Meanwhile in the Baltics...

edited by Agnieszka Pikułicka-Wilczewska
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Edited by Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska, New Eastern Europe
Editorial Assistants: Isabel Fleming and Emily Look
Cover image by Baiba Tropa
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About the project:
Solidarity Academy is an international project aimed at inspiring and supporting the development of the young intellectual elites across Europe. The project's title refers to the Polish social movement Solidarność (Solidarity) and the peaceful socio-political transformations that took place in Poland and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In such movements we can find inspiration for solving the problems of the modern world.

In 2016, the Solidarity Academy – Baltic Sea Youth Dialogue was realised as a joint programme of the European Solidarity Centre and the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS). The Baltic Sea Youth Dialogue project is further a flagship of the EUSBSR Horizontal Action Neighbours and was conceptualised by the CBSS and the Körber Foundation Germany.

The project is part of an initiative of German Foreign Office, using youth cooperation as means to conflict resolution.
Dear Reader,

The following publication includes pieces written by the graduates of the Solidarity Academy – Baltic Sea Youth Dialogue 2016, an international project aimed at inspiring and supporting young intellectuals across Europe. This year’s edition was organised in cooperation with the Council of the Baltic Sea States (and supported by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs), therefore, the participants have taken on topics related to the different facets of the region and its diverse social, cultural and political makeup.

Given the timing of this year’s edition of the Academy, post-truth was a recurrent theme during our workshops and discussions. While the year 2016 may be behind us, the processes it stirred up are here to stay. We are yet to experience the consequences of Brexit, the victory of Donald Trump in the United States presidential election and the growth of nationalism and populism all over the European continent. The communication tools we have been used to, the expanding social media, and the demise of print publishing have only reinforced these processes and helped rumours, half-truths and conspiracy theories spread. Everything can be questioned and nothing is certain, or so it seems. But is that really the case?

The participants the Solidarity Academy - Baltic Sea Youth Dialogue 2016 have tried to prove the opposite. In order to challenge the overwhelming climate of uncertainty and skepticism, several of them (Ruben Dieleman, Volha Damarad, Koen Verhelst, Georgy Makarenko and Jyri Tuominen) created a Facebook page titled “Make Facts Great Again”, where they disclose lies and half-truths and help the readers distinguish genuine facts from falsehood. Thanks to such initiatives by young people we can still hope that quality journalism is not a thing of the past.

As editors and organisers, we would like to share the talent and work of the project’s participants with a wider audience and encourage new generations of journalists to join future editions. We hope that more of you will cherish and pass on the values of solidarity and dialogue. And make facts great again.

Yours,
The Editors and Organisers
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In 2016 classic political sociology died. Having celebrated its 80th jubilee in November, over the course of elections in the United States, it suffered from a tremendous stroke, from which it did not recover. At the beginning of December, when Italy held its constitutional referendum, it tried to wake up, get up off the sofa and stand up. But instead, it fell into an even deeper coma, from which it has not awoken.

The birth and death of political sociology (by which I understand the system of pre-electoral public opinion surveys) is strongly connected with presidential elections in the United States. At the beginning of the 20th century (and no later than the 1920) the main organisation responsible for predicting election results was the weekly journal Literary Digest. Before every presidential election, the publication would send questionnaires to millions of its subscribers. The recipients were expected to indicate who they were going to vote for and send the completed form back to the editorial office.

Each time, Literary Digest was able to correctly name the next US president. However, in 1936 the journal sent ten million queries and received 2.3 million responses and, based on the data gathered, Alfred Landon was meant to become the next president.

However, in the election on November 3rd 1936, the Democratic candidate, the then-president Franklin Delano Roosevelt, easily defeated Landon, winning in 46 out of 48 states. But the election had one more winner: a young sociologist, George Gallup. Before the voting began, he got in a public debate with the management of Literary Digest, claiming that the prognosis of the journal were inaccurate, since they were based on views expressed by its subscribers only – who in large part belonged to a higher social strata. Instead of two or three million, Gallup surveyed 50,000 people, having divided them into different groups based on their income level, place of origin, gender, age etc. In the end, his prognosis was the most accurate. Two years later Literary Digest closed down, unable to deal with a prolonged crisis.

The test of time

In nearly 80 years of public opinion research, based on the method developed by Gallup, the company has correctly named almost every winner of presidential races in the United States, with the exception of years 1948 and 1976. Another failure
to predict the election result occurred in 2012, when Gallup gave Barrack Obama 48 per cent of votes and his opponent – Mitt Romney – 49 per cent. That year Obama retained the presidency.

The most recent prognosis by Gallup before the 2016 election asserted that support for Donald Trump was at 35 per cent, while for Hillary Clinton it was 40 per cent. But Gallup was not the only one predicting Clinton's victory, as so did almost all other sociologists. Many social research agencies claimed that Clinton's victory would be between 95 and 99 per cent certain. FiveThirtyEight website's estimates were the most generous for Trump and claimed he had a 23 per cent chance to win.

After the election, in December 2016, Swiss Das Magazin published an investigation on how Trump's victory became possible. "It cannot be claimed that sociologists lost the election, because their prognoses were mistaken. Quite the opposite: sociologists won, but only those ones who used the latest methods", the publication concludes. Instead of analysing wide groups of population, the newer methods are based on studying Facebook activities of individual users. Subsequently each of the users was recommended a certain context-based advertisement, to mobilise Trump's electorate or to compel Clinton's followers to start questioning her actions.

Alexander Nix, the CEO of data and communications agency Cambridge Analytica, who used this system in Trump's pre-election campaign, challenged Gallup's classic sociology. Or rather the way Clinton's team treated the results of the survey: having divided society into groups, the campaigners prepared certain solutions to women, with other appeals they tried to express support for African Americans etc. Trump's campaign, on the contrary, focused on an individual approach to each voter or to small groups of people – for example the residents of one house.

Shortly before the US election, one more important failure of political sociology had taken place – United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union. Before the vote, the majority of polls suggested a three to ten per cent victory for the "Remain" supporters. However, in the end the "Leave" vote won by a four per cent margin.

On December 4th 2016, a constitutional referendum took place in Italy. Public opinion surveys showed that the opponents of the reforms of Prime Minister Matteo Renzi would win by around five per cent. No one predicted that the actual voting gap between the two positions would be close to 20 per cent.

Polling in Russia

From the point of view of survey methodology, the leading Russian sociological centres, no matter how pro-Kremlin they may be, can be compared to Clinton's pre-election team rather than the internet-savvy Trump's technologists. Social research surveys in Russia are based on the same old system developed by Gallup, slightly modified to better suit the Russian reality.

For example, VCIOM – Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (the oldest and largest sociological centre, completely owned by the state) is using the “Express” survey. Every week professional sociologists interview around 1,600 Russian
citizens in their homes in half of the country’s regions. The regions are chosen on the basis of their representativeness; first, by population size and second, by their similarity to the average social markers (such as economy, urbanisation, share of resource sector and even political loyalties or instability).

During the process of conducting the survey, respondents are divided into groups by gender, age, education level, income and other social categories. The study is conducted using the so-called omnibus poll: the sociologists ask up to 20 different questions in one round (about politics, economy, society), from which they later compile a summary report on a given subject.

One of the most recent Express surveys, released on December 11th 2016, shows that the level of trust for Russia’s president had risen over the past week by 0.6 percentage points and reached 86 per cent. It is worth noting how the question was posed: “Do you, in general, approve of the actions of the president?” Clearly, the apolitical majority of the Russian population can “in general” support the actions of the president and the parliament, but “in particular” every citizen may have their own list of reservations about the authorities or questions to which he or she needs answers.

For a comparison, apart from VCIOM there are two more leading sociological institutes in Russia: FOM (Public Opinion Foundation – private, but actively cooperating with the authorities) and Levada Centre (private and not so open to dialogue with the state, for which it was included in the list of foreign agents at the end of September 2016).

According to FOM, on December 11th 2016 the popularity of the current president Vladimir Putin was on the level of 66 per cent (the question was: “Who would you vote for if the election was taking place on Sunday?”). While according to Levada Centre, Putin is supported by 84 per cent of the population (just like with VCIOM, the question was: “Do you, in general, approve of the actions of the president?”).

**Classic mistakes**

As we can see, the difference between “approval” and the “intention to vote” comes to around 20 per cent – and this is according to a rather loyal sociological centre. In fact, coming back to the question of predicting the election outcome, survey data in Russia always shows a lower number of votes for a leading candidate than they actually receive.

For example, in 2012, FOM and VCIOM predicted that Putin would receive around 59 per cent of the vote. The final result, however, was 63.6 per cent for the president. Before the parliamentary election in 2016, the last survey by VCIOM showed 41.1 per cent support for the ruling United Russia, while the final result gave the party 54.2 per cent. Even if we believe the reports saying there were mass falsifications, the results of the elections are far from the sociological prognoses.

The methods of Trump’s advisers can be used as a weapon on social media: if not to influence the election results, at least to affect social moods. However, the amount of Russian users on Facebook is limited – there are only around six million unique visitors a day, according to data from April 2016. V Kontakte social
network, a Russian equivalent of Facebook, is much more popular and is visited by more than 70 million users a day (not only Russians, but also citizens of the rest of the former Soviet Union). However, the algorithm of the social network differs from Facebook, and V Kontakte, as a Russian company, has to adhere to certain rules. For example, the site’s personal user data are accessible not only to the company’s owners, but also the governmental agency “Roskomnadzor”.

**The hidden stratum**

The most interesting sociological surveys in Russia, which attract the most media interest, are thematic polls, as opposed to the “omnibus” ones. Indeed, it is one thing to ask about the relationship towards the head of state and another to share one’s own view on a given divisive issue. The results of such surveys continuously prove to be sensational and do not support the conventional stereotype of the “84 per cent” (the percentage of Russians who, according to data presented by the media, support the activities of the Kremlin since the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine).

For example, a recent survey by Levada Centre suggests that in 2016, 33 per cent of Russians put personal well-being above saving the current state system (in 2015, 27 per cent of respondents gave this answer and in 2014 – 21 per cent).

Moreover, additional research conducted by Levada Centre found that in November 2016, around 71 per cent of Russians supported rapprochement with the West. In March 2015 after the conclusion of the Minsk agreement on the situation in Ukraine, the same was true for 50 per cent of respondents.

In the end, it seems that Russians are rather “lucky” as a society, as they have not been divided into two camps (as Americans on Trump and the British on Brexit). A person who is ready to vote for Putin, can at the same time support normalisation of relations with the West – and the other way around.

