Dear Reader,

It is with great esteem and pleasure that we introduce you to the very first edition of *New Eastern Europe*, a magazine focusing on Central and Eastern European affairs. The magazine is the sister edition of the Polish version, *Nowa Europa Wschodnia*, which has been published since 2008. *New Eastern Europe* is published by the non-profit College of Eastern Europe, based in Wroclaw, Poland, with generous support from the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk, Poland. We are deeply grateful for their continued support.

The countries that encompass the region of Eastern Europe are distinct and diverse, and not analogous by any means. Yet, a deeper analysis of this region shows that common threads weave together a story of shared history, mutual experiences, and a vibrant culture that is too important for the West to ignore.

*New Eastern Europe* presents its readers with provocative texts, in-depth analyses and stimulating reports from the countries that belong to what we commonly call Eastern Europe. Our authors bridge old divisions. They come both from the East and West.

This first issue examines the meaning of Eastern Europe from various perspectives. Martin Pollack’s piece provides a critical view of how Western Europeans imagine the borders to their East, even if some of them have already disappeared. Filip Florian contemplates Romanian intellectuals’ role in Europe and what real changes have occurred as a result of its membership in the European Union. Vesna Goldsworthy shares her experiences and reflections as she returns to the Balkan region. Olena Betliy draws on the writings of Havel, Milosz, and Konrád in her quest to determine whether countries such as Ukraine and Belarus are truly free. Anna Żamejć’s piece on Azerbaijani youth reveals the struggles facing young people in a system that inhibits their aspirations. Damon Wilson talks on security in Eastern Europe and provides clear evidence that the story about this region is still being written.

We provide a specific focus on issues happening in Ukraine. The arrest of Yulia Tymoshenko has once again brought concerns about Ukraine back to the forefront. Piotr Pogorzelski, Bogdana Kostyuk, and Viktoriya Chyrva all provide deeper analyses of the events unfolding and some underlying causes. In addition, Tomasz Kulakowski’s report on the “Beheading of Stalin” is a fascinating tale of a young boy at the centre of a controversy in a small Ukrainian town.

Many ideas and opinions presented may differ from our own, but it is worth understanding and reflecting on them. Only by connecting the dots are we able to see the whole picture.

We look forward to giving you more ideas, perspective and dialogue. Please feel invited to join in this exciting intellectual exchange!

The Editors
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This project is co-financed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland under the cyclical programme Promocja wiedzy o Polsce ("Promotion of Knowledge about Poland").

The Editors do not return submitted texts unless requested. The Editors reserve the right to edit and shorten submitted texts. Circulating texts without the Editors' permit is strictly forbidden. The Editors bear no responsibility for the content of advertisements.

Circulation: 6000
Copyright by the Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe (Kolegium Europy Wschodniej im. Jana Nowaka-Jeziorańskiego), 2011
Printing: Drukarnia Colonel
International Distribution: www.pineapple-media.com
Where East Meets West

MARTIN POLLACK

In the West, there is still ignorance to what is happening in the countries which were once behind the Iron Curtain. A great deal of effort and patience is needed to overcome prejudice and fear in order to start a real dialogue with our neighbours to the East.

What does a Western European see in the eastern part of the continent? What would a satiated Austrian see if, changing his own habits, he decided to turn his attention to the East rather than the West? Or if, for some reason, he put aside his own minor, everyday concerns and contemplated the region, incorrectly called Eastern Europe? Let’s put it differently: What do Western Europeans expect from these countries? What can they find there?

This is a legitimate question, as there is always a gap between image and reality. We become convinced that we see things and have certain knowledge. We contrive our own opinions. And yet all these are simply conjectures, predetermined opinions, prejudices which would not pass a reality test. Rarely do we consider such a confrontation. It would not even cross our minds to make an attempt to break stereotypes, which, in many cases, have been passed down to us for generations. Hence, our attitude towards Eastern Europe has been shaped by such ungrounded judgements, fake images and clichés.

Eastern Europe – where is it?

Problems already arise with an attempt to precisely define the term “Eastern Europe”. Where is it? What are its eastern and western borders? Which countries does it include? Is it still politically correct to use this term? Isn’t it more correct to say “Central and Eastern Europe”, “South-Eastern Europe” and “North-Eastern Europe”? Not that long ago, the common belief was that Eastern Europe was the area inhabited by the Slavs. This image still haunts us and many people believe in this absurd idea. Just think: how Slavic are the Hungarians, the Albanians,
the Romanians, the Moldovans, the Lithuanians, the Latvians, or the Estonians? Maybe they should be considered Western Europeans?

The problem doesn’t end there. In geographical terms, at least from Austria’s perspective, Eastern Europe is almost impossible to be captured in one definition. A glimpse at a map and we see that Prague is more to the West than Vienna and the same goes for Ljubljana, Rijeka or Szczecin. All these cities would be assigned the label Eastern Europe, without much thought, although their residents really feel that they live in Central Europe. Therefore, maps and atlases will not help us much here and it is probably better to just put them aside.

My point here is that the idea of Eastern Europe is more a political than geographical concept. Its borders were drawn after 1945 and fell under the influence of the Soviet Union. For decades, we, in the West (and of course in this context the term “West” is just as imprecise as “Eastern Europe”) were content referring to “the countries of the Eastern bloc” or just simply “the Eastern bloc”. We looked at this region as if it was one uniform territory deprived of differences or borders. For us, Eastern Europe was an area in which everything was more or less the same: politics, economy, lifestyles, people’s mentality and even the cities and countryside. We had a vague idea that the landscape was slightly different, but we had no first-hand knowledge of it because we had never travelled east.

And when it comes to travelling east, not much has really changed. Even today a trip to Ukraine or Moldovia is regarded, just like it was years ago, as a risk. Many of us simply prefer not to go there: sicher ist sicher.

In our minds, Eastern Europe was an area of backwardness, poverty, lacking political freedom, and imposing uravnilovka. To us, everything that was on this other side seemed miserably poor, worth very little, and even dangerous. In our eyes, the Eastern European countries were perceived as one entity; an alternate, colourless version of our own world.

**Rich, proud and overconfident**

This period has affected our mentality and behaviour. The thought that our home is in the “better” part of Europe gave us pride. It made us feel quite confident towards our eastern neighbours whom we regarded as our underprivileged relatives. Yes, the unfortunate souls, who once in a while could count on our generosity and charity. Even at such moments we preferred to maintain our distance. These are the emotions they generate; they are more tolerable than loveable.
A sense of superiority with a degree of pity, which at any moment could turn into intolerance, allowed us to treat the Czechs, the Slovaks, the Poles, not to mention the Ukrainians or Belarusians (about whose existence we barely knew), with such arrogant attitudes. We would never allow ourselves to treat the British, the French or the Italians in such a way. Our neighbours in the East were simply inferior, in many aspects. They were poor, they had no luck, and we knew how to remind them of their misery. As it often is in relations with poorer relatives, we did not think it was inappropriate to show them our superiority. Let alone the fact that we were able to give them good advice, without even knowing what their lives were like. When they ignored our words of wisdom, we treated it as a sign of a lack of gratitude. Ultimately, we were proud of our success. We were the West who they were supposed to listen to.

With time we started believing that maybe our neighbours from the other side of the Iron Curtain were actually deserving of their fate. Maybe, at least partially, they shared the responsibility for their fate. In the end, we, or maybe our parents and grandparents, were capable of rebuilding our ruined country after the war and put our efforts into establishing “the good life”. Surely there had to be a reason why those living behind the Iron Curtain were not so successful and that their countries suffered crisis after crisis. Was it really only the political system? Or maybe they, the Eastern Europeans, were less ambitious, less diligent and less hard-working than us.

That Eastern Europe, a creature of the Cold War, disappeared from the maps along with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of communism. It all happened so fast, much faster than even the biggest optimist could predict. Soon after, at a similar pace and with unexpected courage, the process of Eastern enlargement of the European Union took place. Indeed, the courage of European politicians was amazing to many of us. It is disappointing to see that the momentum has diminished in the recent years.

The fearsome East

The once alluring enthusiasm towards a united Europe without borders has been replaced, at best, by troubling doubt or, worse, by national egoisms, petty and self-centred thinking. In many countries, also in Eastern and Central Europe, there is a visible popularity of nationalistic thinking and hostility towards minorities. For many people in the West this has become a pretext to yet again turn away from the East. For them this region is once again starting to look unpredictable and threatening.
However, the same tendencies can be seen in Western democracies, in countries which for years have served as an example of liberalism and openness to the world. This can be seen in the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway.

Hence, there is no reason for us in the West to look with pity at the East and warn it against the danger of nationalist movements, something that is all too familiar to us. We should rather reflect on similar tendencies in our own countries. Take the example of our own good, old Austria where a politician who is building his political capital on nationalist ideas and prejudice against foreigners can quite realistically count on winning elections and entering the government within a few years.

These types of views, often used by politicians, include the spreading of fear of the “East”. It is the fear of tribes of wild barbarians flowing from this undefined East through our open borders in order to steal and loot our countries. Or, at the very least, they will take our jobs away from us. Such arguments are far from being novel. In fact, they are obsolete. They were used under the Habsburg Empire by the politicians who were representing the German nationalist fraction.

I live in the southern part of Burgenland in Austria, near the border with Hungary and Slovenia. Today, when both countries are members of the European Union, the border has no meaning. And yet, it seems as if it has never disappeared. It exists, at least, in our heads. Between the southern part of Burgenland and the border regions of Hungary and Slovenia there is no significant interaction. People from my area are usually quite reserved and sceptical when it comes to the other side. Old fears and distrust thrive and are propagated.

Ironically, before 1918 Burgenland belonged to the Hungarian, and not Austrian, part of the dualist Habsburg monarchy. Yet, not much remains from the ties that historically glued us together. These ties have long been cut. New ones are being established slowly and with many difficulties. Today, any attempt to reopen the old doors, which before 1989 were sealed by the Iron Curtain, is met with resistance on the Austrian side; many Austrians living near the old border are still against its reopening.

This visible distance reveals ignorance towards our neighbours’ languages. This would not be so surprising, if not for the fact that, some time ago, many residents of Burgenland spoke Hungarian, or even Croatian (Burgenland is also inhabited by a Croat minority). Today multilingualism is regarded as being something unusual. This is true, at least, for our side of the border. On the other side, meaning in the East, it is quite different. There, many young people speak German.

This seems to be the characteristic of all these unique parts of Europe where East meets West. Much patience is still needed to dismantle existing prejudice,
overcome fears, and undertake a real dialogue with our neighbours. And by real dialogue I do not mean the teary speeches uttered in shaky voices during anniversary ceremonies in which participants embrace each other, exchanging kisses. By real dialogue I mean simple, everyday conversation.

One can say that political events are not only faster than people’s mentality but that people with the old mentality remain behind the changes brought to them by politics. It is quite a surprise and a shame, at the same time, that all borders, walls, and barriers of distrust disappear in people’s minds much slower than they do in the world of politics. It seems that it is more difficult to weed out prejudice and the lack of compassion towards our neighbours than to get rid of even the most stringent political systems.

Clearly, this is because our attitudes have not changed significantly. Until today, many people in the West are still ignorant on what is going on in the countries that were once behind the Iron Curtain, their nations and culture. Anyone who knows something about literature understands this. German-language publishers are resistant to include books of unknown Polish or Czech authors, not to mention Ukrainian, over an unknown American, Italian or French author. When asked about why this is the case, the experts, publishers, bookshop owners and reviewers only shrug their shoulders. No one has an explanation. It is just how things are.

The once alluring enthusiasm towards a united Europe without borders has been replaced by troubling doubt.

In culture, much endurance and patience are needed to overcome the old thinking patterns and achieve change. Quite often it appears that indifference and lack of interest emerge from small details. Let’s take the example of the spelling of names. Someone could say that this is my personal whim to fret about such a minor thing. And yet I believe that there is a reason behind a carefree attitude towards the spelling of foreign last names, especially when they are of Eastern European origin.

For example it is a norm among Austrian journalists to misspell Polish, Czech and Hungarian last names. Something nobody seems to be bothered about. Even mainstream newspapers are not certain on how to correctly write the last name of a well-known Polish politician. Is it Kaczinski, Kaczinsky, Kacsinsky or maybe Kaczyński? For many years, I personally fought for the proper spelling (let’s
forget about the pronunciation) of the name Kapuściński (late Polish reporter and writer – editor’s note), which was a quixotic fight. At the same time, the last names of French politicians or writers, for instance, also not easy for Austrians, are given special attention, making sure they are written correctly, up to the last accent mark.

Sloppiness in this area, which is also a sign of ignorance and/or a sense of superiority, has a long tradition. I have talked about this on many occasions. The first time I brought up this issue was in 1985 in an essay with the provocative title – *A Call to Easternise Vienna*. Back then I wrote: “It is common knowledge that a large part of Vienna’s telephone directory consists of Slavic or Hungarian last names. What is irritating, however, is the fact that not many Viennese are able or show enough effort to spell them, not to mention pronounce them, correctly...And this is not because the Viennese are somewhat hostile towards foreign names: French or English last names are loved here. The situation is completely different when it comes to the names of politicians or other dignitaries from Hungary or other Slavic countries. Here, the languages are mixed, here cultural imperialism is joyfully rising: who, on earth, cares whether the last names of the Polish workers’ leader or a Hungarian composer are properly pronounced?”

My essay was written over a quarter century ago, and not much has changed since then. Until today our attitude towards our neighbours in the East is characterised by a lack of interest, ignorance and prejudice. This is all despite the fact that these neighbours have long been members of the EU and their economic situation is not much worse than ours. Before, we could blame the Iron Curtain, which, of course, we did not build ourselves. It was those on the other side. And it was the Iron Curtain which was supposedly blocking our view to the East and the main reason for our poor relations. We conveniently blamed the Iron Curtain for the lack of not seeking contacts with people from the other side.

A great deal of endurance and patience is needed to overcome the old thinking.

The same old story

The Iron Curtain has long since been raised. The barbed wire and land mines are history. The borders are open. Even the nations, once closed in the Soviet Union, have been states for 20 years now and can be freely visited. They have their own good hotels, restaurants and just as sophisticated intellectual life as the one in the West. And yet the curtain still exists, as if nothing has changed.
How is it possible? How can we explain it? Why is it so difficult to fill this ignorance towards Eastern and Central Europe?

I believe that the reasons are mainly of a historical nature. Prejudice which is revealed in our attitude towards our Eastern neighbours goes deep into history reaching back to the 19th century or even deeper. As is commonly known, such prejudices are most vivid and the hardest to root out. Again, I am referring to Austria, although it is quite similar in other Western countries. But let’s stay with Austria. Here the lack of understanding towards the history and tradition of Eastern European nations is very deeply rooted. Already before the Habsburg Empire collapsed, in the Austrian part, the orientation was predominantly pro-West, even though Vienna was also a city of Poles, Ukrainians, Czechs, and Slovenians.

However, even back then, the German-speaking Austrians were irritated, and carried a certain level of distrust towards the easterners. Anybody who could afford it then, would choose a vacation in the Austrian mountains, at the Austrian sea or at least the Austrian lakes but not in Böhmen (this is what the Czech Republic was called back then) or in the flatland of today’s Hungary. And God forbid a journey to Galicia.

If anybody decided to make a journey in these remote regions, he would return with stories of dissatisfaction and stereotypical complaints. Franz Grillparzer (1791-1872), Austria’s national poet, a well-known grouch and misanthrope left such a description of his trip throughout the Czech country, “The moment you cross the Czech border, everything slows down and gets worse. Is this only my conviction or maybe it is the area, all in all probably not that bad, in its essence – how to say? – more boring, bitter, wilder than in Austria. And the beggars on the side roads are more numerous and more shameless”.

The same Grillparzer once visited Budapest, and he must have been in an exceptionally foul mood when he wrote: “The local language when spoken by women sounds simply terrible. When spoken by men, it sounds a little better, but still somewhat husky… I saw a few things. Museums, universities, and what else? I really feel sick. Dinner with the Takatschs’ (common Hungarian last name – editor’s note). I ate very little, but instead drank a lot of really strong wine to make myself feel better… At the tavern, the service was the worst I have ever experienced. I went to the Hungarian theatre. The show was The Barber of Seville. To say that it was weak would be a complement. It was below any standard”.

Until today, this is, or at least similar to, the reaction of many Austrians (and not only Austrians) looking East. Negative from the beginning, they are distrustful and always convinced that by them, meaning in the West, things are
much better. In this sense, Grillparzer is quite up-to-date. The fact that this great Austrian national poet, without many qualms, would write “Takatsch” instead of “Takács” is not surprising; it’s the same old story.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

Today’s Eastern Europe is an area recovering from a serious illness. It is a region of wounds that are still raw. And yet, whenever I enter a country in the East I can breathe easy and feel the blood flowing through my veins.

I think that Romanian intellectuals’ relationship with Eastern Europe can be likened to having a taste for goat’s cheese or not. Some of them can’t stand goat’s cheese. Others don’t care what kind of cheese they eat. And others still are crazy for goat’s cheese. Those in the first category reject the label “easterner.” They deny it; they despise it. What lies at the bottom of their sad, angry, dispiriting theory is a truth as big as a cartwheel, namely how hard it is to be a writer, painter, director, photographer or musician in today’s Romania, and how difficult it is to make a name for oneself on the western cultural stage.

In short, this is the way things stand: when it comes to dealing with the West, a Romanian passport is a liability, a millstone around your neck. Wherever they might go abroad, Romanian artists are viewed with a sourer, colder, more mistrustful eye than Swedes, Belgians or Portuguese; or Poles, Czechs or Estonians, for that matter, to name the other easterners. This defeatist theory, which has a long tradition and is high-pitched in tone, like a keening funeral lament, holds that in order to get noticed in the West, Romanian intellectuals have no other choice than to leave the country and erase their citizenship and place of birth from their identity cards.

One of the arguments, rather a solid one, is the list of those Romanians who left home and found success, fame and prestige abroad. The list features Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, Eugène Ionesco, Constantin Brâncuşi, Celibidache and plenty of others, but also goes so far as to include Herta Müller, winner of the 2009 Noble Prize in Literature, without her being consulted or her own opinion being taken into account. Another argument, also strong, derives from a legitimate question, the answer to which nobody knows for sure – even though it is highly predictable.
What would their names have meant today, internationally, if an essayist like Andrei Pleșu had been German, a novelist like Ștefan Agopian had lived in Paris, a poet like Mircea Ivănescu had been English, or a short-story-writer (as he defines himself) like Radu Cosașu had spent his days and nights in Vienna? I for one, in my immense naivety, say with my hand on my heart that they would have been reckoned among the world’s greatest writers and their books would have been translated and cherished all over the world, regardless of latitude or longitude. Otherwise, given the way things currently stand, given how few Romanian authors are really admired outside Romania, and given how few Romanian artists, film and theatre directors, musicians, choreographers and actors have genuinely made waves abroad, the neurosis of being from the East is virulent and widespread. Sometimes, it resembles not only a frustration, but also a kind of obsession, or even impotent hatred.

One bittersweet consequence of this perception is the emergence of a small army of mediocre wannabes, who put their own failures and lack of abilities down to the stamp of being Romanian, to their belonging to the cursed East. For decades, increasingly numerous choruses of failures have been singing the same refrain: we are geniuses, but those stuck-up westerners have no eyes to see, no ears to hear, no brain to understand. Ultimately, this refrain is like a drug. If it doesn’t cure the illness, at least it soothes wounded pride, coddles vanity, and nurtures hope.

Beyond maps

On the other side, in the camp of those in love with Eastern Europe, things are much more tranquil. Let me make it clear from the outset that I am not talking about the syrupy blood-and-soil brigade, the iron or cardboard nationalists, the mystics, the bucolic nostalgias, or those who are waiting for mediaeval kings to return to the East on winged white horses. I am thinking of those people who see deeper than the surface, who understand many things and in minute detail, who feel the changing winds and seasons, who laugh heartily – the dreamers. I suspect that such people feel at home in this part of the world, where magic has not yet been buried under the asphalt of motorways or in hypermarket warehouses.

I like to delude myself with the idea that a book like Travelling to Babadag, although authored by a Polish writer, Andrzej Stasiuk, has very little to do with the Polish spirit. It is, in fact, a declaration of love for a miraculous, unsophisticated, seething and slothful, calm and agitated, wakeful and sleepy East, an East of dusty
little towns and of villages nestling among hills. I am inclined to believe that a novel like Ádám Bodor’s *Sinister Zone* breaks the Hungarian mould, that it mixes together all the perfumes of the East, extracting the essence of human degradation. What is startling in this book is that somewhere beyond maps and the times, but in the East, the deepest East, all things are on the same level: mountain mists, villainies, a woman’s bared thighs, murders, sour apples, humiliation, the whinnying of a horse. Likewise, I doubt that Milorad Pavić’s *Khazar Dictionary* is a novel of Serbian tonalities. I see it as the literary pearl of an entire continent. It rises above frontiers and languages. Without question, another member of this family of enchanted books from the East is *The Book of the Millionaire* (or *The Book of Metropolis*) by Romanian writer Ștefan Bânulescu, a book such as God permits to appear in a country only once every hundred years.

**The two Romanias**

Alas, I have been only talking about writers, but all the members of this species, whether they play with words and characters, with brushes and pigments, with musical instruments and notes, with cameras, with the stage, or with dance movements, love their home (the turbulent East), beyond its historical tragedies and horrors, beyond the upheavals of communist dictatorship and the lawlessness of post-communism. Obviously, I myself play the same game, conscious of the political squalors of today’s Romania. Its mafia-style president and government have elevated corruption to the status of a religion, brought every institution to its knees, from nursery schools to the justice system, the police and the Church, turning the state and democracy into a farce. They have mastered the shameless art of pulling the wool over the eyes of starched European functionaries. Although I live in this Romania, I flee from it.

I seek out the other Romania, the one that is not to be found on the front pages of the newspapers or in the news bulletins. In the other Romania, there is a host of things that send a shiver of joy and happiness down my spine. For me, it is enough that there are still villages deep in the mountains, that there are still horses and carts on the country roads, that there are still gaggles of geese on the country lanes. And, above all, that among other mortals there still live the last of the Mohicans, the old people of eighty and ninety who still tell the stories of all the things in their soul, all the weight and mystery of the past. The Mohicans who, on St Jeremy’s Day, cannot go to bed until they tie a birch branch to the beam of the stable. On
Maundy Thursday they have to be at the cemetery to converse with the dead. On the feast of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste they have to leap over a fire to drive out snakes from the hay. For all these little things, and for being able to put the words down on paper, I thank God.

As ever, the wind of apathy and indifference blows through the camp of the moderates. To those who neither loathe goat’s cheese nor go mad for it, the question of the East is a minor, secondary issue, one that is not worth worrying about. Culturally speaking, such a mentality gives rise to a conformist, salon kind of art, where the nature morte seems to be the highest form. Indifference cannot produce flames or sparks.

**A region of wounds**

What is for sure is that Eastern Europe nowadays is not what it once had the potential to be. Before the Second World War, Romania attained the highest economic, cultural and social level it has ever known, in every respect. Bucharest’s clock ticked in time with the clocks of every major European capital, even if a rustic atmosphere still dominated in its suburbs. Back in those days, Eastern Europe was no more than a geographical term, because Romania was ranked at the level of Belgium between the wars. In the interwar period, East and West were nothing more than two cardinal points.

What followed, under the communist regime were labour camps, crimes, abuses, the nationalisation of industry and private property, the destruction of traditional rural life through collectivisation of land and livestock, monstrous propaganda, daily humiliation, the fear to speak freely, food queues, unheated homes in winter. The perversion of hearts and minds, that whole sombre, terrible epoch, pitched the country into a quagmire. Unfortunately, more than twenty years after the fall of communism, it is no longer possible to speak of East and West in purely geographical terms.

Today, Eastern Europe means an area recovering from a serious illness, a region of wounds that are still raw, a body that has not wholly healed, a scarred body whose tissues are slowly and painfully knitting themselves back together. For all those who ate their daily bread under communism, things cannot look any different, especially when the erstwhile employees of the Romanian Communist Party and Securitate are now billionaires and millionaires, ruling from the shadows, pulling all the strings.

Ukrainians, Serbs and Moldovans deserve to become EU citizens as much as Romanians did or did not deserve to.
To say that I am wary of the European Union sheltering new eastern states under its umbrella would be an egregious impertinence. Ukrainians, Serbs and Moldovans are viewed today in exactly the same way as Romanians were viewed a few years ago. They deserve to become EU citizens as much as Romanians did or did not deserve to. Personally, I believe that Romania had no business joining the EU and it has no business being a member even now.

By means of a vast ruse and consummate skill in deceiving the EU bureaucracy, successive governments in Bucharest have created hollow forms and phantom institutions and mimicked the passing of the laws, norms and regulations demanded by Brussels. All these have been nothing more than a ludicrous cardboard cut-out, and the EU negotiators, whether willingly or not, allowed themselves to be led by the nose. It’s highly likely that they themselves were playacting, that they were just pretending to take all that Romanian empty talk seriously, so that they could gain a market of twenty-odd million customers, something that is perfectly evident now in every supermarket, petrol station, and clothes and shoe shop, because local industry and agriculture are incapable of competing. Otherwise, for the political clans of Bucharest and the motley local businessmen, the European Union has been manna from heaven.

After having laid their hands on everything of any value (land, factories, forests, mines, hotels, refineries), and after having stolen everything there was to steal, wringing the state treasury dry over the course of two decades, Romania’s high and mighty have now moved on to European funds, discreetly funneling them into their own pockets. The Liberal-Democrat Party currently in power is like a pack of ravenous wolves, which don’t allow so much as one penny to slip through their claws. But to come back to the subject, I have no illusions that politicians in Ukraine, Serbia, Moldova or Croatia will be gripped with patriotism and honour. Money is money wherever you go, and the East, a region of wonders, is also unsurpassed in financial wizardry.

Culture can’t be measured using callipers. It is what it is, and that’s all. How can one discuss whether there is such a thing as the European people or European culture? What other kind of culture could it have? Caribbean, Hindu, or maybe Apache? The rest is just talk, a play of nuances, the entomologist’s obsession with arranging each moth or grasshopper in its little box and meticulously inventorying it. I don’t believe in such a viewpoint, and so I have nothing to add. I can only speak personally and in accordance with my own tastes. Whenever I enter a country in the East I can breathe easy and feel the blood flowing restfully through my veins. I’m a heavy smoker, and in the East
people still smoke a lot. That’s good. They also munch toasted, salted sunflower seeds, even more than in Istanbul. I munch them myself from time to time. And that’s good too.

Translated by Alistair Ian Blyth

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The year 2011 marks the twentieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Yugoslav wars in 1991. Seeking to escape the ghosts of the past, the region is still haunted by faces of former “heroes”. And yet, it is impossible to imagine the successor states of former Yugoslavia wanting to choose any other path.

In 1989, I spent a couple of nights in Dubrovnik on my way from London, where I moved in the mid-1980s, to Montenegro, where I was heading for a summer holiday. One did not need to own an oil well in Siberia to afford a week on the Queen's Beach in Miločer in those days. I recall little of that Dubrovnik stopover. The walled city must have been as beautiful as ever, and I must have felt the pleasure I had always felt on the sun-bleached streets which are as familiar to me as those of my native Belgrade. I had been going to Dubrovnik since I was a small child. Had I suspected that this was to be my last visit for more than twenty years, I might have taken better care to remember the details.

**Everything, and nothing, is as it was before**

For a summer or two I spent my holidays elsewhere, and then the disintegration of my native Yugoslavia changed things forever. I watched the television pictures of Dubrovnik under shelling from the surrounding hills. I might not have believed the veracity of the newsreels but for the fact that the voices of artillerymen could have been those of my Montenegrin cousins. Exile keeps
you at a safe distance, but does not spare you the pain and confusion. Like later moments of iconic vandalism – the Serbian shelling of the National Library in Sarajevo, the Croatian destruction of the Old Bridge in Mostar, or the Albanian torching of the fourteenth century Serbian Monastery of the Virgin of Ljeviš in Prizren – the shelling of Dubrovnik may have been a smaller offence on the scale of human crimes than the killing of thousands of innocent people, but it had a symbolic impact beyond the destruction of mortal bodies.

The Yugoslav “Baedeker raids” – to borrow the expression coined in the German raids on Britain in 1942 – were poignant not only because the Baedikers had already offered slim pickings in a region which had suffered so much ravage and so many wars, but also because the havoc was wrought by my generation of Yugoslavs. These were people brought up in a relatively open and prosperous socialist federation which respected the cultural achievements of its constituent nations with the same exuberant zeal with which it stifled each minute breath of nationalist dissent. Now the former were being obliterated while the latter erupted with a vengeance, in a veritable explosion of the Freudian return of the repressed. As Walter Benjamin wrote, “There is no document of civilisation that is not simultaneously a document of barbarism”.

The year 2011 marks the twentieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Yugoslav wars in 1991, which started exactly half a century after the German invasion of the earlier Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1941 – for Yugoslavs the start of the Second World War. In the region therefore, 2011 represents 1961 in terms of the Second World War: the wars are sufficiently close for the survivors to feel the rawness of the trauma, and yet distant enough for an entire generation to have grown up with only a second-hand memory of it. The monastery in Prizren, set ablaze only five years ago, is still a charred shell, but, away from Kosovo, other iconic buildings have been repaired. A new “Old Bridge” in Mostar spans the emerald waters of the Neretva. As in the new “Old Town” in Warsaw, everything, and nothing, is as it was before.
As your parents knew it

This July, I returned to Dubrovnik for the first time since that stopover in the late 1980s. I made two other visits to Croatia in the intervening years, but they were so brief that they barely count; an hour at Zagreb airport on one of the last Yugoslav airlines flights from London to Belgrade which had the Croatian capital as its regular stopover, and a few hours in Ilok, just inside Croatia’s eastern frontier, when I drove across from Serbia simply for the sake of experiencing an international border where, for most of my life, there had been none.

This summer, I went on a sailing holiday, taking in Dubrovnik, Split and a number of idyllic islands in between. In their easy hedonism, the pictures in the travel brochure promised an Arcadia with the sun and the sea untainted by the dirty business of history. They reminded me of the land of the lotus-eaters; indeed, fittingly, they included a visit to Mljet, on which Odysseus was reputedly delayed for several years by the nymph Calypso while Penelope waited on Ithaca. Both in London, where I live, and in Belgrade, which I visit regularly, huge billboards advertising Croatia and “the Mediterranean as it used to be”, or “the sea as your parents knew it”, have beckoned for several years with that unmatchable Yves Klein blue of my childhood memory.

I finally gave in to temptation, but I was worried too. The moment I utter a word in my mother tongue, my accent declares me unambiguously to be from Belgrade. If I spoke English I could preserve a degree of anonymity, yet I hardly wished to pretend I couldn’t understand Croatian. It would be as strange as trying to speak French to people in New York. But what if a person I addressed in Serbian was a Croat whose house was shelled or whose family member had been killed by a Serb? Or what if it was a Croat who took part in the Operation Storm, which cleared the Knin region of its Serbian population? Slobodna Dalmacija, Split’s daily newspaper, noted that in the 2001 census only nine people in the entire Split area declared themselves to be of Serb ethnicity. Not so long ago, there would have been thousands. I wondered who the nine were, but I also wondered who else might be asking the same question.

I wasn’t concerned about personal safety – too many Serbs and Croats, politicians, business people, and tourists like me, had already paved the way by visiting each other’s country since the hostilities ended in 1995. Rather, I worried about
the ethics, the appropriateness of such a holiday. Wasn’t it better to go to Greece, Spain, or Italy, where I could travel without any of the baggage of history which seemed to weigh heavier as the day of departure approached?

In the end, curiosity and nostalgia prevailed. If any of the dozens of Croats I spoke to as I travelled harboured any hostility towards me on hearing my accent, they chose a perverse way of showing it, by being unfailingly kind, and often going the extra mile to express delight at not having to struggle with English, German or Italian.

The coast was as beautiful as I remembered it, the crickets as noisy, and the pine trees as headily scented. I was determined to take a break from the messy business of Balkan history. Without internet connections, and if one averted one’s eyes from newspaper stands in the island ports, it was easy to pretend that one had escaped it all.

It was not always possible. As often as not, the jolt which brought back reality was the image of Ante Gotovina, the Croatian general sentenced to twenty four years imprisonment at the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague in April, 2011. For many Croats, Gotovina evidently remains the national hero. His image is displayed on huge roadside billboards near Dubrovnik airport, and it hangs over a street in Diocletian’s sprawling palace in Split. His face looks out from a framed picture on the walls of shops and cafés, and from the T-shirts on dozens of souvenir stands.

**Haunted by “heroes”**

If I was made to feel welcome in Croatia, this image, sternly militaristic and macho under the gold embroidered visor of a general’s cap, repeated with insistent regularity that it might be wiser to pack up and go. I am sure that a woman from Zagreb or Sarajevo would feel the same looking at the pictures of Ratko Mladić, which are perhaps just as frequent in Serbia. The region may seek to escape ghosts of its past but it is still haunted by faces of such “heroes”. Hastily scrawled graffiti on the walls proclaim them to have been betrayed and sold for a fistful of euros.

No sooner than I was back on dry land, I was again reminded of the dark shadows which were briefly banished by the Adriatic sun. Goran Hadžić, the Hague Tribunal’s last remaining Serbian fugitive, was arrested by the authorities on 20th July in the rolling Fruška Gora overlooking the Danube, close to Novi Sad, the capital of the Serbian province of Vojvodina. Hadžić had neither the dubious charisma of Karadžić, nor the macho militarism of Mladić and Gotovina. Compared to the spectacle of the earlier arrests, this one seemed a bit of an anticlimax, the last line on a to-do list crossed out.
Two days earlier and a little further up the Danube, in Budapest, the Hungarian high court acquitted Sandor Kepiro, a former gendarmerie officer accused of taking part in the Novi Sad raid, a massacre in which over a thousand Serbs, Jews and Roma perished in January 1942. Many of the bodies were thrown into a hole in the ice which covered the Danube at that time of the year, while the Hungarian forces continued shooting at drowning survivors. Kepiro himself, allegedly, killed at least thirty of the victims. He was tried, found guilty and sentenced to imprisonment by both the war-time right-wing Hungarian government and by the post-war communists. He escaped the former by fleeing to Austria and then to Argentina, and was tried by the latter in absentia.

While the Jewish organisations declared the acquittal outrageous and the people of Novi Sad expressed anger and disbelief, the international news agencies reported that the courthouse was full of people, many with obvious neo-Nazi leanings, who cheered, clapped and chanted after the judge read his verdict. It was not the court’s decision, based on alleged absence of evidence, which allowed a 97-year old to go home to die in his own bed that troubled me, not nearly as much as that audience response. It made me, perhaps for the first time since 1989, more worried about the direction that Hungary was taking, than about Serbia or Croatia’s path ahead.

In a way, that is a good sign for the former Yugoslavia. In delivering the indicted to The Hague, the governments of Yugoslav successor states may primarily have been hoping to speed up the process of joining Europe, but they also, much more importantly, did the best thing they could do to help their countries move on and progress.

Whether or not “joining Europe” is still the high prize it had once seemed, it is impossible to imagine the successor states of former Yugoslavia wanting to choose any other path at the moment. With their experience of the failed socialist federation, which, like the EU, came out of the trauma of the Second World War, and which in ways both positive and negative resembled a kind of EU avant la lettre, the “former Yugoslavs” may turn out to be good for Europe, as much as they themselves would benefit from it.

