Territory, identity, transformation: A Baltic-Balkan comparison

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Ivaylo Ditchev, Tomas Kavaliauskas
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Lithuania and Bulgaria: two nations on the peripheries of central Europe, both bearing strong traces of former Empires. Subjected to neoliberal forces of disintegration, historical identities re-pattern along new lines of conflict, the politics of '89 now redundant in the regulated zone of market democracy that is new Europe. Ivaylo Ditchev and Tomas Kavaliauskas share Baltic-Balkan perspectives on the present.

Tomas Kavaliauskas: For the most of the time since its second independence, Lithuania has been an ambassador of democracy in Belarus, Ukraine and Georgia. The former president Valdas Adamkus supported the Orange revolution and, as a friend of George W. Bush, caused Moscow numerous headaches. The new Lithuanian president, Dalia Grybauskaite, has a different attitude: true, she did not travel to Moscow to attend the celebrations of the sixty-fifth anniversary of victory in WWII, but she does not criticize Ukraine for its lack of democracy and she did not invite Mikheil Saakashvili to Lithuania to celebrate the twentieth jubilee of Lithuania’s independence. Until now it could have been said that, despite being a small state, Lithuania has successfully played geopolitical games against the Kremlin’s dominance in those same territories where, in the thirteenth century, the Lithuanian Grand Duchy thrived. But the new president seems more concerned with realpolitik than with acting as an ambassador of democracy in eastern Europe and the Caucasus. The Estonian intellectual and academic Rein Raud has argued that Lithuania, as a small country, should be aware of its limits. He was referring to this self-perceived role as ambassador of democracy. Raud’s message was clear: if you are small, act small.

Is it possible to note anything similar in the Balkan region? Bulgaria has a number of neighbouring countries – Serbia, Romania, Macedonia, Greece, Turkey. One seems to be like a little brother, and that would be Macedonia. Romania also has a younger brother – Moldova. Has Bulgaria acted like a big country in the region since 1989? Has it been a geopolitical player over the last 20 years? Has it perceived itself as an ambassador of
democracy, or of anything else, in its own region?

**Ivaylo Ditchev:** To start with, we live in a world where territories are a burden rather than an asset (with the exception of territories rich in natural resources, of course). If Shanghai could get rid of inland China, or London of the British countryside, they would be much better off. It would be a disaster, both for Bulgaria and for Romania, were they to get back (if I can say “back”) Macedonia or Moldova respectively: there would be political upheavals, possibly riots, the economic price would be huge, massive political efforts of integration would be required, and so on.

The territorial phantasm has a purely symbolic value. I would rather see a tendency towards the dissolution of territorial solidarity and redistribution within the states themselves - a feudalization so to speak. It is the rich who wanted to get rid of the poor in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, now this is happening with Belgium. The tensions between the rich municipality of Sofia and the rest of the country are telling. The disappearance of solidarity within the national territory is screened off by nationalist, even quasi-fascist discourses: this seems to me to be a general trend of neoliberalism (Margaret Thatcher was the first to make her citizens swallow the assault on the social state by an absurd but triumphant war in the Falklands).

Exporting democracy is quite a different matter. Nowadays, you try to become a hub through which flows of capitals, influences, symbols, people or goods can circulate. This implies that you try to maintain the specificities or sovereignties of the other, rather than impose your own culture or imperial power: the “othering” of the other is part of such a plan. Today, market democracy is sold as a franchise: the other state gets the brand name but takes on all the risks.

In the Balkans, countries or cities try to position themselves as intermediaries between the region and a bigger geopolitical sponsor: traditionally, Romania has been the exclusive representative of France, Bulgaria and Serbia of Russia, Turkey of Britain, and so on. No country has yet become a hub of inter-Balkan exchange, and certainly not Bulgaria, despite it being geographically at the centre of the peninsula and having various advantages, such as being a member of the EU. Then there is the older reflex, inherited from territorial modernity, to be the last bastion on a frontline, be it between Christianity and Islam, between Communism and the “free world”, between Rome and the barbarians... There is very little exchange between the Balkan countries. One telling example is the fact that there is just one old bridge over the Danube along the entire, 470 km stretch separating Bulgaria and Romania.

