Conference organised by

1989’s CONTESTED LEGACIES

The challenging of ideological, institutional and (geo)political heritage

University of Warsaw, 26-27 September 2019

This conference is the second in the framework of a cycle of three conferences held consecutively in Paris, Warsaw and Prague.

"1989-2019: Beyond the Anniversary, Questioning 1989”

Scientific direction of the Cycle of conferences:
Maciej Forycki, Scientific Centre in Paris of the Polish Academy of Science
Jérôme Heurtaux, CEFRES–French Research Centre in Humanities and Social Sciences
Nicolas Maslowski, Centre for French Studies (CCCEF), University of Warsaw
Paweł Rodak, Centre de Civilisation Polonaise, Sorbonne University

Call for proposals

This conference aims at rethinking the legacy of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) through the prism of its ongoing contestations, with a focus on the current trends and deliberate political efforts that challenge the major achievements of Velvet Revolutions as well as the outcomes of the collapse of the Iron Curtain. 1989 launched a process that continues to this day. Three decades of transformations, crises and setbacks have noticeably changed the shape of Central and Eastern European societies.

Thirty years after popular democracies organized their first free elections, ideas and processes that question the liberal democracy model are returning to the forefront however. National-populists in Poland and Hungary call for establishing “illiberal democracies”, challenging the “end of history” thesis, and the naive belief that democracy would be consolidated enough to not face any backlash. In Romania, the Social-democratic Party is suspected of decriminalising abuses of office and massive manipulations. Further East, Putin’s Russia is promoting an
authoritarian governance model - misleadingly labelled “managed democracy” - in support of its relict superpower ambitions, thereby threatening peace and security in post-Cold War Europe.

These are but the most salient aspects of the current challenging of the very legacy of “the spirit of 1989”, and subsequent socio-cultural, institutional and strategic transformations that transitologists thought would durably shape Central and Eastern European politics. Against this backdrop, the scholarship on transiting countries needs to develop new prisms for investigating how the recent past (1989) is being (mis)used in contemporary (geo)political struggles.

The conference organisers welcome paper proposals based on original and theoretically grounded empirical research, in one of the following three thematic fields:

1. The mnemonic games in Central and Eastern Europe

Mnemonic games – the political uses of memory – intend to produce narratives about the past that challenge the legacy of 1989 in CEE countries. The discourses of neo-conservative forces in particular contest the meaning of post-communist transformations in political, cultural and economic terms. Illustrative of this trend are memory politics, de-communisation policies, the criticising of 1990s neoliberal reforms, opposing “traditional” and religious values to “Western” values such as secularism, among others. To what extent do such discourses form a coherent narrative of post-communist transformations, and contribute to the shaping and popularity of “illiberal” ideologies? Whereas memory politics or historical policies have been widely analysed in recent years, the political role of current narratives about the past remains understudied however. Yet they contribute to the (de-)legitimation of political parties, ideas and/or discourses in a way that deserves academic scrutiny. We particularly welcome papers offering new insights on the following questions (the list is non-exhaustive):

- How are references to 1989, to former communist regimes or the first years of the transition mobilised and becoming a resource for current “illiberal” political discourses?
- How do political actors revisit and instrumentalise the ideological legacy of 1989?
- How do policy tools such as institutes of national memory, memory laws or history education contribute to the challenging of 1989, eventually bringing about a “democratic backlash” in CEE countries?
- Can we trace the roots of present political discourses to the pre-1989 past, especially to the dissidence movements, eventually up to the interwar period?

2. Transformations of the State and its institutions: challenging the rule of law

Having triumphed for about two decades, in the past couple of years democracy seems to have started losing ground. Some governments in CEE countries have implemented institutional reforms that challenge the liberal democratic legacy of 1989, ie. principles such as respect for the rule of law, civil and political rights, media freedoms, free and fair elections, the independence of the judiciary, etc. The constitutional reform in Hungary is described as illiberal, while the reform of the judiciary in Poland and Romania appears to be violating rule of law. The European Union (EU) even triggered article 7 against Poland for passing reforms that undermine the independence of its judiciary.

