's leading right-wing broadsheet turned Boris Johnson fan-sheet. He has been too lazy for regular social media use: but as PM has clearly been pushed by adviser Dominic Cummings to prioritise messaging through Facebook (615,000 followers), and Twitter (871,000). Johnson is doing 'The People's PMQs' (Prime Minister's Questions) on Facebook, rather than having to face it in parliament. But Trump is the obvious master here: @realDonaldTrump had 63.1 million followers as of August 2019. It's worth listing what Trump uses Twitter for—the list is quite long. (Significantly, Trump fought but lost a court case to try and keep critics away from his Twitter account). Twitter is for distraction. For reverse-framing. To overcome the dissonance moderate Republicans should feel about his policies. And @realDonaldTrump has real power to harass opponents. Arguably most importantly, however, it is a cue for Fox. 'The White House and Fox interact so seamlessly that it can be hard to determine, during a particular news cycle, which one is following the other's lead'.⁵

For Zelensky, commentators are divided as to whether his social media or his traditional TV campaign were more important in getting him elected; so we will settle for saying that what matters is that they feed off each other, like Twitter and Fox for Trump. Once Zelensky announced his candidacy on New Year's Eve, the Ukrainian channel 1+1 was basically ZeTV. There were constant runs of his show 'Servant of the People', repeats of his

old shows, reality TV reporting about him, and a rather strange documentary about Ronald Reagan, ‘the great communicator’, narrated by Zelensky. The total output of his production company Kvartal 95 was on air for a total of 203 hours and 35 minutes during the campaign, which was 14% of 1+1’s total screen time.⁶ And 1+1 is the most trusted channel in Ukraine, with a 22% rating to its nearest rival’s 8%.⁷

1+1 also showed ‘ZePrezydent’ every night after the evening news during the campaign, which was also his vlog on YouTube, with 716,000 subscribers. Ze!Life had 433,000. The most viral video, with background music and skilful editing of Zelensky publically haranguing public officials in the regions, had 2.5 million views.⁸ YouTube, however, was second in importance to Zelensky’s preferred medium Instagram, a natural home for his mini-clips and punchy jokes. His following grew to over four million during the campaign, rising to eight million by August 2019. His Facebook account clocked in at a lowly 976,000 followers, Twitter at 111,000.

It helps to cement the alliance between ‘authentic’ candidates and their ‘authentic’ followers to get online armies to sing the praises of both—the candidate as endorsement of the supporter, as much as vice-versa.

Rule Number Six: Enlist Cheerleaders

It helps to cement the alliance between ‘authentic’ candidates and their ‘authentic’ followers to get online armies to sing the praises of both—the candidate as endorsement of the supporter, as much as vice-versa. The ‘ZeTeam’ included ZeBots, leaving his green heart symbol everywhere, and 600,000 ZeDigital volunteers, trained at seminars and webinars to use the ZeBook and its accompanying style guide, the ZeLogobuk. At the key stadium debate, Zelensky channelled ‘ordinary’ questions from ‘ordinary’ Ukrainians, but they actually came from this heavily-managed source, and from similarly curated online discussions.

Rule Number Seven: (Only Then) Fake it. Bring in the Bots, etc

Bots can create a launch effect for marginal candidates. But normally, the amplification of your brand is only the final task. The brand comes first. For Trump, ‘61% are bots, spam, inactive or propaganda’.⁹ Bots propelled his

4) Interview with leading Ukrainian sociologist Iryna Bekeshkina, Kyiv, 9 April 2019

5) Jane Meyer, ‘The Making of the Fox News White House’, *The New Yorker*, 4 March 2019; www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/03/11/the-making-of-the-fox-news-white-house/amp

6) ‘Monitoring: 1+1 prysvyatyv 14% efiru pozytyvu pro Zelens’oho, Teksty, 18 April 2019; texty.org.ua/pg/news/textynewseditor/read/93103/Monitoring_11_prysvatyv_14_usogo_jefiru_pozytyvu?fbclid=IwAR1B2_GYBKNaNIKIFj6kvgrjCAomuI3g01f09JdyXsS_82cZLjslp58R1gk

rise through the primary process and during the debates with Hillary Clinton, but mainstreaming also requires a popular brand and a complicit mainstream media.

Critics argued that Zelensky's meteoric rise in Ukrainian politics had to be explained by the use of bots and aggregator technologies—both of which are now common enough in Ukrainian politics. (And in US politics too). But Zelensky has been in comedy for over a decade: Kwartal 95 was founded in 2003. He had almost universal name and face recognition. His initial boosters were not bots but the new breed of social media comedy channels in Ukraine, many of which are imported or copied from Russia: 'politainment' like Novinach, Perepichka and BadComedian.

Nevertheless, his online supporters, organised in a 'Mobile Online Group', were also accused of 'aggressively whitewashing Zelensky and denigrating Poroshenko'.¹⁰ One investigation by Vox Ukraine in the summer of 2019 showed that Zelensky had one of the highest number of bot-comments on his personal pages (58,350 comments out of 255,157, or 23%). Although the pro-Russian politicians Vadym Rabinovych (45%) and Yevhen Murayev (39%) had a much higher share. That said, 'only 24% of bot-written comments about Volodymyr Zelensky were positive'—indicating that many 'hate bots' might be run by his opponents or out of Russia.¹¹

Ukrainian elections were fought on TV. 2019 was the first year when social media had a massive impact. But Ukraine has not (yet) leapfrogged into a situation where only social media matters.

Rule Number Eight: Govern by Campaigning

Carry on with the show. It did not take long for Trump to go back to rallies rather than the tedious business of actual governance. Every move in Johnson's first week in office was performance politics in advance of the expected early election. In Ukraine, Kwartal 95 are back on the road. Zelensky may join them. But he is also looking at new forms of enlisting 'popular participation' against an immobile state. He is trawling Europe for ideas: referenda, like in the UK (maybe not a good idea); online policy approval, as with Five Star Movement in Italy; leading a national conversation like in France. He has concentrated on early symbolic moves, like shifting the presidential administration

downtown. But he remains happiest with TV shows. His party candidates were presented on a 1+1 show *Pravo na vladu* ('Right to power'), although the audience was there to cheer not to choose. A new breed of these types of shows is likely.

Conclusion

Not everyone is equally good at all of the above. Trump's constant rallying obviously distracts from actual governing. Johnson's shtick may have worked during the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign, but by 2019 his negative ratings were high. The Daily Telegraph is not as big a media player as Fox, or indeed the BBC.

We do not know yet whether it will help or hinder President Zelensky to also be President Holoborodko. Traditionally, Ukrainian elections were fought on TV. 2019 was the first year when social media had a massive impact. But Ukraine has not (yet) leapfrogged into a situation where only social media matters. Mediated reality is now multi-screen reality. Zelensky's plans for economic, business and judicial reform are all complicated by his relationship with the leading oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky, which is complicated by his control of 1+1. Zelensky has promised to keep Kolomoisky at arm's length, but could he do without 1+1? Zelensky has also promised to serve only one term, but all Ukrainian presidents have lost popularity over their first term. Can Zelensky avoid this trap? And can he use his social media savvy to push real reform rather than just distract?

7) Yevgeniya Blyznyuk, 'Mediinoe ekho: kaie media pomogli Zelenskomu stat' prezidentom', Liga.net, 11 May 2019; www.liga.net/politics/articles/mir-multiekрана-kak-media-pomogli-zelenskomu-stat-prezidentom

8) ЗЕПрезидент is at www.youtube.com/channel/UCp2zBKrqPOZQF6RN4RjtF2Q

9) Rand Fishkin, 'We Analyzed Every Twitter Account Following Donald Trump: 61% Are Bots, Spam, Inactive, or Propaganda', SparkToro, 9 October 2018; sparktoro.com/blog/we-analyzed-every-twitter-account-following-donald-trump-61-are-bots-spam-inactive-or-propaganda/

10) Yuri Zoria, 'How Zelensky "Hacked Ukraine's Elections"', Euromaidan Press, 26 April 2019; euromaidanpress.com/2019/04/26/how-zelensky-hacked-ukraines-elections-op-ed/

11) Maryna Ott and Volodymyr Lozovyi, 'Erase This If You Can. What Ukrainian Bots Are Doing on Ukrainian Politicians' Pages', Vox Ukraine, 7 August 2019; voxukraine.org/en/erase-this-if-you-can-what-ukrainian-bots-are-doing-on-ukrainian-politicians-pages/

ANDREW WILSON

is a senior policy fellow at ECFR, a permanent Reader in Ukrainian Studies at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES), University College London. He is also an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Institute of International Affairs. His books include *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship* (2011) and *Ukraine's Orange Revolution* (2005).



Jamie Fly: Radio Free Europe Comes Back to Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria

President Jamie Fly comes to RFE/RL as someone with extensive experience in transatlantic relations. Over the last five years, the organization he now heads has changed tremendously, expanding from the legacy media to digital platforms. It has launched *Current Time*, a 24-hour TV news-channel in Russian, something the Kremlin is not particularly excited about. Fly's vision is to continue the trend of adaptation to digital, while remaining flexible and able to deploy all platforms according to the audience needs.

In his light-filled spacious office in Prague, he shows me a large framed photograph on the wall. It is a blowup of a color picture taken this past summer in Moscow. There

is a *Current Time* reporter in the photo interviewing a protester lying on the ground, dragged by a riot-police officer. Fly looks proud of the symbolic moment, and of the work his organization does in Moscow and beyond. I ask about their current state of operations in Russia.

"We have a bureau in Moscow and are able to do journalism from there and other parts of Russia. We occasionally run into challenges. Our journalists are often harassed, sometimes our freelancers are detained and there have been attempts to prosecute them on different charges. But we are able to operate in Russia. We have our 24/7 Russian-language network which through its work on social media gets a lot of viewers inside Russia.

Our Russian service covers a wide range of political issues inside Russia and does great work for the Russian audience, so we have been pleased with our reach. I am always looking to expand our audience and some of that requires the Russian government to stop the trend towards more control of the media, closing the media space and making it more difficult for independent media, whether local or international, to operate. We covered the Moscow demonstrations live throughout the summer and the Duma has threatened foreign media. It has claimed that they were inciting the protests.

The other major concern is that the Russian government has announced the potential for it to exert control of the Internet; basically adopting a version of the Chinese firewall. That would be incredibly concerning to anyone who supports freedom of speech and I would imagine that many Russians, and not necessarily fans of opposition, would be unhappy about that,” says Fly.

We also want to be a platform that allows people with all political views to come and present them. That is incredibly important in a democracy.

Can you personally do anything about this on your level: some sort of direct engagement with Russian authorities, for example?

I have not done it yet because I have only been in the job a little over two months,

but I do plan to visit Moscow at some point. I will certainly meet with any Russian officials willing to meet and talk. We'll see how receptive they are to that.

Recently we see RFL/RL re-turning to markets that were considered stabilized because they are part of the European Union. What is behind this move?

In the last year we've re-launched services in Bulgaria and Romania and next year we will be re-launching a Hungarian service. This is an area where we generally take our strategic direction from our funder, the U.S. Congress. This is an annual process where we get advice about where there is the greatest need in terms of language services. Most of the focus in these countries, which are EU and NATO member states, is not that there is no free media. It is just not the case in any of them. The challenge is media consolidation. Media that is allowed to operate for the most part were bought by forces aligned with the government and have a political agenda. The result is that most of the media is biased one way or another. It is either incredibly supportive of the government, or there is an opposition press that spends all of its time just attacking the government rather than presenting all sides. So we felt that there is a space for us to return and we have done so in a rather limited way with small digital operations that primarily are putting news and information

and video on the web and social media. Our hope is to do serious journalism, serious investigations and some of the news-gathering that might not be done right now. We also want to be a platform that allows people with all political views to come and present them. That is incredibly important in a democracy. It is something we are trying to do even in countries governed by undemocratic leaders. We routinely invite them to come and in some cases they do. Even if they are not democratically elected, we want their perspective. We will also highlight the oppositions' perspective. We feel that it is important to be the type of news organization that actually allows for civic discussion and debate on our platforms. That is our hope for these small news services we've launched. They are digital only operations. We don't have plans to expand beyond that. There are various segments of the population that are underrepresented, for example young people who get their news online. We currently do not have plans for a radio or TV broadcast in those EU markets.

Will you have correspondents there?

Yes.

How large will those bureaus be?

They are relatively small bureaus, with a handful of journalists in each country doing original reporting.

Have you met resistance from the governments so far?

The Romanian and Bulgarian re-launch started before I became President so I was not involved. My understanding is that when we announced our intention to return, both governments welcomed us in. We haven't had major issues at this point. We are just starting the process in Hungary. I have visited Budapest and I met with Prime Minister Orbán's office, his spokesperson, and made clear that once we are up and running we would love to interview government officials and to sponsor debates between government officials and the opposition. We seem to get positive indications about the government's willingness to engage with us. I'm sure none of these countries is pleased that there is an assessment of a need for RFE/RL's return but we've been pretty pleased with our ability to operate thus far in Bulgaria in Romania.

