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INTRODUCTION: REVISING THE POST-SOCIALIST "NATIONAL" AFTER UKRAINE

The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, while itself a symptom of deeper changes in the global balance of economic and political power, has in turn generated a seismic change in relationships in the Old Continent and is having a sustained global impact: from the current perspective, the consequences of dismantling the post-World War II nexus of "state sovereignty/human rights" is the inevitable drawing of a new iron curtain between the EU and Russia and Belarus and greater instability in the wider European area, from Northern Africa over Southwest Asia to the Caucasus region. The entire post-socialist region has been experiencing greater polarisation of societies, with consequences being felt across the "frozen" and "pacified" conflicts that either evolved from or were fomented during the Cold War, as in the countries of former Yugoslavia, in Moldova or in the Southern Caucasus. This polarisation has also intensified an already existing tendency in post-socialist countries to reassess in negative terms the Soviet legacy, as can be seen in the further removal of socialist-era monuments in Bulgaria and the discussion on the possibility to expel Russian citizens in Latvia, while drawing into NATO two traditionally neutral countries such as Finland and Sweden. The rearmement of European states and the current public debate on the reintroduction of conscription and the necessity to be ready for war is the logical consequence of this slow but by now visible crumbling of post-1991 (old) 'new world order'. Across the globe too, the war revived zero-sum political rhetoric and black-and-white projections for the future: recasting historic experiences as a foresight, hardening security perceptions, balancing traditional alliances against opportunities for economic cooperation can be observed across the whole post-socialist political space and beyond.

Globally, the potential end of Western hegemony in setting and pursuing political norms by leveraging economic power seems to be shifting to a fully-fledged multipolar competition around the globe, and indeed the conflict has already resulted in a recalibration of relationships: China and other emerging powers are prepared to invest into, and question the role of international organisations to build and maintain peace in Europe and elsewhere, or propose their own alternatives to the existing international platforms. The crisis of Western hegemony and this increasing multipolar competition can also be clearly seen in China's increased assertiveness on the Taiwan question and in the enlargement of BRICS, which from loose regrouping of emerging nations seems now increasingly poised

to act as a club for the advancement of the interestes of the economic 'newcomers' and as a counterweight to the old G7. Such crisis can be seen also in the lively reactions to the Gaza war in the Global South, from Iran's renewed protagonism in Southwest Asia to the challenge to Western hegemony on human rights discourse represented by the proceedings for genocide instituted by South Africa against the State of Israel at the International Court of Justice, and in the fact that many countries in Asia, North and Central Africa and in Latin America which had been prompted to take sides on the conflict in Ukraine are now openly denouncing the West's double standard in the Gaza war. In the Sahel, the new military regimes emerged in the past few years are increasingly looking at Russia as an alternative partner to counterpoise to the former colonizing power, France.

At the regional level, the war has accelerated the reformatting of the post-Soviet space, particularly in Central Asia and the Caucasus as areas of entanglement of competing Russian, Chinese, Turkish, US and European interests. Azerbaijian has recently taken advantage of the favourable situation to liquidate the Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh secessionist republic with a short war that has resulted in the flight of almost all the Armenian inhabitants of the region and in a serious blow to Armenia's traditional alliance with Russia; Georgia is threading a thin line in trying to avoid antagonizing Russia while continuing pursuing its path towards the EU and NATO; Kazakhstan, in turn, has refused to recognize Russia's annexations in Ukraine and to participate in the war and is hosting tens of thousands of young Russian citizens who have fled their country to escape mobilization. While the Eurasian Customs Union is still in force, its once potential transformation into a fully-fledged Eurasian Union seems now to have ended up in the bin of history in Europe (with the exception of Belarus) and to have lost any force of attraction in Central Asia, where the conflict has also increased pressure on the Central Asian elites to address domestic dissatisfaction with their quality of governance and whose republics seem now more interested in Chinese investments than in getting closer to their increasingly assertive northern neighbour.

An idea on how these dynamics may impact on Central Asia is provided by Mukhtarbek Shaikemelev's article, whose object of inquiry are the identification practices whereby non-Kazakh ethnic groups have been integrating into Kazakhstan's nation-building. Based on sociological research, the article traces how ethnic minorities perceive and fit in the evolution of the state policy of shaping a civic Kazakhstani identity that, while granting a leading role to Kazakh language and culture, encourages intercultural practices by other ethnic groups towards their integration into a larger Kazakhstani society. This policy, interestingly, recognizes non-Kazakhs as "ethnic groups" and not as "national minorities", which is perceived as a term redolent of separatism. The sociological data presented show that for the vast majority of ethnic Russians and of the representatives of other ethnic groups a nation-building policy aimed at «the creation of a single community without discrimination on ethnic grounds» is the most favoured option, although they recognize that the aforementioned policy of creating a Kazakhstani identity in which Kazakh language and culture play an integrating role while granting other groups the preservation of their ethnocultural characteristics better suits the hybrid and ethnically

complex nature of Kazakhstani society. This process of composite nation-building might have been put at serious risk by the shockwaves of the war in Ukraine, as there were fears by some that the Russians who had found refuge in Kazakhstan after the beginning of the war might turn into a "fifth column" in case a Ukrainian scenario developed in the north of the country, where the local ethnic Russians are more concentrated. However, such fears so far have proven unfounded: the state policy towards ethnic Russian has not changed, nor have interethnic relations worsened, and it seems in fact that the war might even end up reinforcing the current trend of societal integration of all Kazakhstani ethnic minorities around a Kazakh core.