Just as important is the self-examination which The Hague both imposed and offered an opportunity for, and a hope that it leads to political maturity. Paradoxical though it may seem to say so at the moment, such a self-examination,
which moves away from depicting oneself as an innocent victim of historical storms generated elsewhere, is a process some former Warsaw Bloc countries, more easily ensconced in the EU, may well have missed out on to their ultimate disadvantage. To judge by the sounds which greeted the verdict in the Budapest courtroom, the ghosts invoked as peculiar to the former Yugoslavia are just as virulent elsewhere in Europe.

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It has been twenty years since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the question remains whether countries such as Ukraine or Belarus are truly free. The writings of Václav Havel, Czesław Miłosz and György Konrád may provide clues to the answer.

In the early 1990s, Václav Havel wrote in one of his essays that after 1989, the European mentality had changed. As president of the Czech Republic, Havel sympathised with his colleagues in the West who suddenly found themselves in an entirely new situation. In an instant, they had to learn how to cooperate with the post-communist countries, then labelled “newly independent states”, which they hardly knew.

The problem at that time was not really that the architects of Europe knew nothing about countries such as Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, but rather that not many in the West had a clear understanding of all of the traumatic experiences these countries underwent during the 20th century. These experiences had been a result of short-sighted political decisions made by the world’s superpowers. Hungary’s fate, for instance, was sealed by the treaty of Trianon; Czechoslovakia’s by the Munich agreement; and Poland’s through the “phony war” and the partition of the whole region at Yalta. Reflecting on the 1990s, as the first decade of the political transformation in Central Europe, Havel wrote: “in such moments I realise how much easier it must have been for Western politicians when they were faced with a homogenous Soviet mass and didn’t have to worry about distinguishing one nation from another”.

Havel, a broadly recognised European thinker, believed that unless the West assumes its share of the responsibility towards the East an agreement between both sides of the European continent will not be feasible. For Havel the main element of freedom and independent development was a sense of responsibility.
The dissidents

How can one develop a sense of responsibility while allowing space for independent existence in an interconnected world? There is only one answer – through a critical reflection on the actions that were taken and the effects that they brought. This was the starting point for the post-Second World War development of intellectual thought in Central European countries.

It was a topic of many discussions published on the pages of the leading émigré political-literary journal *Kultura*. Later, the same debate was echoed among those involved in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the Prague Spring of 1968. These extensive discussions were often described as a debate on the sense of history or common guilt. Regardless, the truth is that these discussions built for the countries of the former Eastern Europe (referred to as Central Europe since the mid-1980s) a framework for contemplation on their fate as independent states. Further, these great debates prepared a strong intellectual point of reference for the countries which were about to become democratic in 1990.

Today, it is still prudent to ask the question – how well do Europeans still remember these intellectual debates? The answer is that, outside academic circles, probably not very well. And yet an understanding of these debates may help explain the different course of the transformation that characterise both the countries who joined the EU in 2004 as well as those which have yet to join.

The most relevant text is Havel’s *Power of the Powerless* (1978). In this text, the main focus is on the role of the government in a post-totalitarian state; in other words, a government that creates its own ideology and tempers a new reality. It is also about a government which lies about the past, the present and the future in order to maintain power, and a government which deceives in its claim to believe in the rule of law.

Following the path set out by Havel, we enter into the worldview of a man who functions in the system once created for him. We agree with the Czech thinker that people don’t have to put their faith in all the mystifications imposed on them by the government. They need to act as if they did not believe in them, or at least silently tolerate them – if nothing else, not oppose those who use them. Again we concur with Havel that people living under an oppressive system are often forced to lie. Havel, a dissident himself, tries to navigate through a complicated matrix of an authoritarian regime.
The next question emerges – does accepting government lies just because someone lives under an authoritarian rule mean that this person “accepts and implements the system”? What should we say about people who, as Havel would state, live in lies only because they were created for such a life? Are these people, these “opportunists”, deprived of their own individuality? Are they deprived of free will?

Is this a dead end or is there another dimension, another experience? Havel talks about living in the truth. In fact, there are many ways to disagree with the government’s manipulation: open letters, workers’ strikes, rock concerts, student manifestations, refusals to participate in non-free elections and hunger strikes. Such acts of resistance can help people overcome the barriers imposed on them by the system, especially those that are aimed at limiting independent and critical thinking. Just think about role of culture: literature, art and music (the rock music of the 1960s became the music of the free people). More than anything else, it was the culture that started to break the system apart and finally led to the collapse of communism in 1989-1990.

What to call the people who become the messengers of cultural codes? Havel names them dissidents, people who became close to each other. If any of them were separated, it was only from the things that were false and isolated. A dissident became a channel of the truth that nobody else wanted to spread. A dissident is a messenger broadcasting to the world news of the system’s victims; as Alexander Solzhenitsyn informed the West about the Gulag. A dissident is also a co-architect of the parallel polis (a theoretical concept developed by Václav Benda – editor’s note), which is based on human solidarity and an aspiration for freedom. Havel reveals the structure of this parallel polis by constructing his own contacts with the foreign world. This world is to become what Havel desires; the messenger of the spirit of change, who again will teach people how to use such values as trust, honesty, solidarity and responsibility.

These texts poignantly illustrate the choices that were put before the Czechs and the Slovaks as they made a decision to transform Czechoslovakia into two independent states. The foundation of such a decision was the clear recognition of the importance of one simple fact – a departure from the life in lies.

The borders of Eastern Europe have clearly moved to the East to include the territory of Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus, which depend on Russia and are economically backward.
The uniqueness of Eastern Europe

Havel’s writings bring us to another seminal European thinker, a Polish poet of Lithuanian origin, Czesław Miłosz (1911-2004). Two of his essays from the collection entitled *Captive Mind* (1953) are particularly relevant. These two essays are *The Pill of Murti-Bing* and *Ketman*. Characteristically, they both reveal the uniqueness of Eastern Europe – unless the intellectuals cease serving the governments of their countries, the region will not fully understand the meaning of the word “freedom”.

*The Pill of Murti-Bing* is a story of a pill from the East that by simply ingesting it can make people happy (Murti-Bing is a Mongolian philosopher who produced pills which can instantaneously and painlessly change people’s “philosophy of life”). In this essay, Miłosz touches upon issues that go beyond Eastern Europe. These issues refer to the “system of thinking of the whole social organism” and its language, a platform of understanding between intellectuals and their readers – a problem of the “painful sense of detachment”. However, once free, an intellectual becomes a preacher, switching to the government’s side and involved in the ideological discourse of the ruling elite. What are the dangers that such a conveyor of the public word could bring in a non-democratic world? First of all, the readers would be deprived of the “tortures of thinking” and develop an uncritical attitude towards the façade of the new world.

In his text Miłosz often reflects on the clash between two cultural codes that characterise Eastern Europe – the culture of the pre-Second World War period and the culture that came from the East. Clearly, it was more than the Murti-bing happiness pill that came from the East. In the writer’s view, the East also offers an antidote which is a practical experience of conspiracy and camouflage.

*Ketman*, another essay, refers to a highly developed craft that places a premium upon mental awareness. Everything needs to be reflected on: all words and their effects. That is why, it was possible to cheat the communists by taking some elements of the system while leaving a little bit of internal freedom. Thanks to such survival methods, the communist system maintained itself for such a long time but also fell so easily once the people started asking Miłosz’s question, “If I lose, won’t I regret?”

Free, meaning healthy

No analysis on intellectuals’ life under authoritarian regime should neglect the voice of the Hungarian dissident, György Konrád. Konrád’s works are characteristic of a distance to both the ideology and the roots of the author’s own culture.
Konrád takes the position of a person who follows and registers the events, but whose personal life is not influenced by the times. He believes in a fight with devotion. In Konrád’s case, it was writing, which he believed to be an activity for extraordinary times. In Hungary, Konrád would say, such times came when almost every word was potentially regarded as anti-state agitation, trespassing the framework of imposed norms.

Konrád’s personal choice led him to emigration. For 15 years of his adult life, (from the age of 40 to 55), Konrád was persona non grata in his own country. And what was his reaction to the outlawing of his work and publications? He felt an unrestrained personal freedom. His works were published and distributed as samizdat copies. Konrád also gives us a choice on what freedom is – a valuable lesson after twenty years of independence. “Only free people are healthy and only healthy people can decide for themselves. Sick people are steered by others, are dependent on others and cannot take care of themselves. They cannot stand on both legs, make decisions, or see things as they are. They see what they want to see or what they are scared of”.

It is thanks to Konrád’s writings that we can better understand what life in Eastern Europe was about. Again, a question arises; what did it mean to live in a system where so many were oppressed and distrustful? An answer to this question also required individual attempts of self-fulfilment, something Konrád could not imagine outside Hungary. “When I was twelve years old I experienced national socialism, when I was fifteen I witnessed the communists coming to power. Communism and I grew up together. Twenty years have passed in an active and disciplined resignation,” writes Konrád.

What does the reading of the texts of Václav Havel, Czesław Miłosz and György Konrád teach us about freedom in Eastern Europe? First of all, in the last twenty years, the region has lost one important element, namely being Eastern and related to Russia. The countries once known as Eastern Europe became Central Europe, which is now understood as an area of common fate and different cultures. And these Central European countries have already shown their political vision in creating the Visegrád Group, an entity envisioned for their faster integration with the European Union. However, there is also the flipside to the coin. At times, Central European countries look back at their past and introduce some of the most non-democratic procedures. Consider the process of lustration (a process of investigating public officials’ involvement in the previous communist regime – editor’s note).
What has happened to Eastern Europe during this time? Its borders have clearly moved to the East to include the territory of Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus. It has again become a name for a political system dependent on Russia and economically backward. This is a territory in which elements of the socialist system are still visible and the methods of Soviet-style government are still being applied.

What has the level of freedom been in this Eastern Europe during the last twenty years? If freedom is to be understood as Konrád taught us, then we cannot say that the minds of Eastern Europeans went through any revolution. Even today, in this part of Europe, many people prefer to delegate the responsibility of their fate to the state. They prefer that bureaucrats decide on their lives. They prefer to remain oppressed in their thoughts and actions. People who experienced the “be like everyone else” mentality of the previous system are not capable of starting a resistance against the political order that has been instituted in their countries since 1991. It is the humility of being a beggar in one’s own country and the ability to show solidarity only to maintain the country’s external image. Just consider the Ukrainian experience with the Orange Revolution.

What specifically does this solidarity translate into? It translates into a common acceptance that it is the sick who finance the health system and the parents who finance the schools. It is also the drivers who pay the traffic police and the criminals who, to a large extent, support the police and the courts. It also means that the political elites feel immune to any punishment. Can such a country be called free? And what about its citizens? Do they understand the meaning of the word “freedom”? The answer is: no. And this is because today, just like it was twenty years ago, one of the main principles of survival is pretending that democratic institutions work, that the state takes care of its citizens and that the constitution is binding. Neither would we say that the remote world of the 1920s and 1930s that was based on special agreements and black markets has disappeared.

Who are the intellectuals of today’s Eastern Europe? Where are they? It is difficult to find an answer to such a question and point to those who, like Václav Havel, would show that a life in lies does not allow for an emergence of universal values.

If today in Belarus, writers and journalists have been forced to live just like the dissidents described by Havel, Miłosz and Konrád did and by doing so they carry the legacy of the first generation of Eastern European dissidents, then in Ukraine, a lack of such voices is rather a sign that the country itself has been a great victim of lies. It does not mean that there are no people ready to follow in Havel’s footsteps. It only means that their voice is weak and unheard. They may live in a parallel, but closed polis.

The case of Ukraine illustrates how difficult it is to implement the Western ideals of freedom among those who had been kept in the dark for too long. That is
why, twenty years after independence, Ukraine’s only pride is that it has lost an internal battle aimed at creating a national awareness (all based on a 19th century model of territory, language and ethnic background) as well and experienced a catastrophic end to the project of internal integration.

Can we even talk about freedom in Eastern Europe, if, by definition, freedom is an alien concept here? 🤔

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

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The Glass Wall

KATARZYNA PEŁCZYŃSKA-NAŁĘCZ

The Eastern Partnership is another stage in the evolution of the European Neighbour Policy. Just as with the previous improvements, it did not and could not overcome the strategic borders set by the 15 EU states at the beginning of the last decade.

Two years ago, the Eastern Partnership brought great hope and enthusiasm. Today, the atmosphere around this initiative is much less enthusiastic, even sceptical. There is a common belief that the Polish engagement (at the political but also non-governmental and expert level) is more a result of a sense of duty than a real conviction that the Eastern Partnership can bring real changes in the region. Is this a natural effect of disillusionment or is it a result of inherent problems with the policy?

What have the last two years of the Eastern Partnership really brought? An upcoming summit of the Partnership, to take place in Warsaw during the Polish Presidency in the European Council, is a natural moment to conduct such a review and try to answer these questions.

Selective integration

Let’s start with a certain fact that is rarely explicit, but is the key to understanding this phenomenon. In 2009, when the European Council accepted the new policy towards the East that had been initiated by Poland and Sweden, all significant decisions regarding the relations between these countries and the European Union had already been made. These decisions had been taken a few years earlier, right before the Eastern Enlargement in 2004. Then, after a long and heated debate, the European Neighbourhood Policy was established. Until today, it serves as the EU strategic framework in regards to Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus.

The European Neighbourhood Policy established the framework for Eastern European states and Caucasian states from the post-Soviet territory in the EU
policy, sealing their special status as EU neighbours. At the same time, the policy has somewhat deprived these countries of their “Europeaness” by putting them together in the same basket with the overseas neighbours of the EU (eleven countries from North Africa and the Near East). The European Neighbourhood Policy has, in fact, negatively answered the question regarding the likelihood of membership in the EU for these Eastern European countries in the next decade (or decades to come). Finally, this policy assumed that integration with the EU’s neighbours will be quite selective. The framework of this integration was to be established by the ambitions and potential of the EU neighbours on the one hand, and the protectionist interests of the Community and its member states on the other.

Defining the main framework did not obviously mean that the European Neighbourhood Policy could not be improved or tweaked. On the contrary, the policy has been amended several times. Two years after the enlargement, a debate on the European Neighbourhood Policy began, in which the German Presidency played an important role. The result of this debate led to an enforcement of the offer directed towards the Eastern states as well as a decision to begin negotiations about an accession agreement with Ukraine. The agreement envisioned a wider free trade zone.

The next stage of evolution in the European Neighbourhood Partnership established the Eastern Partnership. Similarly, to previous actions, it did not and could not overcome the strategic borders set by the 15 EU states set in the beginning of the last decade. An illustration of this was the way in which the Partnership was formulated. In the conclusions of the European Council of March 20th, 2009 presenting the programme assumptions read as follows: “The Eastern Partnership will bring about a significant strengthening of EU policy with regard to its Eastern partners by seeking to create the necessary conditions for political association and further economic integration between the European Union and its Eastern partners”. Hence, the Partnership was meant to push forward the integration process of the Eastern European countries. Nonetheless, just like the European Neighbourhood Policy, it did not establish final objectives of this process nor provided a framework of interaction.
Exercises in negotiations

The Eastern Partnership has brought four new elements into the EU policy towards the East. First, it has opened a possibility to make accession agreements with the EU for all six countries (so far such agreements were only signed with Ukraine). Second, it provides for visa-free traffic as a long-term goal of the EU policy towards Eastern European states. Third, it has created an institutional framework for multilateral cooperation between EU member states and the countries of Eastern Europe and the Northern Caucasus. Fourth, it has led to an increase in EU funding for eastern policy.

This may sound like a considerable amount of success; however a deeper examination illustrates exactly what has been achieved in these four areas. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the core of EU policy towards Eastern Europe has been a two-stage cycle concentrated on bilateral agreements. The first stage was the slow and lengthy process of negotiation and ratification. The second stage was implementation. Working out the first partnership and cooperation agreements took almost a decade and was completed in the late 1990s (for political reasons no agreement was signed with Belarus). These agreements regulated economic cooperation. In a few areas they also foresaw an adjustment to EU standards; however, these provisions remained predominantly a letter of the law.

Nonetheless, during the debate on the strengthening of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2006, negotiations began for a more advanced accession agreement with Ukraine. The Eastern Partnership created an opportunity for the remaining four neighbours (excluding Belarus). Indeed, since 2009, negotiations were started with Moldova and three Caucasus countries. Despite no agreement yet being signed, it is worth asking the question – what could they have changed in the EU relations with the East? Politicians supporting integration have no doubt that signing agreements has a strategic dimension and would be the final sealing of the geostrategic, pro-European orientation of the Partnership countries.

Economic analyses are less euphoric. Reports prepared for the European commission stated that should the provisions of the association agreements be implemented, there would be positive changes in the investment climate and an inflow of foreign capital to Partnership states, which, in turn, would stimulate economic growth. The problem is that even this scenario is grossly exaggerated. A special...
case is Azerbaijan, which is not a member of the World Trade Organisation and therefore cannot create a free-trade zone with the EU, something which was meant to be the main element of the association. In this situation, it is hard to imagine what new solutions an agreement could bring to the already binding partnership and cooperation agreements signed in the 1990s. A suspicion remains that the negotiations are more a public relations exercise, with no other aim than to show that mutual relations are moving forward.

The situation is quite different in the case of the remaining four states. Their association agreements are meant to include the free-trade zone. Adjusting to EU standards is quite costly, both politically and economically. In turn, the ability to stimulate this process is quite limited. The EU can send positive impulses by increasing aid for countries which effectively implement the agreement. However, the size of this aid is still quite small when compared to the costs that the countries will have to endure in the process of integration. Theoretically, it is also possible to punish countries for blocking access to the common market. However, such radical undertakings usually bring harm to both sides – the EU treats them as the last resort. In this situation the implementation of agreements will depend, above all, on political will and strategic determination of the Partnership countries. As of today, it is hard to say that these conditions are met.

**Visas – no guarantees**

While the issues of economic integration are still quite ambivalent, the majority of Partnership countries (especially Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia) declare a readiness to do everything necessary to eliminate visas for the EU. Their determination is further stimulated by the fact that the new EU members such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and the Baltic states, had to, as part of the accession process, give up on the visa-free traffic that they had with their neighbours in the 1990s. This visa barrier was most burdensome after the enlargement of the Schengen zone in 1997. The greatest victims were the closest: Belarus and Ukraine. Compared to 2007, new member states issued 40 per cent fewer visas for citizens of Eastern Europe in 2008; including around 50 per cent fewer for Belarusians, and about a third fewer for Ukrainians. Altogether, the number of visas decreased by 600,000. In the subsequent year, the number increased slightly, however, it never reached the same level as pre-Schengen.

The Eastern Partnership, as a long-term initiative, has clearly set its goal for visa-free movement between countries that are included in this initiative. By far, the greatest success has been the EU action plans for Ukraine and Moldova,
which included a list of reforms necessary in order to waive visas. For the moment, it is difficult to assess to what degree Ukraine or Moldova are able to fulfil their obligations. Some experts believe that this goal can be reached in a few years. Quite discouraging for the Partnership countries is the fact that the action plans are in no way binding for the EU, meaning there are no guarantees that their fulfilment will lead to visa waivers. In the end, it is the political will of the member states that must be sustained. And yet, as one of the members of the European Commission recently said: “Chances for such a decision are decreasing with each election”. Inside the EU member states, elections are being won more and more by parties unwilling to open European borders to citizens from the Eastern states.

**No team work**

Until 2009, the EU policy towards Eastern Europe has been of a solely bilateral nature. Thanks to the Eastern Partnership many multilateral institutions have been created at different levels. The partnership includes four thematic platforms, which can summon expert panels, to address specific issues. The effects of these platforms are summarised annually at a ministerial summit. Every two years there are Eastern Partnership summits convening the head of states. Multilateral, intergovernmental cooperation is to complement activity at various levels: the business level, the local governmental level, the parliamentary level, and the non-governmental level.

Establishing institutions, within which regular meetings take place between representatives of 27 EU countries and the Eastern European states, without Russia’s participation, has a large symbolic meaning. In the same way, cooperation has shown that differences in attitude towards the EU and the transformation processes are so large among the Partnership countries that common actions of these countries at the government or parliamentary level are very difficult. Thus far, they have barely left the scope of a ritual-political debate.

The situation is different at the non-governmental level. Organisations involved in the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership have managed, in the last two years, to define common goals (fighting for human rights, democratisation, the fight against corruption, visa waivers) and focus their activities around them. One of the forum’s key problems is a relatively small interest in this initiative shown by EU institutions and European non-governmental organisations. Here, a new chance came with the Arab Spring which radically changed the belief in the role of the civic society, especially in the Eastern Partnership. As one of the European Commission’s staff said “a new, pro-social wind has started to blow”.
An example of this new friendly atmosphere is an unexpected readiness of the commission to finance the forum's secretariat. Requests for such an institution were refuted for a long time as impossible to implement for legal and financial reasons.

**Multilateral cooperation within the Eastern Partnership**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK</th>
<th>IMPLEMENTATION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Partnership Summit (at the heads of state and ministerial level, once every two years)</td>
<td>The first one took place in Prague in 2009; the second one will take place in Warsaw on September 30th 2011.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ministerial meetings:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Minister of foreign affairs (once a year)</td>
<td>Meetings between ministers of foreign affairs take place as agreed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Other (depending on need)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Four thematic platforms (meetings at the staff level, twice a year)</td>
<td>All platforms meet as scheduled.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Democracy, good governance (an anti-corruption panel, integrated border management)</td>
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<td>• Economic integration and conversion with the European Union</td>
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<td>• Energy security</td>
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<td>• Interpersonal contacts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parliamentary Assembly – Euronest</td>
<td>The first Parliamentary Assembly meeting took place in March 2011. The Belarusian delegation did not participate.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assembly of Local and Regional Governments</td>
<td>Currently under way</td>
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<tr>
<td>Civil Society Forum (once a year)</td>
<td>The first meeting took place in November 2009 in Brussels, the second one in November 2010 in Berlin. The third one is scheduled for autumn 2011 in Poznan. The Forum’s Steering Committee works between the meetings.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Business Council</td>
<td>In the proposal stage</td>
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**Money with no vision**

Many organisations have welcomed the Eastern Partnership as an initiative which will bring new opportunities for implementing multilateral projects at the civil society or local governmental level. Indeed, thanks to the Partnership,
an additional 350 million euros out of the EU budget for cooperation with Eastern countries in the years 2010-2013 have been assigned. This money has only partially been allocated to multilateral projects. In most cases, it is spent on bilateral intergovernmental cooperation. An important element is an institution-strengthening programme, which seems to be a very sensible initiative. Its aim is to build the potential of state institutions, whose engagement and competence are necessary for effective negotiation and implementation of accession agreements.

Additional funding is assigned to finance five flagship initiatives. They include, among others, border management, small and medium-size enterprises, and environmental protection. Thanks to the Partnership additional credit funding has been secured from the European Investment Bank (1.5 billion euros) to support EU investments in Partnership countries. In addition, a special fund has been set up by the European Investment Bank for technical support which has been co-financed by membership states.

Looking at what has been achieved since 2009, we cannot say that the Partnership has been an empty initiative. But the Partnership has not succeeded in overcoming the real barriers of integration.

Until at least one of these changes, not even the best policy instruments will move integration forward. Looking at the EU and its reaction to the events in North Africa, it does not seem probable that the strategic framework of the Neighbourhood Policy adopted in 2004 will be changed in the near future. What the EU can now afford are only tactical corrections – creating or modifying financial mechanisms, cooperation institutions, etc. The ball seems to be in the
court of the Partnership states. It is up to them now to determine whether and how the policy instruments will be used. It is difficult to say whether Georgian, Moldovan or Ukrainian politicians understand that. This truth has not seemed to reach them.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

Katarzyna Pełczyńska-Nałęcz is the head of the Brussels office of the Centre of Eastern Studies (Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich).
EURO 2012. 
Two Sides of the Same Coin

PIOTR POGORZELSKI

Four years ago, when Poland and Ukraine were awarded the right to organise EURO 2012, the government in Kyiv had big investment plans. Ukrainians were getting ready to speed along new highways and travel on modern trains. However, the revolution of modernisation did not live up to its dream.

EURO 2012 is just around the corner. Indeed, EURO 2012 has provided some impetus for Ukrainian cities, perhaps even significant change. However, in order to make any judgements one needs to look at the Ukrainian cities four years ago and now. Most visitors will not be able to make such comparisons, since their stay for EURO 2012 will probably be the first and last time in Ukraine. Furthermore, as Markiyan Lubkivsky, the Ukrainian head of the tournament, often stresses, preparations for EURO 2012 are a way to ensure that Ukrainians reach a standard of living similar to other European countries. In Ukraine, progress is still measured in small steps, such as posting a timetable at a bus stop. What is the norm in the West is still an exception in Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries. “EURO-renovation” is the new, hip term for renovation work, while ordinary plastic windows have been dubbed “EURO-windows”.

Progress, but not success

The streets of Lviv have been finally marked by street names in the Latin alphabet and by bilingual road signs. There is a lot of construction work in the city centre. A new airport terminal and a stadium are being built. And yet, the problem of public transportation has not been solved. To travel around one can take a slow tram, a trolley bus or a small marshrutki – small, private
minibuses. The city is quite a challenge to any foreigner trying to figure out how to get around. All signs are in Ukrainian, the stops are hard to find and reliable timetables simply do not exist. Andriy Sadovyi, the mayor of Lviv, claims that the city is developing a transportation policy and that by the time football fans come to see the championships, there will be reliable timetables and normal bus and tram stops.

Donetsk (a city in Eastern Ukraine which will also host EURO 2012) is also undergoing changes. It has almost entirely banned marshrutki from the city centre. New trams and buses are now running along its main street – Artema. A new airport terminal is being built, roads have been repaired and the railway station has been modernised. Maksim Rovenskyi, the press secretary of the City Council, has told me that had it not been for EURO 2012 and the support of the central government, the city would not have been able to implement any of the projects.

At first glance, the city’s centre is impressive; rich, well-maintained and surprisingly clean. Only once in a while one can smell the fumes from the industrial plants nearby. Some even joke that the centre of the city could already join the European Union. The Donbass Arena is the pride of Donetsk. It was built and financed by Rinat Achmetov, considered to be one of the richest Ukrainians, who is a sponsor and a deputy of the Party of Regions. The stadium is clearly of the highest elite category. It resembles a UFO that has awkwardly landed on top of an industrial mine.

Kharkiv, another Ukrainian city to host EURO 2012, has also learnt the importance of local oligarchs. Its patron, Oleksandr Yaroslavskiy, is a businessman who ranks 15th on the list of the richest Ukrainians. Yaroslavskiy has financed the construction of Kharkiv airport and stadium. Kharkiv is the only Ukrainian city which can proudly admit to having the facilities that UEFA considers crucial for the championships. Kharkiv is also lucky to have an underground metro with three stations already located near the stadium. This is perhaps the one factor that makes the city’s transportation system slightly more manageable in terms of the coming championships, even though it is as poor as in any other Ukrainian city.

The transportation system is particularly bad in Kyiv. The city has an underground with one of the stations, Olimpiiska, located near the Olympic Stadium, a future host of EURO 2012 matches. The stadium is still being built, but its opening will take place in October and not August as earlier promised. The new airport terminal remains closed. Its expected completion date is constantly being pushed back.
The flip side of the coin

These aspects are just one side of the coin. The flip side is the one which the fans will not see. Let’s return to Kharkiv. The local stadium Metalist is located not far from the city centre. The arena is surrounded by blocks of flats and looks quite exotic; a pocket of luxury. Not to look too conspicuous against the background of the neighbouring blocks, their facades have been painted or big colourful club banners have been hung to cover the buildings. The fans coming to the matches will see many more of these Potemkin villages. The same trick has been used around the Olympic Stadium in Kyiv.

In Donetsk the stadium is also located in the city centre. The centre may be very impressive, but it is enough just to wander away a little bit to see rows of neglected houses without a sewage system. Denys ‘Frankensstein’ Kazansky, a famous Donetsk blogger, admits that the farther away from the main street, the worse Donetsk gets. Other cities like Gorlovka or Ukrainsk are even worse. They are still haunted by abandoned industrial plants and crumbling blocks of flats, the last remnants of the Soviet system. Kazansky says that the area is perfect for tourists who enjoy extreme vacations.

Pavlo Kolesnik, a journalist for the Komsomolskaya Pravda Donbass, a local newspaper, adds that the city is preparing for EURO 2012 without any consideration for the comfort level of its own residents. For example, to build the VIP terminal at the airport, the bus terminal had to be moved to the city outskirts. “Nothing for people”, says Pavlo Kolesnik. For him, EURO 2102 is mainly an opportunity for government officials to line their pockets. In Donetsk, the local government buys portable toilets for the price of a limousine, while in Kharkiv, the cost of new benches for the metro system was 63,000 hryvna (almost 6,000 euros) a piece.

“Without a doubt this is corruption and someone is making big money here. There are many more cases like this all over the country, yet it is impossible to prove anything. Politicians are tight-lipped and keep all information secret,” says Zurab Alasania, journalist and owner of the Kharkiv information portal Mediaport. In his view, the preparations for EURO 2012 have only somewhat Europeanised Ukraine. In fact, what is happening now in the country fits into the same corruption patterns that have been seen in many other projects implemented thus far. And this goes beyond local investment projects. Economist Andriy Novak bluntly calls EURO 2012 the biggest corruption project in today’s Ukraine.

The media have brought some new, unpredicted expenditures that have appear out of nowhere to the publics’ attention. As an example, Vyacheslav Konovalov,
from *Europatrol*, points to the access road from the airport in Lviv, which is above the level of the runway and needs to be lowered, obviously requiring additional funding. Another interesting example is Kaniov, a city 130 km away from Kyiv. In Kaniov, which is most known for being the location of the tomb of Ukraine’s national poet, Taras Schevchenko, a construction of a landing space is under way. Interestingly, this construction is also considered a part of the EURO 2012 project. The government seems convinced that foreign football fans will be visiting the writer’s tomb. The common joke goes that when it comes to the Shevchenko family, it is Andriy, the footballer, and not Taras, who is famous. And then they add that the real reason for this landing area is probably the nearby forest – a hunters’ paradise.

**Get it done**

Are these facts surprising? According to public opinion polls, as many as 66% of Ukrainians fear that the public money allocated for the preparations of EURO 2012 will end up in the politicians’ pockets. It is not just Ukrainians who realise that Ukraine is one of the most corrupt countries in Europe. Every government speaks of the need to fight corruption but none has yet fulfilled its promise.

It seems that EURO 2012 has also allowed the introduction of some shady procedures. From the moment Poland and Ukraine were granted the right to co-organise the championships, the question most often asked was whether Ukraine would be able to build all of the stadiums and airports on time. On many occasions, the press warned that Ukraine may lose the right to organise EURO 2012 if it proved unable to build the necessary infrastructure on time. Ironically, these voices only encouraged Ukrainian officials to turn EURO 2012 into another goldmine of public money.

“We don’t really care how they will do it, as long as they get it done”, said one of the high ranking Polish officials when I asked if she felt uncomfortable because of the unclear tender procedures during the preparations for EURO 2012. Such declarations, probably also heard during the talks between UEFA, Poland and Ukraine gave Ukrainian officials the green light. Tender bids with one participant are nothing unusual. Consent for such tenders is given by the Coordination Council on Preparation and Coordination of the Football Championship EURO 2012 in Ukraine, which is headed by Volodymyr Kovalevsky, an old acquaintance of the vice prime minister for EURO 2012 and Borys Kolesnikov, the minister of infrastructure who is on the board of the Donbass Arena. Hence, the spectacular successes of a Donetsk-based company, Altkom, which is in charge of construction of the stadium and airport runway in Lviv, as well as the runway and a new
airport terminal in Donetsk, comes as no surprise. The Coordination Council is also responsible for purchasing the not-so-cheap benches for the Kharkiv underground and the helicopter landing space in Kaniov.

**In for a big surprise**

Sums of public money were transferred to the cities organising the championships, putting the lower-ranking officials in a position to get their slice of the pie. Despite many construction work under way, roads remain Ukraine’s biggest pain. How can local governments make money here? Consider Kharkiv, where local politicians own private companies which produce asphalt used to pave the city streets. According to Zurab Alasania of Mediaport this situation also has two sides. “On the one hand, the problem of the shortage of asphalt has been solved. On the other hand, the public money goes straight into the politicians’ pockets”.

For the ruling Party of Regions, the championships are of great political significance. Parliamentary elections are scheduled for October 2012, a few months after EURO 2012. EURO 2012 may turn out to be the government’s huge success or a grand failure. Until now, the opposition has remained silent on the topic of the preparations. Make no mistake. It is quite likely that next year every little pitfall connected with the organisation of the tournament will be pointed out. Alasania is convinced that “EURO 2012 is like a ‘circus’ which can divert Ukrainians’ attention from the rising prices of food and public services”.

EURO 2012 may become a great opportunity to change the negative image of Ukraine in Europe. According to GfK Ukraina opinion poll, as many as 40% of foreigners visiting the country are convinced that the money allocated for the organisation of the championships will be embezzled. The situation will not get better even with the media’s attempts to inform on unclear tender procedures. The advertisements on BBC, CNN or Eurosport, showing stunning views of Ukraine, including a digitally brushed up monument of Lenin in the centre of Kharkiv won’t help either.

Tourists are in for a big surprise. Especially those who will expand their routes beyond the recommended route of airport-hotel-stadium.
and the drivers’ disregard to road regulations. “I’m not asking you to go easy on us, but please keep in mind that for 74 years we lived in a country with a planned economy,” said Boris Kolesnikov, the vice prime minister for EURO 2012, to foreign journalists who visited Kyiv in June.

However, the government has done very little to use the championships as a platform for real transformation of the country. In 1993, Russia’s prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, famously said, “We wanted the best, but it turned out as always”. Ukraine’s experience with EURO 2012 can be put into the following words: “We wanted the best and to keep things as always”. This is what Soviet-style modernisation is all about: technologically things are changing, but ideologically they stay the same. It is simply yet another five-year-plan, just not a Soviet one this time, but capitalist.

Translated by Bogdan Potok

Piotr Pogorzelski is a correspondent of Polish Public Radio (Polskie Radio) in Kyiv and writes a travel blog for people visiting the Ukraine.
NEW EASTERN EUROPE: What are Transnistria’s plans – independence or being part of Russia?

IGOR SMIRNOV: Transnistria is the historical border of the Russian Empire. From a legal point of view, we have never left the Soviet Union! Our nation supported maintaining ties with the USSR in a referendum which was deemed binding according to international law. Later we asked other questions: should we be with Moldova or without? And if without, should we be united with Russia? For sure we should be with Russia, because Russia is here.

So you think that Transnistria is simply a part of Russia?

The nation of Transnistria was formed on the basis of an attachment to its own state. And this is what our nationalism is like – state-oriented and civic. Transnistria is inhabited by Ukrainians, Moldovans and Russians, and made up of something like 30 per cent of each of these nationalities. We have three official languages. But this is to our merit. Here at this cemetery the entire Russian Empire is buried (the interview took place at the memorial site in Benderach – editor’s note), and thanks to Russia and its engagement in establishing peace, we can live freely. That is why our place is at Russia's side.

Isn’t such thinking a reason why the international community does not fully understand the government of Transnistria?

You are saying the international community does not understand and I say: the most important is for Russia to understand us. And if the international community has now decided to use methods of communist pressure, then I do not want to belong to such an international community. That is no democracy.

