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Real and Apparent Crises: A Reinterpretation of the Cold War

By Csaba Bekes

Recent historical research provides us with increasingly convincing proof that the fate of East-Central Europe until the fall of the communist regimes was determined by the status quo the allies set up in 1945. Both the United States and the Soviet Union, the two superpowers that controlled the bipolar world order after World War II, were guided by this tacit agreement of the East-West relationship even though the agreement has never been recorded in any official document. Their mutual consent worked as an automatic rule of thumb in the chilliest years of the Cold War era and



Csaba Bekes is the Director of the Cold War History Research Center in Budapest and visiting Fulbright professor at NYU

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Thaci: Kosovo Will Not Settle for Less Than Independence

Columbia University: Tuesday, Nov. 14
By Dragana Vesovic

Kosovo and Serbia can live in peace only as two independent states, said Hashim Thaci, president of the Democratic Party of Kosovo, at Columbia University on Tuesday, Nov. 14. "Without borders and sovereignty for both countries there will be no peace for our peoples," Thaci said.

Serbia's proposal to grant Kosovo "more than autonomy and less than independence" is unacceptable, Thaci said. The people of Kosovo will not settle for less than independence. If Serbia fails to recognize this, the situation

might yet again deteriorate into a conflict, he added.

Asked about Kosovo's current economic and socio-political situation, Thaci said that Kosovo is the poorest country in the region. Although there has been some progress in the past several years, its economy remains stagnant. Organized crime, corruption and disrespect for minority rights are other troubling issues. However, a solution to these problems has been

deliberately postponed until after independence is achieved. Then, new political elites will have the opportunity to tackle current problems. For the time being, the government of Kosovo has three major priorities: "status, status and status," Thaci concluded. •



Hashim Thaci is the president of the Democratic Party of Kosovo and former political leader of the Kosovo Liberation Army

Poland Goes Its Own Way

Columbia University: Thursday, Nov. 2
By Dominika Ornatowska

The October events in Hungary in 1956 had important consequences for Poles. Several leading Polish historians, among whom Pawel Machcewicz, Krzysztof Persak, Andrzej Paczkowski, and Zdzislaw Krasnodebski, as well as Harvard University's Mark Kramer, gathered at Columbia University on Thursday, Nov. 2 to discuss the consequences of 1956 for Poland. First, Soviet ideological pressure on the Polish population was reduced substantially after the October events. The process of Sovietization of Polish political culture was halted, and nationalist histories were put back on the curriculum. In addition, the Polish Catholic Church was no longer a mere vassal of the socialist state. In

Porter: The Catholic Church Fueled Anti-Semitism in Poland

Columbia University: Monday, Oct. 30
By Dominika Ornatowska

The Catholic Church in Poland fueled apocalyptic visions of the world in the interwar period, said Brian Porter, history professor at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, at a lecture at Columbia University on Monday, Oct. 30. Dire economic conditions were fertile ground for the spread of such ideas. Evil was winning the battle against good, the church prelates preached. The Jewish minority became a scapegoat for Poland's economic plight.

Anti-Semitism grew out of perceived differences in the economic status of Poles and Jews. Over time, these differences fueled the apocalyptic rhetoric of the Catholic Church. Jews were labeled enemies of Catholicism and, by extension, as adversaries of the Polish state as well. The Catholic Church not only fueled but sought to justify growing anti-Semitism, Porter said. Ironically, Poles were more preoccupied with "the Jewish question" than with immediate foreign policy threats coming from Germany and Bolshevik Russia, he concluded. •

short, 1956 marked for Poles the demise of the ideological utopia propagated by the Soviet Union. The totalitarian state came up against strong resistance. From 1956 on, Poles perceived the communist system as a Soviet imposition, incompatible with their

culture and traditions. On a practical level, 1956 also led to the dismantling of collective farms in Poland. It would not be too far-fetched to say that after 1956, Poland diverged from the Soviet line both in ideology and in practice. •

Schmidt: Democratic Deficit Exists in the EU and in Member States

Columbia University: Monday, Nov. 20
By Dragana Vesovic

Vivien Schmidt, professor of international relations and Jean Monnet Professor of European integration at Boston University, presented her new book *Democracy in Europe: The EU and National Politics* at Columbia University on Monday, Nov. 20. The book explores the impact of EU institutions on four states: France, Great Britain, Germany, and Italy. The approach used in assessing these four cases combines methods from comparative politics,

international relations and political theory, Schmidt said.

