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Location **Church of St. Teresa of Christ Child and the Roman Martyrs in Warsaw, Poland**

Editorial



Back in 1992, **Francis Fukuyama** declared the end of history – the absolute victory of the Western neoliberal democratic system, which rendered future ideological development impossible and redundant. However, in the past year, there has not been a day without unprecedented breaking news. The US and Israel have started a war against Iran, whilst the bloody Russian onslaught on Ukraine continues. For the first time since 2007, the Victory Day parade saw no heavy military hardware presented on Red Square. Hungarians have voted out their authoritarian leader, **Viktor Orban** and his **Fidesz** party, with pro-European **Peter Magyar** securing a constitutional majority. The very next weekend, after years of instability and six elections since 2021, **Rumen Radev** formed a stable majority in the Bulgarian parliament. The wind of change is blowing across the world, with cracks in the post-Cold War order unable to withstand the ever-stronger gusts of unpredictability.

Tomasso Valastro sheds light on one of the primary issues of the post-socialist transition – democracy being undermined by populist rhetoric, sowing the seeds of an authoritarian takeover. **Franzi Gaibler** guides us through the history of one of the most resilient 'institutions' in Poland – the humble **Milk Bars** [pol. Bary Mleczne] – which have fed generations of workers, students and other city dwellers. **Della Pirrie** explores the theme of societal divisions in Northern Ireland and Estonia and how the two nations deal with their long colonial heritage.

Adkhamjon Janobiddinov, our dear guest writer from the *Stockholm School of Economics*, explains how the five nations of Central Asia have managed to set aside national ambitions for the sake of regional cooperation. **Ayaan Mohamoud** reflects upon the fragmented nation stuck in transition – Bosnia and Herzegovina, thirty years after the signing of the Dayton Accords. **Isaac Steinmeyer** takes us on a journey back in time to pre-independence Kyrgyzstan, walking us through the intricacies of backroom Kyrgyz politics amid the collapse of the Red Empire. Finally, **Kacper Regulski** also shared some of the board's thematic film selections, including gems from Romania, Poland and Kyrgyzstan.

Kacper Regulski and Leo Ooms
Editors-in-Chief of Gazeta Sasha

Location **Osiedle Południe, Zawiercie, Poland**

Chair's Greetings

The theme of this issue is "Transition", a fitting theme for the first main issue of the year, when both the editors of Gazeta and the board of Sasha ry have changed since last year. Although the spring season is busy and filled with mandatory work in both the study and association world, I feel like we have started with great energy. There are constantly new ideas discussed and events being planned. That is entirely thanks to the active and resourceful membership of *Sasha ry*, who do not hesitate to bring their ideas forward and act to make them a reality!

Moving on to a Master's program often means taking some distance from the active student life of Bachelor students. In the case of *Sasha*, I am very happy there is an exception. It has been a great pleasure to gather together with our members from multiple study programs and backgrounds and enjoy our common interests.

There are many things planned for this year, and I hope they all come to fruition. Our biggest project for the year will be a study excursion to Warsaw in late August, which we are finalising with our partners. An international study trip is an enormous feat for an organization of our size, but I have no doubt in my mind we will make it happen – and have a blast while doing it.

I have been active in numerous different organizations during my student life. Along with the important paper (or PDF) at the end of the tunnel, I feel like the most important takeaway from my time at university has been the joy that comes from working together towards a common goal and being helpful to others. Sasha ry is a great place to do just that, and I'm immensely grateful to be among all of the smart and talented people who show up at our events and make sure everyone is having a good time. Here's to another year of community!

Armin Kellomäki
Chair of Sasha ry



ULKOMAISTEN AGENTTIEN

Foreign agent summer picnic

KESÄPIKNIK



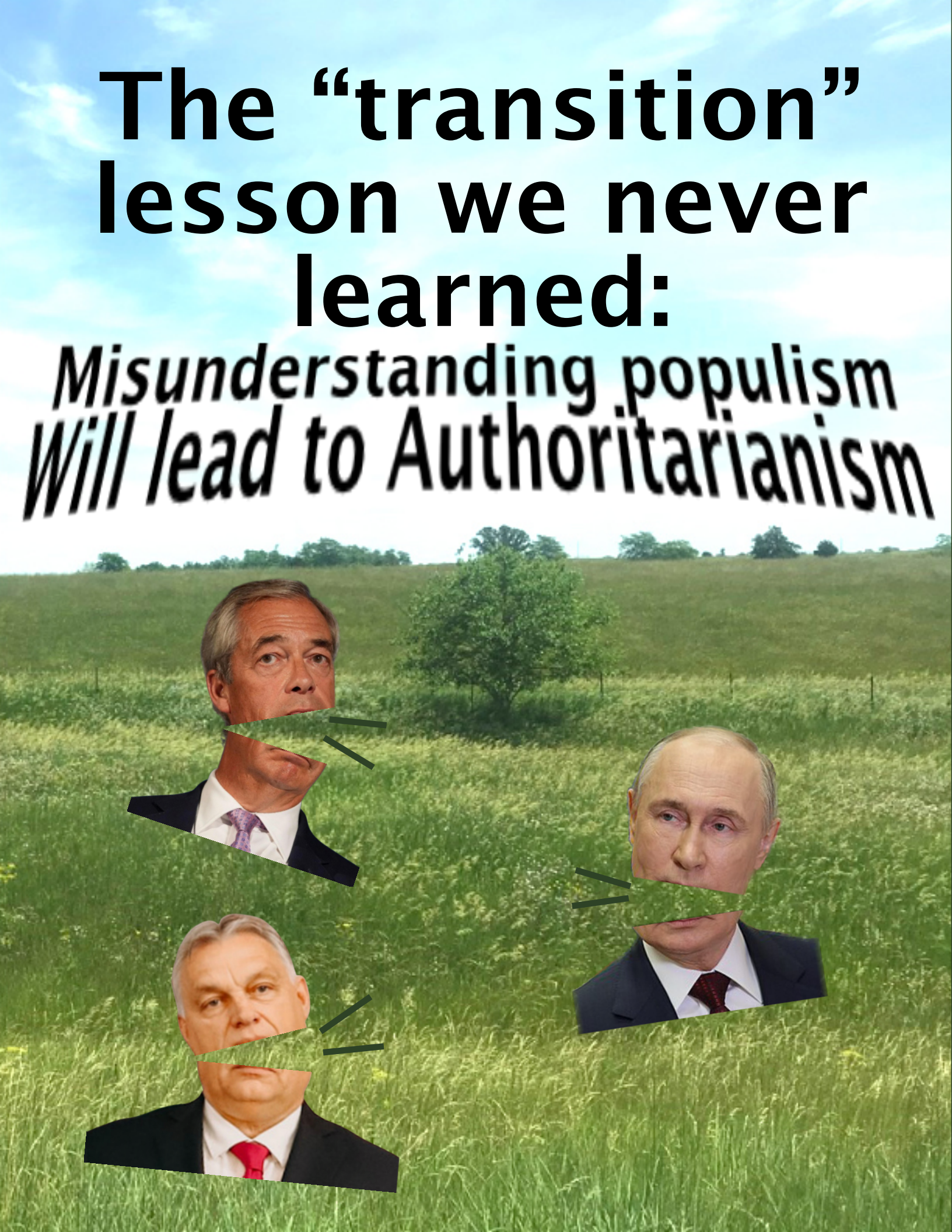
Bring and protect
new and old students,
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Welcome
new students of
ExpREES studies!

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The “transition” lesson we never learned:

Misunderstanding populism Will lead to Authoritarianism



Text — Tommaso Valastro (University of Helsinki)

In the 1990s, many post-socialist states embarked on radical economic transitions. Within a few years, a wave of anger swept anti-reform populists into power, steering several of these countries down an authoritarian path. Thirty years later, a similar backlash to the globalization transition is propelling populists to power across the democratic world, from the United States to France, Germany, and Italy. What lesson did we fail to learn?

While the late twentieth-century surge of economic globalization marked a turning point for post-industrial economies, it was accompanied by a dramatic increase of the relative weight of populist parties in democratic politics. Thus far, most attempts at defining the reasons behind this phenomenon simply converge on the awareness that "the people" seem to particularly dislike "something" about this transition. Yet, the experts have hardly reached a consensus on what exactly is disliked by what people. This article maintains that neither immigration nor inequality are the problem, and no policy aimed merely at reducing them will solve it. What populist voters want, above all, is a fair chance.

Drawing the wrong lessons

Heracles thought he could kill the Hydra by cutting off its heads, but each swing of the sword only made the beast stronger. Populist rage works the same way. We keep attacking its visible heads — inequality or immigration — when the beast is kept alive by something deeper: the sense that the game itself is rigged[1].

For both scholars and practitioners of populism, immigration has become the perfect scapegoat. On the one hand, successful populism has mostly developed within a right-wing xenophobic environment, where anti-immigration discourse flourishes[2]. On the other hand, the success of such enterprises has led researchers to conclude that maybe populism could have been prevented by restrictive immigration policies (see Kaufmann, 2018). To be sure, immigration has significantly increased in many countries, and populist voters do hold anti-immigration views (fig. 1). However, no robust evidence so far demonstrates that the actual phenomenon of immigration has caused people to hold populist attitudes.