Russians in general are not a politicised people. According to FOM’s data, 75 per cent do not plan to take part in any demonstrations (against the authorities or in their support) and 55 per cent will verbally support neither the authorities, nor the opposition. Therefore, public opinion surveys in Russia might get a second chance: at least when they are conducted on a narrow topic. It will not help in accurately predicting election results, but it may help to shape a better picture of where the country is heading. Perhaps.

*Translated by Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska*

**George Makarenko** is a Moscow-based Russian historian and journalist. He currently works as a staff writer at RBC Russian daily newspaper and news agency.
Hebrew and Yiddish commemorative plaques, statues and busts, an active synagogue, stumbling blocks to remember those who died – when walking down the Vilnius streets, one cannot escape the city’s Jewish history.

Until the beginning of the Nazi occupation in 1941, the so-called Litvaks, Lithuanian Jews, constituted between 30 and 40 percent of the city’s inhabitants. Wilne, as it was called by its Jewish population, was the biggest Jewish city of the time. In the 18th century it was known as the religious centre and even called the “Jerusalem of the North” despite anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish attacks. While there is little left from the old Wilne, given the Soviets never rebuilt what was destroyed by the Nazis, one can still follow the footprints of the extinguished Jewish community, which can be found all over the city. Vilnius in Lithuanian, Wilne in Litvak, Wilno in Polish and Wilna in Belarusian – the city deserves a walk along its ethnic paths.

The centre’s centre: The German Street

The starting point is Vilnius Town Hall, in the middle of Didžioji gatvė, a broad central street in the southern part of the old town. Jews were forbidden to trade there, but they could do it in Vokiečių gatvė, the German street, just a few metres further away. The street got its name from the German craftsmen and traders and soon became a lively centre of Jewish and German culture.

The Litvaks, as the Jews from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth referred to themselves, were regarded as highly cultured and erudite. One of their sayings was: “To gain money, go to Łódź, to gain knowledge, go to Wilne.” They mainly lived in a self-governed quarter near Vokiečių gatvė, also called the “black quarter”. The origins of the name have been contested: some argue that it comes from the black clothes of Orthodox Jews, others say it recalls the bad hygienic situation in the quarter. Anti-Semitic prejudices were still alive in the 19th century – such as the story that Jews were baking their bread with the blood of Christian children. Nowadays, this part of the city is the touristic centre with its cobblestones, narrow alleys, low houses and arrows over the streets. The arrows served not just as supporting structures for the buildings on both sides of the street, but also as emergency exits in the case of fire.

Near the broad Vokiečių gatvė, accessible through a small path between two tall apartment buildings, there is Žydų gatvė, the Jewish Street. Remigijus Šimašius,
the liberal mayor of Vilnius, unveiled the new street sign in Hebrew and Yiddish to emphasise the historical diversity of the city. The same happened with Rusų gatvė in Russian, Varšuvos gatvė in Polish and even Totorių gatvė in Tartar. However, the project evoked not only positive feelings – already a few hours after its unveiling, the sign of Rusų gatvė was painted over by nationalists. The one in Žydų gatvė is still intact but its future is uncertain: a local politician announced they will challenge the project in court, as according to the Lithuanian law official places’ names have to be written in Lithuanian. If the charge is successful, the sign in Žydų gatvė will have to be removed.

The story of Gaon Elijahu

Not far from the place in Žydų gatvė where once the Great Synagogue of Vilnius was located, under birch trees and weeping willows, a careful visitor can see a bust of the Gaon of Vilne, Elijah, a representative of the 18th century’s Orthodox Jewry. Many myths developed around his wisdom: it is said that he read the Tora when he was five years old and interpreted it at the age of seven. He slept for four hours a day at most and put his feet into cold water during his studies in order to not to fall asleep during the day.

On the occasion of the 200th anniversary of his death the bust was renovated in 1997. The original was never found, but there are a few legends about the circumstances of its creation. According to one, it was supposed to be made by an arts student out of the image of Karl Marx. Another anecdote claims that the Lithuanian artist did not know about the prohibition of showing faces in Orthodox Judaism and the bearded bust remained in his basement for several years. To protect it from the anti-religious Soviets, he passed it off as Karl Marx’s bust.
The Great Synagogue

In Žydų gatvė there was a big library that belonged to the Great Synagogue. According to different sources there used to be more than 35,000 books and the Synagogue itself could fit 5,000 people. In 1812 even Napoleon described it as being as magnificent as the French cathedral of Notre Dame. Unfortunately, the Great Synagogue and the library were destroyed during the Second World War partly by the Nazis and partly by the Soviets when they reoccupied Lithuania in 1944. Today a school is located there.

Since 1990 the Jewish community of Vilnius have been demanding the Great Synagogue be rebuilt. Yet, only superficial promises have been made and no concrete steps have been taken so far. Perhaps this is due to the fact that Lithuania and Lithuanians have not yet confronted their role in the Shoah, the Holocaust. To sum it up in numbers, out of a former 100 houses of worship there remained just one synagogue, which was used as a warehouse by the Nazis. Out of more than 60,000 Jews who used to live in Vilnius, only 2,000 survived the three years of German occupation.

The Shoah and remembrance

Immediately at the beginning of the Nazi occupation in 1941, Jews were placed in the city’s two ghettos. In the smaller one, located in the east of Vokiečių gatvė, lived 11,000 people – mainly those who were unable to work and the elderly. After two months, the Nazis and their Lithuanian collaborators brought them to the small village of Paneriai outside Vilnius and shot them there. The big ghetto was in the west of Vokiečių gatvė and lasted until autumn of 1943. The Judenrat had its headquarters there; there was a library and a well-attended theatre, which was visited even by the occupying forces. For the actors it was an important advantage – thanks to the theatre, they were not classified as “unfit for work” and were not moved to the small ghetto.

In 1943 the big ghetto was dissolved as well and the imprisoned Jews were either shot in Paneriai or deported to labour camps in Estonia. The Austrian Gedenkdienst organisation, which established the online “Holocaust Atlas of Lithuania” project in 2010, calculated the number of Jewish victims as 70,000 in Paneriai alone. If counted with other victims – mainly Russians, Poles, Roma and communists – the number rises to about 100,000.

Between 1941 and 1943 the Polish journalist Kaziemierz Sakowicz, who lived near Paneriai, wrote about the mass shootings in his diary. He worked for a Polish newspaper in Vilnius and was part of the Polish Home Army that fought against the Nazi occupation. He was shot in 1944 by unknown Lithuanians and the circumstances surrounding his death were never fully discovered. His diary explains the daily horror of Paneriai forest: the deportations, torture and shootings lasting whole days. On certain days he would make only short notes of the number of people killed. The diary written on loose sheets, placed into lemonade bottles and buried in the ground were dug up by Sakowicz’s neighbour and handed over to the Jewish Museum of Vilnius, where it remained without proper attention until 1998. It was published in Polish in 1999, in German in 2003 and in English in 2005. The Lithuanian edition was finally published in 2013 on the occasion of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27th.
The Paneriai tunnel

When the Red Army approached the territory of Lithuania in 1944, the Nazis and their local collaborators tried to destroy the traces of their crimes. They forced 80 of the last surviving Jews to exhume the corpses of their kinsmen and burn them. However, the group of Jews did not believe they would spare them in the end, and during the works they managed to dig a tunnel to safety and freedom with their own hands. On April 15th 1944 they tried to escape. 11 of them survived and were able to join the partisans in the Lithuanian forests. The story about the Paneriai tunnel was well-known over the years, but it was not found until the summer of 2016. An international team of archaeologists from Canada, the United States, Lithuania and Israel discovered the tunnel and the ashes of about 7,000 corpses nearby. The case is now administered by the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum.

Today, this chapter of the city’s history seems to have been memorialised only by a handful of small initiatives and not in a broader, systematic way. In front of the former building of the Judenrat in Rūdninkų gatvė, for example, there is a stumbling block that commemorates Icchokas Rudaševski, born in 1927, imprisoned in the ghetto in 1941 and shot in Paneriai in 1943. Through his well-maintained diary the young man became the chronicler of the ghetto of Wilne.

Vilnius, Wilno, Wilna, Wilne

Besides busts, statues, stumbling blocks and remembrance plaques very little of the former “Jerusalem of the North” has survived in modern Vilnius. The former highly diverse city is much more homogeneous today. In 1900, Vilnius was not only the biggest Jewish city, but also the centre of the Belarusian national movement, and it was exposed to a strong Polish influence. Only two per cent of inhabitants at the time were ethnic Lithuanians. Today their share of the total city population is higher than 60 per cent. 20 per cent are Poles, but the Jewish community in Vilnius – as in the whole of Lithuania – nearly vanished. Many of those who survived emigrated to Israel or the United States. Those who stayed still pursue the reconstruction of the Great Synagogue at its former site. Primarily, however, it is the Jewish community that demands proper remembrance politics and, in this way, contributes to Lithuania’s important public confrontation with its own history.

Marita Gasteiger is a graduate student of Interdisciplinary Eastern European Studies at the University of Vienna. After several study visits to Minsk and Moscow, she is currently doing an abroad semester at Vilnius University. Gasteiger works as a freelance journalist for the Austrian Augustin street magazine and has been politically active in the Austrian Students’ Union.
In 2016, the topic of the abortion ban has been among the most popular issues discussed in Polish media. Citizen legislation initiatives, several-thousand-strong demonstrations and public appearances of representatives of the Catholic church were on the front pages, and Polish politicians actively tried to find a solution or at least present the concerns of society with regards to the issue.

**The epoch of legal abortion**

Abortion in Poland has not always been banned. From 1956 until the 1990s it was legal and performed in state-run clinics for free. The reason for terminating a pregnancy could be not only a threat to a woman’s life, or foetal diseases, but also, for example, a difficult material situation of the mother.

At the beginning of the 1990s, circles connected with the Catholic church launched a campaign against legal abortion. At the time, a project banning the practice altogether was prepared and after it was submitted for review of the Sejm (the lower Chamber of the Polish Parliament – editor’s note), the parliament decided to conduct a public opinion poll about legal access to abortion. Almost 53 per cent of respondents answered that in case of a referendum on the issue, they would vote in favour of legalisation. The legislation draft was rejected.

The crucial event was the 1993 adoption of the law “On family planning, protection of human foetus and conditions allowing for termination of pregnancy”, which introduced the restrictions that are still in place. The law is often referred to as the “abortion compromise” between the state and the Catholic church.

**The missing compromise**

The enacted law permits abortion only in three cases: when the pregnancy threatens the mother’s life, when the pregnancy is a result of rape, and in the case of foetal disease.