So, to return to your question, acting as a big country is somewhat absurd unless one is a great military power, which we are not. Being a hub implies to act as a small country, even a city, with a high concentration of links and channels – being a Singapore or a Hong Kong, not a Berlin or a Paris.

**TK:** Czeslaw Milosz referred to Lithuanian statehood “a philological project”. In the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, Lithuanian intellectuals purified the Lithuanian language from slavisms and worked on the creation of new and modern vocabulary. This project has not ended: Lithuanian national identity is still maintained through the language. The language issue is even more important in the other two Baltic
States, Latvia and Estonia, where almost half the population is Russian-speaking. Due to the experience of Soviet occupation and the imposition of the Russian language, national languages in the Baltics today play a key role in asserting national sovereignty as well as in defining ethnicities.

The legacy of communism is inseparable from political-linguistic role of the Russian language. Bulgaria also has this legacy, yet the difference is that the Bulgarian language has a Cyrillic alphabet and is a Slavic language. Does the Russian language imply anything negative, or remind Bulgarians of the Warsaw Pact? In the 1960s, the Bulgarian language underwent a process of modernization without experiencing resistance. To what extent does the Bulgarian language play a political role in maintaining Bulgarian identity against the background of the communist legacy?

**ID:** Unlike in most of the other countries of the Soviet bloc, Russia has a uniquely positive image in Bulgaria. First, the country was created following the Russo-Ottoman war in the nineteenth century. Communism in Bulgaria was also less violent: most people are more or less nostalgic about the times when the Soviet Union poured aid upon the country (for example, we bought cheap oil from Moscow and re-exported it secretly). A particular aspect of Bulgarian national identity is that the Cyrillic alphabet, together with Orthodox Christianity, was adopted here first, by the Bulgarian Tsar Boris, and then passed north to the Russians. There is no resistance to the Cyrillic alphabet: on the contrary, Bulgarians take pride in it as something they have “given” to Russia, and often present themselves with it at EU occasions.

As far as Russian cultural influence is concerned, it withered away naturally: people stopped learning Russian, Americanized culture is now much more aggressive. Russia has no systematic cultural policy and is hardly interested in the Balkans, except for selling gas or opposing US bases. So there is a discrepancy between the imaginary Russia and the real practices: everyone says they like Russian culture, but few read Russian books or watch Russian films. I have hardly met a single Russian guest-professor at our department for twenty years. This seems to me as absurd as the saturation by Russian culture during communism: I grew up with the songs of Vysotsky, Soviet jokes, Bakhtin, Bulgakov.

**TK:** A Polish colleague was surprised when I included the Baltic states into central Europe. According to her, central Europe is mostly the Visegrad countries. My reply was the following: there are the Baltic states and there is the Baltic Sea Region, to which Iceland also belongs. During the interwar period, Finland was also a Baltic state. Finland then dropped out because it was not “liberated” by the Soviets. Today, Estonia tends to identify itself with Scandinavia rather than the Baltic states. So what picture do we get? The Baltic Sea region is large enough to embrace even remote Iceland, yet if Estonia has become Scandinavia, then the Baltic states have now shrunk to two states: Latvia and Lithuania.

Most likely, we can agree that the Baltic states are, for the time being, part of the larger Baltic Sea region, as well as – due to history, culture, and political experience – part of a post-Soviet region that has in common the central European revolutions of 1989 and EU membership since 2004. When the “Vilnius 10” – the central European countries, together with the Baltic states and Romania and Bulgaria – supported George Bush and
Tony Blair’s war in Iraq in 2003, it was treated as one voice of central Europe. When Jacques Chirac criticized the Vilnius 10 for being immature, he did so without distinguishing the Baltic states, the Visegrad countries and the Balkan countries. Vilnius 10 meant central Europe.

How, then, do you see Bulgaria in a geopolitical sense? It is a Balkan country, but like Greece it is treated as being distinct from other Balkan nations due to the specifics of the former Yugoslavia. The division is clear – there are former Yugoslavian states and there is the rest of the Balkans. Do you see a similarity between Lithuania and Bulgaria in terms of this dual belonging? What are the essential geopolitical differences between the double geopolitical identity of Baltic Lithuania and Balkan Bulgaria? Does Bulgaria even have a double geopolitical identity at all?

