Concluding Remarks: The Geopolitics of Memory

Tatiana Zhurzhenko

Since 1989, as after 1945, Europe has again been confronted with its controversial past. Meanwhile, in the post-communist countries, history has been re-narrated and national memory institutionalized. But national politics of memory can only be understood in the context of recent geopolitical changes: the end of the Cold War and EU enlargement. Current discussions about the possibility of a common European memory tend to focus on a desired European solidarity rather than on the new cleavages and power struggles on the European continent. However, no different from energy politics, memory politics is less about the communist past than about the future political and economic hegemony on the European continent – in other words, it is always a geopolitics of memory.

Communist Memory “Hotting Up” Again

In 2002, Charles Maier published an article widely referred to in subsequent debates about historical memory in Europe.¹ He draws a distinction between the “hot” memory of Nazi crimes, which still has not faded, and the relatively short-lived, “cold” communist memory, which unavoidably becomes dispassionate with the passing of time. Indeed, while the Holocaust remains the symbol of absolute evil in human history, the horrors of the GULAG and of Stalinist terror, despite being publicly condemned Europe-wide after the collapse of the Soviet empire, have not received comparable institutional recognition (e.g. museums, educational programmes, victim recompensation).

Convincing as Maier’s argument is, evidence has emerged in the recent decade that necessitates a revision of his thesis, at least the second part of it. After fifteen years of successful transition, culminating in the accession to the EU, it seemed that the accounts of the East European countries with the past had finally been closed. Yet what we observe is that communist memory is “hotting up” again in Eastern Europe. Bear in mind the “decommunization” campaign of the Kaczynskis in Poland, where the Institute of National Remembrance was turned into an instrument of domestic politics; recall the controversies and political fights about communist memory in Hungary (where in September

¹ Maier 2001.
2006 right-wing demonstrators staged a “re-run” of the anti-Soviet 1956 revolution); or look at the conflict around the statue of the Soviet soldier in Tallinn in 2007, which went beyond the scope of Estonian-Russian relations and caught the attention of the European public.

The discussion on the communist past took a Europe-wide dimension after Sandra Kalniete, a prominent Latvian politician, had claimed in her opening speech at the Leipzig Book Fair in 2004 that the “two totalitarian regimes – Nazism and Communism – were equally criminal.”2 The debate was fuelled once again in 2005 with the celebrations of the sixtieth anniversary of the victory over fascism, a jubilee that revealed essential incompatibilities between the attitudes of Eastern and Western Europeans to their recent past. It has become more than evident that the comfortable post-war consensus among Western European societies has been thrown into question since enlargement: for some of the new EU members, “Yalta” is not a symbol of the Allies’ victory over Nazism, but of the partition of Europe, in which half the continent was abandoned to four decades of repression.

The debates in the enlarged EU resonate with similar tendencies in the post-Soviet periphery of Europe. The “Coloured Revolutions” in Georgia and in Ukraine mark the most significant shift to an anti-communist politics of memory in these countries since independence. In May 2006, inspired by the example of Tallinn and Riga, Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili opened a “Museum of Soviet Occupation” in Tbilisi, and an institution of the same name and function was established in Kyiv soon after. In November 2006, the Ukrainian parliament adopted a law recognizing the Holodomor as a genocide of the Ukrainian people, and two years later the 75th anniversary of this tragedy was staged as the most ambitious national commemorative campaign in Ukraine since independence. In May 2006, the Institute for National Remembrance was established in Ukraine, inspired by the Polish model. In January 2010 Stepan Bandera, the controversial leader of the radical nationalist movement and a symbol of anti-Soviet armed resistance, was posthumously awarded the title Hero of Ukraine by outgoing President Yushchenko.

The most evident explanation for these new tendencies in the landscape of European memory is the generation change. Young politicians and intellectuals, who due to their age carry no burden of the past and have no blanks in their biographies, turn the “grace of late birth” (Helmut Kohl) against the older generation occupying the political Olympus. It is the growing distance from the communist era and the demographic factor that help explain why the new

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2 Leggewie 2006.