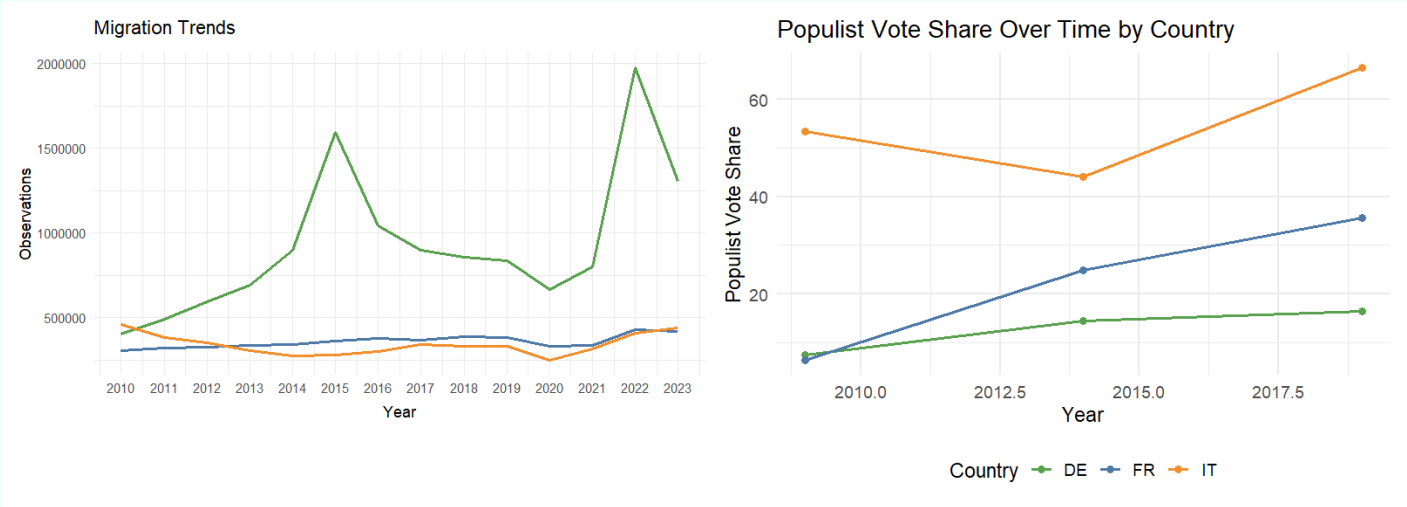


Fig. 1 – Migration trends and European parliament outcomes in Germany, France, and Italy. Source: Eurostat

[1] This argumnt heavily relies on the work on economic fairness by Guriev (2018a) and Protzer and Summerville (2021).
[2] For an introduction to populism and its recent right-wing success, see Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017).

In fact, most proposers of this "immigration hypothesis" cannot go beyond the observation that survey respondents with anti-immigration views tend to vote for populist parties, which is the equivalent of observing that populist parties are elected by voters with populist attitudes[3]. In other words, they usually lack an explanation of why such attitudes emerged.

A more complex way of tying the success of right-wing populism to immigration contends that voting for xenophobic parties has always been explained by a materialist cultural backlash, with the recent success of such parties being the result of increased economic insecurity[4]. Indeed, less favorable views of migration often translate in more authoritarian attitudes (fig. 2). However, the attribution of populist attitudes to the effect of increased inequality requires more careful scrutiny.

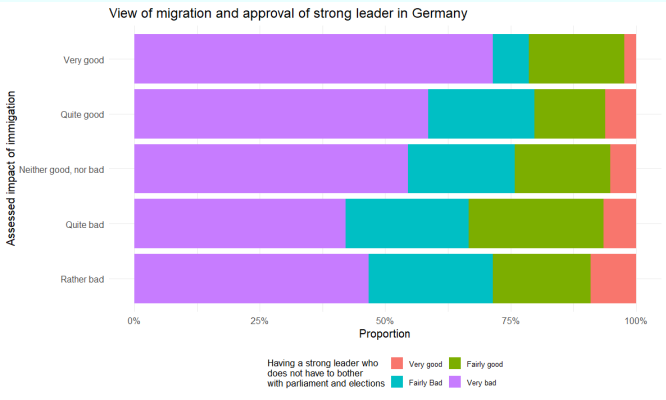


Fig. 2 – Authoritarian attitudes decrease with positive views of migration. Source: WVS wave 7 - Germany.

Among the hydra heads of populism, economic inequality has been by far the most targeted for a long time. In the face of the backlash against the 2008 financial crash, Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz accused neoliberal policies of producing excessive inequality and undermining the social contract of democratic societies (see Stiglitz, 2012). Within this framework, a long-lasting, inequality-driven reading of contemporary political grievances has developed, with authors like Thomas Piketty at the forefront (Piketty, 2014). Similarly, other authors have argued that excessive inequality produces a narrow elite that is capable of rigging institutions in their favor[5], and a look at the data on rising inequality may lead to reasonable concerns (fig. 3).

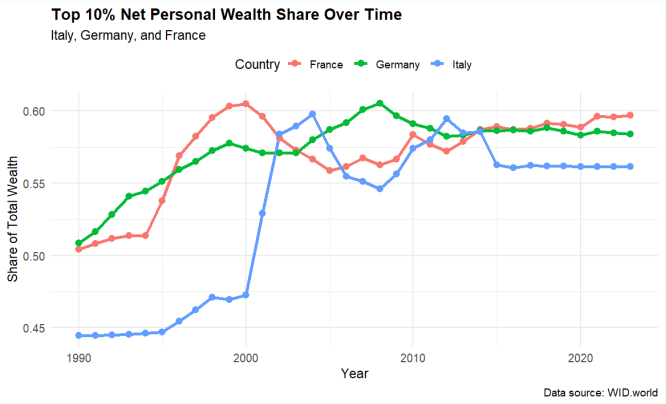


Fig. 3 – Share of wealth by top 10% in France, Germany, and Italy. Source: WID.

But there is a catch. The various measures of inequality of economic outcomes do not account for the fairness of the process producing them. Would people still support populist politics if they felt like everybody had a fair chance at increasing their wealth? The evidence says it would be unlikely[6].

First, while not all unequal societies are experiencing a populist backlash, populism has gained significant traction in contexts in which inequality is low. For example, despite a comparatively high wealth inequality, Australia has so far resisted the populist drift, while a populist party dominated Dutch politics for two

[3] This "attitudes on attitudes" problem in studying populism has been well documented by Protzer and Summerville (2021).
[4] See Inglehart and Norris (2017) for an introduction; Norris and Inglehart (2019) for an extensive review.
[5] This perspective gained traction with the work of Acemoglu and Robinson (2012).
[6] The argument for economic fairness is laid out systematically by Protzer and Summerville (2021).
[7] The main populist party in Australia is Pauline Hanson's One Nation (PHON). Since the Bondi Beach shooting in December 2025, this party gained approximately ten percentage points in opinion polls, reaching about 25% of consent for the next federal elections. Despite this recent, possibly contingent success, it still remains far below the Labor party as of March 2026.

years despite much lower levels of inequality[7].

Second, the evidence advanced in support of the inequality argument presents some key methodological flaws, including the overlap of insecurity and inequality. Finally, the idea that unequal economic outcomes are a source of resentment overlooks the extensive evidence that people systematically seek reward according to contribution, regardless of equality (see Starmans et al., 2017). This is the lesson of the post-socialist transition to capitalism —and we never learned it.

Post-socialist transitions and economic fairness

In the 1990s, many former communist societies embarked in a transition attempt to transform their planned economies into market economies. In doing so, all of them became more unequal. Some of them experienced a populist backlash against market reform, precipitating into crony capitalism and authoritarianism as a result[8]. Some, instead, carried out the necessary reforms and transitioned with relative success.

This variety of outcomes produced a wider scholarly debate, which came to be known as the "transition literature"[9]. As with every major transformation, worries were concentrated on potential backlash by the possible "losers of the transition" (See Offe, 1994; Bohle and Greskovits, 2012; Greskovits, 2015).

While a debate over the salience of inequality emerged early on, however, the promise of transition to capitalism was about economic fairness[10]. Being the furthest away from the principle of reward according to contribution, planned economies had been based on unfair equality, which ultimately undermined incentives for growth (Guriev, 2018). As a result, market reforms in the 90s were the only way to achieve growth, which in turn made growth the only way to withstand populist backlash. And yet, substantial growth did not prevent populists from taking over in countries like Russia. Why did people back them?

It turns out that people do not reward reforms against unfair equality if they produce a dramatic increase in unfair inequality. Market reforms lost political legitimacy in those countries where they were carried out unfairly, bringing corruption instead of equal opportunities. In Russia, for instance, reforms were applied inconsistently, disproportionately benefiting insiders and generating widespread perceptions of corruption and systemic unfairness (fig. 4). This sense of a rigged system contributed to populist and authoritarian backlash. By contrast, Poland pursued liberalization alongside relatively transparent institutions and mechanisms that promoted fair competition and equal opportunity. Although inequality rose, the perception of procedural fairness helped mitigate populist unrest and supported the consolidation of democracy.

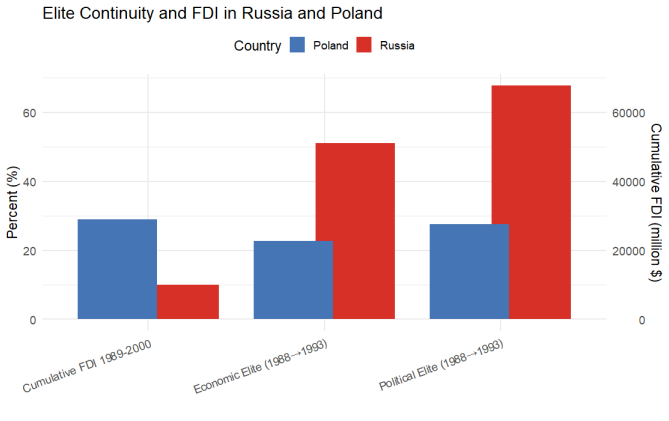


Fig. 4 – Fairness as elite mobility in Russia and Poland. Source: King (2002)

In the aftermath of the first liberalization reforms, residents of transition countries were less likely to

[8] Guriev (2021) mentions Lukashenko, Putin, or Orban as examples.
[9] This "transition paradigm" is tied to the idea of a "triple transformation" (Offe, 1994) turning communist, one-party, and empire-like societies into capitalist, pluralist and nation-state units.
[10] This perspective is well elaborated in Guriev (2018b). For a more critical perspective, see Greskovits (2015).

support reforms if unfair inequality was high—but were more likely to support reforms if inequality was fair, even if it was high[11]. This anti-reform version of populism was our chance to take economic fairness seriously.

