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Article

After *homo sovieticus*: Democratic governance gaps and societal vulnerabilities in the EU's eastern neighbourhood

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Abstract

This article explores three intertwining issues facing the countries in the EU's eastern neighbourhood: (1) the continued legacy of *homo sovieticus* or the 'Soviet Man', (2) the state of democratic governance and (3) societal vulnerabilities. Existing since the collapse of the Soviet Union, they can be seen as both barriers to reform as well as vulnerabilities exploited by domestic and foreign actors for the purposes of division and subversion. The article argues that if the EU or the wider transatlantic community wants to support the countries of the eastern neighbourhood on their road to security, democracy and prosperity, we must place the dignity of the individual at the heart of our policies. This requires (a) fostering deeper social and cultural capital, and (b) ensuring that we strengthen the resilience of society rather than that of autocratic leaders and oligarchic structures.

Introduction

The countries of the EU's eastern neighbourhood face multiple challenges and vulnerabilities that hamper their development and continue to be exploited by domestic and foreign actors. In this regard, it is important not to lose sight of the intersection of the

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macro (e.g. geopolitical questions, the conditions of state institutions and the state of the countries' economies) and the micro (e.g. the mentalities governing people's everyday conduct or the everyday conditions of day-to-day life). Or as French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1992, 21) noted, one has 'to discover externality at the heart of internality, banality in the illusion of rarity, the common in the pursuit of the unique'. To this end, this article explores three intertwining issues for the EU's eastern neighbourhood: (1) the continued legacy of *homo sovieticus* or the 'Soviet Man', (2) the state of democratic governance, and (3) societal vulnerabilities.

The purpose of the article is to look into the vulnerabilities that have continued to exist in the EU's eastern neighbourhood since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The term 'vulnerabilities' is understood to mean 'conditions that make communities susceptible to harm' (Bergstrand et al. 2015, 392). The main body of the article is divided into four sections. The first explains the concept of *homo sovieticus* and its continued relevance to understanding the social dynamics within the individual countries as well as the broader region. The second and third explore the continuing gaps in democratic governance and societal vulnerabilities respectively. The fourth and concluding section argues that if we, as European and transatlantic policymakers and practitioners, seek to support these countries on their road to security, democracy and prosperity, we must place the dignity of the individual at the heart of our policies, by (a) fostering deeper social and cultural capital, and (b) ensuring that we strengthen societal resilience rather than that of autocratic leaders and oligarchic structures.

Homo sovieticus

As the 2015 Belarusian Nobel Laureate for Literature, Svetlana Alexievich (2016, 2), observed following the collapse of the Soviet Union: 'socialism has ended, but we stayed'. Even after the leading role of the Communist Party disappeared from state institutions and McDonald's restaurants appeared on street corners, *homo sovieticus*, with his/her memories and experiences, remained and had to interpret this new world for himself or herself. *Homo sovieticus* was, as Alexievich further noted in her seminal work on the phenomenon, *Second-Hand Time* (*Vremya Sekond-Khend*), probably the most successful Soviet project. However, where Soviet ideologues were hoping to create their own version of Superman, years of totalitarian Communist rule (mixed with historical experiences of feudalism, monarchy, fascism, national socialism and some liberal democracy), repression and the denial of basic human dignity instead depleted human capital and created a demoralised individual.

As was recently noted in *The Moscow Times* (2017), *homo sovieticus* 'is the archetype of a person born in and shaped by a totalitarian regime'. Opinion polls conducted across the post-Soviet space (Levada Center 2017; Pew Research Center 2017; IRI 2018a, 2018b, 2018c) continue to show that former Soviet citizens feel apathy, a sense of disillusionment, insecurity about their identity, and an odd mixture of nostalgia for the Communist times on the one hand and a need to safeguard Christian values on the other. For example, although church attendance continues to increase, Christianity is increasingly correlated with the

individual's fluid identity rather than religious belief, while the individual prefers to focus more on the private environment (*The Moscow Times* 2017). Moreover, his/her relationship with state institutions is based on suspicion and distrust, while pessimism about the future continues to impact his/her daily conduct.

For example, while 67% of Georgians say that their country is heading in the wrong direction (IRI 2018b), as many as 71% of Ukrainians (IRI 2018a) and 73% of Moldovans say the same (IRI 2018c). At the same time, these traits are further driven by all too often genuine (and visible) social, political and economic conditions which together hamper the possibility of reform and open up the possibility for subversion by oligarchic groups, foreign states or other actors.

