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# CRITICAL DISCUSSION FORUM: NEW WAR FRONTIERS AND THE END OF POSTSOCIALISM

## Introduction

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The annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, followed soon after by Brexit, the Syrian refugee crisis, and the 2016 presidential elections in the United States have all had enormous impact on Eastern Europe. They have fractured east European states' commitment to the continuity of western (neo)liberal projects, leading many to rethink their own national histories. This Forum contributes to discussions of post-2014 political transformations in eastern Europe by focusing on the militarization of the region, the threats to liberalism, and the emergence of new polarized civil societies. We argue that the emergence of the new war frontiers, where war is actual or eventual, after 2014 is likely to mark the end of postsocialism and the beginning of a new historical and political era in the region.

The new frontiers are extensive and porous. They become part of people's experience of western countries, as in the case of the shooting down of MH17, the Malaysian Airlines jetliner in eastern Ukraine in 2014 with many Dutch passengers, or Ukrainian asylum seekers from the war zones. These new war frontiers also create new borders and boundaries that divide NATO countries and allies from other military alliances and minorities from titular nationalities. We ask how the new war frontiers emerge as powerful emotional, moral, and symbolic landscapes defined by anxieties and new justice regimes (Wanner, Neofotistos, Klumbytė); how they materialize as soundscapes of war and dreamscapes of warfare (Ozoliņa); how they become embodied by dying, grieving, and remembering (Wanner); and what their effects are in shaping sovereignty, nationhood, and identity. At the frontiers, commitment for liberalism coexists with illiberal politics and military emancipation. They are frontiers of hybrid warfare and hybrid resistance.

Unlike the Iron Curtain, which symbolized the frozen divide between socialist eastern Europe and the USSR and the capitalist west, the new war frontiers are spaces of eventfulness.<sup>1</sup> Russian jets violate NATO airspace, NATO troops travel with NATO flags on highways, mock military exercises are launched, imagined occupations are staged, a border patrol gets kidnapped and real spies are arrested. The national and international media industry contributes to creating the war frontiers as spaces

1. Discussions with Catherine Wanner, Nancy Ries, Vasiliki Neofotistos, and Liene Ozoliņa have shaped the idea of the Forum as well as this Introduction; my gratitude goes out to all of them. I am deeply thankful to Bruce Grant, as well as Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, for their insightful comments and suggestions.

of eventfulness, as in the 2016 BBC fantasy film “Putin’s Invasion,” which depicts a Russian incursion into Latvia and a nuclear attack on the UK. These films do more than simply envision dystopian futures: they create their own kind of military aesthetics, where the concrete dangers of war are wrought in exquisite detail to large audiences. The war dangers resurface in mock events, disinformation, and propaganda. One can read on an alleged US Department of Defense website that a B-52 bomber in Lithuania destroyed an apartment building in Klaipėda region by discharging a B-61 nuclear bomb model. In the fake news, victims are often children, as in the case of a crucified three-year-old boy in Ukraine or a raped teenage orphan in Lithuania. These stories dehumanize the projected enemies of the Russian Federation, whether the Ukrainian Army, in the first case, or the NATO German troops, in the second.

At the frontiers, relations are dramatized and emotions overflow. In Ukraine, memories of real victims are integrated into everyday urban landscapes. The “sites of immortality” emerge on the Maidan, the central Kyiv square, where over 100 civilian protesters were killed in 2014. Ritualized mourning, as argued by Catherine Wanner, is a response to the affective materiality of death and plays a key role in defining space in terms of sovereignty, borders, and sacredness. Here the dead speak to us of undeclared wars.

The emergence of the war frontiers after 2014 is likely to mark the end of postsocialism. First, the two eras, are shaped by different temporalities: postsocialism was primarily defined by rearticulation of the socialist past. The post-2014 era has been shaped by anticipation of an uncertain future, with the proposition that this uncertainty may be tamed by pursuing either a pro-European, pro-western, or pro-Russian alliance. Second, the two eras are defined by different governance regimes: the postsocialist period marked the triumph of liberalism and democracy, while newly emerging polarized societies espouse populist and illiberal ideologies, raising concerns about the return of authoritarianism. The war frontiers era is a time of changing politics when the dominant social contract, based on knowledge about Europe, democracy, and liberalism has been discontinued. Third, the war frontiers era is defined by a new geopolitical regime. Postsocialism was structured by a choice: either integrating into the European Union (EU) and NATO or upholding the political and military alliances of the socialist period. In the postsocialist period, east European countries were the eastern periphery of Europe, inferior to west European nations, lacking identity and political competences to be democratic. The war frontiers are defined by the threat of disintegration of supranational alliances and the Baltics as the frontline of western democracy and regional security.<sup>2</sup> Fourth, the war frontiers era is also a time of rising social movements, some uniting against illiberalism or authoritarianism, others embodying the new left and new civil societies. Unlike in 1989, these

2. See Dace Dzenovska and Larisa Kurtović, “Introduction: Lessons for Liberalism from the ‘Illiberal East,’” *Fieldsights*, April 25, 2018, at <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/1421-introduction-lessons-for-liberalism-from-the-illiberal-east> (accessed May 7, 2018).

social movements have global connections and are not organized around political figures.<sup>3</sup>

The militarization of the region, the threats to liberalism, and the emergence of new polarized civil societies are the new developments not anticipated in major works conceptualizing postsocialist transitions and transformations. At the war frontiers, the postsocialist pathways that opened after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the USSR are closing. Waiting and uncertainty define the current time. Postsocialism may have ended, but as Liene Ozoliņa warns us in her Forum article, its analytical toolkit is still useful for tracing how the current social and political tensions have come to be.

3. See Emily Channell-Justice, “‘Time for Intensive Change’: Ukrainian Revolutions in Global Context,” *Revolutionary Russia*, April 24, 2019: 1–25, doi: [10.1080/09546545.2019.1603382](https://doi.org/10.1080/09546545.2019.1603382) (accessed May 5, 2019); Jessica Greenberg and Ivana Spasić, “Beyond East and West: Solidarity Politics and the Absent/Present State in the Balkans,” *Slavic Review* 76, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 315–26.