To make this issue even more complicated, Lithuania has a coastline. Because of the sea, it belongs to the larger Baltic Sea region, together with the Scandinavian countries. But if Lithuania is studied culturally, and if Vilnius is viewed as a multicultural city with roots in Belarusian, Polish and Jewish history, then Scandinavia, not to mention Iceland, becomes irrelevant. Seen through the eyes of Vilnius, Lithuanian identity is an inland identity. What about Bulgaria: does it perceive itself as Black Sea nation, or does it have an inland identity?

**ID:** Regions tend to be defined by the empires that have occupied them – in the Balkans that means the Byzantine empire, the Ottomans, the Soviets, and now the “soft” Euro-Atlantic global power. The various overlappings give you an idea of the identity of the region. Central Europe used to be a German-dominated space: Bulgaria does not have much to do with this, although of course there was an influence during the 1930s and early 1940s. As to the Black sea, it was never an important route for commerce during any of those empires. The Greeks found it too dangerous to navigate (that is why they called it “black”); the Ottomans were hindered by the fact that the northern coast of Anatolia has a bad climate and was underdeveloped; as for the Soviets, the Bosphorus blocked their expansion and they preferred other sea routes. The Slavic, Valah or Turkish populations have little relation to the sea. It has been argued that the Black see does not unite but separates. I would say the same for the Danube – in the Balkans, it is as if it separates worlds. The Black Sea economic region is a failure: there is no capital to make it work and neither are Russia and Turkey the best partners possible.

The disintegration of regional identity has been the result of the dramatic failure of the first three empires mentioned. Then came the national purification undertaken at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially after WW1 – those who effectuated cultural exchange were expelled: the Greek sailors, the Jewish merchants, the Armenian artisans. A similar process, I think, happened in the Baltic cities, too (Jews, Germans) - now it continues with the marginalization of ethnic Russians. The populations that had contacts, which were mobile, who traded were exchanged for peasants of one’s “own blood”. As a result, we have ethnic nations, artificially homogenized, constructed in opposition towards the neighbour, very territorial. Decades were needed before the ethnic Bulgarians removed from Yugoslav Macedonia and settled in the Greek sea towns became sailors and fishermen.

Balkan identity operates from below, through music, cuisine, bodily gestures, festivities:
you recognize a Balkan party in Berlin or London right away. High culture has always been thought as a frontline: an incredible effort is made to differentiate oneself from the other, to expel from one’s culture anything that recalls him.

**TK:** 1989 in Poland is inconceivable without Solidarnosc, which began in the 1980s. Solidarnosc went hand in hand with the Polish Catholic church. In Lithuania the situation was the same: the Catholic Church was an island of independence. After 1989, the Catholic Church played a key role in establishing independent statehood in Lithuania. In Bulgaria, however, the Orthodox Church played no such role. Perhaps it was not even necessary? Had the Orthodox Church had stepped in as a spiritual leader in Bulgaria, promoting independence and democracy, would the transitional period have been any smoother?

**ID:** The Orthodox Church has always collaborated with the state - this is the theory of “symphonia” between spiritual and worldly power. Many priests worked for the State Security; even now they do not see a problem with that, saying they served the national interest. Catholic or Protestant priests received much more persecution from the regime.

The Orthodox Church is in very bad shape, especially in Bulgaria. It has merely a sort of ethnographic function, to mark “our” space or to nationalize events or tourist sites. The patriarch might come to the opening of new offices, for example, to chase away devils with incense. In general, Bulgarians are not very religious (unlike Russians or Romanians). The ethnographic - if not pagan - role of the Orthodox church appeared to satisfy the population and did not disturb the communist authorities. Under communism, superstition and pagan beliefs were rife: fortune-tellers, an old blind lady called Baba Vanga, a clairvoyant whom even Brezhnev is said to have consulted. We know that Liudmila Zhivkova, the daughter of Todor Zhivkov and a minister of culture, participated in a spiritual community called the “white fraternity” together with other members of the central committee – their ideas combined theosophy, Indian teachings, astrology and so on. I would analyse religion under communism in this larger anthropological context.