Gaps in democratic governance

As the late US President Ronald Reagan (1961) used to remark, 'democracy is never more than one generation away from extinction': in the EU's eastern neighbourhood democratic governance continues to be vulnerable to authoritarianism, oligarchy and state capture. Despite two 'Maidans' in Ukraine (in 2004 and 2013/2014), the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003) and the Velvet Revolution in Armenia (2018), the gaps in democratic governance continue to be significant, the chances of meaningful change sketchy, and *homo sovieticus* continues to exist in a state of pessimism.

Furthermore, despite the removal by the EU of the largely redundant sanctions against Belarus, the release of its last political prisoners in 2015 (Freedom House 2015), and some positive steps in technical cooperation and low-key dialogue (especially on border management), the political situation in the country remains by and large unchanged. In fact, political repression continues through other means, including legal and administrative routes (Human Rights Watch 2018), and to this day no meaningful reforms have been undertaken. Freedom of assembly, of association and of expression remain curbed, and the police brutality on the streets of Minsk in April 2017, against people protesting over the worsening socio-economic conditions and an ultimately cancelled 'parasite tax' on unemployed individuals (Miller 2017), highlights the regime's continued preparedness to use naked force to suppress any show of discontent. The argument that the level of brutality shown was more restrained than in 2010 (Preiherman 2017) is sadly insufficient, especially as the regime's machinery of repression continues to grind and find new means to suppress dissent.

In Azerbaijan, too, political repression continues, while it remains questionable whether the new Armenian government of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan will be able to break the oligarchic stranglehold upon the country. In Moldova, the level of state capture has been exposed through the disappearance of $1 billion from its banking system in 2014 (Gherasimov 2017), the recent invalidation of the mayoral election results in Chisinau (Jozwiak 2018), and the continued presence of the shadowy eminence Vladimir Plahotniuc—a wealthy businessman and politician. Thus, as Emerson and Noutcheva (2018, 5) note: 'One of the main manifestations of poor governance across

the wider neighbourhood has been widespread corruption and impunity for officeholders. Weak rule of law and inefficient law enforcement institutions have been commonplace in nearly all neighbouring states and have allowed incumbents to act with impunity while in office.'

Such statements are not exaggerated. For example, Moldova and Ukraine consistently rank well below other countries in the region (Georgia is 46th) in Transparency International's 2017 corruption rankings, and even below the worst performers in the Western Balkans, such as North Macedonia (107th) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (91st)—Moldova is ranked 122nd and Ukraine 130th out of 180 countries worldwide (in Emerson and Noutcheva 2018). A similar trend can be seen in the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index (2018).

In this regard, state capture, authoritarianism and oligarchy continue to dominate the governance of the eastern neighbourhood countries, feeding (and, in some cases, even furthering) the extent of corruption and the weak rule of law. In turn, the citizens' continued mixture of distrust and disillusionment, as well as the all too apparent poor social and economic conditions continue to limit the possibilities for further reform.

Social and economic vulnerabilities

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, institutional structures remained rigid in the post-Soviet states, but this did not necessarily translate into effective (let alone, in a number of cases, democratic) governance, resulting in the collapse of the welfare system (except, perhaps, in Belarus), poverty, high unemployment, social inequality and low levels of economic development. For example, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in the eastern neighbourhood remains the lowest in wider Europe: in 2016, Moldova's GDP per capita was $5,332 and in Ukraine it had increased from $6,663 in 1990 to $8,269 by 2016. By comparison it was $10,004 in Georgia ($5,174 in 1990) and $18,060 ($5,399 in 1990) in Belarus. Even in Kosovo, the worst performer among the Western Balkans countries, it was $10,063 (Emerson and Noutcheva 2018, 12).

This combination of factors is significant, as social policy is often seen as a precondition for 'economic growth and creation' in order to produce high levels of employment (Zimmermann 2017, 6). Instead, we see a region marred by socio-economic problems and experiencing high levels of emigration as a means of escaping the conditions there.

The EU tends to look at cross-border mobility as a glass half-full situation. For example, it is highlighted that in the first year of the visa-free regime with Moldova (May 2014–May 2015), some 500,000 citizens made use of the new opportunity to travel to the EU (Merheim-Eyre 2017). However, what remains in the glass is a more complex mixture. For example, visa liberalisation with Moldova was partly a response to widespread applications for Romanian passports. However, the mass emigration of Moldovans to the EU via this option has created both an economic drain on the EU and an unresolved migration issue that requires better management.

