

Centenary Anniversaries of Independence

BALTIC, EAST EUROPEAN, AND CAUCASIAN CONTEXTS

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In 2018, many former Soviet republics celebrated their anniversaries of independence gained by the collapse of the Russian empire one hundred years ago. These remembrance events gave these countries the opportunity to peer into their century-long experiences of autonomy, independence, and subsequent forceful inclusion into the Soviet Union. Over this time, they produced new narratives of political legitimacy and subjectivity, cultural belonging, nation-building, and statehood. In this memo, I look at how the centenary festivities in the Baltic states, Eastern Europe, and South Caucasus contribute to the ongoing debate about the relationship between a former empire and its colonial subalterns. I also relate storylines about national independence with a plethora of issues pertaining to the fragility of democracy, its multiple vulnerabilities, and its interconnectedness with nationalism.

Nationalist Forces at Attention

A series of post-Soviet centenaries produced new historical and political narratives that formed a common network of symbolic solidarity between a dozen countries that formerly belonged to one imperial entity and that henceforth were forcefully incorporated into the Soviet empire. The fall of the Romanov monarchy and the end of World War I created an anarchic political landscape in Europe where issues of the legality of the newly independent state-like entities opened windows of opportunities for nationalist forces all across the former imperial periphery. Due to apparent parallels with the disintegration of the Soviet Union that generated a second and much more successful wave of national resurgence, the centenary narratives stretched far beyond communities of professional historians into the political core.

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More “Post-Colonial” Than “Post-Soviet”

One of the dominant narratives from the centennial events was the idea that the states’ independence came not from the fall of the USSR but from the much earlier developments of the 1917 era. This contemporary gaze into that age-old era implies a different understanding of legitimacy through a rebranding of a group of countries that was loosely defined as “post-Soviet states” to “independence fighters on the battlefields of Europe.” These concomitant heroic narratives created new space for political semantics of glory and pride, on the one hand, and victimization and trauma, on the other. A good illustration would be a contemporary Georgian national discourse that portrays their loss of independence in 1921 as a direct result of “Russian occupation” (even if it was masterminded by ethnic Georgians Joseph Stalin and Sergo Ordzhonikidze).

Of course, post-Soviet and post-colonial interpretations of national identities might co-exist. An illuminating case in point is Armenia. At the official celebration of the centenary anniversary, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan [suggested](#) that:

“...only thanks to the existence of the First Republic was Armenia incorporated into the Soviet Union as a full-fledged constituent republic. And only thanks to this status did Armenia manage to secede from the Soviet Union without upheavals and to gain the status of an internationally recognized independent country.”

By the same token, Karekin II, Catholicos of All Armenians, more straightforwardly [underscored](#) the post-colonial notes of the national narrative:

“A century ago, our people were on the verge of life and death. Ottoman Turkey, taking advantage of the confusion of World War I, carried out its Armenian Genocide program. Western Armenia and Armenian settlements were ruined in Turkey, the Turkish troops even entered Eastern Armenia, thus threatening the existence of our people.”

In this sense, the celebration of a historical date turned into a reiteration of the traumatic core of Armenia’s relations with imperial Turkey, and justification for their inevitable and, in a sense, trans-historical, hyper-securitization. This confirms that post-colonial conceptualizations of history offer a broader scope of meanings attached to the events of the past, in comparison to the vocabulary of “post-Soviet transition.”

Westernized Memories

The 1918 nationalism is largely characterized as pro-Western. Official discourses put a strong premium on the democratic traditions of nations fighting for independence, for

example, on self-government in Ukraine, civil rights and gender equality in Azerbaijan, or the Wilsonian principles of self-determination in Baltic countries.

Georgia provides another example of the Westernization of memory politics. In the [words](#) of former President Giorgi Margvelashvili, his country “still continues movement on the path from independence to freedom.” The normative crux of this transformation boils down to Georgia’s institutional, symbolic, and civilizational association with democratic nations. Quite telling in this regard were the titles of two major conferences held in Tbilisi in 2018: “Remembering the Democratic Republic of Georgia, 100 Years On: A Model for Europe” and the Second Annual U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Conference “100 Years Since the First Republic,” with both interpreting the events of 1918 from the perspectives of Georgia’s Western(ized) identity and security posture.

