Three decades of disintegration, integration, and uncertainty in Europe: comparative views of Poland, Ukraine and Belarus

Description

Eastern Europe has just gone through three decades marked successively by the disintegration of the USSR and the CMEA, the rapprochement to the EU, and, now, uncertainties about the future. These developments can be approached through the prism of the sensitivity of Polish, Ukrainian and Belarussian societies to the "communist idea" and the idea of "Europe."

It is helpful to look at the evolution of national identity in Eastern European societies to understand the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the CMEA, the subsequent European integration, and the current period of uncertainty. In particular, it is interesting to assess local perceptions of the « idea of Europe » and the « communist idea » in Belarus, Poland, and Ukraine. Matured throughout the 20th century, these views feed certain widespread expectations of order, reality, desirable or avoidable decisions, and national mythology and memory.

Perceptions of "Europe" and "communism": historical overview

These three countries have had very different trajectories in forming their respective national perceptions of « Europe » and « communism.

1917-1922: regional wars for independence and national follow-up: Ukraine and Belarus failed to defend their sovereignty. At the same time, Poland succeeded (thanks in part to the impact of the Treaties of Versailles and Trianon, which allowed Poland to be recognized by Western states). Gradually, a popular, non-communist Ukrainian mythology emerged, in which the armed forces played an important role.

*1922: formation of the Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR) of Belarus and Ukraine: f*or the first time in history, both nations acquired their state with clearly drawn (and secured) borders. In local societies, the USSR began to be perceived positively, which led to the emergence of groups of « sovereign communists. At the same time, Poland had very tense relations with the USSR.

The 1930s: targeted repressions in the SSRs of Belarus and Ukraine: the mythology of victimization begins to take shape in Belarus and Ukraine as events unfold (Holodomor, eradication of the middle class, extermination of intellectuals, submission of the Orthodox Church to the Kremlin). At the same time, Poland was gradually industrializing and establishing the cult of the nationalist strongman Józef Piłsudski.

*1939: the beginning of the Second World War: w*hile the Nazis invaded Poland, we witnessed in Ukraine the emergence of nationalist independence movements anti-Polish, anti-communist, and anti-Nazi. It is the birth of the mythology of resistance in Ukraine.

1940-45: the destruction of Central and Eastern Europe: Belarus lost 209 out of 290 cities, 85% of its industrial potential, and more than one million buildings. Ukraine and Poland were no less traumatized. A communist government was installed in Warsaw.

*1950-1970: post-war reconstruction: i*n both Soviet republics, the optimistic view of the USSR is growing, seen as a victorious part of the Second World War and the driving force behind reconstruction. However, in Ukraine, nationalist

myths and memories of the resistance (alternative to communism) continue to circulate. In Poland, the interwar sense of independence began to gain momentum, forming an organized anti-communist opposition. The omnipotent myth of communist prosperity, equality, and a "bright future" was reinforced in Belarus.

1970-1990: the crisis of the "idea of communism," disintegration of the Eastern bloc: the Soviet authorities proved incapable of keeping the "promises of communism." Elites, intellectuals, and anti-communist movements became active in all three countries. In Poland, the "communist idea" quickly gave way to the "idea of Europe" and a return to the « European family. The West was no longer perceived as the ideological rival in all three countries.

1990 to today: differentiated trajectories: a series of historical conditions determine the evolution of perceptions in each of the three countries: the role of the Church as a holder of identity, geographical proximity to the West, memory(s) of the events of World War II, effectiveness/legitimacy of the opposition after the fall of communism, effectiveness/legality of the old regime after the fall of communism, the legality of the "idea of Europe," the nature/dynamics of domestic reforms and foreign policy in the early years of independence.

First stage: the disintegration of the Eastern bloc (1980-1995)

The « communist idea » evolved according to a dynamic specific to the three countries.

Total "breakup" in Poland: several factors combine to explain the complete abandonment of the "communist idea": active clandestine anti-communist movements (Workers' Defense Committee, Flying University, and Solidarność) in the 1980s, the strong position of the Catholic Church, and its role as a receptacle of national identity, reforms of the judiciary in the mid-1980s (separation of powers, introduction of administrative litigation, and the creation of the institution of the ombudsman), and the comparatively high level of legitimacy of noncommunist actors. The 1990s in Poland were marked by the smooth takeover of security agencies by the democratic opposition (army, police, intelligence, and counter-intelligence), a rapid shift to a market economy (shock therapy), the loss of the monopoly of power by the ex-communists (who became « socialists ») and the introduction of a free electoral system.

« Hybrid » breakup in Ukraine: there was hybridization between the "communist idea" and new aspirations. In the 1980s, the opposition was poorly organized and small in number, the Orthodox Church was fragmented, alternatives to the communist idea lacked popularity (nationalism, liberal democracy), and the state did not support the opposition parties. The strengthening of the "sovereign communists" (led by President Leonid Kravchuk) delayed liberal reforms. The citizens have a weak perception of shared European destiny. Instead, they put more faith in the ability of the former communists in power (in a more open political environment) to keep the « promises of communism.