Conclusions: un-rigging the game

The recognition of economic unfairness as the main fuel of populism implies the necessity to shift policy interventions from the symptoms to the disease. In the 90s as much as today, effective policy responses must first and foremost be targeted at the various constraints at economic fairness that cause a generalized perception that the system is rigged.

Policy-wise, the path is not always straightforward. In their book "Reclaiming Populism," Protzer and Summerville warn against the risks of "uniform laundry lists of best practices," suggesting instead a diagnostic method aimed at delivering the largest payoff for each context (Protzer and Summerville, 2021). In any case, no policy solution introducing unfair equality is likely to solve unfair inequality, as it targets inequality while leaving unfairness untouched. Failing to learn this lesson, as the post-socialist transition shows, will have painful consequences for the future of our democracies.

In sum, simply addressing inequality will not resolve the deeper fairness deficits fueling populism. Lessons from post-socialist transitions suggest that the focus should be on removing the key barriers to equal opportunity, particularly those limiting social mobility. Only by ensuring a genuinely fair system can we meaningfully respond to populist grievances and steer societies away from authoritarian trajectories.

[11] This argument is developed and tested in Guriev (2021).

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Kolme vuosikymmentä Daytonin rauhansopimuksesta

poliittisia kriisejä sekä menneeseen katsomista

Teksti: Ayaan Mohamoud (Helsingin yliopisto)



30 vuotta on kulunut Dayton rauhansopimuksesta, joka päätti Bosnian sodan ja loi maalle perustuslaillisen viitekehyksen. Dayton toi rauhan Bosniaan, mutta poliittinen stagnaatio ja sisäiset jännitteet jatkuvat. Vuoden 2025 aikana Bosnia koki yhden merkittävimmistä poliittisista kriiseistä sitten 90-luvun. Vietin lukukauden vaihdossa Sarajevon yliopistolla, josta pääsin seuraamaan aitiopaikalta Bosnian tilanteen kehitystä.

Baščaršija, Sarajevo.

Bussi kulkee hidastamatta Montenegron mutkittelevia vuoristoteitä suuntanaan Sarajevo. Ikkunasta avautuu postikortin omainen näkymä jyrkkien kallioiden ympäröimään kanjoniin. Ylitämme rajan Bosnia-Hertsegovinaan (myöhemmin tekstissä Bosnia), ja saavumme Bosnian Serbitasavallan itsehallinnolliselle alueelle. Vielä muutama tunti ehtii pyörähtää ja silmissäni vilisee lukuisia pieniä asutuksia vuorten rinteillä, kunnes kyltit vaihtuivat kyrillisistä latinalaisiin ja saavumme Bosnian federaation itsehallinnolliselle alueelle.

Bosnian sodan päättäneen Daytonin rauhansopimuksen puitteissa maahan luotiin kaksi laajan itsehallinnon omaavaa aluetta sekä keskushallinto, jossa kroaattien, bosniakkien ja serbien väliset valtasuhteet on järjestelty. Järjestely on kuitenkin johtanut poliittiseen stagnaatioon, jossa konsensuksen puute kolmen etnisen ryhmän välillä jarruttaa päätöksentekoa. Lisäksi Serbitasavallan separatistiset pyrkimykset ovat kasvattaneet jännitteitä korostaen yhtenäisyyden puutetta ja poliittisen järjestelmän heikkouksia.

Poliittinen ilmapiiri kärjistyi entisestään helmikuussa 2025, kun Bosnian tuomioistuin tuomitsi Milorad Dodikin, Serbitasavallan presidentin, kuuden vuoden virkakieltoon. Tuomion taustalla oli Dodikin kieltäytyminen seurata Bosnian kansainvälisen yhteisön korkean edustajan (OHR) määräyksiä, jonka mandaatti perustuu Daytonin rauhansopimukseen. Dodik ei poistunut poliittiselta kentältä hiljaisesti tappion hyväksyen, vaan ajoi maan poliittiseen kriisiin haastamalla tuomioistuimen päätöstä ja ajamalla Bosnian keskushallinnon perustuslaillista asemaa kyseenalaistavia lakeja. Kädenvääntö Serbitasavallan ja Bosnian keskushallinnon välillä lisäsi jännitteitä entisestään koetellen maan yhtenäisyyttä.

Lopulta tappio oli hyväksyttävä. Tuomioistuimen päätös jäi voimaan Dodikin valituksesta huolimatta, ja hän menetti presidentin asemansa elokuussa 2025. Serbitasavallassa järjestettiin aikaistetut presidentinvaalit, jonka voitti Dodikin puolueen ehdokas Siniša Karan helmikuussa 2026. Karanin kausi jatkuu lokakuuhun asti, jolloin Dodikin mandaatti olisi myös päättynyt. Vuosi 2026 onkin merkittävä Bosniassa lokakuun yleisvaalien myötä. Serbitasavallan aikaistettujen presidentinvaalien tulosta voidaan pitää suuntaa antavana tuleviin vaaleihin, jossa Dodikin kansallismielinen puolue oletettavasti jatkaa asemansa lujittamista valtapuolueena.

Vuosi 2025 sisälsi niin mittavia poliittisia kriisejä kuin menneeseen katsomista. Silloin tuli kuluneeksi 30 vuotta sodan päättymisestä ja Daytonin rauhansopimuksesta, joka on edelleen kritiikin ja kiistan kohteena. 30 vuotta tuli myös kuluneeksi Srebrenican kansanmurhasta. Tällä kertaa seitsemän uutta vastikään tunnistettua kansanmurhan uhria asetettiin haudan lepoon 11. heinäkuuta, Srebrenican kansanmurhan kansainvälisenä muistopäivänä. Srebrenican muisto jakaa Bosniassa: Bosnian muslimeille se on keskeinen sodan symboli, kun taas Serbitasavalta ei tunnusta tapahtuneita kansanmurhana.

Matka hiljaiseen Srebrenicaan

Odotan asuntoni edessä matkatoimiston auton saapuvan. Hengitykseni huurtuu marraskuun viileänä aamuna ja käyn hakemassa vielä kaulahuivin lämmittämään. Ajamme keskustaan, josta toinen matkalainen liittyy seuraamme. Sarajevon turismi on hiljentynyt tähän aikaan vuodesta, joten olemme päivän ainoat matkustajat. Nappaamme matkan varrella aamukahvit ja aloitamme noin kolmen tunnin matkan kohti Srebrenican kaupunkia Bosnian itäosassa. Matkaoppaamme, Sarajevon piirityksestä selvinnyt keski-ikäinen mies, kertoo sotatarinoita läpi ajomatkan.

Saavumme Srebrenican keskustaan aamupäivällä ja kaupunki on kuin unessa, hiljaisessa horroksessa. Ohitamme autioituneita taloja, joiden julkisivuja läpäisevät lukemattomat luodinreiät. Srebrenica kuuluu Daytonin sopimuksen mukaisesti Serbitasavallan alueeseen. Bosniakit omistavat

edelleen maata alueella ja paluumuutto on ollut vahvaa sodan jälkeen, mutta moni on suosinut muuttoa bosniakki- ja kroaattienemmistöisen federaation alueelle. Bosnian sota on esillä niin Sarajevossa kuin monen muunkin kaupungin julkisivussa, mutta Srebrenicassa vuoden 1995 tapahtuvat ovat erityisen tuntuvasti läsnä.

Heinäkuussa 1995 Bosnian serbijoukot valtasivat YK:n turva-alueella sijainneen Srebrenican ja muutaman päivän sisällä kuolonuhrit ylittivät 8 000 bosnialaista muslimimiestä- ja poikaa. Kansainvälisen yhteisön epäonnistuminen suojella aluetta johti massiiviseen siviileihin kohdistuneeseen kansanmurhaan. Vaikka kansainvälisen tuomioistuimen päätöksestä Srebrenica katsottiin kansanmurhaksi, Serbiaa ei pidetty laillisesti vastuullisena tapahtumista. Srebrenica on monella tapaa edelleen avoin haava bosnialaisessa yhteiskunnassa eikä kaikkien uhrien jäänteitä ole vielä löydetty saatika tunnistettu. Tapaamme matkaoppaamme ystävän, jonka perhe on päättänyt jäädä asumaan kaupunkiin. Hän kertoo, kuinka hänen isänsä selviytyi serbijoukkojen hyökkäyksestä ja kuinka useat muut sukulaiset ja ystävät eivät olleet yhtä onnekkaita. Palaamme Sarajevoon illan hämärtyessä. Autossa on hiljaista.

Lokakuun vaalit – muutoksen mahdollisuus?

Sarajevon yliopiston välikokeet ovat ohi. Tämä tarkoittaa viikon lomaa, jolloin suuri osa oppilaista suuntaa kotipaikkakunnilleen. Pakkaan matkalaukkuni ja suuntaan kohti Sarajevon juna-asemaa varhain aamulla. Yksi lippu Mostariin, palvelutiskillä istuva mies kysyy ennen kuin ehdin tervehtiä. Mostar onkin suosittu päiväretkikohde Sarajevosta hyvästä syystä. Kaupungin ikoninen Vanha silta (josta kaupunki on saanut nimensä) kohoaa turkoosisen Neretva-joen yllä, jota ympäröi Ottomaanien arkkitehtuurin taidonnäytteitä. Osa pienemmistä putiikeista on kiinni kesäkauden ulkopuolella ja väkijoukko on harvassa. Astun sisään vanhassa kaupungissa sijaitsevaan hostelliin, jossa olen hiljaisen marraskuisen päivän ainoa asiakas.

Nuoria lähtee täältä jatkuvasti, pienravintolan omistaja kertoo mietteitään. Mostar on minun kaupunkini. Asuin täällä läpi sodan ja tulen jatkossakin asumaan. Nuoret ovat kuitenkin poissa.