Can we foresee further expansion elsewhere in Central Europe?

After all there are serious issues with media freedom in the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia.

We'll have to see. A lot of those decisions are made by our Board in Washington after annual assessments of the state of press freedom. Right now there aren't any active discussions about launching elsewhere, but we'll just have to see what the trend is.

Russian and other governments increasingly spread disinformation not

just here in Central Europe, but also in Western Europe and the U.S. How does RFL/RL cope with the challenge?

It's become such a huge challenge, and like you said, it's not just the Russian government. As I started to travel to our bureaus and talk to our staff about the situation they're facing in their countries, many of the governments are adopting the same tactics of troll farms, spreading fake news and disinformation to their publics to advance their agenda. Our reporters often get trolled and our news stories get comments that clearly come from those, who are trying to manipulate the narrative about our work. I think some of our best TV programming that we've been doing and that we also put then on social media, are explainer videos debunking the propaganda. They are very effective tools in raising awareness about the facts behind a particular situation. We do fact checking and highlighting of particularly prevalent conspiracy theories. If you look at the Skripal poisoning in the UK carried out by the Russian Federation, we have been pointing out many different conspiracy theories Russian state media have put out, showing that they just tried to sow confusion about the facts. I think we often also forget that just having reputable sources of news and information available in many of these languages is one of the best antidotes to disinformation. I've come to believe that our presence in many of these markets is one of the best ways to

combat disinformation. It's an evolving challenge and I think we and other news organizations are going to need to do much more to combat it going forward, especially as new forms develop, for example so-called deep fakes, those bizarre manipulated videos.

How serious is this challenge? Does it threaten liberal democracy itself?

I tend to be pretty pessimistic about this. Democracy is remarkably resilient and will survive this challenge. What worries me, however, is the corrosion of the truth and increased apathy in many Western publics about fundamental concepts like truth. It creeps up on people—many don't realize as they get drawn into biased media. It rattled lots of people in the U.S. in

I think some of our best TV programming that we've been doing and that we also put then on social media, are explainer videos debunking the propaganda. They are very effective tools in raising awareness.

2016 when they were surprised that due to social media algorithms they were living in bubbles. They were largely consuming news from sources that were saying the same thing, which reinforced preconceived notions that they had about political issues or even society. That's why we now debate regulating social media. Europe has taken a bit different approach, but I think some

of those discussions will be incredibly important in determining how damaging in the long run disinformation will be. It is because of the attack on truth that I think news outlets like ours are so important.

What is your advantage being funded, and in a way guided in your mission, by the United States government? Is there an edge, a competitive advantage to it?

It allows us in many markets to cover stories that other media cannot. Imagine a commercial TV in a Central Asian region that would want to cover the finances of a family member of a President or conduct a hard-hitting investigation into corruption in a national agency. The political pressure would be such that they just won't be able to do it, and would probably shut down. The fact that we are funded by the U.S. government, even though we are really independent, makes some of those countries deal with us more sensitively and maybe not try to close our operations as quickly as they might in other instances. I've been told in my early travels as president that our mere existence there creates additional space for local independent media, which otherwise might not even exist. Some of the stories that we cover get picked up by local media, which gets them a little bit of top cover. I've been told by local activists in one country in Central Asia that because we are there and cover A, B and C, they are at least allowed to cover A. So that kind of prying opening the media

ecosystem helps create some broader space for freedom of expression in some of these countries.

I'm just talking about the more authoritarian states here. Countries like Georgia and Ukraine have a different issue. There the problem is not no choice, but too many. You have individuals connected with the government or the opposition with their own TV channels, so some viewers may be hungry for a brand that is seen as not having a party, nationalistic or political ideology. We actually play an important role beyond just the people that we reach with the news that we provide, and that is the role of—to some extent—influencing media ecosystems in some countries.

Some European observers believe that the United States has been steadily disengaging from Europe. On the other hand, your institution is expanding. How do you see these fears?

I think that our continued existence here and a robust presence—we have actually expanded in the last five years and our budget has increased—is all a sign of continued U.S. commitment to Europe. It is also an important part of the U.S.-Czech relationship. We hosted the Mayor of Prague here a couple of weeks ago. I have met the Foreign Minister recently and will host him here within the next month. The Czech officials I've spoken to really see our presence as relevant. Next year it will be 25 years since we have moved

to this city, which is among other things part of President Václav Havel's legacy, since he played a key role in attracting the Radio from Munich to Prague. And I do think we play an important role from yet another perspective. There are European broadcasters like Deutsche Welle and others operating in some of the same markets as we are, but in some places there are really no European or EU-funded media conducting similar work, which has been interesting to me as someone who has

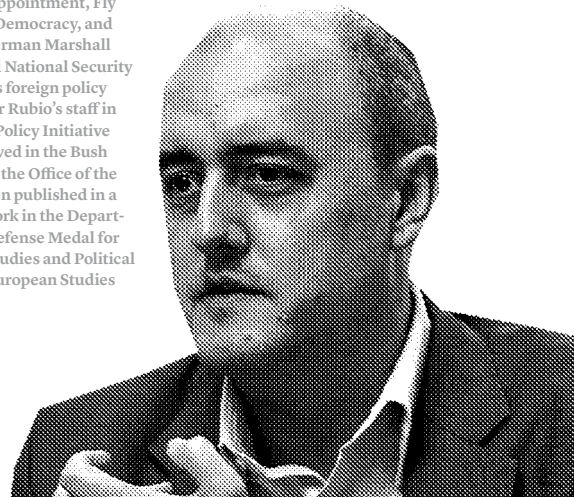
worked a great deal on the transatlantic relationship. We are actually carrying the independent media water in a number of places, as we would say in the United States, by ourselves. The continued commitment of the U.S. Congress, despite budgetary pressures and despite a lot of the political debates that are going on in the United States, to RFE/RL should be seen as a reassuring sign of the continued U.S. commitment to the continent.



Jamie Fly was one of the speakers at the Aspen Disinformation workshop—read more about it in the article by Jenda Žáček on page 84.

JAMIE FLY

was appointed RFE/RL President and Chief Executive Officer by the RFE/RL Board of Directors on 10 July 2019, effective 1 August 2019. Prior to his appointment, Fly served as a senior fellow, co-director of the Alliance for Security Democracy, and director of the Future of Geopolitics and Asia programs at The German Marshall Fund of the United States. He served as counselor for Foreign and National Security Affairs to Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) from 2013-17, serving as his foreign policy advisor during his presidential campaign. Prior to joining Senator Rubio's staff in February 2013, he served as the executive director of the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI) from its founding in early 2009. Prior to joining FPI, Fly served in the Bush administration at the National Security Council (2008-09) and in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (2005-08). His articles and reviews have been published in a wide variety of outlets in the United States and Europe. For his work in the Department of Defense, he was awarded the Office of the Secretary of Defense Medal for Exceptional Public Service. Fly received a B.A. in International Studies and Political Science from American University and an M.A. in German and European Studies from Georgetown University. | Photo: RFE/RL



ASPEN.REVIEW
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POLITICS
DISINFORMATION
AUTOMATION
MEDIA



Disinfo Competition— Taming the Trolls and Algorithms

Disinformation has always been here. The digital transformation has increased its impact and spread dramatically. The reach and influence of social and online media in general is much bigger than the reach of any traditional media or any government of the world. Algorithms govern today's society and will do so even more in the future. Welcome to the reign of algorithms—welcome to the disinformation competition.

On 24–25 September 2019, Aspen Institute CE brought to Prague more than 40 distinguished professionals, researchers, experts and practitioners from various areas of society with the most diverse perspectives possible mainly from Central European countries. For one day, starting with an evening public event, they discussed the current state of disinformation and its possible future development. Particular attention was paid to the digital information environment focused on disinformation techniques, including the role of online and social media in people's perception and acceptance of disinformation. Tools and measures were explored which can contribute in fostering the resilience of societies and individuals against manipulated information.

During the presentations, there was a discussion on today's media and the overall disinformation landscape. The following points were made by the speakers and the audience. The reach and influence of social and online media in general is much bigger today than the reach of any traditional media or any government of the world. The propaganda and disinformation mostly start on the web, and are amplified on social media (mainly Facebook). Online and traditional media rarely reflect on and adapt to topic based microtargeting and the atomization caused by social networks merely offering just what content the user wants to see. This results in negative user feedback which results in a loss of trust in the media and institutions in general. The social media algorithm works using AI and all the data. One of the views is that algorithms govern today's society and will do so even more in the future. It is therefore important to be able to protect ourselves and our societies. The principles of social networks may contradict the society principles developed over the last centuries.

It is very important to think proactively about developing digital literacy and civic education programs that can help people be better prepared for the information they are going to encounter online.

One of the important things that came up during the discussions, tackling the complex problem of disinformation, was that *“it was critical to focus on the importance of protecting free expression and freedom of information in the digital space”*. No regulation will ever serve for the good of any society if fundamental rights can be violated. Blocking or banning media outlets is not an answer to the phenomenon of disinformation and propaganda, as it may easily lead to censorship.

Furthermore, *“it is an imperative for governments to bring the fight against disinformation to their national security strategies and actually bring the struggle against disinformation to the executive cabinet level”*, which plays a crucial role in securing democracy and naturally not only fighting but preventing attacks before they happen. *“Objective reporting, independent news and information to a broad group of citizens are ultimately the last line of defense when it comes to countering disinformation”*, another speaker stated during the debate.

It is very important to think pro-actively about developing digital literacy and civic education programs that can help people be better prepared for the information they are going to encounter online.

The Reign of Algorithms

The algorithms of social networks are in charge of spreading the content we create. Every algorithm—trying to deliver the desired content, to keep the user on the platform as long as possible and monetize the time spent on the platform—also has various pernicious side effects: e.g. Twitter using the principle of shouting loud to be heard, which is easily manipulated by bots and disinformation spreaders (automated amplification effect), YouTube with the autoplay function serving up more and more extreme content to keep you watching (the extremization effect), or Facebook encapsulating users in content bubbles, further assuring them with hypertargetted content causing radicalization and atomization effects.

The algorithms of social networks currently drive the distribution of content, which is still created by humans. By means of technology and AI development, we are slowly approaching an era, where machine generated content—such as text, but also video and images—will be hard to discern from human creation. This will change the perception of creating and distributing the content, which will be fully automated and based on content personalization and microtargeting for the user. The fake news then become a more fundamental threat because it will be based on an algorithm improving itself and looking much more like trustworthy, human-created content. The main question will be the role of humans in an automated and AI society—our individual (human) integrity should be addressed as an issue.

People tend to think that the news we disagree with is disinformation. We all tend to think that these are the others, who are misled by fake news and believe in disinformation—in fact, all of us are vulnerable to it.

Objectively, disinformation has always been here and can be identified focusing on various aspects, such as dubious sources, no separation of opinions and information, lack of facts, no corrections or the amplification on social networks and other platforms. People tend to think that the news we disagree with is disinformation.

We all tend to think that these are the others, who are misled by fake news and believe in disinformation—in fact, all of us are vulnerable to it. The most important thing is to acknowledge that you can be manipulated as well.

We Really Can Combat Disinformation

There are several positive experiences supporting the claim that we really can combat disinformation, although it is not easy. In order to do so, there has to be a system or a set of tools and approaches, addressed by the media houses and journalist on the one hand, and the governments, the public and the private sector on the other. The following recommendations have been made by 5 working groups with an inspiring mix of backgrounds on the part of the participants:

While disinformation in the digital world erodes the roots of democracy more than ever before, it has become more important to understand the role and all aspects of digital technology to defend democratic principles.

The media should:

- focus on quality journalism, cover challenging topics, show and highlight the sources, raise the standards of journalism and increase the trust in media by proper journalist processes,
- highlight and multiply the content across various platforms, change the perception of getting qualitative information,
- find new ways and technologies for fact-checking (real time fact-checking in TV shows and online),
- explain and point out facts by infographics, images and statistics,
- tell people what fact-checking is,
- respond faster and be proactive (facing the entities or governments which are very adaptive in using digital technologies spreading disinformation),
- bring more diversity to the media market and expand media services to areas without access to information.

The governments and politicians –in cooperation with public and private sectors– should:

- not to be too restrictive in information regulation,
- primarily be guarding freedom of speech,
- label real media to distinguish from disinformation spreaders,
- work on increasing media literacy of various target groups,
- support the development of fact-checking technologies,

- create a fact-checking working group bringing together various fact-checking organizations to combine resources and expertise along with traditional media, reporters and even government ministries to promote cooperation,
- look for local representatives in villages or towns to monitor their communities for fake news impacts,
- when using regulations focus on the social media algorithm regulation,
- focus on how to demonetize the disinformation sites to reduce the possibilities of spreading their content,
- support tools and programs to build up trust in institutions and political parties (e.g. by supporting codes of conduct about not using disinformation, bots),
- involve a governmental cybersecurity strategy team,
- promote fact-checking and raise awareness of the elections (using campaigns, fact-checking working groups, counter speech groups, online campaign targeting the disinformation consumers, etc.),
- involve tech companies and scientists in handling these issues.