Is there any possibility for re-integration with Moldova?

The people of Transnistria know precisely what they want and where their place in the world is. Until today, I have not understood who the Moldovans really are. Are they Moldavans or Romanians? And where are they heading? To Europe or towards the East? We have answers to these questions because we asked our people. And this is why I only feel sorry for the international community for not recognising it.
Do you see much sense in the five plus two talks? (Negotiations including Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE as mediators, the United States and the European Union as observers, in addition to Transnistria and Moldova – editor’s note).

I do. Firstly, because as long as we talk, there is hope that there will be no war. Secondly, these talks give us a chance to bring our nations – that is the nation of Transnistria and the nation of Moldova – closer together in the coming years. This would be possible if there were no pressures, no obstacles to normal life and work.

What pressures do you have in mind?

They say that they obey the highest democratic, European standards. Hence, I say put a European Union Border Assistance Mission (an EU mission for monitoring the border between Transnistria and Moldova – editor’s note) on our border. But there has been nothing of that. To export our own goods we have to pay bribes in Moldova (the EUBAM control only allows the export of products which have passed the customs of the Republic of Moldova and which have been paid – editor’s note). And they say that this is a European democracy. I do not want such democracy. But returning to the previous question, let me stress that we have never abandoned the talks. Do you know why? To answer that, I would have to take you to another cemetery. I would have to show you where those are buried for whom they came to murder: the youth and the elderly. All under one slogan: “Jews to the Dniester river, Russians behind it”.

Is the memory of the war still strong among the people of Transnistria?

We do not strengthen it. Moldova does. Look what happened on April 7th, they attacked the parliament. The police beat the protesters; and this is civilisation, yes? (the event mentioned is the revolution which took place in Moldova on April 7th 2009 – editor’s note).

What do you think of the role of the OSCE in regulating the conflict in Transnistria?

All I can say is, the OSCE is a platform on which we can stand and stare into each other’s eyes and try to guess – are they cheating us or not? We have signed over 84 documents which have been deposited in Brussels. They are lying there with the OSCE’s signature. The problem is that our “partners” do not stick to these agreements.

What is the OSCE offering you?

Sometimes they tell me to look at the success of the German unification. Then I answer them: when it comes to unification, we are always for it! Hence, together with Moldova we will unite with Russia! Let me say this again: we have never left the Soviet Union. And Russia is a legal descendant of the Soviet Union! Please understand that. Both in a legal and historical sense, we
have never lived in Moldova, which is regarded as a state together with its institutions, budget, etc. For us, everything has always worked separately. We all live within one large union, part of which was the Republic of Moldova. That is why we cannot compare the unification of Germany with our situation. And if such an analogy is used, it could only refer to the unification with Russia. Just as Germany was divided after the Second World War, we were divided after 1991.

What are your political plans?
We are planning informal consultations in the five plus two format, during which we will probably try to start official talks. The most important thing is that they should be accompanied by some sort of guarantees. If we sign something, it should be fulfilled. You Poles should be able to understand this best. For you, honour is always the most important. This will be a difficult task for our diplomats.

And what about internal policy?
We are focusing on agriculture. Last year we took care of this area of our economy. Hence, no matter what happens, no matter what pressures are applied on us, we will not be hungry.

What has been your biggest success and failure?
From the tasks that we wanted to complete by the end of the year 2010, we only didn’t complete one. We did not succeed in having Transnistria recognised by the international community. And this doesn’t depend on us, but rather on those who have a direct interest in recognising or not recognising Transnistria.

Who would be a better partner for the talks: former President Voronin and the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova, or Prime Minister Vlad Filat together with the Alliance for European Integration?
First of all, we did not discuss the negotiation process with Vlad Filat. We would simply meet and exchange opinions. When it comes to other presidents, one needs to look at Mircea Snegur. He was the one who went to war against his own people. One must have a small brain to decide on a move such as this. Transnistria is also inhabited by Moldvans. And Vladimir Voronin? He himself takes the responsibility for the repression of the Moldovan identity and the coming together of Moldovans and Romanians. He did this despite the contradictory claims he had made. The real Moldovans who can read and write Cyrillic only live in Transnistria. We print Moldovan literature and handbooks in this alphabet. However, the alphabet is not the most important thing. For the last 20 years in Moldova, children have not been learning the history of their own country, but have learnt about their neighbour, Romania, instead. Can you imagine that in Poland you wouldn’t be learning about
the history of your own country, but let’s say Russian history? Or that I would tell you that it is bad that you are learning about the history of your own country. Where would you send me then? Yeah? Exactly there...! 🌓

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

Igor Smirnov (born in 1941) is the first, and so far, the only president of the unrecognised Republic of Transnistria. He has been in office continuously since December 3rd 1991. He arrived in Tiraspol in 1987 to take up the position of director of a local enterprise – Electromash. As a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, he was actively involved in the political changes that took place in the Soviet Republic of Moldova. He was the main leader of the Transnistrian army during the conflict in 1992. Based on the 2004 decision of the European Commission he was deprived, together with the majority of the Republic’s leadership, of the right to enter the territory of the European Union.
The crisis in Belarus has caused a phenomenon that even state officials painfully admit: “sooner or later it will be normal here”. Europe now faces an important task — it must consider how and when normality will come to Belarus and, more importantly, what form it will take.

For over a decade, Alexander Lukashenko has provided heavy-handed stability. But one change taking place in Belarus could destabilise everything. At the petrol station a litre of unleaded fuel cost about 50 eurocents in 2007; now it is twice that amount, up to about 1 euro. This is a nightmare for Belarusian drivers and the Belarusian economy. Even elegantly dressed drivers curse and swear at the rise in prices, surprised at the fact that gasoline is more expensive in Belarus than in Russia.

Three scenarios

The rapid increase in prices of petrol and diesel are the consequence of Russia’s new energy policy on the fuel market. For many years, Moscow subsidised the Belarusian economy by selling oil, gas and electricity at privileged prices. Natural gas is used almost entirely by heating plants, which barely meet the technical standards of the 1980s. The oil and gas are resold with profit by the Belarusian authorities and the savings from the transaction deposited in the national treasury. The surplus of cheap Russian oil brought another benefit to Belarus. The Belarusian petrochemical plants could modify the raw material for products needed in the chemical and automotive industries. Obtained in this way, the currency allowed the import of goods, mainly food products and electronics.

Simultaneously, the authorities could afford to pay out salaries and pensions, to maintain unprofitable industries, to construct new roads, flats and leisure facilities. The financial crisis, which reached Belarus in 2008, led to the dramatic fall of foreign currency reserves held in the Belarusian treasury. Two years later, Russia began to raise gas and oil prices and introduced taxes for their delivery. Moscow
also stopped giving preferential conditions for the sale of Belarusian food and machinery on its market, adding more competition to Belarusian industry.

President Alexander Lukashenko, who regularly found himself in conflict either with the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev or Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, had three options. The first was to allow Moscow to assume control over the state in exchange for preferential energy supply conditions. The second was the possibility to look west and to seek cooperation with the EU. Brussels, however, imposed tough conditions on how political reforms would have to be implemented. The third was to try to restructure the economy while maintaining its stability through loans. Minsk chose the third option.

According to experts, Belarus’ low foreign debt has become a myth and the growth of debt and its repayment suggests that the country has fallen into “a spiral of debt”. At the beginning, the first loans were designated to maintain the impression of stability, while subsequent loans were only used for repaying or servicing the previous ones. This issue was repeatedly raised by the Belarusian opposition, who tried to raise the alarm that the treasury was being depleted and that economic reforms are desperately needed. Many opposition leaders, including the president of the “Oh, Freedom” movement, Alaksandar Milinkevich, warned that further borrowing will push the country into the hands of Russian oligarchs and could lead to the “loss of independence”. Russians in exchange for providing financial support are preparing to take the majority share of key companies in Belarus, for example of Beltransgaz, which manages the transit pipelines.

Soon, Minsk will not affect either the supply of energy resources or their transport to the European Union. Belarusians, in exchange for shares, are trying to negotiate lower prices for oil and gas, but recent statements made by representatives of the Russian government do not indicate that the negotiations have not been successful. A lifeline for the Belarusian economy may prove to be the Customs Union of Russia and Kazakhstan. Starting July 1st, the provisions of a common economic space are to take effect: providing greater access to the Russian market for Belarusian companies. This will allow the producers of dairy, farm machinery and household appliances to momentarily catch their breath. Experts doubt, however, that the sale of these goods will provide any significant revenue for the empty national treasury.
Silence and applause

One Wednesday afternoon in Minsk, on October Square, next to the Palace of the Republic, a large crowd of people gathers. They have no banners, no flags and no megaphones. From time to time, we hear applause. The large TV display mounted here usually shows Lukashenko or football matches. But on this day, the Belarusians did not come to watch a match. They came to express their discontent with authoritarian rule.

Not more than a year ago, in the same spot, groups of opposition supporters with portraits of political prisoners were demonstrating. However, the police quickly dispersed the picketers within minutes. Now the “silent protests” are held every Wednesday. People learn of the protests through social networks. They come at the appointed hour and stand, or sometimes clap. At first, only a few hundred showed up. However, on each subsequent Wednesday, on the streets of Minsk and other Belarusian cities, thousands of people who are dissatisfied with the rule of Lukashenko appear. The most active in the “silent protest”, called the “revolution through social networks”, are young people from large cities such as Minsk, Brest, Mogilev and Grodno. They are joined by like-minded young people from Baranovichi, Molodechno, Orsha and Pinsk. A map of where the “silent protests” have taken place would show that they are happening all over the country. The internet played a significant role in organising the actions. Initially, there were loose exchanges of opinions on the pages of popular portals. Soon after, Belarusians began connecting with each other on the social networking website “In-Touch”. In the spring of this year, the portal had over a million users. Statistically, this means that one in six Belarusians, over fifteen years old, has a profile. In May, the users formed two groups named “Revolution by Social Network” and “We are for a Great Belarus”. In early June, the virtual community announced a protest. On June 8, the organisers of the two groups met up and took to the streets of Belarusian cities. They stood silently, in protest, and later went home.

Despite the success of this virtual revolution, the protesters felt the unpleasant reality of the authoritarian regime. Plainclothes security officers waited on the squares and streets where the silent protests took place. Some participants of the protests were taken into custody. Some were beaten on the head while others were accused of disturbing public order. It continued like this on the following Wednesdays.

Without radical changes and the full cooperation of her neighbours, Belarus risks falling into the abyss with no hope of escape.
July 3rd saw a break in this tradition, when Belarus celebrated its national holiday which falls on the anniversary of liberation from German occupation. A military parade was organised, hosted by President Lukashenko. The army marched and the president spoke. All were silent and those who wanted to applaud were quickly detained and placed in prison vans. On the square in front of the railway station in Minsk, the whiff of tear gas lingered for hours. The international community angrily responded by calling it “a brutal attack on human rights and civil liberties”. President Lukashenko assured his countrymen that “he will not allow foreign forces to destroy a young democracy”.

From the reports published by human rights organisations it seems that in June and July alone, over a thousand people were detained in connection with the “silent protest”. Some had to pay fines. Others had to sit for several days in detention. And though apparently it would seem that the authorities have been successful because the number of protesters dropped, for the opposition, the success is the fact that “the revolution through social network” continues, and there is no way to extinguish the flame.

Car owners have joined the internet-organised protesters. The rapidly rising fuel prices and frequent interruptions in fuel supply means that drivers have also decided to express their discontent. They meet at petrol stations and block access to the distributors or park their cars along busy streets. In response, officials try to close off the streets and issue tickets. However, it is impossible to restrict all outbreaks of discontent.

Today Belarus is on the brink of the abyss. Each step to the right or left means bankruptcy and human tragedy. The attempt to balance will end in failure. Without radical changes, flexible policy and full cooperation with Belarus’ neighbours, a long flight into the abyss with no hope of escape lies ahead.

**Social order**

During the most active period of the demonstrations in Belarus, Poland took over the Presidency of the European Union. The Belarusian opposition and its supporters are counting on Poland’s support in restoring civil liberties and in forcing the officials in Minsk to hold democratic elections.

How do those who represent the official Belarusian line view the Polish Presidency? I had the opportunity to talk about it with Ihar Karpienka, the head of the
Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives or the lower house of the Belarusian parliament.

“Poland has a chance to become a major political player in Europe. To succeed, Warsaw must take remarkable steps that will be noticed by both the European Union and beyond. When talking about Polish foreign policy in relation to Minsk, a few radical phrases are used in the on-going dialogue that characterise the introduction of sanctions and restrictions of contacts,” says Karpienka.

Karpienka hopes that Poland will be able to use the EU Presidency to normalize relations with Belarus. “In Belarus there are no political prisoners and political trials taking place,” he says. “This is just a stern response of the state to the efforts trying to destabilize the social order”.

The Belarusian elite believes that the European Union sees Belarus from a distorted perspective. Karpienka thinks, for example, that the country is experiencing serious but only temporary financial problems. The neighbours, who should be helping, are instead “putting spokes in our wheels” as Lukashenko describes it.

The Belarusians themselves see the situation very differently, however. In a year, inflation has taken its toll; a year ago, thirty thousand to fifty thousand rubles was enough for milk, bread, cheese, cigarettes, bottled water and newspapers. Today, this amount has doubled. According to Belarusian and Russian analysts, the sharp reduction in living standards may cause a mass exodus of people into the streets. What is the chance for change? At the protests, there are fewer opposition supporters. But experts believe that the number of true-believers in Lukashenko’s policy will decrease with the persistence of this crisis. The lack of a decent livelihood may force the Belarusians, peaceful by nature, to protest.

For now, without any financial support from the West, officials in Minsk have an open door to the East. It’s not just the Russian market and the loans from the Eurasian Economic Community, but also the Chinese, Azerbaijani and Russian privatisation and takeover attempts. Trade within the Customs Union, the sale of shares of state companies to Eastern and Far Eastern partners and the cheap oil and gas, give Lukashenko reason to believe that he can survive the worst socio-economic crisis of his seventeen-year presidency.

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In Ukraine – The (Un)freedom of Speech

BOGDANA KOSTYUK

The freedom of press and freedom of speech have always been a contentious issue for Ukraine. Since the rise to power of President Viktor Yanukovych, many believe it has considerably worsened, with Yanukovych being named the “number one enemy of the press in Ukraine” during the 2011 World Press Freedom Day.

The rise to power of President Viktor Yanukovych and his team in Ukraine has been marked by several resonant facts and events concerning the freedom of speech. These facts and events have changed the situation in the information sector of the country. Most notably has been the August 30th 2010 decision of the Administrative Appeals court in Kyiv to deprive two TV channels, Channel 5 and TVi, of their frequencies.

The history surrounding the frequencies of these two known television stations, which for many Ukrainians are the most objective and fair in their news reporting, began right after the presidential election in 2010. The judicial order stripped these TV channels of their licenses and the right to broadcast in an announcement on new frequencies in Ukraine. This decision satisfied the claim by a group of channels belonging to INTER Media Holdings, which then received these frequencies themselves. Mykola Knyazhytsky, the Ukrainian journalist and leader of TVi channel argued that INTER belongs to the family of Valeriy Khoroshkovsky, the present Head of Security Services in Ukraine (SBU). In an interview with pravda.com.ua, Knyazhytsky claimed that Khoroshkovsky “is not interested in the distribution of truthful information on the activities of the current president of Ukraine”, or the journalistic investigations concerning corruption circles in which businessmen close to President Yanukovych distribute resources from the state budget.
The law of force

The situation with Channel 5 is just as dramatic. The channel belongs to Petro Poroshenko, a colleague of ex-president Viktor Yushchenko, a businessman and founder of ROSHEN Corporation (a confectionery manufacturer). Poroshenko has recently labelled the decision of the court on behalf of the INTER media group, as an attempt “to redistribute the information sector of Ukraine to narrow the radius of action of the independent press”, and as trying “to interfere with business”. Following the court’s decision, Channel 5 notified its viewers of a gradual transition to a digital platform.

Another aspect regarding Channel 5 and TVi has also been illustrated through the example of the corruption of the judicial system. Representatives of the Ukrainian-Helsinki group of human rights and the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group claim that the law of force, rather than the force of law, is in operation. In places outside the capital city of Kyiv, independent editors and journalists are frequently subject to pressure and impunity by the authorities. Thus, the Ukrainian law sides with the strongest, such as local officials, policymakers or businessmen. The Association of Independent Regional Publishers in Ukraine has compiled a list of infringements on the freedom of speech and the rights of journalists. The association has noted cases of infringement in Dnipropetrovsk, Kremenchuk, Lviv, Odessa and Kharkiv. According to the association, representatives of large businesses “dictate to local authorities and editors what is necessary to report on”, and prevent journalists from doing their professional duties through pressure on their editors and from the courts. The strictest month, according to the experts of the association, was February 2011, when seven regional editors indicated pressure upon their employees and attempts by the authorities to prevent them from working.

The situation with the mass media in Ukraine is nothing unusual. Western experts accuse Ukraine of curtailing the freedom of speech, and demand the leadership of Ukraine not to deprive the rights of journalists.
precisely what newspaper owners or the government wanted to hear. Some journalists recall that during Victor Yushchenko’s presidency, many articles were magnificently coloured with custom-made plots.

President Yanukovych and his team, despite having come to power in Ukraine through the democratic process, have successfully continued the depravity of the press. They have demanded the creation of a positive image of the government and the oligarchs. Newspaper owners haven’t refrained from increasing the pressure on the management and editors of journals, as well as journalists. Evgeny Zakharov, President of the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, writes that this pressure sometimes comes directly from above, meaning from an official or deputy, and sometimes through the course of making money. The publicist and political scientist, Viktor Kaspruk adds: “Unfortunately, in Ukraine, journalists haven’t become the fourth estate, and the new Ukrainian oligarchs have ignored their opinions and criticism of the government; many journalists are pressured by them. However, this is not only a problem of the attitudes of the authorities of the press, but also a problem of the absence of public control over the authorities. Furthermore, it is a problem of the absence of an advanced civil society which should provide serious support for a free press”.

Only two exits

As Natalia Ligachova, the chief editor of the internet portal www.telekritika.ua notes, “Even if a journalist strongly believing in the mission comes to a journal, he or she is completely dependent on its owner. And if the owner does not pay attention to the principles or standards of journalism, the journalist only has two exits from this situation: to leave the journal and the trade altogether – or to accept the rules which exist in the journal”.

On the other side, officials and the government continue to demonstrate the illusion of a free press in Ukraine. Andriy Shevchenko, a deputy of the Ukrainian Parliament and a prominent journalist, expresses his belief, “The most important aspect for any journalist and any editor is trust! Trust in society and trust in the country. And this trust will not exist if you have told a lie once, twice, and then continue to do so”. In his opinion, civil society in Ukraine has, in many respects, arisen due to the role played by the press and acted as a catalyst for civil understanding and discussions about the future of Ukraine. On June 23rd 2010, a couple of days before Constitution day, a group of journalists were invited by
President Yanukovych to the presidential residence in the town of Mezhgyrya, near Kyiv. The group consisted of the media loyal to the president and his team and of journalists who openly demonstrate their support for Yanukovych (the majority were representatives of popular TV talk shows). When asked why other media representatives were not invited, the presidential press centre responded, “President Yanukovych invited the group based on his wishes. This is his right”.

After a year and a half of President Yanukovych’s democratic rise to power, Ukrainian society is once again becoming more active, in many respects owing to the authoritarian pressure that has taken place in the information sector. Public opinion polls carried out by experts from the Democratic Initiatives Foundation in April 2010 and April 2011, showed that just over a year ago, the majority of Ukrainians considered the freedom of speech in the country as being “normal”. A year later, in the spring of 2011, that number had dropped to about 30%. Further, the results showed that more than half of Ukrainians fear going down the Belarusian path.

**Empty words**

In the meantime, after a long silence and the examination of the new Ukrainian reality, international foundations and research centres are starting to describe the risks and uncertainties of Ukraine’s independent media. International organisations such as Reporters Without Borders, the Association of European Journalists, the Ukraine-wide initiative “Stop Censorship” and other European institutions, have started to spend more resources monitoring Ukraine’s media sector. These groups have illustrated the situation in Ukraine with regular references and recommendations to the Ukrainian authorities. They have also demanded that the authorities “provide a normal functioning public information sector”; “provide equal access to objective information for all citizens”; “not interfere with the professional work of journalists”; and “provide journalists with the normal conditions of work”. Separate recommendations have been made to specific representatives of power structures and law enforcement bodies in Ukraine, such as the Office of the Prosecutor General. These recommendations include “effectively investigating the facts regarding the cancelling of journalistic activity, and strengthening the control over maintaining the rights of journalists on behalf of all branches of the government in Ukraine”. Another recommendation states that employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs should not “apply force against journalists”. (These citations come from statements of the Reporters without Borders and the Stop Censorship initiative from December 21st 2010).
In a letter written by Reporters without Borders and sent to Ukrainian leaders in December 2010, the organisation highlighted cases of infringement of the rights of journalists and freedom of speech. They stated that politicians and officials should “according to the legislation of Ukraine and the international duties of Ukraine concerning the press, protect the freedom of speech”. Ukrainian officials responded to both its own people and the international community, stating that they support the freedom of speech and the development of a democratic society as a whole. However, words remain words, and Ukraine continues to shed its freedom of speech like a snake sheds its skin.

**Enemy number one**

It comes as no surprise that on May 3rd 2011, during World Press Freedom Day, President Yanukovych was named the “number one enemy of the press in Ukraine”. This comes from a rating of the enemies of the press conducted by leading Ukrainian journalists and independent researchers and publishers. The publication of this list also included the comment that:

“In modern Ukraine, the question of freedom of speech is at the centre of attention for both domestic and foreign observers. A day doesn’t pass without information on the investigation of the murder of George Gongadze. Every day, international and Ukrainian organisations publicise the facts about the suppression of freedom of speech in Ukraine. We welcome public statements by President Viktor Yanukovych on his adherence to support the freedom of speech and his readiness to protect journalists, and also on his acceptance of the law related to the access of citizens to official information. However, we do not forget the words, which the American Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, said in the summer of 2010 during her visit to Kyiv: ‘We understand that rhetoric alone does not change behaviour’. Concrete actions of the Ukrainian government should follow statements regarding the protection of the democratic rights and freedom of citizens, including the right to freedom of speech”.

In May this year, international non-governmental organisations, such as Freedom House, declared that with Victor Yanukovych’s rise to power, the general
situation surrounding the freedom of speech has worsened. Ukraine has also, once again, found itself on the list of countries which the organisation characterises as “partially-free”. As for this partial freedom of the press in Ukraine, this is gradually moving towards being “not-free”. ✝️

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The slogan “Ukraine in the European Union” is on the lips of almost every Ukrainian politician. In the West, one can often hear voices saying that Ukraine’s place is in the EU. And yet, has anybody ever thought about what the EU would look like if Ukraine became a member?

Today, through the actions of politicians and symbolic gestures, Ukraine shows a lack of readiness for joining the European Union, thinking of everything other than its integration into Europe. President Viktor Yanukovych, however, seems to have great PR experts – since day one of coming to office, he has declared that Ukraine has pro-European aspirations. When he made his first official visit to Brussels, many experts felt very confident. His decision to go was interpreted as a clear signal: the new government is willing to keep the pro-European policy of the previous government. In reality this “pro-European policy” has not gone beyond lip service and the patting of backs.

Discounts for friends

Soon after the Brussels visit, Yanukovych flew to Moscow. It then became clear that Ukraine’s foreign policy would turn East, not West. His decision to visit Moscow was explained thus: pro-European values are not bread-and-butter values, and friendship with Moscow needs to be maintained. Otherwise, Ukraine will not get its preferred price for energy resources imported from Russia. It is no secret that since signing the agreements with Russia on imports of natural gas in 2009, Ukraine is still paying much more than many Western countries. Kyiv has not managed to get its preferred price, despite signing the Kharkiv agreements in which Ukraine agreed to station the Russian Black Sea Fleet until 2042, in exchange for a discount on natural gas.

In truth, the Ukrainian people have not noticed this discount because the real discounts went to large industrial enterprises owned by politicians connected with
Yanukovych’s Party of Regions. Additionally, the agreement on the stationing of the Black Sea Fleet did not mention the fee which the Russian state would pay for this “service”. Experts are of the opinion that as a result of this agreement, Ukraine will lose billions of dollars each year. Even more, Russia has been persistent in convincing Ukraine to join the Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan. Such a decision would directly contradict membership in the World Trade Organisation, and would put Ukraine in a lost position in the talks on the free trade zone with the European Union as part of the Eastern Partnership programme. And yet Ukrainian diplomats have found a way out: they argue that if they agree to cooperate with Russia within the Customs Union, it would follow a special 3+1 formula. This means that Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan would trade with each other based on one set of rules, while Ukraine would obey a different set of rules. This “different” set of rules wouldn’t violate the earlier agreements with the WTO. Nevertheless, until now, nobody has been able to clearly explain what the 3+1 formula really means. One thing is clear: neither Russia nor Europe will be pleased with this option. The European Union has made a diplomatic allusion that Ukrainian attempts to integrate using Russia’s economic structures currently used by Ukraine, will freeze talks on the free trade zone that are under way with the EU. And, EU membership will certainly be out of the question. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has said that Ukraine cannot sit for too long on both chairs: it either wants the EU, or it should integrate into the structures led by Russia.

_Ukraine cannot sit on two chairs for too long: it either wants the EU or it will integrate into structures led by Russia._

Currently, President Yanukovych is trying to please Europe and officially show how Kyiv is approaching Brussels. And yet the next nail in the EU integration coffin hammered in by Ukraine, is the misunderstanding around the celebration of Victory Day on May 9th. There seems to be little difference between subsequent governments in terms of protecting the memory of the Great Patriotic War and the involvement of Ukrainians in it.

It is true that the previous president, Viktor Yushchenko, believed that veterans of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army deserve social benefits, but he also said that the victory was a success shared by Soviet Army veterans. Therefore, May 9th was meant to be a day of reconciliation. And yet, during the last Victory Day, Ukraine made a “beautiful” show of it. In Lviv, there were a few confrontations between

_Flying the red flag_
right and left extremists, and as a result, the veterans suffered. This was all due to a provocative decision of the Ukrainian parliament: the members of parliament passed a law ordering a red flag to be hung next to the Ukrainian flag on public buildings during Victory Day. Although the initiators of this decision argued that the red flag was a symbol of one of the Rifle Divisions famous for its outstanding acts of bravery, the flag is quite similar to the old Soviet flag. It is also red with the much hated symbols of the hammer and sickle. Most striking were the celebrations in Kyiv, where during the official ceremonies, it was noticeable that no state flag hung behind President Yanukovych’s back. The red flag is all that could be seen. What was the reason for this provocation? This question cannot even be answered by the best analysts.

One thing is certain: time and again, Ukrainians have not thought about their actions or their consequences. Some would say that there is an “invisible hand of Moscow” influencing Ukraine. Anna German, an adviser to former President Yushchenko, believes that the events that took place in Lviv on May 9th were initiated by an outsider and were meant to show that Ukrainians are barbarians. The purpose was to drag Ukrainians away from Europe. Volodymyr Lytvyn believes that since the events of May 9th, the issue of federalisation has come back on the agenda. And this could cause a natural threat to the integrity of Ukraine whose clear division into East and West was revealed during the Orange Revolution in 2004.

**Ukrainians stand out in Europe and are regarded as aliens. They simply do not fit with European standards.**

The government by our people

Applying a selective mode towards everything is another example of Ukraine’s barbarianism, something which the world cannot comprehend. Throughout the period of Ukraine’s independence, a clear division between “us” and “them” has been created. Those loyal to the government receive political and financial privileges, and the opposition is eliminated (sometimes literally). The five years of Viktor Yushchenko’s government was a moment of democratic fresh air. But we cannot live in myth. Yushchenko did not get Ukraine closer to the European Union. He knew that this would require reforms which were too difficult to introduce at the time of the transformation. These reforms would have created high social costs and wouldn’t have been easy to bear. That is why, Yushchenko chose to deal with the problems he faced with the opposition instead. The Orange camp wasted an opportunity of moving Kyiv closer to Brussels and further from Moscow.
The truth is that Yushchenko’s campaign slogans, such as “criminals to prisons”, spread fear among the opposition, but only for a short period of time. Politicians close to Yanukovych, who were alleged to have manipulated the election results, as well as other crimes, were put behind bars but soon released. Conversely, today’s leaders have taken the fight with their opponents much more seriously. Yanukovych’s opposition regards it as revenge and political repression. Yuriy Lutsenko, the former Minister for Internal Affairs who spent half a year in prison, has the right to such thinking. His prison sentence seems to be revenge for his lawsuit filed against the current deputy prime minister, Boris Kolesnikov, back in 2005.

The arrest of Yulia Tymoshenko and dozens of her colleagues, despite objections by foreign diplomats, illustrates the tenacity of those in power. Her arrest was the ultimate goal of the new power elite. Naturally, the prosecutor general denies the political nature of the case against Tymoshenko and is trying to convince Ukrainians that justice is blind to human divisions between the government and opposition. An illustrative example is the case against former President Leonid Kuchma. Kuchma was considered to be “one of our men”, and yet he was interrogated in the case of Georgiy Gongadze (the Ukrainian journalist of Georgian origin who was kidnapped and murdered in 2000 – editor’s note). During the interrogation he was found neither guilty nor not guilty, and the case probably won’t have any serious consequences for him. It is also possible that people around Yanukovych wanted to “butter up” Kuchma’s son-in-law, Viktor Pinchuk, who happens to be one of the wealthiest businessmen and the owner of one of the most popular television channels in Ukraine.

The freedom of speech is still a burning issue in Ukraine. All television channels in Ukraine belong to people who are close to the president. Their reports on the government are like funeral speeches, where one can only speak positively about the government or say nothing at all. The journalists commenting on current events have started to look so much like their Russian colleagues. At times it is easy to forget that one is watching Ukrainian TV and he or she may think that they have accidentally switched over to a Russian station. Not that under the Orange camp the media were free. There may not have been a lot of censorship, but many texts were written on request. Journalists were easily bought, and the Orange team did not plan on following up the beautiful slogans on freedom of speech that they had propagated during the Orange Revolution.

Sharp divisions between “us” and “them” are also noticeable in business. In the last six months, a new tax code has become a deterrent for small and medium-size entrepreneurs. Around half a million have decided to close their businesses. Methods of fiscal control are quite tough and the tax administration feels free to act, while transparency in business is being reduced. People are less and less willing to start a business on their own and the Ukrainian middle class is shrinking.
Don’t pay taxes, live well

It may sound strange, but every citizen of the former Soviet Union (maybe with the exception of the Baltic states) stands out in Europe. This is true even when they are well-dressed, well-behaved and speak a foreign language. Ukrainians abroad are regarded as aliens. They simply do not fit into European standards. This might not be a problem if we are to talk about common people: many of them have never left their own country and only know different lifestyles from watching television. What is surprising is the fact that there remains a perception of Ukrainians as being barbarians, even those who travel regularly; either for work or leisure. A good example of this is Ukrainian high officials, such as members of parliament.

Why are we barbarians? Because in no other country do members of parliament fail to ignore their duties as much as they do here. Their parliamentary immunity protects them from law enforcement agencies. Many parliamentarians have a “black” past and run their own businesses. Therefore, immunity from the police and prosecution is simply a necessity. This can’t be understood in Europe.

The second issue is the tax declarations of high officials. When they are made public, one almost wants to conduct charity work and raise money for these officials (the same refers to officials from the Orange camp). Their modest incomes are in sharp contrast with their multi-million dollar villas and luxurious cars. For example, if one was to believe the tax declaration of Viktor Yanukovych, one would think that he doesn’t own a car. The same refers to many other members of the government.

The principle of “pay your taxes and live calmly”, the motto of law-abiding Europeans, is generally ignored by Ukrainian officials. Take the example of Mikhail Brodsky, the leader of the State Committee of Ukraine for Regulatory Policy and Entrepreneurship. His voice was one of the loudest voices in the debate that entrepreneurs should fulfil their tax obligations. Suddenly, it turns out that one of his enterprises owes the pension fund 350 million dollars. In any civilised country, such a revelation would translate into huge fines imposed on Brodsky, as well as demands for his resignation from office. The truth is that Brodsky did later lose his position, but for a completely different reason. And his unemployment did not last too long. His consolation was a position in the Council of Ministers.

Opel and Ford are too cheap for our guys

In Ukraine, high officials and members of parliament are easily recognisable by their expensive cars. Unlike in Europe, where parliamentarians usually drive Opels or Fords or even take their bicycles if they don’t want to be stuck in traffic,
Ukrainian politicians are kings of the road. They drive against the traffic, blazing their horns (something which has long been banned).

During parliamentary sessions, the square in front of the Supreme Council of Ukraine (Ukraine’s Parliament) resembles a car expo in Geneva. Ukraine is one of the world leaders when it comes to the demand for luxurious cars, to the point at which some models are seen in Kyiv even before they are mass produced.

Yanukovych’s rise to power opened the VIP list to many more people. On the roads, their cars are treated with special privileges, which can be quite painful for normal drivers. Kyiv is crammed with cars more than most other cities, and this problem is doubled by the never-ending road works. Looking at all of this, one can only doubt whether Ukraine will ever be ready for the EURO 2012 Football Championships.

Our officials cannot understand why their western counterparts make their own decisions to resign. Germany’s Minister of Defence, for example, resigned after being accused of plagiarism, while Volodymyr Lytvyn, the head of the Ukrainian parliament, ignored similar charges. A few years ago when the same accusation was issued, he did not even deny it. Since then, the Ukrainian media have pointed to many more offences of Ukrainian politicians. However, these accusations don’t hurt them. In fact, they give them even more popularity.

**Finger pointing**

Does Ukraine want to become a member of the European Union? German politician, Elmar Brok, the former Chairman of the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs wasn’t convinced about this at the Yalta conference, and said he needed to be more assured. Unfortunately, Ukraine has not yet given a clear indication of such assurances.

Europeans are concerned about everything that is taking place in our country: corruption, the lack of an independent judicial system, poorly implemented reforms and the lack of respect for democracy. Rather directly, they say: unless you change something in your country, you won’t be able to join the European Union for decades to come. The Ukrainian government seems oblivious to this. It prefers to search for the enemy somewhere else, and claims that the blame for the problems related to joining the European Union lies with the political opposition. The Ukrainian government also has its own perception of the opposition. It wants to have an opposition that will support all of its actions, or at least not question them. The opposition states that the reason why its representatives make broad negative comments about the situation in Ukraine is not because
they are looking for pity, but because they want to present a real picture of what is happening in Ukraine.

Instead of making efforts to get closer to Europe, Ukrainians put the blame for the current course of events on anybody they can. Among those most blamed, are the opposition and the West, which, apparently, is trying to hinder Ukraine’s membership into the European Union. And Ukraine tends to count on outsiders without analysing its own behaviour. At the moment, Kyiv is putting great hopes on Poland which, since July 2011, has been in charge of the European Union Presidency. President Viktor Yanukovych has already guaranteed himself some support from his Polish friends. Yet, the question remains: who can help us if we ourselves are not up to reforming and getting closer to Europe?

Perhaps a good start would be a sense of national identity and respect towards our own country. This sounds all too simple. Yet without it, we cannot respect ourselves and will continue to have the finger pointed at us by the West. ⚠

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

Viktoriya Chyrva is a Ukrainian journalist, and columnist for the web portal www.comments.ua.
Since the beginning of the 1990s, Russia has been grappling with a serious demographic crisis, experiencing a decline of five million people.

