

# Interview with Prof. Serhii Plokhii

## THE TRADITIONS OF UKRAINIAN DEMOCRACY MAY BE PROBLEMATIC, BUT THEIR EXISTENCE IS UNDENIABLE

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**My first question concerns the notion of conjuncture in contemporary academia. Today, the history of the twentieth century is in high demand. In your opinion, where are the current blank spots in the research of Ukrainian history or the broader history of Central and Eastern Europe? Which time periods remain out of sight for Ukrainian researchers? What is responsible for this boom in the research of the ‘short twentieth century’?**

– I think that, first and foremost, this demand comes from a society that is currently being transformed by war.<sup>1</sup> The war in Ukraine has gone on for eight years now, and this is what is determining the agenda. This war was preceded by an active application of historical mythology, specifically the subject matter of World War II. Everything connected to WWII was given priority. That is why once-marginal topics of Ukrainian nationalism, such as the history of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), have taken centre stage. All of this is directly or indirectly connected with the events of Maidan, with the war; in essence, we are talking here about military historiography.<sup>2</sup> Topics that are not connected with WWII or the question of victims, of heroes, of national identity are deprioritized now. It's not that they don't exist. They do. Recently, the history of everyday life has become quite important. Interesting research has been conducted on the subject of eighteenth-century history. This is quite an accomplishment, since even a decade ago there was no active research in this field in Ukraine.

At the same time, it is clear that the war is the precise cause of this barrage of books that focuses on the formation of society and state. Therefore, it is no wonder that this subject matter finds its way into academic works, even though not all historians are thrilled about this.

**In connection with revived interest in WWII and twentieth-century history, a logical question arises regarding the validity of the concept of the ‘short twentieth century’. Was it not too early for Francis Fukuyama to proclaim ‘the end of history’ and the victory of liberal values? After all, we are witnessing the decline of liberal democracy right now. Should we re-evaluate the construct of the ‘short twentieth century’ as an element of the global periodization of history?**

– Every periodization is a reflection of today's outlook and the questions that are currently relevant for us. The ‘short twentieth century’ as a periodization appears at the moment of the completion of the communist phase of human and social history. It thus offers a vision of the twentieth

<sup>1</sup> The interview was recorded on 17 February 2022.

<sup>2</sup> In this context, the word means ‘historical description’.

century from this particular point of view.<sup>3</sup> This does not mean that this concept is somehow incorrect; it appeared at a particular moment when an important phase of human history was coming to an end. The phase in question started with the Russian Revolution and was preceded by World War I. If one is to look at all these transformations from the point of view of the end of an empire, the disintegration of an empire, this periodization makes sense. After all, 1991 is when the history of the Russian empire, having been saved by the Bolsheviks back in 1917, ended. As you can see, some clusters of questions can be resolved quite successfully within the analytical constraints of the 'short twentieth century'.

From today's point of view, this is less interesting since we now know for certain that history has not ended – it still continues. (*Laughs*) And if it does continue, let us then talk about the 'long twentieth century'.

Russian aggression against Ukraine can be viewed in different contexts, including the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which is still taking place. In fact, the 'short twentieth century' might have ended in 1991, but the 'long twentieth century' found its continuation in the twenty-first century.

**1991 saw the disintegration of the Soviet empire. However, postcolonial processes are taking place not only in Central and Eastern Europe. One can say that they are themselves worldwide processes. Interestingly, at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, a new academic discipline came to the fore: postcolonial studies. In this context, can we equate postcolonial and post-Soviet studies?**

– I do not think we can equate the two. In this case, one should instead use mathematical equations such as 'approximately equals', that is to say, gentler formulations. Indeed, in certain situations we can trace the overlap between these two layers. When one is contemplating the history of Voronezh, postcolonial terminology hardly fits unless we are talking about internal colonialism, but the parallelism works in the case of post-Soviet Georgia or Ukraine.

The impetus for the development of postcolonial studies was caused by the process of the dissolution of the British and French empires, which accelerated in the 1950s and 1960s. The map of the world changed radically. Interestingly, Ukrainian historians in the 1960s attempted to adjust their history to the postcolonial context as well. The Cossack wars, which were previously regarded as mere peasant uprisings, were transformed into the struggle of Ukrainians for their national liberation. This is a word-for-word borrowing of the concept of national liberation struggles in Congo,

<sup>3</sup> This concept was introduced by the Hungarian historian Iván Tibor Berend, and it gained popularity thanks to the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm.

with Patrice Lumumba included, as well as other colonies. The Ukrainian narrative was re-evaluated in this context but did not go beyond the 1960s. Ukrainians were also trying to interpose themselves into this process while it was taking place. I would say that, in this case, everything depends on place and time.

Russia can be interpreted in the context of a post-imperial situation, with the emphasis on the problem of determining a new identity, a connection with the empire and its territories. Clearly, contemporary Russia is suffering from post-imperial sickness. The extent to which this disease is post-communist or postcolonial presents an interesting question for investigation. The disintegration of the Soviet Union was not a classical death of an empire. It is important not to discard multi-factual understanding of historical processes. We can't explain the fall of the Soviet empire by one factor only.

**The 1980s saw aggravation of the national question in the USSR, which led to the collapse of the empire. I would like to focus on the conflicts that sprang up in post-Soviet territory in the 1990s: in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria. To a certain extent, one can add the Crimea and Donbas to this list as these are regions in which zones of conflict between cultures and identities were created by means of so-called 'soft power'. In a *de facto* sense, these zones of conflict became 'delayed-action mines' that were harnessed by Russia. In 2008, the situation in South Ossetia was used as a pretext to launch the Russo-Georgian war; in 2014, the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas took place; in 2020, we witnessed the next stage in the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. How and why did these conflict zones appear? During its existence, the Soviet Union put substantial effort into solving the national question and forming a new Soviet identity. Are these conflict zones in post-Soviet territory a Soviet legacy or do they have deeper roots than that? Are we talking about the failure of Soviet national politics or are conflict zones a logical outcome of Soviet politics?**

– In reality, Soviet history is truly imperial in the sense that it demonstrates the strategies that the Soviet Union used to replicate and even expand the territories of the Russian empire. In a sense, this was done by way of a transformation into an 'empire of nations'. National statehood for minorities, even in its hollow manifestation, became indicative of attempts to resolve the national question within the Russian Empire. We are talking about associating a certain ethnic group with a certain territory and endowing it with (relatively) privileged rights to use its own language and culture according to this territorial prerequisite. In any case,

it is quite difficult to 'slice up' a territory in such a way that it corresponds to its ethnic groups. Problems inevitably arise. The 'drawing' of boundaries is inherent not only to the history of the Soviet Union; it also relates to the history of the Paris Peace Conference, during which the territories of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and other countries that emerged from the remains of the Austro-Hungarian empire were 'sliced up' in a similar way.