Code of Conduct, Shining for Better Times

A separate discussion was dedicated to the possibility of developing and establishing a Code of Conduct to be agreed on between all the political parties, promising not to use disinformation, bots, trolls, or amplification tools. There was an agreement among the workshop participants that even if the Code of Conduct is not legally binding, and there is little hope that all the parties will adhere to it, it has been seen as an important positive step, as progress, and as an opportunity to raise awareness. There were several reasons given as to why (even anti-democratic) parties would sign such a Code of Conduct (e.g. motivated by its own PR “protecting the country and citizens” against disinformation). The observance to the Code might be initially supervised by the public, experts, civil society or other political parties, without any legal binding or penalties. It may develop over the years in small steps, and in the future, for example, funds and airtime on TV during political campaigns could be tied to compliance with the Code of Conduct.

Disinformation has always been here. The digital transformation has increased its impact and spread dramatically. While disinformation in the digital world erodes the roots of democracy more than ever before, it has

become more important to understand the role and all aspects of digital technology and AI, to be used to face disinformation effectively and defend democratic principles. Democratic states and societies have to increase their ability to protect themselves, but when doing so, fundamental rights have to be guarded and the positive impact of the development of digital technologies must not be threatened; digital technologies empower freedoms such as free access to information, the public's right to know and the right of individuals to seek and receive information and ideas of all kinds regardless of borders. These must not be violated. States should promote a free, independent and diverse communication environment, including media diversity, which are crucial tools to address disinformation and propaganda. The impact of digital spreaders' activities has to be minimized, be it unfriendly states or non-state bodies. Eventual restrictions and regulations may only be imposed on the right to freedom of expression and freedom of the media in accordance with international law. Countries and societies also have to look for innovative solutions, which can react in time and appropriately to malicious use of digital technology, be it in the field of disinformation manipulating individuals and distorting public opinion, or any other cyber threat.

The workshop was organized by Aspen Institute CE within a series of conferences, seminars and workshops organized by Aspen Institute Germany, Aspen Institute Spain and Aspen Institute Central Europe under the title Tech and European Society looking at the societal impacts of digital technologies and AI.



Read also the interview with one of the workshop speakers Jamie Fly, the President and CEO of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty on page 78 or watch a video with the speakers' interviews at aspn.me/WatchDisinfo

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The Unstoppable Rise of Czech Oligarchs

ASPEN.REVIEW
DAVID TRAMBA

ECONOMY
OLIGARCHIZATION
CZECH REPUBLIC
SLOVAKIA

About a hundred Czechs have a net worth of more than one hundred million EUR. Most of them present examples of acute business acumen and success. The wealthiest of these men present disturbing problems with their ambitious plans.

The current decade has blessed the countries of Central Europe with unusual economic growth and prosperity amongst the majority of the population, but has also damaged their democratic structures. While in Hungary there is a growing personality cult of Viktor Orbán, and in Poland the pursuit of “the national conservative regime” of the Kaczyński brothers, the Achilles heel of the Czech Republic—as well as Slovakia- is the rise of power and influence of wealthy businessmen.

The centerpiece of this problem are individuals known as oligarchs. Their influence entered public consciousness with full force in 2013, when then the second richest man in the Czech Republic—the agrarian and food magnate Andrej Babiš—succeeded in the parliamentary elections, became the Minister of Finance, and went on to become the Czech Prime Minister in 2017. At the same time, other billionaires, be they Petr Kellner, Daniel Křetínský or the weapons magnate Jaroslav Strnad, have gained a growing say over where the Czech Republic goes next.

It is interesting to compare these individuals with the Forbes' Dollar Billionaires column. The Czech Republic has eight members, the much bigger Poland only seven, and the comparable Hungary only a meager two. Let us take a deeper look as where the richest Czechs have come from, what their fortunes are made of, and how strong their influence is on the domestic and foreign policies of the Czech Republic.

Stories of successful entrepreneurs, who thirty years ago started somewhere in a rented garage or a shop and slowly built their billion crown empires from the ground up, provide a completely different narrative.

Privatization, the Bedrock of Wealth

When we look inside the Euro weekly, leaving Slovaks aside for the moment, six out of the ten richest Czechs made their first billions in privatization between 1990-2005. The remaining four succeeded even without privatization of state property. In contrast, entrepreneurs with a net worth in realms of billions in CZK are mostly self made and outnumber the active participants of privatization.

In contrast, many such parvenu of the privatization era have long left the charts. Some lacked ability and drove their companies into the ground, while others, like the profiteers from the wild 1990s Viktor Kožený and Boris Vostrý have disappeared somewhere in the Caribbean on the run from justice or have ended up in jail.

The seventh richest Czech Pavel Tykač cannot seem to shake off his dubious past, when he allegedly participated in asset stripping of privatization funds in the 1990s. Never found guilty by the courts, he disappeared from the public view around the year 2000, only to resurface in 2006 when he acquired a share in the mining company Mostecká Uhelná. Ever since he has been expanding in fossil fuel industries, yet given the European stance on burning coal his business model seems to be seriously challenged.

Petr Kellner, the all charts topper and the richest man of the day, had a somewhat more dignified presence in the privatization. He took advantage of the opportunity and gained control over the monopoly insurer in the country—Česká Pojišťovna. He then went on to sell it to Italian Generali between 2008 and 2015 for an impressive 3.6 billion euros, which to this day

forms the base of his wealth. Ever since he has created a diverse portfolio in consumer lending, energy industries, telecommunications and real estate.

Dozens of Positive Stories

Stories of successful entrepreneurs, who thirty years ago started somewhere in a rented garage or a shop and slowly built their billion crown empires from the ground up, provide a completely different narrative. And there are dozens of similar stories like these. Given the industrial tradition of the Czech Republic, many are found in machinery engineering industries, but there are also success stories in the IT, retail and power generating industries.

Lubomír Stoklásek, Businessman of the year in 2017, can serve as a typical example. When he bought Agrostroj Pelhřimov more than twenty years ago, it was a neglected factory begging to be torn down. It is currently a modern prosperous conglomerate that is supplying components to European and American manufacturers of trucks, agricultural machinery and utility vehicles. More than 98% of his production is for export.

Thanks to Pavel Bouška and his company Vafo Praha, the Czech Republic is a European powerhouse in pet feed. Zdeněk Pelc and his GZ media have a strong position on the market with CD, DVD and vinyl records. Linet of Zbyněk Frolík is among the leading world companies in the market of hospital beds of the highest quality, and Contipro of the innovative entrepreneur Vladimír Velebný has succeeded in the production of hyaluronic acid for the pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries.

Down to fewer tens of billions of CZK, we find four IT entrepreneurs. In thirty years, Pavel Baudiš and Eduard Kučera built Avast Software into a major company guarding computers against viruses and other risks, with a successful IPO on the London Stock market in May 2018. The search engine seznam.cz of Ivo Lukačovič is to this day a capable competitor to the global titan Google, and the online retailer alza.cz of Aleš Zavoral can rightfully be called the “Czech Amazon”.

How They Grew into Giants

From the self made subset, only Pavel Baudiš and Ivo Lukačovič have made it into the Top Ten. Here we find other names and other stories. The second spot is occupied by Radovan Vitek, whose success is based on real

estate expansion on a massive scale, with equally impressive debt accumulation. His strategy is based on the appreciation of his investments, and so far it holds.

Karel Komárek is no stranger to debt as well. His largest asset to date is the lottery and betting business under the umbrella of Sazka Group. He is also expanding rapidly in Italy, Austria and Greece, where he is attempting to gain a majority in the lottery company OPAP.

Swift expansion and high debt ratio with banks and bond holders is also a mantra of EPH's expansion. Daniel Křetínský and his energy holding have global ambitions, attested by his recent acquisition of shares in a German retail chain Metro and the French daily Le Monde.

The holding Agrofert, indirectly controlled by the Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, has a debt of almost forty four billion crowns. His rise began after Miloš Zeman's ascent to the premiership in the summer of 1998. A year later, Agrofert bought a large and profitable state chemical company Deza, followed by Precheza, Lovochemie and others. Within a few years, Agrofert established practically a monopoly in the chemical industry in the Czech Republic. If he had not changed his mind at the last possible moment in 2001, he could have also acquired the petrochemical and refinery giant Unipetrol.

When there was almost nothing left to privatize, Andrej Babiš threw himself into expansion abroad, and ventured into the food industry, buying the meat factory Kostelecké uzeniny, the poultry producer Vodňanská drůbež, the dairy producer Olma and the bakery group Penam. Since 2014, he became an equity investor as well via an investment fund called Hartenberg, investing in diverse ventures ranging from fertility clinics to distribution of cut flowers.

Oligarchs in Politics

So what really motivated Andrej Babiš to enter into politics? According to Jaroslav Kmenta and some other investigative journalists, he simply reacted to a loss of political influence. His relations with center-left leaning governments between 1998-2006 were very cordial, to say the least. The center-right governments dominating Czech politics between 2006-2013 did not have much time for him and he struggled to advance his business interest at the highest political level.

He first initiated a protest movement “Akce nespokojených občanů” (roughly translated as “resistance of disenfranchised citizens”), which then morphed into a political party ANO (YES) 2011. He masterfully rode the wave of popular discontent with a weak Prime Minister and the budget cuts of his finance minister Miroslav Kalousek. In the 2013 election, thanks to a professional campaign, the movement ANO 2011 ended up in the second position with 18.65% of the vote.

The trend of servile bowing to the Chinese regime began seven years ago with Prime Minister Petr Nečas with the idea of kickstarting Czech export and investment.

Despite his many glaring political weaknesses—ties to the Communist Party and secret police in the 1980s, vast wealth, conflicts of interest, and often confusing communication—Andrej Babiš managed to transfix a great part of Czech society. To this day, he expresses himself in a peculiar mix of Czech and Slovak, yet in 2013 became Finance Minister and in October 2017 rose to the Premiership.

There are other billionaires who also attempted to dabble in politics. Pavel Juříček, the owner of the car part manufacturer Brano Group was elected to parliament in the ANO colors and there have been some speculation as to naming him as a candidate for the post of Ministry for Industry. Ivo Valenta, the unofficial king of the gambling industry, has been an unaffiliated senator since 2014. Another billionaire Pavel Sehnal has been trying to resurrect a long gone political party ODA, yet even minuscule electoral success has eluded him thus far.

Stories of the Puppeteers

Then there are some that prefer to be in the backseat of the car. We can start off here with Petr Kellner, the owner of PPF group. According to many insiders it is in his best interests to push for cordial Czech-Chinese relations. And the reason? His cash cow is a consumer lending company Home Credit, with the core of its activities in mainland China.

The trend of servile bowing to the Chinese regime began seven years ago with Prime Minister Petr Nečas with the idea of kickstarting Czech export and investment. The baton was consequently passed on to the already pro-Russian president Miloš Zeman whose annual voyage to Moscow with

an entourage of influential businessmen, including Petr Kellner, lasts to this day. There was even a hint of a scandal some five years ago when Zeman returned back home on board Kellner's private jet.

Other businessmen focus on lobbying on the domestic political front. Legendary skills in this regard are attributed to Daniel Křetínský, the main shareholder of EPH Group, who is seen as exercising considerable influence over the Ministry of Industry and Trade, and the Energy Regulatory Office on the Electricity and Gas Industries. EPH owns a number of heating plants in large Czech cities and managed to lobby through a decrease in VAT on heating supply and an increased subsidy on combined heat and electricity production.

Foreign publishing houses dominating the market a mere ten years ago have pulled out of the market. The main newspapers are owned by the billionaires Andrej Babiš, Daniel Křetínský, or Marek Dospiva from Penta Group.

Some of his efforts went too far, however, and have been facing growing criticism. One example is his influence putting a temporary stop to the project of a Czech-Austrian gas pipeline (BACI) that would have been a direct competitor to the EPH co-owned gas pipeline in Slovakia. The government ran out of patience and sacked three members of the Board of Energy Regulatory Office for being too cozy with private business outfits, namely EPH.

The ownership of media outlets is its own beast. Foreign publishing houses dominating the market a mere ten years ago have pulled out of the market. The main newspapers are owned by the billionaires Andrej Babiš, Daniel Křetínský, or Marek Dospiva from Penta Group. A significant and mostly negative influence on public opinion is exercised by private TV stations, namely Prima owned by Ivan Zach or the controversial TV Barrandov controlled by Jaromír Soukup.

The Rise of the White Knights

To every action there is a reaction. Recently there has been an increase of activity of so-called "white knights" among Czech businessmen who support pro European policies, healthy democratic institutions and independence of media. Several of them (Dalibor Dědek, Martin Wichterle, BPD partners) financially supported the presidential candidate Jiří Drahoš, who only narrowly lost to Miloš Zeman in the second round of elections in 2018.

Other pro European entrepreneurs aim for the return of independent media. About a year ago, a new daily, Deník N, entered the market, supported by Martin Vohánka, Libor Winkler, Jaroslav and Silke Horák. Unlike Daniel Křetínský or Andrej Babiš, who use the media to further their interest, they do not meddle with the content of their news.