The results of the latest census in Russia, published in the spring of 2011, demonstrate that, despite some positive changes, there is still a failure to reverse the course of population decline. After 2006, the decline slowed from 700,000 people a year (between 2000 and 2006) to almost zero in 2009. In 2010, the population again decreased slightly by 83,400 people. Today, the number of deaths still exceeds the number of births. However, the negative birth rate has changed from -6.6 per 1,000 total population in 2001 to -1.7 per 1,000 in 2010. Is this a sign of the beginning of the end the demographic crisis in Russia?

Give birth to a patriot

Seemingly, maintaining a positive trend of demographic changes in Russia will be difficult. The generation born during the period of population decline of the 1990s is currently entering childbearing age, which shall soon be reflected in an increased birth rate. The growing number of births after 2006 is assumed to be related to the economic boom and the greater feeling of safety during prosperous times. In the years that follow, the economic crisis of 2009 will adversely influence the birth rate dynamics. Yet because of its scale, it should not cause a dramatic drop in the rates when compared to the economic collapse in Russia of the late 1990s.

Over the last several years, a system of incentives for mothers helped reinforce some changes. In 2007, the government introduced the “maternity capital” programme, awarding grants to families for having a second and third child. In 2011, an equivalent of 9,000 euros (13,500 dollars) was given to mothers in a form of a certificate that could be used towards housing expenses, children’s education costs or mother’s retirement plans. The maternity capital programme is planned through 2016. Its introduction had a positive but short-term effect. Surveys conducted by Rosstat (Russia’s official statistical bureau – editor’s note) showed that
in 2008, 41% of women decided to have a second child because of the new social incentives, while in 2009, the number decreased to 21%.

President Dmitry Medvedev, at a meeting with health officials, declared that the maternity capital programme was no longer effective and asked the ministry of health to create a new incentive for women to have children. One of the most innovative solutions was proposed in 2008 by Sergey Morozov, governor of Ulyanovsk Oblast. Morozov organised a competition with the poetic name “Give Birth to a Patriot on Russia Day”. Each couple whose child was born on June 12th, Russia Day, received a cash award, a refrigerator or a washing machine, and acquired the right to participate in a lottery to win a brand new SUV. To induce people to take part in the action nine months before Russia Day, the governor proclaimed a public holiday. On the final day of the competition, three times as many children were born than on any other day. The campaign, although unusual, was considered too impractical and not a serious solution of demographic issues.

Russia’s abortion rate is still the highest in the world.

Children, not budget

Women thinking of having a child rely more on stable pro-family policies than sensational campaigns. In Russia, public officials, citing necessary budget cuts, began to scale back the system of support for mothers. In December, the rules of calculating maternity benefits were altered, to the disadvantage of the beneficiaries. The changes were implemented despite unprecedented protests. The protests were made up of pregnant women from across Russia, holding signs with the slogan “children are not a budget; they’re not so easy to plan”.

The state’s decision to lower the benefits may have contributed to the decrease in the number of children in Russia. Statistically, in 2010, a woman had 1.5 children. Generation replacement requires the rate of 2.2. In a survey conducted by the non-profit Levada Analytical Centre, 73% of the respondents declared no plans to have children in the next two to three years. Interestingly, when asked about an ideal family, the Russians reply that it should consist of two (54%), or even three or four (28%) children. The respondents also declared that, if their living standards allowed, they would like to have two (43%) or more (24%) children. In 2009, 50% of women in child-bearing age had one child while only 5% had three or more.

The abortion rate is another problem. However, with the growing awareness of birth control and the increasing availability of contraceptives, abortion is no longer considered a family planning method as it was in the USSR. Nonetheless, Russia’s abortion rate is still the highest in the world. In 2010, for each 100
births there were 58.7 abortions, which suggests that many as 40% of all pregnancies were aborted. Until 2007, the number of abortions was higher than the number of births, and that’s according to official statistics. Apart from registered abortions in state institutions, abortions are also performed underground. The World Health Organisation estimates that abortions have a substantial impact on Russia’s demographics. Their impact translates both into a decreased birth rate and negative health consequences observed among women who undergo the surgery. It is estimated that as a result of early pregnancy termination, about 8% of women become permanently infertile. The state does not intend to strengthen abortion regulations and the surgery remains a procedure available at the request of the patient, covered by social insurance. However, there are public awareness campaigns that show women the dangers of abortion, both physical and mental. In July 2011, an act was signed into law by President Medvedev, which mandates advertisements of abortion clinic ads, just like in the case of tobacco and alcohol ads, to allow 10% of the advertising space for warnings that abortion may cause infertility.

**The effects of the negative population growth rate in Russia are offset by the inflow of immigrants.**

The effects of the negative population growth rate in Russia are offset by a positive migration rate. Starting in 2007, the rate of migration remains at 1.8 per 1000 inhabitants. According to official statistics, 2.8 million people immigrated to Russia in 2009, mainly from the countries of Central Asia, the Caucasus, Ukraine and Vietnam. Konstantin Kosachov, the chair of the parliamentary committee for international affairs, presented a forecast during the EU-Russia Dialogue on Migration. During the summit in Nizhny Novgorod, Kosachov declared that Russia would need 20 million new immigrants through 2025 and 50 million through 2050. For decades to come, Russia will probably remain an attractive destination for migrants from neighbouring states.

However, the flow of migrants, even those who are legal, is not always welcomed. The government fears it might contribute to considerable changes in the ethnic structure of the state. The ethnicity data from the recent census will not be published until 2012. Most likely, they will show a significant rise in immigrants from the Caucasus, the region which leads in birth rates. The proof of this is a 6% increase in population numbers (the highest in Dagestan: 15.6%) recorded for the eight year period between both censuses. Russian society is
definitely not enthusiastic about the newcomers. Xenophobia is spreading. Recent riots near Moscow after the murder of a football fan, who had been killed by Caucasian immigrants, show an outbreak of Russian nationalism. Another example is Khotkovo near Moscow, where in November 2010 an ethnic Russian was killed in a fight between Russians and Tajiks. After that event, all non-Slavic looking residents were forced out of town. In an instant, the town’s service sector nearly vanished, and yet the city’s residents endorsed a ban on employing immigrant workers.

The only exit: Sheremetyevo-2

In 2007, the government launched a resettlement programme allowing Russians living abroad to relocate to the homeland. Through 2012, 300,000 participants were expected to join the programme, which could translate, if they were accompanied by families, to the total arrival of around one million people. By 2010, only 30,000 returned home. The main reason why the programme failed was that the patriots were only given the opportunity of settling in some of the least attractive parts of the Russian Federation. Of these, the Kaliningrad Oblast was perhaps the ideal for those returning. During the first three years of the programme, it was chosen by 30% of the participants out of 35 other regions. What is more, the costs of the programme implementation were mostly shifted to the regions, many of which were unable to meet the needs of the newcomers.

The migration processes show one more negative trend. Even though more people come to Russia than leave, the majority of those who decide to depart the Federation are young, well-educated and entrepreneurial. Based on official data in the last three years, 1.25 million people have left Russia and never returned. Among them were scientists, specialists and businessmen. A high 40% of them have university degrees as compared to Russia’s national rate of 15%. Even more worrying is the data that around 30% of Russia’s businessmen educate their children abroad, many of whom never return. Official statistics also do not include those who leave, but still maintain citizenship and official residence in Russia, even if they live abroad. It is estimated that the current emigration of elites is comparable to that of the early 20th century when the Bolsheviks came to power. Gennady Gudkov, vice-chair of the parliamentary committee for security, while commenting on the problem of emigration cited an anecdote circulating among Russian businessmen saying, “there is just one way out: Sheremetyevo-2,” which is the international airport in Moscow.
Apart from the traditional destinations, such as Western Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia, India and Taiwan are becoming quite popular among Russian émigrés. Yet increasing emigration among Russia’s business circles may become a threat to the country’s development and modernisation.

The evil behind it all

The last several years have seen a reverse tendency in the recorded death rate. Since 2003, when 16.4 thousand deaths were reported, the death rate has been falling and stopped at 14.2 thousand in 2009. At present, the generation of baby boomers of the 1940s and 1950s is starting to die out, which may make it difficult to maintain a favourable trend. Premature death among men remains a serious problem. The projected life expectancy for Russian men is 63 years, while women are expected to live 11 years longer. And even though there are more boys than girls born in Russia, the ratio changes only after the age of 25, at most 30. In these age groups women start to dominate and their participation increases in subsequent age groups.

Women constitute around 54% of Russian society, a rate which has been quite stable for years. In a study on Russia’s demographic problem, Professor Nicolas Eberstadt, while analysing the death rates among men, concludes that in this aspect Russia resembles a post-war society or a society in conflict more than a developing economy during peacetime. The reason behind this situation is alcohol. Alcohol intoxication is the direct cause of only 1.5% of deaths. A demographic specialist, Professor Alexander Nemcov, estimates that excessive alcohol consumption is the cause of 19% of deaths due to cardiovascular diseases, the most frequent cause of death in Russia, and of 60% of fatal incidents (including 67% of homicides and 50% of suicides). Excessive alcohol consumption is also related to deaths resulting from diseases such as cirrhosis, tuberculosis, pneumonia and cancer. Nicolas Eberstadt cites research from one city in the Urals which showed that over 40% of men who died young were, at the moment of death, under the influence of alcohol or drugs (and that includes 25% of those who died from heart-related problems and more than half as a result of an accident or injury). Alcohol also impairs men’s reproductive health. According to Nemcov’s estimates, Russian men, on average, drink one bottle of vodka a week (produced legally and illegally).

The Russian government is trying to curb alcohol consumption. Drinking in public places is prohibited. Alcohol cannot be advertised on TV from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. In July 2010, the State Duma passed a law which banned alcohol sale (including beer) at night. The question remains: how effective are the restrictions? Alcohol production thrives in Russian homes. In May 2010, the Ulyanovsk oblast
introduced “dry weekends”, a ban on the sale of hard liquor on public holidays. The new policy resulted in an increase in the number of intoxications caused by low quality alcohol and spirit–based chemicals.

**Statistics speak**

The results of the national census may look quite optimistic, yet it would be a mistake to speak of a reversal of the negative trends in Russia’s demographics. The Russian government may voice some concern regarding the current situation, but not much action actually follows. International data indicates that Russia will keep shrinking. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the number of inhabitants in Russia is projected to fluctuate between 136 and 121 million in 2025 and 133 and 115 million in 2030. A moderately optimistic forecast of Russia’s statistical office talks about 140 million in 2025 and 139 million in 2030. At the same time it projects a lower birth rate, from -3.1 per 1,000 to -9.4 per 1,000, and that would be the most pessimistic scenario. Despite some differences, all forecasts point to a gradual decline of the Russian population. If these predictions do come true, Russia could face a 40 year-long period of depopulation. During that time the country may lose up to 30 million of its people and fall from the sixth to as low as the twentieth position among the world’s most populous countries. Its population potential will be more and more out of proportion with its territory. It may stunt Russia’s planned development and, moreover, slow down the economy and weaken the country’s international position.

*Translated by Bogdan Potok*

Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga is an analyst at the Centre for Eastern Studies.
NEW EASTERN EUROPE: Does the United States still have security interests in Eastern Europe?

DAMON WILSON: Absolutely. I strongly believe that the United States still has security interests in Eastern Europe and in the new Eastern Europe as we have come to understand it. My fear is, however, that this is becoming a less common view in Washington and the United States. I believe that, throughout the 20th century, the United States has been a strong ally of European powers. In fact, part of what has brought us to Europe has been the conflict within Europe. Once the historic rivalry between France and Germany was resolved, we saw the narrative of European conflict move east, and since then, conflict in Europe has been about the uncertainty in the space between Germany and Russia. Since the end of the Cold War a lot has been achieved. Large players such as NATO and the EU, mainly through their enlargements, have taken care of a large portion of that narrative; but not the whole story.

Is the United States completing the story?

It is true that we have radically transformed the security situation in Central Europe, to the point that we are much less worried about what is going on in terms of security in this region. The majority of countries are, in fact, America’s allies. However, we know that it is important to take their concerns seriously. Take the example of our contingency plans developed within NATO and our seriousness about Article 5’s commitment that an armed attack against one or more member is considered an attack against them all. Further to that point, President Obama has just announced the United States will deploy an F-16 aviation detachment to Poland in addition to the Patriot missile battery and our continuing joint efforts on the NATO missile defence system.

But our focus is not a particular military concern or battle situation for Central Europe. Our compelling security interest surrounds the uncertainty about
the future in this space between NATO and the EU, and Russia. In other words, we are concerned about the situation in Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova.

**What about further south?**

Yes, I would absolutely consider Georgia and the southern Caucasus a part of this area of uncertainty, even risk. This would not be the case if Russia, coming out of the Soviet Union, had followed a different path than it has. Look at what happened with Germany after the Second World War and the resolution that took place between the French and Germans. Instead of maintaining the historical conflict, their cooperation became the engine of Europe.

So you are saying that the enemies of yesterday can be allies of today, like Poland and Germany?

It is remarkable that, despite some natural differences between a democratic Poland and a democratic Germany, we now see them as strong partners in trade and foreign policy with growing ties among citizens through travel, exchange programmes, and numerous cross-border initiatives. But Russia has not gone down that trajectory, and this is a problem. Of course, we would not have this problem if Russia had emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union as a democratic, free-market and open society. The context would then be dramatically different.

Should we then consider Russia the biggest threat to security in this region?

No. What I am not saying is that Russia is the number one security threat, nor is it the number one concern for the United States in Eastern Europe. What I do believe is that the region to Poland’s east is in play and its future is still uncertain. And with uncertainty always comes risk. Without a doubt this uncertainty that I am talking about is related to the lack of democratic foundations in the region. This is something to think about. As I said, we Americans have strong security interests in the narrative of “Europe is not yet whole, free, and at peace”. The full chapter is not yet finished.

**So what is NATO’s role in the region?**

NATO is a guarantee of predictability, security, and stability. Having an alliance of free-market democracies that projects stability and security – which is defensive and non-threatening – is one of the stabilising factors that I wish our Russian friends appreciated. However, they do not. They do not see it that way at all, and that makes me concerned about instability in the north Caucasus and places like Crimea.

I think the Alliance’s role offers assurance to the Russians that they have reliable and predictable partners to do business with. Look how much the relationship has improved between Russia and those countries that have come into the Alliance and the European Union. Membership in these organisations has provided them with a sense of maturity and respect in international relations. And it is through those relationships
that we see more normalisation in state-to-state relations.

But when we look east to Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia – they do not seem to enjoy this normalisation. There still is a lot of unpredictability, a lot of risk and a lot of uncertainty. And this is quite problematic. So NATO's other role in this region is to build confidence and forge partnerships with Eastern Europe. Particularly, Ukraine and Georgia, but also Russia.

**Can NATO play a role for Russia?**

In terms of forging partnerships, absolutely. NATO can also demystify, for Russians, Ukrainians and others, this idea of being an aggressive Cold War alliance focused on containment and aggressive militarisation in the region. Instead, NATO can demonstrate that it has become a cooperative security organisation that can work with Russia, if Russia's leadership is inclined to do so. But it is going to take a little bit more interest on their side to make that work.

**Referencing outgoing US Defence Secretary Gates remarks where he said that there is the possibility for a “dim, dismal future for the Alliance”, how do you think Russia will interpret these remarks, especially as we talk about the uncertainty of the region?**

I think some in Russia will take a little bit of joy in Secretary Gate's remarks because, unfortunately to Russia's detriment, many of Russia's leaders today seem to be trapped in the Cold War mentality of zero-sum thinking about the Alliance. As I said earlier, NATO is demonstrating that it has moved beyond this Cold War mentality. But in Russia, many still retain this Soviet strategy of making the effort to divide members within the Alliance.

Let us step back for a moment from where we are today and let us think about this century and the events that have happened so far. We should be focusing on a transatlantic partnership that would, hopefully, include Russia – aligned, integrated and cooperating – as we deal with the systemic changes that are taking place on a global scale and where we can see significant shifts of economic and political influence from the west to the east.

Look to the Middle East and the Muslim world. Here we have significant uncertainty but also real change, along with real opportunities. But with this uncertainty come risks. Changes that are taking place in the greater Middle East and the Muslim world are quite close to Russia's borders and its "soft underbelly". I dream of a strategic view in Russia that would see, over time, the importance of a partnership with the transatlantic community and a partnership with NATO. But instead, I feel that the Russians see things like Secretary Gates' warnings and they take a little bit of pride in the fact that the Americans are criticising the Europeans.

And I am sure there will be a little bit of acrimony among Europeans who will be resentful of the critique that Secretary
Gates has put on the plate. Yet, I think that is a short-sighted perspective.

**And the EU’s role in this region? What is your take on the Eastern Partnership?**

In my opinion, the role of the EU in the security of Eastern Europe is very important. In fact, I would say that the EU has the only real solid effort that could produce results, which is called the Eastern Partnership. And even though many Europeans criticise the Eastern Partnership for its lack of substance and lack of resources, this initiative is really the best chance for changing the debate about Eastern Europe. As an American, I say, we need to support such undertakings and we need to encourage the Europeans and the Eastern partners to continue working together. As an American looking at what is happening with the Eastern Partnership, I am reminded of some of the similarities to the Partnership for Peace programme in the mid-1990s.

**Déjà vu?**

Yes. Look, when the Partnership for Peace programme was first initiated, this programme was resoundingly disapproved of by our Central European partners. They did not think that it was what they wanted at all. They wanted a direct path towards membership in NATO. Instead they got a waiting room called the Partnership for Peace.

And yet, the Partnership for Peace grew. It grew into something beyond the expectations of its founders. It grew into a very practical programme that prepared countries to join NATO. That may not have been its original goal, but this is what it turned into. And in part, this success was because the recipients, the Central European partners, made it happen. The Central Europeans aggressively pursued an agenda which they advanced through tools we gave them.

When I look at the European Union’s role today – I look at the Eastern Partnership. There is an opportunity here to change the debate about Europeanisation and integration. Instead of having the Ukrainians grumble about the lack of perspective in the Eastern Partnership, they should take this programme and own it. Through their actions and successes of reform at home, the Ukrainians can change the gravity of the debate in Europe about what the Eastern Partnership means and what it could become, just like the Central Europeans did with the Partnership for Peace.

Unfortunately, I do not see the same resolve in the Ukrainians that we saw in the Estonians or the Poles. If you think about NATO enlargement and especially about the first debates on the enlargement, the idea that countries like Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania would join NATO was incredibly controversial. And yet by the time of the Prague summit in 2002, it was not controversial at all. This is because of how much was done and how successful the Baltic countries had proved to be. Equipped with their success stories, they had, in fact, changed the nature
of the debate among NATO countries. I wish that today the countries within the Eastern Partnership would feel that sense of power. They have the potential to change the nature and gravity of the debate within the European Union. However, they can only achieve this if they focus on their own success at home. Unfortunately, I do not quite see that sense of motivation yet.

And that is why I believe, as an American, that the European Union’s role in this area is of utmost importance, be it trade, visas or other areas of exchange, such as that of Moldovans and Europeans studying and working together in Europe. The EU can help the process of Europeanisation of this region. This includes helping the Eastern European nations become Europeans, which means thinking and acting like Europeans. These countries can then become European and eventually be able to join Europe.

However, the strong position of the EU should not give the United States a reason to back off, wash its hands and say we are not relevant here any more. But it is okay for the United States to say “Look, Brussels and European partners – it is you who should really take the lead on this”. This is, in part, because the European Union will be a more effective partner, than say NATO, in the dramatic transformations that are required in a country like Moldova or Ukraine.

There is a lot of debate surrounding a common EU defence strategy as well as a common European foreign policy. Is this something the US should embrace?

I fear that the United States embraces this more than the European capitals do. We now see that American attitudes on this issue have come full circle. Many of us that worked on European security issues in the early 1990s were very alarmed by the European Security and Defence Policy. We were alarmed by the challenge it might represent to the Alliance and worried that this may push the European powers to act on a global stage in direct opposition to the United States. We have now come full circle and the United States – I believe that Republicans and Democrats alike – are very anxious to see Europe unify and pursue a global role in partnership with the United States. The United States needs Europe as a strong partner on the global stage. Our fear today is that Europe lacks the will and self-confidence to be able to drive forward with an increasingly more common
foreign policy through which it can really act effectively in partnership with us. As long as we agree on the common vision of our role in advancing what free-market democracies should be pursuing around the world – we can do this in partnership.

Ironically, we now see a greater appetite for a more unified European foreign policy in Washington, DC, than in Europe itself. I really hope this changes. If the US supports a stronger EU common foreign policy, some eastern members of the EU might see this as further abandonment of the US in bilateral relationships. Some concern is already voiced here.

I am aware of these concerns. In the United States we can hear them too. Personally, I think they are short-sighted. My question here is: are we abandoning our bilateral relationships with France, the UK, Germany and Italy because of the European Union? Of course not. So why should it be any different for Central Europe?

What I am concerned about is that Washington is becoming less interested in issues related to our Central European partners. These are truly special partners that deserve our attention. I think they have had a special relationship with the United States, and this is something that cannot be taken for granted by either side. We have to continue to invest in it. We can do this while still working with the European Union.

How?

I will give you an example. Working with the European Union allows us to interact with Slovakia on African development aid. This is not at the top of Slovakia’s objectives or its foreign policy priorities. But this is why having the European Union as an organising structure in which we can coordinate policy on Burma, on Pakistan, on African development aid, on AIDS in Africa or on climate change, is very useful not only to Americans but, in fact, to all. It is very useful to the Poles, the Czechs, the Slovaks, and those for whom these issues are not at the top of their list or the top of their agenda, but can help make an impact in these parts of the world.

But that does not mean that the bilateral relationships should shrink or disappear. I feel very strongly about the importance of a bilateral relationship between the United States and our allies in Central Europe. These are some of our closest allies. The role that we have played in helping to secure freedom and security in Central and Eastern Europe, and the role that Central and Eastern Europe can now play in completing that story in the Balkans and Europe’s East is remarkable. This is a compelling agenda for us to continue to work together. I think we should not take this for granted. We have to work together.

Is there relevance or meaning in the death of Osama bin Laden to Eastern Europe and the Caucasus region?

I would not say that there are any first order effects, but that does not mean it is irrelevant either. What I think the death of Osama bin Laden represents
will be a turning point in the Alliance’s involvement and commitment – particularly in Afghanistan. And while I think Secretary Gates has been clear that there should be no rush for the exits, Osama bin Laden’s downfall will be the turning point towards the end of a major Alliance commitment in Afghanistan that has spanned the last decade.

This will ease up some of the burden, over time, on the Central European forces that have been deployed in that region. It is very expensive for these countries to sustain deployments far from home, and ending this engagement will allow them to reinvest in their own defence programmes.

Secondly, Osama bin Laden’s death does not end Islamic extremism, and I think the locus of that concern is in the northern Caucasus, which will have an increasing impact on Europe. I fear that the Russians are continuing to lose control of that area and the Islamic communities there. It is very risky for European interests, our interests in the Black Sea and particularly our interest in a Georgia that can join the West.

We need to work more with Russia to help it understand that it shouldn’t be concerned about Zapad military exercises (army drills simulating a NATO offensive – editor’s note) and a planned invasion of Poland, but rather, that Russia needs to be focused on how to maintain order in its own soft-underbelly. I think this is one of the things that we may come to focus on in a post-Osama bin Laden era.

What is the key take away message from this year’s Wrocław Global Forum – an event co-sponsored by the Atlantic Council? (The interview took place at the Wrocław Global Forum – editor’s note)

The key take away message for me is that the Wrocław forum has provided an emotional and sentimental backdrop for the Annual Freedom Awards that the Atlantic Council gives every year. There is power in the combination of being in a city referred to as a microcosm of Central Europe, the substantive issues on the agenda at the forum and the inspiration and symbolism of the Freedom awards. This power is demonstrated in the transatlantic partnership. For me this power is our history. In 1989, the United States and Europe came together and forged a historic response to a historic situation.

Although it was not clear at first, we were soon able to open up our institutions and our community to the East. What is more, we were able to open up our treasuries to help ensure the security and stability of a free democratic Central Europe. The key question that I take away from the discussions that we have had here in Wrocław is: can the transatlantic community today – which includes Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia – put together a historic response to the historic developments that are happening to our South, in the Middle East and North Africa?

I do not know if we have this ability. I do not know if we have the vision, the will or the resources. I think it is imperative that
the transatlantic community pursue this goal and play a supporting role to ensure that the Arab Spring becomes an enduring transition to more open, pluralistic societies who, over time, will become close partners of ours. This transition, which could lead to a convergence of values and interests between the transatlantic community and the Middle East, would be a powerful force.

So that is my key take away message for us today. In 1989, we managed to forge a historic response to a historic situation. Do we still have this ability in 2011? 🦁

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Books published by: Letnyj Sad in Moscow and the College of Eastern Europe in Wrocław. Books are available for purchase exclusively in the Russian Federation. The series is funded by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Book Institute in Krakow.

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Interview The Unfinished Chapter of Europe: Security and NATO's Role in Eastern Europe – A conversation with Damon Wilson

Photo: Krzysztof Miller / Wydawnictwo W.A.B.
NEW EASTERN EUROPE: Do you think the transformation that is underway in the Arab world will have an influence on the situation in the Caucasus?

WOJCIECH JAGIELSKI: I don’t think so. It has already happened in Georgia. The revolution is over and it was a success. Shortly after the revolutions in Georgia and in Ukraine there were attempts at introducing similar changes in Armenia and Azerbaijan. It was a failure in both countries. The Azeri were very enthusiastic about the revolution. They even had opposition youth groups linked to political parties. Why didn’t it work? The weakness of internal forces and a lack of interest from Western countries. The Azeri opposition explained that the West was not interested in destabilisation of Azerbaijan because it supplied the West with natural resources.

The revolution in the North Caucasus took the form of guerrilla warfare, a terrorist war. This part of the world has been destroyed for a long time, beset with numerous problems, civil wars, the conflict with Russia and terrorist attacks. What is needed for a revolution similar to the one in the Middle East to happen here, is civic courage; not mere dissatisfaction with the system, but a true readiness to take to the streets and protest. The North Caucasus is paralysed with fear and terrorised with violence. These are no conditions for a revolution to take place. In the countries of the Caucasus there are institutions where citizens can express their social discontent. However, these institutions and the political leaders are weak. Opposition parties are often at odds with each other, like in Azerbaijan. A few political candidates with clearly defined electoral programmes and experience in government exist, but even they are not able to earn sufficient trust from the society. Perhaps it is true that the period of autocratic rule coincided with the time of an increase in prosperity, with the improvement of living standards. The Kazakh, for instance, became rich under the reign of President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

What they need is a desperate imperative to take to the streets. Colour revolutions in the former territory of the Soviet Union, at least as seen by those who participated, were successful. The local population generally perceive them as an attempt by the West to curb Russia’s influence over the region.
So, they are not seen as democratisation and a chance for a better life?

Towards the end of his life, Polish reporter and expert on Africa Ryszard Kapuściński, during conversations we had together, spoke of the third process of decolonisation. A successful political decolonisation is followed by a failed economic decolonisation and that in turn is followed by cultural decolonisation. This aspect has been missed by the West. I am somewhat terrified when I read news captions on TV. There are some automatic clichés used whenever referring to forces standing in opposition to Muammar Qaddafi – they are called pro-democratic forces. As if protesting against Qaddafi was enough to become a democrat. If that is the case, then Libyan democrats with the longest seniority are the Muslim extremists who had been the first to oppose the colonel before they joined al-Qaeda.

We know so little of the rebels, of their political or religious convictions. It would not be true to say that Qaddafi was anti-Western during the last years of his rule. Everything that has been happening there might lead to the loss of Western influence in that region.

Is there anything Europe should fear?

Of course there is. However, Europe should not be afraid that the expansion of Muslim civilisation will go hand-in-hand with the growth of terrorism. What is more probably is that Europe might lose its cultural identity. I would like to refer once again to the words of Kapuściński who really had a first-hand understanding of the developing world. What we are dealing with right now is the next stage of mass migration. These people migrate to Europe for economic reasons. Muslims from North Africa, from Pakistan, or Afghanistan do not come to Europe to become Europeans or to integrate. They come here to earn a living. A Pakistani who moves to Birmingham can earn a hundred times more than in Pakistan. It is enough to go to Berlin, Paris, or London and visit the city suburbs to see that the immigrants do not want to integrate or become European. This migration process cannot be stopped. However, the idea of creating a perfect European is absurd. It is similar to the once propagated concept of homo sovieticus. How many generations have to go by until an African considers himself/herself a European? Are there going to be mosques all over Europe? Similar questions arise when we look at the war on terrorism. The West is using the same methods of those who started the war. Was the killing of Osama bin Laden really a triumph of Western civilisation? Perhaps it would have been, had he been killed in combat or taken to court and found guilty.

Poland is currently holding the EU Presidency. We believe that our key political asset is our understanding of the continent’s East, as well as promoting the Eastern Partnership. Will we really be able to achieve progress with Europe’s attention focused south?

What is going on in Arab countries can be problematic for the Polish Presidency. Active involvement in the East and good knowledge of the region are truly our strong points. Poland is perceived
as a bridge between Eastern Europe and the West. At the moment, the EU is more concerned with the events in the Middle East. Convincing an Englishman, a Frenchman, or an Italian to give more attention to Ukraine, Belarus, and the Caucasus at the same time might prove difficult, if not impossible. On top of this, of course, is the economic crisis in Greece.

The West still sees Eastern European countries as an area of Russian influence. I believe that bringing up the idea of the Eastern Partnership might be irritating to the West. Who is going to be concerned with the elections in Moldova if a war breaks out in Syria? There are soon to be elections in Egypt. How can we be sure that pro-democratic forces win? What happens if the Muslim Brotherhood gets elected, to which the current leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman Al Zawahiri, is linked? How should we look at elections won by religious-oriented parties?

Whatever I have achieved as a journalist was due to the lack of understanding of the processes in the East by the West. In the beginning of the 1990s, I would travel to the Caucasus on a very small budget. There, I met journalists working for CNN, Reuters, and Associated Press. Their budgets were unlimited. Back then, ATM cards were used much less and they carried suitcases filled with cash. They would hire the best local journalists to have them explain what was happening.

Those from the West needed a clear answer to the question “who is pro-western”? And when it comes to Georgia or Armenia, for example, there was additionally the knowledge of ethnic minorities. They got lost in all that. Back then the most important problem was nuclear weapons. Today the West has problems interpreting even the most recent events in Ukraine. Why did the Ukrainians gather at Independent Square? What are the differences between the two political camps of Yulia Tymoshenko and Viktor Yushchenko? What about the differences between the Orange and the Blue? I think that the West needed colour revolutions to be able to differentiate quickly between those who were “with us”, or pro-European, and those “pro-Russian”.

You have spoken of the Muslim migration to Europe, yet Russia faces the threat of terrorism and another war breaking out in the Caucasus. The extremists might find the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi a good opportunity to remind the world that they are still there.

I am convinced that attempts at destabilising Russia are going to take place just when the world’s attention is focused on that country. A similar situation happened in Tibet, right before the Olympic Games in Beijing. Those conducting bomb attacks will be perceived as terrorists in the West while Russia will do everything to keep its image intact. The closer it gets to the Olympics, the more focus the Russian security forces are going to give Sochi. That does not mean, however, that Russia won’t get hit somewhere else. There could easily be another bomb attack on the Moscow subway. I do not expect any terrifying events or revolutions to happen. A revolution in the countries of the Caucasus would
require financial support. And the camp that could finance such a revolution has more and more of its own problems.

Colonel Yuri Budanov’s murder proves that Russia does not keep the situation under control. Who do you suspect is responsible for his murder?

Seven shots in the head. I would not be surprised if it was done by the Chechens as an act of revenge. Budanov was among the most hated Russian officers in Chechnya. Not even Putin was detested so much. For Russians, on the other hand, Budanov was as a hero. I believe that for someone who had a score to settle with him, the situation was a perfect opportunity to avoid any suspicion and cast it on the Chechens. We do not know whose tracks to follow. Budanov was not the first Russian officer to be killed this way. Viktor Polyanichko, the Russian governor in North Ossetia and Ingushetia was also shot dead. He was infamous for his role in the first Chechen war.

How strong is public support for the idea of an Islamic caliphate in the Caucasus?

Followers of the caliphate are considered terrorists and no one wants to support them. Aside from war, nothing has ever united the Caucasus. The question is – were they really united when faced with war or were they temporarily forced to do so by Russia?

The Caucasus is also the regional centre for all sorts of conspiracy theories. Akhmed Zakayev claimed that Dokka Umarov, along with the idea of caliphate, was created by the Russian secret service to discredit the independence movement. The Chechens lost a lot of respect for Shamil Basayev when he invaded Dagestan. Even today one can hear stories about the amounts of money Basayev accepted from Boris Berezovsky (Russian MP and oligarch in the 1990s – editor’s note) on the Côte d’Azur to give Russia a pretext to invade Chechnya. A caliphate movement that would aspire to become politically influential in the Caucasus is not going to get any public support. The nations conquered by Russia a long time ago and secularised would have a very difficult time accepting Sharia law.

How do you see the status of women in the Caucasus?

They do not play a prominent role in politics. One can mention Nino Burjanadze from Georgia. But apart from her, there really isn’t anyone else.

These are typically male societies. There exists a hidden matriarchal structure present in the whole Caucasus. Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s wife influenced his political decisions. But, men get jealous of leadership roles played by the heads of families, politicians, warriors. Georgian women are not allowed to sit at the table and by the same token they are not allowed to engage in politics. I would have real difficulty listing the first ladies in many of these countries, even though I specialise in this area of the world. Perhaps I would be able to say more about the wife of the first president of independent Armenia who was a scientist. The first lady of Azerbaijan, Mehriban Aliyeva got a lot of publicity at the time when her husband came to power. Mikheil Saakashvili’s wife
is a Dutchwoman, Sandra Roelofs. Do these women play a greater political role in the countries ruled by their husbands? No, they do not. Actually, Nino Burjanadze is the only exception to the rule.

**Will it ever be possible to freely and safely travel throughout the Caucasus?**

The conflict in the Caucasus has been present, with short breaks, for over four hundred years. There is nothing to indicate that total peace could be restored in that area. Russia bitterly guards its sphere of influence in the Caucasus, while not offering much to its inhabitants. As a rule, Russia finds Caucasian highlanders to be disloyal, untrustworthy people.

**When did you find out that you were not welcome in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States because of your writing and reporting?**

It was in 2008, when I tried to leave Georgia after the Russian-Georgian war. The airport in Tbilisi was shut down, so I bought a ticket for a plane leaving from Yerevan and set off for Armenia. I was detained at the border between Georgia and Armenia. I was told, “the photo-journalist can go, but you must stay”. I thought it was a mistake. I had not been to Armenia for years. The customs officers said that they could not reveal the reason why they would not let me in. Later, when they went out to have a smoke, they let the truth out and told me that I was on the blacklist of people who should not be allowed to enter the territory of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

I was at a total loss; after all Georgia, from where we had just come, formally still belonged to the Commonwealth. I called the secretary to President Saakashvili who assured me that I could re-enter Georgia. Since I gave no reason to any of the Caucasus countries to disfavour me, my next guess was that it was because of my disregard for Russian law. I had travelled to Chechnya many times without permission. The Russian embassy complained that I interviewed people who they considered terrorists. After I conducted an interview with Sheik Abdul Khalim Saidullayev, the Polish daily Gazeta Wyborcza, where the interview was published, was accused of supporting terrorism.