Over the 23 years since the introduction of the law, several attempts were made to amend it. The first one took place only a year after the bill came into force, when as a result of a request made by a parliamentary women’s group, the Sejm reviewed the possibility of liberalising the law and allowing for abortion if a woman is in a difficult financial situation.

The Sejm passed the law, but the then-president Lech Wałęsa refused to sign it. The situation was repeated two years after in the next convocation of parliament and
after the end of Wałęsa’s term in office. The amendment came into force only in 1996 during Aleksander Kwaśniewski’s presidency, who maintained the decision about the liberalisation of the law and extended the right to abortion to cases of difficult material circumstances.

However, the law did not survive in this form for long. In 1997, as a result of a decision by the Constitutional Court, the possibility of terminating a pregnancy due to financial reasons was excluded. Since then, no changes to the law have been made. The issue of the legalisation of abortion would resurface in the pre-election promises of left-wing parties and from time to time in the media. Most often, however, it appeared in art projects or controversial cases related to the issue. Importantly, the discussion was never as heated as at the end of 2015.

**The year of the “Black Protest”**

In order to understand the situation, it is worth looking back to the autumn of 2015, when Law and Justice came to power. This is when a pro-life organisation submitted for review a draft of legislation completely banning abortion. The main argument of abortion opponents is that the current law did not protect children in the pre-natal period of their lives.

In spring 2016, the Polish Episcopate issued a statement, which on April 3rd was read in a number of Polish churches. In the letter the Church called for the total protection of human life from conception to death. When the statement was being read, in many churches people left in protest.

After the Episcopate voiced their position, Polish politicians began to comment on the issue. For example, the head of the ruling party, Jarosław Kaczyński, reassured the public that the representatives of his party all unequivocally supported the full abortion ban. At the same time, the Prime Minister, Beata Szydło, reaffirmed the position of the Catholic Church and called for a total abortion ban.

The words of the head of the government were not met without reaction. The action “send a hanger to the prime minister Beata Szydło” was launched on social media, and joined by more than 32,000 people. The main point of the action was to send iron hangers to the office of the prime minister, which in the United States are a symbol of illegal abortion. In the past, women used wired hangers to self-terminate unwanted pregnancies.

The hangers became a symbol of street protests organised by the activists and women’s rights defenders. In April demonstrations under the banner “Say No to torture of women” took place in 18 Polish cities.

At the time three former Polish first ladies – Danuta Wałęsa, Jolanta Kwaśniewska and Anna Komorowska - called for the preservation of the 1993 compromise in a joint letter. Moreover, in May 2016, the Polish Public Opinion Research Centre conducted a survey, which showed that the majority of respondents was against the total abortion ban.

Another drop in the sea of disagreement was the submission of two citizen projects for parliamentary review. The first called for a total abortion ban, including in the three circumstances listed in the 1993 law. On top of that, the project included punitive measures for mothers, who
decide to terminate pregnancy. The project of the committee “Stop Abortion” was signed by more than 450,000 people.

The second legislation draft, legalising abortion, was prepared by the Committee of Legislative Initiatives “Let’s Save Women”. According to the project, termination of pregnancy would be allowed until the end of the 12th week. It also included the implementation of a sexual education programme. The authors of the bill managed to gather 215,000 signatures in support of the initiative.

On September 23rd 2016, the Sejm considered both citizen projects. The parliamentarians decided to send the total abortion ban bill for further refinement and rejected the liberalisation project. This was the drop to make the glass overflow.

The so-called “Black Protest” began even before the next session of parliament on September 21st. In protest against the abortion ban, the demonstrators wore black clothes, and social media platforms were swamped with photographs with the hashtag #czarnyprotest.

After the decision of the Sejm on September 24th, the Polish Episcopate once again voiced their opinion. They stated that “every human life has a fundamental and inviolable value. Its protection is necessary regardless of world view”. However, the representative of the Church did not support penalties for women who performed abortion.

The main event of the protest movement was the nationwide women’s strike within the “Black Protest” against the possible total abortion ban, which took place on October 3rd 2016. On the protest day, women dressed in black took to the main squares of the biggest Polish cities. The largest demonstrations took place in Warsaw, Kraków, Wrocław, Gdańsk and Poznań. As the participants told me, they were not calling for the legalisation of abortion, but to secure the compromise developed in the 1990s. The protests bore fruit. The developments that followed showed that the government began to look for alternative answers to the questions.

“For Life”

Three days after the protests, a majority in the Sejm rejected the legislation project of the “Stop Abortion” committee calling for the total ban and criminalisation of abortion. Importantly, on the day prime minister Beata Szydło announced a programme of support for mothers bringing up children with disabilities.

Moreover, in October statements by the head of Law and Justice Jarosław Kaczyński and Polish president Andrzej Duda followed, claiming all measures will be implemented to limit the number of abortions in Poland.

On November 2nd, the government submitted for parliamentary consideration a project titled “For Life”, providing support for women, who, regardless of the diagnosis of serious foetal disease, decided to give birth. After several days, the project was enacted by the parliament and signed by president Andrzej Duda.

The project dictates that from January 1st 2017, women who decide to keep and give birth to a child with genetic disease will receive a one-off payment of 4,000 zloty. The money will be paid only if the
child is born alive. The project does not include situations when the child is still-born or dies during labour.

It is understood that the “For Life” programme will cost the Polish state several hundred million zloty. The government claims that the means for the project have already been found. Part of the costs will be covered by the salaries fund.

**To be continued?**

The government programme appears to be a reaction to the protest movement and disagreement about the total abortion ban in Poland. For the time being, the programme has been criticised by both the supporters and the opponents of abortion. Among those with right-wing views who oppose the programme, the main argument voiced is that only a total abortion ban will save the lives of unborn children.

Despite this, in December Gazeta Wyborcza reported that in January 2017 the Sejm might vote on a new abortion ban, which is now under review by the Parliamentary Commission for Petitions. If the document prepared by the Polish federation movement for the protection of life receives a positive recommendation, it will soon be presented to the Speaker of the Parliament.

Even if the legislation draft is rejected, the topic of abortion will again return to the Polish media in 2017, as the “For Life” programme suits neither the supporters nor the opponents of the abortion ban. Against the programme are also those it relates to in the first place – mothers of children with disabilities.

Most likely the government will try to make amendments to the existing law or change its position, taking into account on the one hand the opinion of the Polish Episcopate, and, on the other, the position of the wider population and the protest movement, which will only become stronger in the case of another attempt to completely ban abortion.

As the results of the survey by the Polish Public Opinion Research Centre suggest, 62 per cent of Poles support the existing abortion law. 23 per cent of citizens support liberalisation of the legislation and only 7 per cent are in favour of tightening it.

*Translated by Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska*

**Svitlana Ovcharova** is a journalist, a graduate of the Faculty of Journalism and Political Science, University of Warsaw, and a student at the Centre for East European Studies, University of Warsaw. She writes for Ukrainian and Polish media and is currently working on an academic study on reproductive policy in Poland and Romania after 1989.
What kind of fact-checking tools exist? What are they utilised for? And what challenges have to be overcome to make best use of them? An incomplete overview.

The phenomenon of fake news is nothing new. As Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe’s Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatović, has put it, “people lie and they always have”. But it seems that, especially after the Brexit referendum and the presidential election in the United States, the topic of fake news in social media and its impact is higher on the agenda of journalists and politicians than before. Some even see fake news as a threat to the fundamental democratic order. The structure of social media with its like-and-share mechanisms, and the need to individuate through publishing exclusive material, makes a good breeding ground and distribution sector for false information or for the misinformation of masses. Moreover, as every post on social media comes in the same layout, it makes it more challenging to distinguish between professional journalistic products and populistic clickbait.

Important questions in this regard are not only what exactly counts as fake news but also to what extent should internet giants like Facebook or Google take action? How far can automated fact-checking software tools be helpful for journalists and the general public? And how should those applications be designed?

After a lot of criticism, it seems that Facebook is making a first step announcing, in mid-December, a new option for its users to report allegedly fake news to the social media company. After being run through pre-filtering algorithms, the reported links are passed on to a conglomerate of US journalistic fact-checkers debunking actual fake news with published articles. However, since these were only tests, as Adam Mosseri, Facebook’s vice-president of product management for News Feed, writes in a blog post the changes are confined to a small percentage of US-based English language users only.

Looking further into the matter of existing tools and extensions to flag or fact-check potential fake news online, it seems beneficial to be an English-language user interested in news from English speaking countries, since many tools are language and region specific. Neither the recent moves by Facebook nor the latest popular Chrome extensions to flag false information (among them BS Detector, FiB or
Slate Magazine’s This Is Fake) are of direct use to non-English speaking Europeans. On the positive side, however, several initiatives offer their extensions as open source material, meaning the code can be used by anyone to improve or adopt it to a different language.

**Using what is available**

One European initiative that took this opportunity and reprogrammed the existing extension – BS Detector, is “Viralgranskaren” from Sweden. Like the original, the extension warns people on Facebook if a post from a problematic Swedish source appears on their timeline or if they access a webpage that deliberately spreads fake news. The extension bases the warnings on a list created by the Swedish fact-checkers. “We have decided to include in the list only those, who intentionally publish false information. That excludes for example pages that deal with conspiracy theories. These are not intentionally false stories, since the people posting the articles there seem to believe in what they are publishing,” says editor Åsa Larsson.

Viralgranskaren can be translated to Viral Examiner and was originally founded as a project within the Swedish Metro daily newspaper in 2014. Now it is a permanent section and fact-checking format that runs a webpage on which the editors publish fact-checked stories and rumours that previously appeared online. In addition to the webpage, Larsson says they are trying to raise general awareness in Sweden to be more source-critical. A short video, created in cooperation with the Internet Foundation in Sweden explaining the importance of fact-checking, recently got broad attention both inside of Sweden and abroad. “We also provide material for school lessons and are planning a special Be-Source-Critical-Day in March 2017,” says Larsson.

This educational approach seems especially fruitful in the light of a report published in November 2016. The study conducted by a group of Stanford University researchers suggests that up to 80 percent of pupils and students are not able to distinguish between an advertisement and a news article online. Similarly, they struggled with claims on social media. Less than a third of the study’s participants were able to explain how the political agenda of a social media user could influence the content of a tweet or post. Even though the study includes young people in the United States only, it gives an interesting insight into a generation that is considered to be digital natives.