The conflict zones that were created by such demarcations are the legacy of empires and they always erupted, albeit in various ways. Think of Ukrainian Galicia, Volhynia in Poland, or Transcarpathia in Czechoslovakia. In the Soviet Union, which was ruled by authoritarianism, these contradictions between boundaries and identities were suppressed. The problems began when the central authority began to weaken. The weakening of centralized power in the USSR led to problems with Meskhetian Turks, for example, and provoked the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. Initially, the Kremlin had no interest in inciting such conflicts, since they led to the destabilization of the country.

Soviet helmsmen were so involved with *perestroika* that they weakened the centralized control system on the ground. What did Gorbachev do in this situation? He tried to suppress and resolve national conflicts. He reintroduced the military component to the 'solution of the national question', as was observed in Baku in 1990.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Gorbachev was attempting to use these conflicts to put an end to the republics' trajectory toward sovereignty and independence. This card was played in Gagauzia, in Crimea, and in other national conflicts.

Basically, at that time, Yeltsin was the leader of the Russian SFSR, a republic that was also participating in a raffle. That is why it is quite logical that he did not support the idea of creating a Transnistrian Moldovan republic, at least not in the early 1990s. The Russian SFSR already had sufficient internal problems.

Instead, in the case of Transnistria, the key role was played by the Slavic population, which felt threatened by the Moldovan majority. A similar situation occurred all over the Soviet Union. The centre as a political player which used to guarantee the rights and security of national minorities disappeared. These minorities had to face the majority population in every republic and so, with all their might, they clung to the centre.

The answer to the question of why Jewish and Polish parties did not support the full independence of the Ukrainian National Republic in

<sup>4</sup> These events are known in Azerbaijani history as 'Black January'. In response to demonstrations by the Azerbaijani opposition, on 16–19 January 1990, the central government dispatched 50 thousand Soviet armed forces to Baku. On 20 January, they stormed the Azerbaijani capital. During the operation, under the codename 'Blow', the Soviet authorities managed to regain control over the territories of the Azerbaijan SSR. The operation led to hundreds of civilian deaths in Baku.

1918 can be found here. They supported the government in Petrograd until the very last moment, since the existence of the imperial centre secured the balance of power and security. At that moment, the minorities were absolutely not ready to find themselves standing alone against the Ukrainian majority. In the 1990s, a similar approach was employed by the majority of the national minorities of the Soviet Union, with the exception of Ukraine: there, the minorities no longer perceived a threat from the culturally Russified Ukrainians in the central and eastern parts of the republic. There is nothing new here: it is the typical post-imperial situation; it is a rather banal story of imperial disintegration and the emergence of new state structures, with new interrelations between the majority and the minority. For instance, the Moldovan majority was a minority in the Soviet Union; the Gagauzian minority, in turn, could act against the titular ethnicity only with Moscow's help. Upon the disintegration of the Soviet Union, these power dynamics changed substantially.

The Russian Federation did not create these conflicts. More than that: at first it was trying to avoid them. However, with time the Kremlin learned how to use 'frozen' conflicts in its favour, and it understood that this 'card' could be played to control post-Soviet territory. In essence, this means going back to Gorbachev's policy of utilizing autonomous territories in order to undermine their trajectory toward complete independence. At this point, the Russian special services step in and create conflicts in places where none existed previously. Ukraine is a striking example of such an act of creation, of an artificial conflict. In truth, this conflict is not 'frozen' but rather 'hot', and it has now transformed into a full-scale war.

**Is it fair to say that during the creation of the Soviet Union, at a time when national republics were taking shape, the creation of enclaves with national minorities within larger republics became a deliberate policy of the Kremlin?**

– If someone could demonstrate how to correctly 'slice up' the territories of former empires without creating these enclaves, I would believe that this process could be artificially engineered. (*Laughs*) In reality, even the leaders of democratic states at the Treaty of Versailles could not manage this problem. Everything was over at the Yalta Conference and later, when expulsions, migrations, and deportations led to the creation of ethnically homogenous countries. Of course, Soviet helmsmen were striving to create monoethnic administrative units, but this was impossible.

I think that, in the early 1920s, Bolsheviks truly believed they could bring the ideas of communism to life. They adhered to the logic that prioritized class over nationality. For instance, when we consider Lenin's support

for the idea of including Donbas within Ukraine, the key factor here is that Donbas was the centre of the working class that served as a buttress for the party and its policy of centralization. Ethnic and national aspects were important as well, but the main goal was to keep peasant Ukraine within the orbit of Soviet influence. At the same time, we cannot reduce Bolshevik policies to just one principle as this would be an oversimplification.

If we are talking about conflict zones in post-Soviet territories, it is fair to note the general post-imperial situation: the impossibility of solving issues of ethnicity without deportations and the creation of enclaves. Other factors begin to add up; in the case of the Soviet Union in the 1920s, the approach was based on class above all else.

**In your book on the Cuban Missile Crisis,<sup>5</sup> you pay particular attention to the mistakes made by Soviet leaders. After WWII, Soviet power underwent a transformation from Stalin's cult of personality to the gerontocracy of the 1980s. What was the evolution of the Soviet party apparatus? What was the Central CPSU Committee's process of decision-making like at various times? Finally, how did the phenomenon of Gorbachev, such an active and charismatic leader who initiated *perestroika*, come to the fore?**

– I would say that the process of forming elite groups in the USSR, as well as in contemporary Russia and Ukraine (at least partially), is quite similar. Let us start with the Soviet Union. After the 1920s, debate between factions or groups within the Bolshevik party, even parliamentary groups, became impossible. The following questions arose: How to form groups of political elites when political groups and parties are prohibited? How to set up a power structure? How to enforce party discipline? When regional elites (clans, in essence) emerge, with them emerges a certain 'know-how'. These regional clans fight to attain central power. During the first stage, the 'Caucasus' clan, headed by Stalin, Ordzhonikidze, Kirov, Beria, and others, came to the fore. What did representatives of this clan do? They fought with their competitors and, specifically, initiated the 'Leningrad affair',<sup>6</sup> given that Leningrad oblast was a large region boasting its own powerful elite.

**Do you mean to say these people were rivals of Stalin's clan?**

– Exactly. In order to destroy and later replace these competitors, Khrushchev was brought back to Moscow. He created a counterweight to the Leningrad group. In his turn, while ascending the career ladder,

<sup>5</sup> Serhii Plokhii, *Nuclear Folly: A History of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Penguin Random House UK, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> The 'Leningrad Affair' was a series of show trials in the late 1940s and early 1950s against the party and state functionaries of the Russian SFSR and USSR, especially those who worked in Leningrad oblast or had been promoted to leading positions in Moscow or other cities.