The other three articles in this collection focus instead on 'the heart of the matter', Ukraine, but from different vantage points. Iryna Zhyrun's contribution, like Shaikemelev's, sheds light on the strained relation between Ukraine's nation-building and its national minorities, and tries to assess the level of cohesion it has achieved by analysing how these relations are intertwined with the dynamics of its foreign policy. As a key interpretive tool Zhyrun uses the notion of «quadratic nexus» i.e. a nexus between four actors (international organisations, nationalising home states, national ethnic minorities and external kin-states) and the role of «kin politics», that is the formal and informal practices and policies a state resorts to in order to establish, develop or support ties with a kin-ethnic group in another state. In the case of Ukraine, the kin-states in question are Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Hungary, Moldova and the Russian Federation. Zhyrun critically delves into Ukrainian national minority politics and its legislative and practical outcomes, analysing in depth its complex entanglement with various actors and interests. Her conclusion is that Ukraine's pro-European orientation in foreign policy created a situation in which the power struggle between kin-states and Ukraine is carried out under unequal conditions, as it provides more leverage to EU kin-states (which is particularly visible in the case of Poland). On the other hand, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict produced another asymmetry which affected national cohesion in Ukraine by preventing the Russian minority to claim and defend their minority rights, as these are now perceived as potentially threatening for national unity.

Nation-building, or rather its failure in the Donbas self-proclaimed People's Republics, is also an issue in Jack Cathcart's contribution, which tries to assess to what extent ethnic divisions were really a driving force behind the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The author explores briefly the formation of Donbas as a region and its history, noticing how in the results of the 1991 referendum on Ukrainian independence Donbas was «not out of step with the majority in Ukraine when it came to feelings about the Soviet Union». Cathcart also offers a glimpse into the huge problems experienced by the region after independence, from deindustrialisation to hyperinflation and unemployment, using some polls carried out before and after the Maidan revolution to gauge the growing popular disappointment in the new state of affairs and the shifts in public opinion on some key issues. The article argues that ethnic divisions were not a key factor in the latest development: much more important was the fact that the actual economic and social problems (specifically citizenship and voting) that had emerged after the stalling of the

Novorossiya project since 2014 and the failure of the state-building process in Donbas were co-opted and reframed by the Russian Federation and state Russian media as a national issue, thus pushing the narrative that ethnic Russians and Russophones were under threat and establishing a pretext for the 2022 invasion.

Nation-building is currently seen in Ukraine as closely intertwined with cultural decolonization, which in this context means freeing Ukrainian culture from a condition of subalternity to Russian hegemony. Such decolonization, however, can be articulated in several different ways: Anna Cavazzoni's article tries to chart what forms of decolonization are currently taking shape through the prism of a hybrid historical and cultural figure that more than anyone else represents 'Little-Russianness': that of Nikolay Gogol'/Mykola Hohol'. Cavazzoni maps out this inflamed discussion by analysing the discourse on Gogol's identity in the Ukrainian press since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion, when the question of decolonizing Ukrainian culture became a heated topic. Gogol's figure is extremely complex and is closely connected also with the formation of Russian and Polish national identity, therefore whether or not to consider Gogol' as part of the Ukrainian literary canon expresses the intention of the Ukrainian side to clearly demarcate the borders between the two nationalities. The article indentifies four tendencies that build on previous debates on this topic but also reflect the national intellectual élite's main current drives: one that completely rejects Gogol' as a 'traitor' to Ukraine, another one that tries to reappropriate him and his works (especially those set in Ukraine), a third one that (curiously) sees him as an anticolonial Ukrainian maverick that tried to poison Russian culture, and a fourth one that considers him a complex, hybrid figure that cannot be 'nationally demarcated'. Cavazzoni concludes her outline by identifying in the reappropriation of Gogol' (with a more or less pronunced attention to his hybridity), the currently prevalent tendency, in accordance with a larger movement aimed at reappropriating Ukrainian figures of the past. Overall, the four articles that constitute this monographic issue of *Nazioni e Regioni* offer an attentive and nuanced insight into the developments set in motion or accentuated inside and outside Ukraine by the war, and we are positive that they will certainly help readers chart a better course and get a better understanding of the current situation, beyond the clichés and white noise that all too often can be found on most media outlets.

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