No breakup in Belarus: the "communist idea" never disappeared in Belarus. In the 1980s, the opposition was poorly organized and had little presence in the new political environment. There were few or no influential nationalist and democratic political actors to legitimize a collective consciousness of alternatives to communism. The popular belief in communism remains strong. At the same time, the « idea of Europe » is discredited by the ruling elites. The Orthodox Church plays an ambiguous role, more as a vector of Panslavic than national identity. The political system remains dominated by a hierarchical leadership, the security organs (such as the KGB) are maintained, and the country tries to secure its economic links from the Soviet era.

Second stage: European integration (1995-2010)

The « idea of Europe » is imposed in Poland and Ukraine, while it is rejected in Belarus.

Adherence to the "idea of Europe" in Poland: the harsh economic and political reforms of the early 1990s were accompanied by a massive and general impoverishment of the population. The "idea of Europe" was widely idealized by suffering people, hoping it would bring a general improvement in living standards. With the transition to a representative parliamentary republic, the former communists returned democratically to power (Aleksandr Kwaśniewski), leading to a strengthening of nationalist mythology, and the cautious limitation of the political role of the Church, and the desire to return to the Europe of Christian values and Enlightenment ideals. There was a growing fear of what was perceived as

Russian revisionism.

Limited adherence to the "idea of Europe" in Ukraine: the choice of a semi-presidential republic is accompanied by the use of authoritarian practices and the "penetration" of big business in parliament. This is known as oligarchic control of political decision-making. The judicial system is non-transparent, encouraging corruption and informal practices that lead to a variable application of the law. Ukraine is organizing a reorientation of its foreign trade towards the EU, exporting steel, coal, cereals, chemical products, etc. From 2004 onwards, Ukraine has seen the nationalist/pro-sovereign mythology strengthen with the changeover to a parliamentary republic. The Orthodox Church, attached to the Moscow Patriarchate, plays a unifying role at the national level.

Rejection of the "idea of Europe" in Belarus: the authorities' unwillingness to implement political and economic reforms is accompanied by fear and widespread impoverishment of the population. The system of governance remains rigid despite the creation of a presidential republic. Security agencies remain influential in the presidential sphere. Opposition parties are suppressed, and civil society, when not conformist, is buried. Public opinion is fed pan-Slavic and post-Soviet mythology, and the country continues to integrate with Russia (including in the military and economic spheres).

Third stage: current uncertainties (2010-2020)

Growing skepticism towards the EU in Poland: with the increase in the standard of living and the emergence of a middle class since Poland joined the EU in 2004, a critical discourse towards the European institutions is emerging. The "idea of Europe" is gradually being distinguished from the EU, the latter being increasingly compared to the USSR's ability to impose restrictive policies on Poland (in the media and political discourse). Disillusionment with Euro-Atlantic organizations (EU and NATO) is also expressed in collective security. At the same time, Poland is witnessing a return of the Catholic Church to national policy-making (through closer cooperation with conservative parliamentary parties). Poland is now a self-proclaimed « last stronghold » of « true » European identity.

A firm shift towards European integration in Ukraine: narratives that depict Ukraine as a European state and regional power are flourishing from 2010 onwards. The "idea of Europe" is popularized, and the EU is perceived as a « perfect space." The growing pressure of civil society on political actors is reflected in the inclusion in the Constitution of the objectives of membership in NATO and the EU. At the same time, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is growing stronger. It is a vector of national identity (acquisition of the Tomos of Autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine from the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 2018). We are then witnessing the emergence of a new national heroic mythology, especially since 2014. The feeling of insecurity in the face of Russian revisionism remains prevalent.

Delayed "disintegration of communism" in Belarus: demands for more democracy and freedom accompany the gradual emergence of a middle class. Civil society is awakening, and lassitude and a general distrust of the elites are taking hold. Censorship is becoming more visible and repression by the security agencies stronger, especially in the run-up to the presidential election in August 2020. In the face of biased media under the authorities' control, the "idea of Europe" is making its way into popular discourse. Still, it is not enough to counteract a disproportionate dependence on Russia.

Intolerance of communist legacies, which are now also partly assimilated with Russia's excesses, has initiated and continues to drive the pro-European transformation in Poland and Ukraine. However, it should be noted that Poland today is much less optimistic about Europe and the EU than it was in the 1990s. On the other hand, Ukraine seems to be following a similar pattern to Poland in the mid-2000s (with the Russian-initiated war in late February 2022 even prompting it to accelerate its desire for the EU). The experience of Poland's and Ukraine's painful relations with the USSR stimulates this transformation, now reinforced by the repulsive example of a Russia adrift. Belarus, now under increasingly close control of Moscow, continues to capitalize on its communist heritage and minimizes the need to adapt to contemporary European realities. Unlike Poland and Ukraine, its national memory and mythology primarily emphasize the positive contribution of the USSR to state and nation-building. Some of the processes in Belarus are reminiscent of those in Ukraine in the late 1990s.

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This text is based on the author's intervention at the international conference *Thirty years after the disintegration of the CMEA: what lessons for Europe today?* The podcast of Ostap Kushnir's intervention is available on this link.

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Back to the top of the page

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