**Projects from Eastern Europe**

In Central and Eastern European countries, platforms that fact-check statements of politicians and participants in the public debate are prevalent. “Demagog” started for that purpose in Slovakia, due to its success exists now also in the Czech Republic and Poland. “Faktograf” has the same aim in Croatia and “GRASS Fact Check” is active in Georgia. The project “Proverka na Fakti” provides a broader fact-checking overview of the media in Macedonia. The Ukrainian “Stop Fake” investigates how propaganda influences Ukraine and other countries and regions, according to their own accounts. Nevertheless, all the initiatives depend on human fact-checkers and have not yet launched any automated tools or applications.
“Funky Citizens” from Romania has just made an attempt in this direction. The NGO was established in 2012 to engage taxpayers in decision-making processes and to make data on public budget more accessible. By now they also run the fact-checking webpage called "Factual" and have launched a Chrome extension of the same name. However, as explained by Cosmin Pojoranu, project coordinator in charge of the communications department at Funky Citizens, the extension is not meant to flag fake news but highlights fact-checked statements on pages browsed by the user. He or she, therefore, does not need to go to a fact checking page but gets information on fact-checked statements without changing their media habits. The tool is designed to work in Romanian only, but since the extension is open source it can be adopted to different languages and regions.

Tools for Professionals

On a broader pan-European background, the "REVEAL" project funded within the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme aims to develop tools to automate simple verification steps for social media. Their target group are journalists and fact-checking professionals. According to their own accounts they are working on natural language processing as well as image and social network analysis. Since its conception in 2013 they have, for example, created tools to verify the origin of a tweet. Most tools are freely accessible and open source.

By publishing the white paper "The State of Automated Fact-checking" the UK-based platform “Full Fact” tries to position themselves among the pioneers of automated fact-checking, not only in Europe but globally. Having just received major
funding from Google’s Digital News Initiative, which supports online journalism in Europe (among them also a few fact-checking initiatives), they promise to deliver two automated fact-checking software tools by the end of 2017. Full Fact also stresses the need to think and work globally in the field of fact-checking, as, according to them, so far resources are being wasted in fragmented projects reinventing the wheel.

Indeed, this seems to be of key importance in the further development of fact-checking software or applications: the standardisation of data and designs that are adaptable to different languages and regions. However, as explained by Krzysztof Madejski, project coordinator at ePanstwo Foundation, which maintains an open database of public data in Poland, “The adaption to another language or country is connected with costs and the tool will always need a reference knowledge base”. Furthermore, improved natural language processing is needed to monitor speech recognition, for example during a TV debate among politicians. Otherwise real-time fact-checking during TV or radio discussions will remain impossible.

Moreover, Aleksandra Kuczerawy, a legal researcher and a PhD candidate at KU Leuven, Belgium, recently discussed in a blog post that fact-checking tools can also reflect the biases of their creators, therefore transparency and accountability issues are inevitable. “It is furthermore important to note that content verification tools should not work as censorship tools but rather opt-in mechanisms to remind people that not everything they read online is true,” Kuczerawy explains in the blog post.

Will automated fact-checking tools ultimately do the job by themselves? Certainly not. Åsa Larsson is convinced that for the foreseeable future technological tools to detect and fight fake news can only be one element in fact-checking routines. “Reality is complex. We will need journalistic-skilled people to work with and continuously improve those tools and databases.” Furthermore, according to Cosmin Pojoranu, no computer can read between the lines as well as humans can. Therefore, the work of trustworthy journalists and fact-checkers operating transparently is still of key importance even in times of automated fact-checking.

**Mira Fricke** is a Poznań-based German freelance journalist and master student of Science Studies, Humboldt-University Berlin. She holds a BA in Science Journalism.
To some it might seem strange to go to a remote corner of Siberia for two weeks each summer to clean up a graveyard – but this year more than 800 young Lithuanians applied to do just that.

For the last decade, at least once a year, youth project Mission Siberia has taken 16 young people to try and reconnect them to one of the most tragic events in their country’s history.

Between 1941 and 1953, while Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union, more than 300,000 people were rounded up by the Soviets, put on cattle trucks and deported to gulags – labour camps – in Siberia, the Arctic Circle and Kazakhstan.

More than 70 per cent of the deportees were women and children, and around 50,000 people never returned to Lithuania again.

In total during this period, around 600,000 people from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were sent to remote parts of the Soviet Union while their countries were under occupation. Ukrainian, Belarusian, Moldovan and Polish men, women and children were also deported.

Some of the reasons the Soviets gave for deportation included: being members of a patriotic or religious organisation, police or prison officials, former members of the Lithuanian or Polish armies, citizens of foreign states, representatives or employees of foreign firms, employees of foreign embassies, Red Cross workers or bankers, members of aristocratic families, or rich farmers.

In 1956 Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev decided the deportees should be released, and people started to return to Lithuania in the late 1950s. But after their return their lives were not easy due to strict working laws, which required registration with their local municipality. Few employers had the courage to offer work to former deportees, and many were forced to live and work illegally for many years.

The people who lived through that time will never forget what happened, but for some, 75 years is a long time ago and long before they were born. And as more times passes, survivors dwindle and memories fade, recreating tangible links with the past is more important than ever.

This is the aim of Mission Siberia.

“Young people see these events as more like a myth or a legend, something that happened like 200 or 500 years ago, far far away from their realities,” said Karolis
Žemaitis, project manager at the charity Jauniems, which started Mission Siberia (Misija Sibiras in Lithuanian).

“For our grandparents the Soviet times were a reality, but for us it’s not. What we try to do, [talking about] these events the deportations and occupations, it is not – I would say – a sexy topic to discuss with a pint of beer. It is not very attractive. This is why we are trying to shift this [view] a little bit. Not only the bit that we are sad about, but also the parts that we are proud of, such as the people who survived.”

The project started in 2005 after discussions took place in Lithuania about how to encourage young people to play a more active role in society. Common complaints from adults were that not enough of them were voting and that they lacked “civic-mindedness”, says Karolis.

But the youth organisation thought that this was not true and that young people were just active in different ways, and so they started Mission Siberia.

For two weeks each summer, 16 young people are selected to travel, usually first by train to Moscow and then by plane to Siberia to tend to the graves of Lithuanians who never came home. They clean up graveyards, some of which have lain untouched for decades, make new wooden crosses and try to speak to Lithuanians who still live in the area.

When they return home they make presentations about their trips and hold talks with youth organisations and at universities, to tell people what they have seen and how it has impacted on their lives.

Over the last ten years, more than 10,000 people have applied for a handful of
coveted places. Karolis said the organisation has been surprised that the numbers of applicants has kept increasing, as the project idea had not changed very much over the decade.

Their task is a huge one as there are thousands of graves throughout Siberia, but that does not mean they will stop anytime soon. “We see that this is more of a symbolic gesture because this is not a technical expedition,” explained Karolis.

This year the group went to Igarka, in the Krasnoyarsk region above the Arctic Circle. The Baltic Times has reported that between 5,000 and 10,000 Lithuanians were deported there in 1948, making it the city that had the highest concentration of deportees from Lithuania.

Since 2005, the project has visited dozens of locations in Siberia, usually sites where there were Soviet prisons and forced labour camps. Karolis told Deep Baltic that these trips have had a big impact on the participants, saying they often see “history completely differently” afterwards.

“We are trying to stress that history is not only statistics,” he said. “When you say 22,000 people were deported in two days or 48 hours – OK, these are huge numbers. But when you go 5,000 km away from Lithuania, and there is suddenly some old man who is speaking in a rural Lithuanian dialect and he says: ‘I have not spoken Lithuanian for 50 years’ and starts to cry and says ‘I never ever thought I would speak Lithuanian again with anyone’: these are the stories that are very emotional.”

“The people who take part in these programmes realise that history is based on each and every person, every man, woman and child who actually went there and the families that came back who then tried to carry on living their lives. And what we try to do is connect with the young people; to show them that the people who lived 80 years ago are the same as the ones that live right now. They had their own lives, their own romances and ambitions, and they were exactly like us, but they just suffered so much more.”

This article was originally published by Deep Baltic.

Helen Wright is a freelance journalist based in Estonia. She has written for the BBC, ERR News, EurasiaNet, the Baltic Times, Deep Baltic and Estonian World. She is currently studying for an MA in Baltic Sea Region Studies at the University of Tartu.
Only 50 kilometres from the northern border of Poland one finds a different reality. A small world, where one is welcomed by a border guard in a typical chapka and where during the day the doleful greyness of post-socialist buildings cuts through the kilometres of lopsided pavements, on which street trade blossoms. A four-hour trip from Gdańsk to the Kaliningrad Oblast, like a time machine, lets one go back to the Cold War era.

From the charcoal block districts the remnants of German architecture resurface like snowdrops. Immanuel Kant guards Russian free thinking. It is a world of little absurdities; a world which at night completely changes its mien. Kaliningrad in the evening blossoms almost like an ugly duckling, thanks to the ever-present neon lamps casting their pale light over asphalt ribbons. The lives of the inhabitants and the unbridled street traffic are overseen by the vigilant eye of the concrete robot, the House of Soviets, built on the place of the Prussian castle destroyed in the 1960s.

Rusty trolley-buses and streetcars scurry through the streets, tightly incubating the breath of the inhabitants, who can be spotted through the steamy windows. Not knowing the facts, one feels as though one is in a multi-million metropolis. A metropolis which suffers from a peculiar schizophrenia, unsure if it should keep pace with the urban McDoinaldisation or welcome travellers with its nostalgic climate, traditional ukha and the sign on the Kaliningrad hotel towering over downtown. It is a place where one can observe the “Goodbye Lenin!” live. With one exception – no wall will collapse here.

Translated by Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska

Dorian Jędrasiewicz is a master student in the Institute of European Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. He is a vice-president of the German studies University Circle.
The social-cultural centre of Kaliningrad is characterised by typical German architecture.

The House of Soviets (the intended headquarters of district administration), built on the place of the Teutonic castle which was destroyed at the behest of Leonid Brezhnev.
The inhabitants are connected with each other, just like they are with their local motherland.

Kaliningrad is full of Soviet architecture.
A souvenir shop nearby the Cathedral.

Afternoon rush hours, Kaliningrad inhabitants are returning home from work.
"All the elements from the periodic table can be found there", the man grumbled.

From the great St. Mary’s Church Tower in Gdańsk, I noticed the vague, distant silhouette of a big hill, in an eastward direction. A local watched me gazing and told me it was the “Fosfory” dump, apparently consisting entirely of nuclear waste. “It is probably the greatest cause of cancer among Gdańsk’s inhabitants”, he said.