There was no massive opposition to the regime, especially after collectivisation had been completed by the end of the 1950s. Socialism industrialized and urbanized the country, several generations of city-dwellers emerged, received education, became mass consumers. In Bulgaria there was nothing similar to 1953, 1956, 1968 or 1981. The dictatorship was milder, comparable more to Latin America than to Stalinism. The main point was that the Soviet Union was not perceived as an occupant, but as a powerful ally against traditional enemies like the Turks, the Greeks, and later the Yugoslavs.

**TK:** What role did Bulgarian intellectuals – academics, writers, artists – play in 1989? In Lithuania we call it the Singing Revolution, whereas in Romania it was bloody. In Bulgaria, it was more about roundtable negotiations. Still, is it correct to say that Bulgarian political discourse in 1989 and the early 1990s is inconceivable without Bulgarian intellectuals?

**ID:** Of course. Intellectuals were central to the change, the first parliament was full of writers, happenings were performed every day on the streets; it was a big carnival. Zhelyu Zhelev, the leader of the anti-communist opposition, called it “The heyday of the intelligentsia”. Most people were either communists or members of artists’ unions; we
now know a large part of them were linked to the state security. The main impulse came from Gorbachev’s perestroika, which wanted to implement an honest reform of socialism. I suspect that some of them, especially those linked to the state security, were directed from Moscow: Gorbachev wanted to get rid of the aging Zhivkov. Later, of course, things got out of hand and more radical forces entered the political battle.

Today, one can see that it would have been better to have more lawyers, economists and political scientists: the humanist intelligentsia ("artistic-creative" it was its ideological etiquette) was naive, chaotic and extremely fractious. Yet it was the detonator that was needed to shake up the larger population: if you see on TV a well-known poet or party member all of a sudden saying he has been lying all his life, it throws you into a state of crisis. In fact, the intelligentsia performed a sacrificial gesture: they destroyed a system that had given them privileges. The moment the revolution succeeded, they became marginalized, some having to change profession, others living in misery. Nowadays, their place is occupied by a new class of NGO experts who perform exactly the opposite function: i.e. not to challenge the system, but to consolidate it.

TK: Bulgaria is a very large country and its regions have different histories and distinct identities. In the town of Peshtera there is Roma population that lives peacefully alongside the Bulgarian and Muslim population. On Saturday, the market belongs to the Roma, but Muslims and Orthodox Bulgarians come to shop. But in Lithuania, the dominance of the Lithuanian ethnic group means that, as a state, Lithuania is not regarded as multiethnic, despite the fact there are Polish, Russian, Roma and Karaite Jewish minorities. In Latvia and Estonia, the Russian speaking population is largely regarded as a Soviet leftover, an historic misfortune, an artificial add-on to Latvian and Estonian ethnicity. Therefore Estonia and Latvia are semi-homogenous, despite their diversity. Are non-Bulgarian ethnicities regarded as historically “other”? Is Bulgaria Bulgarian in the same way that Lithuania is Lithuanian? If so, has there been some evolution in the way the “the Other” is treated?

ID: In Bulgaria the tendencies are as bad as anywhere in Europe. There is a problem with the nation-state model, which on our continent implies homogenisation. Integration is often forceful, unlike in places like Malaysia or Canada, where communities coexist within a common state-framework, but without genocide or ethnic cleansing taking place. To understand interethnic relations in the Balkans, or more generally on the peripheries of failed empires, we need to take into consideration two levels of inequality. On one hand, there are inter-communal conflicts, corporate interests, pre-modern status differences; on the other, there is the violence of the nation-state, which usually dominated by one ethnic group. Ottoman rule incorporated the first type of interethnic relations into the millet system, where religious groups had relative autonomy, with varying obligations and privileges. There is a tendency to idealize this period and overlook the fact that relations between the communities were not easy. The second type of conflict culminated with the new-Turk violence on the Armenians, then the pro-Nazi and finally the forceful communist homogenization.