While there is, on the one hand, the growing power and influence of old style oligarchs who present riskiness for the future of the Czech Republic, we can be hopeful, on the other, of the increased activity of honest businessmen bent on anchoring the country firmly in the EU and Western civilization sphere. We currently find ourselves in the middle of a tug of war, the results of which remain to be seen.

Top Twenty

An estimate of the wealth of the richest Czechs, according to the calculation of the Euro weekly (2019, wealth in billions CZK)

RANK	NAME	WEALTH	KEY SOURCE OF WEALTH
1	Petr Kellner	270	finance
2	Radovan Víttek	89	real estate
3	Karel Komárek	80	gaming and lottery
4	Andrej Babiš	71	chemistry
5	Daniel Křetínský	68	energy
6	Pavel Baudiš	36,5	IT & internet
7	Pavel Tykač	31	mining
8	Jiří Šmejc	28	finance
9	Marek Dospiva	27,5	diversified investments
10	Ivo Lukačovič	25	IT & internet
11	Tomáš Chrenek	24,5	metallurgy
12	Eduard Kučera	19,9	IT & internet
13	Dušan Kunovský	19	real estate
14	Zdeněk Bakala	18	mining
	Jaromír Tesař	18	energy
16	Aleš Zavoral	17,8	retail
17	Tomáš Němec	15,5	rubber industry
18	Oldřich Šlémr	14,2	rubber industry
19	Petr Otava	13	metallurgy
20	Jaroslav & Michal Strnad	11	military, machinery

DAVID TRAMBA

graduated in finance from the Prague University of Economics (VŠE). He embarked on a career in economic journalism, with a specific focus on power engineering, investment and industry. He has worked for the Czech Information Agency since 2002, the daily *Lidové noviny* (2010-2013), the weekly *Ekonom* (2013-2015) and the online magazine *Dotyk Byznys*. He has been a staff writer with the weekly *Euro* since December 2016. Apart from writing for print and online media, he is also the principal author of the publications *Česká energetika* [Czech Power Engineering 2013-2015], *Atom Energy Outlook* (2015) and *EuroTop miliardáři ČR a SR od roku 2017* [Top Euro Billionaires in the Czech and Slovak Republics since 2017].



Philipp Ther: Ruthless Modernization from Top Down

It is not a coincidence that right wing populists and nationalists have taken government control in countries whose economies are very open to the outside world and where the state social safety network is either very weak or has had little time to develop properly.

ROBERT SCHUSTER: How would you evaluate the economic transformation that began thirty years ago in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe? Broadly speaking, can it be viewed as a success?

PHILIPP THER: I would not say it can be measured on a scale between success and failure. That approach used to be very common in the 1990s, when countries were evaluated on the basis of various indexes, as if at a sports competition. The perception of success

or failure comes down to the subjective perspective of an individual in the end. From a historian's point of view, your perspective is of utmost importance. Various charts paid attention to growth, inflation and debt but less so to the earnings and purchase power of the population. There is no doubt that former communist states have been catching up with the West, a process that has no parallel in European history. Viewed from this angle, it can be argued with some merit that the transformation has

been relatively successful. The Czech Republic and Slovenia have overtaken several older EU members as far as GDP creation is concerned and stand a very good chance of catching up with the level of prosperity that is the EU average. Poland has done exceedingly well, and despite certain prognoses right after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, Slovakia has achieved some good progress. It should be stated, however, that the growth data does not tell you much about the earnings and purchasing power. It should also be noted that experience based on real life often differs from the official perspective. The Documentation Center Karta announced, for example, a memoir competition in Poland in 2009. Young people were then asked to record their experiences after 1989. What clearly stood out from the results was that people were much more critical of the transformation than was apparent from all the macro-economic data. Despite clear progress and new opportunities for personal consumption, many people growing up in the 1990s perceived this time as an era of struggles and great uncertainty. So one has to bear in mind these negative reflections as well. I therefore disagree with a simple evaluation of the transformation into categories of success or failure. Experiences with the transformation differ significantly based on your social standing and, most of all, on your region. Each and every post-communist country has a strong division between

its western and eastern part, as well as between the urban and rural. There is also a generational divide. Young people often went on to do rather well, while those who were forty at the time were often left behind by the transformation. It is these differences one has to keep in mind in order to comprehend the complexity of the entire transformation process.

Despite clear progress and new opportunities for personal consumption, many people growing up in the 1990s perceived this time as an era of struggles and great uncertainty.

Is this the case of Eastern Germany, where despite massive financial transfers from the West satisfaction with the unification has been stagnating and electoral success goes to parties that seek to cast doubt on the successful unification narrative?

As far as Eastern Germany is concerned, I have compiled the economic data of the five new German states for my planned book and viewed them as if the East German state still existed. When we compare the data with the Czech Republic, it is evident that earnings and pensions are significantly higher in former East Germany. When one compares the GDP performance, for example, the Czech Republic is only a fraction behind. This took me by surprise because during the first 25 years

of the transformation, the West sent about 1600 billion euros in transfer funds. It is apparent that the investment fell short of its intended effect.

Additionally, the East has not been catching up with the West for several years now, but on the contrary, the economic divide is actually growing. This is one of the reasons for the popular discontent in Eastern Germany. Another reason is one's reference point. For Eastern Germans it is Western Germany, and not Poland or the Czechs. If they were to compare themselves with their eastern and southern neighbors, they might feel a good deal happier. In the 1990s and around the turn of the millennium, the protest votes went mainly to the post communist Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), or later to the Left (Die Linke). In recent years in most European countries, the clash between right and left wing populism has been won by the former, with this being the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany. The reason behind this may be that nationalism draws in more capitalist critics. It needs to be said that the share of the vote going to AfD is not that dramatic when compared with other post communist countries..

Is it possible to say, with the benefit of hindsight, what the biggest transformation mistakes were?

On the basis of the data that I have at my disposal I can not grasp the notion of “a success—story”, when roughly since the

1980s there has been this dissemination of the idea that so-called “shock therapy” is the basis for economic growth further down the road. The Eastern Germany story can attest to that. Poland has also had its share of problems with its shock therapy. It has eventually experienced an economic growth, partly because Leszek Balcerowicz was a pragmatist. The same goes for the Czech Republic, where Václav Klaus was nominally a Thatcherite, although he ended up making a number of compromises. The housing market and rents remained well regulated, for example, as well as privatization—which led to the banking crisis of 1996. In hindsight, I am now convinced that deep structural changes were the main problem of shock therapies. Some regions have gone through massive deindustrialization, and small to mid-size towns have often failed to deal with it to this day. There are nations that were more careful back then, the Czech Republic in the 1990s, for example, and it was better for them. On the other hand, countries that put off reforms because post-communists took control of the government, such as Romania or Ukraine, fared much worse in the end.

Another mistake that can be clearly seen was a strong anti-etatism. There was a clear antipathy towards government with the Chicago school and Milton Friedman. During Reagan's era in the 1980s, for example, Friedman warned against “big government” and attacked the institution

of the state as such. It is clearly untrue that all human needs are best met when in private hands. On the whole, such anti-etatism was counterproductive, because the states that were having the most serious problems with reforms after 1989, such as Russia or Ukraine, were struggling with the weakness of the state and its institutions. This led to corruption on a massive scale that ought to have been dealt with much more strictly. It is not surprising that transformation as such had a bad reputation among the people. Even the West had its own share of problems with corruption during privatization drives. The goal of the privatization was to increase effectiveness and competition. What seemed correct in theory did not necessarily work in reality.

The East has not been catching up with the West for several years now, but on the contrary, the economic divide is actually growing. This is one of the reasons for the popular discontent in Eastern Germany.

All in all, transformation was a process of modernization from top down, and often very ruthless. The intention was to transform the perceived homo sovieticus to homo economicus. Human resources were not compensated properly, and not all were competitive under new rules. Many people were disappointed by the reforms and their wellbeing declined

dramatically. The notion, in other words, that an individual drive for profit automatically leads to greater prosperity for all needs to be reexamined as an outdated liberal concept.

In former Czechoslovakia, there was this witticism during the transformation that it was a tug of war between lawyers and economists that would decide how fast or slow it would be. How important was it that the transformation of a socioeconomic system took place in the context of a poorly developed legal framework?

It just demonstrates the lack of understanding of what it takes for a state with democracy and rule of law to function. To do something hastily does not necessarily mean to do it better. To establish rule of law has never been easy yet I am not sure the lawyers are to blame. It is difficult when most of the legal experts were educated in the old system. I am also surprised by this bon mot because, according to neoliberal ideology, a human being only needs a state providing rule of law, police protection and a market economy. The economic crisis in 2008-9 has shown that something else is needed, this being democracy and a social state. Most of the people in the post communist countries wanted exactly that.

To what extent were the reformers in Central and Eastern Europe

autonomous when it came to the methods they chose to implement after 1989, and to enact systemic changes? Did they have to play ball with the creditors, for example?

When it comes to the concept of the reforms, there was a worldwide neoliberal hegemony, with the exception of Vietnam or China. You had the IMF, on the one hand, providing a clear neoliberal framework, along with the World Bank and European Development Bank (EBRD) later. Then there was the EU, which put a great emphasis on the reform and improvement of governance and civil service, and strengthening of the state as such, as it was not viewed with such skepticism.

We should not underestimate, however, the influence individual national actors have had. Leszek Balcerowicz in Poland, Jegor Gajdar in Russia and Václav Klaus in the Czech Republic were acting independently when they managed to push through their way of reform, which did not always align with the recommendation of the IMF. The amount of debt towards the Western institutions also played its role. In 1989-90, Poland had little room to maneuver and had to all but follow the Western guidelines. It needs to be said that there was strong support for radical overhaul even in the political camp of the former Solidarity movement. Czechoslovakia ventured into its systemic reforms more independently, and later Slovakia under the authoritarian government of Vladimír

Mečiar rejected the conditions of the IMF altogether. At a later point it needed a line of credit and turned to neoliberalism towards the end of the 1990s. On the whole, the autonomy of national government, when implementing reforms, should not be understated.

Some socialist countries did not have such rigid rules; private handicraft companies always existed there, and agricultural collectivization also had not been fully established. In 1989, did such countries have a head start? Have people there adapted to free market conditions and rules more easily than elsewhere?

Yes it did help, and it also meant that Poland and Hungary were pioneering reformers that managed to attract significant foreign investment. Both countries were quickly off the blocks as, towards the very end of state socialism, they tolerated many privately owned initiatives and enterprises in their economies. When initial transformative capitalism later entered another phase, many of the self employed also experienced economic difficulties, but this also varied in different sectors of the economy. In the service industry, retail and manufacturing it was beneficial to have a large diverse private sector. In agriculture, specifically in Poland, not so much. There the large number of independent small farmers was thought to be the major obstacle for the reform. On the

whole, the most important resource for the transformation in all of these countries was the relatively high level of skills and education and very low wages and salaries. The quality of education was of course given by state socialism and began to be neglected after 1989.

All in all, transformation was a process of modernization from top down, and often very ruthless. The intention was to transform the perceived homo sovieticus to homo economicus.

Over the past thirty years, could there have been an establishment of a strong middle class, which is such an important condition for democracy?

The bigger the middle class, the greater the support for democracy—there is a clear interconnection. The new class of small and mid-size businesses in Visegrad countries and the Baltic states was very important for building and consolidating democracy. Today they play an important role in protecting and preserving democracy. This middle class is very unevenly distributed. It is mainly found in cities, and struggles in the rural areas and postindustrial regions. It can be seen in the elections results, as well as in demonstrations fighting for democracy and rule of law. Fortunately, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland have a relatively strong middle

class, with Slovakia recently having abandoned right wing populism.

How would you explain the current situation in Hungary? People there had some experience with market principles before 1989, the country had great support from foreign investors, transformation went about relatively smoothly without any hitches...

Hungary today is not a fully functioning democracy but a semi-autocratic system. We can see it in the media and there are interventions into academic liberties, as is the case of Central European University (CEU) which was expelled from the country. Another important factor in Hungary is a traditionally strong polarization between the government and the opposition. It also needs to be said that the opening of the Hungarian market was so radical that in some sectors there are no local products to be found, and this also led to a certain alienation among people. Thirdly, direct economic investment was partly very speculative, especially in the consumer and building loans in foreign currency. Orbán's regime managed to take hold mainly thanks to the financial crisis of 2009. It discredited the Western order and neoliberal policies as such. In connection with foreign currencies loans, Orbán managed to pull off an act as the savior of middle class, thus laying the basis for his current popularity, which cannot really be disputed.

Even prior to 2009, the reforms did not always go smoothly, far from it. In 1995 there was a credit and currency crisis which the then post-communist government decided to solve with the so-called Bokros packet (named after the finance minister responsible). As a result, thirty percent of the population slid under the official poverty line. In other words: in Hungary there were many left reeling from the effects of transformation, and such people are especially susceptible to slogans and propaganda, be it right wing populist, nationalist or now anti-European.

Parallel with the transformation processes in Central and Eastern Europe, there was the worldwide advent of globalization. Did they influence each other, did they overlap, was there a connection of any kind?