That is quite shocking, if true. Is this the way the country treats its nuclear waste and energy production? What is Poland’s nuclear energy policy now, and what will it be in the future? I asked Jan Haverkamp, an expert consultant on nuclear energy and energy policy for Greenpeace Central and Eastern Europe. For more than 15 years, he has been based in Gdańsk, working on nuclear and renewable energy production and processing policy.

Haverkamp describes the current situation. The radioactive waste in Poland comes from industry, hospitals and from the existing research reactor: the MARIA reactor in Świerk. It is the only functioning reactor besides those used for research. Currently, Poland is searching for a proper way and place to store its radioactive waste. This is a very slow process. Right now, most of the high-level waste is being shipped back to the deliverer of the reactor, which is in Russia. "The amounts of that waste are not so great - just a few dozen kilograms per year. But low-level waste is also within the lower numbers. In nuclear countries over 95 per cent of radiation is concentrated in waste from power plants."

Poland has been planning to develop a nuclear energy programme since the 1970s, though the Chernobyl catastrophe caused a 20-year hiatus, Haverkamp says. But the reports on what to do with the high-level waste of those plans are “basically cut and paste copies of the plans that Finland and Sweden have”. He does not consider the reports to be realistic in the Polish context and it is hard to estimate when the nuclear programme will see its inception. “Definitely not before 2027, as claimed by the government”, he asserts.

Looking at the details, the current plans estimate that by 2030, between four and six future reactors will produce 6,000 megawatts. Those reactors may be built 80 kilometers north of Gdańsk, in the municipalities of Żarnowiec and Choczewo. While Poland most certainly is capable of putting large swathes of nature under concrete, according to Haverkamp, it cannot afford the project. This argument is gaining ground.
“Building one reactor that would deliver 1,000 megawatts would cost at least five billion Euro.” He calls the Polish government's earlier estimation of €3.5 billion “pure nonsense”. “30 billion Euros at minimum for two power plants with two to three reactors each – Poland simply does not have the money. Moreover, pushing this project through would increase the energy prices by three times of their current market value”, he predicts.

Environmentally, having to process the nuclear waste, or spent nuclear material that these reactors will produce, is also very likely to cause problems. Where the waste will be stored is not entirely clear from the reports that Haverkamp refers to. As for how it will be stored, he expects that deep geological storage may be used, in salt layers or in granite, for instance. “This is an option, but technically, there are many downsides. Corrosion and leaks in the layers and containers are big risks. Other countries, such as Finland, France and Sweden are investigating new options right now. What happens in Poland is dependent on what happens abroad.”

"Altogether, this project will only cause loss. The Polish government did not produce any report evidencing a detailed plan for proper management of future nuclear waste, nor does it know what the exact costs will be," Haverkamp asserts.

In the meantime, there is pressure on the country to switch to other sources of energy. Poland still uses coal to generate almost 90 per cent of its electricity, but the mines in the south are no longer profitable. It does not want Russia to be its energy provider, mostly for geopolitical reasons. Poland has signed the Paris Climate Agreement and is actively involved in other global governance energy initiatives. Renewable energy sources are slowly being discovered, but wind and solar energy are only getting a foothold recently. Through feed-in tariffs like the system that existed in Germany, it could become more financially attractive and safe for smaller companies and individuals to invest in renewable, environmentally friendly energy resources. But the Polish government is hesitant. “They’re scared to undermine the position of King Coal”, Haverkamp says.

Poland faces a lot of challenges for its future energy policy. It is still unclear whether the new nuclear reactors will be built and how their waste will be dealt with. It seems that to abandon the project altogether would be the most sensible idea. As for the hill seen from the tower, according to Haverkamp, it does not contain nuclear waste. “I have been walking around there with a dosimeter and it does not show signs of increased radiation. But the hill certainly does contain a lot of other undefined crap.”

Ruben Dieleman currently pursues an MSc in international administration and global governance at Gothenburg University.
A POORLY TAILORED FEDERALISM. THE BIGGEST ILLS OF THE RUSSIAN TERRITORIAL SYSTEM

By Hubert Gregorski

Russia is a federation of a special sort – a so-called ethno-federation, whose boundaries are based on ethno-national divisions within the country. Moreover, Russian federalism is often referred to as Soviet federalism. These enigmatic concepts have important implications and require, if not force, the Russian authorities to conduct a “flexible” regional policy, often conflicting with international standards and the basic constitutional rules upon which the Russian state is founded. In consequence, it deems the Russian federalism anachronistic. Arguably, even democratisation of the state would not solve the issue.

How Russia became a federation

Russian federalism did not develop organically, as was the case in Germany and the United States. It was forcefully imposed after the 1917 October Revolution. Bolshevik propaganda used slogans of decentralisation and the right of nations to self-determination. The Bolsheviks had a special interest in it: first, they wanted to gain the support of the various groups and nations of the Russian Empire, often repressed by the tsardom. Second, they aimed to speed up the process of decay of the old public system, which was meant to ease the creation of the state almost from scratch, based on the new rules. This was mostly achieved.

The Bolsheviks used federalism as a tool of governance. However, paradoxically, this did not lead to decentralisation, but helped to concentrate power in the hands of a few top-level Communist Party officials. Neither the Soviet Union, nor the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic broke away with the absolutism of the previous era that they widely condemned, and did not convey real power to the people.

For almost all of the 20th century, the Soviet Union remained a federation, although only on paper. This lasted until 1991 when the thaw came and the ice conserving the old, rigid system melted. Changes were so rapid that there was no time for a deeper legal-systemic reflection. Russia, therefore, inherited the federal system from the Soviet Union, but in the new quasi-democratic reality it has largely failed. In the turmoil of the 1990s it became a tool of the almost unconstrained power of local elites allied with the criminal underworld.

In some regions, and especially in north Caucasus, separatist forces rose in prominence, which resulted in two Chechen wars. Only the rise to power by Vladimir Putin and the following centralisation reforms ended the free-riding of the local cliques. At the same time, however, the reforms distorted the idea of federalism based on the decentralisation of power.
The shape of Russian federalism

Federations can be generally classified as symmetric and asymmetric. In case of the former, the subjects are equal in their relations with the centre, which means that each has the same rights and obligations. The US is an example of such a federation. On the contrary, in asymmetrical federations, some regions have wider competences, such as the Halabdia region of Iraq dominated by Kurds, which has bigger powers than the other 18 regions and is the only one to possess its own government.

Formally, Russia is a symmetrical federation – despite the existence of several types of territorial units (such as republics, kraie, oblasti) they are all equal in mutual relations and in relations with the central authority. Similarly, the constitution of the Russian Federation from 1993 divides competences between the central and local governments equally without privileging any region. The differences remain only on the symbolic level – for example only republics have their own constitutions, while other units have ustavy.

However, from the beginning of the 1990s, Russia's domestic policy did not reflect this arrangement. For instance, Moscow has had a special approach towards north Caucasus. The same has been the case with other regions dominated by one national, ethnic or religious group, such as Tuva and Tatarstan, where local particularities naturally call for such a policy. Because of the lack of formal tools, the Kremlin has been forced to resort to informal or ever extralegal solutions. It has been especially visible in its relationship with Chechnya.

Russia and Chechnya

The subjugation of Chechnya in the 19th century took several dozens of years. However, it has never ceased to be a flash point. Chechen society, mainly due to its tribal structure, ethnic distinctness, adherence to a special Sufi version of Islam, the Chechen language and the rule of customary law called adat, has been particularly alienated within Russia. Public opinion polls suggest that Russia's inhabitants would rather consider a Ukrainian or a Belarusian as "their own" rather than a person from the Caucasus.

To understand the special relationship between Russia and Chechnya, it is worth looking at the specific nature of the north-Caucasian republic. Importantly, it has to be stressed that there is no one single legal order in place, as next to the official Russian state law, people adhere to Islamic law (of the Hanafi school, the most liberal and accepting customary law) and adat, which is firmly based on the tradition and which was in place before the region's conversion to Islam.

On the one hand, the three legal systems are contradictory and in competition with one another, but on the other, they are complementary. They are spelled out in three different languages, Russian, Arabic and Chechen, and they have become the bases for different institutions. For instance, the recently created body with the aim of overseeing adherence to rules related to marriage ceremonies, which has invoked many controversies, does not originate in the Islamic tradition, but in adat, where family law and customs play an extremely significant role.

The current regime of Ramzan Kadyrov treats each legal source instrumentally
and uses them interchangeably depending on the situation and its particular interests. As both the Sharia law and adat have been in operation in Chechnya several times longer than the Russian law, it is unlikely that the latter will sideline or even dominate the other two anytime soon.

Chechen society adheres to the Sufi version of Islam, far from Middle Eastern legalism, based on brotherhoods passing on knowledge verbally from generation to generation. Sufism has no generally accepted theology and every order (tariqa) has a wide independence. This has been accompanied by a complicated tribal structure, which makes governing Chechnya from the centre extremely difficult.

Informal relations and agreements, often based on ties of blood, play an important role. Although Ramzan Kadyrov has tried to forcefully break the traditional dependencies in order to strengthen his power, over the course of history, no one has yet succeeded in the task. Nevertheless, such a distinct organisation of Chechen society calls for a special approach.

The tackling of the Chechen crisis from the 1990s, accompanied by two wars and the existence of an independent Chechen state for nearly three years, ruled by Islamic fundamentalists, was ended after the Russian intervention with the Putin-Kadyrov agreement in 1999. It provided that the Russians will grant Chechnya a high level of independence in return for loyalty and dealing with the problem of Islamic extremism. After the assassination of Akhmat Kadyrov, he was replaced by his son Ramzan, who meticulously fulfills the decisions of the agreement, at the same time fully enjoying the rights it has guaranteed him. It is worth noting that the arrangement is based on the personal relationship and has no formal basis. Moreover, the current Chechen leader more often refers to his personal loyalty towards Putin, rather than the Russian state.

The head of Chechnya also controls the power structures in the republic, which formally are answerable to the central federal resorts. One of the most scandalous cases in point was when the police from the Stavropol krai conducted an action on Chechnya's territory and Kadyrov urged his people to shoot the “foreign” officers if such a situation repeats in the future. It was met with strong criticism from Russia's Ministry of Internal Affairs, but no legal consequences followed.

The free riding of Kadyrov's regime is visible also in his nearly independent foreign policy. In particular, he maintains relations with the wealthy states of the Persian Gulf. He also declared that he will conduct his own fight against the Islamic State. Kadyrov receives funds not only from Moscow, but also from abroad, from the above-mentioned states, and directly from his citizens, who, as human rights defenders report, are forced to pay a certain percentage of their salaries a month to the Akhmat Kadyrov Foundation. It is therefore a de facto unofficial tax imposed on the inhabitants of Chechnya, which has been tolerated by the central authorities.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in other republics in the north Caucasus, as well as in Tatarstan, Bashkiria and Tuva. Back in the day, separatist movements were also visible in Siberia, which too has a distinct identity from the traditional Russian one. Such a diversity requires a distinct philosophy of the state's territorial organisation.
What is the solution?

