Timofey Agarin, *A Cat's Lick. Democratisation and Minority Communities in the Post-Soviet Baltic*, Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2010, 379 p. ISBN 978-9042-029-89-7

Quite a lot has been written about the Baltic transformation after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Usually the Balts themselves, as well as some Western authors, consider the democratisation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania an example of success. And in fact, institutional reform, the democratisation of the political system, in the Baltic states was sufficiently smooth. Political practice confirmed this theoretical finding: all three Baltic countries became members of Western democratic structures, the EU and NATO. True, there is no single answer to the question why the political development of the Baltic states was faster than that of the other post-Soviet neighbours. Progress has been explained in different ways. It is argued that the impact of Western structures and their desire to expand to the east had an influence on the Baltic states' transformation, their democratisation (as for other Central European countries). On the other hand, the expansion was where the values of those structures, liberal democracy, the free market, had public support. In any case, most authors agree that external and internal factors influenced the successful democratisation. One of these was the national consolidation of the Baltic societies, or, more simply, the more expressed national identity of those societies. This factor was an important premise for the formation of stable democratic political systems. It is true that scholars evaluate the influence of national factor on the processes of democratisation ambiguously.

Timofey Agarin assesses the democratisation of the Baltic States critically. In fact, the study is interesting for this alone. According to the author, the democratisation of the Baltic countries was superficial, i.e. the Balts rather successfully adapted the democratic institutions characteristic of the West, but the democratisation of societies, the adoption of Western liberal values essential for the effective, transparent functioning of the political system, was clearly delayed. On the other hand, according to the author, in the Baltic states tension was formed between the formally democratic political institutions and societies, which to a great extent remained closed and influenced by nationalism. By the way, the logic of the interpretation is not new. In a similar manner, the democratisation of Central European countries, including the Baltic States, in the interwar period was interpreted, which as we know was not successful. Authoritarian regimes, whose ideology was based on integral nationalism, replaced the

unstable democracies in practically the whole region. It is also noted that an important factor destabilising the role of democratic political systems was the national tension between the titular nations and the ethnic minorities.

In the book, Agarín discusses the democratisation of societies in the context of the relations of the dominant nations and the national minorities. The study analyses the relations of Latvians, Estonians and Russian-speakers, as well as Lithuanians-Poles in the perestroika period, i.e. until the restoration of independence, as well as the ethno-policies of the new nation-states. State language policies, the development of citizenship laws and questions on the adaptation of national minorities are discussed in detail. The reader will find in these chapters of the book many useful and valuable materials, as well as interesting insights by the author. Even the occasional minor errors do not diminish the value of the completed study. For example, on p. 77 it is stated that the councils of the Vilnius and Šalčininkai districts in September 1989 announced not only the creation of a Polish autonomous district, but also raised the demand for the districts' 'membership in a Soviet federation as autonomous individual – national units'. At that time, the councils of the districts proclaimed national autonomy in the composition of the Lithuanian SSR. Or on p. 86: the Vilnius district was 'in Poland's sovereignty' from 1923 until 1939 and not as stated in the book (from 1919 to 1940.)

I will discuss somewhat more broadly several more interesting and important insights of the author from a methodological point of view. According to Agarín, when they were fighting for the liberalisation and democratisation of the Soviet system, some members of ethnic minorities were inclined to cooperate with the Baltic national movements. Similarly, the elites of the titular nations seeking political allies tried to develop relations with the national minorities. However, when the democratisation of the system acquired a clear orientation to the restoration of nation-states, and especially after winning independence, the strategy of the majority toward the minorities began to change. The Baltic elites adopted various laws, with the help of which they tried to dissociate the minorities from national policies, to marginalise them. Among the politicians of the titular nations, the increasingly prevalent belief was that national minorities posed a threat to the national states. However, also among the ethnic minorities, the conviction became ever stronger that the newly formed nation-states, although proclaiming to be democratic, were not, because they did not take into account the needs of the minorities. Between the majority and the minority, there began to form a social separation, which later, with the Balts consolidating their statehood, internal tensions only deepened and became stronger. These circumstances, in the author's view, testify to the shortage of democracy in the societies of the Baltic States.

In essence, one can agree with these conclusions by Agarín: the relations in the Baltic states between the titular nations and the national

minorities remain quite complex. On the other hand, it must be noted that inter-ethnic tensions did not spill over into violent conflicts. And this is evidence of a certain civilised (as well as democratic) quality of the majority and the minority.

How does the author answer the question, what factors determined these dynamics in the relations between the titular nations and the national minorities? Agarín provides, in my opinion, a rather interesting interpretation. His version is supported in theory by the works of T. Martin, R. Sunny and Y. Slezkín, which analysed the specifics of ethno-federalism in the USSR. So Agarín concludes that the late Soviet ethno-federalism in the Baltic area shaped the separation between the titular nations and the national minorities. Ethno-federalism created the preconditions for the cultural expression of the titular nations, their social mobility, and, ultimately, ethnic mobilisation. On the other hand, the model of ethno-federalism not only did not form the conditions for the integration of the national minorities into the culture of the titular nation, but also encouraged their insularity and social-political passivity. In this way, Agarín refutes the widespread belief that the national minorities (in particular, we have in mind Russian speakers) were in corpore a support of the imperial Soviet system. Perestroika policies encouraged the participation of the minorities, but the re-established Baltic nation-states, rejecting the Soviet heritage and practices, preserved the political principle characteristic of Soviet ethno-federalism: the separation of ethnic minorities (pp. 92–93).

These are observations worthy of further and deeper study. However, it seems to me that the author ignores another important factor influencing the mutual relations between the titular nations and the national minorities. One cannot ignore the fact that there was another institution organising the Soviet system: the centralised CPSU. The Balts, at least a clear majority of them, perceived the CPSU as an instrument of Russification, posing a threat to their national identity. And the ethnic minorities that formed in the Soviet period in the Baltic States, primarily Russian speakers, were understood as an instrument of the Russification policies.

In summary, the study by Timofey Agarín is definitely interesting and valuable, for both its insights and abundance of factual materials. It will interest both scholars studying the ethno-policies of the Baltic States and the more curious reader, for whom this may perhaps be the first book about the relations between the Balts, the titular nations, with the national minorities.

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