There is a close and direct relationship. What transformation brought about was that the post communist countries were again part of the world economy. They

It is not a coincidence that right wing populists and nationalists have taken control of governments in countries whose economies are very open to the outside world.

became active players in globalization and made it stronger. Another relationship is that European integration, or Europeanization, can be seen as globalization on a

smaller scale. In certain aspects it went even further, when it established open borders for capital, goods, and people—i.e. for potential migrants as well. It can be argued that Central and Eastern Europe became the subject and even the driver of globalization. The right wing populism that has been so strong recently is a reaction to this dimension of transformation, as well as globalization and Europeanization.

What lessons for the future can be learned from the transformation experience in the last thirty years?

It is not a coincidence that right wing populists and nationalists have taken control of governments in countries whose economies are very open to the outside world and where the state social safety network is either very weak or has had insufficient time to develop properly. If we want to apply the domino theory from 1989, then Hungary, Poland, the UK and the US have been domino pieces that fell down first and moved in this direction. The success of right wing populists is tied with socio-economic changes, and especially with the social and geographic divide. This development is not only taking place in post communist countries. Western countries have undergone social-economic transformations that have created, apart from a few victors, too many disenfranchised and too many worries. There also exists a link and continuity between neoliberalism and illiberalism, not least in that they dismiss

public debate and criticism. It used to be that there was no alternative to their course, and now critics are being labeled as the enemies of government, the nation and the people.

If there was a conclusion to be made from all of this, then it is perhaps that openness to world markets and globalization can be sustainably managed via the social-liberal way, not the neoliberal. Countries with a traditionally strong social state have experienced a smaller rise of right wing populism, such as Austria, Germany or France, although it has been gaining some support. One of the factors is the level of education in the society, and there are notable differences between Central and Eastern Europe. This could explain why the Czech Republic and Slovakia have resisted the right wing populism more than Hungary, and to a certain extent Poland. The critique of neoliberalism should not be too broad. It makes no sense to turn it into a bogeyman. When we look at transformation, it is important to distinguish between certain phases. Many of the reforms made sense in the 1990s. That applies, for example, to subsidies for big

companies being scrapped, (when small enterprises were sold to private owners, (so-called small privatization), convertibility of currencies established, gradual opening to the world market and to a certain extent privatization of big industrial conglomerates.

But then the second phase of radical neoliberalism came about, which directly led to the global economic crisis in 2008–9 due to deregulation of the world financial markets.

From the historical perspective, the crisis started a new era. In many regards, a number of the current political problems stem directly from it. It remains to be seen whether we can reach some stability, but there are some reasons for hope, the recent election to the EU parliament being one of them. It was lampooned as an almost certain catastrophe but in the end it was far from it. The large party coalitions of Christian Democrats, Liberals and Social Democrats have remained key powers in the new parliament. Perhaps even the right wing populism has already reached its zenith.

PHILIPP THER

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Beijing's Bet on Expansion

The New Silk Road creates markets and jobs wherever it passes, representing China's response to the demand for development in any number of countries. The challenge for Beijing remains how to expand and prosper without appearing to threaten other world powers, especially Washington.

In just thirty years, with a growth model based on its comparative advantages and heavy in investment and exports, China has developed from a poor agricultural country to a global manufacturing powerhouse. In 2010, it officially became the world's second largest economy. Since the 2008 global financial crisis, however, China—along with many other countries—has been faced with economic slowdowns. Beijing has thus been searching for new ways to stimulate or sustain growth. Indeed, in a post-Trump and post-Brexit world where the USA and the UK are both retreating genuinely or symbolically from their commitment to globalization, many have expected China to play a larger role in the world economy. China's economy now stands at some 12 trillion dollars in magnitude, contributing about one third to world economic growth in recent years.

Viewed in this context, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can be taken as China's response to a global challenge. On the one hand, China itself has to deal with industrial overcapacity such as in steel, aluminum, cement, chemicals, ship-building and construction. On the other hand, many other

developing countries are experiencing rapidly rising demand—especially in infrastructure—but with a huge gap in financing and industrial capacity. Infrastructure development in Asia and the Pacific will exceed 22.6 trillion dollars through 2030, or 1.5 trillion per year. The estimate rises to more than 26 total, or 1.7 per year when costs for climate change adaptation and mitigation are included.

Not surprisingly, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (in a press conference with foreign and Chinese journalists in 2016) billed the BRI as “both a major step in China’s all-round reform and opening-up under new historical circumstances, and a most important public good that China contributes to Eurasia.” He was somewhat echoed by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres in July of 2017: “while the Belt and Road Initiative and the 2030 Agenda are different in their nature and scope, both have sustainable development as the overarching objective. Both strive to create opportunities, global public goods and win-win cooperation.”

On the one hand, China itself has to deal with industrial overcapacity.

The Beginnings of a New Concept

The Chinese *Yidai yilu changyi*—translated as BRI,¹ is an abbreviation of two components: the “silk road economic belt” and the “twenty-first century maritime silk road”. Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke of the first during his visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013 and of the second in Indonesia one month later. Along similar lines, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang also emphasized the need to revitalize the “maritime silk road” for ASEAN countries, and to rev up growth propellers for hinterland regions at the China-ASEAN Expo in 2013.

While the name may seem somewhat awkward in English, it rolls off the tongue in Chinese. The “belt” component is overland and includes countries situated on the traditional Silk Road, through Central Asia, West Asia, the Middle East and Europe. The “road” part refers to several contiguous bodies of water—the South China Sea, the South Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean—which make up the ocean-going Silk Road routes that connect China with Southeast Asia, Oceania and Africa. Taken together, countries along these Silk Road routes represent almost two thirds of the world’s population and more than one third of the world’s wealth.

1) “The Belt and Road Initiative” is the official English translation, according to a note issued in 2015 by the Chinese government. Previously, *Yidai yilu changyi* had been translated as “the One Belt One Road strategy (or project or program or agenda)”. Notably, by rejecting “strategy” and adopting “initiative”, the accent was put on cooperation: “strategy” connotes a unilateral foreign policy tool, whereas “initiative” suggests a proposal to work with other countries. The idea is to improve connectivity in Eurasia, with extensions to Africa and Latin America.

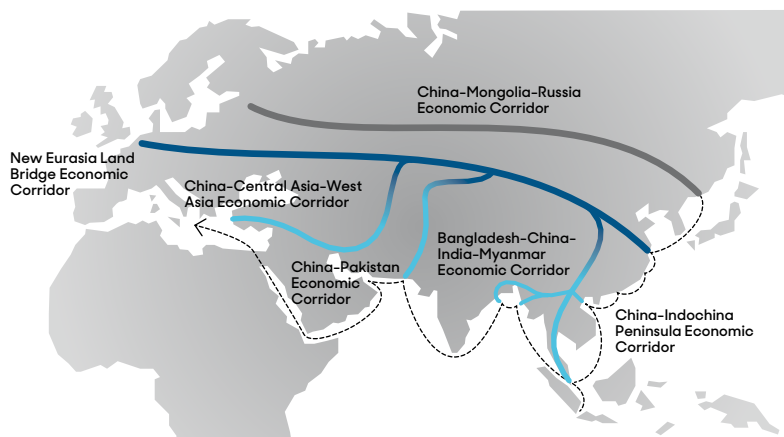


FIGURE 1: The Belt and Road initiative: six economic corridors

The appellation “silk road”, of course, is not new. Historically, the so-called Silk Road emerged as early as China’s Han Dynasty (202-220 BC). It began from China’s Chan’an (now Xi’an) in the East and ended in the Mediterranean in the West. As silk was China’s chief trade product then, Ferdinand Von Richthofen, a German geologist, coined the term *Die Seidenstrasse* (the Silk Road) in the mid-1800s.

To be sure, the Silk Road was not just one road but rather a network of trading routes linking commerce and cultural ties between China, India, Persia, Arabia, Rome and more. It flourished during China’s Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), but dwindled away in the fifteenth century, with the rise of the Ottoman Empire whose rulers opposed the West. The term “silk road” has continued, however, to stir the imagination, evoking mystery and travelers from far off lands. Indeed, many now prefer to call China’s BRI the “New Silk Road”.

What is on the Menu?

Initially, details of the BRI were patchy. They became clearer in 2015, after the Chinese government published an Action Plan entitled “Vision and actions on jointly building the silk road economic belt and twenty-first century maritime silk road.” The document was issued jointly by the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce, with the State Council’s authorization: an indication of extensive intragovernmental consultation and coordination.²

As envisioned by the Action Plan, the BRI is an ambitious economic framework aimed to enhance connectivity between China and countries along the ancient Silk Road land and maritime routes and beyond, primarily in Asia and Europe, but also in Oceania, Africa and Latin America. The Action Plan defines connectivity as having five main areas of focus: policy coordination, infrastructure development, investment and trade facilitation, financial integration, and cultural and social exchange.

The infrastructure projects—roads, railways, air and sea ports, oil and natural gas pipelines, power plants and power grids, and fiber optic lines—remain the first priority. This emphasis reflects China’s own experience over the past 40 years: *yaozhifu, xianxuelu* (want to get rich? build roads). Notably, the Action Plan says that these infrastructure projects are to be developed “in mutual consultation, mutual construction, and with mutual benefit”. These principles were highlighted again during the Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing in May 2017, presumably to allay international concerns or clarify misunderstandings that the BRI is China’s solo show.

Countries along these Silk Road routes represent almost two thirds of the world’s population and more than one third of the world’s wealth.

The core of the BRI is geographically structured with six economic corridors. Specifically, the “twenty-first century maritime silk road” is envisioned as having two economic corridors: the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (from China to Singapore through Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar and Malaysia), and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor. The other four will make up the “silk road economic belt”: the New Eurasia Land Bridge (which will horizontally link China’s Jiangsu province with Rotterdam in Holland, through more than thirty countries along the way); the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (from Northern China to Russia’s Far East); the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (from Western China to Turkey through Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan); and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

These sweeping, lengthy routes aim to facilitate trade, investment, the flow of information, the movement of people, and the creation of local jobs and markets.

2) In late 2014, the Chinese Communist Party established a BRI group to exercise oversight, and named as its leader Zhang Gaoli, a member of the seven-man Politburo Standing Committee, the highest de facto decision-making body in China.

What is Going on in the Kitchen?

Initial numbers (from the Chinese ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Commerce), although incomplete, are impressive. Senior officials from 140 countries and 80 international organizations attended the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017; China has signed intergovernmental agreements on BRI cooperation with 80 countries and organizations, and made over 50 billion dollars of outbound investment in BRI countries. In 2016, China's outbound investment in BRI countries was 14.5 billion, while the inbound figure hit 7.1 billion—with a net figure of 7.4 billion representing a 17.5% increase over the previous year. Moreover, Chinese firms had set up 56 trade and economic cooperation zones in BRI countries with a total investment of 18.5 billion dollars, creating some 180,000 local jobs.

An “Insights e-Newsletter” from LehmanBrown notes that in 2015 Chinese firms signed 3,987 construction contracts in BRI countries, representing 44.1% of the value of all Chinese overseas construction projects. A June 2017 McKinsey & Company report finds that the local employment rate of Chinese firms in Africa is as high as 89%, indicating that Chinese overseas business operations are fairly inclusive.

One big item project is the Nairobi-Mombasa railway. This 471km-long railway connects Nairobi (capital city of Kenya) with Mombasa (the largest port in East Africa). China invested 3.6 billion dollars in this project. Construction began in October 2014, and the line opened in June 2017: it created nearly 30,000 local jobs and cut cargo costs by 40%. This line is only the first section of a larger rail network designed to connect six East African countries—Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and South Sudan.

Another example is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a 3,000km route all the way through the underdeveloped northern part of Pakistan. It starts in China's hinterland city of Kashgar and ends in Gwadar, a deep-water port along the Arabian Sea, thus connecting the far northern reaches of the Silk Road Belt to the deepest southern ports of the Maritime Silk Road. China has already invested 62 billion dollars, about half of which for power projects to combat Pakistan's energy shortage. Once the corridor is completed, a bulk of China's oil imports from the Middle East, for instance, will no longer have to pass through the Strait of Malacca, dramatically reducing the shipping distance from 16 to 5 thousand kilometers (and, hence, transportation costs).

Dubai Hassyan Energy provides a glimpse into the nature of a project with multiple participants. With investment estimated at 3.4 billion dollars, this 2,400 MW clean coal power plant is a joint venture between Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (51%) and a Chinese consortium of Harbin Electric International and the Silk Road Fund (49%). The project aims to provide electricity to 250,000 households. The construction has also involved EDF and GE. Lenders include First Gulf Bank, Union National Bank, Standard Chartered Bank, Bank of China, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, the Agricultural Bank of China and the China Construction Bank.

3) About 50 Chinese SOES have invested in 1,700 BRI projects since 2013, according to the spokesman of the Belt and Road International Forum in May 2017.