Centralised management of Russia seems impossible. Moreover, the development of unofficial channels of cooperation between Moscow and the regions, as it is the case with Chechnya, does not facilitate the building of stability, trust for the law and the state, and therefore a democratic system. Currently, communication is largely conducted through the ruling party - United Russia. Both in Chechnya and in the majority of other regions, paradoxically, no strong regional political forces were formed.

In the former, Kadyrov’s regime, in return for a nearly unlimited stream of funds coming from the federal centre, makes sure that the ruling party maintains almost 100 per cent of support in the republic. United Russia has dominated not only in the Chechen parliament, but also in legislative bodies of the other regions. The strong position of the ruling party in most of the country, regardless of any national or religious divisions, somehow ensures the cohesion of state policy and is a one-off remedy for the ills of the Russian territorial system.

An alternative to the current situation could be the remodeling of the federal system into an asymmetric one, which would grant different regions more freedom or, depending on local conditions, reshaping of relations between the core and the region on an individual basis. A similar process was taking place in the 1990s, when Moscow signed bilateral agreements with the regions, however, at the time it was dictated by the need of the moment and the attempt to keep territorial integrity of the state. It was understood that these were only short-term, ad hoc solutions.

Understandably, such a change would be connected with certain threats and risks. Above all, those regions which aspired or aspire to independence, would surely try to use the opportunity and claim more independence, which in a long run could turn out to be a first step to secession. For it should not be forgotten that since the collapse of the Soviet Union, many republics have formally declared state sovereignty or created their own citizenships, existing in parallel with the Russian one.

The central authorities deemed such acts to be illegal and the position has been backed by the rulings of the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation. Acknowledging the sovereignty of some regions or the existence of a parallel citizenship would be an entry point to the development of their own national identity and therefore the strengthening of separatist tendencies. These tendencies would be only reinforced by the pro-secession stance of regional leaders.

It should be remembered that those threats have not been curtailed thanks to structural systemic reforms. On the contrary, they were possible because of the firm rule of Vladimir Putin, who does not lead the country towards democratisation. It can be argued that the current stability is the result of Vladimir Putin’s authoritarian governing style. And it does not refer to Chechnya alone. For instance, although on the symbolic level Tatarstan did not comply with the federal law requesting the change of the title of republic’s leaders from “president” to something else, Tatarstan is still headed by a president.

Vladimir Putin was asked about the issue during the yearly “direct line” in 2015 (a call-in show with Russian president,
where he answers preselected questions from citizens on live television) by the representatives of the republic, and said: "You decide for yourself there, okay?" This shows that there are extralegal relations between Putin and regional leaders. It also shows that the word "rulers" is still more important than the letter of law.

There are a number of similar examples, but it is important to point to a yet another relationship. The consequence of the lack of thorough reform of the federal system in Russia will be the impossibility of implementing democracy and the rule of law in the country. Governing such a diverse state within the existing legal framework will be simply impossible, as the current regulations will not provide any appropriate tools. Moreover, they are not flexible enough to respond to the real needs of the various communities.

Undeniably, a serious public debate about the state system would be needed. However, it is unlikely that it will take place under current conditions. The leaders in the Kremlin will not allow for democratisation and real decentralisation because of the state’s weakness and the related risk of disintegration. A reform based on granting a wider autonomy to the regions could prove effective, and bring positive results, only if it provided the nations and religious groups with better conditions for the development of their traditions, culture and identity.

However, at the same time, they would have to be encouraged to stay within the federation. Factors such as participation in the common Russian market, security issues, implementing good regulations, attractive tax regimes and so on could be used to potentially encourage loyalty. Such conditions, however, can only be met in the case of serious reforms and democratisation efforts in Russia, which are nowhere in sight.

Moreover, paradoxically, democratisation would also act as a guarantor of the country’s territorial integrity, stability and internal security. As research indicates, so far no single democratic country in the world has faced a secession through use of force. Therefore, the common belief in Russia that democracy is the source of chaos and instability has proven wrong.

Importantly, democratisation in Russia should be parallel and complementary to the reform of the federal system. Without a real democracy, federalism will not function and at the same time, effective governance of such a diverse country is extremely difficult without the far-fetched possibility of decentralisation.

Translated by Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska

Hubert Gregorski is a graduate of Inter-area Individual Humanistic and Social Studies at the University of Warsaw, focusing on Law, International Relations and Iranian Studies.
Introduction

Home is one of the topics that will never lose its actuality, because it could appear in a million different physical or metaphorical forms that everyone has something to say about. Home is not only the place you grew up or live at the moment, but also involves just trying to understand which of all your locations would be worth this title. Sometimes it can also be something that someone is looking for, has just lost or is forced to accept as this magical place. During my visit to my hometown in the eastern part of Latvia I met Valdis. He, I believe, has experienced one of these forced home forms – prison. I tried to find out what kind of life he had there and how could it change his perception of the term home.

The twenty year old man is a father of two children already. The famous Latvian character Spriditis’ conclusion that the best place in the world is at home next to loved ones, became clear to Valdis during his half-year stay in prison for twenty two thefts committed over several years. Now, just after getting out, he appreciates each moment he can spend with people he loves, lives in his small hometown, fixes cars and is about to change his life – make the right decisions, so that he never has to go back behind bars.

Interview

How did you end up in prison?
Police were searching for me. They thought I was trying to escape from the court. In truth, I was working abroad. When I came back, I was driving with my friends and police stopped us, checked my documents and arrested me. After that they questioned me for six days, held in a small, narrow room where I had to sit with one prisoner that was taken to the court. In some ways I was lucky, because he told me what awaited me in prison and how to behave there.

There are two ways you can be welcomed in prison – they can peacefully greet you, ask who are you and why you are there, or they can just ask nothing and beat you up. Thank God – everything went well for me.

I was put in a cell with people who were also in prison for the first time – no matter for what. Only the rapists have to sit separated from others, because everyone hates them. It also turned out that one of my cellmates was an old friend of mine, and this was one of the reasons I had good relations with my other cell mate. There is an unwritten rule in prison – to drink tea and smoke cigarettes with others after familiarisation. It is an important foundation for good relationships if you are a normal person and are going to stay there for a while.

THE BEST BIRTHDAY IN PRISON

By Monta Gāgane
What was your daily schedule?
There is an alarm and light turned on at six in the morning. The guard takes a look in each cell to check everything is all right. After that we were allowed to turn on the television to watch the news. There are approximately eight channels, mostly in Latvian and Russian, with sports, music and so on. We were also allowed to play games on the PlayStation. Breakfast is served before seven – mostly it is disgusting porridges that always taste the same. If it is not eaten in an hour, it gets so hard and dry that it is impossible to get out of the bowl.

Quarter past eleven is lunchtime. Usually it is soup and a second dish that almost always is cooked with cabbages. Over half a year, only several times was a meal served without it. After lunch it is possible to take an hour long walk in a 25-square-meter concrete room with a barred ceiling. You can walk there around the circle and just breathe some fresh air.

Dinner is served at five o’clock in the evening. Sometimes it is just plain potatoes or potatoes with cabbage. Every day there is a cell check every three hours. At 10pm there is an alarm again, and the day lights are switched to night lights. Then we just sat, watched TV and went to sleep.

Weren’t you scared to get in contact with him?
No, because I knew what kind of people he used to kill – rapists. There are harsh rules in prison. It is not allowed to put rapists in a cell with others, because it is clear – the next stop for them will be prison hospital. Guards still sometimes do that, so these rapists can suffer more. That was also an opportunity for this killer to commit these murders.

How was your way home?
I packed all my stuff and just said goodbye to my cellmates. They were people with whom I spent all my time there and they were like my family. Those people were really good people even though they were in prison. When I was leaving, I almost cried after goodbyes. At the same time I enjoyed each step that took me closer to freedom. I remember that the first breath of air out the prison building was very special and pleasant for me.

Can you name three things you missed the most in prison?
I missed my family, emotional and physical freedom. I was dreaming about walking just straight outside for ten or more kilometers. I wanted to meet my mom, dad, grandmother, girlfriend, kids, friends and even my dog.

How would you define “home”?
Home is a place where you always love to return, and where there is someone who
is waiting for you. Even if you live alone, you can know that there is someone who would love to visit and be around you. In my home everything is always calm, easy and without stress.

**Do you think that prison could be home for someone?**
I think that yes, but mostly it would be against their will. I met a guy in prison that can really admit that it is his home. When he was out of prison, he lived in an old garage and dumpster dived. Now he has a roof over his head, better food, a shower and cigarettes that he can get if he works for them. For the next two years prison will be his home and it is better than his previous living conditions.

The first things that popped into my eyes about "prison" were gloomy, grey walls, bad lighting, bars and people with shaved heads. After only two weeks I started to get used to these conditions and dealt with it being my home for some time. I started to fit into this world and after some time it got a bit easier, but the thought about real home still didn’t leave me. To be honest, every evening I tried to go to sleep early and every morning I tried to not open my eyes as long as possible, so I could just think it was a bad dream. Each time I had to realise it was reality, my mood became bad immediately and it was hard to smile for a long time.

**Do you think you have changed during your time in the prison?**
It is a world where a person can change. I even started to read books, which I never did previously. Before I got there, I was quite frivolous and without a concrete plan for life. Now I want to get more serious and reach something. I want people to remember something good about me; I want for my family and me to be happy; everything would be all right. I don’t need to return there.

**How about something positive you experienced in prison?**
There were lots of different kinds of jokes in everyday life. One of them I will remember for a long time – once my cellmates made a small ball out of foil and during the night put it in my cigarette. While I was smoking it in the next day, the small ball got heated and exploded, and I burned my nose. Next two weeks everyone was laughing about me and called me reindeer Rudolph.

I also celebrated my twenty-first birthday there. To be honest it was one of the best birthdays in my life. As I was used to, I went for a sleep very early the day before, but two minutes past midnight mates woke me up and scared me a bit. I got off my bed and everyone started to congratulate me. During my sleep they had made drawings for me, and people from other cells were congratulating me. They sent me presents – of course in prison it was very simple – tea, sugar, coffee. It was very nice that so many people remembered me. It is not a secret that there are mobile phones available in prison as well, so I got phone calls and messages from home. It was very nice. Actually that time there were more people that remembered me than my last birthday.