Khrushchev had to oppose both the Leningrad and the Moscow clans. In this struggle, he bet on Ukrainian personnel. As a result, in the 1950s, Ukrainian elites moved to Moscow and obtained the highest-ranking posts in the Soviet Union. Ukrainian elites continued to keep their central positions during Brezhnev's term. Their supremacy ended in the mid-1980s, just a few years before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, when access to 'fast-track promotion' stalled within the empire. Gorbachev put a stop to it.

You mentioned my book on the Cuban Missile Crisis. While working on it, I was shocked by the number of Ukrainians and people with Ukrainian last names who were in Cuba. I have to point out that at the time a new type of weapon was situated in Cuba, namely the missiles and the officers responsible for them. Basically, Khrushchev left this domain in the care of his own people. If we look at the development of the Space Race, behind it we can see the undoubtedly important figure of Yuri Gagarin and Ukrainians such as Serhij Korol'ov<sup>7</sup> and Marshal Kyrylo Moskalenko.<sup>8</sup> Actually, Moskalenko was one of those people whom Khrushchev summoned to the Kremlin to arrest his main power rival, Lavrentij Berija. Moskalenko's deputy, Pavlo Batyc'kyj,<sup>9</sup> was the one who personally executed Beria.

**So, we could say that the Soviet party apparatus was structured like a clan?**

– Yes, it was. And this structure was present not only within the party, but also in the army. The two Ukrainian generals who in 1962 gave the order to shoot down American U-2 jets over Cuba<sup>10</sup> had perfectly Ukrainian

<sup>7</sup> Serhij Korol'ov (1907–1966): Soviet scientist in the field of mechanics and organization, spacecraft designer, and one of the founders of practical aeronautics. Academic of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR (1958), twice Hero of Socialist Work (1956, 1961). Korolyov was born in Zhytomyr. Between 1924 and 1926, he studied at the Aero-Mechanical Department of Kyiv Polytechnical Institute. Starting in 1946, he worked as Chief Designer of long-range ballistic missiles and as Head of the Council of Chief Designers. In August 1957, the first intercontinental ballistic multiple-stage missile, designed by Korolyov, was launched. He designed and led the launch of the spaceships *Vostok* and *Voskhod*, which were the first in history to carry humans into outer space. For more details, see *Encyklopedija istoriji Ukrajinjy* (hereafter *EIU*), ed. by Valerij Smolij, and others, 10 vols (Kyjiv: Naukova dumka, 2003–2013), V (2008), 175–76.

<sup>8</sup> Kyrylo Moskalenko (1902–1985): Soviet military, Marshal of the Soviet Union (1955), twice Hero of the Soviet Union (1943, 1978), Hero of the Czechoslovak Republic (1969). Moskalenko was born in the village of Grishine (currently in Donetsk oblast). He joined the Red Army in August 1920. He graduated from the Ukrainian School of Red Officers (1922) and the Red Army Artillery Academy (1928). In September 1936, he was appointed Head of the 113th Mechanized Corps within the Kyiv Military District. Moskalenko took part in the Soviet-Finnish War in 1939–1940. During WWII, he held command of the defensive battles on the Southwestern front and took part in the battle for Moscow in 1941–1942. His troops liberated Ukraine, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. After the war and up until August 1948, Moskalenko held command of the Carpathian Military District, and later he served as a Commander of the Air Defense Forces of the Moscow Region. From 1960 to 1962, he was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Strategic Rocket Forces and Deputy Director of USSR Ministry of Defense. For more details, see *EIU*, VII (2010), 75–76.

<sup>9</sup> Pavlo Batyc'kyj (1910–1983): Soviet military leader, Hero of the Soviet Union (1965), Marshal of the Soviet Union (1968). He was born in Kharkiv and graduated from the Frunze Military Academy (1938) and the Academy of General Staff (1948). During World War II, he commanded the 1st and 2nd Corps of the Ukrainian front, and the 1st and 3rd Corps of the Belorussian front. After the war, he occupied leading positions in the Soviet Army. From 1965 to 1966, Batytskyi was Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the USSR Armed Forces; from 1966 to 1978, he was Commander-in-Chief of the Air Defense Forces, Deputy of the Minister of Defense. He died in Moscow. For more details, see *EIU*, I (2003), 200.

<sup>10</sup> This refers to the events of so-called 'Black Saturday' (27 October 1962) when the U-2 American reconnaissance aircraft was shot down.



last names: Harbuz<sup>11</sup> and Hrečko.<sup>12</sup> Let us have a look at the Red Army commanders' last names: we see not Malynovs'kyj,<sup>13</sup> but Hrečko!<sup>14</sup> All of them were Ukrainian. There is nothing unique here. Stalin had the same story with his own people from the Caucasus. Khrushchev's pool consisted of Ukrainian natives. Since Putin came to power, positions of Russian power have been occupied by the so-called *piterskiye*.<sup>15</sup>

**And contemporary Russia inherited this Soviet clan-like power structure?**

– This structure is a consequence of the absence of political strife. In Ukraine, the Dnipropetrovsk clan held power for quite a while. When Yushchenko came to power, the previous clan moved to the background, but then the *donec'ki*<sup>16</sup> emerged. One might ask how they differ from the *dnipro-petrovs'ki*,<sup>17</sup> the Ukrainian 'mafia' in Moscow during the times of Khrushchev and Brezhnev, or the *piterskiye*? It's the same structure of loyalty that manifests itself in appointing people from one's own region.

**So, can we say that the client-patron relationship that formed in Soviet times and was the *de facto* system during Stalin's rule is still shaping political culture in the post-Soviet space?**

– Exactly. From Khrushchev on, the regional and political elites of Soviet republics secured certain rights not only in the centre but also on the ground, in their own republics. After Stalin's death, an unspoken rule

<sup>11</sup> Leonid Harbuz (1918–1998): Soviet military leader, General-Major (1961). He was born in Yalta. Garbuz served in the Red Army from 1937 to 1975. He graduated from the 2nd Kyiv Artillery School (1939), Dzerzhinsky Artillery Academy (1952), and Academy of USSR General Staff (1960).

<sup>12</sup> Stepan Hrečko (1910–1977): Soviet military officer, General-Colonel of Aviation (1963). He was born in Tavriya province (now the village Černihivka in Zaporiz'ka oblast'). Hrečko served in the Red Army from 1930. He graduated from Odesa's Frunze Artillery School (1932) and participated in the so-called 'liberating campaign' by the Red Army in the fall of 1939. In 1940, he graduated from Zhukovsky Air Force Academy of the Red Army. Hrečko took part in World War II. Starting in 1957, he served as the Head of the Air Defense Force of Moscow Region. From 1962 to 1964, he was Deputy Commander of Soviet Air Defenses in Cuba.