The Azerbaijani government also did its best to use the centenary anniversary for strengthening its symbolic links with the West. Azerbaijan’s Foreign Ministry [issued](#) a statement reminding everyone that in 1918 “Azerbaijani diplomacy made its first steps, diplomatic missions of 16 states functioned in Baku, including the USA, Great Britain, France, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland, Belgium, Iran, Poland and Ukraine” and, moreover, that it was the Bolshevik invasion that put an end to independence. Baku officialdom tried to embellish its democratic credentials, claiming that the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was the first democracy in the Turkic/Islamic world, where women received the right to vote on an equal basis with men earlier than in some countries of Europe or in the United States. Apparently, the articulation of this thesis should be understood as a reaction to multiple voices in the West accusing the Aliyev regime of deviating from basic democratic standards. The U.S. Embassy in Baku had [issued](#) a reciprocal statement that is worth noting:

“The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic’s founders envisioned a country whose values closely aligned with those of the United States. They enshrined those values in the country’s founding documents, which guaranteed full civil and political rights to all its citizens, regardless of ethnic origin, religion, class, or sex. When Azerbaijan regained its independence in 1991, and the Azerbaijani people worked to shape a new state in which to enjoy their newfound liberty and independence, its leaders looked to the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic as a guiding light. The United States, too, still looks to its Founding Fathers.”

This statement is a perfect example of inscribing historical reference into the dominant security discourses shared by Baku and Washington.

In the current Estonian discourse, the 1918 independence is associated with the ideas of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson such as the principle of self-determination, which serves to underline the historical consonance between American and Estonian foreign policies. When it comes to the broader Baltic context, centenary anniversaries gave new impulse to

the principle of solidarity in the foreign policies of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The centenary anniversaries became important landmarks substantiating the importance of the Baltic states for the United States. On the occasion of the celebration of their independence, U.S. President Donald Trump met with the three Baltic leaders in Washington, DC., and on April 4, 2018, the U.S. government issued a declaration on their 100 years of independence that reiterated the principle of trans-Atlantic solidarity as the major security protection tool for the Baltics. For the EU and NATO, their experiences are an important counter-balance to the current wave of EU-skepticism and national conservatism widely spread in the countries of Central Europe.

The Fragility of Democracy

Within the celebratory discourses, democracy might be discussed as an institutionally fragile form of governance that tends to have a nationalist bias, something which is of particular importance against the backdrop of today's backsliding democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. Some authoritative Estonian speakers raised essential issues pertaining to the controversial trajectories of democracies in the Baltic states. As prominent Estonian-American political scientist Rein Taagepera [put it](#), "what made the Baltic states different from the rest of Europe in the late 1930s was to have as dictators precisely those people who had most contributed to the formation of independent democratic republics 20 years earlier and, thus, had earned widespread trust." These and other critical insights are important contributions to the ongoing debate of institutional weakness of liberal democracy and its possible merger with right-wing nationalism.

Debates on contemporary democracy were an inherent part of the Estonian independence narrative in 2018. Its core element was the Estonian government's more inclusive policies toward Estonian Russophones. In particular, in the fall of 2018, Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid moved her office to the predominantly Russian-speaking city of Narva for one month as an inclusive symbolic gesture meant to send a positive message to the entire Russian speaking community in the country. By the same token, officials in Tallinn started generating a set of cultural policies aimed at closer engagement of Narva's population in Estonian and European cultural milieus, with a core initiative of nominating Narva as a bidding city to be the European Capital of Culture in 2024. These measures were designed and implemented in response to Russian speakers' expectations of long-awaited changes in integration policies. In particular, Russians in Estonia appealed to the original ideas of independence as embracing all ethnic groups residing in the country, as opposed to the predominantly ethnopolitical background of Estonian statehood. However, the difference in approaches remains: activists of the Russian-speaking community are putting a premium on the necessity of a more inclusive citizenship policy, while the Estonian government is more keen on undertaking measures pertaining to the cultural and symbolic domains of integration.

The centenary anniversary expanded diversity within the Estonian political discourse in a different sense as well: by acknowledging and legitimizing left-wing narratives boosted by the revolutionary movement in Russia in 1917. In particular, the Estonian National Museum in 2018 gave floor to a performative installation representing local revolutionaries as fighters for social justice, gender equality, and people's rights. This adds some new elements into the hegemonic discourse that started at the fall of the Soviet Union and was largely influenced by the neoliberal ideology of market capitalism and liberal democracy – the key shapers of the Estonian strategy of Europeanization.

The Russia Connection

The cultural and political dimensions of nationalist sentiments all across the imperial periphery were directly linked to the dynamics within the ex-imperial center. According to many national interpretations of independence, Russia did have a chance to keep inside its polity many of the colonized territories under the regime that came to power in Moscow after the February 1917 revolution. "National territorial" autonomy within Russia was conditioned by Russia's acceptance of the principles of democracy and federalism. It was the October 1917 revolutionary coup that radicalized nationalist movements and led them to the pathway of independence.

