

**C A S
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01/2022

Literature & Crisis
Newsletter of the
Cassandra Project

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About the Cassandra Project

The Cassandra Project represents an early warning system of a special kind. It does not operate on the basis of Big Data or demoscopic surveys, does not use the findings of intelligence agencies or diplomatic activities, but relies on the largest archive of individual and collective sensations, memories, opinions: that of literature. A gigantic database, if you will.

Our observations concern largely, but not exclusively, the European space, including its "external borders," systemic fractures, and its neighbors.

Within the framework of this format, we have made it our task to react quickly to current developments and to cast spotlight-like glances at different zones.

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Poland: The recent resurgence of protest culture

The Poles have voted in 2019 and 2020. The conservative PIS party received 43.39% of the vote (8,051,983, turnout 61.74%), and the PIS party's candidate in the presidential election, Andrzej Duda, received 51.03% of the vote with a turnout of 68.18%.

For some time now, Poland has been witnessing the revival of a protest culture. People are taking to the streets and voicing their opinions on issues that dominate the political public sphere. In 2021, large segments of the Polish population protested:

- against the planned media law, which was intended to suppress freedom of expression in the media and prevent government-critical media (protests in 126 cities in Poland),
- against the abortion law, which denies women the right to abort sick fetuses and provides for a registry of pregnant Polish women (protests in over 60 cities),
- against judicial reform and political control of judges (250 cities and towns),
- for Poland to remain in the EU (over 100 cities and towns),
- against discrimination against LGBT people,
- against the law banning LGBT demos,
- against hate speech with the participation of 100 art and culture workers,
- against the rejection of migrants at the border with Belarus.

The Situation on the Polish-Belarusian Border

A field report. By Urszula Gleńsk, Translated by M. Wolting (excerpts).

"The Kurds are lying on a silver-gold thermo foil, leaning against birch trunks. Their faces are covered with masks and caps. They do not want to reveal their names. Translator Jakub Sypiański adds that one of them was politically persecuted in Turkey and spent two years in prison.

'The situation on the Belarusian side was very bad' - reports one of the Kurds - 'the Belarusian army took everything we had, money and food, people sleep in the open, they freeze in the cold.'

The second adds: 'When we first came to Poland, we were given some documents to sign, we signed and were pushed back to the Belarusian side. We spent a day at the border, crossed back over to the Polish side, then we wandered through the woods for five days without food, without water. It's very stressful psychologically and physically.'" (Urszula Gleńsk, People in the Bog)

"The trigger of the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border was the Belarusian regime, but among the parties to the conflict in Podlasie, two groups are visible.

One includes the refugees and migrants trying to reach Western Europe, the other group is formed by the Polish border guards, supported by the police and army, who intercept them and push them back across the border.

In the border area it is impossible to close your eyes and see nothing. The sight is dramatic - Looking at the suffering of others, as Susan Sontag wrote. It happens in close proximity and at the same time remains beyond the limits of any imagination. No one can answer the question of how these people, who are being hunted, can survive in a frosty and dark forest.

Eighteen dead have already been found. A four-year-old girl went missing on the night of December 6-7 when her parents were deported to Belarus. The border guards stopped the search operation and forbade the volunteers who wanted to search for Eileen to enter the restricted zone.

People die as a result of the 'border action' of the government in Warsaw. They were pushed back, tried to survive, died suffering. Many of them were buried anonymously in Poland. Everyone wonders what the border forest, to which there is currently no free access, will still show." (Urszula Gleńsk, People in the Bog)

"The information blockade imposed by the government blocks journalists' access to border areas within a three-kilometer strip. People who do not live there permanently, are not registered or have not received a special permit are banned from entering.

'As employees of the Polish Red Cross, we have no access to the restricted zone, we cannot deliver packages ourselves' - says a Polish Red Cross volunteer from the border area. 'We are a part of a closed world here,' says Kamil Syller, initiator of the 'Green Light' campaign. Its purpose is to turn on a green light in the window to mark the house where refugees get help and are not handed over to police officers.