Money Money Money

It is clear that investments will have to be massive and long-term to build BRI infrastructure projects. Presumably, many will be build-transfer-operate or build-operate-transfer schemes in which large Chinese SOES will lead the way, but smaller companies will follow.³ The Development and Reform Center (a Chinese think tank) estimates that total investment stands at 10.6 trillion dollars for the 2016-2020 period. While China seems willing to play a major role (see Figure 2), realistically, it has neither the intention nor the capacity to go it alone. Indeed, China’s deep pockets have limits, with the country’s total debt to GDP at 250%. The Action Plan states that the BRI “is open to cooperation [...] with all countries, and international and regional organizations for engagement.”

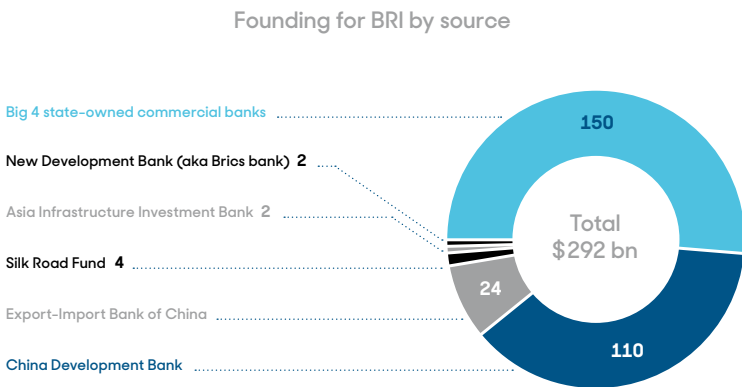


FIGURE 2: figures from the end of 2016, in billions of dollars. Sources: Oxford Economics and Financial Times.

BRI implementation will require complex financial tools, including investment banking, third-party facilities, risk analysis, credit-rating and financial management. Evidence suggests that the Chinese government has encouraged blended approaches—a mixture of domestic and foreign, public and private—and the involvement of various banks and funds.

The BRI is an ambitious economic framework aimed to enhance connectivity between China and countries along the ancient Silk Road land and maritime routes and beyond, primarily in Asia and Europe.

The Silk Road Fund, for example, is a state-owned limited liability company with a total capital of 40 billion dollars. It was established in February 2014 by four Chinese shareholders: State Administration of Foreign Exchange (65%), which manages China's foreign currency reserves, China's Export-Import Bank (15%), the China Development Bank (15%), and the China Investment Corporation (5%), a Chinese sovereign fund. As of the end of 2017, the Silk Road Fund had invested 6 billion dollars in the BRI—80% of which in equity investment—including 1.65 billion in the Karot Hydropower project along the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Notably, the Silk Road Fund and the European Investment Fund signed a memo of understanding in 2017, each committing 250 million euro towards private equity and venture capital.

Two multilateral institutions—the Shanghai-based New Development Bank (NDB) and the Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)—are also major financiers of BRI projects. The NDB was established in July 2014 by the five BRICS—Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. The bank was seeded with 50 billion dollars, and the intention was to increase that to 100, to finance infrastructure projects.

The AIIB, a multilateral development bank, now has 87 approved members from around the world. Initially proposed by China, the AIIB began operations in January 2016—with a registered capital of 100 billion dollars. The bank provides sovereign- and non-sovereign-backed project financing. Pledging to be “lean, clean and green”, the AIIB has invested 5.34 billion so far in projects in Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, China, Egypt, Georgia, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Oman, Pakistan, Tajikistan, the Philippines and Turkey. The AIIB teamed up with the World Bank in June 2017, for instance, providing 40% of a 380 million dollar loan to Andhra Pradesh in India to build a power plant.

The World Bank has given both verbal and monetary support to the BRI. In May 2017, the bank pledged 86.7 billion towards development and connectivity projects in BRI countries. In the words of the World Bank president Jim Young Kim: “The Belt and Road Initiative has potential to lower trade costs, increase competitiveness, improve infrastructure, and provide greater connectivity for Asia and its neighboring regions.”

The IMF has increasingly recognized China as a positive force on the global economic stage. In fact, China is the first emerging economy to have its currency included in the Special Drawing Rights Basket. Being in the SDR Basket boosts the credibility of the renminbi with international investors. In line with its currency’s internationalization, Beijing supports foreign governments, financial institutions and companies with good credit rating to issue renminbi bonds in China to help finance BRI projects.

Challenges Ahead

Reflecting China’s own experience and preferences, the BRI seems to represent a move away from standard development models that emphasize institutional reforms—often with accompanying conditionalities—towards a more investment-driven approach focusing on infrastructure, jobs creation and trade. Many have welcomed it, as evidenced by the long list of AIIB members and the intensely high-level international participation at the Belt and Road Forum in May 2017.

But the glass can be seen as half full or half empty. Implementation of the BRI is likely to entail risks. International investment in contemporary history is a field where China is a novice; as such, the learning curve will be steep and ensuing costs high. Indeed, cross-border infrastructure projects are some of the most difficult to implement, as they require complex and often long negotiations over proposed routes, development rights, financing and investment returns. BRI countries are in various states of development, and their regulatory frameworks vary, as do their levels of corruption. Some are politically unstable. Many remain unfamiliar to Chinese investors both linguistically, institutionally, culturally and religiously, which adds to misperception, misunderstanding and miscalculation.

Evidence also suggests that state-led or subsidy-driven investment, when pursued in a hot dash, tends to cause boom-bust cycles. China has managed to weather quite a few rounds in the past due to the unique features

of its political economy. But it is not clear whether this will also work in different cross-national institutional settings, especially where state capacity is weak and tribalism looms large. Although it is too early to pronounce a final verdict, the risk is obvious; if not managed well, the entire initiative could boomerang to hurt China. The BRI is a work in progress: China needs to maintain vigilance in this early phase.

The biggest risk, however, is not economic but geopolitical. To many observers, implementation of the BRI will likely have an important effect on the regional economic architecture—patterns of infrastructure development, trade, investment, energy supplies, IT outlays, policy coordination and institutional setups. In turn, it will have geostrategic implications for China, the United States, and other major players, such as Japan, India and Russia. Having boycotted the AIIB, Washington increasingly sees the BRI as a threat to the liberal post-WWII system dominated by the US. Indeed, as a countermeasure against China, Trump has tried to upgrade the profile of the Quad—a partnership that includes the United States, Australia, India and Japan.

More notably, in its December 2017 “National Security Strategy”, the Trump administration explicitly identified China (together with Russia) as a near-power revisionist rival that poses the most significant long-term threat to America’s position in the world. Uncertainty is mounting as a trade war intensifies. At least one observer (Graham Allison, in 2017), has likened the battle brewing between China and the US to “Thucydides’s Trap”—a deadly pattern of structural stress that results when a rising power challenges a ruling one. Indeed, for China, the biggest challenge becomes how to manage such big-power relationships.

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Imagination Takes Revenge. A Political Turn in Contemporary Polish Art

ASPEN.REVIEW
JAN SOWA

CULTURE
POLAND
BERLIN BIENNALE

You can ignore politics pretending it does not exist and focus on your own basic problems, but it does not mean that politics is going to ignore you as well.

The seventh Berlin Biennale opened to high expectations from both the Polish and international audience in May 2012. It was a moment of symbolic significance for the Polish art scene as both curators of the Biennale—Artur Żmijewski and Joanna Warsza—came from Poland. Much more important in a wider context was, however, the promise of a politically engaged and engaging art event different from everything that happened before. Żmijewski was at the apex of his political commitment at that time. Just a few years earlier, he issued his political manifesto bearing the emphatic title *Applied Social Art*.¹ It lambasted contemporary art for its lack of social relevance and for not being able to take its political efficiency beyond the model of a virus disturbing the *status quo*. He proclaimed his faith in a different kind of art, one that would function like an algorithm taking social problems on directly and solving them. Żmijewski is considered to be one of the most important artists of his generation and remains a prominent figure in the group of artists emerging in

the late 1990s and early 2000s from the studio of Grzegorz Kowalski, an artist and art educator at Warsaw's Academy of Fine Arts. Źmijewski is also represented by the most important Polish commercial art gallery, Foksal Gallery Foundation, so at least for these two reasons his brave act of political engagement provoked a great deal of debate and comments.

The fall of the old regime in 1989 and the transformation of the early 1990s brought a great number of changes to Polish culture and thus to contemporary art as well.

The Biennale curated by Źmijewski was hardly a political or social success. It tended to create social problems rather than solving them as was epitomized by the failed project of the London-based artist Nada Prlja, who erected a much contested wall in the middle of Friedrichstrasse enraging many members of the local community. Its title—*Peace Wall*—turned out to be ironic at least, if not cynical, given how much hatred it generated. The inclusion of the Occupy Movement in the program of Biennale and in the daily functioning of its main venue, the KW Institute for Contemporary Art, came about in the most awkward way possible with activists entrapped in a kind of human zoo in front of the mostly bourgeois and upper-bourgeois Berlin art audience.

At the very end of that edition of the Berlin Biennale, Źmijewski got into a fight with a group of Brazilian street artists, Pixadores, who were invited to take part in the event, but who were also censored for their attempts to spray their artwork on the walls of a church that was not supposed to be used for that purpose. This was a typical internal contradiction of an art event that tried to be radical without breaking any rules. Despite his critical attitude, Źmijewski had no objections against calling the police, when the angry Pixadores poured their paint on his head.

A Radical Return of the Political in Contemporary Polish Art

Despite being a failure, the seventh Berlin Biennale remains interesting as a symptom. In the psychoanalytical use of the term, a symptom is an indication or a token of truth that breaks through a lie or an illusion. As such it is directly opposed to a fetish which is a lie devised in order to cover the truth. What is symptomatic in Źmijewski's attitude and his manifesto is the radical return of the political in contemporary Polish art, where

it has been somehow repressed or hidden throughout the decades of the 1990s and early 2000s. Let's take a brief look at this interesting and still unfinished process.

1) See A. Żmijewski, Stosowane sztuki społeczne, „Krytyka Polityczna”, no 11-12, 2007.

The fall of the old *regime* in 1989 and the transformation of the early 1990s brought a great number of changes to Polish culture and thus to contemporary art as well. State censorship was gone and this meant that a lot of artists felt that they could finally express their minds in a supposedly liberal regime. It was, however, not entirely true. The liberal order was installed in Poland in a very peculiar and perverted way. Polish (neo)liberals were closer to American neoconservatism than the old European liberalism that advocated both economic and social liberties. A free market was implemented in Poland in a swift and radical way while individual freedoms remained frustrated by traditional, conservative arrangements.

Throughout the 1990s, Polish contemporary art took two distinct approaches to this new social and political reality. Some artists tried to work with issues and problems that had some social significance, although their interest was usually limited to the sphere of individual freedoms and mainly focused on questions related to body, gender, sex or existential issues such as death, illness, disability and aging. The most important figures in the circle of so-called “Polish critical art” of that period—Katarzyna Górna, Katarzyna Kozyra, Alicja Żebrowska or, last but not least, Artur Żmijewski—fall into that category. On the other end of the spectrum, there were artists who seemed to be completely uninterested in any social or political issues of the time. Important painters and sculptors such as Tomasz Ciecierski, Edward Dwurnik, Leon Tarasewicz, Teresa Murak or Mirosław Bałka, were focused on subjects at best loosely connected with the social and political reality of that period and more often on issues without any socio-political relevance whatsoever.

The situation in media art with such dominant figures of the time as Józef Robakowski or Zbigniew Rybczyński was quite similar. There were some outsiders, of course—artists whose art had always been deeply political, such as Zbigniew Libera, Krzysztof Wodiczko or collectives such as CUKT or Luksus, but they remained in the minority and were going against the dominant *Zeitgeist* of the time. Even artists who would later become radically and openly political like Grzegorz Klaman tended to invest their creative interests in the sphere of individual and existential problems during that period.

The Art of the 1990s Did not Deal with the Neoliberal Transformation

There was one colossal gap in Polish critical art of the 1990s, a genuine elephant in the room as one might call it from today's perspective: a complete lack of interest in issues of class and social hierarchies different than the ones related to gender and sexual orientation. It is a kind of ironic and even funny blindness that Polish "critical" art of the 1990s literally did not deal at all with the most important social and political process of the time: the neoliberal transformation that radically pauperized about one fifth, or maybe even one fourth of society. Polish artists remained uninterested in any forms of oppression related to class position at that time, or even worse: they were not aware of the existence of class structure altogether. Even as late as the mid 2000s, I had a long and bizarre conversation with an important Polish artist associated with critical art who claimed that as an artist she did not belong to any social class (*sic!*).

On the other end of the spectrum, there were artists who seemed to be completely uninterested in any social or political issues of the time.

It is against such a background that the attempt to introduce the political to the artistic creation undertaken by Żmijewski in the late 2000s needs to be considered. It is not true that Żmijewski discovered the importance of politics and the political; it was rather the opposite: the political penetrated the realm of art. For that reason I view Żmijewski's attitude and endeavors to be firstly and mostly symptomatic. That penetration took place on two levels—local and global—and we need to briefly address both of them to understand the political turn in contemporary Polish art.