Bosniassa on jo pitkään ollut vahvaa maastamuuttoa inflaation, työttömyyden ja ekonomisen stagnaation seurauksena. Erityisesti nuorisotyöttömyys on yksi Euroopan korkeimmista ajaen nuoret etsimään parempia mahdollisuuksia maan ulkopuolelle. Viime vuosien aikana nuorisotyöttömyys on kuitenkin lähtenyt laskuun. Bosnian federaatio linjasi uuden työllisyysstrategian 2023, jonka pilottivaihe on käynnissä. Uuden strategian lisäksi Bosniassa on tarvetta rakenteellisille muutoksille aina työlainsäädännön päivittämisestä byrokraattisten menettelytapojen muokkaamiseen houkuttelemaan ulkomaisia investointeja ja uusien yritysten kehitystä. Bosnian poliittista kenttää voidaan kuvata pirstaloituneena, mutta kaikki puolueet ovat samaa mieltä ainakin yhdestä asiasta: nuorisotyöttömyydelle on löydettävä ratkaisu. Tuovatko lokakuun vaalit muutosta tilanteeseen?

Paikallinen ystäväni suorittaa maisterin viimeistä vuotta ja keskustelu siirtyy urahaaveisiin. Hän tietää alan parhaimpien paikkojen menevän usein suhteilla eikä elättele suurempia toiveita vaalien vaikutuksesta paikallisten nuorten arkeen. Luottamus vaalijärjestelmää kohtaan on ollut koetuksella Bosniassa, jossa aikaisempien vuosien vaaleissa on ilmennyt vaalisääntöjen vastaisia toimia, jotka ovat heikentäneet vaalien sekä demokraattisen järjestelmän läpinäkyvyyttä. Lokakuun vaaleihin on suunnitteilla uuden teknologian käyttöönottamista, jota voitaisiin hyödyntää niin äänten laskemisessa kuin äänestäjien henkilöllisyyden varmistamisessa. Vaaliteknologian kehittämisen toteutuminen jää nähtäväksi, ja onnistuneena se voisi toimia positiivisena askeleen kansan luottamuksen parantamisessa julkisia instituutioita kohtaan. Vuosi 2026 tuo mukanaan muutoksen mahdollisuuden Bosnialle.

A Lunch in Gdańsk



Text: Franzi Gaibler (University of Helsinki)

For me, the answer is June, 2025, when I was visiting Gdańsk and stepped foot into an establishment, called *bar mleczny* (eng. *milk bar*). After finishing a plate of *Gołąbki* that had this unmistakable taste of something home-cooked, the kind of taste that reminds you of a meal you had at your grandparents house when you were younger, I looked around seeing tourists and locals chatting while having their lunch.

I began to wonder what the story behind this place was. How did these seemingly unspectacular eateries, born in the 19th century and shaped by communism, survive, and even experience a revival in contemporary Poland?

The history of milk bars, as it turns out, is a history of transition. A transition from communist infrastructure to market economy, from necessity to nostalgia, and from being closely intertwined with Polish social life to becoming a subject of urban gentrification.

The roots of milk bars go back to the late 19th century, where in 1896 – a Warsaw dairy farmer named **Stanisław Dłużewski** – opened the first one with the idea of offering cheap and nourishing, mostly dairy-based meals to workers. Starting from there, milk bars gradually became part of Poland's culinary landscape in the early twentieth century, truly beginning to flourish under socialist rule after the Second World War.

In the Polish People's Republic, commonly known as PRL, they formed a nationwide cluster of state-subsidized cafeterias, offering traditional Polish meals, such as *Pierogi*, *Kotlet schabowy* or *Barszcz* at reasonable prices, with functional interiors where a wide range of customers could be efficiently served.

At their peak, between the 1960s and 1980s, there were up to 40.000 *milk bars* across Poland, many of them concentrated in large cities, with their simplicity, cheap pricing and central location, becoming places where different parts of society crossed paths. Workers, students, and professors stood in the same line, ordered food from the same menu and sometimes ended up sharing a table, thereby becoming, even if only briefly united, by the search for a cheap lunch.

With the end of socialist rule in 1989, Poland began to embrace market economy and globalisation, and the country's food culture changed along with it. New restaurants appeared, offering cuisines that had previously been rare or less accessible. Western fast-food chains, pizzerias and modern style cafes quickly became symbols of a newly global and consumer-driven Poland. Against this backdrop, milk bars began to look like relics of another era, like reminders of a system people fought to leave behind.



For decades, they had relied on public subsidies that allowed them to keep prices extremely low, and when those subsidies were reduced or removed, many could no longer sustain themselves. Throughout the 1990s, large numbers of milk bars closed, which was especially visible in city centers, where rising rents and new types of restaurants reshaped the urban food landscape and for some time it seemed possible that milk bars might disappear altogether.

However, about 100 of them managed to survive. Some continued to receive limited government support for vegetarian dishes, which helped keep prices low. As a result, they remained important to many people, especially students, pensioners, and workers who valued their affordability. Over time, milk bars also began to take on an additional meaning beyond their practical role. At least to an outsider it seems that they came to be seen as part of the country's everyday cultural landscape with menus largely unchanged and an atmosphere that stayed familiar: trays sliding along the counter, handwritten menus, and functional interior that had changed little over the decades. Besides the local clientele in a milk bar, with pensioners still coming for inexpensive lunches and students dropping in between classes, the lines are also filled with tourists, who are, partly driven my a sense of anemoia for the socialist era, curious about a place which offers traditional food at an affordable price, which seems virtually unchanged since the 1960s.

At the same time, the neighbourhood surrounding many milk bars have changed considerably. In several cities, redevelopment and rising rents have transformed central areas, bringing new businesses and new residents, and with these shifting urban landscapes, milk bars often stand out as places that have either maintained a certain continuity, while the city around them transformed. Or on the other side, the milk bars transformed alongside their surroundings, becoming more gentrified with craft beers and matcha on the menu and coffee rave events, targeting a different clientele and serving a different purpose than in the past.

So what does this history of milk bars tell us about transition? I'd say it offers a window into Poland's broader changes over the past century. Born in the late 19th century and shaped by the socialist period as well as later economic transformations, they have remained part of everyday urban life. Back in the milk bar in Gdańsk none of this history was immediately visible to me, it simply felt like a place where people came to eat lunch.

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Central Asia in Transition: From Border Conflicts to Regional Cooperation

Text: Adkhamjon Jannobidinov (Stockholm School of Economics, Riga)

For centuries, Central Asia functioned as a single civilizational space. Empires rose and fell across its cities, from early dynasties to empires, from the three Turkic khanates to the Soviet Union. Trade routes connected cities like Samarkand, Bukhara and Merv to Xi'an, Istanbul, Delhi, Tabriz and Baghdad. During the Soviet era, five states of the region –– Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan –– were established in their current form and eventually gained independence in 1991. As the USSR crumbled, the Central Asian Five inherited rampant inflation, economic collapse, and, alongside that, the previously non-existent borders turned into, sometimes bloody, disputes.

Soviet administrative borders, drawn in the 1920s and 1930s with little attention for ethnic, geographic, or economic realities, hardened overnight into international frontiers. Water systems were divided. Transport routes were disrupted. What had once been internal lines became sources of sovereignty disputes. Moreover, the newly drawn borders divided families and relatives, as it was common among Central Asian nationalities to intermarry; consequently, to this day, many Central Asians have at least one relative living in a neighboring country.



The territorial structure of Central Asia is further complicated by a dense concentration of enclaves and exclaves, particularly in the Ferghana Valley, where borders between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan intersect in highly irregular ways. Examples include the Uzbek enclave of Sokh within Kyrgyz territory and the Tajik enclave of Vorukh, both of which have been recurrent sources of tension due to disputes over land access, water resources, and transport corridors.



For nearly three decades, cooperation in the region remained limited and cautious. Borders were mainly closed and trade fluctuated. Armed clashes, particularly between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 2022 caused the death of more than 100 people and forced over 100,000 Kyrgyz citizens to flee their homes.

On March 13, 2025, Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov and Tajik President Emomali Rahmon signed a landmark agreement fully demarcating their nearly 1,000-kilometer border. Weeks later, on March 31, the presidents of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan met in Khujand to publicly declare the dispute resolved. It was considered a great achievement as one of Central Asia's most deeply entrenched conflicts had been formally settled.

This result was not achieved easily. It unfolded within a broader regional transition that began after 2017. That year marked the first consultative meeting of Central Asian leaders in Astana, attended by the heads of state of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. The Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia was established at the initiative of the President of Uzbekistan[1] and acts as a regular, leader-level dialogue without external powers at the table. It played a great role as an institutional foundation to resolve regional problems and deepen ties in the neighborhood. In 2025, Azerbaijan was included as a member of this organization, representing a broader unified Central Asia.[2]

Numbers demonstrate that the growing ties among Central Asian countries is turning into economic reality. Trade between Uzbekistan and its Central Asian neighbor has grown significantly in recent years, with some figures indicating an increase of over 20 percent. Similarly, other Central Asian countries also experienced a rapid increase in their trade with neighboring countries. This suggests that the diplomatic thaw underlies a transformation of the economic reality. Moreover, cross-border checkpoints have reopened, visa restrictions have been removed and it is now possible for citizens of Uzbekistan to visit neighboring countries with national ID cards, except for Turkmenistan which kept its visa requirements. Economic integration is also assuming an institutional form. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan recently launched the Shavat–Dashoguz cross-border trade zone, allowing visa-free entry for

[1] Notably, the initiative has facilitated the ending of the Tajik-Kyrgyz border conflict

[2] Although Azerbaijan is located in the South Caucasus, its integration into Central Asian affairs and participation in regional consultative meetings have contributed to the concept of a broader Central Asia.

citizens of both countries within the designated area. The joint marketplace includes over a hundred trading rows and shared commercial infrastructure. Earlier, Uzbekistan opened a similar trade zone near its border with Afghanistan. These types of trade zones help foster economic integration and trade between the countries, granting access to the otherwise inaccessible Turkmeni and Afghani markets.