The main point of the book is that the democratic deficit does not exist only at the EU level but also at the national level. The reason is the EU's effect on "the traditional workings of national democracies," Schmidt argues. In member states today, democracy has a two-tier structure, divided between the EU and national administrations. However, citizens of member states tend to adhere to the traditional, national perception of democracy. As a result, the main challenge for the EU is creating a discourse that

will reconcile traditional and new perceptions of democracy. So far, no such discourse has been created, Schmidt said.

Schmidt argues in her book that the EU is a regional state, characterized by highly complex governance, a composite identity and constantly changing boundaries, institutions and policies. Using the four big member states as examples, Schmidt explores how these problems affect national structures, ideas and discourses. •

EURODIGEST: *Europe in November*

Nov. 6: EU leaders sign an energy pact with Azerbaijan and emphasize EU support for the territorial integrity of that state. Human rights organizations criticize the EU's courting of Azerbaijan given the latter's human rights record.

Nov. 6: One of the worst blackouts in three decades plunges millions of Europeans into darkness over the weekend.

Nov. 10: The European Court of Human Rights finds the Kremlin complicit in the murder and abduction of Chechen civilians snatched by Russian troops between 2000 and 2002.

Nov. 13: Poland vetoes a common position on a new EU-Russia treaty because it does not state that Russia has to ratify the earlier Energy Charter Treaty (ECT) on gas and oil market access.

Nov. 15: The European Parliament approves a controversial directive aimed at liberalizing the internal services market.

Nov. 15: Human rights activists try to persuade German prosecutors to open a war crimes investigation against outgoing US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld over his alleged role in abuses at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba.

Nov. 17: The French Socialist Party nominates Ségolène Royal for presidential candidate following a vote on Thursday.

Nov. 17: Spain, France and Italy propose a Middle East peace plan, taking the British by surprise and prompting the Israelis to reject it right away.

Nov. 16: Turkey suspends military relations with France because of the latter's adoption of a law criminalizing denial of the Armenian genocide.

Nov. 22: The Left and Far Right make huge gains in Dutch elections, leaving the country in limbo.

Nov. 21: The number of Eastern European workers registered for jobs in the UK reaches half a million, figures show.

Nov. 22: Six individual countries and the European Union sign an international agreement to build the world's biggest nuclear fusion reactor, which aims to harness the same energy that powers the Sun.

Nov. 27: EU-Turkey talks on Cyprus end without an agreement.

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especially when sporadic East-West conflicts had to be subdued.

It is also increasingly obvious that several set ideas about the Cold War have to be reassessed or rectified, as previously-hidden archive sources became accessible in Western Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, and in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 1990s. A complete survey being impossible here, I will point out a few problems that might be reconsidered and amended. (1)

Interdependence and compelled co-operation

The era after Stalin's death, between 1953 and 1956, and its importance for world politics, still causes controversy. Public opinion holds that controversial political events and tendencies mark this era: the beginning of *détente*, a promising attempt at relieving tensions between East and West, on the one hand (e.g., the "spirit of Geneva" and the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party), and serious crises (the 1953 Berlin uprising, the rebellion of Poznan, Poland, in June 1956, the October events in Poland, the Hungarian revolution and the Suez crisis), on the other. No spectacular agreements were achieved in the East-West relationship during these years – apart from the cessation of hostilities in Korea and the conclusion of the Austrian state treaty. Even though it is usually presumed that something certainly changed after 1953, the logic of the Cold War prevailed until after 1956, so real *détente* started only in the mid-1960s. This very opinion explains why so many scholars even today think that the West abandoned and betrayed

Hungary in 1956. According to the rules of the Cold War game, the US administration, who called themselves "liberators of enslaved states" until October 1956, had to look no further to find a better

"The fate of East-Central Europe until the fall of the communist regimes was determined by the status quo the allies set up in 1945."

occasion to fulfil their promise than the Hungarian Revolution. The biggest paradox of this controversial era was that Eisenhower and Dulles announced their intention to peacefully liberate enslaved nations at the very end of the classical Cold War era, in the framework of the presidential campaign in the autumn of 1952. This policy or, rather, propaganda stunt, certainly contributed to the Republican victory. At the beginning of 1953 it was accepted as official government policy, an event which seemed to herald a change in world politics.

"...Many scholars even today think that the West abandoned and betrayed Hungary in 1956."

