

The European Histories of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia and their Russian Challenges

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There is no such thing as a clearly defined presence of European traditions, let alone political structures in the rather abridged histories of national independence in Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia. These countries, however, display a strong commitment to Europeanness, which, in turn, shapes the political culture of the above post-soviet states. Famously, Zurab Zhvania, at the time president of the Georgian parliament, stated in 1999 in Strasbourg: "I am Georgian and therefore I am European."¹ Similar statements could be heard in Ukraine and in Moldova.

CULTURE, STATEHOOD AND INDEPENDENCE

For Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, Europe, or more precisely the European Union, is the main focus of their foreign policy. This becomes clear when we examine the websites of the respective foreign ministries – the European flag has a prominent place everywhere; Moldova's foreign office even adopted the official designation of 'Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration'.



Flag of Georgia in the Council of Europe.
Author: Spartaky, wikimedia commons

¹ Natia and Maia Mestvirishvili: 'I am Georgian and therefore I am European.' Researching the Europeanness of Georgia. In: Central European Journal of International and Security Studies. 8/2014, S. 52-65.

None of the three states has a long tradition of independent statehood. All of them experienced a very short period of sovereignty after the collapse of the Tsarist Empire in 1917. Though Ukraine and Georgia declared their independence after the Bolshevik Revolution, they were soon incorporated into the newly established Soviet empire. Moldova enjoyed a brief period of independence in 1917 only to be occupied by Romania one year later. During the interwar period, Moldova belonged to Romania. Transnistria, meanwhile, became part of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic.

Moldova was created as a Soviet republic after World War II when Stalin seized Bessarabia, which had been part of imperial Russia in the 19th century. Moldova is a good example of the contradictory nationality politics in the Soviet era: On the one hand, the official Soviet Marxist ideology belittled the importance of nationality in its assumption that nations were products of the bourgeois era and would eventually disappear. On the other hand, national minorities were protected, and rewarded for their loyalty with some limited autonomy. The "friendship of nations" was one of the ideological pillars of the Soviet Union. In order to justify the new state of the Moldavian Socialist Soviet Republic, a full-fledged Moldovan nationality was created on the basis of a "Moldovan language" by switching from the Latin to the Cyrillic script.² Today, we can observe an essentialising European discourse in all three states. Moldovan, Ukrainian, as well as Georgian intellectuals and politicians highlight European episodes of the past in order to prove their European heritage.

The idea of a European national culture itself, however, came to Moldova, Ukraine, and

² see Euxeinos No. 15/16, 2014.

Georgia mainly through Russian intellectual discourse. This reception ensued relatively late; only in the 1860s did ideas about national unity reach the periphery of the Russian empire. Crucial was, of course, the successful example of Italy with the heroic myth of Garibaldi. The design of the desired state was not very clear either. In Georgia, intellectuals fantasized about a state structure that would resemble a combination of values, including those of liberal Britain, and national Italy. At times, they also aspired to establish a socialist state.³ In 19th century Ukraine, ideas about a federation with Great Russia were prevalent. These dreams were destroyed after the 1863 Polish uprising, which entailed a severe policy of oppression also directed against the Ukrainian nationalists.

Under Soviet rule, after an initial policy of “korenizacija” (“rooting in”), national movements were brutally suppressed. This was especially the case in Ukraine and Moldova. In both territories, horrible famines occurred as a result of a reckless collectivization – in Ukraine in 1931/1932, in Moldova in 1946/1947.

In Georgia, ironically enough, the claim for national rights took a pro-Stalinist stance. A post-soviet marble plate on the Rustaveli boulevard reads: “This monument commemorates the participants of a peaceful rally gunned down by the Soviet regime on March 9, 1956”. The text may, mildly put, lead to misunderstandings, as the demonstration was against successive de-Stalinisation measures. In 1956, Georgians were still proud of their leader, and were discontent with the policy of thaw proclaimed

by the new secretary general Khrushchev.

RELIGION

The orthodox church is dominant in all three countries. There has been a long discussion about the compatibility of Western Democracy and the orthodox mind-set in the territories of the former Byzantine Empire. Yet, such allegations mostly perpetuate both catholic and protestant resentments against their eastern rival.