Currently, on the Polish side, seventeen thousand officers guard the border and heavy military equipment is stored. The services track the approach of refugees to villages and organize searches in the forest. Anna K. says, 'There is so much suffering and terror as in war. We see scenes like in wartime. But in war, at least everything is clear. And this is worse than war, because here half of the society denies what is happening.' Many comment on the situation of refugees by asking, 'Why do they leave their homes and why do they take children?'" (Urszula Gleńsk, Hajnówka)

Appeal of the Nobel literature laureates

Nobel literature laureates Elfriede Jelinek, Herta Müller, Svetlana Alexievich and Olga Tokarczuk appeal to EU institutions to resolve the crisis on the EU's external border with Belarus "as quickly and effectively as possible"

„The Polish government has introduced a state of emergency within the border zone between Poland and Belarus, on the strength of which no medical aid is being allowed in to help those who are sick and dying on the border, and blocks media access to the tragedy that is unfolding there.“

„However, even the incomplete, fragmentary information that is coming through provides insight into the vast scale of the humanitarian disaster that is taking place on the border of the European Union: we know that the people there are being subjected to a merciless push-back procedure, condemning them to hypothermia, starvation and exhaustion in forests and marshes.“

„Belarusian travel agencies controlled by the Lukashenka regime are promising desperate people transit into the European Union in exchange for a high fee. Lured by this means to Minsk, they are then taken by organised transportation to the forests on the border.“

„We are appealing for the fastest and most effective solution to this humanitarian crisis, for observation of the rules of the Geneva Convention, and above all for an asylum procedure to be initiated for all those asking for it, and who are being detained in this part of the eastern border of the European Union.“

Appeal of the cultural community on the situation on the eastern border of the Republic of Poland

„We, the undersigned, strongly oppose the illegal and inhumane ‚push-back‘ practices used by the Polish Border Guard. People in a desperate situation, fleeing war and violence, are demanding support from the Polish state, and we have an obligation to provide it.

We appeal for immediate help for those in need, for medics to be allowed in, and for all individuals and organisations that are able to find people wandering in the forests and save them from death. At this point we would like to point out that we fully support the efforts of the Granica (Border) Group. We do not agree with the dehumanising and insulting way in which displaced people are portrayed by the Polish authorities and associated media.

There is a humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border that requires immediate intervention. We appeal to the international community and in particular to human rights organisations for support. We demand compliance with the Geneva Convention and, above all, that human lives be saved.“

(Signed by over 700 Polish cultural workers)

Current debates

Olga Tokarczuk and Svetlana Aleksijewicz:

"We need a new language, new forms of protest and a redefinition of concepts such as heroism and patriotism, argued Olga Tokarczuk and Svetlana Aleksijewicz at a public debate in Wrocław on July 15, 2021.

The Nobel laureates commented on events in Belarus, the women's strike in Poland, and the mass protests that swept through Poland after the Constitutional Court tightened abortion laws.

Viktor Yerofeyev: Our Tsar is Unpredictable.

"Thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Putin has subjugated Russia. But he wants more. Post-heroic societies in the West are no match for him" (Dec. 22, 2021).

Serhij Zhadan: Hybrid Peace and Hybrid War.

"A President Redefines Himself: Volodymyr Selenskyi's anti-Russian rhetoric irritates his core voters without convincing patriots" (04/21/2021).

Viktor Martinovich: Back in the USSR (12/21/2021).

"Good afternoon, my name is Viktor Martinovich and I am a person who, at the age of 44, has lived three lives. Three lives at an age when most people can't even manage one properly. And, to clarify, by three lives I mean the entire range of self-perceptions in one epoch.

Three different dream worlds. Three different value systems. Three different selves. Three differently directed aberrations. I owe my deaths and rebirths entirely to a single event exactly 30 years ago. The collapse of the USSR. The emergence of a new state, the Republic of

Belarus, and my successful self-realization as an established writer in that country. And finally, the reintroduction of the USSR, especially in the most serious, massive meaning of this word. The reintroduction first within the borders of a small republic, then expanded to union with gigantic Russia."

Jacek Dehnel on his decision to leave Poland

"The Polish people elected the man who used hatred as the main instrument of the campaign. I could live in a country that was ruled by a terrible regime and fight this regime together with everyone else. This is the experience of many people in different countries, including Poland before 1989. However, if the majority of society democratically elects this ruler, then sorry, but not with me. Since most of my fellow citizens believe that my human rights can be taken away from me, I prefer to leave the country" (10.07.2021).

Ukraine. "Hybrid war" or "internal conflict" (by Oksana Naumann, edited by M. Wolting).

For Russian politicians, the crisis between Russia and Ukraine, which has been going on for almost eight years, is an "internal conflict" of the Ukrainian state. The Ukrainian side, on the other hand, speaks of a "hybrid war" in which, at least initially, information policy was used instead of military force.

The term "internal conflict" refers to Putin's statements in 2013 in which he portrayed himself as the "savior and protector of the Russian population on Ukrainian territory." This is because in 2013 there were mass protests in Ukraine against the government of the time, which was trying to oust the Russian language from public life

(publishing, education, media) through administrative actions.