Regional Integration

10.7 Million
(Tourists to Uzbekistan in 2025)

80%
(Nations with mutual visa-free travel)

20%
(Growth in intra-regional trade)

100+
(Trading rows in the Shavat-Dashoguz zone)

Tourism offers perhaps the clearest indicator of this transition. According to Uzbekistan's National Statistics Committee, 10.7 million foreign citizens visited the country for tourism purposes between January and November 2025. The largest numbers came from neighboring Kyrgyzstan (3 million), Kazakhstan (2.5 million), and Tajikistan (2.5 million). At the same time, millions of people from Uzbekistan visited Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan for touristic and family purposes. Easy and convenient border checkpoints and the increasing number of flights in Central Asia made it possible for foreign travelers to visit multiple countries during their time in Central Asia.

Beyond intra-regional ties, Central Asia is increasingly presenting itself as a collective diplomatic actor. Over the past two years alone, leaders have participated in high-level summits in the Central Asia Plus format. Summits took place with the United States, the European Union, China, Russia, Golf Cooperation Council, Japan, Italy and more. This format is considered a more effective diplomatic and economic framework, empowering the Central Asian countries by acting as a unified bloc , increasing their bargaining power with major powers and diversifying the economic partnerships. Moreover, it also represents the political realignment in the region.

Furthermore, Central Asian countries are members of several international organizations, including the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, through which they continue to deepen their cooperation. The states are also actively pursuing major connectivity initiatives such as the Trans-Afghan Railway project, the Middle Corridor, and the recently completed China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway. These projects aim to connect Central Asia with South Asia, Europe, and China in order to expand exports and increase regional trade.

The term "transition" aptly describes Central Asia, as the region has managed to resolve several border disputes, reopen border checkpoints, integrate markets, and increasingly act as a coordinated sovereign bloc in international diplomacy, while continuing efforts to deepen cooperation and achieve mutually beneficial economic outcomes.



From Stagnation to Sovereignty

The Transition of Kyrgyzstan into Independence



Text: Isaac Steinmeyer (University of Helsinki)

The air in Frunze was stale, full of the tobacco which Soviet bureaucrats smoked late into the night as they argued about the future of the Soviet Republic. Inside the White House[1], the Supreme Soviet remained paralyzed in a heated debate. Meanwhile, outside their window, a large crowd had gathered to protest the very government that had strangled them for the past 70 years (Huskey, 1995: 813).

To understand the transition to democracy in Kyrgyzstan, we must understand the very nature to which Kyrgyz democracy was born. It was forged not from memory of the old Kurultais or from outside pressure, but emerged after heated debate in which 350 deputies remained locked in constant fighting over the future of their state and, in turn, their power.

Contrary to the academic narrative, the transition to democracy in Kyrgyzstan was not without violence. In June of 1990, the Ferghana Valley was overtaken by brutal clashes (ibid.: 826). Two peoples who had shared the land for millennia, the Kyrgyz and Uzbek, descended into some of the Union's bloodiest late-era violence during the Osh Riots, fighting over the rights to the homes and lands of their ancestors (ibid.: 827). This bloody conflict reverberated across the Soviet Union and acted as one of the final nails in the coffin of the socialist experiment.

For the deputies in Frunze, this conflict was the backdrop that framed discussions on the topic of independence. It had shown that the period of stagnation had to end, or else they risked the, for now, local conflict to engulf the entire Republic in the future. Absamat Masaliev, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kirghizia[2], was the man to whom the conflict was attributed (Engvall, 2011: 15). Masaliev had spent his career protecting the myth of Soviet harmony, just for Osh to shatter it. As the conflict erupted under his watch, he became the man who had failed to keep the peace.

Elections for the new president took place on the 23rd of October, with it being widely assumed Masaliev would become the new president.Under the recent alteration to the functioning of the individual Soviet Republics, each of them saw its parliament directly elect a president. Unlike the other Republics, the Kyrgyz elites were deeply divided on what the future of the Republic needed.

Masaliev failed to secure a majority, with the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Apas Jumagulov, trailing closely behind (Huskey, 1995: 828). After both failed to secure a majority in the second round of voting, they were disqualified under a law which required a candidate to receive more than 50% of the vote (Engvall, 2011: 16). In turn, both of the leading candidates were removed from the race, leaving the question: who would be the next president?

After the traditional elite failed to secure votes, new name began to circulate among the deputies, that of the President of the Kirghiz Academy of Sciences – Askar Akaev. The name started to be whispered in the corridors of power, even as he sat far away from the governmental halls, (ibid.: 18). While many of the Communist Party of Kirghizia career cadres would have been likely choices, it was known that a

[1] The Kyrgyz one!

[2] At the time, the Russified name for Kyrgyzstan – Kirghizia – was used.

candidate from outside the pre-established party architecture had to be chosen.

Akaev's candidacy, and the subsequent victory, was born out of necessity. Kyrgyzstan was a deeply divided state, where a fragile balance was kept between the North and the South (ibid.: 12). The Osh conflict proved fatal to Masaliev's ambitions. With the violence fresh in memory, the Northern politicians seized the moment to push forward a candidate of their own – Jumagulov Akaev, on the other hand, was seen as the perfect candidate compared to a parliament divided between the two sides. To the Northern politicians, he was a fellow Northerner (ibid.: 20). To those from the South, he was someone inherently alien to the regional politics of Soviet Kyrgyzstan , given he studied and worked outside the Republic in Leningrad and Moscow (ibid.: 20).

And most importantly, because he had lived outside the Republic, he was seen as untainted by the failures leading up to the Osh conflict (ibid.: 20). Moreover, he was a Gorbachev loyalist, meaning he would push for greater reform and open elections, offering Soviet cadres a path to retain influence by submitting to the ballot's rather than party appointment (Huskey, 1995: 813).

On October 27th of 1990, Akaev was elected narrowly, making him the first elected President of the Kirghiz SSR. The spirit of the elections could be felt in the wind traversing the streets of Bishkek. The protests, which had been ongoing outside the White House, ended after the legitimation of the elected ruler. Akaev built his power on public support and that of the pro-Gorbachev faction in the parliament, which allowed him to keep the old cadre from blocking reforms.

The rise of Kyrgyzstan as a democratic state was cemented by the August Coup in Moscow in 1991. Akaev, unlike his regional peers, immediately condemned the coup and threw his support directly behind Boris Yeltsin (Engvall, 2011: 17). In turn, Akaev branded himself a democratic supporter, leading to direct Western support after independence.

As the tanks left the streets of Moscow and the coup was thwarted, the balance of power shifted in Bishkek for the final time. As the 350 deputies gathered once again, the old Soviet bureaucracy fell quietly. On August 31st, 1991, the parliament which had just failed ten times to elect a president decided to declare Kyrgyzstan a sovereign, independent state.

For Akaev, the transition towards democracy was now complete, his path having grown from that of a compromise candidate to the first leader of a sovereign state. To cement his position he made a decision which no other Central Asian state had taken. He decided to ban the Communist Party of Kirghizia, and nationalize their assets (Engvall, 1995: 18). The party, which since 1920 had held a monopoly on power in the SSR, was dethroned with a singular strike of a pen

by a man, whose name was unknown to the Kyrgyz echelon of power just months ago.

The years that followed in Kyrgyzstan were full of frantic experimentation both politically and economically. Akaev opened the state to international investment and organizations, welcoming the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and many other NGOs, all of which made Kyrgyzstan into a hub of civil society organizations in a sea of insular autocratic regimes (Engvall, 2011: 28). Akaev brought upon Kyrgyzstan what can only be described as shock therapy: the economy was rapidly opened through a three stage process, which was meant to facilitate the transition from a centrally planned economy to a privately-owned market one (ibid.: 22-23). In the end, this privatization was a distinct failure, with much of the previously public property having been de facto gifted to old Soviet cadres and other well-connected individuals (ibid.: 24). The period which became known as the Akaev Spring was one of hope, with a deep promise of change, but also of disappointment and pain.

As the promises failed to materialize, we are able to look more critically at this period of 'wild capitalism.'The 'compromise candidate', despite his early successes in the late Soviet period, was a source of corruption and unwanted centralisation of power around his post. This eventually led to his deposition in 2005. Today, Kyrgyzstan, after nearly three decades of it being known as the "Switzerland of Central Asia", has fallen into autocracy. Still, Kyrgyzstan stands out as a unique case of the transition from Soviet bureaucracy to an independent state, which to this day remains understudied and, frankly, widely misunderstood.

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That Small Nations Might Be Free

Reimagining Estonian and Northern Irish Pasts and Futures











Scenes from the 1988 documentary A Tale of Two Visits

Fegan, 2023 (40:50-42:03)

B-Roll: Army vehicle driving down a busy street. Vehicle's siren fades into narrator's voice.

Narrator: On to Belfast, and to the all-too familiar sounds of sirens. But what do our visitors make of it?

BELFAST, CAR-PARK, NIGHT.

Older Estonian Man: I don't know… it's tragic I know, and I feel a deep sympathy and sorrow for what's happened and what's happening there… (looks intently at the interviewer off-camera) and there are some… some similarities between the situation in… some parts of the Soviet Union.

B-Roll: Soldiers carrying rifles on residential street, civilians looking on.

BELFAST, CAR-PARK, NIGHT.

Young Estonian Man: I have followed the news about the things that take place there. Not-not that I'm afraid! But, but it is… (pauses, resumes speaking slowly) It's just that the situation is very… similar in some parts of Estonia already, it may happen, things like that… (trails off, looks towards the ground)

SCENE END.

