

### Book Presentation

#### TWENTY YEARS AFTER:

#### POST-COMMUNIST COUNTRIES AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

*Twenty years after the end of communism in Europe, the European Union includes ten post-communist member states, eleven, if one takes the former GDR into account. This, however, does not mean that the „reunification of Europe“ has been successfully concluded. Many post-communist states are still struggling with their new identities; the countries of ex-Yugoslavia have, with the exception of Slovenia, not yet found their way into the European Union and have not arrived at a sustainable reconciliation. Ukraine and the countries of the Southern Caucasus have not yet turned into stable democracies and their perspectives for EU-membership are practically non-existent. Belarus has remained more or less untouched by changes in neighbouring countries and Russia, finally, has not made the much hoped-for progress on the road towards democracy and has developed an often problematic relationship with the European Union and other neighbours. Where do the post-communist countries of central and eastern Europe as well as those of the Western Balkans now stand in Europe? What role has the example of the European Union played in the last twenty years? In what way has the accession of the post-communist countries influenced the European Union and its policies? How do the post-communist countries see themselves in twenty years time? And, finally, on what goals and values should Europe’s future be based?\**

The focus of the presentation lay on the Baltic states as example for the new EU member states, Croatia as an example for the candidate states and Ukraine as an example of an ex-Soviet Union state with unclear EU perspective. In the **Baltic states** the enthusiasm for the “return- to-Europe” was great. While NATO membership was sealed in March 2004, the three Baltic states became – after referendums on EU membership – official members of the European Union on May 1, 2004. The membership of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in western organisations solved the major security dilemma of those countries – their vulnerable position vis-à-vis its geographically large eastern neighbour, Russia. Also, it made the restructuring of the inefficient post-Soviet administrative and political system part of the *acquis communautaire*. The strengthening of the states’ administrative capacity was among the major causes for concern but the end results of accession negotiations differed. While the period preceding EU membership could be evaluated positively, now after five years of membership it may be concluded in hindsight that the mechanisms of the EU operation do not allow for the correcting of mistakes overlooked at the moment the aspirant country was deemed ready to become a member of the EU.

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\* Guest speakers were **Ilana Bet-El**, writer, historian and political analyst, Brussels, **Juri Durkot**, freelance journalist, publicist, translator and producer, Ukraine, **Tihomir Ponos**, political journalist of the Croatian daily *Novi list* and **Veiko Spolit**, head of the European Studies and International Relations Programme at the Riga Stradins University. The debate took place under Chatham House Rule. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

If one follows the political statements of the Baltic politicians it becomes evident that the EU is seen as a mere political project that fosters the development of the economies of their respective countries. Expressions extolling European values, human and minority rights and civil society are in most cases expedient for the sake of rhetoric in populist politician's speeches. However, the democratisation of society and the fine-tuning of the constitutions turned out not to be easy. They still need to be followed up. There was a 'naïve' believe that EU/NATO membership would bring immediate prosperity. The Baltic revolution destroyed the old system, everything needed to be renewed from scratch. The pushing and pulling forces of integration that have defined the ongoing transformation of the three Baltic states for the last twenty years are still at work. The nexus is different today because while centripetal European integration is perceived among the Baltic populations as something positive, the centrifugal forces of globalisation make elites and populations concerned. A transformation of societies and state structures is a positive phenomenon if it brings stability to the population at large and can be sustainable in the long term. Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian political elites convincingly argue that their countries have no alternative to the future within the European Union. The focal point for the Baltic states' political elites during the coming twenty years would be to construct a political discourse that would make the populations willing to suffer relative economic decline for the sake of a better future in the EU after the ratification of the Lisbon treaty. During the times of double digit economic growth it was hard to achieve sustainable stability without all members of society taking part in the decision-making process for the strategic development of the respective states. However, the period of high economic growth has passed and the expected stability is being lost and will be for years to come. The time has come for the Baltic elites and populations to come to an internal consensus about the future of their economic, education and welfare systems

Relations between **Croatia** and the European Community/Union have gone through various stages in the past 20 years: from the absolute idealism present at the very beginning, disappointment during the war years, suspicion in the second part of the 1990s, to the period of painstaking co-operation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Union has also been perceived as a promised land, which would almost instantly provide a life of abundance to Croatian citizens. After the enlargements of 2004 and 2007, this attitude slowly disappeared, first of all, because of an intuitive awareness that, after the enlargement in 2004, the EU had shifted from a union of the elite, to a community of mediocrity.

The EU insists on dealing with crimes of war and full cooperation with the international Court of Justice. In 2005 this cooperation was officially established, yet criticism remains. Important in this discussion is the question as to whether the indicted Croatian general Gotovina should be "sacrificed" for EU membership, regardless of whether he was responsible for the crimes or not. This discussion was the result of insufficient knowledge about the European Union and domestic political manipulation but it also demonstrated that the Croatian nation is, in terms of sovereignty, incomplete. As much as it presents itself as an old nation, it is also a young country, having existed independently for less than 18 years. This lack of experience of sovereignty is evident in the relative ease with which public discussions on the possible loss of sovereignty following certain events comes to the forefront. It

is clear that sovereignty is interpreted as something supernatural and its (fictitious) endangerment is greatly feared. The European Union has thus helped change attitudes, as membership will require Croatia to transfer a part of its sovereignty to the European institutions.