<sup>13</sup> Radion Malynovs'kyj (1898–1967): military leader and a statesman of the USSR, Marshal of the Soviet Union (1944), twice Hero of the Soviet Union (1945, 1958), and People's Hero of Yugoslavia (1964). He was born in Odesa. From 1927 to 1930, he studied at Frunze Military Academy. In 1937, Malynovs'kyj was dispatched to Spain, where he helped the Republican military commanders with organization and the carrying out of military operations during the Civil War of 1936–1939. With the beginning of the Second World War, he found himself on the frontline. After the war, Malynovs'kyj served as Commander of the Transbaikal-Amur Military District (1945–1947), the Supreme Commander of Far Eastern Forces (1947–1953), and Commander of the Far Eastern Military District (1953–1956). In 1956, he was appointed First Deputy to the Minister of Defense and Supreme Commander of USSR Ground Forces. Starting 1957, Malynovs'kyj was appointed the Minister of Defense of USSR. He died in Moscow and was buried in the Red Square's Kremlin Wall. For more details, see *ELU*, VI (2009), 475–76.

<sup>14</sup> Andrii Hrečko (1903–1976): military, state, and party Soviet leader, Marshal of the Soviet Union (1955), twice Hero of the Soviet Union (1958, 1973), Hero of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (1969). He was born in the village of Holodajivka (now Kujbišev, Rostov oblast, Russian Federation). He joined the Red Army in 1919. Hrečko graduated from the Cavalry School (1926), Frunze Military Academy (1936), and the Military Academy of the General Staff (1941). Starting in 1938, he was Head of the Special Cavalry Division of the Belorussian Military District. Hrečko fought at the front in the Second World War. From 1945 to 1953, he served as Commander of the Kyiv Military District. In 1953, he was appointed Commander-in-Chief of Soviet Forces in East Germany. Starting in 1957, he served as the 1st Deputy of the USSR Minister of Defense, Commander-in-Chief of the Ground Forces; starting 1960 – Commander-in-Chief of the Warsaw Pact Forces. In 1967, he was made the Minister of Defense. For more details, see *ELU*, II (2004), 193–194.

<sup>15</sup> Natives of St Petersburg, who formed Putin's inner circle.

<sup>16</sup> Donec'k regional elite. The most vivid representatives are Victor Yanukovych and Renat Akhmetov.

<sup>17</sup> Dnipropetrovsk regional elites. The most vivid representatives are Leonid Kuchma, Yulia Tymochenko, Pavlo Lazarenko.

was put in place regarding the head of any republic: they had to be a local 'Kunaev' type.<sup>18</sup> When Gorbachev came to power, he thought the national question had already been solved and these rules did not have any value. He exchanged the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, Kunaev, for an ethnic Russian named Kolbin.<sup>19</sup> As a result, in December of 1986, riots started in Kazakhstan. Basically, Gorbachev's actions led to the first national uprising.

Gorbachev's situation is quite similar to Poroshenko's. In order to stay in power, one needs the backing of a large and well-staffed region like Donetsk, Dnipropetrovsk, the Caucasus, Leningrad, etc. If, as in the case with Poroshenko, this region is Vinnytsia, it might not be sufficient, since Vinnytsia does not have enough of this staffing potential, thus the necessity of working differently or of orienting oneself toward the creation of some other model. This is how the transformation of political culture takes place.

**Can we then say that Gorbachev left Ščerbyckyj<sup>20</sup> in power despite the fact that the latter did not support *perestroika*, especially after the situation in Kazakhstan?**

– I think so. Gorbachev really burned his fingers in 1986 with the Kunaev situation. In addition, Ukrainian Soviet political elites reigned supreme, in the sense that they were well consolidated. Party elites from the Ukrainian SSR constituted the majority during the sessions of the Central Committee of the CPSU. This fact had to be taken into consideration.

**So, Ukrainians had a real impact on centralized power?**

– Yes, since Russians had neither separate representation nor a separate Central Committee within the party structure. As a consequence, despite their numbers, Russians did not have the facilities to structure and institutionalize their influence. Ukrainians were the largest organized group within the party ranks. It was this influence that allowed them to

<sup>18</sup> Dinmukhamed Kunaev (1912–1993): Soviet party leader, First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan (1960–1962, 1964–1986), a member of Politburo (1971–1987), Hero of Socialist Work (1972, 1976, 1982).

<sup>19</sup> Gennadij Kolbin (1927–1998): Soviet political leader, member of the Central Committee of the CPSU (1981–1990), First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Kazakh SSR (1986–1989). He replaced Dinmukhamed Kunaev. Prior to his appointment, Kolbin was the First Secretary of the Ulyanovsk Regional Committee of the CPSU (1983–1986). On December 17–18, 1986, students in Almaty protested against Kolbin, who did not speak Kazakh and was not connected to Kazakhstan in any way. The riots were brutally repressed by internal military forces. Some of the students were criminally prosecuted or received administrative penalties.

<sup>20</sup> Volodymyr Ščerbyckyj (1918–1990): Soviet political leader. In 1972, he was appointed 1st Secretary of the Central Committee of CPSU; he remained in this position for 17 years. Ščerbyckyj did much for the economic, scientific and technical development of the Ukrainian SSR, as well as for solving social issues in cities and villages. He supported Soviet methods of management, which entailed centralization, planned assignments, and extensive agriculture. During his term, the process of Russification intensified, and Ukrainian dissidents faced persecution. The Chernobyl catastrophe demonstrated the inability of the Soviet apparatus to adequately react to challenges, and Ščerbyckyj's authority was undermined. He did not accept or understand Gorbachev's course toward *perestroika*. In September 1989, Ščerbyckyj asked to be relieved of his responsibilities as the 1st Secretary of the Central Committee of CPSU. For more details, see *ELU*, X (2013), 685.

stay in power for so long. It was not at all easy to remove Ščerbyckyj because he had been spreading his roots into the system for thirty years. All that time, he was selecting and promoting his own people. When the central authorities finally decided to get rid of Ščerbyckyj, Gorbachev came to Kyiv in person to take part in the Central Committee's session. This was an unprecedented event. The dismissal happened quite late in the game. Let's look at the way Petro Šelest<sup>21</sup> was removed from power – it is also a fascinating story! First, he was sent to Moscow for promotion, and while there he was dismissed. There was an understanding among the central authorities that the Ukrainian party 'mafia' had to be reckoned with and carefully considered.

**To what extent were the regional political elites supported by the populations of their republics? Were Ščerbyckyj or Kunaev popular among the people? Were they concerned with their level of popularity?**

– The party leaderships of the different republics enjoyed varying levels of popularity. Mašerov<sup>22</sup> was quite popular in Belarus; Šelest was popular in Ukraine; while Ščerbyckyj was perceived rather neutrally. Regional political elites tried to control contact between their subordinates and the centre. Specifically, they intercepted letters and complaints that had been addressed to the centre since it answered such appeals with various inspections, which marred the reputations of the regional political elites. This kind of communication over the heads of the leadership was usually blocked.