However, the "peaceful liberation of enslaved nations," as Eisenhower imagined it, meant nothing more than a *moral* obligation to fight by *peaceful means*, i.e., with words, or by the application of political pressure, at most. In the favourable international climate after Stalin's death, the authorities of both superpowers were more interested in relieving Cold War paranoia and, more tangibly, in slowing down the gallop of the arms race. The large-scale arms race, which started in the

late 1940s, had by 1953 exhausted the scarce internal resources of the Soviet Union and seriously curtailed funds intended for the development of infrastructure and domestic consumption in the newly emerged US welfare state. The race also weighed on France and England, which had hardly recovered from the ruins of the war.

The analysis of recently declassified documents from Eastern and Western

archives (in particular documents issued by the highest executive bodies) makes it clear that the most important trend between 1953 and 1956 – despite the odd disturbance and hostile propaganda – was a mutual and gradual realisation that the two rival political-military blocs and ideologies had to live side by side and tolerate one another in order to avoid a third world war, which would certainly lead to total destruction. This was such a marked departure from the idea of total confrontation that it is not too far-fetched to distinguish two radically different phases of the Cold War – before and after 1953. In fact, we could call them Cold War I and Cold War II. I consider the period between 1953 and 1956 – contrary to what many think even today – not only a promising attempt at realising the policy of *détente* but a *major landmark*, after which the Cold War was not the same as before. The general assumption has been that the defining feature of the Cold War was a bipolar world order based on the *opposition and competition* between the United States and the Soviet Union *all along*. However, I think that the *main characteristic* of the relationship between the rival superpowers after 1953 – despite ever-increasing competition and mutual antagonism – was increasing *interdependence* and *forced co-operation*.

The model started taking shape as early as 1953 and produced more tangible results after the mid-1960s, at times transforming into near-cynical co-operation. The model was punctuated by real – but more often just “apparent” crises – which caused temporary friction in East-West relations (and usually not even that) before the mechanism of compelled co-operation was restored again.

The traditional interpretation holds that the “classical” Cold War era lasted between around 1947 and 1962.(2) However, I assume that this stage, which was dominated by the idea of total confrontation, ended in 1953. What came after that can be described – in terms of the *logic* of the relationship – as the era of peaceful coexistence, a term generally used for *characterising* East-West relations in the period beginning in the mid-1960s.(3) Following the above argument, this term should be replaced with *compelled* coexistence.

Crises: real and apparent

Another important problem that needs to be revisited is the character of the crises that took place during the Cold War era. The multinational archival evidence now available to scholars proves convincingly that not every crisis of the Cold War era was attributable to the *Cold War* as far as its *main character* is concerned. After World War II and until the mid-1960s, both Eastern and Western public opinion was informed by the idea of an ideological and strategic East-West opposition. As a result, all major internal crises within the Eastern bloc were labelled as Cold War crises. This trend has been replicated in Western scholarship as well, which incorporates all those conflicts into the general history of the East-West relationship. However, it should be made clear that most of these conflicts were not real crises *in this sense* because they did not threaten the above-outlined co-operation

framework of the superpowers despite what their propaganda trumpeted. Eastern bloc crises did not pose a real threat to the interests of the opposing political-military bloc. In fact, they did not challenge the post-war European status quo and consequently did not disturb the East-West relationship in the long run. Such *apparent* East-West crises – which only had an effect at the level of public opinion and propaganda – were the 1953 Berlin uprising, the events of 1956 in Poland and Hungary, the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and, finally, the Polish conflict of 1980-1981.

"Eastern bloc crises did not pose a real threat to the interests of the opposing political-military bloc."

These were, of course, serious *internal* crises both in the countries where they occurred and within the Soviet bloc. Although these conflicts were rooted in the domestic situation, they were not isolated from international developments. In fact, because they occurred in the Cold War context, their beginning and course were at least partially affected, while their outcomes were basically determined by the Cold War. They were also perceived as real conflicts between East and West by contemporary public opinion (but not by policymakers) both in the East and in the West, and this evaluation has survived in public memory even after the end of the Cold War. In *this sense* – and only in this sense – they could be called Cold War crises. However, as pointed out above, they were not crises of East-West relations.

Another crisis of consequence was the Suez crisis of 1956, a serious

conflict that unfolded at the same time as the Hungarian Revolution but which did not have an effect on East-West relations. It was, rather, a conflict within the Western alliance (4). The Soviet leadership assessed the situation realistically and decided not to get involved. The Soviets were not willing to confront the West in defence of Egypt. (5)

Fundamentally different from the above-mentioned conflicts were those crises that did create a serious clash of interest between East and West. Some of them increased the likelihood of a general East-West armed confrontation. Such *real* Cold War crises were the two Berlin crises

(in 1948 and in 1958-61), the Korean War, the Chinese off-shore islands crises in the mid- and late 1950s (6), the Cuban Missile Crisis, the war in Vietnam, and the Soviet invasion of

Afghanistan. These crises represented real threats to world peace and had a long-lasting effect on East-West relations.