Text: Della Pirrie
(University College London/University of Helsinki)

When studying in Estonia, a professor called Tallinn a 'divided city'. I remembered a novel we'd had to read in school about Glasgow's sectarianism, called (naturally) Divided City. Three boys, a Catholic, Protestant, and an asylum seeker from the Balkans, become friends as Glasgow's role as a microcosm of The Troubles wanes[1]. It was the first time I understood that Glasgow and the wider Northern Irish conflict were considered an anomaly in Western Europe. The novel questions this idea, that this violence was something found to the East and South of the North and West, in the Balkans or elsewhere even further. But Tallinn as a divided city felt odd: to me, the fact that inter-ethnic relations between Estonians and Russian-speakers were difficult, but non-violent exempted Estonia from this moniker. This revealed my own biases; a city can be divided without bombings backing it up. But how did Estonia avoid this? And why then is the conflict between Catholic-Republicans and Protestant-Unionists (or indigenous Irish and settler descendants?) different?

Estonia often found me tired. Tired of my own people, in Glasgow, Scotland, and Ireland, for somehow not fighting like Estonia for sovereignty, language, culture. Are we so pathetically apathetic? So comfortable with colonial status quos? Too ignorant to learn our own languages? Tired of others' opinions on the disintegration of our national movements: too violent, too angry, not peaceful, popular, constructive. Tired of Estonia, envious, twistedly resentful: what did they do that we did not, to have what they have, and what we do not? Tired of my ignorant, incessant coveting of Estonia's situation. A successful independence campaign doesn't negate the pain, violence, and suffering. Many in Russia would invade the Baltics tomorrow, existing interference and espionage insufficient for ravenous territorial expansion. How could I envy such a situation? Regardless of lingering colonial inclinations, many in England now care little for Britain's unity; not enough to fight for it. Tired of cyclically hating myself and my choices: studying the languages of Eastern Europe while my own rot at the back of my tongue. And tired, as ever, of the legacy and maintenance of violent imperialist structures in the British Isles going unquestioned – but that was nothing new.

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[1] Massive historic Irish migration to Glasgow meant the dynamics of The Troubles played out on a smaller, relatively less violent, scale.

This was a culmination of the then three years I'd spent in London studying Eastern European history, languages, and culture. How many hours had I devoted to the Habsburg Empire's national awakenings, Polish revolutionaries, the plight of Eastern Europe's small nations a constant refrain? As a famous ballad goes, Irish soldiers fought and died in World War One that small nations might be free, while British forces massacred those in Ireland seeking the same[2]. There was a frequent funny feeling: in a classroom in the British Imperial core, next to someone making an intelligent point about the harmful legacy of Ottoman ethnic quotas. Before class began, they'd made fun of my accent and questioned how I got into the university, given the inferiority of Scottish education.



Historians often used Scotland and Ireland as examples when analysing Central and Eastern Europe's national movements; when we were assigned such a reading, I arrived in the seminar biting my tongue. Do you know what I know? Do you see what I see? Despite knowing it was self-centred, annoying, off-topic, I still sometimes raised my hand when the parallels were utterly unavoidable. The professor would nod and I would scan my classmates' faces. Will you see what I see? Will you take this knowledge further?

Universities tell prospective students that area studies degrees offer 'transferable knowledge and skills'[3]. This is done to encourage applicants from any background, irrespective of their initial interest in the region. And the universities aren't wrong. I've learned to recognise authoritarianism through studying interwar Hungary; analysed propaganda techniques via Czechoslovak soap operas. A strength and pitfall of Eastern European studies is that few of the area's perceived 'problems' are unique – they're merely more recent or clear-cut. I'd even say that if you graduate from an area studies programme with only specific knowledge about the area in question, and no ability or willingness to apply this knowledge, you've failed.

Through an Eastern European prism, I understand my own country, my own national identity, more than ever. So what? What good

[2] From *The Foggy Dew*, lyrics by Father Charles O'Neill, 1919.

[3] See SSEES at UCL listings for prospective students for BA programmes, particularly Politics and Sociology, HPE, and Economics.



does it do, to notice socio-linguistic patterns in Russification and British policies towards the Scots language, to see Irish national awakeners in the Austro-Hungarian parliament? To see my entire life, my mother's, my grandmother's, with new eyes, unsure if I'm hallucinating? For my studies, it's more detrimental than anything else. I'm distracted, seeking my own identity in studying others'. No real comparison is possible: too many variables, too many differences. And who cares? Any parallels are irrelevant, curiosity and coincidence, something entertaining at dinner parties.

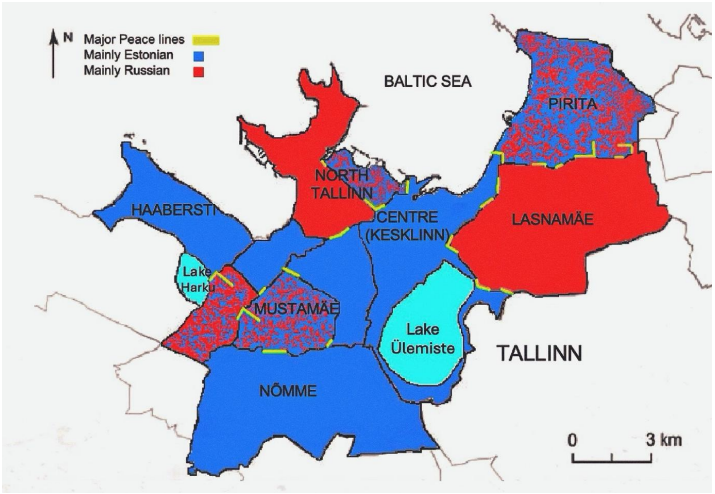
But I can't help myself. If comparison is the thief of joy, studying Eastern Europe robbed me blind. As it stands, these small nations have what mine never will. They succeeded, and are celebrated for it. It came at unimaginable costs, tireless efforts and lives lost, still threatened by Russian aggression. Yet they endure – even thrive.

Alternate histories are pop-history. YouTubers imagine the implications of Germany's continued partition, Trotsky gaining power over Stalin. They're entertainment, reductive by nature. But the exercise of revisiting world-shaping events and imagining outcomes for seemingly minor changes has value. It challenges assumptions of history's concrete nature, introducing creativity and flexibility to a discipline some still insist seeks one, objective truth. Quantitative papers often compare Estonia and Northern Ireland: similar demographics, industries, social problems (rates of alcoholism, suicide etc.). I'll push this further.

The following are imaginary versions of real newspaper articles and maps: one from 1989 covering the Baltic Way demonstration, the other from 2023 on Northern Ireland's so-called 'Peace Lines'. I've altered some historical details, names, and placenames to imagine each country in the place of the other; the articles remain otherwise unchanged. Some disbelief needs to be suspended but nevertheless, I hope my reimagining and analysis of Estonia and Northern Ireland show despite comparison's futility, alternate histories provide new ways of looking at what is thought to be understood. The enduring idea of Eastern Europe's (generally negative) exceptionality limits Western self-examination: ignoring our own problems and limiting any ability to learn. Area studies degrees provide 'transferable knowledge', but one might find similar knowledge at home. It may simply be more comfortable seeking this knowledge in the other, rather than in the mirror.

Tallinn's Peace Walls: Potent symbols of division in Estonia are dwindling - but slowly.

Riina Padar once had compelling reason to appreciate the high walls that separated her Estonian part of Tallinn from the adjoining Russian neighbourhood. For five dreadful months in 2000, she and other mothers had to walk their daughters to the local Lutheran school past an Orthodox mob who hurled insults, rocks and bottles. Even by Estonian standards it was a vile protest and made headlines around the world. Walls did not cover the whole school route, but Riina still valued them as a bulwark. "I'd never felt that hatred before."



Retaining "peace walls" from the Smuta (Estonian - Raskused, translated as The Troubles) between Estonian and Russian areas seemed advisable even though the 1999 Peace Treaty had supposedly ushered in an era of peace and reconciliation for the autonomous region of Estonia. In 2015 one of Riina's teenage daughters, Katre, fell in love with an Orthodox boy. It was a shock. Questions abounded. Was he a bigot? Was Katre safe visiting his area? Was Sergei safe visiting their area?

Eight years later the couple are still together and have their own children. The Padar family love Sergei "to bits", enjoy visiting his family, and support the recent removal of a barrier that had separated their Estonian area from the neighbouring Russian one. "You just realise, we're all the same," said Riina, who is now 54.
Yet society and politics are sectarian and dysfunctional. Estonian and Russian paramilitaries still wield control in some communities. Children still tend to go to Lutheran or Orthodox schools, families living in Lutheran or Orthodox areas. Peace walls still proliferate, especially in Tallinn and Estonian-majority Tartu-Moscowtartu, where the conflict began in the 1960s, Russian-majority police force attacking Estonians marching for civil rights. One wall between the neighbourhoods of Lasnamäe and Pirita stands 45-feet tall, three times higher than the Berlin Wall, and in place for twice as long.

Research shows a sharp decline in sectarian incidents and much greater mixing between Estonians and Russians in workplaces and socially. A recent survey showed 24% of relationships were mixed, triple the 8% recorded in 1999. But the most potent symbols of division - the barriers erected in the 1970s and 1980s to deter killings are dwindling very slowly.