More broadly, comprising 60.4% of the total, in 2013 the 666,000 Ukrainians represented the highest (official) number of migrants in the EU from the eastern neighbourhood. There were also 210,000 Moldovan, 78,000 Belarusian, 69,000 Armenian, 55,000 Georgian and 24,000 Azerbaijani migrants in the EU (Pluim et al. 2014, 6). As in the case of migration from these countries to Russia, the unofficial numbers are much higher. For example, it is estimated that there are circa 200,000 Moldovans in Italy alone, some working illegally and others using Romanian passports. The number of Belarusians and Ukrainians is also higher, as it excludes not only those working illegally, but also those making use of the Polish Card, which is obtainable for those able to prove their Polish ancestry (Bara et al. 2013, 7).

Thus, while social policies usually seek to 'strengthen peoples' capacity to fully participate in employment and social life' (Zimmermann 2017, 6) and thus ensure high employment and successful economic governance, the present conditions mean that remittances from abroad still constitute a significant part of the countries' economies. According to the UN Development Programme, in 2012 remittances represented almost 23% of Moldovan household income (down from 26% in 2008) (IOM 2013). Of this, 9% came from Russia, but a staggering 52% came from Italy, 5% came from the UK and 4% came from Spain (ETF 2012).[1] According to the International Organization for Migration, without remittances, the poverty rate in Moldova would be circa 40% (currently it is circa 8%).

At the same time, in 2012 over 71% of surveyed Moldovan migrants expressed a wish to return home (ETF 2012). The response of the Moldovan institutions, together with the EU and other international partners, has been to focus on the concept of 'circular migration' in order to 'mobilise human and financial resources of Moldovan migrant workers for the sustainable development of Moldova's economy' (ETF 2012).

For example, under a Swedish-led project (involving Bulgaria, Italy and other EU member states, 2009–12), 30 Moldovan wine specialists were trained in prestigious Italian vocational training schools (Migration4Development 2012), while Germany led an EU-funded programme focusing on the circular migration of medical professionals (IOM 2014). Although these schemes serve as models for circular migration projects, they are limited in scope, and wider implementation and strategic foresight are still lacking.

In other words, despite attempts to mitigate the continued emigration and brain-drain from neighbouring countries, emigration, all too often, is a response by citizens to existing vulnerabilities, as well as to the continued gaps in democratic governance. While emigration is a testimony to citizens' endeavours to overcome the personal and societal vulnerabilities facing them, the factors leading to emigration and its consequences should also serve as a *raison d'etre* for supporting our neighbours and their citizens in the pursuit of security, democracy and prosperity.

Conclusion

In its Global Strategy (EEAS 2016), the EU emphasised the need to strengthen the resilience of the countries in its neighbourhood, acknowledging the ongoing vulnerabilities facing

individual countries across both the southern and eastern neighbourhoods. However, all too often we overlook the intersecting vulnerabilities on both the micro and macro levels which hamper the possibility of reform. This article has sought to highlight some of the ongoing vulnerabilities and gaps in democratic governance facing the countries of the eastern neighbourhood, and also the continued legacy of *homo sovieticus* which, though hard to quantify, represents an important phenomenon in the post-Soviet societies.

Despite this, it is imperative that neither policymakers nor practitioners simply fall prey to helpless gloom. The need to support the countries on their road to security, democracy and prosperity remains crucial, but we must also not be afraid to critically assess our own policies and approaches. To this end, European and transatlantic policymakers and practitioners must place the dignity of the individual at the heart of our policies, by (a) fostering deeper social and cultural capital, and (b) ensuring that we strengthen societal resilience rather than that of autocratic leaders and oligarchic structures.

For example, to engage in a principled approach with Belarus, the EU and transatlantic donors must recognise that while policies of sanctions and isolation against Belarus have failed to foster any meaningful change, simply going along with President Lukashenko in the name of regional stability will not bring about any meaningful change either, whether in the short, medium or long term. Instead, Lukashenko (as well as other autocrats and oligarchs in the neighbourhood) will use such overtures to his own benefit, namely to strengthen his own position and legitimacy at home and abroad. To this end, we must continue to remind ourselves that free and dignified people invested in the countries' commonwealth, and not autocrats and oligarchs, should determine the countries' futures.

Note

1. According to the International Organization for Migration, these are only the official figures; remittances sent through unofficial channels (including cash) would add further to this but the figures are not known.

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