A reinterpretation of the essence of the Cold War could explain a contradiction which is seemingly difficult to unravel: why it is that the most outspoken and direct military challenge of the whole era – the so-called “missile notes” of Soviet Prime Minister Bulganin – was advanced during the Middle Eastern pseudo-crisis of 1956. (7) Even more intriguingly, recently opened sources reveal just how restrained the leaders of the superpowers were; they actually demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility and good intentions in dealing with the Cuban Missile Crisis, the largest threat to global peace to date. (8)

For a full version of this article, see: www.coldwar.hu/publications.

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Endnotes:

1) Parallel with revealing new sources - especially from archives of the former Soviet Bloc - international historiography, mainly in the United States, has been reinterpreting the history of the Cold War since the early 1990s. It is worth noting a few important works of the already bulky collection of new interpretations: Richard H. Immerman (ed.): *John Foster Dulles and the Diplomacy of the Cold War*. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1990; David Holloway: *Stalin and the Bomb: the Soviet Union and Atomic Energy, 1939-1956*. New Haven, 1994; Melvyn P. Leffler, Davis S. Painter (eds.): *Origins of the Cold War. An International History*. London—New York, Routledge, 1994; Vojtech Mastny: *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years*. New York, 1996; Vladislav Zubok — Konstantin Pleshakov: *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War. From Stalin to Khrushchev*. Harvard University Press, 1996; John Lewis Gaddis: *We Now Know*. New York, 1997; Marc Trachtenberg: *A Constructed Peace. The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. See also *Bulletin* (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project, Washington D.C. — hereinafter called *CWIHP Bulletin*), Nos.1-14. and *CWIHP Working Papers*.

2) This chronology is generally used in international historiography.

3) The term “peaceful coexistence” was originally used by Lenin and then reinvented by the old-new Soviet leadership right after Stalin’s death. For a long time, it remained a *Soviet* category, since the Western powers, especially the US were unwilling to accept this concept. This happened only gradually from the mid-nineteen-sixties.

4) While the view that the Suez crisis was basically a conflict within the Western alliance is generally accepted in Western scholarship, interestingly enough, in the former Soviet Bloc countries it is still widely regarded a serious East-West conflict. This contradiction itself suggests that further examination of the nature and the contemporary and retrospective perception of the crises during the Cold War era would be beneficial not only for history writing but for other disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology and political science as well.

5) A fine example of this pragmatic Soviet opinion is Khrushchev’s announcement at the meeting of the CPSU Presidium on 31 October 1956, hastening an armed intervention in Hungary: “If we depart from Hungary, it will give a great boost to the Americans, English and French - the imperialists. They will perceive it as weaknesses on our part and will go onto the offensive.... To Egypt they will then add Hungary.” Namely, the possibility of backing president Nasser was not even considered, the Soviet leaders gave up on Egypt at the very moment of the Israeli-British-French attack. Cf. The “Malin Notes” on the Crises in Hungary and Poland, 1956. Mark Kramer ed. *CWIHP Bulletin*, Issue 8-9. p. 393.

6) Communist China started to shell the offshore islands of Quemou and Matsou, occupied by the Chinese Nationalist government in Taiwan in 1954. Although it became clear what the real

motives of the Beijing leadership were (as eventually they did not invade the islands) these attempts potentially posed a continuous danger of “hot war” between the two military alliances in the mid- and late fifties because of a US security guarantee defending the territorial integrity of Taiwan. The historical importance of this crisis, however, has been generally and unduly underestimated in public memory both in the East and the West. For a recent account on this crisis see: Chen Jian: *Mao's China and the Cold War*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 2001,163-204 pp. For the fascinating minutes of conversations between Mao and Khrushchev discussing also this issue in 1958 and 1959, see: Vladislav Zubok: *The Khrushchev-Mao Conversations*, 31 July-3 August 1958 and 2 October 1959, *CWIHP Bulletin*, Issue 12/13, Fall/Winter 2001, 243-272 pp..