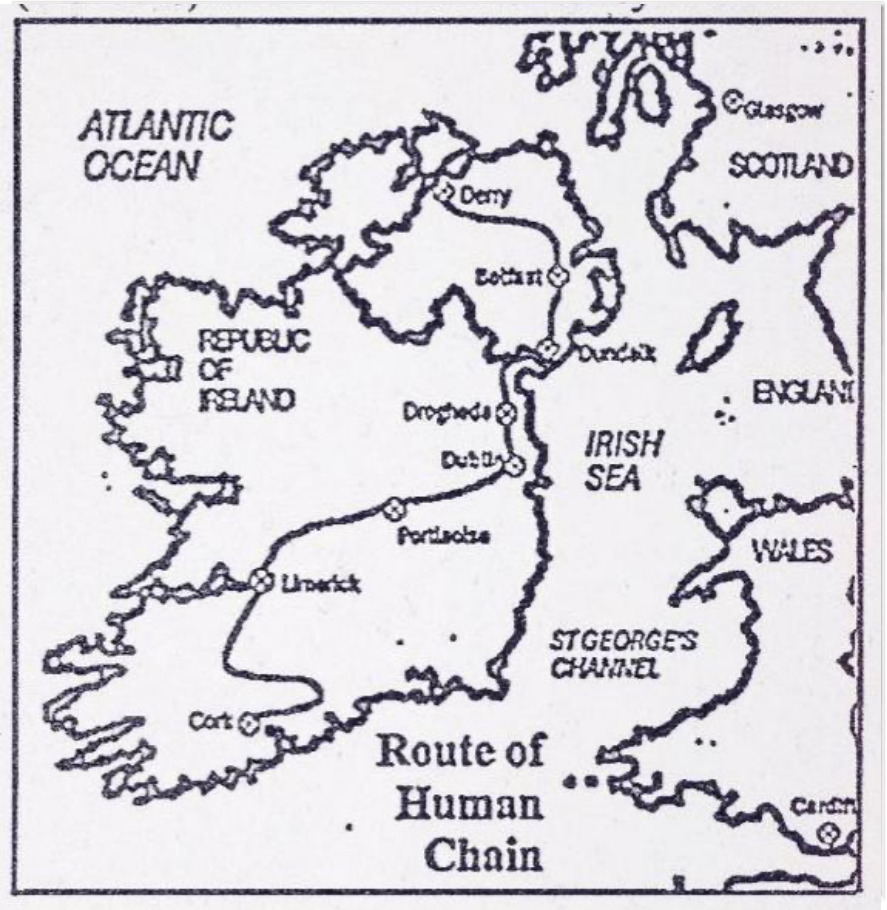
For some Russians the walls are protection against perceived nationalist ascendance. Estonians now outnumber Russians, the Estonian Popular Front has becom the biggest party, making Kaja Kallas the region's putative first minister, and Russia's increasing isolation has revived the spectre of an independent Estonia. All are psychological shocks.

"Only one side benefited from the agreement, and it wasn't the Russians. It was a stitch-up," said Grigorii, a 67-year-old retired soldier. Peace walls were one of the last defences against encroaching Estonians, he said. "The minute it's down they'll be over and move into our housing."

The 1998 agreement was a collective leap of faith - a declaration that separate identities could govern together while seeking different destinations. The hope that accompanied the agreement today feels naive. Politics churns with rancour, squabble, crisis. But the killing stopped, and horror, grief and despair ebbed. The result is limbo: a messy, inchoate, post-conflict dispensation. It is not pretty. And yet, compared with what came before, it gleams. - ***Rein Kender, Estonian Correspondent*** (*Adapted by Della Pirrie*)

Irish Mark Partition Anniversary with Human Protest Chain

UKGBNR: Hundreds of thousands of Irish people linked hands across their homelands on Wednesday in an act of peaceful protest, demanding the right to restore their "independent and reunified statehood".



Some government officials joined the leaders of independent political movements in a sharply worded declaration issued to mark the anniversary of the British partitioning of Ireland, preventing six counties in the province of Ulster from joining the Republic in independence.

The statement said that Britain had "infringed on the historical right of the Irish nation to self-determination, presented ruthless ultimatums, now occupies the North of Ireland with overwhelming military force and, under conditions of military occupation and heavy political terror, carried out their violent annexation."

The statement, which advocated the right of the Irish to determine their own political futures, was drawn up jointly by representatives of popular front movements from both the North and the Republic of Ireland.

"Self-determination is the natural desire of all nations," said the President of the Republic of Ireland, Patrick Hillary, speaking from atop the medieval Walls of Derry, originally built by the British imperial state to protect colonial settlers from the indigenous population in the 17th century, to a vast crowd gather below about to begin a human chain across the island.

Organisers estimated that nearly a million people stood side-by-side in the evening chill, hands clasped in a human chain from the cobbled streets of Derry-Londonderry more than 500 kilometres (311 miles) across the border to the city of Cork near the island's southern coast.

The crowd estimate could not be confirmed, but aerial film broadcast on Irish television showed a nearly continuous line of people stretching across the countryside.

The day was marked by defiant but measured declarations of independence, reflecting the growing passion for freedom and uncertainty about what London will tolerate.

"During this past year, we have come ever closer to the ideals our people have carried in their hearts for 70 years," said Maura Ó Leathlobhair, a leader of the Northern Irish Popular Front and a deputy to the British parliament. "All of us want to have freedom, and freedom without independence is impossible," - ***Aaron N. Vein*** (*Adapted by Della Pirrie*)

In August 1989, the Baltic Way was covered and praised in Western media as a powerful demonstration of popular will, solidarity, and peaceful protest against the USSR. In Northern Ireland, no such event occurred: the 20th anniversary of the British Army's deployment to Northern Ireland passed eleven days before.

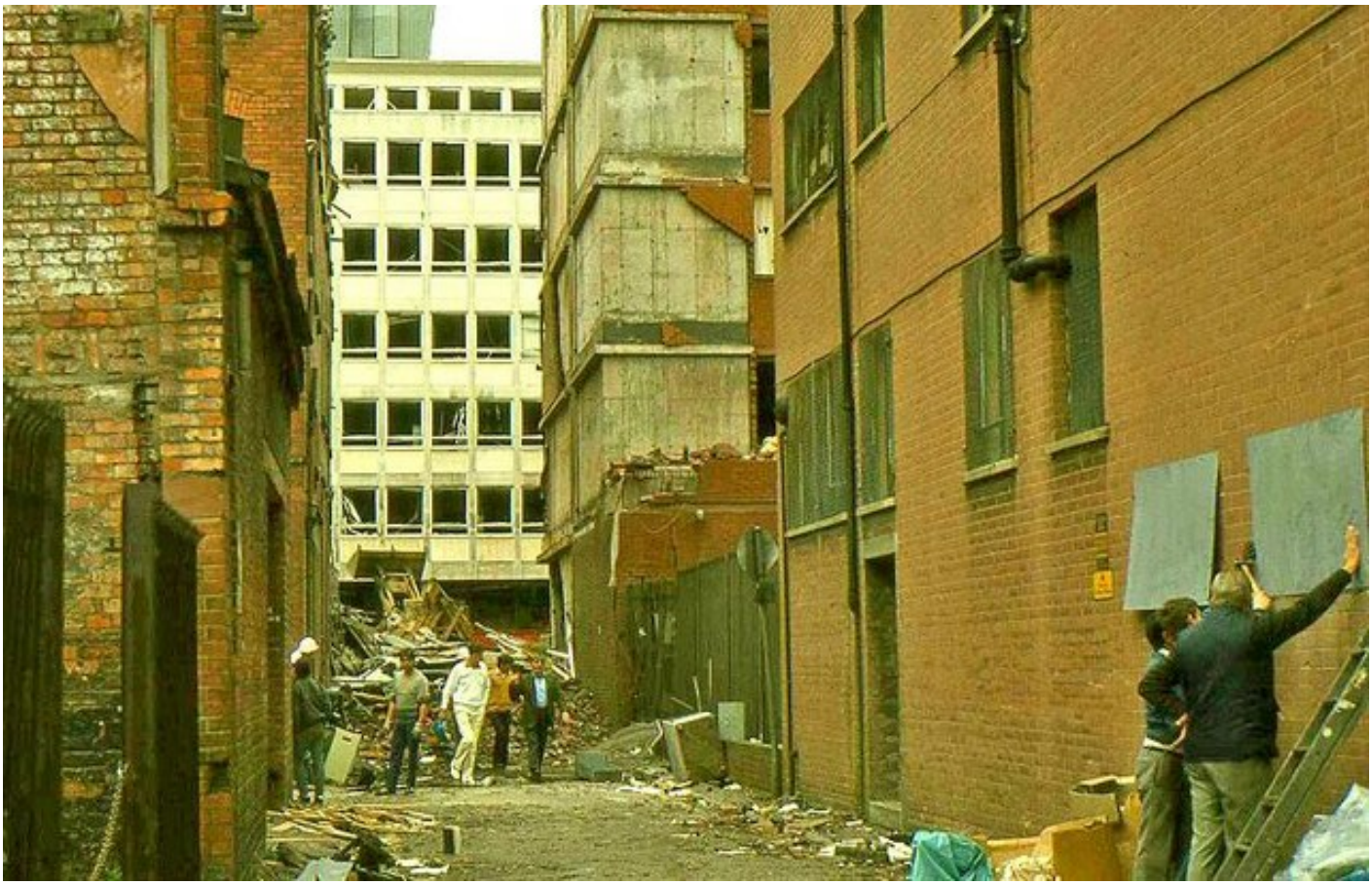
Many view Soviet collapse as stemming from the oppression of national identities, their independence a necessity and a victory. Attitudes towards similar situations were not always so positive. In 1991, Margaret Thatcher said "All of us, I think, agree that the Baltic republics, which were illegally taken...should have their independence," (Matus, 1991). This drastically differs from the narrative on Northern Ireland – particularly hypocritical coming from Thatcher, who significantly contributed to the escalation of violence in Northern Ireland. Some claim that any British atrocities during The Troubles were necessary: the IRA were terrorists, at war with Britain. This prevents analysis of the conditions causing the conflict. Peaceful demonstrations in the 1960s for Catholic civil rights were met with violence from Protestant-Unionists, escalated by British troops, prompting retaliation from the provisional IRA[4] (Melaugh, n.d).