What’s interesting is that at the same time I was called a Russian lackey on the caliphate’s official web site only because I edited the interview removing all longer references to God that followed each question. Had I published a full version, it would fill the pages of two weekend editions of the paper. As a result I decided to shift my interest to Afghanistan and recently to Africa. Now I am leaving journalism and focusing on writing a book.

**Was it a good move for Poland to get involved militarily in Afghanistan?**

There was no other choice. Perhaps there wasn’t really a need for such a large contingent (2,600 soldiers) and I wonder how we benefit from the continued presence of our soldiers there. The fact that soldiers are trained in real combat,
as opposed to a training ground, is definitely an advantage. The war victims are the price we pay. There has been a lot of talk about those killed in action, but not so much about the mentally injured. Some people believe that we should withdraw our contingent from Afghanistan. The Netherlands and Canada have done so, would anyone accuse them of being faithless allies? To be honest, I am not sure why Americans need troops from allied nations in Afghanistan when they do nothing but complain about them.

The Soviet Union lost over fifteen thousand people during the war in Afghanistan...

I think that if the West had been involved in a war against terrorism back then, losses in men would have been equally high. Thanks to technological progress the allied armies in Afghanistan have lost 2,500 soldiers within the past ten years. Where the Russians used to send infantry units and helicopters into combat, the Americans send unmanned aircraft.

It is also the war of two different worlds. One side is using remote-controlled, unmanned aircraft while the other is made up of a mujahideen with a Kalashnikov for 120 dollars. These disproportions really struck me in 2003 and 2004 in Kabul when I observed American soldiers dressed in something that looked like science fiction spacesuits, communicating among themselves but not able to say a single word to the Afghan people. Now Americans desperately want to reach an agreement with the Taliban and pull out of Afghanistan as soon as possible.

Could events in Afghanistan have taken a different turn?

Had the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington DC not happened, the Taliban regime would have been overthrown by the Afghans. Several reasons indicate such a probability. It was intolerable to the Afghans that the government in Kabul interfered with their private lives. No Afghan man would allow his woman to leave home without wearing a burqa. But he cannot stand it when he is told to do exactly the same by a minister. Osama bin Laden would have been expelled from Afghanistan because he was imposing and the Afghans could not tolerate it any longer. Let us not forget that there was a short period of five years when Afghanistan was occupied by the Arabs. I was in Afghanistan at that time and I could see that there was a lot of hatred towards the Arabic invaders who treated the Afghan people just as bad as Russians had before or the West does now. Mountain people tend to be very independent.

As a war correspondent you had to face many dangers. Your serious car accident, for instance...

We were part of a convoy that started from Faizabad. All members chose to drive in off-road Toyota trucks except for a friend of mine, Krzysztof Miller, a photographer, who decided...
that a Russian UAZ was a better fit for Afghanistan. And he would have been right but our driver was used to driving a Toyota – and the difference in size of steering wheels in both vehicles is comparable to a difference between a regular steering wheel and a millwheel. We were driving in the mountains at night. The convoy was somewhat spread apart. Our driver missed a sharp turn on the right and drove straight ahead instead. We fell ten metres down into the river.

I had always been very sceptical when hearing stories from people who claimed that in extreme, life-threatening situations one is capable of doing things they would not normally be able to do. Underwater, I kicked out the car window to get us out of the car and swim up to the surface. Thanks to that we survived. Luckily, we were part of the convoy. At that point, it was late in the night, we were high up in the mountains, and the temperatures were near freezing. We were soaking wet and in rough shape. The other cars of the convoy finally picked us up. I was bleeding badly but the wounds were superficial. After we returned to the base, a group of Japanese journalists came to film us. They were all waiting for the outbreak of the war and only because I ignored him. During my trips to Afghanistan over a decade ago, I had opportunities to chat with the sheik. But meeting the sheik was not on my list of things to do. I never seemed to have enough time for that. After all these years there is one thing I regret. I wish I had been in South Africa when Nelson Mandela left prison. Though being a journalist from Poland which had just overthrown communist rule, I would most probably not have been allowed to enter South Africa at that time. The stories told by my colleagues who witnessed this event still give me goose bumps.

When I was young, it was not very wise not to go to Berlin when the Berlin wall fell. I simply had to be there.

Translated by Agnieszka Rubka

Wojciech Jagielski (born 1960) is a Polish journalist for Gazeta Wyborcza. He has written books on the Caucasus (A Good Place to Die, 1994), on Chechnya (Towers of Stone, 2004), on Afghanistan (A Prayer for Rain, 2002), and on Africa (Night Wanderers, 2009). His books have been translated into English, German, Spanish, Italian, and Dutch.
Interview The Caucasus, a Journey in Time – A conversation with Wojciech Jagielski

Photo: Piotr Andrusieczko
The Ukrainian Stables of Augeas

A conversation with Oksana Zabuzhko, Ukrainian poet and writer, Interviewer: Iza Chruścińska

NEW EASTERN EUROPE: One of the major weaknesses of the twenty years of Ukrainian independence is the problem of dealing with the history of the twentieth century. Under the blue rule of Yanukovych, your novel *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets* takes on special relevance. Why does the memory of Ukrainian people still encounter difficulties?

OKSANA ZABUZKHO: In dealing with the past, Ukraine’s experiences are much different than those of Poland after 1991. The Polish experience of communism, in comparison with the Ukrainian, was incomparably shorter and communism in Poland was not as destructive. Even 30 years ago, Ukrainians had to prove that they existed as a nation. Around 1984, Milan Kundera in one of the interviews he gave in the West talked about the process of dilution of national identity in Czechoslovakia, which followed the strong Russification after 1968. He feared that the Czechs would quickly disappear as a nation, and in Europe nobody would have even noticed. He referred to an earlier example of this disappearance – Ukraine. We need to revive our historical memory, as in Ukraine there is no historical framework to replace the Soviet perspective. Hence, after 1991, we did not have anybody to do this work.

At the time it declared its independence, Ukraine was not intellectually ready for it. Neither were its institutions nor its elite. For this reason, the simplest transformation took place. The former communist elite became post-colonial. For Ukraine, *Soyuz* did not end in 1991. The Stables of Augeas were left behind and nobody had cleaned them. Among the unresolved issues, the real curse is the lack of public memory. One who does not know where he or she comes from does not have an important means of psychological support. In other words, he or she does not understand the logic and content of their own lives and the events that occur in it. This applies to both individuals and nations. The Bolsheviks understood this perfectly. Therefore, they discontinued the bond which united generations and declared war on the cursed past. The shorter the memory of the society, the easier it is to manipulate it. Our society is in a state of chronic amnesia. In Ukraine, only the generation that emerged after 1991 is beginning to
look around. They are the first ones who are trying to understand where things came from. They realise the magnitude of how their past was “stolen” from them. They are the first generation that wants to understand why this happened. They want to restore history. The struggle for Ukrainian identity continues.

**What are the most crucial events of the 20th century for Ukrainians to cure themselves of this amnesia?**

The central event remains – the trauma of the Great Famine of 1932-1933. In the official discourse after 1991, the subject of the Great Famine was marginal until the period of the Orange Revolution in 2004. However, even then it was subject to political manipulation. Although Viktor Yushchenko as president has done much to restore the collective memory of the tragic event, much still remains to be fully defined. We stopped half-way. First of all, the guilty have not yet been named officially. In the Law on the Great Famine Years 1932-1933, which was passed with great difficulty in 2006, the word “communist” was removed from the section discussing responsibility for the Great Famine and changed to “totalitarian regime”. Without analysing the consequences of Joseph Stalin’s policies which governed the Ukrainians from the 1920s to the early 1950s, it is impossible to close this chapter of Ukrainian history.

And this is what impedes the complete understanding of the problems of modern Ukraine. It is difficult to understand the careers of such people as Pavlo Lazarenko (prime minister at the time of Leonid Kuchma), Petro Symonenko (leader of the Communist Party of Ukraine) and Volodymyr Lytvyn (now chairman of Ukraine’s Parliament). These are the people who have formed the country’s political elite.

They all came from peasant families. Those who survived the first Great Famine, then the Famine of 1946, also survived life on collective farms, which did not differ much from the Gulag. To survive on collective farms, people had to learn to cheat and steal from the fields by farming at night. Until 1956, Ukrainian peasants could not leave the country without special permission. When Nikita Khrushchev came to power, they were finally given permission to leave. As a result, they moved to the cities en masse, but their moral fibre had already been broken. Lazarenko, Symonenko and Lytvyn, amongst the many others who made up the political elite, were the children of that broken generation. This is only one example of the consequences of Stalin’s policy, a topic that has not appeared in the official discourse in Ukraine after 1991.

**This discourse was also deprived of some facts which you brought out movingly in your book.**

The Great Famine was completely lost to memory during the life of three generations of Ukrainians. Until the end of the 1980s, it was forbidden to even mention it. Even during my childhood in the Soviet Union, people were sent to labour camps for just talking about the
Great Famine. Leonid Plushch, a former Ukrainian dissident, once wrote that for the sake of the society’s ethical value system, events of such magnitude as the Great Famine needed an immediate reaction of the society, which should find a symbolic meaning for it, as death by starvation of millions of people is not in accordance with human nature.

In Ukraine, this process has never occurred. Three generations of Ukrainians were not even allowed to seek such symbolic meanings. Without understanding of the scale and social consequences of this phenomenon, there can be no settlement, not only for Ukraine, but for the whole world.

The approach to the Holocaust in the Soviet Union was the same as that to the Great Famine. It was officially silenced not only because of the state’s anti-Semitism, but also because the Soviet government was afraid of the topic of genocide. Officially, the authorities only talked of “Nazi crimes against the Soviet people”. The idea was not to distinguish the Jews as a separate ethnic group.

This brings me to the story of Pavlo Buchalas in the book, whose fate shows both the mechanisms of Soviet-style anti-Semitism and the spiritual mutilation of people employed by the Soviets.

In Buchalas’ character, I wanted to show an image of both a Soviet man and the devastation which results from social engineering, producing such a “new” man as well as its consequences. In this context, we have not deciphered the history of the 20th century. We cannot do this without opening the Russian archives.

The fate of Buchalas is made up of stories that have in fact taken place. In the book, I have made him the son of a Jewish girl, Rachel, who was saved from the Przemyśl ghetto, and Adrian, an activist of the Ukrainian underground. As a nurse in the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), Rachel was tortured for refusing to reveal her son’s father and was raped by the investigators of the Ministry of State Security (MGB). She hanged herself in her cell by her own braid.

The two-month old Buchalas was adopted by the MGB captain to be brought up as an exemplary Chekist (Cheka was a Soviet state security organisations – editor’s note). The methods he used to “treat” his soul were employed by the NKVD, and later by the KGB, who employed them on thousands of peasant children taken after three or four years of primary education from the poorest families and “molded” into model Chekists. And the role of such people, whom Buchalas embodies, did not end with the disintegration of the empire. To this day they have access to archives of the Security Service of Ukraine and have an impact on life in Ukraine. They decide when and which archives to declassify, including those on the UPA. They use them for their own political games.

Through Rachel’s character, you also touched on the presence of Jews in the UPA…

The Jews in the UPA, with their tragic Shakespearean fate, are a forgotten
chapter of the Holocaust. Jews who ended up in the UPA, and there really were many of them, were trying to save themselves from the Germans. Some memoirs and some valuable papers on this topic have been published. They are painful and traumatic stories. For instance, there is a story of a man who, wishing to save his mother, became a doctor in the UPA, and took his mother with him into the woods. After the NKVD raid he received a prison sentence of 25 years, which he served in a camp in Vorkuta. Incidentally, the character of Rachel is a prototype of the UPA nurse Stella Krenzback. The only difference was that Stella was able to flee and, through Austria, illegally enter Israel in 1946. In the West she published her memoirs and shortly after died in mysterious circumstances. It hurts me that today nobody is interested in these Jews from the UPA. Not too long ago, an article by Vitaly Portnikov titled “Spitting at Hirsch Keller” was published in one the Jewish newspapers in Russia. Portnikov showed the complexities of the elections in the UPA during the Second World War, and defended the UPA against accusations of anti-Semitism. At the same time, he pointed to another phenomenon. Hirsch Keller, the name used in the title of the article, is the character described by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in the report of the prisoner uprising in the Soviet labour camp Kengir in 1954. The only difference was that Solzhenitsyn never wrote that Keller was a Jew.

**The topic of the UPA is another key element of the Ukrainian public discourse.**

Few phenomena have been subjected to as strong a manipulation as the UPA. Altering the methods only slightly, the Soviet government fought with the UPA to the end of its existence. In independent Ukraine such stigma still exists and it is also used for political purposes. Until today there are no comprehensive historical studies based on which a reader could create a complete picture of the “cursed territory,” which the Western Ukraine, finding itself between the two totalitarian grinders, became in the years 1939-1954.

Without the understanding of this complexity that entire period of Ukraine’s memory cannot be restored. It was the generation, and we are talking about the soldiers of both the UPA, as well as their families that survived the atrocities of the two occupations: German and Soviet. First the German arrests, executions, then the Soviet collectivisation together with the pacifications and deportations, also as punishment for giving partisans a piece of bread, or for the refusal to denounce them. Another important thing to remember is that, as in every war, a spontaneous criminal element appeared. This is something that the Soviet government actively exploited for its “special operations” against the Ukrainian underground. The tragedy of this is that a whole generation in Ukraine still does not fully understand who the people who ended up in the UPA were, who went underground after 1945 and fought until 1954.
Those who found themselves in the underground were mostly young people. Theoretically, they were there voluntarily, although in reality they had no choice. During the war, those in Western Ukraine who did not go to the UPA were taken by force and enlisted into the Red Army, or were deported to labour camps or sent into exile. Today, we are not able to imagine how difficult it was in those years for a young man to be Ukrainian and desire freedom for his people! Soldiers were taught to die heroically, with poison capsules sewn into clothes and instructions on what to do if captured by the enemy. And indeed, most of them died in battle. Those who did not die in combat often received 25-year sentences in camps in Siberia. After serving the sentences, they were under strict supervision by the KGB. This situation lasted until the fall of the Soviet Union. These prisoners lived with the stigma of being Ukrainian nationalists and the country’s enemy. Even after 1991, they had to defend themselves against similar accusations. How can such a tragic situation be translated into the literary language?

The many recollections of the prisoners of labour camps, as well as the memoirs of dissidents, show the significant role that UPA prisoners played in the Soviet camp system.

The uprisings in the Gulag began after the soldiers of the Ukrainian underground were sent there. They were among the initiators of the first and largest uprisings: in 1948 in Krasnoyarsk, and then in 1953 in Norilsk, in 1954 in Kengir. One of the Russian historians recently said that in 1956, these Ukrainian prisoners disbanded the Gulag camp system, not because the Soviet system began to liberalise, but because Nikita Khrushchev, who previously had been responsible for dealing with the underground in Western Ukraine and knew the strength of the UPA, realised in 1956 that the Gulag could not be maintained.

After the dissolution of the Gulag, the next logical step for the Soviet leaders was to murder Stepan Bandera, the last symbol of the Ukrainian resistance. The Soviets were really afraid of the Ukrainian nationalist movement.

Translated by Łucja Wąsowska

Oksana Zabuzhko is a Ukrainian writer and poet. She is the author of the book Field Work in Ukrainian Sex which has been translated into several languages. Her last novel, The Museum of Abandoned Secrets, was published in Ukraine in 2010.
Stalin’s beheading lasted only seconds. Three men with a chainsaw attacked Stalin, two men blocked the doors of the building, one filmed the entire event, and the rest were on the lookout. This was to be a social act of patriotism, but nine people are now facing up to ten years in prison.

A bust of Stalin stood before the new, unopened headquarters of the Communist Party of Ukraine in Zaporizhia, a city of almost a million that lies in the east of the country. On the evening of December 28th 2010, nine young people beheaded the bust of Stalin. A day later, the communists welded the head back on and asked the police not to investigate. Their leader decided that the party had suffered no material losses, so police involvement was not unnecessary.

The case would have probably faded away on its own, had it not been for an explosion on New Year’s Eve 2011. A young man dressed in a parka and jeans jumped the fence and placed a bag full of explosives on Stalin’s bust. Stalin was blown to bits. Windows shattered and fresh plaster was scattered everywhere. The explosion resulted in serious material damage. It remains a mystery exactly who, three days after the act of vandalism, conducted the act of terrorism, which carries not just a fine but a prison sentence. Nine men, aged between twenty and thirty-nine, are suspected of committing the crime. They all have ended up in jail.

Release

Edward Andryushchenko is a short, slim man. His bald head shines in the sun. Edik, the nickname he goes by, has spent eighty-one days in solitary confinement for revealing to the eight anti-Stalin participants the location of the bust. The activists, members of the Stepan Bandera Trizubovtsev organization, came from western, central, and eastern Ukraine. They hail from cities as Ternopil, Ivano-Frankivsk,
Kyiv, and Kharkiv. Edik did not participate in the beheading. That evening he was at home with his mother. He was resting after passing his university exams and was looking over the materials he was preparing for his master’s thesis titled “The Ukrainian Nationalist Movement in the 1990s”.

Edik was eventually released from custody. During a hearing of his case, he had to sign a declaration that he would not leave Ukraine. When the hearing was over, he hugged his mother. He had tears in his eyes. “It’s nice to sit in class and not behind bars,” Edik says. “I’ve always liked going to college, but now I pay double attention to everything I learn”. Biting his plastic coffee cup he adds, “Classes are so interesting”. A young historian, Edik returned to the university with a lot of work to catch up on.

“Where have you been for these last three months? Were you resting by the seaside?” His college friends jokingly ask, happy about their silent buddy’s return. Edik’s friends and family appealed for his release. The dean of the history department, who sent letters to the prosecutor and the court, supported him. Thanks to their intervention, this fifth year history student was released from prison.

Later everything went smoothly. Edik defended his thesis with honours, earning the maximum number of points. One part of the thesis he wrote while in he was in custody. The investigators agreed to provide him with a pen and paper.

“How was it behind bars?”

“The conditions were pretty good, my parents sent me fruit and sausage,” Edik recalled. “Morally and mentally, however, it was difficult. I was in jail with guys, most of whom were repeat offenders. They were not able to comprehend that you can break the law for ideological or patriotic motives and not for money”.

A swallow

Before Edik was arrested, Ukraine’s Security Service (SBU) had studied his biography closely. The SBU officers visited his family’s flat on January 9th, 2011, five days after Edik’s twenty-second birthday. The SBU searched every nook and cranny. They seized Edik’s computer, some materials and books on nationalism, and a voice recorder he used for interviews with activists from the Ukrainian nationalist movement.

Edik spent three days in the Zaporizhia SBU building. The officers picked him up in the morning and then brought him home in the evening. The SBU interrogated his colleagues and anyone with known connections to the activists. Edik was never a member of the Trizubovtsev or any other organisation. In his case, the connection was his research for the MA thesis. He conducted interviews with activists and collected newspaper clippings. He dug in the archives in Kyiv and elsewhere.
Report text and photos Tomasz Kułakowski, The Beheading of Stalin

Edik
That is how he met members of the Trizubovtsev organisation. None of them live in Zaporizhia, but about a dozen people here sympathise with them. “The organisation decided that participants from other cities would take part in the beheading,” explains Edik. “They contacted me because, as a local, I could point out the monument. That is all.” He explains that in Zaporizhia, where everyone knows each other, a person who comes from a different city is harder to catch.

The officers pressed him for the names of the people who blew up Stalin. They were not interested in who had cut off the dictator’s head, even though the Trizubovtsev immediately claimed credit for this. The SBU linked the two events and said it was looking for “terrorists”. Edik knew nothing. To this day, the perpetrators of the explosion have not been found. Nobody knows who they are.

A police patrol car was waiting in front of the building. The police picked up Edik because they were leading an investigation on the dictator’s beheading. According to the official version, the police initiated the investigation on its own. The Communists did not report the offence. Edik and other residents of Zaporizhia say, however, that the police were inspired by Alexey Baburin, a local member of the Communist Party of Ukraine and a Member of Parliament. Baburin is a politician and an activist with contacts in many circles. His friends work for the state and local governments as well as the justice system.

“So this is how I ended up in temporary isolation. It’s a legacy of the Soviet Union, targets that belong to the regional offices of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. During the hearings they urged me to admit to the attack on Stalin’s bust. They threatened that I would never leave prison. But it was not that bad. I experienced mainly verbal aggression,” he says.

“They did not beat you?”

“Yes. On the head and on the legs. They handcuffed me and twisted my hands back, it’s what they call a ‘swallow’. They choked me by putting a plastic bag around my head cutting off my air supply. They know how to torture without leaving a trace”.

Edik spent seventeen days in temporary confinement even though the law forbids detaining a suspect for more than ten days unless the court gives a decision to extend this deadline. An extra week was added without explanation. After that they informed him that he would be relocated to jail.

Edik’s mom, Nina Andryushchenko, recalls this terrible time. “When the SBU came and raided our home, I became convinced that nationalism is a crime. They treated us like bandits. In time, I understood that the SBU did not know about the
nationalist movement. It does not know the articles that my son read and wrote and it does not understand his fascination with Ukraine”.

Nina adds, “I’m proud of him because the boy has passion. While Edik was in jail, people from all over Ukraine called me with words of support. This means that my son and the other boys are heroes”.

**The veterans**

“Oh! A Polish journalist has come to us! From our neighbouring Poland! Come into my office. I will make you some tea. I have honey from my own hives. It is delicious,” says Alexey Baburin, leader of the Zaporizhian Communists. Baburin is a member of the parliament, an influential person. He is tall and slim. His face is round. He has grey crew-cut hair. In this one-story building hang a few portraits of Lenin and red flags with the hammer and sickle. The logo of the Communist Party of Ukraine is prominently displayed.

Baburin considers himself a Soviet man, brought up by the USSR. He does not distinguish Ukraine from Belarus or Russia. In his opinion, the people of these nations have common roots. He wants the rebirth of the Soviet Union, preferably in the same form. He argues that the former Soviet republics do not need Europe, the European Union or any another international creature. They must reunite to recreate what was good.

“So why did you decide to commemorate Stalin?”

“It was the veterans’ initiative. They collected money from contributions and asked us for organisational help. They wanted to erect a monument to Stalin in gratitude for the leadership in the war against the Nazis. They all went into battle with Stalin on their lips. The bust was unveiled on the eve of the 65th anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War. It was May 5th, 2010. We all knew that there would be trouble. That is why we put Stalin on our property. People laid fresh flowers in front of the monument every day,” says Baburin.

“The fate of nine young people is at stake. If it was up to you, would you grant them a pardon for the beheading?”

“I’m not a judge. I have nothing to do with it. I do not even know who the perpetrators are. For me, only the facts count. Since there is an offence and suspects, let the courts take care of it. They did not put up this memorial and they should not have touched it”.

“So who blew up the bust? The nationalists are the obvious suspects, but there are some suggestions that the evidence might also lead to you and the secret services”.

“The case is being examined by the SBU,” responds Baburin. “I’ve told the service, if you do not find anyone, it means that you did it yourselves”.
When we say goodbye, he asks that I send Poland his greetings. He used to work in car factories in communist Poland.

It is only a few kilometres from the old Communist Party building to the new one. Where Stalin’s bust once stood, there is now just a hole in the concrete and a blown apart sign that reads in Russian: “Peripheral Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine”.

“Why on earth did they touch it?” asks a local driver. “The veterans put up the bust with their own money. They are poor, old and sick. They have experienced so much in life. Isn’t this fascism?”

**Support**

The day Edik was released from prison, several dozen patriots, activists and supporters of the right-wing nationalist All-Ukrainian Union “Svoboda” gathered in front of the district court on Dzerzhinsky street in Zaporizhia. Some of them came from Dnepropetrovsk, which is less than one hundred kilometres from Zaporizhia. Others travelled from Kharkiv, which is further north.

Vitaly Podobnykov, the leader of the Zaporizhian “Svoboda” is a balding, stout man in his fifties. He gets very emotional as he walks back and forth, trying to get through the police barrier and arguing with the policemen blocking access to the courthouse. He is constantly on the phone.

Podobnykov was not allowed inside the building where the process against the nine nationalists was taking place. The judges chose the smallest courtroom so that only a few people could listen to the proceedings. This is not the first time Podobnykov was in front of the district court. He was here once to defend Yuri Hudymenki. Hudymenki was a student from Zaporizhia who poured paint on a Dzerzhinsky monument. The young man got two years in prison for property damage. He was released after several months.

“This is just another farce. In whose interest is it to rename patriots as terrorists? The explosion in Zaporizhia was intended to begin political repressions against the Trizubovtsev. The SBU breaks into homes and holds relaxed conversations with the opposition and active youth. The Ukrainians get a clear message: don’t go to the streets, don’t support nationalists, unless you want to spend time in jail,” shouts Podobnykov.

Asked if he would do it again, Edik responds, “I don’t know, probably not, certainly not in this form. I would look for legal solutions to do something about this Stalin”.

Tomasz Kulakowski, The Beheading of Stalin
Podobnykov does not know who is behind the blowing up of the Stalin monument. He swears that nobody from his organisation did it. Yet he is also convinced that this was done so that the boys would be sent to prison. “They look at us like idiots, as nationalists who do not know what they are fighting for... For a Ukrainian Ukraine”. Podobnykov continues, “They accuse us of invading Zaporizhia. But this is my city. This is where I was born and raised”. He is not angry at the veterans with whom he often verbally argues. He is furious with the communists for playing on the emotions of the elderly. And these are the people who really fought against Hitler and whose prime years were spent during the Soviet Union.

The leaders of “Svoboda” urged pupils, students, activists, and pensioners to attend court. However, the court only admitted the immediate family of the nine men. The mother of one of the defendants came from Ivano-Frankivsk. She travelled for more than 24 hours on an overnight train. Her son, the oldest of the accused, was born thirty nine years ago.

“This court is a disgrace for Ukraine. They have nothing better to do. They beat the boys and they beat my son,” she exclaims. “This has been very difficult for me. Once I was even taken to hospital”. It is very difficult for her to speak. “Oh, the constant trips to Zaporizhia. If the trial was in Lviv, people would have wiped the court off the face of the earth”. She believes that her son will return home with her.

Before heading back to Ivano-Frankivsk she bursts into tears when she hears the court’s decision that only Edward Andryushchenko is to be released.

**Trial**

At first, the nine members of Trizubovtsev were charged with vandalism, the penalty for which is a fine. Later, the prosecutors dropped those charges and began proceeding with new charges: “intentional destruction or damage to property by arson, bombing, or posing other danger to society”. For such an offence the sentence is between three to ten years in prison, which is the same as for the unknown offender who blew up the monument. The cost of the damage to the bust, made of silumin, aluminium with the addition of silicon and other metals, amounted to 240,000 hryvnia (over 20,000 euros).

“In what other country are people imprisoned for three months for vandalism?” Edik wonders. “Since they took us into custody, they had to change the law. The length of time the communists want us to spend in jail is way too long”.

The battle continued in court. The deputies of the Supreme Council of the People’s Self-Defence bloc, “Our Ukraine”, supported both Edik and the Trizubovtsev. Because a few of them came to Zaporizhia, Edik and the other men were freed.
Nationalists protesting outside the court
The All-Ukrainian Union “Svoboda” hired a lawyer. “Stalin’s monument was erected illegally. By law, every small architectural form must be entered into the register of historic monuments by the Ministry of Culture. In this case it did not happen,” explains Sydir Kizin, the defence attorney for those arrested. “In addition, a court in Kyiv found Stalin a criminal, guilty of genocide against the Ukrainian nation, which makes the ideological motives of the accused understandable,” he adds, having cited the same arguments in court, though there they fell on deaf ears.

“This trial is completely politicised. People are taking action across the country to impair the socio-political situation. Trizubovtsev is an organisation that is often critical about the government, calling it authoritarian. That is probably one reason why it was decided to curtail its operations and to politicise the trail”, says Edik.

“Are you sure it was a social and not a political initiative? Hasn’t anyone from the All-Ukrainian Union ‘Svoboda’ contacted you?”

“No,” Edik responds. “The thought of doing something with the monument crossed the minds of many people from different organisations, not just nationalists. The topic was discussed on Internet forums. There were different ideas. Some agreed with the court’s decision that the monument was illegal, while others wanted to annihilate it. Trizubovtsev decided to physically deal with Stalin”.

“Would you do it again?”

“I don’t know,” Edik responds. “Probably not. Certainly not in this form. I would look for legal solutions”.

The veterans of the Great Patriotic War are collecting money to reconstruct Stalin’s bust. They want to have it in the same form and in the same place. The Communists are convinced that Marshal Stalin will return to his old seat.

Translated by Łucja Wąsowska

Tomasz Kułakowski is a journalist for Polish Public Radio (Polskie Radio) and a reporter for its press agency, Informacyjna Agencja Radiowa (IAR). Kułakowski specialises in Eastern Europe, frequently covering the former Soviet Union.
Underground culture thrives in St. Petersburg with numerous places serving as clear evidence of grassroots social initiatives. And more importantly, for many Russians, it gives hope of something new and fresh.

“In Soviet times, people lined up in queues to see our art. They were not bothered by the fact that the exhibitions were not held in large galleries, but mostly in private homes. They were not bothered by freezing temperatures. They were not even bothered by the fact that KGB agents were always standing outside the homes taking notes”, says Sergei Kovalsky, the artistic director of the Pushkinskaya-10 Art Centre. “All that mattered was to see something new”. While he is saying these words out loud, his face looks serious, and the gleam in his eyes betrays the fact that these phrases are an important part of his life. A life he has devoted to fighting for artistic freedom. “Today it is different,” Kovalsky says. “We live in different times. No one in St. Petersburg stands in a queue to see contemporary art”. How can these times be described?

Notes from the underground

Is it underground art? The phenomenon usually occurs within a culture. The concept of underground art implies a different type of art that stands in opposition to the dominant variety, or, depending on the political context, opposes the official art promoted by the authorities.

It is difficult in this case to speak of underground art. The Russian word podpolje is very similar to the English equivalent: underground or cellar. Podpolje was the word used by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in his description of the existential writings of a man standing in opposition to the world. The original title of Notes from the Underground in Russian is Zapiski iz podpolja. Kovalsky uses the same reference
to express what the people standing in the queues were waiting to see. They were waiting for something to emerge from the underground.

When taking a deeper look at contemporary art in St. Petersburg, one can clearly say that this city has always expressed the trends taking place in Russia in exaggerated terms. That is why, the English term underground sounds more relevant here. Many artists in St. Petersburg simply say, “Our work is entirely in the underground”. Someone may ask, “Where did this underground come from?”

Culture or art is not a sphere of life that operates on the principle expressed in the words of Joseph Stalin, “not a step backwards”. Here stagnation, progress and regress are all possible. According to Russian artists, a decline is currently observed. Of course, no one can say that contemporary art in Russia went back to the same underground; such words could only be expressed by a person who does not know the realities of Russia, someone who believes that it is only a continuation of the Soviet Union.

Russia has changed. The changes can also be felt within its culture. Contemporary art is underground, but the cellar itself has changed completely. There is no one party line dictating the aesthetics of Socialist realism. There is no content that cannot be expressed. In fact, anything may be discussed. But how can one be heard? Here lies the essence of the problem of art and artistic circles in Russia. This is obviously part of the wider problem of Russia’s democracy. Culture, along with the transformation, began operating on free-market principles. Some free-market processes in Russia have taken on a more extreme form than in the West.

Many artists in St. Petersburg simply say, “Our work is entirely in the underground”. "No one will come to a contemporary art exhibition if advertising is not ensured," says Kovalsky. Yet nobody in today’s Russia guarantees such advertising. In the West, the third sector, NGOs and non-profit organizations, put forth many efforts to build a strong civil society. Naturally, its performance is dependent on the other two sectors: politics and business. This is where the much needed financial resources are. Why doesn’t the third sector function in Russia? There are many reasons, and they are more complicated than the fact that the average business representative in Russia thinks about “some other purpose” than the development of a civil society. The problem is serious, but no real action has been taken on the part of Russian politicians. These politicians could potentially change the situation by enticing society to act through awarding grants. Yet, the people who want to
act *pro bono* are left alone. Finding a sponsor, even when the activities are national in scope, borders on a miracle.

“We have recently completed a massive tour of an exhibition at museums in Siberia and the Far East. The tour took a year. The exhibition travelled across all of Russia reaching Vladivostok, returning to St. Petersburg. The official end of the exhibition is planned for July 11th, 2011 in the centre of the city, the Peter and Paul Fortress,” Kovalsky explained. “Can you imagine that despite all our efforts, we could not find a single business that wanted to support our initiative?”

The ability to cope in very unfavourable conditions is one Russian characteristic worthy of deep respect. It can be seen by observing the enthusiasm and effects of the work of contemporary artists and people who are engaged in popularising art in Russia. They still manage to achieve their goals, despite their difficult situation. Proof of this is the amount of activity coming from the four popular cultural centres in St. Petersburg. All of them operate entirely outside the realm of the famous St. Petersburg institutions such as the Hermitage and the Russian Museum, which have much stronger business connections. They are not places where dead art is commemorated, but where new ideas are created and creative circles converge. Every visitor to the northern capital should visit these venues, as they provide living proof of a grassroots artistic movement in Russia. Most importantly, for many Russians, they provide hope of “something new, fresh”; something that can only come from the underground.

Russia has changed. The changes can also be felt within the culture.

**Pushkinskaya-10, a factory of contemporary art**

The Pushkinskaya-10 Art Centre is an institution which brings together artists and artisans. It is also a place where the creative process flourishes. The numbers themselves speak for how powerful and energetic this venue is: countless exhibitions, 156 artists, 424 concerts, and more than 36,000 visitors. And this is only the data for the last year between June 2010 and June 2011.

The place itself is impressive. Pushkinskaya-10 Art Centre is made up of a total of five galleries, two music clubs and more than 30 art studios. The whole group is directed by veteran artists including Yuli Rybakov, Evgeny Orlov, Sergei Kovalsky and Nikolai Medvedev who created avant-garde art in the Soviet era. It was through their initiative in October 1999 at Pushkinskaya-10, when this unique nonconformist art museum opened. The museum collects independent art created between the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the 1990s, in the “city of heroes”: Leningrad.
A loft with a view of culture

Young Petersburgians speak of the gallery Etagi in terms of “stairways”, often emphasizing that it is the strongest competition for Pushkinskaya-10 in the city. Indeed, it is a place that can compete with the largest independent art centres in the northern capital of Russia. But outside competition, it is also a perfect complement. The nature and history of the gallery is unique. It all started with a young Russian woman who, despite her education in journalism, decided to open an art gallery. In 2007, on the initiative of Maria Romashova, the gallery Globus was founded. The project turned out to be a huge success.

One floor of the building at 74 Ligovsky Prospekt, where the gallery was located, was no longer enough. The gallery grew rapidly. It now includes three art galleries, a book store, a hostel and a café/restaurant called the Green Room, which probably has the richest vegetarian menu in St. Petersburg. In contrast to Pushkinskaya-10, where the commemoration of history and tradition plays an important role, Etagi looks only to the future.