The Resistance of Conservative Elements within Polish Society

Throughout the decades of the 1990s and early 2000s, artists and curators dealing with sensitive issues such as sex, religion and gender had to face the important resistance of conservative elements within Polish society. In some cases it cost them a great deal. When Jarosław Suchan, an art historian and curator, currently the director of the Art Museum in Łódź, decided to organize a panel discussion about a widely commented exhibition *Irreligion*,

the gallery he headed at the time—Bunkier Sztuki in Kraków—was literally sieged by a group of religious bigots trying to block the event. Local politicians who engaged in the protest used the first available opportunity to fire Jarosław Suchan.

Polish artists remained uninterested in any forms of oppression related to class position at that time, or even worse: they were not aware of the existence of class structure altogether Even.

Throughout the entire decade of the 2000s the problem only grew worse and worse as attacks on contemporary art were becoming more and more ruthless. Two spectacular assaults on contemporary art occurred in National Art Gallery Zachęta in the year 2000. First the installation entitled “The Nazi” by Piotr Uklański was destroyed by Daniel Olbrychski, an actor whose image was reproduced by the artist. The project consisted of dozens of stills from Polish film where Nazi soldiers were impersonated by various actors. Olbrychski did not like the fact that his picture was there so he brought a spade and smashed it in front of cameras.

You can ignore politics pretending it does not exist and focus on your own basic problems, but it does not mean that politics is going to ignore you as well.

Just a month later, the installation *La Nona Ora* by the renowned contemporary artist Maurizio Catellan was attacked and demolished by two right wing politicians who objected to the fact that the art work depicted Pope John Paul II crushed by a meteorite. The most troubling and traumatic moment came about in 2002 when a young artist Dorota Nieznalska was put on trial for her allegedly blasphemous installation entitled *Passion*. She was acquitted by an appellate court in a ruling delivered on a symbolic day: the fourth of June 2009, the twentieth anniversary of the 1989 elections that marked the end of Soviet rule in Poland and the beginning of at least a verbally liberal order. During, however, that difficult period of seven years she went through an ordeal of judiciary proceedings that, according to her statements, ruined her personal and professional life. All these events provoked a deep change in the Polish art-world. They demonstrated that you can ignore politics pretending it does not exist and focus on your own basic problems, but it does not

mean that politics is going to ignore you as well. It proved that the political is real in the structural, psychoanalytical meaning of the term: it is something that is always going to return and haunt you no matter what you say or do.

A Ban on Thinking and of Imagining

There was yet another global factor that greatly contributed to the political turn in Polish art that Żmijewski's manifesto and his later curatorial practice were symptoms of. The mid 2000s and the second half of that decade were marked by a mounting crisis of legitimacy of neoliberalism and a gradual decline in its global hegemony. 2008 was, of course, a decisive year, although the cracks began to appear earlier. When figures such as George Soros or Joseph Stiglitz, who had been deeply implicated in the very creation of neoliberal globalization, began to fundamentally question neoliberalism, it was obvious that it would not last long. Already after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 it was clear that the neoliberal slogan "There is no alternative" and the self-comforting belief of the (neo)liberals that history had ended, were dubious at best and ridiculously false at worse. An alternative was clearly there, just not the one the (neo)liberals had been fighting against and the progressives hoping for.

We need to recall that neoliberalism had relied on a specific *Denkverbot*—a ban on thinking, and not only thinking but, in general, of imagining. If there is no alternative it is wasteful and harmful to spend time trying to imagine it. Instead we should all make an effort to adapt to the neoliberal rule of the market, which in the Polish context meant the liberal rule of the market combined with the conservative hegemony of the Church. Politics was completely irrelevant in that situation and should be replaced by management. As this ideological edifice began to crumble in the mid 2000s, imagination took its revenge on the end of history and all sorts of political speculations and ambitions were reborn. And where imagination reins, art will always flourish.

Thus the turn of the years 2000s and the following decade, which is now coming to its end, mark a sharp political turn in Polish contemporary art. New generation of Polish artists—from Roman Dziadkiewicz to Łukasz Surowiec to Janek Simon to Julita Wójcik—have created art that is intimately intertwined with politics, departing sharply from the realm of personal-existential

issues that was the domain of the critical art of the 1990s. Most institutions also follow this line engaging more and more in overtly political projects; the anti-fascist exhibition *Never More* (pol. *Nigdy Więcej*) on display in Warsaw's Museum of Modern Art in Autumn 2019 is only the most recent example of this tendency. The change is not, by any means, uniquely or even primarily generational. Well established artists, already active in the late 1990s—like Joanna Rajkowska, Grzegorz Klaman or Zbigniew Libera whom I mentioned before—also subscribe to the same trend.

The mid 2000s and the second half of that decade were marked by a mounting crisis of legitimacy of neoliberalism and a gradual decline in its global hegemony.

One may, of course, ask, what is the effect of all this and whether political works created by artists have any influence on actual politics. This is a legitimate and important question, but it remains a different subject that would have to be addressed in a separate investigation. Whatever the answer would be, the political turn in contemporary Polish art is undeniable and it looks like it is here to stay.

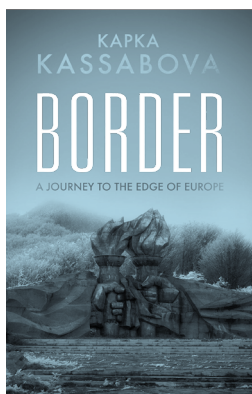
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| Photo: Iwona Bojadziejewa



The Edge of Europe



Border:
a Journey to the Edge of Europe,
Kapka Kassabova
Granta 2017/Greywolf 2017

Kapka Kassabova's impulse to travel to the Bulgarian-Turkish-Greek borderland was the desire to visit those locales sites that had the status of forbidden places in her childhood, separating with barbed wire communist Bulgaria from the NATO members, Turkey and Greece. For several decades, those who wanted to reach the other side of the Iron Curtain to a better world tried to climb over this barrier. Apart from Bulgarians, these were mainly citizens of the former GDR who were convinced that the Bulgarian forests would be easier to get across than the Berlin Wall. They were wrong as the south-eastern tip of the Eastern Bloc was guarded extremely closely. Escape attempts were also made by Czechs, Hungarians and Poles visiting the Red Riviera on the pretext of spending their holidays at Black Sea resorts. Almost all the fugitives were targeted by the border troops, and many of them were shot on the spot.

The eponymous border can be seen as the edge of Europe and Asia, but also as a corridor through which a stream of people, goods and ideas flowed for centuries. At the same time, this particular borderland like no other reveals the arbitrary nature of political borders, demonstrating that they

are a network imposed on reality in order to organize space and thus gain power over it. The rules of cartography and politics do not satisfy the author of *Border*, who decides that she will get to know the borderland as intimately as possible. She gives herself time to adjust to the rhythm of life of the inhabitants of the villages and towns, mirroring each other across the border, with these places gradually revealing to her their complex history, tangle of languages, cultures and painful scars.

Good and Bad Passports

Despite the change in political systems, the “back door to Europe” that Kassabova writes about still remains impenetrable for a great number of people. The corridors used during the Cold War have remained the same, only the direction of movement has changed, and people are still divided into those with good and bad passports. Under communism, the border was supposed to stop the inhabitants from crossing it and escaping, while the current task of the border is to prevent “others” from entering the western world. Those people who risked their lives to enter Europe from the Middle East and their difficult stories, often marked by war and the loss of loved ones, are an important part of this book.

Kassabova visits her protagonists in a temporary border camp, makes friends with a Kurdish family in Svilengrad, Bulgaria, waiting for the decision of the refugee office and meets war fugitives in roadside bars when they try to buy freedom from smugglers or just something to eat. She does not reduce their lives, however, to refugee biographies, but learns about their everyday lives and shows their fate in all its dimensions. She also changes her perspective at times and looks at herself through the eyes of her protagonists, as during her first visits to the Kurdish family. When Alal, the host’s wife, looks at her during the initial greetings, Kassabova wonders where this look can place her in the spectrum of those good-intentioned but incompetent people who want to solve other of the Totalitarian Machine.

Frankensteins of the totalitarian machine

Border is created by people, with the five hundred pages of the book pulsating with life and human stories. The author visits her interlocutors and establishes a close relationship with them, participating in family celebrations and meals.

We get to know the story of the owner of a pub between Bulgaria and Turkey, an Orthodox priest who loves dancing, amateur treasure hunters, smugglers trading in human life and secret agents who, while drinking whisky, complain about too many gypsies in Bulgaria and nostalgically recall the good old days of Todor Zhivkov (the former communist dictator).

She also reaches out to the former functionaries who guarded the border of the Eastern Bloc before 1989. He calls them Frankensteins of the totalitarian machine, because they received nothing for their fanatic devotion to communism and obeying orders, but, on the contrary, lost what is most precious. One of them is a retired border guard, who visits his home just after his wife's death. The man is all alone, because it turns out that his son, who inherited his father's profession, was killed in a senseless way at the order of one of the generals, with no one even facing the consequences of this terrible death. By juxtaposing the figures of former beneficiaries and victims of the former regime, Kassabova points out that the new system has not managed to repair all that much in this regard and that it largely reproduces the old divisions.

Under communism, the border was supposed to stop the inhabitants from crossing it and escaping, while the current task of the border is to prevent “others” from entering the western world.

Invisible people whose history nobody particularly wanted to listen to up until now, because they were thrown aside, are probably the most interesting for the author of *Border*. Since the borderland is also a periphery distant from the centers of power, it is a genuine barometer of social change. We read about life in one of the villages visited by Kassabova that it is full of both charm and pain. The borderland is not only the seductive beauty of nature, but also bumps in the roads, unemployment that drives young people away and the poverty that produces inertia in those who remain.

Resignation and Lack of Hope for a Better Life

Kassabova also writes about the brutal devastation of the Strandja Massif by the Mafia, which exploits the region with the consent of state institutions, carrying out massive deforestation without new plantings, building new cement factories, extracting sand from river beds, irreversibly changing

the microclimate there. In this sense, the Strandja turns out to be part of a global phenomenon. Although Western bureaucratization and constraining of human life with new regulations have not reached this area, the exploitation of nature is as greedy as in the West, where the environment is being robbed by profit-seeking corporations.

Born in Bulgaria in the late Zhivkov period, Kassabova emigrated to New Zealand with her family at the age of 19 in 1992. Perhaps it is the experience of living in both political systems that makes the author look at the border so thoroughly and from so many different perspectives, observing the mechanisms of its operations both in space and in the mentality of people. The author also sees how smoothly one political system can turn into another, into its apparent opposite. Former capitalist Turkey, whose borderland the author visits during her journey, is now a welfare state with a hypocritical paternalistic facade, in which it resembles former communist Bulgaria. Contemporary Bulgaria is, in contrast, in many respects like former capitalist Turkey. The author sees resignation and lack of hope for a better life in the faces of the inhabitants of the Bulgarian borderland, but she adds that you can swim naked with impunity and drink rakija to your heart's content, which is unthinkable in today's Turkey.

Testimonies of the Collapse of Grand Visions

Reading Kassabova, I was reminded of Kate Brown's *Dispatches from Distopia: Histories of Places Not Yet Forgotten*, in which the author, reflecting on the contemporary fascination with ruins, finds common features between the Chernobyl landscape and the cities of the American rust belt. What these spaces have in common is the fact that they are monuments of the collapse of great modernization projects, testimonies of grand visions that were once supposed to change the world for the better, and turned out to be not only impossible, but also disastrous.

The rust veil, on a par with that covering Detroit and Chernobyl today, has a remarkable attractive force, creating a bizarre branch of catastrophic tourism. One of the aims of the people practicing it is to observe the successive stages of the disintegration of matter created by the human hand and to contemplate the process of absorption of human works by nature. Kassabova's journey does not take place in the footsteps of the graves of progress, but the scenery of this journey is also a reality in which the

successive political systems look at each other as if they were looking in their mirror images, revealing their common places, but also the space that disintegrates, reaching its end.

Contemporary times and communism are only one of the layers, however, of this multithreaded story. The world Kassabova writes about is a world inhabited by people and spirits alike. A busy modern Thrace, intersected with trade routes, reveals itself time and again in the myths of Orpheus, born in this land, and in various local legends. The Thracian land turns out to hide secrets that attract generations of treasure hunters. For Kassabova, local beliefs and opinions are a legitimate part of her knowledge of the world, just as important for her as for her protagonists, who, as she writes, have been robbed of everything they had, but at least nobody will take away their own tradition that organizes their lives and gives them a deeper meaning.

The rust veil, on a par with that covering Detroit and Chernobyl today, has a remarkable attractive force, creating a bizarre branch of catastrophic tourism.