This struggle for sovereignty sometimes manifests itself in economic issues, such as shipbuilding. Some parts of the media present Brussels as endangering the Croatian shipbuilding industry (which is failing even without Brussels' "help") and thus threatening the existence of thousands of Croatian families. Shipbuilding, a significant part of the Croatian economy, thus stops being an industry and turns into a kind of national no go area that no outside force should disturb or endanger. It is obvious that in such an emotive situation, any objective discussion about the true state of Croatian shipbuilding is difficult.

The European Union had also been perceived as an annoying and tyrannical teacher constantly giving the country new tasks. The pupil believed that by finishing the existing task he had achieved a goal but then a new task would arrive from Brussels not necessarily connected to the *acquis*. This uncertainty about how many tasks needed to be completed and who was entitled to give out new ones has generated a sceptical attitude towards the Union. Looking 20 years ahead, two things can be said about Croatia with some certainty: Croatia will surely become a member of the European Union, probably in 2012, and it will have a lower unemployment rate than today. The latter will not necessarily be a consequence of the economic prosperity expected with EU accession but rather the result of demographics. Till then it has to do its homework: fulfil the *acquis* and change the constitution, especially the clause requiring a referendum on the accession to any other entity – without this change it will be impossible to gain the necessary public majority. Croatians, in the meantime, are aware that EU membership won't give them prosperity from one day to another that they will have to rely on hard work. Today 7 of the 43 negotiation chapters are closed; one of the major issues pending is the settlement of the border dispute with Slovenia. If this "last obstacle" is overcome, 14 more chapters could be closed easily.

The EU-**Ukraine** common history of expectations is full of disappointments. From the very beginning the dialogue proved to be difficult. Also, the EU is lacking a proper strategy towards Ukraine. In 1996 the desire for EU membership was uttered for the first time. Yet, Ukraine developed into the direction of an authoritarian regime which was fine for the EU as there seemed to be no obvious necessity to act in the sense of an EU-approach/membership. Internal changes came with the Orange Revolution: competition was more strongly expressed in the media, in politics and the economy - yet an adequate functioning framework is lacking, hence the internal chaos is likely to linger on for some time to come. There is still no independent judiciary and corruption is hardly less than it was in the early 2000s. Even though elections have become an instrument of legitimate change of government, the presidential elections in 2010 won't change much – the "democratic chaos" will continue: the political elite only pursues its own interests and Ukrainian civil society is weak. There is a need for establishing and consolidating a democratic framework. In that sense the cooperation with the EU is important. However, the fact that the EU is not clear on its strategy, makes the relationship cumbersome.

If cooperation is to be developed there are three areas that need consideration: expansion of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) programme, active participation in the modernisation of the Ukrainian pipeline infrastructure and real advances in the application of the agreement on easier visa application. For the Eastern Partnership there could be a medium term option of increasing funding for various projects. It all requires from the EU a not insignificant amount of political will and a common strategy. Whereas 60% of the Ukrainian population is for EU membership linking it to prosperity; 60% is against NATO-membership as Ukrainians keep seeing it as a Cold War institution. The EaP was perceived mostly negatively as Ukraine has been further in its development than other EaP countries and the expectations for a European perspective were disappointed. Also, the funds for EaP are considered insufficient. Still, the view on EaP has become more positive and it may actually become a good vehicle for future development, even though as an instrument it needs to be developed further

The **European Union** is an anomaly: a truly historic creation that is fundamentally ahistoric. The EU has proved to be a very elaborate mechanism for not talking about history at the collective level and, instead, concentrating on processes. The new member states have different historical narratives, their own history and identity had been denied for nearly half a century. They tried to suppress their narratives in order to get into the EU, but this is not yet possible. The West lacks an understanding of the Eastern European narrative, but also vice versa. Neither the new member states nor the EU was prepared for this culture shock, the clash of narratives!

Europe has never been unified. The so-called reunification should be rather regarded as an act of 'removing obstacles'. The process of mass enlargement after the end of the Cold War has been a political, strategic decision. The ex-communist countries should not be left on their own: the EU could not accept a chaotic neighbourhood; there was a need for action to maintain collective security. Why the post-Cold War enlargement was so important, was never well explained to the public (in the old member states). Nowadays there is a lack of confidence at the public level to push ahead with the European project, enlargement fatigue has taken over. Whether and how the enlargement process will continue is unclear at the moment. No one wants to take a decision.

Unlike a marriage, in which love and loyalty are assumed, the EU is much more like the modern couple, who live together for decades, always refusing the absolute final commitment, leaving a permanent edge of uncertainty yet excitement. They share a common home a lot of the time, yet each also keeps their own house; it is a close and intangible relationship; it is ambiguous; it is a polling of sovereignty. Enlargement did not undermine the relationship, but it did change it: whilst the older member states probably sought to retire gracefully, growing the family became a necessity, demanding a lot of work and money. Hopefully there will be enough affection to keep the family together.

An important defining factor for the EU is the search for its eastern borders which cannot take place without defining its relationship with **Russia**. Russia regards the NATO-enlargement as a threat, which was not the case with the 2004 EU enlargement. Even the EaP is very critically looked at by the Russian political elites: it is perceived as *Drang nach Osten*. Russia today is historically weak: it is in a bad

economic situation and the Georgia military show-off was not the performance of a super power. What is the EU's interest in Russia? What sort of relationship does the EU want? This has never really been defined, but is absolutely necessary in order to create a stable European environment.



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