Valya Vasilyeva, the deputy director of Etagi, believes that the creation of new prospects is the most important goal of this place. This is a place for young Russians to see an avant-garde film, visit a World Press Photo exhibition, or just drink coffee while sitting on a big purple pillow on the roof top of the building.

Reconstructing the silver age

The fame of places like the Stray Dog Café (Podval Brodyachy Sobaki) goes beyond the borders of Russia. The richness of its history dominates over other places in St. Petersburg. The café was opened in December, 1911 and immediately became a favourite spot for many artists of the silver age. It attracted symbolists, alchemists, imaginists and futurists. Among its guests were the most important artists of the time: Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandelstam, Nikolay Gumilev, Velimir Khlebnikov, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Boris Pasternak. This is where they presented their art. Unfortunately, the legendary place was closed during the First World War in March, 1915.

After the war, the Soviet authorities, aware of the influence of the old regulars, decided against reopening of the café. Only after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the “new” Stray Dog Café was reopened in 2001. Vladimir Sklyarsky became the new director and immediately brought back the tradition of the place. He did not
only honour all the great artists who would come there back in its heyday, but also made sure the place functioned as it did before. Thanks to his efforts, the café is again a host to numerous cultural events, performances of independent theatre groups, exhibitions, concerts and poetry. Despite Skyarsky’s passing in early 2011, the café remains in good hands. His wife makes sure that the most important goal is maintained; to commemorate its former glory and develop the avant-garde of the contemporary movement.

An intellectual retreat

The artsy Books and Coffee café is a unique place to have a cup of coffee. It may not have tradition reaching back a hundred years, nor pay tribute to the non-conformist art of the Soviet Union period, and certainly it has no vegetarian restaurant. But, instead, it has the most unique atmosphere of peace and quiet, which makes it very different from other artistic haunts. And this, more than anything else, is the legacy of its founders. Thirteen years ago a group of writers including Boris Strugatsky, Ilya Shtemler, Dmitry Karalis and Alexander Zhitinsky created a new venue. The Centre for Contemporary Literature and Books was meant to be a meeting point for writers to talk, create and exchange opinions. The club took on the character of being completely inaccessible to outsiders.

It was only four years ago that its manager, Zhitinsky, decided to open the place and its concert hall to the general public. Today, it too is a host to numerous concerts, workshops and film screenings. However, its biggest competitive advantage is the enormous amount of books on contemporary literature, philosophy, psychology and art. And now they are available to anyone who orders a hot cup of coffee.

Translated by Łucja Wąsowska

Arkadiusz Kudelski is a student of philosophy at Jagiellonian University. He is a graduate of Tischner European University in Krakow.
Despite a rapidly growing economy and a large influx of oil money, Azerbaijani youth are far from being jubilant. Amid fears that the wave of democracy may never reach the shores of the Caspian Sea, many young, educated people seek ways to start a fresh life, preferably far away from the state borders.

He introduces himself as Khan, a 27-year old blogger. But neither his name nor age are certain of being true. He carefully weighs every word before replying to the questions. Khan is determined to protect his identity, worried that the authorities may want to take their revenge on his family and friends he left behind in Azerbaijan. Journalists, after all, are the last to be trusted.

It must make him truly uneasy, observing from afar, how Baku-wired activists take every effort to track down the real name of the lucky guy who has been recently granted political asylum in the US, a dream destination for many of his peers. Khan, who has been involved in anti-government actions since 2005, fled to America, not only out of fear but also in hope of a better future. He believes that the United States, unlike Azerbaijan, will safeguard his personal freedoms. As an asylum seeker, he vows to continue struggling for democratic change.

“I really think we [blogger-activists] are more productive here abroad than in Azerbaijan. Here I can criticise the regime without any fear of being arrested on fake charges. I could have written articles while I was in Baku, but I am sure that I would have shared the fate of Adnan [Hajizade], Emin [Milli], Bakhtiyar [Hajiyev], and others who were arrested and went to jail for their criticism of the government,” Khan argues.

Murad Gassanly, an Azerbaijani political exile with a British passport, reveals that he is contacted by scores of young people who seek advice on how to emigrate abroad. Gassanly left Baku with his parents 17 years ago, after the former communist secretary and father of the incumbent president Heydar Aliyev rose to power to re-introduce an iron fist rule in the country. He returned to Baku in 2005 to
assist the opposition in the parliamentary elections but found himself deported and blacklisted a few months later.

Gassanly is hardly surprised that the youth may prefer to live abroad. He describes Azerbaijan as a “mature authoritarian capitalist system based on autocratic politics and corrupt economics” where success is proportional to the level of ties one enjoys with the ruling family. “Poverty, corruption, abuse of law and persecution of the opposition are the chief characteristics of the Aliyev regime,” Gassanly says. “This is augmented by the total absence of free speech, total control over the media, especially television, and the ridiculous cult of personality built around the late President Heydar and his son Ilham Aliyev (and increasingly his wife and children). Essentially it is a neo-feudal monarchy”.

The emigration issue may soon turn against the country’s development, with an exodus of active and productive citizens.
In the context of rapidly shrinking freedoms, an exodus of active and productive citizens, in his view, is inevitable. “In Europe, Russia and the US there is a growing Azerbaijani diaspora made up of political exiles like myself, political refugees and economic migrants”.

Gassanly adds that the emigration issue may soon turn against the country’s development. “I recently carried out an unscientific poll and found that more than half of young Azerbaijani professionals (highly qualified and skilled experts and specialists) listed on the social network LinkedIn are in fact based outside Azerbaijan, working for global multinationals or having emigrated permanently. The brain drain is a reality which is only accelerating”.

Rodion, age: 24.

“You can call me Rodion Raskolnikov. Please, don’t forget to use this nickname. Do not reveal my real name. I am a lawyer. I was dismissed from my previous workplace for political reasons, which is why I can’t tell you the name of my current employer. I was detained several times. Last time they detained me in connection with demonstrations on March 11th, 2011 before the protest even started. The authorities harass me, my family and my friends. My parents fear losing their jobs, it’s a real threat. I am 24, and it should be the best years of my life. I want to spend my youth as I dreamed; being free, in a democratic country. I want to live abroad but not for good. I would need to return because my goal is to democratise Azerbaijan”.

On the rise, downward

Equipped with vast energy resources, Azerbaijan managed to weather the global economic crisis. Fueled by a large influx of oil money, the Azerbaijani economy is on the rise. The official unemployment rate runs at six per cent. Investments are booming. President Ilham Aliyev has said that 800,000 new jobs have been created within the last five years.

Yet, Zohrab Ismayilov, a Baku-based economist who runs a watchdog NGO, paints a less optimistic picture about the economy’s efficiency in the country. Ismayilov reckons that underdevelopment of the private sector and the service industry may jeopardize the job market. That, in turn, may encourage people to seek work elsewhere. “The private sector can’t stand on its feet due to rampant corruption and strong monopolies. In addition, the investment climate is not that good,” the economist says.
The situation becomes particularly difficult for young people who lack higher education and have no connections. A low income would often push them toward Russia where they try to make ends meet by working as street vendors.

Their better educated peers also face challenges. Blogger and new media specialist, Ali Novruzov, believes that the Azerbaijani market is of little attraction for those who hunt for career advancement. “The problem is that there are no prospects for young, educated professionals to achieve something here. There are no adequate career and financial opportunities”.

To some extent, however, there is. Yet it’s all about picking the right lot. Those who find themselves loyal to the ruling elite may not experience any trouble in finding an attractive, well-paid position, provided they accept that their comfort of living is worth paying the price.

“There are other aspects of comfort in Baku that money can’t buy…and in general it lacks a meaningful quality of life, a respect for human dignity from the political administration and all other things that the middle class values, but can’t obtain in an increasingly authoritarian country,” Novruzov says.

"Hi. My name is Rustamli, I’m 19. I help coordinate activity in the Popular Front Party [one of the main opposition movements]. I have been detained by the police many times, always during protests. I would like to live in Germany or another European country because they respect their citizens. In Azerbaijan they treat you like an animal. But I wouldn’t stay in Europe permanently – I want to see European values in my country. Azerbaijani youth dream of democratic change. I dream that one day Azerbaijan will also become a democracy, like Georgia or Ukraine. I believe it will happen one day”.

Dwindling in numbers

Although the authorities constantly assure that Azerbaijan steadily follows the path of democracy and liberty, its human rights record remains very poor.

Intiqam Aliyev [no relation to the incumbent president], a human rights lawyer, argues that there are serious infringements on legally protected liberties, ranging from the freedom of speech, elections, to independence of the judiciary. “Despite the fact that the Constitution of the Azerbaijani Republic provides a long list of rights, in reality, the situation is still very frustrating,”Aliyev explains, adding “Azerbaijan
ratified most of the international treaties on human rights, reformed a number of laws in consultation with the Council of Europe, and even released some political prisoners, but many of its commitments have remained paper commitments... the government continues to be engaged in concerted efforts to limit freedom of expression, using criminal defamation, legal action and violence to intimidate dissenting journalists and activists, frightening many into silence”.

The situation deteriorated in the wake of the March 11th campaign inspired by the peaceful revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia. What started as an online Facebook campaign launched by a group of Azerbaijani diaspora quickly turned into real demonstrations on the streets. Frightened that the Egyptian scenario could be repeated in Azerbaijan, officials responded with a heavy crackdown on the activists. Although the demonstrations were not large in numbers, hundreds were detained and dozens arrested.

“Since the beginning of 2011, some 50 people have been arrested on political grounds. This list includes opposition and youth activists, as well as members of the Islamic party. The legal proceedings show that they all are potential political prisoners,” Rasul Jafarov, Baku-based human rights defender, reveals.

Jafarov points to the example of Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, a 29-year old blogger. Hajiyev was detained and violently interrogated in connection with the March 11th demonstration in Baku.
Facebook campaign. Recently, he was charged and sentenced to two years in prison on charges of evading compulsory military service.

Cases like Hajiyev serve as a reminder that breaching the level of freedom allowed by the government may trigger serious consequences. Thus the circle of defiant and audacious democratic activists is dwindling. There are still a handful of devoted activists who are determined to stay in the country. They argue that leaving Azerbaijan will not help them escape the reality of life in the country. Some, however, have switched sides to help boost their professional career. Others have come to the conclusion that there is no other way but to struggle for Azerbaijani democracy from beyond its borders.

**Rovshan, age: 26.**

“My name is Rovshan. I want to go abroad for studies or work. I am 26 years old; I am a member of the Musavat party [main opposition movement]. I have been detained five times. I am jobless with an MBA diploma in my pocket. I don’t know why I can’t find a job, but this unemployment may have to do with my activities as a dissident. I lost my job with a bank after attending the March 11th demonstrations. I would like to learn English and get a PhD in economics or social sciences from a university abroad. My dream is to have freedom in Azerbaijan, just as they do in the Netherlands or Denmark. You ask me if I regret taking part in the demonstrations, yes, sometimes I do. We risk everything, we have to advance change and society just sits by. They don’t assist us. I am sorry. Can you please help me leave Azerbaijan?” ⛔

Anna Żamejć is a US-based, freelance correspondent with the Azerbaijani Service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty. She is a member of the editorial staff of the monthly Liberté! specializing in politics of the South Caucasus and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
In the museum pavilion of the Piskaryovskoye Memorial Cemetery in Saint Petersburg, a daily food ration from the time of the Leningrad Blockade is displayed: a slice of bread weighing 125 grams.

Perhaps the most moving exhibit of the Warsaw Rising Museum is a piece of bread taken out of the levelled city and stored as a relic of the Warsaw Uprising. In August 2010, the exhibition “The Warsaw Uprising of 1944 – through the photographers’ lens,” was opened in Saint Petersburg. The similarities of fate of both cities were easily seen. Despite some obvious differences, one thing is clear – both Warsaw and St. Petersburg were severely afflicted by the Second World War and the Great Patriotic War. In both cities it was the civilians who endured the most unbearable suffering. The Siege of Leningrad left its indelible imprint on the face of the northern capital of Russia. Yet, the painful truth about the fate of the city continues to be manipulated, even today.

**Traces on the walls**

For the sake of the memory of that terrible time, elderly citizens still use the name Leningrad. The traces of war are still noticeable in the urban fabric. They can even be seen on the sunny Nevsky Prospekt, a street full of upscale shops, luxury hotels and posh restaurants. In the 1960s, on the walls of public school No. 210, the following inscription, dating back to the autumn of 1941, was restored: ‘Citizens, in case of artillery shelling, this side of the street is the most dangerous’. On Anichkov Bridge, next to a bullet hole, a memorial plaque reads: ‘These are the traces of one of the 148,478 shells fired by the Nazis in Leningrad between 1941-1944’. Such signs of recollection exist throughout the city.
On Vosstaniya Square, a 34 metre high granite obelisk was erected, with a gold star on top. The inscription reads: “Leningrad – gorod gieroj” (city of heroes), and this is not just an arbitrary title awarded to the city. For almost nine hundred days the citizens of the besieged city fought a truly heroic battle. It was, first and foremost, a fight for survival, a struggle with oneself, a desperate attempt to survive. The children of Leningrad did not go into battle; thousands of them died of starvation, disease and cold. They were commemorated with a monument unveiled on Dekabristov Island on September 8th, 2010. Coincidentally, less than a month later, a monument in commemoration of the Fallen, Murdered and Expelled Citizens of Warsaw was erected in Freedom Park by the Warsaw Rising Museum.

**Traces of memory**

The most famous account of the siege is a diary written by an 11-year-old schoolgirl, Tanya Savicheva. Nine pages, filled with uneven writing, paralyse the reader with their brevity, “My granny died on January 25th 1942 at 3 pm... Uncle Losha on May 10th at 4 pm. Mother died on May 13th 1942 at 7:30 am”. The entire Savicheva family died. Everyone perished. Only Tanya survived. The girl did not live to see the end of the war. She died during the evacuation on July 1st, 1944.

Those who survived kept silent for years. They had no choice. After the war, in the Soviet Union, memories about the heroic epic of Leningrad mainly focused on the commanders and party activists. Lofty literary works published their accounts. It wasn’t until the late 1970s when two writers, Ales Adamovich from Belarus and Daniil Granin from Russia, began collecting stories about the common citizens of Leningrad, describing life in the besieged city and published them in an anthology called *The Blockade Book*. This “epic of human suffering,” became the basis for Alexander Sokurov’s film script of his documentary in 2009.

Memories of the blockade, containing accounts of the members of the Union of Veterans and Participants of the Blockade, were published by the Polish Consulate in Polish and Russian in the series *Petropolitana Polonica*. Here are some excerpts:

“The human stories about the siege are told without any false pathos, without a mention of heroism.

“At the beginning of the war, and then during the siege, everything changed for the worse. The rooms were dark and cold. Instead of glass in the windows, we had quilted duvets. The stove protected us from the cold. Grandma Emilia Feliksovna, my sister and I constantly spent our time in the kitchen. All the chairs, numerous pieces of furniture, almost the entire home library, even musical instruments were burnt in the stove. I did
History

Ewa Ziółkowska, They All Perished, only Tanya Survived

not like the stove. It became the end of my world. My favourite doll was burnt in it. What upset us even more than the cold was hunger and its evidence, my one year old sister’s little voice, constant, monotonous and thin: “beba, beba” (bread)... My dead grandfather Felix Francevicz lay in the cold room for almost the whole of January 1942. We did not bury him in order to get another ration of bread for February.” – Ludmila Alekseyenko.

“In the spring of 1942, my little sister died of starvation and, with my mother, we took her on the toboggan to Piskaryovskoye Cemetery. Then my brother died. I remember the incident. Then mother fell ill and had to stay in bed, and I, a seven-year-old, became the housewife. In our street there was a canteen where one could get soup and a very small piece of bread for a voucher. And so, carrying a half-litre jar, I would go to the canteen to get lunch, and on my way back home somebody would snatch it from my hands together with the pieces of bread... we stayed hungry that day,” – Rose Vrubelevska.

“Severe freezing weather came. The ration of bread became smaller. My uncle, aunt and grandmother died, one after another. I remember going with my mother to the bakery, which was opposite our house. Dead people usually lay in the yard. When we would go one way, they would still have their clothes on, but when we came back they would have already been stripped. I was so weak from the hunger, I could not walk...” – Bronislav Yereshchenko-Vakhivska.

These are all memories about childhood. Human stories told without any false pathos, without a word about heroism. They are unusual, because they are true. In the introduction Maria Budkiewicz writes directly. “He who endured many months of malnutrition, hunger and cold, knows that not only the muscles and tissues disappear, but also the senses get blurred and the scope of thought narrows”. The authors of The Blockade Book put it bluntly. “Dystrophy caused by malnutrition is not only a skeleton without muscles...it is also the brain devoured by the stomach”.

Death was the only thing that was abundant.

History without retouching

For twenty years, Stalin had been preparing for the war and the Soviet Union had a decisive military advantage over Germany. Despite this, the Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army suffered a crushing defeat in June 1941. Having subdued the Baltic countries, German troops turned toward Leningrad in late August. They tightly encircled the city, but they did not decide to launch an assault. The siege lasted from September 8th 1941 until January 27th 1944, 872 days precisely. In
accordance with Stalin’s wishes, a partial evacuation of civilians was carried out, as manpower was needed. About 400 thousand children remained in the city. The famous Road of Life over Lake Ladoga did not become operational until mid-January 1942. Half a year later, the siege was partially lifted, but it changed very little for the civilians. The siege claimed the lives of over a million victims, a third of its inhabitants. Almost as many soldiers were killed in the battle or died in hospitals. Tens of thousands of people lost their lives during the evacuation.

What is mainly highlighted in most Soviet, as well as Russian, studies is the heroism. Admittedly, they also show the terrible sufferings of the citizens of Leningrad, but the question of why the siege happened at all, or why it cost so many lives, has never been raised. The answer given by contemporary historians, including independent Russian researchers, leaves no illusions. This was the consequence of the incompetence of the high command, organizational inertia, lack of supplies and communication and, perhaps most importantly, indifference for life. The only thing that was not in short supply was the people. To defend the city, alongside the army units, the Leningrad People’s Militia Army (the Leningrad Narodnoe Opolcheniye Army) was created. It was poorly equipped and lacked training and combat experience. The militiaman’s main weapon was his own chest. This is the reason why any attempts to break the siege were unsuccessful for so long.

“The Führer ordered that the city of Saint Petersburg be wiped off the face of the earth. After the defeat of Soviet Russia there is no reason for the continued existence of this great urban area,” stated a directive issued by the headquarters of the Wehrmacht. And the city was condemned to total destruction not only by Germany, as the Soviet propaganda claimed, but also by the Kremlin. If the Nazis were to enter the city, it was to be destroyed. In accordance with the superiors’ decisions, officials in Smolne too busy setting up mines around major Russian targets, did not build up reserves of food or fuel, thus making three million people suffer hell on earth. At the beginning of the war, Stalin himself ordered not to send any additional food to Leningrad. To make matters worse, on the first day of the siege, as a result of an air raid, the wooden buildings of the Badajevski General Store, which housed the major reserves of flour and sugar, burnt to the ground.

The hunger was horrendous. The people were forced to eat domestic animals and pets. People fed on drugs, glycerine, or leather goods. Jelly was made from carpenter’s glue, and porridge from wallpaper. Acts of cannibalism became common. There were instances of mothers, pushed beyond the limit, eating their own children. Starvation and death occurred everywhere; on the streets, in factories,
at home. Whole families died off. Soviet propaganda called hunger the “fascist mercenary killer”. In the book, *Defence of Leningrad, History without retouching* Vladimir Bieshanov explains, “The mass deaths caused by starvation resulted from two things: first, they were a consequence of the organisational mistakes of the Soviet bureaucracy, unaccustomed to caring for people, and second, they were a result of widespread theft”.

**Death as deliverance**

Food ration cards, introduced at the beginning of the war, were reduced fivefold. From November 20th 1941, after a further drastic decline in the quality of bread (other products did not really exist), the daily ration amounted to 500 grams for soldiers at the front line, 250 grams for workers and only 125 grams for the others. It should be added that only half of the bread was baked from poor quality rye flour, the rest was bran, cellulose and sawdust. In early February 1942, bread was not sold for three days and 20,000 people died every day. Electricity and fuel were also in short supply, and the freezing winters were exceptionally cold. At the same
time, bombs rained down on the city along with artillery shells. The sewage and water supply systems were dysfunctional. Death was the only thing left, and that was abundant. Death became something common, an everyday incident. It often seemed to be the only salvation.

In these conditions, “the citizens of Leningrad had to go to factories, to work, to keep guard on roofs, to save equipment, homes, their closest relatives, children, fathers, husbands, wives, to supply the front, to look after the wounded, to put out fires, to get fuel, to carry water, food, missiles, to build shelters, and to camouflage buildings”.

The truth about the tragedy of Leningrad and, above all, about the enormity of the losses was carefully hidden by the Soviet authorities for years. Suffice to say, the Museum of the Defence and Siege of Leningrad, made available to the public in 1946, was closed after three years and most of the exhibits were destroyed. With the wave of perestroika in 1989, it was reopened on Solyanoy Pereulok. For the same reasons the Piskaryovskoye Memorial Cemetery, which is a visible symbol of the sufferings of the citizens of the city, was made ready only several years after the war, while, the first renovated halls of the State Hermitage Museum could be visited as early as autumn 1944.

Here lie the citizens of Leningrad

The living citizens had neither the strength nor the possibility to bury the dead. Since the middle of December 1941, corpses had been dumped in cemeteries on a massive scale. In January 1942, they were more and more often left on staircases, in courtyards, streets, or in abandoned flats. The municipal services could not keep up the pace with burying the thousands of bodies. The local anti-aircraft defence units and NKVD were ordered to see to the burials. Those who worked in the cemeteries had the status of frontline soldiers. They received more bread and a ration of vodka. The victims of the blockade were buried around the city, including the Volkovskoye Cemetery, the Chesmenskoye Cemetery and the Serafimovskoye Cemetery. Space in the cemeteries quickly ran out and officials decided to arrange mass burials on the north-eastern outskirts of the city, near the Piskaryovskoye train station.

In this nearby small rural cemetery, graves of the Red Army soldiers who had died in the Soviet-Finnish war first appeared in 1939. During the siege of Leningrad, the Piskaryovskoye cemetery became the main burial ground for local people and unknown soldiers. No systematic records were kept. According to official data, more than 42,000 civilians and 70,000 soldiers were buried in 433 trench graves. In the winter, when the ground was frozen solid, graves were not dug but
the ground was blown up by special units. Three to ten thousand corpses were buried every day. Between December 16th, 1941 and June 1st, 1942, 372,000 people were buried in Piskaryovskoye. On one day alone, February 20th, 1942, as many as 10,043 people were laid to rest.

In the post-war period, blocks of flats sprouted up nearby. After several years, the cemetery found itself in the centre of a new housing complex. It was decided to put the place in order. Although the project of a memorial complex began to emerge before the end of the war, suitable commemoration of the victims became possible only after the death of Stalin. The construction was started in 1956, with 186 mass burial pits built on a 26 hectares area. They were covered with granite tombstones engraved with oak leaves. Each tombstone included the date of burial and a star on the graves of the soldiers, the hammer and sickle on the graves of civilians.

From the square, with the Eternal Flame moved from the Field of Mars (Marsovo Polye), one can enter the nearly 500 metre long alley, which leads to a 150 metre granite wall. Carved inscriptions by the celebrated poet Olga Berggolts read, “Here lie Leningraders. Here, citizens; men, women, children...” In front of the wall, on a six-metre-high pedestal, the bronze statue of the Mother Homeland was set. The
figure leans forward slightly, holding, “quiet, strong and work-worn,” a garland of oak leaves as a symbol of courage in her hands. At the entrance to the cemetery stand two pavilions. The inscription reads, “To you, who were entirely devoted to our defenders. Your memory will always remain with the grateful Leningrad... In memory of the blockade victims of the Great War. Eternal is your heroic deed... undying fame for the proud heroes...”

The official opening of the cemetery took place on the fifteenth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, on May 9th 1960. Since then, state ceremonies have been held on subsequent anniversaries. The cemetery has been given the status of a museum. It houses collections of war memorabilia, letters, photographs and everyday objects from the time of the siege. One of the pavilions hosts the exhibition “900 days of the Leningrad blockade”. Mournful music of the great composers like Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky and Chopin drifts over the cemetery.

No religious symbols were taken into consideration while building the monumental Piskaryovskoye Memorial complex. Not long ago, in 2007, a small wooden chapel was built next to the cemetery. In time it is to be replaced by the Orthodox Church of the Beheading of St. John the Baptist. Because of the number of people buried, the Piskaryovskoye cemetery was entered into the Guinness Book of World Records.

Avenue of Remembrance

A few years ago, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, on a visit to the Piskaryovskoye cemetery, proposed to honour people of other nationalities who died in Leningrad. He suggested commemorating the 12,000 Belarusian children who studied in vocational schools in Leningrad and who did not survive the war. Over time, the Piskaryovskoye Avenue of Remembrance began to emerge. Dozens of plaques commemorate representatives of different nations, cities, occupations and institutions.

There is also a granite plaque with a bilingual inscription that reads “To the Polish defenders of the besieged Leningrad”. It was unveiled on January 24th, 2004, during the celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the lifting the siege. The ceremony was attended by official delegations from both countries, as well as by the few remaining Polish participants of the defence.

Journal of the siege

To sustain the will to fight, in August 1942, the local radio broadcast Dmitri Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 7, called Leningrad. The brush and pencil became a weapon in the fight against the enemy. Artists had an obligation to prepare plastic
works of art that tell of the warfare on the outskirts of Leningrad, the courage displayed by its defenders and the everyday life of the city. During a recent exhibition, *Journal of the Siege*, more than 200 drawings, prints, paintings and photographs were on display. The exhibition and the accompanying film projects also showed how the camera and the movie camera were a tool of the official propaganda, carefully rationing the truth about the besieged city.

The dying Leningrad was plastered with posters showing energetic armed soldiers calling “Husbands and sons – defend the homeland to the death!” Having no choice, they did defend. The Soviet propaganda reinforced the image of the defence of Leningrad as part of the great heroic victory in the Great Patriotic War. The phrase, “the invincible Red Army defeated the German invaders, who had treacherously attacked the Soviet Union” has all but become a cliché. But the statement that the blockade was an “immortal, heroic deed and the highest manifestation of courage” is not just rhetoric of war propaganda. The city really did not give up, but it endured until the very end.

The question of the cost of the victory and the true causes of the high mortality rate among the population is not a subject of debate in Russia. It is not, because it cannot be; otherwise it would challenge the myth of the Great Patriotic War, one of the most important elements of the legitimacy of Stalin and his successors in building national identity and national pride. To this day, the official interpretation has been dominated by heroic tones. It was enough to look at the Moscow celebration of the sixty-fifth anniversary of the end of the war. Any attempt at de-Stalinising Russia of its historical memory in Putin and Medvedev’s Russia is considered to be revisionist history. The reflection on whether victory at the cost of so many victims is actually a victory, in post-Soviet Russia, is still regarded as heresy. Yet, one could consider the blockade as another tragic chapter, following the red terror employed by Lenin and the great purges of the 1930s, in the history of Leningrad, the city of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandelstam and Joseph Brodsky. 🌐

*Translated by Tomasz Gąssowski*

Ewa Ziółkowska is a historian. She has recently published the book *Petersburg po polsku* (St. Petersburg in Polish).
Two Historians in One Lviv

ANDRIY PORTNOV

For decades, the intellectual landscape of Lviv was shaped by two historians: Yaroslav Isayevych and Yaroslav Dashkevych. Academically they were equal competitors, whose intellectuality and strong personalities led them to a great rivalry.

In Ukraine, the profession of a historian has always been regarded as risky and requiring a fair amount of courage. This was especially true under communism, when the government would do anything to subordinate Ukrainian historiography to join in the mission of creating a “new Soviet man”. This goal was never reached. Even at the most cruel of times, historians generally had freedom, though limited, in their choice of lifestyle.

In this context, Lviv has played a special role. It was absorbed into the Soviet Union only after the Second World War. That is why it did not experience the changes that Stalin made to science in the 1930s. And while in Kyiv the continuity of the historical school of Mykhailo Serhiyovych Hrushevsky, the father of modern Ukrainian history, was being brutally severed by repression, his students and followers were calmly working in the interwar Lviv. Among them was Ivan Krypyakevych, who after the Second World War became a member of the Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. He headed the Institute of Social Research. Krypyakevych, although not allowed to teach at Lviv University, retained great influence amongst young historians who worked at the institute. It was thanks to his help that both Yaroslav Isayevych and Yaroslav Dashkevych were introduced into the positivist-national tradition of historiography, strongly associated with Hrushevsky.

Dashkevych was born on December 13th 1926, in Lviv in the family of Roman Dashkevych, a general in the Ukrainian People’s Army. Isayevych, almost ten years younger than Dashkevych, was born on April 7th 1936, in a small village in Volhynia. His father, Dmytro Isayevych, had once been a member of the Central Council of Ukraine (a council that led the nationalist movement, later becoming the
revolutionary parliament of Ukraine – editor’s note) and a delegate of the People’s Republic of Ukraine to the Peace Conference in Paris. He returned to Ukraine from France in 1930. When Yaroslav turned eight, the family moved to Stryi, in western Ukraine. In 1949, Dashkevych graduated from the Department of Philosophy at Lviv State University. Three years later, Isayevych began his studies at the History Department of the same institution.

Two paths

Dashkevych worked as a student at the Lviv Library of the USSR Academy of Sciences. There, on December 10th 1949, he was arrested as being the son of the “famous Ukrainian nationalist Olena Stepaniv-Dashkevych” and imprisoned for possessing and distributing “anti-revolutionary literature”. He returned to Lviv in 1956, after spending almost seven years in prison and forced labour camps. A year later he found a job as a bibliographer at the Department of Ukrainian History in the Institute of Social Sciences, part of the USSR Academy of Sciences. In 1958, the same institute employed Isayevych.

In 1961, Isayevych received the title of Candidate of Science (the equivalent of a PhD). Dashkevych defended his thesis two years later in Yerevan at the Armenian Academy of Sciences. The topic of his dissertation was Armenian colonies in Ukraine in the light of sources and literature from the 15th to 19th centuries. Dashkevych’s book was published under the same title in Russian in 1962, with Isayevych as the reviewer. In 1964, the two Yaroslavs, for the first and last time, co-authored a text: an article for the Communist.

Soon after, their career paths again converged. A job opening appeared for a senior academic position and for the first time, the two historians entered into direct competition. Dashkevych, for political reasons, found himself at a slight disadvantage, and he lost the position to Isayevych.

In 1966, Isayevych’s book Brotherhoods and their role in the development of Ukrainian culture from the 16th to 18th century (Братства та їх роль в розвитку української культури XVI–XVIII ст) was published. In the same year, Dashkevych lost his job at the Institute of Social Sciences “due to an elimination of the position of bibliographer”. It took him three years to find a job at the Museum of Ethnography and Craft and later in the Central Historical Archives in Lviv. In 1969, the same publishing house that published Isayevych’s book in 1966 printed a collection

Dashkevych’s and Isayevych’s academic publications quickly gained acclaim in both the Soviet Union and abroad.
of documents on Ukrainian-Armenian cultural ties in the 17th century that had been prepared by Dashkevych. Three years later, Isayevych’s book *Sources for the history of Ukrainian culture of the feudal period* (Джерела з історії української культури періоду феодалізму) appeared from the same publisher.

Dashkevych’s and Isayevych’s academic publications quickly gained publicity in both the Soviet Union and abroad. They were particularly popular among the Ukrainian diaspora and its academic circles. Omeljan Pritsak, director of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, tried on many occasions to invite both historians to Harvard University. Clearly, the Soviet government did not agree to such visits.

Inside Soviet Ukraine, the two historians were received differently. For Dashkevych, it was impossible to have an official academic career in Soviet Lviv. The main reason was his family history, but his unwillingness to compromise also played a role. From 1980 to 1990, Dashkevych was again unemployed. During this period, he wrote numerous articles on the science of historical sources, published in academic journals in Moscow, Warsaw, Yerevan, Harvard, and Paris.

The career path of Isayevych was definitely much calmer. In 1975, Isayevych published another book titled *Ivan Federov and the emergence of printing in Ukraine* (Першодрукар Іван Федоров та виникнення друкарства на Україні). Three years later, in Moscow, he received the title of Doctor of Science (an academic title higher than a PhD). This was quite significant, as in the Brezhnev period it was possible to defend academic dissertations in Moscow which had been rejected in Kyiv for their “bourgeois nationalism”.

**Independent, but still unequal**

In the early 1990s, the Institute for Social Studies (renamed the Institute for Ukrainian Studies in 1995) was chaired by Isayevych. A year later the Academy of Sciences nominated Isayevych to “Corresponding Member” and in 1992 to “Member of the Academy”. Isayevych would then often state that this rise in his career was quite accidental and only possible in democratic times.

Dashkevych followed a different path in the avant-garde of the post-Soviet Ukrainian historiography. Unlike Isayevych, who left Ukraine after 1988 to lecture at Harvard, Dashkevych spent more time lecturing and publishing. He established, under his own leadership, a Lviv-based branch of the Institute of Ukrainian Archaeology and the Science of Historical Sources. In the early 1990s, Dashkevych published a number of ground-breaking academic articles on Ukrainian-Jewish
relations and Polish-Ukrainian relations. The most significant of these was entitled “Ukraine at the border of East and West”. In this piece, he departed from simple schemes of eternal confrontation between Ukraine and the East while simultaneously questioning the over-optimistic “Occidentalism”. To a great extent, thanks to Dashkevych’s article, the metaphor of “Ukraine between East and West” has played a central role in the different concepts of Ukraine’s history since 1991. Articles from the once persecuted, unemployed historian, started to be receive recognition by being published in the historical journal Ukraïns’kyi Istorychnyi Zhurnal (Ukrainian Historical Journal).

In 1994, Dashkevych received the title of Doctor of Sciences for his overall academic achievements and in 1995 he was exonerated as a victim of political repressions. Nonetheless, both of his attempts to become a “Corresponding Member” of the Academy of Sciences ended in fiasco. The academic nomenklatura decided it was better to have him as an “experienced heretic” outside a privileged circle of recognised academics. Despite the political change and the acknowledgement of his achievements, Isayevych’s formal status remained unachievable to his older colleague.

**Political choices**

At one point in his career, Dashkevych became a regular political commentator, criticising globalisation and the European Union, but also focusing on Ukraine’s domestic issues. The world which emerges from his publications is like a combat arena with different nationalisms competing for supremacy. Even though he gave up thoughts of a political career, he was considered a potential charismatic leader in right-wing circles.

Isayevych refrained from making political comments, although he had an exceptional understanding of politics. He also never tried to portray himself as a dissident, a victim of the communist regime or a man who has the right to explain issues to wider audience. His patriotism was based on criticism, European values and was, to a large extent, very private.

Dashkevych, on the other hand, wanted to set up a standard of thinking about certain problems of Ukraine’s past and present. Very often he would surprise with unexpected theses. Also unlike Isayevych, who was always ready to question elegant theories and popular books, Dashkevych refrained from being involved in polemics with views and works that, in his opinion, were not meeting the standards of historic texts.

Dashkevych died on February 25th 2010. On June 24th 2010, Isayevich passed away. Since their deaths, an intellectual gap has been left in Lviv.
One was the measure of the other

In Brezhnev’s times, Isayevych’s and Dashkevych’s academic papers maintained, although somewhat limited, continuity with the Hrushevsky and Krypyakevych schools of historiography. In an independent Ukraine both historians could try to find the wider perspective, yet none succeeded in proposing their own syntheses of Ukraine’s history. They continued to remind others that history is there to be discovered, relativism is relative and breaking with tradition is rooted in tradition.