Crucial support for Estonia's peaceful demonstrations came in the late-1980s, when activists were joined by the Estonian political establishment (Beissinger, 2002:165-170). Solidarity between Eastern Bloc and Soviet independence movements provided legitimacy, strength, and protection. In Northern Ireland in the 1960s, state institutions were overwhelmingly Protestant-Unionist, one of the civil rights issues causing The Troubles' outbreak; as the conflict escalated, Catholic-Republicans had limited outside support due to the consequences of appearing supportive of IRA terrorism[5]. Estonian activists capitalised on international and domestic institutional support that was not available, to either nation, in years previous. Historians now often claim the Singing Revolution was able to flourish due to glasnost' and perestroika (Ryynanen & Talviste, 2023). Estonian dissidents in years past were unable to act as successfully as their successors, through no fault of their own; the growing weakness of the colonising state allowed peaceful protest to deliver a critical blow. Peaceful protest partially helped end The Troubles, but civic action met with violence had sparked it. For both, the more powerful party controlled the outcomes of non-violent protest.

A strength of the Baltic independence movements was their legal argument. The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact that caused their annexation and subsequent occupation was declared criminal and void, constituting a legitimate claim for reverting to inter-war independence (Tedla, 2011). The partitioning and continued occupation of Northern Ireland was 'legal'. The Irish Free State's government accepted partition in 1921 (prompting a civil war), after years fighting the war of independence . They were depleted and feared that Britain, recovered from World War One, would destroy them. But does this acceptance, made under duress, negate any legal claim to reunification? Not quite, especially today. The terms of the Good Friday Agreement that ended The Troubles require a referendum to be held if a majority in Northern Ireland desire one. Recent polls indicating as such have yet to be acted upon (Butterly, 2022).

[4] Examples of such issues included blocking of access to social housing and extremely limited voting rights. Described in texts such as O'Dochartaigh (1997). *From Civil Rights to Armalites: Derry and The Birth of the Irish Troubles*.

[5] Clandestine support was another story, with weaponry provided by external sources, such as Irish diaspora communities in the US, Libya, and supposedly the USSR under Andropov.



I in no way want to imply the USSR was benevolent, progressive, or peaceful – even perceived independence aspirations were often violently suppressed. But one reason Northern Ireland's civil rights movement led to war and Estonia's non-violent campaign led to independence was the colonising state's response. Britain in the 1970s was primed for a full-scale military operation, interning and torturing thousands for 'suspected' Republican sentiments, funding paramilitaries and prompting terrorism, beginning a cycle of retaliatory violence (Melaugh, n.d). The USSR in the late-1980s was at its brink – the timing was critical for Estonia's success in pushing them over the edge.

Haas' paper on Estonia's non-violent inter-ethnic relations notes that Soviet control limited civilians' access to weapons (1996:57), vastly different to Northern Ireland. Soviet ideology was officially opposed to Russian supremacy; independence activists were chiefly criticised for stoking 'nationalist sentiment' (Haas, 1996:52). Aggrieved Russian-speakers had limited means to weaponize their own national identity in counter. Crucially, Russian-speakers never felt seriously physically threatened. Estonian criticisms focussed on the Soviet state: Russian-speakers a symptom, not a cause. Haas believes they experienced discomfort, not danger, producing little cause to seek support from the Russian federation – unlike Protestant-Unionists who turned to Britain and militarily organised to defend themselves (1996:60). The Russian state might take the Baltic Russian-speakers' cause upon themselves, but Estonian Russian-speakers haven't organised in a legitimate manner to argue for such intervention.

Moreover, Estonia's Russian-speakers are not homogenous: the name describes language, not ethnicity. Many have roots in Estonia, Ukraine, Poland, Armenia, etc., meaning no unified identity with which to agitate. The fact Estonia's Russian-speakers largely arrived during the Soviet period further limits their unification. A

Protestant, British-loyalist community has existed in Ireland for centuries, the population of ethnic 'Britons' in Ulster being partition's justification (Ulster's lucrative industries in shipbuilding and mining – unrelated).

Estonia is highly irreligious, even prior to Soviet annexation (Haas, 1996). Religion scarcely factors into perceived differences between Estonians and Russian-speakers. This removes an additional divider that could be exacerbated in a situation of escalating violence. This is wholly different from Northern Ireland and many other sites of ethnic conflict. Yet increasing secularism in Northern Ireland, particularly amongst youth, means less differentiates Protestant-Unionists from Catholic-Republicans. The Protestant population is also ageing; new immigrants to Northern Ireland are often neutral or even supportive of reunification, culminating in the 2021 census showing Protestants as a minority for the first time (Butterly, 2022).

Estonia's prosperity promotes co-existence. It is materially a better decision for Russian-speakers to maintain Estonia's (and their own) stability (Tammaru et al., 2015). The material argument is one prompting hope for Irish Reunification; worsening socio-economic prospects can limit feelings of loyalty towards Britain. The north of Ireland was historically wealthier but deindustrialisation, economic downturn during The Troubles, British austerity, and Brexit reversed this dynamic. Northern Ireland is now among the most deprived areas of Western Europe; the material benefits of reunification now apply to the North, not the Republic (Barrett & Bergin, 2025). My mother once said that if my grandfather were alive to hear that, he'd have fallen down where he stood.



Language is the most blatant barrier to Estonian social cohesion. Yet the only reason language is not as similarly divisive in Northern Ireland is because there is little chance Irish will return as even the Republic's dominant language. Anglicisation has been thorough the world over, but nowhere so much as the British Isles. In an imaginary reunified future, non-Irish citizens would manage as many Irish in the Republic do. The fact there are Estonians who speak only Estonian is something so inconceivable for Ireland (or Scotland) that I truly cannot imagine a world where it is so. Setbacks in defending the Estonian language can be extremely painful, and it remains a problem for society and the state, but the fact the problem exists at all is, to me, a beautiful thing.

There is one Northern Irish development Estonia could look to: efforts of civil society, charities, organisations, and individuals to improve cross-community relations: sports, travel, arts, every hobby and leisure activity you can think of. Similar projects have existed in Estonia, but further community organising could hasten Russian-speakers integration. Yet this demonstrates the issue's lesser importance compared to Northern Ireland. Many Estonians (rightfully) feel integration is not their responsibility, unlike Northern Ireland where citizens must actively seek reconciliation and co-existence, as violence was perpetrated between communities and civilians. Mass-emigration from Estonia post-1991 saw those with strong ties to Russia leave. Those remaining have chosen the new Estonia, with all that that entails (Haas, 1996:58).

If Estonia had fallen into the violent, escalatory cycle Northern Ireland did, if Russian-speakers

and Estonians formed paramilitaries killing civilians at home and abroad, the Russian government supporting one side and largely controlling the conflict's narrative, how would perceptions of Estonian independence be impacted? If Northern Ireland had sang their way to freedom, would outsiders be more open to the cause? The question of why Estonia and Northern Ireland's independence campaigns diverged, in method, public perception, and results, seems less to do with the cause itself, and more about how their systems of oppression responded. The structures subjugating Estonia totally collapsed. They must manage the legacies of Soviet occupation and threats that that entails, but now on their own terms. In Northern Ireland, the structures remain, slowly chipped away at but still standing, propped up by fears that past grievances remain flammable.

My degree gave me transferable knowledge. Yet I rarely got the impression they meant for us to consider the other as better. My admiration of Estonia is only ever marred by an unfair envy. Assumed Western supremacy and beliefs that the East will forever lag behind is incorrect and harmful; as it stands, it's a fairytale helping those clinging to the last slivers of imperialism sleep at night. I constantly invoke Estonia as inspiration for my own country: their trains and recycling system, their defence of their own small nation's right to thrive. I keep close to my chest a small hope that I might someday also live in a country with the imperial past like a bad dream, having gained independence with an old union's collapse, not through violence but by someone being convinced that we deserve it. Imagining alternate histories is futile, but aspiring to an attainable, better future is not. I know it exists, I've seen it.

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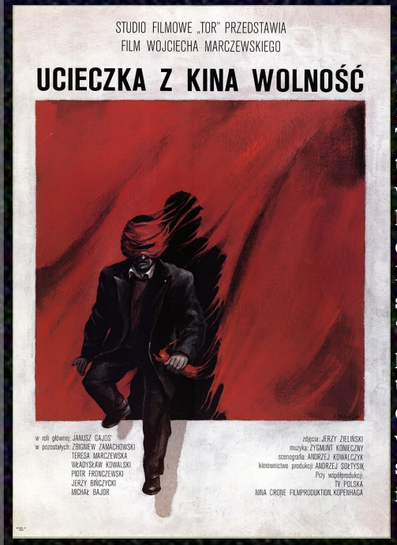
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The Wedding Chest (2005)
Original Title: Сундук предков [Sunduk predkov]
Directed by Nurbek Egen
Kyrgyzstan

This critically acclaimed Kyrgyz film introduces us to Aïdar – a young Kyrgyz man – who returns to his home village from his studies in France with a French fiancée. However, due to conservative costumes, he refuses to inform his family about the true nature of their relationship. The movie walks us through the struggle of forsaking the old ways, which manifest themselves in an ancient curse that puts the survival of the entire clan at risk.



Escape from the Liberty Cinema (1990)
Original Title: Ucieczka z kina „Wolność"
Directed by Wojciech Marczewski
Poland

This underappreciated Polish gem, tells us the story of an old censor, who has sacrificed everything for his communist homeland – divorced, his daughter hates him. However, as supernatural scenes start to take place in the nearby "Liberty" Cinema his loyalty to the party is tested. The film shows us the rot and collapse of the communist system in Poland from within, as even its functionaries started growing disillusioned with it.



Niki and Flo (2003)
Original Title: Niki Ardelean, colonel in rezervă
Directed by Lucian Pintilie
Romania

This obscure Romanian watch tells us the story of Niki – a communist-era colonel of the Romanian army – whose daughter is marrying the son of his neighbour, Flo – a capitalist, who is deeply involved in the 'new' Romania. Niki unwilling and slowly needs to accept the new reality as his daughter is set to move to the USA. This movie highlights the difficulties of individual adaptation to state transition after the de facto societal collapse seen in the late 80s' and early 90s' across Central and Eastern Europe.

The Board's Thematic Film Recommendations

A selection of cinematic hits from the Sasha region by Kacper Regulski

Sasha ry



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