*This interview was originally published in Veto magazine in Latvian*

**Monta Gāgane** is a Latvian new culture and art journalist and movie director. She holds an MA in Movie Directing and Producing from the Latvian Academy of Culture and a BA in Philosophy from the University of Latvia.
THE REYKJAVIK SUMMIT: WHEN ICELAND PAVED THE WAY FOR WORLD PEACE

By Andri Yrkill Valsson

One day in October

The fact that Iceland is currently (July 2016 – June 2017) holding presidency in the Council of the Baltic Sea States may seem odd to some. Iceland is not a Baltic state, so why would it get involved in regional politics? While this is not a question that will be addressed in this paper, it offers a great opportunity to look back on a moment in history when Iceland played a key role.

It was 1986, the Cold War was at its peak, and in the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union every little spark could have had unforeseeable consequences for the world. That was the case for decades after the Second World War. However, when Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, there emerged new hope for a change. Both openly criticised the nuclear stalemate and expressed his readiness to do something about it. Nevertheless, although the arms control negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union had been underway since 1980, the Soviets left the table in 1983. As a result, the USSR’s image in Western Europe suffered significantly and this forced Reagan to speak publicly about the threat Moscow posed to the world. His aim was twofold: to influence public opinion whilst simultaneously putting pressure on Moscow.

Reagan’s “Star Wars”

When Ronald Reagan was elected President of the United States in 1981 he brought some fresh air to the US-Soviet relations. He publicly criticised the nuclear stalemate and expressed his readiness to do something about it. Nevertheless, although the arms control negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union had been underway since 1980, the Soviets left the table in 1983. As a result, the USSR’s image in Western Europe suffered significantly and this forced Reagan to speak publicly about the threat Moscow posed to the world. His aim was twofold: to influence public opinion whilst simultaneously putting pressure on Moscow.

Reagan’s dream was a world without nuclear weapons. However, as this was a complex goal, he decided to create a defence system which could at least stop the incoming nuclear missiles. His plan was put forward in the 1983 Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), with the view to install a laser in space which could protect the
US population from a nuclear attack. It is known as Reagan’s Star Wars programme.

Moscow watched the introduction of the SDI with concern. The Soviets believed that it would have a negative effect on the balance of power in the world and that the West would gain both military and technological advantages. Reagan, however, saw the SDI as a defence tool only, to protect civilians in case of Soviet aggression. In 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, it seemed that there was room for improvement in the relations between the two states. However, it soon became clear that the new leader’s foreign policy would be different from his predecessors.

Domestically, Gorbachev faced the enormous challenge of reforming the economic structure of the country. He realised that the ideological warfare between East and West would be fought on the economic front. The Soviet Union’s primary military investments had been in land-based missiles and Gorbachev realised that Moscow could not compete with the US’s more advanced equipment. This technological gap could jeopardise Gorbachev’s goals for economic reform, as the Soviets would have to invest a great deal in defensive measures in order to keep the balance of power between the two blocs. He could not afford that and thought that nuclear disarmament was a key area which needed attention.

At the time, the leaders of the most powerful states in the world shared the same concerns about nuclear weapons and expressed their willingness to address the issue. They first met in person in Geneva, Switzerland, at a summit held in November 1985. There, they began to develop the respect for one another which paved the way for further negotiations.

**History made in Reykjavik**

Gorbachev proposed a meeting where the two leaders could discuss arms control in more detail. It would be less formal than the Geneva Summit in order to limit the outside pressure that would normally accompany such gatherings. Another important issue was the location: the meeting should not be hosted in any major city or in either of the negotiating states. Reykjavik was believed to be the most neutral spot for further negotiations, geographically located in between the two superpowers.

The meeting was announced on September 30th 1986 and was to take place less than two weeks later. It was held in Höfði, a historical house in northern Reykjavik, and the excitement of the general public in the country was clear. It is not every day that a small island in the north is in the centre of the world’s attention. In fact, nobody predicted at that point just how important this meeting would be. Not even the leaders themselves.

After the Geneva Summit, where the aim was to agree on bilateral nuclear reductions, the US and Soviet negotiators continued their attempts to make progress in the area. However, the negotiations seemed to have hit a dead end. Therefore, even though both Gorbachev and Reagan hoped that their Reykjavik meeting would get things back on track, the expectations on both sides were moderate.

Both leaders came to Iceland with their own set of goals. Gorbachev hoped to negotiate a major arms deal and, if that was not possible, he at least wanted to
highlight that it was Reagan’s SDI that stood in the way of the agreement. On his part, Reagan hoped to discuss US-Soviet bilateral relations, human rights and regional conflicts in addition to arms control, as he thought that the nuclear deal was not separable from the other issues.

However, the Reykjavik Summit turned out to be all about arms control. While negotiating the deal was not an easy task, there were signs of progress. The leaders seriously discussed the possibility of disposing of all ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons. But, just when everything seemed to be heading for an historical solution, the discussion reached a turning point. And it is clear that Gorbachev left the negotiations in a much stronger position than his Washington counterpart.

Gorbachev offered a number of concessions. He suggested the elimination of all medium-range nuclear weapons in Europe, a treaty to ban all nuclear testing, and that both countries would agree to cut down their stocks of long-range nuclear missiles by half over the following ten years. Clearly, Reagan realised that the deal would make him be remembered as the one who ended the nuclear arms race. However, there was a catch in the Gorbachev’s offer – the SDI. Reagan’s Star Wars dream was the only thing standing in the way of an historical deal.

The Soviet Union wanted the US to freeze the development and testing of the new technology, never letting it leave the laboratory. When things seemed to be going in the right direction, Gorbachev stated that all his proposals come as a package deal in exchange for halting the SDI. However, whilst the system was not functional yet, it was still at an early stage of research and many were sceptical about its viability, Reagan was not willing to give it up. He assured Gorbachev that the system was not intended to create any military advantage over the Soviet Union, but to ensure the safety of US citizens. It is claimed that he even offered to share this technology with Moscow, but Gorbachev was strong-minded. Either it would be a package deal – or no deal. For Reagan that was a non-starter.

**Was Reykjavik a failure?**

The leaders left Iceland without giving a common statement and the media was quick to conclude that the meeting had been a failure. Reagan was noticeably more disappointed. His refusal to accept the package deal suggested that he was at fault for the lack of outcome. The tables had turned, as only a few years earlier Reagan had accused the Soviet Union of being the only one standing in the way of arms control. It looked as he had an obsession with the SDI, a system which might not even work and which blocked any progress in nuclear disarmament. At the same time Reagan’s decision a real propaganda victory for Gorbachev.

However, was Reykjavik really a failure? As the dust has settled and scholars have examined the results of the summit more closely, many have come to the conclusion that the meeting was in fact a turning point in the nuclear arms race. Reagan himself confirmed the view when asked about it years later. His Secretary of State at the time, George Shultz, went a step further and claimed the meeting had been no less than sensational.

Even though no deal was signed in Iceland, the discussion paved the way for
future diplomatic negotiations. For instance, progress was made regarding practical issues as regular meetings of working groups, consisting of high-level diplomats and military representatives, were set up. Moreover, the leaders had come to an agreement on the definitional difference between weapons and nuclear weapons and deemed the use of the latter unacceptable by any state.

But the most significant change came only a year later, in December 1987, when the leaders met again at the Washington Summit. The Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) – a deal that had been in progress for several years, was signed by the US and Soviet Union. The treaty eliminated an entire class of nuclear weapons for the first time which would not have been possible without the discussion in Reykjavik.

This more relaxed approach seemed to have worked and the informal face to face discussion behind closed doors in Höfði was a success. The weekend also made Icelandic media history, as the first ever event to be covered live on national television. The journalists on the scene had a difficult job to do, trying to keep the broadcast interesting while the cameras was focused on the door at Höfði the whole time.

The importance of the meeting laying the groundwork for other treaties in the following years is rarely mentioned. But both leaders have referred to the Reykjavik Summit as a turning point for nuclear arms control, especially because of how personal the discussion between them was. To this day, the flags of the United States and the Soviet Union are displayed in Höfði, in memory of this historical meeting. It surely paved the way for more peaceful talks during the fragile times of the Cold War – even though it took some time for the world to appreciate it.

While Iceland’s presidency of the Council of the Baltic Sea States might still seem odd to some, it may be a good reminder to the Baltic states that smaller countries can still play a big role.

Andri Yrkill Valsson holds a BA in Political Science from the University of Iceland, partly taken at Metropolitan University in Prague. He is a sports journalist for Morgunbladid and mbl.is in Iceland.
In 2013, five participants of the Solidarity Academy wrote an essay about the project voicing their doubts, dilemmas and presenting possible solutions to the existing issues. However, in 2016, many of them are still unresolved, and there are new areas that need to be addressed, a sign of our times.

**Youth programmes**

Show me an organisation with international and intellectual ambitions without at least one youth project, skeptics may say. Indeed, there are a number of programmes for young NGO activists, local activists, youth culture managers, students, volunteers and so on. While there is nothing wrong with investing in youth, we all know the phenomenon of “project tourism”. It can be easily seen in application forms – many applicants know what to write in order to be selected by using the same keywords, and consequently participate in the same projects. Of course, this can be prevented by establishing partnerships, pooling resources and choosing quality over quantity. Moreover, from the European Solidarity Centre’s experience, the most effective strategy is to focus on a specific target group and tailor the programme to suit their needs.

**Identifying the target group**

As the essay further argued: “Most people do not grow up with a clear idea of what their future profession will be. In other words, journalists are not born journalists. Oftentimes, it is only by experiencing situations in which reality does not conform with expectations that people are able to define their future goals”. Indeed, it is not easy to design a project for a group with no fixed plans. However, the investment in the development of young, ambitious people sooner or later brings results. With the participants’ involvement in public life and discussions on social and political issues the effort will pay off. As the essay claimed: “A journalistic workshop provides precisely this opportunity; to weigh up our vision with reality, and theory with practice. Moreover, it may simplify the decision whether to continue with one’s current direction or to alter it.”

**Networking**

As the Turkish writer Elif Shafak once said, in order to really understand the world we are writing about, we must leave our cultural ghettos and search beyond the realities of our countries, cities
or circle of friends. That is why the Solidarity Academy connects participants from the East and West, South and North. Even though the project themes are always specific and may vary from Polish-Russian relations to the Baltic Sea Region, we try to engage young people from different parts of the world. The diverse perspectives and experiences from various media fields create a unique possibility for building higher-quality cooperation and reflection. Since a journalist’s work is about gathering and distributing information, explanation and analysis, communicating with others is essential. And, as our participants argued in their piece, “beyond the practical advantages, meeting media professionals from countries like Poland, Georgia, Germany, Romania, Argentina, Slovakia, Italy, Ukraine, the Czech Republic etc. can also contribute to enriching our understanding of the world and breaking the walls that we often surround ourselves with”.