Let's not forget about local patriotism either. It still exists. For instance, people who are staunch fans of Kyiv 'Dynamo' would likewise be delighted to see the next Ukrainian appointed at the centre. These are two sides of the same coin. Residents of Dnipropetrovsk were proud of the Minister of Internal Affairs of the USSR, Nikolaj Ščelokov, because he was a native of Dnipropetrovsk. The Head of Government, Nikolaj Tichanov, worked in Nikopol, and so on. In this grand game, they were 'ours'. A similar attitude prevailed in Donbas regarding Yanukovych.

Without a doubt, this local patriotism was connected with the regional elite groups. At the same time, complaints were sent to the centre with the hope that, in this way, the local placemen could be managed.

<sup>21</sup> Petro Šelest (1908–1996): Ukrainian Soviet party leader, 1st Secretary of the Central Committee of CPSU (1963–1972). He was promoted and transferred to Moscow as Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR. However, in April of 1973, a devastating article that criticised his book appeared in the magazine *Komunist Ukrainy, Ukraina nasha radianska* (1970). Šelest was charged with idealizing Ukraine's past and diminishing the role of the Communist Party and violating the Leninist principles of the 'class and party, concrete-historical approach' in his assessment of historical phenomena. This was used as an excuse to dismiss him. For more details, see *ELU*, X (2013), 625–26.

<sup>22</sup> Pëtr Mašerov (1918–1980): Soviet party leader, 1st Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus (1965 to 1980). He died in a car accident.

That's why local political elites strove to build relationships with journalists from *Pravda*, *Izvestiya*, and other central newspapers. These were direct channels 'to the top'.

**Is it an exaggeration to say that journalists in the USSR had an impact, in spite of censorship?**

– Newspapers were used as a 'feedback' channel, through which people sent various complaints (e.g., 'I was not given an apartment' or 'my pension has not been increased'). First, letters were sent to local branches of government; if there was no reaction, the next round went to the centre and to *Pravda*, which was the official newspaper of the CPSU. *Pravda* journalists were perceived by the regional political elites as 'eyes' or 'representatives' of the Central Committee of the CPSU. However, even within the Soviet system of surveillance, Ukraine held a privileged position.

After Stalin's death, the decision was made to appoint the head of each republic from the local population, while the second secretary was to be sent from outside. As a rule, the latter would be a Russian or a representative of another Slavic ethnic group. Starting in the 1960s, Ukraine was the only republic that had a local secretary. This was a consequence of Ukraine's direct relations with Khrushchev and the centre, and it provided Ukraine with more autonomy than, for instance, the leadership of Azerbaijan.

**In your book *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union*,<sup>23</sup> you emphasized the fact that it was Ukraine that voted for independence during the Referendum and therefore put an end to the Soviet Union's existence. How can one explain the paradox of the Ukrainian political elites who occupied privileged positions, unexpectedly causing the dissolution of the Soviet Union? It begs the question: why Ukraine and not Lithuania? If you recall the chronology of the events, it was Lithuania that first chose the path of independence. In January of 1991, the centre had to forcibly return Lithuania into the embrace of the Soviet empire. 15 people died then. Lithuania demonstrated that leaving the USSR was possible. Why then was it not Lithuania but Ukraine which became the key republic in causing the disintegration of the Soviet Union?**

– Lithuania was an example of an independence that was proclaimed but not gained. It demonstrated a certain ideal. The idea of the Baltic republics leaving the USSR was supported by the Americans. The USA pressured Gorbachev, since the world had never recognized the Soviet annexation of

<sup>23</sup> Serhii Plokhyy, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. However, the secession of these republics was not critical to the existence of the USSR. Without Ukraine, the second largest constituent republic in terms of economic and human capital, the USSR as a political project made no sense for Gorbachev and Yeltsin alike. At the end of the day, as every empire does, the Soviet Union became too costly. The situation demanded economic support for the Caucasian and Central Asian republics. Russia was not ready to carry this load without its second partner. In addition, starting in the late 1950s, Ukraine emerged as Russia's junior partner in terms of managing the empire. Ukrainians occupied many positions in the centre and within the army. In the second half of the 1980s, a special decree curtailed the promotion of Ukrainians to the rank of generals. This was not caused by some sort of xenophobia; it so happened that during the 1950s and 1960s there were so many Ukrainians in these positions that something had to be done about it. The situation was similar to that in the times of Catherine II, when a decree prohibited the consecration of Ukrainians as bishops. That was a real-life precedent. It had nothing to do with xenophobia either: it's just that there were so many Ukrainians in those positions! (*Laughs*)

**So, this decision was dictated by the desire to maintain parity, since the Soviet Union stressed equal opportunities for representatives of all ethnicities?**

– It so happened that one well-organized group grabbed most of the pie...

**Is it fair to say that Ukrainians promoted Ukrainians?**

– It wasn't based on an ethnic principle. It was about the promotion of people from Ukraine as a whole. If you look at who Khrushchev or Brezhnev were, it becomes clear that they were Russians, yet natives of Ukraine. These were primarily regional groups, and I don't think they had any national ambitions. It is clear, however, that during this selection they were guided by the principle of 'our own people versus outsiders', thus giving preference to those who speak the same language, as it were,<sup>24</sup> and have a similar code of conduct. The key was that these people were coherent: you could read them, interpret them, and they, in turn, knew what to expect from you. So, the cultural aspect, of course, was present. It wasn't some kind of proto-independent circle, but it played its role when Ukraine gained independence and began building its own army. This circle

<sup>24</sup> A common system of cultural values.

provided Ukraine with the necessary personnel because people started to come back.<sup>25</sup>

**What role did Boris Yeltsin play in the collapse of the Soviet Union? He was very active in exploiting Russian nationalism. In 1990, a declaration on the state sovereignty of the Russian SFSR was adopted, and until 1998 this holiday was called Russia's Independence Day (now it is called Russia Day).<sup>26</sup> Yeltsin did quite a lot to facilitate the dissolution of the Soviet Union. What did he really want?**

– I can say more about Yeltsin than about Russia's Independence Day. Russia proclaimed sovereignty earlier than Ukraine. In this sense, the apparatus created by Ščerbyckyj was quite conservative. It took hold of Ukraine in a far stronger fashion than the Russian apparatus.