The complicated relations between the two historians were no secret. In Dashkevych’s publications one can find claims against Isayevych, although they are quite far apart. Dashkevych would accuse Isayevych of a lack of patriotism and mention his unpleasant behaviour from the communist era. These allegations were of a personal nature and mostly unjustified. Isayevych would respond calmly and tactfully. He would answer every criticism but would never strike back in return. He would say much more in private conversation than he would ever write on the subject.

In this unavoidable and understandable rivalry the two great historians complemented each other perfectly. For years, one was a measure of the other. Dashkevych died on February 25th 2010. Less than half a year later, on June 24th 2010, Yaroslav Isayevich passed away. Lviv is empty without them and the Ukrainian intellectual space has become flatter and more predictable.

Translated by Iwona Reichardt

Dr Andriy Portnov is a Ukrainian historian. His newest book, Histories of Historians: Images of Ukrainian historiography in the 20th Century is expected to come out in autumn 2011.
Andrzej Poczobut, a Belarusian Pole, correspondent for *Gazeta Wyborcza* and known activist of the Union of Poles in Belarus was arrested in April 2011. In July he received a three year probationary sentence.

“‘Bring some *lokum* back from Turkey,’ he told me, ‘I need to indulge myself, since soon they will lock me up’. When I came back, he was already in jail,” Joanna Kędzierska of Polish Radio shows the box full of the Turkish delight. “They were waiting for him. I was glad that I could finally bring them to him. Andrzej loves sweets. It’s probably his only weakness”.

“He joked that prison will be good for his weight,” Roman Imielski, the chief of the foreign section of *Gazeta Wyborcza* smiles. After a minute, he adds seriously, “no one expected a happy ending to this story”.

Andrzej Poczobut is a correspondent for *Gazeta Wyborcza* and a known activist of the Union of Poles in Belarus. He had prior knowledge of his arrest. He was informed that the prosecution was preparing a criminal case against him. Whether it was a tipoff or an unexpected surge of sympathy from someone with authority, it is not known. One thing is certain, the authorities were not joking.

After December 19th 2010, Belarus experienced a period of repression. Although he unsurprisingly won the presidential elections, Alexander Lukashenko, the first man in the country, was apparently frightened by the protests that shook the capital. OMON brutally dealt with the opposition, to the disbelief of many EU diplomats, who were counting on a political thaw in the “last dictatorship of Europe”. The president’s opponents ended up in prison. Hundreds of protesters who took part in the post-election demonstrations were arrested. The most vocal critics of the government received long sentences. Poczobut was accused of publicly insulting the head of state. In Belarus, this is a serious offense that carries up to several years in prison.
A local man

At any moment he could have left Belarus for Poland with his family. Nobody from the Union of Poles in Belarus would have criticised him. After all, Poczobut has two children. The youngest is not even two years old. In Poland, he would have found a job easily. But he gave no thought to the idea of leaving his homeland.

“I did not do anything wrong, I do not have to run away,” he said. “Let Alexander Lukashenko finally leave this place”.

One thing needs to be made known about Andrzej Poczobut. He is so damned fond of his small homeland: “When he needed to be in Warsaw, it was just to drop by,” Joanna Kędzierska recalls. “As fast as he could, he would take care of different matters and immediately return home. It even annoyed me a bit. I would say many times: ‘Andrzej you have shown me your hometown, let me now show you some interesting places in Warsaw’”.

“Joanna,’ he would reply, ‘for me there is only place – the Grodno region’”.

He was born in 1973 in the village of Bierastavica, 10 km from the Polish border. His father, Stanislaw, was a known Polish activist in the area. As a young man, his father left Belarus in search of happiness. “While I was weeding my flowerbeds in the garden, I looked up and there was Stashu (short for Stanislaw) with a bundle going off into the world,” his neighbour Teresa Porzecka recalled to reporters. The elder Poczubut travelled throughout the Soviet Union. He studied in Odessa, he served in the Far East; he was even a sailor at one point. At the age of 28 he returned to his homeland. He married and had two sons. But Andrzej was never attracted to the outside world. He did not even leave Grodno to go to college.

“It’s amazing that he is so Polish, and yet wasn’t even brought up in Poland,” says the director of BelsatTV, Agnieszka Romaszewska-Guzy. He was one of the few activists in the Union of Poles in Belarus (UPB) of that generation that was not a graduate of a Polish university. “Meanwhile, his Polish identity,” continues the journalist “is contained primarily in the professed value system and a willingness to take risks in their defence”. After staying with the UPB activists, a person gets a new understanding of the word “patriotism”.

Under Soviet rule there were no Polish schools in the Grodno region. The first Polish organisation was founded only in the times of perestroika, in 1988; perhaps because the attachment to Polish culture is so strong here. That attachment is exhibited by the numerous crosses, eagles and red and white flags.
“I will never forget the visit to Sopockin,” Joanna Kędzierska recalls. “Andrzej and his younger brother, Stanislaw, took me there. We entered one of the properties. It was an old, rundown house. There, in the backyard, I saw our emblem. In Poland you can’t find such backyards”.

Despite the patriotic fervour, Belarusian Poles are not nationalists. “Typically, minorities tend to isolate themselves from the dominant population of a given country,” Agnieszka Romaszewska says. “Grodno surprised me with its great openness to other cultures. As Poles, these people are patriots of Belarus”.

When the Union of Poles was started, Poczobut signed up his whole family. At the time, he had begun to study law. When he finished his studies, Alexander Lukashenko had just started his rule of Belarus. Poczobut realised that he would not find a place for himself in the new judiciary. He then decided to become a journalist.

At first, he worked with independent newspapers from Grodno. But there were fewer and fewer of them. The newly chosen president of the UPB, Andżelika Borys, proposed that he take control of the Polish newspaper that they published. He became the editor-in-chief of the Polish magazine in exile. The UPB was on the brink of a turning point in history.

A duo with personality

Unexpectedly, in March 2005, Andżelika Borys surprised the Belarusian government when she replaced Tadeusz Kruczkowski, then president of the UPB, and who turned out to be cooperating with the regime. Two months later, the Ministry of Justice recognised this decision as illegal.

“If it was simply national dances and patriotic songs, the Belarusian authorities would have allowed the Association to operate,” says Agnieszka Romaszewska. “But the UPB activists understood Polishness as a set of values associated with freedom and that was something that Lukashenko cannot come to terms with”. Refusing to acknowledge the ministry’s decision, the Poles from Grodno announced a protest. As a result, the organisation splintered, with the officially recognised UPB dubbed “Prolukashenko” and those that supported Andżelika Borys nicknamed “the underground”. Those who decided to stick with Borys risked a lot. An unequal struggle with Lukashenko’s regime began, in which Poczobut was an active participant.

Poczobut is a burly, quiet man, but if you press him against the wall, he reveals an incredibly tough character. “Andrzej strongly believes in his arguments and always says what he thinks,” Joanna Kędzierska confirmed.
It seems that he has some contradicting traits. On one hand, he is a political fighter and can be aggressive in his fight, but towards his friends he is a wonderful, warm man, like a teddy bear. Despite numerous interrogations, surveillance, threats and the subsequent seizures of property, the UPB underground activists did not intend to give up. Poczubut and Borys created a complementary, dynamic duo.

“Their partnership worked well,” says Agnieszka Romaszewska. “He has the ability to think strategically and has extensive contacts in Belarusian opposition circles; she has common sense. Andżelika was primarily an educational activist, less clued into the broader issues. Poczobut meanwhile was the minister of external affairs of the union”.

In 2006, Poczobut began working with Gazeta Wyborcza. “I am primarily a journalist,” he explains. “I became an activist somewhat by accident. When hard times came, I had to assume the position. Imagine that an educational-cultural organisation, which organised concerts and cared for graves, was suddenly accused of plotting a coup! The Secret Service confiscated our Polish homes, people were shocked”.

Polish public opinion declared itself on the side of the “illegals”. Andżelika, somewhat exaggeratedly, was called “Wałęsa in a skirt”. The leaders of the rebellious movement often visited their motherland. Conferences and high level meetings awaited them in Poland, along with media sympathy. The Polish diplomacy also supported Borys and her team.

In 2008, however, European politicians chose a new course of action towards Lukashenko. To use a media metaphor, it was called the reversal of the carrot and the stick. With the help of loans and concessions they tried to soften his manners and encourage him towards a pro-democratic transition. The UPB underground activists this kind of politics. Concerned voices declared that the Polish diplomacy was ready to sacrifice the UPB in the name of improving relations with Minsk.

It was about this time that the collaboration between Borys and Poczobut began to suffer. “I think it was because of a personality clash,” explains Romaszewska. “They both have strong and very domineering personalities. Andrzej has always defended Andżelika. At a certain point, she came to the conclusion that it limits her”.

After so many years of fighting, their persistence was beginning to wear thin. On June 14th 2010, Andżelika announced her resignation as the President of
the UPB. Officially, it was for personal reasons. Unofficially, it is said that the reason for the decision was the growing pressure of Polish diplomats interested in a compromise with Lukashenko.

The criminal case

Poczobut, a correspondent for *Gazeta Wyborcza* since 2008, often depicted the political situation in Belarus on the pages of the largest Polish daily newspaper. “He has extensive contacts and analytical thinking abilities,” boasts his superior, Roman Imielski. “He is a very good journalist”. Most importantly, he is not afraid to write.

Some of the accredited correspondents in Belarus are trying to weigh their words because of the fear of being banned from the country. Poczobut, a Belarusian citizen, cannot be thrown out of the country. They could try to intimidate him by threatening him with a jail sentence, but as it turned out, unsuccessfully.

“Of course, I was afraid,” Poczobut says of his three-month stay in prison. “But one has to control the fear”.

After his April arrest, a wide-ranging campaign of support started to take hold. This was a ridiculous accusation,” Imielski explains. “Our duty was to give it publicity. From the beginning we knew of the wrongful imprisonment of Andrzej. We needed to make it a matter of European importance. He became a symbol. Some famous politicians from the West spoke out in his defence. Even US President Barack Obama, during his visit to Warsaw, mentioned him”.

“In prison,” Poczobut recalls, “One of the investigators told me: ‘Mr. Poczobut, oh what a political future you are building for yourself!’ I suggested that he switch with me so I could go to my children”.

He spent the last hour of the decisive trial in solitary confinement in court. The tension was terrible. Finally at the end of the trial, the sentence was announced. He was found guilty and received a three year probationary sentence. Despite the prevailing euphoria of his release, Poczobut’s friends were outraged by his unjust sentence. He will appeal this sentence. He will not resign from his newspaper post, despite the risk of going behind bars again, and next time for much longer. “Someone thought that they could train me,” he explains calmly. “The pressure grips me even more. I could not give freedom up. Even while in prison, I felt free. They were more scared than I was”. 
Grodno is a small town. Sometimes, Poczobut runs into his former prison guards. They look away. He does not have to.

“For Andrzej, everything is either black or white. He does not stagger between the greys,” Joanna Kędzierska explains. “He walks a straight path”.

*Translated by Łucja Wąsowska*

Katarzyna Kwiatkowska is a journalist and member of the editorial board of the quarterly *Res Publica Nowa*. She specialises in Belarus.
During an award ceremony for television producers, the teary-eyed Valeriya Guy Germanika grudgingly went on stage to accept an award for the best television series producer of 2010. Guy Germanika was expecting to be showered with awards for the series “School”, which shocked the public in Russia. She treated the consolation prize as a charitable donation given out of pity.

“I prefer to wash floors at McDonald’s if the old-timers from the academy do not consider me a director!” The ambitious Guy Germanika said. Perhaps the tears shed at the TEFIA ceremony had dried by the time she earned the title Woman of the Year, awarded later the same year by GQ Magazine.

Is Valeriya Guy Germanika just a crazy instigator or a non-conformist experimenter documenting young Russia? She constantly provokes. The tabloid press covers her dubious exploits, such as her alleged suicide attempt or MTV firing her for always being truant and for neglecting her official duties. They write about her on-and-off relationships with some hunk and how she casually claims that “now she will make porn”. Her first experience behind the camera is perhaps resounding. Valeriya Guy Germanika (then Dudinska) took her first steps as a film director in a porn studio. She treated this job as an opportunity to test her ability in the filmmaking profession and “to get to know life”. She studied film at the Independent Film School, Internews. At the same time, she was learning about animals and later graduated as a specialist in canine studies from the Agricultural Academy.

Headless plankton in front of the camera

The beginning of her creative endeavours was the original documentaries devoted to emotionally lost teens and children left to themselves by their parents during the first wave of Russian predatory capitalism. Sisters, The Girls (awarded
at the Kinotavr film festival), *The Boys*, *He left*, and *Infanta’s Birthday* are some of the films where young people openly talk about themselves, and express their family and emotional problems. They show their thoughts in crude, honest ways, without censorship, without inhibitions. Guy Germanika, born in 1984, remembers her own *Sturm und Drang* period. She uses her understanding to establish direct contact with the characters, not directing their message, but allowing for naïve sincerity.

The authenticity of these stories shocked viewers. Her stories were in direct conflict with the propagated ideological program of the pro-Kremlin youth groups, promoting the official faith in a bright future with Vladimir Putin at the helm. The young people in her film displayed disoriented relations disturbed by a cruel world and experiencing a miserable fate.

Sociologists have called the young generation of Russian teens from the first decade of the new millennium “headless plankton”. A generation without ambition, focused on consumerism, giving in to the Kremlin’s manipulating engineers of souls (who only want for the “plankton” not to organise coloured revolutions in Russia), rejecting the existing world, whose only point of reference is money.

Guy Germanika responded that with the “plankton”, no one can talk about their issues. She took up the story, remaining faithful to her method. Without prudery or false shame, she decided to show contemporary teenagers with their lost dreams and brutal reality. The feature film *Everybody Dies but Me* (2008) was recognised and awarded at the Cannes Film Festival for its debut with the Golden Camera. It wasn’t until after receiving this award that Guy Germanika’s film was allowed to be distributed in Russia, although on a limited basis.

The plot of this film is simple: a vibrating video camera records a sequence of events. Three girls studying in the ninth grade, on the threshold of adulthood, swear eternal friendship and loyalty, and agreeably wish for all adults “to die”. The school is to hold a dance. Everyone is preparing for it; it is the end of the school year. One of the friends is in conflict with a teacher. She rebels and runs away from home.

The school imposes a collective penalty on everyone and cancels the school dance. This is the end of their dreams. Her friends betray the runaway and force her to return to her hated home because they want to save their dream event. However,
the dance does not fulfil their expectations. It is a painful initiating experience of general maltreatment, emotional stain, humiliating first sex on cardboard, betrayal, disappointment and an even more painful break from the world, soaked in violence and filth.

Guy Germanika’s assertion is pessimistic. In front of our eyes, the girls take the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It lacks, however, the satisfaction of the expected sweetness, there is the bitterness of severe defeat in a dark tunnel of fresh adulthood; there is no light. Only fear and terror remain, the only reaction is rebellion, complete negation, vulgarity, denunciation of authority, and the rejection of the helpless.

**The sorrows of young Ilyusha**

The ninth grade is a breakthrough period. It is a time of fourteen and fifteen year-olds who are no longer children but not yet adults. Guy Germanika is fascinated and inspired by asking provoking and important questions about the condition of young people, parents, school, society, and the country.

The television series “School”, directed by Guy Germanika, broadcast prime-time by Russian state television, Channel One, in 2010, provoking a lively reaction. If shocking the public was the producer’s goal, it was fully achieved. Soon after the first two episodes were broadcast, deputies from the Communist faction of the State Duma demanded that this socially harmful series be banned. Many representatives of the regional parliaments joined their protests. Russian viewers, accustomed to the usual reality-detached programmes, rubbed their eyes with disbelief. Instead of another story about unreal, imaginative quasi-authentic problems, they saw a piece of ordinary school life, faced by thousands.

Meanwhile, Guy Germanika shrugged her shoulders, commenting on the charges of promoting *chernukhy* – “those people who protest have never been in educational institutions”. She said in an interview for the weekly, *The New Times*:

“We have been making our film in an ordinary, normal school; real children are featured in it. We did not invent anything. I hate movies about imaginary, non-existent people. I try to make everything look as authentic as possible. My characters walk where they really walk in life, say what they normally say every day. The actors in my film play themselves. The story I tell is fiction, but it has nothing imaginary. It is life in itself. A new student enters a class and cannot find common language with the new environment. I do not understand what can be disputed here. School is a very cruel world, where wolves rule. What was the shock about?
The viewers saw themselves in the show, naked in their sins, omissions, without love, in the pursuit of money”.

Guy Germanika mercilessly shows the disastrous effects of severed intergenerational ties. The parents are busy and do not understand or know what is happening with their children. The children cope however they can. They flee from dysfunctional families, they try to mimic the behaviour they see on television, they ridicule religion and the belief in miracles, and they learn the art of mimicry.

In the film’s school, the teachers are ignorant, passive, greedy, uninteresting, and immoral. Is this why students ostentatiously ignore them? The students are not any better. They get high, smoke cigarettes, drink beer (the place where they most frequently meet is a liquor store or a school yard. Both are forever occupied by drinking and smoking teens). They use their limited vocabulary coloured by vulgarity. They care little about knowledge, maybe their grades at most, which would open their way to a good college, and this in turn to money.

They humiliate and betray each other. The creator of the film, however, shows that beneath the layer of rudeness and nihilism, good hearts lie hidden. One of the characters, Ilyusha, touchingly takes care of his severely ill mother, he must fend for himself, he has to work; he loves, he desires. Although on the outside he displays an image of a rebel, by attacking his teachers and fighting his adversaries; he is a sensitive teenager, more responsible than most of the adults in the series.
Shock and nausea

Andrei Arkhangelsk writing in the weekly _Ogoniok_ noted, “the reactions of viewers who are heatedly discussing this on Internet forums, mostly repeat two words: ‘shock’ and ‘nausea’. Although if you think about it, in the film there are no shocking things. Yes, the students fight, and they curse, with no deeper feelings, they drink beer and have sex instead of studying. On the other hand, if none of us being as old as the characters in the series have ever tried anything mentioned above, have them throw a biology book at me. What is shown on the show does not worry me, but it’s the lack of standards that does”.

According to Alexei Venediktov, the head of the radio station, Echo of Moscow, the series shows real life problems that are not discussed in literature, theatre, film, the media, or by politicians. The former teacher also adds that, “Those who recognise themselves in the series shout the most. They are the imprudent parents and incompetent teachers. What they see on TV is painful”. There are four million drug addicts among the students, so these are not isolated cases. The series, therefore, shows reality. Another problem shown is the teenage mothers. For instance, in the Voronezh region every seventh child is a child born to a teenage mother, and 27 per cent of adolescents habitually smoke.

The TV series started a discussion on the Internet and many students took part in it. Many, perhaps most, have said that the phenomena that Guy Germanika shows in the series exists in Russian schools, although not as intensely. There are drug addicts, vulgar girls, unwanted pregnancies, secret abortions, smoking and spitting. “Guy Germanika should learn moderation, then her films would be more realistic and closer to life,” one of the students, commenting on the series, advised. But moderation is not something the impulsive Guy Germanika has to worry about.

Guy Germanika shows the effects of broken relationships between generations. Parents have no idea what is happening to their children.

The truth of time, the truth of the screen?

Russian cinematography struggles to find a creative path. Despite the concerted efforts of distributors promoting various films, Russians more often opt for Hollywood movies than for Russian films. In this psychologically patriotic landscape, where do Guy Germanika’s twisted, poignantly simple films belong? Will they at least allow the Russian society to ask themselves who they are, how did they come out of the Soviet red sea; which reefs they hit in the difficult transition period, and
where is this shallow, albeit dangerous, wave of seemingly small stabilisation taking them?

Guy Germanika willingly refers to Vladimir Sorokin’s quote that “talent is like a dog, you have to constantly take care of it otherwise it will go wild and run away into the woods.” As someone who has had an education in canine studies, she will probably know how to take care of her “dog”. She recently announced that her next film will be dedicated to Russian women in their thirties. “A woman’s universe is much stronger than a man’s,” she said in a recent interview for an online TV programme. “Russian men drink themselves to death, while the women blossom”.

Certainly, she will once again go against the grain. 🎥

Translated by Łucja Wąsowska

Anna Łabuszewska is a specialist at the Centre for Eastern Studies and a columnist for Tygodnik Powszechny, a weekly newspaper.
Adam Michnik was raised in a Polish-Jewish household politically active in the period after the First World War. His father was an active communist who had once edited the Polish edition of the writings of Karl Marx. This might be the best place to begin the discussion of this broad collection of essays. Writing amidst the industrial squalor of the 1840s, Marx assured that history moved forward in a precise manner, like a steam engine along a fixed track – ultimately arriving at a utopian workers paradise where the state could eventually “wither away”. But history, as Michnik observes, took a much darker path. He was born in 1946. That was the year Winston Churchill travelled to the United States and warned of an “Iron Curtain” descending across Eastern Europe.

One of Michnik’s essays pays tribute to a literary figure of the left who provided the most penetrating analysis of the pernicious nature of these communist systems. “I have rejected the New Faith,” Czesław Milosz explained while writing The Captive Mind, “because the practice of the lie is one of its principal commandments, and Socialist realism is nothing more than a different name for a lie”. Milosz warned that while the Soviet Union promoted the dove of peace, it was in fact a totalitarian state and a danger to the rest of the world. “The philosophy of history emanating from Moscow is not just an abstract theory,” he warned. “It is a material force that uses guns, tanks, planes and all the machines of war and oppression. All the crushing might of an armed state is hurled against any man who refuses to accept the New Faith”.

The early cold war years, Michnik notes, often made for strange alliances. He is critical of those who never forgave Milosz for once serving in the communist government. At the same time many Western leftists denounced The Captive Mind as part of the overheated rhetoric emerging out of Cold War America. In 1956, Nikita Khrushchev gave his famous speech denouncing Stalin. A few months later, Hungarian crowds toppled Stalin’s statue and took to the streets in revolt. Imre Nagy, a national orientated communist caught up in the fervour of the revolution, declared a free Hungary would withdraw from the Warsaw Pact. To those behind the Iron Curtain, it was difficult to distinguish American campaign rhetoric from actual strategic planning. Hungarians threw Molotov cocktails at Soviet tanks while scanning the rooftop for the American planes rumoured to be coming to the rescue at any moment.
They never came. The Soviet Union ultimately crushed the rebellion and installed a more pliant regime that returned Hungary obediently into the Warsaw Pact. Imre Nagy, despite his declarations of independence, was still reviled as a communist by the émigré voices at Radio Free Europe. The Soviet Union saw another problem and executed Nagy for “flying the pirate flag of nationalism”.

“I recall the sadness in my home and remember the conversation in which my mother convinced me to give all my savings to aid Hungarian children,” Michnik recalled in his essay documenting the 50th anniversary of that event, “I organised a collection at my school, and that was the first political act of my life”.

By 1960 a teenaged Michnik organised a high school political-discussion group called the “Seekers of Contradictions”. He discussed politics with Warsaw’s influential intellectuals–Leszek Kolakowski and Jan Józef Lipski. Michnik was eventually arrested for distributing an “Open Letter” penned by Karol Modzelewski and Jacek Kuroń accusing the corrupt communist party of exploiting Poland’s labouring classes as much as the capitalist system.

By the mid-1960s the Kremlin’s ideological watchdogs directed their most savage denunciations for those “revisionist” voices calling for a more democratic model of socialism. It was in this atmosphere that Alexander Dubček came to power in Czechoslovakia seeking to promote “socialism with a human face”.

Polish students protested with their own rhythmic chant—“Polska czeka na własnego Dubczeka” [Poland is waiting for its own Dubček]. Instead they faced truckloads of Moczar’s club wielding units. This was part of an ugly anti-Semitic campaign that landed Michnik in jail—and led him to reject the revisionist view that political change could eventually emerge via enlightened reform from above.

“This is the point where I said to myself, ‘Halt, stop. I do not want to have anything to do with the system. I am no longer the heretic. I cut my umbilical cord to communism. What they are for, I am against’”.

Dubček’s Prague Spring went forward despite increasingly ominous messages from Moscow. The Soviet Union indeed sent tanks into Prague. A special unit tracked down Dubček in his office, ripped the phone out of the wall, and took him to the Soviet Union bound in manacles. The Brezhnev Doctrine had laid down the law. There would be no more liberalizing experiments in Eastern Europe.

The early 1970s was thus a dark time for dissidents behind the Iron Curtain. Michnik went to work as a welder in the Rosa Luxumbourg light-bulb factory. There he mingled with workers and practised what Václav Havel memorably called “living in the truth”. The Cold War division of Europe appeared permanent.

But slowly the ice began to crack. Michnik’s The Church, The Left, A Dialogue provided a call for an alliance between the Catholic Church and Poland’s less devout intellectuals. A quiet revolution was brewing when John Paul II made an emotional return to his homeland in June of 1979.

“Something strange happened,” Michnik recalled in his essay commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Solidarity movement. “The very same people who were frustrated and aggressive while waiting in line to do their daily grocery shopping were transformed
into a cheerful and jubilant community, and became citizens full of dignity”.

In August of 1980, Lech Wałęsa climbed over the wall at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk. In the ensuing days a spunky unemployed electrician became the symbol of an unlikely group of workers challenging the largest empire in the world. At the same time foreign journalists wondered when the Soviet Union would once again resort to force to crush a hopeful rebellion within its sphere of influence.

“We don’t live on the moon,” Michnik cautioned those bolder voices in Solidarity more willing to taunt the anxious leadership in Moscow. In December of 1981, General Jaruzelski declared Martial Law. The Solidarity leaders were rounded up and imprisoned, leaving a bitter legacy that persists to this day. This provides the context for the emotional debate that has followed Michnik’s qualified defence of Jaruzelski’s claim that martial law represented a “lesser evil”.

He argues that Jaruzelski, while hardly sympathetic to Solidarity, led a relatively moderate faction that believed the movement could eventually be “co-opted, corrupted, divided, and fractured from within”. Michnik notes the Soviet Union [and East Germans] were losing patience with this strategy and were beginning to push a more ruthless line in Poland.

Had that occurred, he argues, Solidarity might not have survived to sit at the Round Table Talks of 1989 that produced, what seemed like a miracle at the time, democratic elections and a bloodless transfer of power in Eastern Europe that would eventually spread to the Soviet Union.

By 1990, Solidarity began to fragment into the raucous debates that has marked the past two decades of Polish politics. Michnik refutes the popular charge that the Round Table talks were the product of elite collusion. He counters that no revolution can obtain all of its objectives. History might well have taken a far nastier path. No ruling power was likely to negotiate if it feared the grisly street justice later meted out to Nicolae Ceauşescu – merited or otherwise. As Poles cast their first votes in June of 1989 they could watch the grainy images of the Chinese tanks clearing out the student protest movement in Tiananmen Square.

Michnik was opposed to placing Jaruzelski on trial for a capital offence—and later raised eyebrows by seeming to even befriend his ex-jailer. He argued that a wave of revolutionary justice was not in the long term interest of a country that had seen too much political retribution over the course of the century.

“I was fully convinced,” Michnik writes, “that a revolution that seeks historical justice consistently and wishes to execute it properly nevertheless ends up with the execution of a monarch, as in Britain, with the guillotine, as under the Jacobins, or with simple terror, as under the Bolsheviks. In a nutshell, begotten of freedom, it ends in dictatorship”.

The final chapters suggest that Polish politics has become poisoned by a grey cloud of suspicion—a product of the lingering totalitarian impulse and amplified by the socio-economic uncertainties of globalization. These political animosities have played a role in intensifying public debates—including the troubling historical legacies of Jedwabne and Kielce which the author eloquently addresses in his concluding chapters.
What does the future hold? Michnik remains generally optimistic about Poland’s new place in Europe. He hardly bemoans the demise of the Soviet Union but voices his concerns about what could follow the gradual demise of the European social welfare state. He also cites Zbigniew Brzeziński’s early warnings that the events of 1989 afforded only the briefest of celebrations, and the West must avoid the triumphal devolution into material self-indulgence – a warning voiced by Miłosz and John Paul II throughout the 1990s.

Indeed, at times he implies his frustration that so many young Poles with no memory of August 1980 would use their political freedom to watch reality television or enjoy the more superficial fruits of the free market. This book can be a sad read at times for those who recall the Polish spirit of the 1980s. But it might also serve as a reminder of a truly remarkable time. When Poland displayed the unity and courage to overcome what most of the world told them was impossible.

Patrick Vaughan

A Reflection of the Opposition


Valery Panyushkin is a liberal Russian journalist, most famous for his previous books on Mikhail Khodorkovsky and on Gazprom. His latest work 12 nesoglasnych was published in Russia in 2008 and has just appeared in English as 12 Who Don’t Agree: The Battle for Freedom in Putin’s Russia. Political accounts of the period are often dull. One strength of Panyushkin’s book is his easy-reading literary style (though the easy read is undermined by a rather clunky translation).

Instead of a chronological narrative, Panyushkin constructs twelve intersecting biographical vignettes of participants in the “Dissident’s March” in St. Petersburg in 2007. His aim is to show how people from different walks of life were brought together by their opposition to Putin. However, although the recurring characters increasingly intermingle, they don’t necessarily interact. The net effect of the book is actually to advertise the narrow circle and limited impact of Russian dissent.

In one concluding scene, Boris Nemtsov, Vladimir Ryzhkov, the veteran human rights activist Lev Ponomarev, Aleksandr Osovtsov, the former head of Open Russia, Marina Litvinovich and Masha Gaidar all sit in Garry Kasparov’s flat after his release from five-day detention. The mood is light, but Panyushkin describes Kasparov as trying to “convince himself and his comrades that this new life, in which we are no longer members of parliament, leaders of parties, or politicians, or journalists, but underground men, this life is not so frightening. It might even be entertaining, and the people depriving us of our freedom might even sympathize with us. And any number of desperate situations might reveal new opportunities to us”.

All the biographies are incomplete. None of the twelve lives ends with a dénouement in which the regime is successfully
confronted. The book documents the regime’s obsessive repression, but it also unconsciously reveals many of the weaknesses of Russia’s old “democrats”. The 12 include a North Ossetian politician and a former Special Forces agent, but most are from a relatively narrow social circle. They have no real strategy to connect with other milieus, or with the majority of voters who have “chosen order over freedom”, as Panyushkin summarises the voters’ contract with Putin. “The Solidarity movement, of which nothing will ever come” is mentioned in passing, but the reasons for its failure are not explained. The Russian dissidents have no real outreach to the working class or to ordinary white collar Russians (once dismissively described by Gleb Pavlovsky as “office plankton”), to the new middle class that vested its hopes in Medvedev or the small businessmen and women who are now moving their money out of Russia.

Democracy is not just about the “other Russia”, it’s also about other people. But the majority of those whom Panyushkin describes have no empathy with economic, quotidian concerns. Panyushkin’s postscript is underwhelmed by the protests that broke out in 2009, as “the reason for the protests will not be the absence of freedom that oppresses us but the tariffs on the import of foreign cars, cars that people evidently need more than they do freedom”.

Panyushkin’s introduction makes the opposition look solipsistic. He conveys his sense of enjoyment in the act of dissent itself, his “effervescent pre-march excitement”, and describes his friends leaning over a map of St. Petersburg to plan the “Dissenters’ March” by candlelight. Their “shadows rose to the ceiling and flickered on the uneven walls. The whole picture looked like it had been painted by Georges de Latour”. The bunker of Eduard Limonov’s National Bolshevik party is a place for inter-activist romances where “Limonov would buy everybody beer out of party funds. This was what the revolution was like”.

Masha Gaidar drifts away from her original programme of “positive action”, when she would document policemen at train stations targeting late passengers for lengthy document checks to ensure easier payment of bribes. She ends up hanging from a Moscow bridge in a PR stunt, having concluded that passengers would rather pay bribes. At one point, Panyushkin worries about his friends’ obsession with the TV impact of their actions, as they try and make sure their gift of flowers to the returning Kasparov, captures international media attention: “What has to happen for these dear and decent people, whom I deeply admire, to stop calculating just for a moment how many seconds of air time they are going to get?”

Of course it is the regime which has systematically harassed and weakened the opposition, but the opposition is also handicapped by its failure to reinvent itself and reassess what went wrong in the 1990s. There is no sense in Panyushkin’s book that the self-appointed “democrats” might have an image problem. The Kremlin’s éminence grise, Vladislav Surkov, wafts on and off-stage, plotting and scheming; but there is no sense that his critique of the 1990s might resonate with many ordinary voters.

That being said, the book’s strength is its telling detail. Panyushkin describes
“arrest technology”. Solitary pickets are still legal under Russia’s deliberately capricious law, but “crowds, that is illegal pickets,” are not. Dissenters therefore start lonely street vigils, but soon find themselves in jail when the authorities hire fake supporters to join them.

The claustrophobic opposition is haunted by the fear of provocateurs. The crazy Limonovites reappear throughout the book, crashing every party with crazy slogans like “Yes! Death!” and their chant of “Stalin! Beria! Gulag!” to annoy the liberals. Putin’s former economic adviser Andrey Illarionov, on the other hand, is calmly rational. He is shocked by the Limonovites’ “illusion of revolutionariness” and the dangers of putting ordinary people on the front line with Putin’s militia. Unfortunately, he has taken his common sense and decamped to the Cato Institute in the US.

Overall, this is a good, but not a great book – like the Russian opposition themselves. It makes for pretty depressing reading in the end.

Andrew Wilson

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The Poet of the Other Europe

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The claustrophobic opposition is haunted by the fear of provocateurs. The crazy Limonovites reappear throughout the book, crashing every party with crazy slogans like “Yes! Death!” and their chant of “Stalin! Beria! Gulag!” to annoy the liberals. Putin’s former economic adviser Andrey Illarionov, on the other hand, is calmly rational. He is shocked by the Limonovites’ “illusion of revolutionariness” and the dangers of putting ordinary people on the front line with Putin’s militia. Unfortunately, he has taken his common sense and decamped to the Cato Institute in the US.

Overall, this is a good, but not a great book – like the Russian opposition themselves. It makes for pretty depressing reading in the end.

Andrew Wilson

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The Poet of the Other Europe

“I am a Child of Europe... but that is a bitter, sarcastic admission. Undoubtedly, there exist two Europes and it happens that we, inhabitants of the second one, were destined to descend into the heart of darkness of the twentieth century,” the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz said on December 8, 1980, in the Library of the Swedish Academy, during a lecture he delivered on the occasion of receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature. In Andrzej Franaszek’s impressive story about the life of the poet, essayist, translator, novelist, and – last but not least – witness to the times and their colourful character, the fates of different parts of the continent, and more importantly, of people living in Eastern Europe are also one of the book’s key.

“It is good to be born in a small country where nature is on a human scale, where various languages and religions cohabited for centuries. I have in mind Lithuania, a country of myths and of poetry. My family already in the 16th century spoke Polish, just as many families in Finland spoke Swedish and in Ireland, English; so I am a Polish, not a Lithuanian, poet. But the landscapes and perhaps the spirits of Lithuania have never abandoned me,” Milosz explained to the members of the Swedish Academy.