Svetlana as a Literary Point of Reference

Kapka Kassabova began her literary career as a poet. In 2008 she published the book *Street Without a Name*, for which she was nominated for the European Book Award and the William Dolman Award for Best Travel Book. Her next book, *Twelve Minutes of Love: A Tango Story* was nominated for the Scottish Art Council Award. Issued in 2017, *Border* received the Nayefa Al-Rohana Award from the British Academy, the Edward Stanford and William Dolman Prizes, the London Highland Society Award and *The Highland Times* Award, as well as many prestigious nominations. Kassabova writes her books in English, although English is not her mother tongue. I mention this fact because I admire this fact. *Border* is written in a beautiful language full of sparkling metaphors. The author distrusts somewhat the language of politics, used in such a way that it has ceased to mean anything, and she seeks linguistic resources for her story in the language of poetry or in the stream of living speech. She manages to recover the meaning of many words, such as the flickering Turkish word *memeklet*, which in Turkish means homeland, whose definition Kassabov seeks from both poets and the people with whom she talks during her journey.

Although hundreds of characters pass through the book, the author manages to give each of them an individual character, a small life. In one of the interviews, Kapka Kassabova points to the writings of Svetlana Aleksiyevich as one of her literary points of reference. Aleksiyevich's books, constructed as polyphonies of separate, individualized voices, are the result of a great deal of work consisting of countless conversations, preceded by the creation of a communication situation that will allow them to resonate. Kassabova also uses the polyphonic structure of the story in *Border*, but unlike Aleksiyevich, she decides to place herself in the polyphony of voices, invoking the Anglo-Saxon tradition of travel prose, which opens the door between fiction and fact, event and metaphor. As a result of the author's presence as one of the protagonists, the book sometimes gains a very intimate, personal dimension.

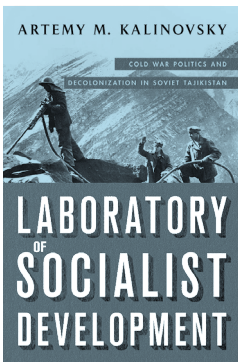
The ravishing landscapes of the Stranja, Thrace and the Rhodopes are described in this book in a fascinating, original fashion. The author often strays from the usual geographical routes in order to reach deserted, half-extinct villages, where the roads end and the inhabitants work in the forest or are fugitives from the world of civilization. Reading this book has yet another additional effect: it gives rise to an overwhelming desire to travel.

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Think Twice Before Promising to Change the World



Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan

Artemy Kalinovsky
Cornell University Press 2018

The rise of a new era of identity awareness and the politics of recognition forces us to re-examine the meaning and the consequences of the policies of development

that transformed societies over the twentieth century. In this context, the legacy of the Cold War has also been reassessed through the lens of two competing ideologies that promoted different vectors of the historical change for the entire world.⁴ Such a global perspective on the history of the Cold War highlights the important encounters of much of the Third World with competing ideological blocs. Two alternative ideologies were projected upon the developing world by the socialist East and the capitalist West backed with massive financial, military, technical and cultural resources. Aspiring to assist in the emancipatory breakthrough of newly sovereign post-colonial nations, these endeavors infiltrated a decolonization process and proved to be, once again, a new form of domination driven by an

inherent civilizing mission.² Whereas in the past social scientists spoke confidently about “traditional societies” becoming “modern”, the very idea of such a transformation as well as diverse and contested strategies of “becoming modern” have now become the subject of critical revision.

Drawing on the case study of the Nurek Dam construction in the Soviet Republic of Tajikistan, the book by Artemy Kalinovsky “Laboratory of Socialist Development” illuminates the complexity of this process becoming modern through the lens of the experiences of local protagonists in remote peripheries of the Soviet Union. The position of the Central Asian republic in this context is twofold. Being part of the story of internal Soviet modernization, it reiterates the major concerns and contradictions of the global development agenda, many of which have remained unsolved until today.

Soviet Ideology as a Dynamic Venture

Kalinovsky’s book covers a peculiar moment in Soviet history, between Joseph Stalin’s death in 1953 and late socialism in 1980s when the most important modernization projects were implemented across the various Soviet republics. The Virgin Land campaign became one of the most famous episodes in the interventionist policy of the Soviet leadership that brought massive changes both in society and in the nature of Kazakhstan, although there were multiple stories of similar transformative ventures across the state.³

Kalinovsky’s book demonstrates the complex interplay between the central power and local participant behind the façade of the top-down modernization scenario.

While the idea of transforming backward peripheries of the former Russian Empire had been on the Soviet government’s agenda since the 1917 October revolution, it was only after Stalin’s death that multiple projects of development—construction of dams, irrigation schemes, industrialization that were designed to accelerate the spread of welfare and education and transform the whole societal fabric—were launched with a new vigor and financial commitments. Based on archival materials, analysis of media accounts and oral interviews, Kalinovsky’s book demonstrates the complex interplay between the central power and local participant behind the façade of the top-down modernization scenario. Soviet ideology

1) Federico Romero, “Cold War Historiography at the Crossroads”. *Cold War History* 14 (4), 2014, 685-703; Akira Iriye, “Historicizing the Cold War”, in *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War*, ed. by Richard H. Immerman and Petra Goedde, 15-31.

2) Jason C. Parker, “Decolonization, the Cold War, and the post-Columbian era”, *The Cold War in the Third World*, ed. by Robert J. McMahon, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 125, 131

3) See for example, Michaela Pohl. 2007. *The Virgin Lands Between Memory and Forgetting: People and Transformation in the Soviet Union, 1954-1960*, Indiana University 2000.

emerges in his portrayal as a dynamic venture: not only it shaped historical actors across the vast territories of Soviet Union, but as it was in many respects also shaped by them.

Drawing on the study of Central Asian elites—from party leaders to economists and social scientists—Kalinovsky demonstrates their rise to being a local power and their input in the Soviet decision-making process. Planning, Kalinovsky contends, became a field of political struggle as much as a technocratic process that allowed different groups to argue for or against investments and targets.

Multiple Links and Parallels to Decolonization in Africa and Asia

There have been predictable difficulties in outlining “uniform” strategies of development in the culturally and economically diverse territories of the Soviet state. Tajikistan proved to be a good spot on the Soviet map to expose the great disparities between the Soviet West (European territories), the Soviet East (Siberia) and the Soviet South—Central Asia and part of the Caucasus. Tajikistan was known for its relative poverty compared to the rest of the Soviet Union with the industrial production per inhabitant much lower than the union average, i.e. 49.7% in 1963 and 37.4% in 1973, and the highest population growth in the whole USSR. In an attempt to overcome underdevelopment and backwardness, economists in Tajikistan, in the Central Asian region as well in Moscow, were forced to rethink how territory, industry and agriculture need to interact if they are to facilitate the development of society as a whole.

Dilemmas of socialist modernization faced by Soviet decision-makers were far from being an exclusively intra-Soviet matter. Kalinovsky demonstrates the important role that the Soviet engagement with nations in the Third World played “back home” in modernization projects implemented in the territory of the former Soviet south. Discussions on economic performance, industrialization and societal changes, which we find at the center of this book, had multiple links and parallels to decolonization in Africa and Asia. Kalinovsky describes how in 1957, at a meeting in Uzbekistan, Khrushchev told local party elites that their region would play an important role in developing friendly relations between the Soviet government and the people of Asia, Africa, and Latin America who were undergoing liberation from colonial oppression.

Central Asian Elites Felt a Connection with Developments in the Soviet Union

In their turn, ambitious politicians in the Soviet republics used this new dimension of Soviet foreign policy in relation to the Third World to articulate and lobby for new cultural and economic policies in their home republics, as well as to advance their own careers. Originally coming from the peripheries, they were often similar to their colleagues from the Third World, while remaining, at the same time, crucial protagonists in the Soviet project that expressly claimed universal nature and aspired to serve a “development donor”. Being inherently national, Central Asian elites felt a connection with broader developments in the Soviet Union and even the world at large: they were both local and global.

Construction of Nurek Dam—which remained the tallest dam in the world up until 2013—in the poorest republic of the Soviet Union provided a vivid example of how the technology driven development intended to transform the entire life of Tajik people.⁴ Large dams have been a true embodiment of what James Scott called “high modernism”, being top-down attempts to improve nature and society led by experts and leaving people out of decision-making.⁵ Across the globe in the 1960s, dams became a popular way to demonstrate the power and prestige of a power. A foreign colonial or a national post-colonial power and their construction projects often came with huge costs and impacts including the resettlement of thousands of people, disrupting of fish irrigation patterns and destruction of the habitats of land animals and so forth.

In addition, supervision of water resource development in the conditions of the Cold War was transformed into a geopolitical instrument. Promoting and designing the Pa Mong dam on the Mekong River in South East Asia during the 1960s by the US State Department was meant to assist in containing the spread of global communism.⁶ Comparing the Nurek Dam with similar American projects (the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Helmand and Arghandab Valley Authority in Afghanistan), Kalinovsky demonstrates how much similarity existed in the reliance on the ideological power of technological projects on both sides of the Iron Curtain. At the center of his analysis, however, is the way in which the dam construction impacted local communities and how it was perceived and received by those directly involved in its making.

4) It remained the tallest dam until 2013, when Jinping-1 Dam was completed in 2013 in China

5) James Scott, *Seeing Like a State*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998.

6) Chris Sneddon, “The ‘Sinew of Development’: Cold War Geopolitics, Technical Expertise, and Water Resource Development in Southeast Asia, 1954–197. *Social Studies of Science*. 2012, 42 (4): 564-590

The Colonial Nature of the Soviet Union

Much like all dams, Nurek caused enormous disruption in the lives of the people inhabiting the surrounding territories, many of whom lost their land and were forced to relocate. The project, however, also brought vital investment in roads, schools, health infrastructure and opened up new opportunities for local farmers. While not omitting the multiple mistakes and pitfalls of the construction process, Kalinovsky shows how the Nurek project differed from its multiple American predecessors and counterparts. Western scholarship has discussed extensively how shortages of human capital led to the failure of Western development efforts in the Third World. Export of US technical expertise to developing countries, paradoxically, only deepened social problems as some groups benefited from the endeavors while others did not. According to Kalinovsky, projects like Nurek proved able to do both—while erecting an infrastructure that would drive development it also created new human capital. The enormity of the task not only attracted people by the promise to transform their life, but also gave them a sense of ownership over the result.

Ambitious politicians in the Soviet republics used this new dimension of Soviet foreign policy in relation to the Third World to articulate and lobby for new cultural and economic policies in their home republics.

While providing a rich historical account of the experience of socialist modernization in the Soviet periphery, Kalinovsky's book makes an important contribution to the ongoing debate on the colonial nature of the Soviet Union and the post-colonial status of the former Soviet republics. Seen from today's perspective of the politics of recognition, the Soviet practices of development were, as some scholars underline, more radical and interventionist than the Western ones. Soviet reforms intruded into those realms that Western colonial powers preferred not to interfere, such as religion, family life and gender law.⁷ This totalizing nature of the changes under socialism was linked to a Soviet ideology that envisioned not mere economic change but a complete transformation of social relations and the creation of "a new man".

The Opposition between “State” and “Society” Became Undetectable

While admitting the semi-colonial status of the Central Asian republics and revealing the quasi-colonial patterns in the central control of the Soviet peripheries, Kalinovsky also demonstrates the essential difference between Western development and Soviet transformation. The Soviet project from the very beginning sought to create a new subject which would trust in institutions, modern forms of knowledge, would be committed to self-improvement and the Soviet conception of equality. Due to a comprehensive welfare policy, this project did transform society as a whole and endowed the Soviet subject with the capacity to have and the ability to shape its own interests and qualities.

Post-colonial optics applied to any state formation usually produces binary opposition between the colonizers and the colonized who cannot evade the totalizing power of the central power and define themselves through the position of a victim. In the Soviet Union of the post-Stalin era, as Kalinovsky’s study shows, the opposition between “state” and “society” that implies a rigid confrontation between two unitary actors often became undetectable. “The state” operated through multiple agencies at various levels ranging from republican to local; the state’s offices were staffed by the people from the communities they were meant to govern. All of this created sufficient space for negotiation and ensured that both large and small projects could be changed and reshaped locally.

The major deficiency of the Soviet project that Kalinovsky detects, following the claims of his interviewees, ultimately failed to deliver promises and sustain the balance between the assurances of cultural autonomy and regional development with the goals of socialist unity and all-Union economic growth. Its de-colonization policy, in its turn, created a new set of quasi-colonial tensions that remained hidden behind the façade of Soviet internationalism until the moment of the Soviet collapse.

One of the central assertions of this book is the correlation of the strategies of development in the Soviet Union, including its peripheries, with post-colonial states across the Third World as well as with the “capitalist West”. It is no coincidence that the decline in support for comprehensive development projects in Soviet peripheries echoed the fate of welfare policies in the First World as of the 1970s.

The collapse of the Soviet modernization project did not end the debate on the notion of development. Some larger questions at the center of Kalinovsky's story on socialist modernization remain unsettled up until the present. Various international agencies involved in humanitarian aid and developmental projects in the Global South are still searching for

Seen from today's perspective of the politics of recognition, the Soviet practices of development were, as some scholars underline, more radical and interventionist than the Western ones.

effective mechanisms of assisting in development of nations. The United Nations and other international agencies have recently begun, once again, to rediscover a holistic approach to development that once constituted the core of socialist modernization. The experience of the Soviet planners, Kalinovsky writes, might not be able to offer a solution, but it can give us the humility to think twice before promising to change the world.

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