Yeltsin headed the liberal wing of the Communist Party. His allies were Anatoly Chubais and Yegor Haidar. They were trying to reform the Soviet Union by introducing economic reforms and opening the USSR to the West. They were liberals who had no special ties to Russian nationalism. However, they quickly realized that their project of liberal transformation stood no chance in the USSR parliament, where Gorbachev could mobilize representatives of Central Asian republics, the Ukrainian party elites, etc. That is, they would be blocked immediately. Their only allies were parts of Ukraine and the Baltic republics, but this was not enough. Instead, Moscow, Leningrad, and Sverdlovsk had a large enough electorate to create a critical mass in the Russian parliament. It is then that these liberal elites decided to change horses midstream, and Yeltsin became the Russian leader and began to actively fight against the centre (in general, not only against Gorbachev personally). During this period, he was far more radical than the Ukrainian leaders. The proclamation of Russia's sovereignty was a sign of this radicalism. This happened in 1990, before the proclamation of Ukrainian sovereignty. In terms of these tendencies, Ukraine was really lagging behind. Ščerbyckyj was dismissed only in the autumn of 1989. While he was in power, everything was swept under the carpet, while in Russia there were already rallies in support of Yeltsin. And, until 1991, he was the champion in this competition for the collapse of the Soviet Union: Ukrainians only 'fetched' some missiles, while Yeltsin was the one who 'fired'. (*Laughs*)

<sup>25</sup> Plokhii means that Soviet army officers who were Ukrainians by nationality and served in different parts of the USSR began to return to Ukraine after the proclamation of independence. Thus, independent Ukraine received military personnel for its national army.



**So, Yeltsin was an unwilling Democrat? Did it just so happen that the political situation contributed to the realization of his personal ambitions?**

– By nature, Yeltsin was an authoritarian leader and a proto-populist at the same time – someone who spoke to the people and tried to be likeable. He had both of these traits. Russia became the ‘battering ram’, and with its help he tried to knock down the doors of the Kremlin. Basically, he caused a second coup when, under the pretext of rescuing the country from the putsch, he removed Gorbachev from power. From the beginning, Yeltsin, with the support of his liberal entourage, sought to become the new leader of the Soviet Union and implement the liberal program. At this stage, Russia should have dropped out – rejected like dead wood – but this did not happen. The Soviet republics rebelled, and Ukraine proclaimed independence using rhetoric about the threat of a putsch. (*Laughs*) The Ukrainian elite’s reaction to Yeltsin’s attempt to consolidate power after the arrest of the putschists and to eliminate Gorbachev and become the new president of the USSR was to proclaim Ukraine’s independence after the putsch.

**Was it because the regional political elites did not accept Yeltsin as a new leader? Or did they see greater prospects for themselves as independent countries?**

– The regional political elites did not want to concede the rights that they had received as a result of Gorbachev’s *perestroika*. For Kravchuk and the Ukrainian communist elites, the main issue was to make sure the putsch would not take away the power they possessed in Ukraine. These elites could have lived under the power of the putschists in the centre, provided that they would retain all their powers. Yeltsin, in the wake of liberal elation, began jousting with Gorbachev for the leadership of the CPSU. His criticism was directed against the CPSU; the situation in Ukraine was very different. The communist majority there continued to control the parliament even after the declaration of independence.

Yeltsin’s victory was contrary to the clan interests of the Ukrainian party elites. First, they were not keen on the emergence of a strong authoritarian leader in the centre. Secondly, Yeltsin played the anti-communist card, which, practically speaking, meant the removal of the Ukrainian communist elites from power. In essence<sup>27</sup>, the August 24 vote was a vote against Yeltsin, the man who strived to reproduce the Soviet Union. Let’s note that the United States, too, was not thrilled with Yeltsin. Actually, it was they and the political elites in Soviet republics who prevented him from finishing Gorbachev off in August 1991.

<sup>27</sup> On 24 August 1991, the Supreme Council (Verkhovna Rada) of the Ukrainian SSR voted for the Act of Proclamation of the Independence of Ukraine.



**On that note, the United States made great efforts to prevent the collapse of the USSR. President George H.W. Bush had hoped that Gorbachev would be able to keep a handle the situation. What was behind such trust in the first and last president of the USSR?**

– The United States was concerned with its own security. This was about the world’s largest arsenal of nuclear weapons. The Soviet Union, under Gorbachev, ensured the reliable preservation of this nuclear arsenal. The country was safeguarding against a possible civil war and the threat of this arsenal falling into the hands of terrorists.

**So why, after all, didn’t the US let Yeltsin finish off Gorbachev?**

– Gorbachev was a convenient person to cooperate with. He was predictable. In fact, at some point the Soviet Union became a junior partner to the United States in the realm of foreign policy. The USSR did not block the UN resolution on the Gulf War, although Iraq was a long-time ally of the Soviet Union. An understanding was reached by both sides. Personal connections played a role. In Washington, they knew the previous Soviet leadership, whereas the new Russian political elites begged the question: who are these people ‘racing their carts’?<sup>28</sup> It was not clear what could be expected of Yeltsin, who now had a nuclear suitcase in his possession. From this point of view, it was obviously in the interest of the US to preserve the Soviet Union as a state. This prompted Yeltsin to persistently pursue a closer friendship with Bush Sr. than Gorbachev ever managed, or at least to show that he was ready to be a partner. So, Yeltsin helped to solve the issue of nuclear weapons. He helped to gather all the nuclear potential of the former USSR into Russia.

To conclude on the topic of Yeltsin, it’s worth mentioning that he really had the ambition of taking Gorbachev’s office immediately after the putsch. When this attempt failed, Yeltsin focused on Russia as his main political project. It was then that he began to promote the confederation model for the post-Soviet space, which he tried to implement via the CIS project. If this was in fact a meaningful model in Yeltsin’s mind, for the Ukrainians the CIS presented a way to ‘divorce’ in a civilized manner. That is why the Soviet Union did not come to an end in 1991 but continued its existence in the 1990s in some form. The Ukrainian-Russian Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership, with recognition of the inviolability of borders,<sup>29</sup> was signed only in 1997, since in the early 1990s it was

<sup>28</sup> Horse-drawn carts equipped with machine-guns were used by insurgents in Ukraine and South Russia during the Civil War of 1918–1920. Here, this phrase is used as a metaphor for revolutionaries.

<sup>29</sup> The Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation was signed on 31 May 1997. Ukraine made concessions on the question of the division of the Black Sea Fleet and also agreed to let the fleet of the Russian Federation remain on the territory of Ukraine until 2017. For more details, see *EIU*, II (2004), 431.

not clear what the CIS would become. As a matter of fact, it was also not clear what would happen to the former Soviet army and the navy.

**You mentioned the 1997 Treaty, which temporarily settled the issues of Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet. The status of Crimea was hotly debated, which fuelled the separatist movement on the peninsula. Why didn't Yeltsin support the separatists?**

– In fact, Russian support for Crimean separatism was paused after the signing of the Partition Treaty on the conditions under which the Black Sea Fleet of the Russian Federation was allowed to remain in Sevastopol. From Yeltsin's point of view, this issue was temporarily resolved, although resistance to this solution lasted for a very long time within the Russian political milieu. In 1993, when Yeltsin ordered the shelling of the White House,<sup>30</sup> he managed to appease the part of the political milieu that sought to annex Crimea, but support for the separatist movement continued.