7) Once it became apparent from the reaction of American leaders that the Israeli-British-French coalition would be forced to retreat by the United States, the Soviet Union came up with the biggest political bluff of the Cold War era: Prime Minister Bulganin sent telegrams to his British and French colleagues on 5 November 1956, demanding an immediate ceasefire, or otherwise the Soviet Union would launch a missile attack against Paris and London. At the same time, a telegram sent to the Israeli government questioned the very existence of Israel as a state.

8) For the latest research on the Cuban crisis, see *CWIHP Bulletin*, Issues 1 (Spring, 1992), 3 (Fall, 1993) and 5 (Spring, 1995). See also *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*, a National Security Archive Documents Reader, Washington D.C.

Montenegro Faces Challenges

Columbia University: Wednesday, Nov. 8
By Dragana Vesovic

The greatest challenge the Montenegrin government currently faces is how to reconcile a deeply polarized population in the post-referendum era, said Alex Grigor’ev Roinishvili, director of the Western Balkans Program, at a talk at Columbia University on Wednesday, Nov. 8.

Montenegrins voted for independence by a narrow margin in May of this year. Yet, deep divisions over Montenegro’s status persist. “[The situation] requires [a] smart policy of Montenegrin

political authority. A lack of it can lead to an open conflict,” Roinishvili said.

Fellow lecturer Branislav Srdanovic, former permanent representative of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to the United Nations, said another big challenge for Montenegro is determining the constitutional rights of minorities. Since the Montenegrin population consists of diverse ethnic and religious groups, their rights must be protected by a new constitution, Srdanovic said.

Ethnic minorities carried the vote for independence. The

government should give them credit by recognizing their demand for guaranteed parliamentary representation. Otherwise, a sense of betrayal might lead to the spread of radical ideas, especially among the ethnic Albanian minority, Roinishvili explained.

The prospect of European Union membership is the single most important factor for securing future stability for Montenegro and for the Balkan region in general, Srdanovic said. The Balkan states should be exempted from the established “first standards, then membership” rule and should join the EU as soon as possible. Otherwise, anything can happen, Srdanovic said. •

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Friday, Dec. 8 at 4:00 pm

Gender in Transition workshop: "Conscientious Objection and Women's Access to Reproductive Health Services: Analysis of Pichon and Sajous v. France"

Adriana Lamackova, Intern, Center for Reproductive Rights, University of Toronto

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Friday, Dec. 8 at 6:00 pm

Zerilli-Marimò/City of Rome Prize for Italian Fiction

Award Ceremony

Reading and Conversation with the authors (in English):

Salvatore Niffoi - *La leggenda di Redenta Tiria* (Adelphi, 2005)

Valeria Parrella - *Per grazia ricevuta* (minimum fax, 2005)

Antonio Scurati - *Il sopravvissuto* (Bompiani, 2005)

Guest of Honor: Rachel Cohen (Author, *A Chance Meeting*)

Zerilli-Marimò Prize awarded to Valeria Parrella

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Thursday, Dec. 7 at 5:00pm

Lecture: "German-American Relations in Historical Perspective"

Fritz Stern, University Professor Emeritus

Maison Francaise, Broadway at 116th Street, Buell Hall, 2nd Floor

Wednesday, Dec. 13 at 12:30pm

Lecture: "Social Security Systems under Pressure: The Politics of Demographic Change"

Kurt Biedenkopf, Universität Leipzig
1510 International Affairs Building

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Thursday, Dec. 7 at 6:00 pm

Lecture: "Democracy Seventeen Years After the Fall of the Iron Curtain"

Jiří Dienstbier, signatory of Charter 77; editor of the underground

Czechoslovak newspaper *Lidové noviny*; spokesperson of the

Coordinating Center of Civic Forum; Czechoslovakia's first post-communist

foreign minister; ambassador-at-large and President Havel's personal

representative to the Group of Sixteen

Heads of State for Multilateral Cooperation and Reform of the United

Nations from 1994 to 2000; the UN's Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and

the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from 1998-2001.

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Thursday, Dec. 7 at 7:30 pm

Milou en Mai by L. Malle

Avery Hall, Auditorium TBA

Monday, Dec. 11 at 7:00 pm

Book Club: La Television by J-P Toussaint

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Tuesday, Dec. 12 at 5:30 pm

"The US Midterms, the French Primary: Cause and Effect on EU Anti-Americanism"

Irene Finel-Honigman, SIPA, Columbia University

Room C205

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Friday, Dec. 8 at 12:30 pm

"Trading Up: The End of Neoliberalism in Latin America, Labor Market Regulation, and Economic Development"

Michael Piore, MIT

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