Franaszek, as the biographer of Milosz, pays much attention to the reconstruction of the family roots of his character. He sketches profiles of various relatives, but also describes the reality of Samogitia. He cites the poet’s opinion that “this country has revealed something...that I would call man’s calm homesteading” and “I reached paradise on earth.” Franaszek also points out that in the grange in Szetejnie, where Milosz lived with his mother in the attic, in “the upstairs” the people spoke Polish (although his father told jokes in Russian), while “those downstairs,” working for his
father, spoke Lithuanian. At the same time, Franaszek argues that “despite the stratification, which soon became a cause of concern for Milosz, the relationship between the family estate and the Lithuanian people were good”. He admits, however, that the idyll then ended and it was difficult to define oneself as a “local” or admit to being both Polish and Lithuanian. Franaszek assiduously describes Vilnius, where Milosz learnt, studied and undertook his first literary attempts. Here ethnic disputes were already clear, and they were intensified by religious conflicts and politics, or rather by the clash between nationalistic ideology (in the form adopted by National Democracy) and the Left (including Communism). The spirit of the times was determined by the memory of the First World War, and the 1917 revolution in particular.

Although Milosz “will never become a typical repatriate, fortunately, he will not experience imprisonment or deportation, the need to be away from the Empire, as far away as possible, was the hidden mainspring of many of his moves”.

The Empire, however, pursued Milosz even across the ocean. Or rather, he himself, out of a sense of duty, could not break free of it. How else can one explain the participation in writing down Aleksander Wat’s memories, which were published in the form of “spoken memoirs” under the self-explanatory title My Century? The book became not only one of the most moving testimonies of the era of the Lubyanka and forced labour camps, but also an extremely thorough analysis of the Soviet system. At the same time, Milosz endlessly repeated Stanisław Brzozowski’s sentiment that anti-Russian resentment intellectually impoverishes Poles, because it obscures the truth about the human condition. That is perhaps why Milosz, in his essay writing, devotes so much attention to the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Boris Pasternak, as well as to the ideas of Leo Shestov.

Interestingly enough, however, when Jerzy Giedroyc came up with the idea to publish in the Literary Institute a Polish translation of Pasternak’s Doctor Zhivago, which had just been awarded the Nobel Prize, Milosz did not show enthusiasm. The distance that Milosz maintained to Doctor Zhivago had a profoundly intellectual dimension. As the poet claimed in a letter to the American poet and writer, Thomas Merton, from this novel there emerges (more discreetly than in Dostoyevsky, though) the old concept of Russia as the chosen people who, through suffering, will save humankind one day and who will show other nations the path to true Christianity. Meanwhile, the dream of collective innocence achieved through the collective suffering usually results in “sagery” against those who allegedly suffer less or who are guilty of the suffering of the selected ones and other sins in the universe.

During his Nobel lecture, Milosz called attention to other details: “The days when the League of Nations and the United Nations were founded deserve to be remembered. Unfortunately, those dates lose their significance in comparison with another date which should be invoked every year as a day of mourning, while it is hardly known to younger generations. It is August 23rd, 1939. Two dictators then concluded an agreement provided with a secret clause
by the virtue of which they divided between themselves neighbouring countries possessing their own capitals, governments and parliaments. That pact not only unleashed a terrible war; it re-established a colonial principle, according to which nations are not more than cattle, bought, sold, completely dependent upon the will of their instant masters. Their borders, their right to self-determination, their passports ceased to exist”.

And he went on to touch upon a personal thread:

“Anthologies of Polish poetry publish poems of my late friends – Władysław Sebyła and Lech Piwowar, and give the date of their deaths: 1940. It is absurd not to be able to write how they perished, though everybody in Poland knows the truth: they shared the fate of several thousand Polish officers disarmed and interned by the then accomplices of Hitler, and they repose in a mass grave”.

That of course referred to the 1939 Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and to the mass killing of Polish officers in Katyn, so the Polish censorship cut out this part of the Polish Nobel laureate’s lecture without hesitation (and some compatriots then proudly handwrote these paragraphs and then added them to the officially published version of the lecture).

Franaszek describes how the Russian and the Polish secret services closely monitored the Nobel ceremonies. As a consequence, the press attaché at the Embassy of The People’s Republic of Poland in Stockholm reported to the headquarters: “The Embassy of the Soviet Union has judged these events very critically…with regard to the hostility displayed by Milosz and the participation of such a sizeable group of top-level Polish diplomats”. Milosz’s mention of “the three Baltic States” was interpreted by the Soviet diplomats as a reference to Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The Soviet diplomats were outraged by the fact that the Polish Ambassador did not protest against this kind of speech delivered in his presence.

In The Captive Mind Milosz wrote:

“It is true that I cannot stop thinking about the Baltics. Yet I can say something in my defence. Certainly, worry over the fate of nations trampled down by history—that elephant—leads nowhere, and is a proof of sentimentality. This much I grant. The rage one feels on reading sixteenth-century memoirs whose authors, mostly priests, recount the atrocities committed in America by Spanish Conquistadors is senseless. It cannot resurrect the Caribbean population slaughtered by Ponce de Leon, nor shelter the Inca refugees pursued through the mountains by knights fighting with faith and a sword. Those who have been defeated are forgotten forever; and anyone who would look too closely into the record of past crimes or, even worse, try to imagine them in detail, must either turn grey with horror—or become completely indifferent…the records of crime will remain for many years, hidden in some place that is remote and secure; then, a scholar of the future, reaching through dust and cobwebs for the old files, will consider the murders committed as insignificant misdeeds compared with the task accomplished. More probably, however, no such files will exist; for, keeping step with progress, the emperors of today have drawn conclusions from this simple truth: whatever does not exist on paper, does not exist at all”.
In this case it turned out that Milosz was wrong: the Baltics were worth remembering about and it was this fact, among others, that helped them to survive being trampled down by “the elephant of history”. Krzysztof Burnetko
Translated by Tomasz Gąssowski

The Fall of Colossus

Od hegemonii do agonii. Upadek Układu Warszawskiego – polska perspektywa (From Hegemony to Agony: The Fall of the Warsaw Pact – a Polish Perspective).
By: Jerzy M. Nowak.
Publisher: Bellona, Warsaw, 2011.

Research into the history of the Warsaw Pact is chosen less and less as a subject of articles and academic dissertations published in Poland. To many, this area of Polish-Russian relations seems rather dull and uneventful. The declining years of the Warsaw Pact are generally thought of as the fall of the house of cards, referring to the title of a book edited by Vojtech Mastny. Ambassador Jerzy M. Nowak’s 300 pages on the Warsaw Pact insist that such a view is fundamentally flawed.

The book From Hegemony to Agony. The Fall of the Warsaw Pact – a Polish Perspective is the first historical and political study fully devoted to two aspects of the subject. First, it provides an analysis of what the Warsaw Pact actually was and what made it such an important instrument of satellitising its member states. Second, it discusses how the collapse of the Warsaw Pact affected Poland’s security policy at the beginning of the 1990s. The author, who witnessed and participated in the decomposition of the Warsaw Pact, debunks several myths regarding this aspect of Polish-Russian relations. The ambassador approaches the subject with a cocktail of inquisitiveness, thorough knowledge and diplomatic tact, drawing on the 50 years of his exceptional experience in the diplomatic service (1960-2010).

In the first chapter, the author provides a unique account in questioning a commonly held theory that the Warsaw Pact functioned as a mirror image of NATO, providing detailed analysis of a whole set of differences between the two alliances: “the dictate of the leading empire, marginalisation of smaller states, superficiality of both the organisational union and of the collegiality of decisional procedures, lack of political and civil control over the army, a low degree of transparency, poor strategic culture and an ideologically formulated military doctrine”.

The subsequent chapters focus on the position of Poland in the Warsaw Pact and particularly examine issues of structure and personnel during the last years of the organisation. Ambassador Nowak treats this last aspect with great flexibility, as it reveals the inner workings of Polish diplomacy at the end of the 1980s. The ambassador’s personal memories might evoke mixed feelings in the reader. In 1980, the author, along with Ambassadors Zdzisław Rurarz and Jan Woźnowski, collected documentation to be later presented to the Ministry of
Foreign Affairs. The goal was to convince the authorities of the need to broaden the degree of independence in Polish foreign policy toward “finlandisation”. As a result, the materials were destroyed and the authors reprimanded.

The chapter “Regaining Sovereignty: Finlandisation the Polish Way or Diplomatic Tactics?” holds a special place in the book. The ambassador concludes here that Warsaw was not inclined to “finlandise” Polish foreign policy and security with regard to the Warsaw Pact, and instead chose the path of diplomatic tactics toward a peaceful dissolution of the pact. The author also writes extensively about the attitudes of major Western empires and NATO towards transformation in Central Europe. These policies often lacked clarity and for the satellite states of the Soviet Union who wished to regain full sovereignty. The ambassador reviews various western ideas concerning the reform of the European security system after 1989; including those presented by George Kennan, Zbigniew Brzeziński and Henry Kissinger. The central theme of the chapter, however, remains the Polish issue.

Selected documents discussing the final phases of the Warsaw Pact, placed at the end of the book, provide added value. Moreover, the interviews and quotes by Ambassador Nowak are a factual supplement which makes the book exceptionally interesting. The interviews that the author conducted with Wojciech Jaruzelski and Franciszek Puchała, whose responsibilities within the Polish General Staff included cooperation with the Warsaw Pact, are truly fascinating.

The book by Ambassador Jerzy M. Nowak is a captivating read that illustrates a colourful picture of Polish diplomacy at the time of the collapse of the Warsaw Pact. The fact that the author does not strictly follow any conventions of academic writing engages the reader by adopting an original form, peppering the text with anecdotes and memories. Thanks to this, the difficult subject of security is presented in a more accessible way and the discussion of “the Polish perspective” becomes vivid with the author’s lively descriptions of the characters involved in the fight for regaining full sovereignty by Poland. It is a compulsory read both for experts on security and for those deeply interested in world diplomacy shown from the inside.

Dominik Jankowski
Translated by Agnieszka Rubka

Ridge and Border


“Here, once again; and, as usual, everything looks different”. This is possibly one of the most important statements in the book, and it says a lot. Wojciech Górecki’s *Toast za przodków* (*Toast to the Ancestors*) is a sum of the author’s knowledge of this part of the world where he spent a good part of his life. The book describes Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia, in other words, the South Caucasus. In a way, the book complements (the author prefers to talk about a “loose continuation”) his earlier published book, *Planeta Kaukaz* (*Planet Caucasus*). The title of the second, though it deals only with the North Caucasus, perfectly completes his work.

Wojciech Górecki has travelled vastly across the Caucasus. He visited all three states of the Southern Caucasus and each republic of the Russian Federation on the northern side of the mountain range. He visited the most unreachable areas of the region, which is often believed to be one of the most dangerous places imaginable. He has talked to people, from presidents to poor shepherds whom he met on mountain trails. His works, a culmination of his travels, meetings and research, provide an easily digestible understanding of a very complex region.

To be fair to all readers, I should admit that I am the mysterious character that you may find on the pages of both books who appears as “Jacek”. Naturally, this makes my review of Górecki’s Caucasus books extremely difficult. However, this is not due to personal reasons. Despite the passage of time, the Caucasus I remember has been blurred by the Caucasus I read about in Górecki’s books.

Personally, I would write a completely different book, and this is not to say that both publications are mediocre. In *Toast za przodków*, the author reveals his impressive knowledge of the region, with no single factual mistake I can find. To put it simply, the truth is that everyone who has at least once been to the Caucasus has his or her own understanding of the Caucasus.

Despite its relatively small size, it is a completely separate continent. Or, as Górecki wants us to believe, it is an entirely separate planet. It is all too diverse to fall into a clear-cut description. Linguists will look at this region differently than ethnologists, and, perhaps even more so, journalists, searching the region for the next sensational story. Finally, the person who happens to live there, in an ordinary, everyday life, has his or her own completely different perspective. Which begs the question; does an average resident of the region, living in some specific place in the Caucasus, even perceive it as a whole? Can he or she even think in terms of a general Caucasus?

I doubt it. If so, such people would be extremely rare. Even those who spent years digesting analyses of the general problems of this “planet” confirm a loose relation between their earlier knowledge and reality.

Górecki talks about a trip to Makhachkala, the capital of Dagestan. He describes a visit to a house of a Lezgian family, “The host had a little bell, which he would use for communication with his family. Ding, ding, and the wife would come. With a gesture he would point to an empty bowl or a carafe. The wife would disappear in the kitchen and after a few seconds come back with a piece of roast or pour some wine. ‘A typical oriental macho,’ thought
the guest. At night the guest woke up thirsty and dragged himself to the kitchen. He saw that the macho was there doing the chores. He had just finished doing the dishes and was about to peel some potatoes. His wife and sons were sound asleep”.

Kakheti is a wine region known for traditional Georgian hospitality. While visiting it, Górecki, a foreigner, was treated with more honours than many presidents who pay official visits to foreign countries. Georgian feasts are known for their long toasts made by the *tamadas*, the hosts of the party, whose oratory talents have become a national pride. During one such long toast, an interpreter finally gave up and briefly explained to Górecki what was happening, “It is all about the same thing, just in different words”.

A mountain *aul* (a typical mountainous village built of stone found throughout the Caucasus – editor’s note) in Azerbaijan really lies at the end of the earth. Its stone houses are in the foreground of high mountains. On one occasion the reporter visited a local museum to look at the old issues of the Koran. He asked the boy who was opening the door a typical “how are things?” question. “Things are difficult,” the boy responded, “very difficult. No work, no money, no mobile phone signal; like in the Middle Ages”.

Tradition and modernity. In the Caucasus these concepts have little real meaning. People try to categorise the Caucasus with labels like “Asia” or “Europe”. It is neither the former nor the latter, but rather former and latter together.

How to come close to these people? Górecki does not limit himself to being just an observer. He talks to people, interacts with them. Contrary to the image broadcast by the Western media that shows the region as an arena for constant wars and terrorist attacks, such human interactions are not difficult to enter into. “It is sometimes enough to smile on a minibus and have a small talk with a travel companion; or to sit next to someone on a bench in a park and hear the story of someone’s life, children, history, religion and the universe. Actually, one does not even need to start such conversations; the locals will initiate them themselves. They will offer us an apple; ask where we come from and what our name is”.

As a rule, at least until recently, such conversations would end with an invitation to their house for dinner, generously accompanied by vodka and the host begging the guest to spend the whole night with them. Of course, it is quite nice for the guest. The smiles, the openness and friendly attitudes, in exchange for some interest, are not a result of a convention, but come from the depth of the Caucasian heart. Nicely indulged by the ancient hospitality, we can yet feel quite surprised when in the most culminating moment of the party, the *tarnada*, after many toasts to all ancestors, will make a toast to Stalin.

In Georgia, this happens quite frequently. One should not forget about the steamroller of sovietisation which came through the Caucasian valleys for over seventy years. As a result, whole nations of the region, whose own history would often date back to antiquity, were successfully deprived of the memory of their own past. The knowledge of their own history was replaced by an ideological mythology bestowed upon the Georgians,
the Armenians, the Azerbaijani, Ossetians, the Ingush, the Chechens and many other peoples of the Caucasus. The theme was the same everywhere; our nation is the oldest and the greatest. We gave the world Joseph Stalin. And, of course, we are also the greatest victims of a neighbouring Caucasian nation. Thankfully all of our miseries are taken care of by a charitable Soviet government.

It has been twenty years since the Big Brother left the Southern Caucasus, the Brother who was watching Tbilisi, Yerevan, and Baku from behind mounts Elbrus and Kazbek. And yet the old scheme still works there. It works flawlessly as shown during the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, which was sparked by a conflict over the South Ossetia. The relations between the Armenians and the Azerbaijani are effectively blocked by a dispute over the Nagorno-Karabakh. The Ossetians remain an enemy to the Ingush and the Karachay or Balkar a foe to the Ossetians. The curse of the Caucasus, whose name is division, remains in its power.

The legendary fortress in the Georgian city of Surami lies in a watershed, dividing the basin of the rivers Rioni and Kura. The first one flows into the Black Sea while the second one reaches the Caspian. In the Rioni valley the scenery resembles the Mediterranean, while in the Kura Valley, in Azerbaijan, one may feel the hot breath of Central Asian deserts. Nature goes hand-in-hand with history. For centuries the Byzantine and Ottoman Turk troops would march up Mount Rioni, while from the Kura side the Persian and Mongolian armies would approach Georgia. One could say that under the walls of the Surami fortress, Asia meets Europe, even though this is, in fact, the middle of Georgia.

Ridge and border; these two words express the essence of this mountainous area. The Caucasus is full of such ridges: some divide nations, others run across territories inhabited by people speaking the same language. There is no simple rule. The entire Caucasus could be treated as one large ridge, but one cannot generalise. The truth about the Caucasus is revealed in stages, like a palimpsest – the word is actually the title of the one of the chapters of *Toast za przodków*. The peoples of the Caucasus, with their openness and friendly attitude towards others, remain shy in some parts of their personalities. Here there are truths which are available to foreigners and the truths which are shared only with one’s own people.

A serious barrier, underestimated by the outsiders, is language, or rather the plurality of indigenous languages in the region. While an average European can, at least in theory, learn Georgian, Armenian or Azeri, he or she will not be able to learn them all at once, along with the many other small languages of Northern and Eastern Caucasus. The problem lies in the fact that the languages of the Caucasian people express everything that is important to them and in the most authentic way.

This problem particularly affects Polish journalists and writers. Poles have little difficulty in learning Russian and use this language to communicate with the people of the Caucasus, where this language is commonly understood, especially in the South. In the North, however, Russian is
a language of communication between different nations. Thus, it is easy to assume that no-one has problems with using the Russian language. Yet, here is where the trap is set. The ease with which Poles establish contacts in the Caucasus causes a practical obstacle for their further deepening. Satisfied with the answers we receive in Russian, we are not aware that maybe now is the time to ask the most important and the most painful questions. Such questions can be only formulated in a language that is close to the heart of our interlocutor. 

It seems that Wojciech Górecki, a remarkable specialist in the Caucasus, is quite aware of this limitation. He has learnt Azeri, which is perhaps why the Azeri part of the Toast za przodków is the largest in terms of volume and the greatest in terms of depth.

“In his time, many Khinalug words, sayings and fables died out,” Górecki writes of a lonely bard in one of the small, mountainous nations of Azerbaijan. “They died, because life changed. When people stopped playing the zurna (a Caucasian musical instrument), people forgot the word zurna. When the last dignified people left, the word meaning dignity left with them.”

This is one of the hidden truths about the Caucasus. Dignity, although nobody says this word openly, appears in both of Górecki’s books in conversations with politicians, academics, and common people he met in villages or mountain trails. The need for dignity is most often formulated through the words, “we can be poor as long as we are not being insulted”. Even though the word dignity is already history, the nostalgia remains.

This nostalgia is clearly visible, even to those who do not speak the Khinalug language.

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A Study of the Phenomenon of Alexander Lukashenko

Last month, Valery Karbalevich unveiled his biography of Alexander Lukashenko printed by the Russian publishing house Partisan. It is another biography of the controversial Belarusian president who has been in office continuously since 1994. It is the first time, though, that we get to see such a deep, reliable and extensive analysis of Lukashenko’s life, his personality formation and how these all relate to his policies.

Laboriously and methodically, like a medieval chronicler, the writer reviews and assesses Lukashenko’s behaviour and opinions regarding a number of issues; from the strategic partnership with Russia to the purchase of new harvesters for kolkhozy. In this way the author reveals Lukashenko’s far-reaching ignorance in most areas of state management. At the same time, he shows the president’s inclination to control everything and interfere

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Translated by Iwona Reichardt

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Alexandr Lukashenko. Politicheskij Portret, Valery Karbalevich

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in almost every aspect of life, a typical attribute of authoritarian leaders.

The author draws attention to the childhood and adolescence of Lukashenko. He was born as an illegitimate child, brought up by a single mother in one of the villages in the east of the Belarusian Soviet Republic. As a child, he suffered intense humiliation, not fitting in well in social situations. This is what has probably led to his vindictive and oversensitive response to criticism and the creation of his unlimited ambition. However, as Karbalevich aptly argues, being stubborn and ambitious does not explain the phenomenon of a man who, formerly a sovkhoz director and an unruly deputy, became the first Belarusian president in the modern history of the country and remains in office until today.

The author claims that Lukashenko is a natural political talent with the gift of intuition making him sensitive to public feeling and the needs of society. Therefore, during his career, he has satisfied the need of society for a strong, effective leader.

The president turned out to be not just an efficient tribune of the people but also a shrewd political strategist on the international political arena. Playing the EU and Russia against each other – both with opposing political interests with regard to the Belarusian question – he manoeuvred skilfully between them, benefitting both politically and economically. In the meantime, he suppressed and even eliminated any internal opposition to such an extent that he became the sole real guarantor of stability and order in Belarus, making his position even stronger in negotiations with foreign partners.

The book by Karbalevich gives a unique opportunity to follow the development of the president’s views and his activities in the context of his whole life. Karbalevich puts particular emphasis on the period of Lukashenko’s presidency. Throughout the book, Karbalevich gradually illustrates that the man, despite the passage of time in the world, has actually not changed at all. He still favours a command economy, rigorous economic planning, tight control and a welfare state. And even though it has been 20 years since the USSR collapsed, he still exercises its policies.

This stability of feelings and views is also the president’s greatest weakness, as he is not able to overcome certain mental barriers. Consequently, Karbalevich reaches the conclusion that Lukashenko depends entirely on the system he created and will never give up power voluntarily. In fact, it is difficult to imagine him watching on Belarusian TV the swearing-in ceremony of another president of the Republic of Belarus.

This opinion is confirmed by the events which took place after the publishing of the book on December 19. Quite irrationally, Lukashenko gave in to emotions, fearing excessive democratisation; he ordered the dispersal of a demonstration of many thousands of his opponents protesting against the fraudulent presidential election in December. That event sparked large scale repressions against the opposition, independent media and social organisations. The autocratic regime, despite the efforts of the EU and Russia, became even stronger.

The events, unfortunate for those Belarusians who think differently, paradoxically seem to have positive overtones for the
author himself. This makes the book even more valuable, and it is at the moment one of the major studies explaining both the specific character of Lukashenko’s system as well as his personality profile, which has great impact on the future course of events.

With 700 pages, the book requires great commitment on the part of the reader as well as interest in contemporary Belarus. So far the book has only been translated into Russian.

*Alexander Lukashenko. A Political Portrait* is ideal for those who have some knowledge of Belarus, but are still intrigued by the phenomenon that is Alexander Lukashenko – a man who has created a slightly modernised, unique mini-version of the former USSR.

Kamil Kłysiński
Translated by Bogdan Potok

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**The Story of the Last Man Standing**

*Kochegar* – a film

Directed by Aleksey Balabanov, Russia, 2010.

The Russian filmmaker Aleksey Balabanov, known for his personal style with long scenes, minimalist acting, deafening silence and strong music playing in the foreground, uses all of his trademark elements to make it easy for the viewer to recognise *Kochegar (The Stoker)* as a Balabanov piece. His latest film premièred in Russia in August 2010 at the “Window for Europe” festival in Vyborg and was also featured at the International Film Festival Rotterdam in January 2011.

The director’s unique style became recognisable largely due to the film *Brother* (1997), starring Sergei Bodrov as the lead. The story, set in Russia in the mid 1990s, was a cult success among the Russian youth. The main hero, a reserved Danila Bagrov, comes to St. Petersburg from the countryside to start a new life and gets involved in criminal activity. The character was hailed as a hero of our time.

After *Brother*, Balabanov’s films received mixed reviews. While some viewers confirmed their belief that the director was a leading Russian filmmaker, others were disappointed. To them the films did not live up to the *Brother’s* cult. The film *Of Freaks and Men* (1999) came as quite a surprise. It employed the convention of the silent film, with succinct expression and an almost exaggerated emphasis on form, pushing the plot to the background.

Balabanov’s films can be divided into two groups. The first includes his artistic films, belonging to the off-cinema genre and often based on literary classics (*Happy Days* based on the writing of Samuel Beckett, *The Castle* based on Franz Kafka, *Morphine* based on Bulgakov’s short stories and the aforementioned *Of Freaks and Men*). The second group includes the films that take place in the Russia of the 1980s and 1990s. Characteristically, they show the cruelty of the times and the struggles of lonely heroes seeking faith and justice. Examples include *Brother*, its sequel *Brother 2* (2000), *Dead Man’s Bluff* (2005), *War* (2002) and *Cargo 200* (2007).
The latest film, *Kochegar*, is hard to put into any of these categories, even though it is a kind of synthesis of many of Balabanov’s prior ideas. The film is grim. Like *The Brother* it has references to Dostoyevsky’s writing and his eternal questions on the limits of freedom and the search for justice in a world where “there is no God so everything is allowed”. While the plot of the film fits into the second group of Balabanov’s films, the form brings it closer to the artistic *Of Freaks and Men*.

*Kochegar*, which depicts the story of a major from Yakutia who works and lives in a dirty boiler room, can be easily considered an off-film. Its budget was quite small (183 thousand dollars) and the filming took only 18 days. Mikhail Sryabin, the lead, was the only professional actor. The remaining cast consisted of mostly amateur actors. Many were simply the director’s friends.

The plot of the film is based on a simple story. Yet, it is not devoid of mystery and ambiguities. The main character, a major and former Soviet war hero who had been injured during the war in Afghanistan, lives and works in a dirty boiler room. In his free time, he taps out a story on his typewriter. The story, *Khailakh* – set in 19th century imperial Russia – had already once been written by a Polish writer exiled to Siberia, Wacław Sieroszewski. The quirky *kochegar*, or stoker, is sometimes visited by two girls, Lena and Vera, daughters of Colonel Minayev, an old war comrade. The girls listen to his stories. On a few occasions, the stoker’s daughter, Sasha, appears. Sasha, a Yakut beauty, visits her father only for one reason: his small salary. Sometimes, his combat comrades come to visit as well. Unlike the main hero, these veterans have been quite successful in the new Russian reality. They trade in arms, gamble and do contract killings. They only visit their ex-superior to burn the bodies of the dead in his furnaces.

Balabanov’s main hero is an example of what in Russian culture is referred to as a “little man”, a person who is pushed to the margin and humiliated. The picture of Peter I, whose reproduction hangs above the stoker’s bed, is a symbol of this degradation. In this context, Balabanov’s film can be interpreted as a voice of support for the discriminated and the humiliated. The film can also be interpreted as a protest against the country’s expansive policy which led it into the war in Afghanistan. It also fits into Russia’s literary tradition. It is easy to notice some similarity between the stoker and the heroes of Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol or Fyodor Dostoyevsky, especially in his first novels. It was the system of administration implemented by Peter I which made them unnecessary “little men” and forced them to live in the “underground”.

Watching *Kochegar*, one may get the impression that the major consciously chose life in the underground. Just like Kluchariov in Vladymyr Makanin’s story *Manhole* who holed up in a hideout to escape from the evils of the world. He resembles the figure of a *yurodivy*, an old Russian “fool-for-Christ” who chose the life of a hermit. The injuries he suffered during the war are signs of the hero’s “foolishness”, which made him unable to live in society, just as his reticence and conscious decision to stay in a place full of decadence and crime.
The outside world seems of no interest to the major. His underground life runs its own regular, slow course. Time stands still in the boiler room. Its passage is only indicated by the burning coals and his daughter’s monthly visits. Even the writing of the story is repetitive. The stoker reaches a certain point in his writing and then restarts it all over again. Yet the boiler room is no escape from evil and the major is forced to face injustice. His daughter’s death forces him to put on his military uniform, leave his haven and seek revenge. And yet an “eye-for-an-eye” brings no relief. The stoker turns out to be just like everybody else. In the end, he commits suicide in front of the open furnace, the burial site of his daughter and hundreds of nameless corpses.

On the surface, Balabanov’s form is minimalistic and unsophisticated. The sparse dialogues are interrupted by long scenes of feet marching in the snow, people driving, or the main character tending the furnace and chipping away at an old, noisy typewriter. Music is also a characteristic element of Balabanov’s style. It blares forcefully in the foreground, almost drowning out the dialogue. The music and the catchy guitar cuts from the Belarusian guitarist, Vasily Didulin, not only create the background but rather become one of the main heroes of the film. Its role is to create the feeling of a purposeful incongruence of the elements in the world. A perfect example is one of the final scenes: the main hero, after committing his act of revenge returns to the boiler room. The background song *Hystery* played by the Russian rock band Agatha Christie is in sharp contrast with his inscrutable, expressionless face.

Contrast is a predominant feature of the film. It is most seen in the music, which is purposefully incongruent with the scenes. Opposite elements recur in almost every scene, which makes the film similar to a musical composition – a symphony of fire and snow. The silent and meek major is contrasted with a lively
sergeant, while the subtle daughter of the stoker is contrasted with the sergeant's vulgar daughter. Light music is played over heavy action.

With such simple form and plot Balabanov has created a multidimensional story rich with symbols and cultural references. The boiler room itself is one of the most meaningful symbols. It becomes a metaphor for a crematorium. The major can be called a fire keeper, a guide accompanying the dead to the place of burial. The major's origin is also relevant. He belongs to the Yakut nation, which still cultivates shamanism.

The story of the stoker can be seen as Balabanov's attempt to seek justice at a time when "there is no God and everything is allowed". Man becomes God. The stoker also becomes a hero who, just like Daniila Bagrov in Brother, undertakes a lonely attempt to destroy the evils of the world. But, like his predecessor, the major is a man full of faults. In the end, his actions bring more evil than good.

Ewa Maria Kaźmierczak
Translated by Bogdan Potok

(No) News from Belarus?


In Poland, the media give extensive coverage to political events in Belarus. Its history, literature and music have also receive more attention lately. However, visual arts do not arouse much interest in Poland. The exhibition Opening the Doors? Belarusian Art Today hosted at the Warsaw art gallery, Zachęta, may be the first significant presentation of Belarus' contemporary art, but will it change the level of interest?

Kęstutis Kuizinas, curator of the exhibition, which was on display earlier at the Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius, made a pertinent observation: "Everyone in Vilnius knows that Minsk is in fact somewhere not far away. But only when you go there do you realise that Minsk is much closer to Vilnius than the Lithuanian port of Klaipeda. However, when you wait half an hour or an hour in the queue at the border, the distance increases".

Where does this ambivalence of perception of the neighbour come from? And why is Belarusian art so little known? The only explanation for this can be the political situation. Other reasons may perhaps include the lack of knowledge or personal contact with the Belarusian people. Belarusian art does not really have a place in the international artistic scene.

The exhibit Opening the Door? does not pretend to represent the whole panorama of the country's art. It tries to draw attention to the important phenomena rather than provide a complete picture. Its initiators, however, decided to take a different, more serious approach. They invited artists who work both in Belarus and the West (as many as a third of the total), some of whom who live permanently in Amsterdam, Berlin or Dusseldorf. The scale of these migrations may come as a surprise, and is well shown by Oxana Gurinovich in her works Artists and Designers I Know who Left Minsk (2003) and Artists and Designers I Know who Returned to Minsk.
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Opening the Door? Belarusian Art Today (2003). The fact that they leave the country is not such a problem, but not being able to exhibit their works in Belarus too often is. The picture of Belarusian art is thus incomplete. Moreover, there is no discourse about Belarus which could be contested and challenged. That gives the curators carte blanche, but also exposes them to charges of latitude.

Generally, the exhibition features works by artists of middle to younger generations, those born in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. However, some older artists are also on display, such as Vladimir Tsesler and Sergei Voichenko. Marina Naprushkina’s The Anti-Propaganda Bureau is a surprisingly effective display of an archaic method of propaganda. In 2007, Napurshkina set up an archive of video materials, texts and pictures, documenting various manifestations of Lukashenko’s propaganda. Postcards, books and photographs where Belarusian sportsmen display their chests proudly are next to photographs of war veterans and of course the president himself; sometimes in the company of friendly leaders from other countries, Vladimir Putin or Hugo Chavez. In front of the building, another work of Naprushikina is displayed. It is the Way of the Sun, a huge flower bed designed in imitation of the Belarusian KGB emblem. Most do not recognise the symbol. For them it is just another flower bed which evokes no emotions. It is completely neutral. Ironically, it became an integral part of the cityscape, just as the secret services became an inherent part of the Belarusian state. The exhibition reminds us that art is completely immersed in local reality. This was actually one of the main objections raised during the exhibition in Vilnius. When discussing Opening the Door? critic Tatiana Fedorenko wrote that “the politicisation of even non-political topics and subjects is quite embarrassing”. Texts dedicated to the exhibition inform us of the escape of Belarusian art into apolitical neutrality.

Lena Prents, an art historian critically writes about the existence of “anti-contemporary art” in the country which is distinguished by the “concentration on inner problems as opposed to the social world. In contrast, there is anticipation of art which may have the potential for social change”.

Marina Naprushkina, in an interview for the Internet magazine New Europe, put it frankly, “Artists are obviously not able to do everything, but they can initiate changes in society thanks to their art”. So where does the discontinuity between the political involvement in Belarusian art and the content of the exhibition come from? Perhaps viewers expected to see politically involved art? Works of art with unquestionably critical and political overtones were an exception at the exhibit, not the rule. The artists represented at the exhibition in Zachęta prefer to examine the mix of Soviet times and the post-Soviet period. Through their works, the artists present the realities of life under Lukashenko rather than take bold steps. Igor Pieshekhonov, in his work Ironconcrete, Substance of Memory, records the cultural and historical landscape of Belarus. He photographs monuments, built from low quality materials and painted with oil paint, erected in even the tiniest city and village. They symbolise both irony and nostalgia.

The Sun City of Dreams by Artur Klinau is part of a bigger project which consists of collages and texts about the Belarusian capital. Klinau was the first one to take up
the subject of the cityscape and to analyse the assumptions that lay at its core. In *The Sun City of Dreams* he views Minsk in its neo-imperial style. Klinau himself admits that for him this work was an attempt at implementing the old Renaissance idea of an ideal city; modified to fit along the lines of the communist utopia (the author refers directly to *the City of the Sun* by Tommaso Campanelli and *Utopia* by Thomas More). Wide streets, long rows of monumental buildings with classical facades resemble theatre décor rather than a real city.

Political or apolitical art? Belarusian art can hardly be described using commonly accepted categories. Moreover, Belarusian artists do not find it so easy to succeed in the West without knowing its artistic language. “One must speak the language of Western art, to make a great cultural leap forward,” observed Alexander Komarov a few years ago. Speaking the language of Western art does not require imitation, but rather a reflection on one’s own traditions, including their folk character. Vladymir Tsesler and Sergei Voichenko’s work from the series *Lubok* (2002) open the exhibition. They resemble cheap pictures, painted or printed and once sold at marketplaces. Their satirical version was popular around the 1950s. Tsesler and Voichenko make use of that old style to recreate a mix of popular contemporary ideas and images of folk tales, local humour and communist myths. The exhibit *Opening the Door?* truly does leave the door ajar, but not completely open. The exhibit provides an interesting experience, but also leaves a feeling of helplessness about Belarus. Alexander Komarov well illustrates this state of limbo. His work *(No) news from Belarus* (2010) is a printout of the title in question. The phrase “no news from Belarus” may lead us to soon start forgetting about the country. The letters on the fax paper of the printout will fade with time to become eventually illegible, allowing the possibility of forgetting about the problem. Then, there will be no more news from Belarus.

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Marina Napruszkina, *Road to the Sun* (2010). Flowerbed shaped as the symbol of the Belarusian KGB
*Courtesy of the Zachęta National Gallery of Art (Warsaw)