At that time, Russia had a complex but partner-like relationship with the United States. Russia in general and Yeltsin in particular were not ready for confrontation. Firstly, there was no combat-ready army. A small proportion of the combat units were bogged down in Chechnya. Secondly, a 'club' of Soviet leaders still existed. The heads of the newly created independent republics had all undergone the same party schooling. Kuchma, 'red director', Yeltsin, Secretary of the Industrial Sverdlovsk Regional Committee, and Nazarbayev, Chernomyrdin, and others were all of the same political culture, while the same cannot be said about the next generations of post-Soviet politicians. Political generations change, so the situation kept changing. In the political arena, a KGB native, Putin, appeared, as did the criminal Yanukovych. At a certain level, they had something in common, but they were still representatives of two different worlds. These purely personal psychological moments also played their role.

**I can't refrain from asking about your book, *The Man with the Poison Gun*,<sup>31</sup> a political crime story about the murder of Stepan Bandera. Why did they have to kill Bandera in 1959? At that time, the entire Ukrainian nationalist underground in the Soviet Union had been destroyed; Bandera was a rather marginal figure in the West; and the Ukrainian nationalist diaspora was fragmented. The decision to kill him seems rather illogical.**

<sup>30</sup> White House: the House of the Government of the Russian Federation. In 1984–92, it was the House of Soviets of RSFSR. During the August coup in 1991, it became the centre of resistance, led by Yeltsin. After that, journalists started to call it the White House. In September–October 1993, the House of Soviets of the Russian Federation became the headquarters for the opposition to Yeltsin's reforms. The political crisis was solved by force. The White House was seriously damaged during the suppression of demonstrations. 157 people were killed.

<sup>31</sup> Serhii Plokhii, *The Man with the Poison Gun. A Cold War Spy Story* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

**Generally speaking, who made the decision to liquidate political opponents in the USSR? Furthermore, why was Bohdan Stašyns'kyj<sup>32</sup> chosen for this task, rather than some professional Chekist, as with the liquidation of Jevhen Konovalec'?'<sup>33</sup>s**

– From the memoirs of Volodymyr Semyčastnyj,<sup>34</sup> the Ukrainian Head of the KGB, we learn that he did not have the right to make decisions regarding these murders. Those decisions were made 'from above'. I can't say for sure whether it was the Politburo or a personal decision by Khrushchev as the foremost person in the hierarchy of power in the USSR. But it was made somewhere at that level. As we know, the leader of the Soviet Union was a native of Ukraine who used to fight against the OUN and Bandera's underground.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, when the decision was made to kill Bandera, and when it was put into action, the second person in the government was Oleksij Kyryčenko<sup>36</sup> – the former first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine. Kyryčenko supervised the work of the KGB in his capacity as the second secretary of the Central Committee. For Khrushchev, as well as for Kyryčenko, the murder of Bandera was a very real symbolic victory over the Banderites.

**So, this is a personal story?**

– It is both a personal and a political story. The lower ranks of the KGB (the level of operatives), which surrounded Bandera with spies and played a game of disinformation with him, considered this decision completely impractical, but there was political will to go through with it nevertheless.

We do not have direct evidence or the documents to confirm this, but analysis of the timeline shows that within a week of Bandera's murder, the Politburo and the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR adopted a resolution to decorate Bohdan Stašyns'kyj. This fact indicates that such things can only happen with the blessing of the leader of the state,

<sup>32</sup> Bohdan Stašyns'kyj (born 1931): the agent of the Soviet special services who murdered the leaders of the Ukrainian nationalist movement, Leo Rebet (1957) and Stepan Bandera (1959). In 1961, Stašyns'kyj fled to West Berlin and surrendered to the German authorities. In 1962, he was sentenced to 8 years in prison. He was released in 1969 and fled to South Africa. His whereabouts are unknown.

<sup>33</sup> Jevhen Konovalec' (1891–1938): military and political leader, colonel of the UNR Army, commander of the UMO (Ukrainian Military Organization), head of the OUN (since 1929). He died as a result of a terrorist attack carried out by a member of the Soviet secret services, Pavel Sudoplatov. For more details, see *EIU*, V (2008), 28–30.

<sup>34</sup> Volodymyr Semyčastnyj (1924–2001): party and military leader, colonel-general (1964). Chairman of the KGB of the USSR (1961–1967). Brezhnev was distrustful of Semyčastnyj, considering him the protégé of his political competitor, Petro Šelest. Taking advantage of the fact that Stalin's daughter, Svetlana Alilueva, did not return from India and requested political asylum in the United States, Brezhnev dismissed Semyčastnyj. For more details, see *EIU*, IX (2012), 527.

<sup>35</sup> Nikita Khrushchev.

<sup>36</sup> Oleksij Kyryčenko (1908–1975): party and Soviet leader. From June 1953, the 1st Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine. He became the first Ukrainian to lead the Central Committee of the CPU. He supported Khrushchev in overthrowing Beria and with the policy of destalinization. Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU (1957–1960). Kyryčenko initiated a conflict with Khrushchev's immediate circle and was subsequently removed from office. For more details, see *EIU*, IV (2007), 301.

and it is clear that Khrushchev had to explain to the members of the Politburo and the Presidium why they had to vote in favour of this resolution.

From our perspective, the decision to kill Bandera may seem illogical since the resistance movement had already been defeated. However, from Khrushchev's perspective these events had taken place only a decade before, which is a short amount of time. For him, it was like yesterday. All the phobias and personal revenge – everything was mixed into it.

Regarding Stašyns'kyj, I can say that he was just the perfect candidate for this assignment. It was run by officers from the Ministry of State Security,<sup>37</sup> who used to fight against the nationalist underground. The very same people, only then they had been sent to East Berlin. But who was Stašyns'kyj? He made his career during the war against the Ukrainian nationalist underground. He had received proper training – there was blood on his hands. In this case, all options for retreat were cut off. In addition, he had already established himself during a business trip abroad, when he killed Lev Rebet.<sup>38</sup> In fact, everyone was surprised because the plan was to blame Banderites for the murder of Rebet, which would lead to an internal conflict within the diaspora's nationalist milieu. This was the primary aim behind the murder; murder is always done for some purpose. Those who gave the orders might have received some moral satisfaction, but, in principle, murder should have a practical purpose. In the case of Rebet, it turned out that the weapon was so effective that everyone believed he had died of natural causes.<sup>39</sup> It was then that the idea of using Bohdan Stašyns'kyj against Bandera was first raised. Firstly, he already knew how to use the weapon; secondly, the method had been tested successfully, so there was no doubt left surrounding it. Why invent something new when there is already someone who has done it once and can do it again?

**When talking about Bandera, we cannot fail to mention the 'war of monuments' we are currently witnessing. For the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, this is above all about a reckoning with the communist past, an attempt to discover their identity. But we see that this process is broader as similar waves have swept both the US and the UK. What has**

<sup>37</sup> The Ministry of State Security, which in 1954 was reorganized into the KGB.