However, the important tradition of dual loyalty in the West should not be underestimated – towards the church on one side, and towards the state on the other. This double allegiance shaped Western notions of citizenship – loyalty to the state could always be limited by the individual religious conscience. In our three examples, such a dual loyalty is only present in the case of Western Ukraine with its Greek-catholic church. The Greek-catholic church recognizes Papal supremacy, but continues to practice orthodox rites.

In all other regions of the states under consideration, there is no rivalling loyalty between the state and the church. According to Orthodox tradition, the head of state is simultaneously the head of the church. In this situation, religious identity markers corroborate rather than challenge national identification. Especially in Georgia, this link between power and religion is exploited by the state power: One of the achievements of the Saakashvili government was the construction of a giant cathedral in Tbilisi.

SOVIETIZATION

The Europeanization project in Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia is very much a product of the local elite. This small layer of the society was able to take advantage of the

³ Gia Tarkhan-Mouravi: Georgia’s Eastern Aspirations and the Eastern Partnership. In: Stephen F. Jones: The Making of Modern Georgia, 1918-2012. The First Georgian Republic and its successors. New York 2014, 49-73, 50.

privatisation of state property in the “wild” 90s, often enjoyed an education in the West, and maintains relations with members of the global economy.

Those left behind by the rapid (and often corrupted) process of modernization, including the rural population as well as the older generation, however, still long for a patrimonial state, which will take care of them. In all three countries, the year 1991 should not only be seen as a rupture. In many ways, Soviet patterns of societal organization and value preferences still persist and shape people’s ideas about the duties and responsibilities of a state.

Culturally, Sovietisation came under the guise of Russianisation. This notion – as opposed to Russification – points to the strong influence of Russian as a language of higher education, administration and interethnic communication.

Soviet nostalgia is also a wide spread remedy against the main illness of modernity: the uncertainty of the future. The Soviet system seemed to last forever; its values and mechanisms were familiar to everyone; Soviet institutions penetrated every realm of life. There was, however, a positive aspect of the totalitarian oppression: The Soviet Union rendered the system and everyday life predictable.

This is also why the self appointed leaders of the Euromaidan chose not to claim responsibility for the toppling of the Lenin statue in Kyiv on Dec 8, 2013. They knew exactly how much Lenin was still revered by the older generation of Ukrainians.

DOMESTIC ETHNIC HETEROGENEITY

Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia still have to come to terms with their minority problems. The topic of national independence almost

exclusively dominated the political agenda in all three states during the 1990s. Unfortunately, the pathos of national independence precluded a viable policy for minorities in all of the newly independent states.

Language policy is a case in point. Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia have strongly advocated for the case for a one state language policy.

Georgia had to contain Abkhazian and South Ossetian separatism from the very beginning of its independence; these tensions reached their peak in the August war of 2008. The Georgian constitution has little to say about the protection of minority rights. The main reason for this is the perceived separatist threat in the country. Georgian leaders were convinced after 1991 that centripetal rather than centrifugal tendencies should be strengthened. Georgia adopted a framework for minority rights only recently, and within the legislation of the Council of Europe.

All three states are unitary states, and rely on one chamber of parliament only. From the outset in the early 1990s, federalism was seen as a threat to the integrity of the state -

Moldova is split between the so-called Moldovanists and Romanianists. Moldovanists believe in a distinct Moldovan nation and culture, whereas Romanianists hold that Moldova is part of Romania.

At the same time, Romania remains the most important partner for Moldova. The Moldovan Prime Minister recently expressed his hope that Moldova might access the EU in 2019 under the Romanian presidency of the EU council.

Moldova already since 1992 has to cope with the runaway republic of Transdnistria which is a de facto state alimented but not officially recognized by Russia.