In particular, in his study of the 1918 events in Ukraine, Igor Torbakov at Uppsala University makes clear that the Russo-Ukrainian conflict reached its peak after the Bolsheviks came to power in Petrograd. Before that, the Ukrainian side demanded greater autonomy from Russia, including non-interference in Ukrainian administrative affairs, the transfer of Ukrainian troops from other troops to Ukrainian territory, and a financial agreement regarding Ukraine's share of state treasury fund. However, Russia responded by creating a fully subordinated-to-Petrograd "workers' and peasants' government" in Kharkiv that launched a military operation against Kyiv.

Therefore, in most cases (except Armenia and Moldova) Soviet Russia is seen as an external intruder and intervener, an interfering country with whom compromises are unfeasible. The contemporary Ukrainian national narrative is emblematic in this respect, being grounded in blaming Russia for waging a hybrid war against Ukraine since the Bolsheviks came to power that links the 1918-1921 events with current Russian interferences in Ukraine. From the vantage point of the mainstream narrative, from 1918 until 1921, Ukraine functioned as an independent state, with its own borders, army, currency, language, and symbols. Then, in January 1918, the Red Army captured Kharkiv and established a fake republic from there that facilitated the advancement of Russian troops toward Kyiv and its ultimate seizure. Apparent analogies with the historical precedents of Russia posing a major security threat were conducive to acknowledging that the failure of Ukrainian independence was due to a lack of unity among the Ukrainian political class.

Russia's Take: from Disregard to Recycling of Old Storylines

Russia does not seem to have a coherent narrative about their centenary anniversary of independence. Reactions have ranged from simple disregard to reiterations of old imperial narratives and invectives against political manifestations of post-Soviet nationalism in whatever form they come. In particular, Ukraine's attempts at gaining independence from Soviet Russia have been caricatured in the Russian mainstream media as futile and conducive to conflicts, wars, and economic degradation. In a radical imperial version, this logic leads to the complete denial of Ukraine's subjectivity: it can only be either a part of Russia or a "wild field."

The Baltic states have been traditionally misrepresented in Russia's dominant discourse as weak borderlands with decaying populations celebrating their nationalism by Nazi-style torch rallies and susceptible to ideas of ethnic homogeneity. The narrative goes on saying that these countries nowadays host EU institutions and NATO military units instead of Soviet-era infrastructure. A milder version argues that the Bolsheviks (Russians and non-Russians) contributed to national awakening and state building in the Baltic republics, which, coupled with Russia's de-facto denial of occupations and deportations, only widens Russia's political gaps with its Baltic neighbors.

Conclusion

The centenary anniversaries of independence produced a bunch of politically accentuated historical discourses contributing to nationbuilding and serving the purposes of consolidation of national identity, enhancement of democratic credentials of regimes in power, further integration of countries with Western institutions, and accentuation of lines of distinction from Russia. The governments of the countries mentioned in this memo used the 100 years of independence as important landmarks for infusing politically expedient meanings in this historical date, and on this basis, constructed storylines allowing for a positive reinterpretation of controversial events of the past. In the meantime, alternative discourses of domestic opposition were marginalized and delegitimized, which are particularly notorious aspects in the cases of Azerbaijan and Georgia.

In most cases – perhaps, with the exception of Armenia – the newly appeared historical discourses are meant to do away with the definition of their identities through the post-Soviet lens, and subsequently to relate the ideas and practices of independent statehood to the dramatic changes that occurred in Europe in the aftermath of World War I. In this respect, while implicitly rejecting their characterization as "post-Soviet," these countries remain "post-colonial" by the sheer virtue of tracing their independence discourses back to the time of breaking away from the Russian empire. It is this experience of post-coloniality that serves as a common denominator for regimes in countries as institutionally different as Estonia and Azerbaijan, or Ukraine and Kazakhstan. It is not

only institutions but rather shared memories of decolonization and re-colonization that have paved ways for solidarity both within this group of countries (for example, between Lithuania and Ukraine, or Estonia and Georgia) and between them and their partners in the West.

Moving in this direction, the celebrating countries have explored multiple ways of overcoming their peripherality through normatively associating themselves with Europe. They have done so through traditional reiterations of a traumatic victimization (stemming from Russia's incursions and encroachments upon their territories) and they also try other pathways meant to embed their experiences and trajectories of transformation more deeply into European milieus. For example, belonging to Europe might be articulated through the commitments of their founding fathers of independence to ideas of democracy and freedom, both in their liberal and social democratic versions, or through deriving contemporary security policies from century-old historical antecedents. This broad menu of choices is conducive to further differentiation within the so called post-Soviet nations, with various models of liberal and illiberal nationalism competing with each other. Finding a common analytical framework by embracing the whole spectrum of ensuing policies and discourses seems to be a daunting challenge for analysts in the years to come.

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