**It is all about sharing**

Sharing knowledge, experience, perspectives and views is key. Therefore, the main task of the organisers is to create comfortable conditions for sharing. But how to facilitate the process and how to build an atmosphere of trust necessary for an honest exchange? Our former participants shared their view on the issue: "Journalism is a diverse subject, and authors from different backgrounds and different stylistic traditions can inspire new ways of thinking about how to approach thorny subjects. Depending on the type of workshop, knowledge exchange can enhance specialisms or broaden horizons. For instance, experts in reportage can help someone who has previously worked only in news add colour to a story about the Gdansk arts scene, while even the most experienced writers’ skillset can be improved by comparing notes.”

**Devaluation of “dialogue”**

“Dialogue” is the keyword in almost every international journalistic project. We have a dialogue between borders, a dialogue between nations - dialogue is the bread and butter of a number of phenomena. The word has clearly lost its power. One can ask: what does “dialogue” mean nowadays? Can we call every conversation and meeting, even the most superficial one, a dialogue? What is the outcome of a real dialogue? Does dialogue always assume difference between the parties? Does it avoid difficult questions? The lack of objective indicators of a dialogue creates a space for fake assessments that can be reported back to the project’s sponsors as easily achieved objectives. In order to regain the meaning of the dialogue, first, the project’s creators have to be ready for a real, deep and frank discussion and choose the appropriate tools. Where dialogue is just a buzzword, only a superficial conversation is possible. Second, in order to come up with the right tools, the organisers have to be aware of group processes, as it often happens that the most common form of an attempted “dialogue” is a general conversation, beating around the bush instead of directly addressing controversial topics. Finally, there is a need for honest feedback from the participants. It should contain information on how their expectations regarding dialogue were different from the outcome. Unfortunately, however, participants used to superficial dialogue often expect just that. And this is how the vicious circle begins.
**Staying in touch**

One of the best indicators of the quality of dialogue is whether the project’s graduates continue to stay in touch, meet, share ideas and spread the ideas of the project. The quality of the programme for graduates can also be an indicator of how seriously the organisers treat networking and long-term cooperation with the participants. Another challenge is to develop a graduate programme that follows the idea of empowerment and involves the participants in the decision-making process about the future of the project. The organisers of the Solidarity Academy decided to engage the graduates of previous editions and assign them important roles in the project as tutors, trainers and partners. Thanks to this idea, the project has a chance to become a common good.

**Journalism in a “post-truth” era**

It does not come as a surprise that “post-truth” has been chosen as the 2016 word of the year by the Oxford Dictionary. Facts seem to have lost their importance. As Ryszard Kapuściński warned us a long time ago, journalists are being replaced by media employees. Perhaps linguists and sociologists are happy to have a new phenomenon to examine, but as supporters of young journalists we feel as if someone is getting in the way of our work. One may say that there is no point in investing in young journalists and talking about media ethics, if in their future work they will not be paid for telling the truth. But the participants of the Solidarity Academy Baltic Sea Youth Dialogue launched a campaign titled “Make Facts Great Again”, aimed at supporting fact-based journalism in contrast to opinion journalism. Thanks to that, we are even more motivated to continue with the Solidarity Academy.

“The borderland” is the theme of the next edition. Journalists interested in the issue - we look forward to hearing from you.

**Anna Fedas** has been the coordinator of Solidarity Academy since 2013. She is a trainer, facilitator and manager of civic, social and cultural projects. Fedas is currently pursuing a PhD at Wrocław University.
Elín Margrét Böðvarsdóttir is a journalist at mbl.is, the largest news and information website in Iceland, and editor of The Student Newspaper at the University of Iceland. She studies Political Science at the same institution and did a year abroad at Sciences Po-Paris, where she was has worked with The Paris Globalist, a student magazine on international affairs. Elín is an activist in the Icelandic Student Movement and writes columns for Rómur, an online platform for young liberals. In her work, Elín deals with domestic and foreign politics/affairs and general news reporting.

Volha Damarad is a Belarusian-born lawyer with human rights background and expert specialised in public policy, democracy and civil society development in Eastern Europe. After graduating with BB.L in International law (Belarusian State University, 2011), LL.M in human rights (Riga Graduate School of Law, 2012) and professional one-year courses on European Integration (Estonian School of Diplomacy, 2013) and foreign affairs (Collegium Civitas, 2014), she worked for the International Republican Institute. Volha completed a number of intensive modules on political science and law issues at the Charles University, Lund University, European University Viadrina, College of Europe, Oslo University, and others. Volha was awarded prestigious scholarships and fellowships from Open Society Institute, Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Krzysztof Skubiszewski Foundation, and German Academic Exchange Service. Currently Volha is affiliated with the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies.

Ruben Dieleman is a Dutch graduate student currently pursuing an MSc degree in International Administration and Global Governance at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Previously, he was involved in the Varieties of Democracy Institute Research Project. As a journalist, he has published in the Huffington Post and on other online platforms. Currently, he serves as chief editor of the Greater Europe Think Tank, an initiative that promotes academic discussion across the European and Eurasian regions on political and cultural topics. Ruben’s interests and experiences range from democracy and media research to radio programme presenting, from dystopic literature to polling station supervising.

Mira M. Fricke is a German journalist and student. She holds a BA degree in journalism. Over the last six years she has worked for several major newspapers in Germany and Switzerland as well as for the Public Service Broadcasting Station in Munich, Bayerischer Rundfunk – one of the nine broadcasting stations of ARD. In 2016 she graduated from the Centre of Polish Language and Culture at the Jagiellonian University, Kraków. She is currently pursuing her master studies at The Humboldt-University Berlin and working freelance for the German Press Agency, dpa. In her work Mira covers a wide variety of topics from social sciences and education to health and medicine.

Monta Gāgane is a new culture and art journalist and movie director from Latvia. She just has completed her master studies in movie directing and producing at the Latvian Academy of Culture. She also holds a bachelor degree in philosophy from the University of Latvia. Monta has worked as video director for a Latvian life style TV show Košākai dzīvei (eng. For a more vibrant life), season 1, directed two short movies, makes videos in Juno digital content agency and is a freelance journalist at Arterritory.com website. Satori.lv and Veto Magazine. At the moment Monta is studying Analogue Photography and collects ideas for her first full-length fiction movie.

Marita Gasteiger is a graduate student of Interdisciplinary Eastern European Studies at Vienna University, originally from northern Italy. After several study visits in Minsk (Belarus’) and Moscow, she is currently doing an abroad semester at Vilnius University. Gasteiger is a freelancer for newspapers, online news platforms and radio, blogging about Eastern Europe. She has been politically active in the Austrian Student Union (ÖH). Her main interests are feminism, gender equality, Eastern Europe, education and politics.
Hubert Gregorski is a graduate of Inter-area Individual Humanistic and Social Studies at the University of Warsaw, focusing on Law, International Relations and Iranian Studies. He also studied in Ukraine, at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations in Russia and in Yogyakarta, Indonesia (as a participant of Indonesian Art and Cultural Scholarship 2016). He has participated in numerous international initiatives and cooperates with eastbook.eu. His research focuses mostly on post-soviet countries, legal pluralism in North Caucasus and Indonesia. Hubert is passionate about traveling, foreign languages, literature and sport.

Dorian Jędrasiewicz is a master student in the Institute of European Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. He is a vice-president of the German studies University Circle. Jędrasiewicz is an active participant of journalistic and educational projects in Poland, Germany and Belgium. This year he also took part in the project organised by Deutscher Bundestag. His interests include Viennese School of Psychoanalysis, culture and social issues in German-speaking area in Europe (especially in Austria), as well as European integration. Dorian is also passionate about photojournalism.

George Makarenko is a Russian journalist writing about foreign affairs for the RBC news agency, one of the largest independent media outlets in Russia. He mostly writes about the current European, American and Middle Eastern policy. George holds a specialist degree in history from Lomonosov Moscow State University. His research focuses on the German revanchist narrative between the world wars. He studied in Germany for half a year and participated in several seminars for the Russian press abroad.

Svitlana Ovcharova is a journalist at Radio Poland (Russian section). She holds an MA in Journalism from the University of Warsaw and an MA in Media Communication at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. Her interests include migration and issues related to border areas. She is currently pursuing a postgraduate degree at the Centre for East European Studies at the Warsaw University. She cooperates with Eastbook.eu. She is passionate about traveling, in the last few months she visited Romania, Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, where she observed the social moods and proceedings of the recent State Duma Elections. Svitlana is convinced that the borders exist only in our minds.

Ekaterina Tikhonova is a Masters Student of the European Union-Russia Studies at the University of Tartu, Estonia. Her research focuses on Russian media and the refugee crisis. She holds a BA degree in journalism and MA degree in sociology from the Tomsk State University, Russia. Over a span of six years she has been working as a journalist and info-graphic artist for different local media in Russia.

Jyri Tuominen is a Finnish Journalism student from Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences in Helsinki. He studied for one semester at the Universidad San Ignacio de Loyola in Lima, Peru. Tuominen writes for Tuima.fi -web magazine. His areas of interest include politics, economics, Latin America and international news in general.

Andri Yrkill Valsson holds a BA in Political Science from the University of Iceland, partly taken at Metropolitan University in Prague. Part of his thesis focused on the Baltic States and their status within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). He attended a course at the Vilnius University, Lithuania, on the changes in the security environment after the annexation of Crimea and its impact on small states in Europe. He is a sports journalist for Morgunbladid and mbl.is in Iceland and a freelance writer for the European Handball Federation, EHF.

Koen Verhelst is a Dutch journalist based in Riga. From the Latvian capital he covers the Nordics and Baltics for media outlets in both the Netherlands and Belgium. The best thing about that is his freedom to travel around the region as much as possible. His interests range from defence and energy to migration and startups. Many years ago he studied journalism and the thing that he remembers most from this time is a four-month reporting trip through nearly all former Soviet Union republics. He enjoys riding bikes, photographing airplanes and being an all-round nerd.

Helen Wright is a freelance journalist based in Tartu, Estonia. She has worked for newspapers in Estonia, England and Mongolia. Currently she is studying for an MA in Baltic Sea Region Studies at the University of Tartu. She has written for BBC News website, Eurasianet.org, Deep Baltic, Estonian World and the Baltic Times.
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