National Constitutions are being violated in the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Romania... As a result of the radical politicisation of public media, notably private ones, the public sphere is shrinking in the whole region. Multiple records of State capture by private forces are turning power abuses for the benefit of a political party, a private enterprise, or crony capitalists into an almost accepted standard. The modernisation of the State is stalled, or even regressing, as a result of the increasing role of political forces on State administrations. The return of far-right nationalisms and populisms, with potentially dramatic consequences for EU institutions following the May 2019 elections to the European Parliament, are bringing up to date concerns about the resilience of democratic politics and polities. This raises a number of issues and questions that this panel should address, such as:

- How can we define illiberalism? Is it an efficient concept?
- To what extent are “de-modernising” or “illiberal” reforms representing a systemic regime-change?
- Are these transformations compatible with EU integration, and how are they challenging it? What are the interactions and limits of the European factor in the national game?
• What sense can scholars make of the relative acception by the wider public of these institutional transformations, and what does it reveal about these societies’ evolutions?
• Beyond transitology: which methodological tools are relevant for apprehending authoritarian backlash in CEE countries?

3. A New Cold War? The legacy of 1989 in light of current geopolitical challenges

The events of 1989 led to dramatic changes in international politics, starting with the dismantling of the Warsaw Pact, the demise of the Soviet Union and the lifting of Cold War division lines, notably in Central and Eastern Europe. A new geopolitical situation took shape in which the CEE countries had to redefine their foreign policy priorities, with a majority of them opting for seeking integration with the Euro-Atlantic community. The triumph of liberal democracy and the dismantling of the Moscow-led block has been perceived as the West’s victory in the Cold War. This vision is increasingly being contested however: from outside of the region - notably by Russia, which aims at coalescing like-minded authoritarian regimes that challenge Western domination over world affairs - but also from within, as evidenced by the growing popularity of anti-European and anti-Western discourses propagated by populists and extremists throughout Europe. Democratic peace is clearly not the only game in town; it augurs ill of the chances for the continent to be spared a new Cold War.

Observing how geopolitical trends unfold, one must admit that the situation in Europe is changing in an unpredictable direction. This prospect raises a fundamental question: is Europe still drawing on the achievements of 1989? Is the post-Cold War order worth saving in the first place? Which regional arrangements concretely foster peaceful conflict-resolution, and deter the destabilisation attempts of anti-democratic forces? Paper-givers in this panel could focus on the following topics:

• Political changes in Brussels and Washington and how they affect the geopolitical situation and strategies of CEE countries.
• Contemporary security dimensions in Central and Eastern Europe and future challenges in the face of new threats, including the impact of new technologies.
• Redefinition of the balance of power in the world (USA, China, Russia).
• The role and importance of NATO (strengthening NATO’s Eastern flank, NATO as an instrument of US foreign policy).
• The EU’s position and future role on the current international arena (European army vs. national defence systems).
• New geopolitical trends: asymmetric and hybrid threats, integration dynamics in post-Soviet Eurasia, the return of armed conflicts in Europe (war in Ukraine).
• The geo-economic influence of Russia and China on CEE countries.
• Russia’s foreign policy in the “joint neighbourhood” and beyond: the impact of Russian autocracy-promotion and “sharp power” tactics on domestic politics in CEE countries.
• New foreign policy dynamics in Central and Eastern Europe (the role of V4 cooperation, North-South corridors, the Intermarium project, the Three Seas Initiative, etc).

Paper proposals (max 500 words) must be sent to seminarium.okf@uw.edu.pl, by 30 April 2019 at the latest.

Conferences costs

Due to limited funding, the organisers will be able to support some prospective or underfunded participants in exceptional cases only. Hence, conference attendees are advised to start exploring financial support from their home institutions or outside sponsors.

Publication of conference proceedings

Conference papers will be compiled into a joint book publication or special issue of a peer-reviewed journal (editor/target TBC). Applicants are therefore expected to send a comprehensive abstract, and the first draft of their conference paper before the event itself.

Schedule:
• Deadline for paper proposals (max 500 words): 30 June 2019
• Selection of contributions and feedback from the conference organisers: mid July 2019
• Deadline for circulating draft papers among panel participants: 15 September 2019
• Foreseen submission of final papers for publication: Early 2020

Scientific Committee

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