Nowadays, with the neoliberal crisis of the nation state, those two regimes coexist – ethnic communities receive back their role as corporations, triggering the envy and aggression of others. On the other hand, the national project apparently remains legitimate, allowing the oppression of differences to occur. In Bulgaria, most visible
nowadays is the national hatred of the Turkish minority for being “potential traitors”, and the racist disgust for the Gypsies as “backward”.

The point I want to make is that the two versions of violence against “the Other” – inter-ethnic and national – are nowadays intermingled, creating ideological confusion and lack of clear political positions. This is a problem for Europe as a whole: are the homogenizers fascists? How is it possible to legitimize ethnic and religious particularism? Are collective rights democratic or undemocratic?

TK: Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007, three years after other post-communist countries. What was the mood in Bulgaria in 2004 as people watched the Baltic and Visegrad states join the EU? Was there a feeling that Bulgaria had been left out? Was there a dramatic change in self-perception when Bulgaria did join in 2007? How does Bulgaria perceive itself today, in 2010?

ID: No one really believes Bulgaria is in the EU: we still say “they” to denote the EU. There is a discrepancy between self-representation and practice: on one hand, we are Europeans by the very fact we happen to live on the continent, that we are Christian and white skinned (this is everyday racism). On the other hand, nothing in the world around us looks like Europe. Peripheral identities are often constructed like this: the discrepancy has existed since the emergence of the modern nation in the nineteenth century.

At best, Europe is seen as a tool through which public opinion can exercise pressure over the political class – there is always a directive that has not been followed, a principle that has not been observed. At worst, the EU starts to become a laughing stock for the enlightened elites, who identify much more with the US, where one sees more clearly the centre of power and political will. As a friend said once, while Europe was building roads, the Americans invested in people. The EU is a highly regulated space, whereas Bulgaria and eastern Europe as a whole is a jungle, where social and fiscal dumping is rife. The clash is inevitable, and the US is usually taken as the better, more liberal example. People who say this usually forget that in most places in the US, you even can’t drink a beer in the street without hiding the can in a bag.

TK: In your essay “Crossing borders”, you “argue that not only contact with the other, but also the increasingly frequent crossing of borders, creates IBO (identity, border, order) effects. The utopia that underlies the European idea, according to which more mobility will gradually homogenize the EU space, thus proves to be wrong”. But would you agree that despite remaining divisions, post-communist central Europe’s entry into the Schengen space is a geopolitical miracle? Today a Lithuanian can visit academic colleagues in Sofia, and professors from Sofia can fly to Paris for conferences – all without visas. For the new generations, the experience of the Iron Curtain is inconceivable: a totalitarian IBO.

ID: Being free to travel is fantastic. But the problem is that mobility creates borders rather than abolishing them. The mobile person has a specific interest in moving from one place to the other: if I go to Germany and present a lecture on Bulgarian political culture, I am interesting because I come from elsewhere. Most writers in Bulgaria nowadays tell stories about migration (Benjamin wrote that the storyteller is someone who comes from far away). A guest worker moves to improve his or her economic
opportunities, a businessperson in order to pay lower taxes of profit from specific local arrangements. If you like, the food we eat is more and more marked by otherness - Chinese, Indian, Balkan...

This generalized mobility creates the condition for the further differentiation of spaces: it multiplies borders rather than abolishing them. If there is a demand for me to be different, I will invent some specific aspect of my identity to be different; if there is demand in my city for certain types of investor, I will offer specific tax-reliefs. In short, mobility, and globalization more generally, makes places and people increasingly different. Consider the classical nation-state: it was also a project of mobility, based on citizenship rights, trains, a common language and so on. But the result was that it produced an incredible variation of individual fates, cultural forms, science, industries. It is pre-national communities that were more monotone!

Besides, today there is no longer a notion comparable to that of the common good that was so central for nation state building. If I were to talk about the common good of global society, you would laugh at me, wouldn’t you? (Ecology might be the only exception). Globalization is generalized privatization. Combine this with easy, even instantaneous mobility (think of the transfer of property over the web, from one side of the globe to the other). The result is competition between places, cultures, citizenships. Superficially, it looks as if we are becoming equal because we eat McDonald’s, but we aren’t: McDonald’s is just a drop in the expanding sea of differences. Unfortunately, more difference usually brings more conflict.

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