<sup>38</sup> Lev Rebet (1912–1957): politician, publicist, and ideologist of Ukrainian nationalism. During World War II, he was imprisoned in Auschwitz (1941–1944). After his release, Rebet emigrated to West Germany, where he joined the OUN Overseas Centre (1945). After the split of OUN Overseas (1954), Rebet established a new organization, OUN Abroad (ZC in Ukrainian, also known as *'dvijkari'* according to their two leaders, Rebet and Zinovij Matla), in 1956. OUN Abroad was in opposition to Bandera's group. Rebet was murdered by the KGB agent Stašyns'kyj and buried in Waldfriedhof cemetery in Munich. For more details, see EIU, IX (2012), 146–47.

<sup>39</sup> Bohdan Stašyns'kyj used a poisonous ampoule which was sprayed into the victim's face with a special weapon. It triggered an instantaneous death. Forensic medical examination revealed no traces of poison and registered heart failure as the cause of death.

**caused such a radical deconstruction and a reckoning with the past? Is this process cyclical? Or is this a trait of our particular epoch?**

– There are global processes, but there are also dynamics at work here, because monuments have not been dismantled in every country. There are situations in which global things overlap with local specifics. Globally, these processes are connected to decreased living standards following the 2008 economic crisis, which caused the biggest recession since the Great Depression. We are now going through processes similar to those of the 1930s. The political system is struggling to cope with the political and social challenges caused by the economic crisis. As a result, radical parties are emerging, populism is growing, and social issues are escalating. In some societies, conflict manifests itself through unresolved issues of historical memory and historical justice. Let's say it's about the imperial past in the UK, whereas in the US it's about race relations, which are exacerbated not only by the demolition of monuments but also by mass protests. This radical revision of history leads to symbolic violence. Ukraine certainly has its own dynamics, but as the recent elections demonstrate, we are also no strangers to populism. In Ukraine, this is about not only a relationship with the past but also with Russia, and a process of decolonization.

**You raised questions connected with the post-imperial situation. In your opinion, why is Ukraine's role a key one in the context of contemporary Europe? We are a large country, and at the same time we are driving the process of democratic transformation on post-Soviet terrain. This is actually something the protests in Belarus and Kazakhstan could not achieve. What will determine the success of Ukraine in its democratic evolution: is it geopolitical factors, or cultural and historical ones?**

– As you mentioned, the country's size is already one factor. A week after the Ukrainian referendum for independence, the Soviet Union collapsed. When explaining the situation to Bush Sr., Yeltsin said that without Ukraine Russia would be crushed by the Muslim republics.<sup>40</sup> People, culture, language – they all play their part. But there are a few other points. The first is Ukraine's geopolitical location, which provides the country with a trajectory toward the EU and NATO. In the sixteenth century, the Polish-Lithuanian Kingdom existed, a state with which Ukraine was historically connected. Ukraine has been part of the European space and, to some extent, it remains so, albeit astride the EU border. For Kyrgyzstan,

<sup>40</sup> The Soviet Central Asia republics (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tadjikistan) as well as Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus, where Islam was the main religion. The Russian Federation also includes Muslim republics such as Tatarstan, Chechnya, and others.

for example, such a choice is not available due to geography. The second point is that, because of its history, Ukraine partially preserved a democratic tradition. This means that it is quite difficult to drag Ukraine into some new union and exercise control over it, because it is not enough to promise a transfer of 15 billion to the president to resolve the issue.<sup>41</sup>

**So, it's impossible to buy out the local elites and thereby solve the Ukrainian question?**

– Russians tried to do it again and again, waiting for their pro-Russian candidate. Now the doctrine has changed: they have realized that they need to do something else – to dismember, to destabilize, etc. This suggests that it is not possible to hold Ukraine down politically and economically, mainly because of its democracy. Therefore, all the factors matter here: Ukraine's size, its geopolitical circumstances, its historical and cultural ties with Europe, and democracy. Rather, the traditions of Ukrainian democracy may be problematic, but their existence is undeniable.

**We recorded this interview one week prior to the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. In response to my last question, you basically predicted such a scenario, emphasizing that Russia has changed its 'doctrine' regarding Ukraine. The entire world was shocked by the crimes committed by the Russian army in Buča and other cities. On 3 April 2022, a notorious article outlining the program for the genocide of Ukrainians was published on the Ria Novosti website.<sup>42</sup> Much has been said about the 'Weimar syndrome' of the Russian Federation. From a comparative perspective, the parallels between the actions of the Russian Federation and Nazi Germany can be clearly traced. How correct are such comparisons from a historical point of view? Can one say that in both cases we are dealing with the phenomenon of fascism, or that 'ruscism'<sup>43</sup> has a different nature? What consequences will this conflict have for the post-Soviet space and the entire architecture of the international security system?<sup>44</sup>**

– The parallels between the two regimes are obvious on several levels. Firstly, in both cases we are dealing with the revanchism of a country that lost a war (in the case of Russia, this is the Cold War) – lost its prestige

<sup>41</sup> Russia's proposal to provide a \$15 billion loan to Ukraine, which was perceived by the public as a bribe to then-President Viktor Yanukovich in exchange for rejecting Ukraine's policy on European integration. See Ksenija Kapustyns'ka, "Borh Janukovyča": sud vynis rišennja ščodo sporu Ukrajinny ta Rosiji, *S'ohodni*, 14 September 2018 <<https://economics.segodnya.ua/ua/economics/enews/dolg-yanukovicha-sud-vynes-reshenie-po-sporu-ukrainy-i-rossii-1170887.html>> [accessed 21 April, 2022].

<sup>42</sup> Timofej Sergejev, "Čto Rossija dolžna sdelat' s Ukrajinoy?", *Ria Novosti*, 3 April 2022, <<https://ria.ru/20220403/ukraina-1781469605.html>> [accessed 21 April 2022].

<sup>43</sup> See more about this term in Timothy Snyder, "The War in Ukraine has Unleashed a New Word: In a Creative Play With Three Different Languages, Ukrainians Identify An Enemy – "Ruscism", *The New York Times*, 22 April, 2022, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/22/magazine/ruscism-ukraine-russia-war.html>> [accessed 22 May 2022].

<sup>44</sup> The last question was asked on 21 April 2022, during the process of authorizing the interview.

and territory – but was not occupied and did not undergo a process of radical political transformation. Secondly, it is about unresolved German (or Russian) questions, wherein authoritarian leaders try to build a great Germany or a great Russia, hence the parallels between the Anschluss of Austria and the annexation of Crimea. Finally, we are talking about the monopoly of the state in the media as well as persecution of the opposition, by way of reducing people to the ‘nuts and bolts’ of the *de facto* authoritarian dictatorial machine. In addition, certain scholars bring our attention to the elements of fascism within the political system and the ideology of Putin’s Russia. Unfortunately, certain elements of history may repeat themselves, even though it might seem that we have already turned over human history’s most horrific pages.

The interview was conducted by YANA PRYMACHENKO