These tendencies were opposed at the time by Ukrainian citizens who were either Russians or considered themselves to be Russians. This situation was used by Putin to conquer Crimea practically without force. Pro-Russia politicians in Ukraine are proposing that the militarily occupied Donbas region be given special status and that this status be enshrined in the Ukrainian constitution.

The question of who is responsible for the war damage and who should repair it still remains contentious, because answering it would name the aggressor and the attacked.

Since the summer of 2021, a massive buildup of Russian troops has been observed on the territory of Crimea, which for the Ukrainian side points to renewed interventions in the near future.

A large number of opposition deputies accuse the current president, Volodymyr Zelensky, of reacting naively to steps taken by Russia. Interviewing the Ukrainian population, one hears a willingness to defend Ukraine against the Russian aggressor.

Russia. Yulia Latynina: "There will be no war, because you can lose it" (by Alexey, edited by M. Wolting).

Russian media have also been reporting on the concentration of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border since early November. One of the first articles on the troop movement cites U.S. intelligence, Ukraine and NATO sources.

However, The Insider, an investigative Russian Internet magazine, finds the maneuvers slower compared to previous buildups and notes no establishment of medical infrastructure. This leads to the

assumption that there would be 'no acute threat from the Russian side' at the moment."

In his annual address to the nation in Moscow, Putin announced, "Organizers of any provocations that threaten the core interests of our security will regret their actions as they have not regretted anything for a long time." At the same time, in recent weeks there have been repeated violations of the ceasefire in occupied territories of Ukraine. The Ukrainian government takes it as an opportunity to claim that Russia, with such actions, motivates them to join NATO.

In Novaya Gazeta, Michael McFaul, a professor at Stanford University and ex-US ambassador to Russia, talks about a crisis without an object, because neither NATO and Ukraine threaten Russia, nor are there plans for Ukraine's integration into NATO structures. According to McFaul, "Putin does not like to be ignored" (Dec. 11, 2021).

In Novaya Gazeta, Yulia Latynina also sees no acute threat from Russia, because "Kremlin has so far waged only hybrid wars," and "it would not dare to wage an open war." (23.11.2021). Hybrid wars allow Russia to minimize risks and consequences.

The surveys of the Levada Center polling institute show that 3% of Russians think that the war with Ukraine is inevitable. 36% of respondents think that the war is likely, and 38% assume that it is unlikely.

Lev Gudkov, vice-director of the Levada Center, explains that Russians are tired of confrontation with the West.

Books to read

Olga Tokarczuk: The books of Jacob.

The novel, which revises the highly idealized 18th-century image of Poland, can also be read as a perspective on contemporary debates about Polish patriotism, nationalism, xenophobia, and religious fanaticism. A sadness informs her lines when she writes about her country, Tokarczuk noted in an essay, without "feeling in the least part of this enforced community." Poland, she said, is still a "place of injustice never overcome, of victimhood never healed, of the celebration of defeat," and democracy in this respect proves to be a thin layer under which "irrational tribal energies" seethe (Anna Augustyk).

Viktor Yerofeyev: Encyclopedia of the Russian Soul.

The first-person narrator is an intellectual who, as a result of a text, finds himself in the circle of secret service agents. With his help, a torn Russia is to become a great power again. Together with the assistant of former general secretaries Pal Palytsch and his adlatus Sascha, he sets out in search of a mythical figure: the Grey - nothing less than a kind of Putin, as Yerofeyev writes in his preface, whom he had already foreseen at the time.

Serhij Zhadan: Antenne. [German/Ukrainian]

Serhij Zhadan is one of the best-known voices in contemporary Ukrainian literature and has also been politically engaged since the Maidan protests. In his poetry collection "Antenna", the author captures everyday scenes from the war in a documentary style. There are pictures of the streets, portraits of disillusioned soldiers, conversations between two people.

Viktor Martinovich: Revolution. [Russian/German]

The novel "Revolution" by Viktor Martinowitsch deals with the seductiveness of man when greed for power becomes the strongest motive for his actions. Even though the novel is set in Moscow and was written in the last twelve years, it can be read as a symbol of the protests in Belarus. For this reason it was confiscated and banned there.

Timothy Snyder, Nora Krug: On Tyranny. Twenty lessons from the Twentieth Century.

Snyder sees democracy in danger; he wants to shake things up. Not only in the U.S., but everywhere where nationalists, populists, and autocrats increasingly call the shots. Do something, he calls out to his readers, resist! "History allows us to be responsible: not for everything, but for something." (Christiane Peitz)