When Saakashvili assumed office in Georgia, he was very much aware of the ethnic

heterogeneity in his country. He addressed the audience during his inaugural speech with the words: "I would like to greet Kartli, Kakheti, Imereti, Mengrelia, Guria, Abkhasia, Adjara, Mtskheta-Mtianeti, Ratcha, Samtskhe-Javakheti, [and] Shida Kartli."⁴ Saakashvili was, however, a strategic player. He instrumentalized the respect he had previously extended to national minorities as a political leverage in order to strengthen his executive power in the government. A notorious case in point was the 2011 decision to transfer the Georgian parliament to Kutaisi, allegedly for reasons of decentralisation.

A similar tendency can be observed in Ukraine. As the constitution states, Ukraine is a unitary state. Federalization has always remained an item on the agenda of the opposition in Ukraine and never made it into government politics. This holds true for Rukh, the nationalist movement in the early 1990's, and for Yanukovich's Party of Regions, which called for federalisation until its accession to power in 2010. After Yanukovich's accession to the presidency, his claims disappeared into thin air. Today, the decentralisation as outlined in the Minsk 2 agreement, is a process imposed by the Russian Federation.

RUSSIAS GEOPOLITICAL ASPIRATIONS

Since 2012, Russia has increased its geopolitical and imperial aspirations. The clearest expression of this new self-consciousness can be found in the foreign policy doctrine from February 23, 2013. This is what the doctrine has to say about Moldova: "Russia [...] will participate [...] in the settlement of the Transdnestria problem on the basis of respect for the sovereignty, territorial

integrity, and neutral status of the Republic of Moldova while providing a special status for Transdnestria."⁵ It is quite interesting that Russia stresses the notion of sovereignty and territorial integrity of Moldova. The reason for this is that Russia seeks to retain Transdnestria as a thorn in Moldova's side. Conversely, the worst-case scenario for Russia would be if Moldova gave up Transdnestria in order to join NATO and the EU. For this reason Russia does not accept Transdnestria as a member of its Federation even though Transdnestria requested membership in 2006, and again after the Russian Federation incorporated Crimea. The status quo in Transdnestria is the best guarantee that Moldova will stay what it is, a satellite of Russia in the so called "near abroad".

The foreign policy doctrine uses a cautious wording when it comes to Ukraine: "Russia will build up relations with Ukraine as a priority partner within the CIS, contribute to its participation in extended integration processes." After the violent events of 2014, Ukraine is no longer a priority partner, at least from a Ukrainian perspective. Though he continues to talk about the brotherly nation of Ukrainians, it is clear that Putin lost Ukraine as a prospective member of his prestigious Eurasian Economic Union project that includes so far Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan and Armenia.

Russia seeks to instigate political unrest in Eastern Ukraine. It may therefore be fair to speak about a 'Transdnestrianisation of Eastern Ukraine': If Donetsk and Luhansk are not controlled by the central government in

4 President Saakashvili's Inauguration Speech. <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26694>

5 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation. Approved by President of the Russian Federation V. Putin on 12 February 2013 http://archive.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/76389FEC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D

Kyiv, Ukraine will not be able to continue its Western integration – or at least not within its 1991 frontiers.

Even Georgia, Russia's most inimical neighbouring state, appears in Russia's foreign policy doctrine: "Russia is interested in the normalization of relations with Georgia in the areas in which the Georgian side shows its willingness, while taking into account the existing political environment in Transcaucasia". This is a euphemistic call to accept the political realities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The most probable outcome is Abkhazia and South Ossetia's integration into the Russian Federation within the coming 5-10 years.

Georgia itself went through a difficult process of disillusionment. It became clear to the Georgians that its Western partners – Europe as well as the US – have only a limited potential to counteract Russian aspirations in Transcaucasia.

PERSPECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE

Georgia and Ukraine finally signed the trade agreement with the European Union on June 27, 2014. But this is only a first step on a long journey.

Moldova probably has to renounce its claims to Transdnistria. Even in this case, EU accession seems to be quite ambitious for the foreseeable future.

Ukraine and Moldova both have their advocates within the EU: Poland and Romania. These two new EU-member states do not act selflessly. Both have an imperial past, which neither of them seeks to revive. Their post-imperial situation, however, clearly shapes their range of political action.

Georgia does not have such an advocate. This is why Georgia may try to move closer to the US and to draw on their geopolitical interests.

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