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in conversation with Larisa Venediktova

I am the Border. Reflections on Resistance, Cooperation and Art

On May, 22d 2017 I was standing on the bridge in the village of Rukhi waiting until international group of my colleagues passed so called «border» of a breakaway region Abkhazia. The word border in quotation marks signals about a rupture between two images of reality – declared by Georgian and international law absence of border and factual presence of a checkpoint and armed “border guards”. As a person born in USSR – a country that doesn’t literally exist anymore but whose ideas are somehow (often in a hidden way) vivacious in the heads of its former members – I could not let myself go to Abkhazia. The argument that cinched my decision was that to enter Abkhazia I would have to talk to representatives to the Russian secret service. These representatives are direct successors and carriers of Chekist ethics. As for me, agreement to talk to the carriers of such ethics can be given only by somebody who is not fully aware of historical and present activity of this organization. *Interaction with the aggressor in the name of no matter how good intentions by the very act of its occurrence to a greater or lesser extent but inevitably becomes cooperation, which literally means legitimization of the aggressor.*

I can not help but mention that, recently in 2018, FSB officers celebrated their professional holiday – the 100 years anniversary of All-Russian Special Commission – CheKa, an organization that subsequently killed millions of citizens of its own country (according to various estimates, from 3.8 million to 9.8 million people were repressed only for political reasons) [2]. Before that day, FSB’s head Alexander Bortnikov in

an interview to the *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* declared that «cleansing of the 1930s was in many respects necessary, because of conspiracies against the Soviet leadership [2]. This publication removes any doubts that current FSB is the successor of the CheKa. Unfortunately, unlike the crimes of Nazis, the crimes of Chekists have never been investigated and condemned. Maybe the roots of this problem partly go back into the times of the Nuremberg Trials.

Karl Jaspers in *The Question of German Guilt* writes that eventually justice was not established during the Nurnberg Trials, as judges like Russian Bolsheviks should have also been judged for the crimes of no less scale*. Something like *The Question of Soviet Guilt* has never been published or even written on the territory of former Soviet Union. Moreover, one of the key festivals of today's Soviet People has always been A Victory Day. Soviet Army is the army of winners. May be this is the reason why it so fearlessly continues its conquest. Who is going to stop it? Or where should it reach for the international community to react?

We argue that European weak resistance to Russian intrusion into dolorous issues of the countries of former soviet control (in particular, Georgian-Abkhazian war in 1992–1993 and Russo-Georgian war in 2008) resulted in clandestine toleration of Russian military presence on the territory of the other countries and Russian direct participation in the process of breaking away of some regions. Absence of sharp reaction of the civilized world to Russian recognition of break away states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia gave Russia a free hand in annexation of Crimea and occupation of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine (we have to be ready for the next points of Russian terroristic appetite). The issue of international communities is always the people that suffer form conflicts, experience violation of the human rights and lack communication with the Western world. Maybe, their position could have been improved if international cooperation have put more efforts

* Translation from Russian is mine.

to the increase – with any possible means including artistic – of the pressure on the leaders and representatives of the influential European countries in order not only to express their «deep concern», but also to show some more profound reaction on the tremendous and repeatable breaks of an international law.

Finally, I stayed in Zugdidi and spent time talking to people in the cafes, on the market, in public places. I also went to the IDP's settlement and tried to talk to IDPs who escaped from Abkhazia in the nineties, when the war started. Each time I risked asking them a very banal question: "Why did the war start, in your opinion?" The answer was almost similar every time: "It was like a bald from the blue" or "we lived in peace, together, everybody, Abkhazians, Georgians, Greeks, Armenians, altogether, nobody could even imagine that this massacre would happen". Probably, the role of peace building activists in conflict zones could have been realized in creating conditions for reflection of the darkest sides of conflict history so that for all of people involved in it any tragic events provoked by people didn't look like *Naturgewalt*. Otherwise, so desirable ultimate resolution of the conflict will be its never-ending freezing that only pretends to be a peace.

Despite Russian interference into elections in the USA and some countries of Europe, Europeans are still inclined to insist on necessity of relatively dense engagement with Russia's brain washed people. Contrary to the inhabitants of the conflict zones, civilized people feel safe having an illusion that they have a possibility to escape from the spaces of war. In Report to the Club of Rome, researchers assert that the humankind should transform their perception from "empty world" (the world of unexplored territories and excess of resources) to "full world" (filled to the brink, with rather vague perspectives for further expansion of the borders) [4]. May be this concept of "full world" is meant to tell us that escape is impossible. Meanwhile, this illusion of safety deepens the danger of Russian (Soviet) influence on the civilized world.

There is no chance to build the dialogue with the people from breakaway entities without legitimizing military and ideological presence / influence of the Russian terrorist, legal successor of the Soviet Union (I don't mean here pure humanitarian help). Let's remind ourselves the thesis of Hannah Arendt about the role of Jewish leaders in the Holocaust. Hannah Arendt claims that benevolent intentions of the leaders and organization of Jewish people has led to the victim number increase. "Wherever Jews lived, there were recognized Jewish leaders, and this leadership, almost without exception, cooperated in one way or another, for one reason or another, with the Nazis. The whole truth was that if the Jewish people had really been unorganized and leaderless, there would have been chaos and plenty of misery but the total number of victims would hardly have been between four and a half and six million people" [1]. So, maybe the favor of moral help (also through art) provided by Western people to the inhabitants of conflict regions in fact prevents them from reflection on their current situation and somehow feed their expectations of patronal support.

Since the 20th century human civilization exists in the situation of anomie". This word comes from the Greek ἀνομία "lawlessness", and denotes a lack of the usual social or ethical standards in an individual or group. This state is most familiar to inhabitants of totalitarian states, who cannot even pretend that things are normal. For instance, the Constitution of the USSR was considered the most democratic and the fairest. But in reality people lived in constant fear and, as Osip Mandelstam said, "with no sense of country" [4]. Soviet citizens didn't even look to the Constitution or laws for a measure of justice because the actual injustices they knew were detached from the declared principles. Actually, this "ideal" Constitution served as a mask to hide the reality of Soviet life from Western cooperation.

** The term of Emil Durkheim used by Giorgio Agamben in his book *Homo Sacer: State of Exception*

In the name of peacebuilding, well-meaning Europeans unwittingly normalize and fortify the state of emergency instead of problematizing and reflecting on it. I believe that the work of Western organizations building bridges to reach people who they treat as hostages of historical injustice only increases the spread of anomie across the entire world. Positioning these people as victims discourages possibilities for resistance.

What can art do in the situation of durational conflict that doesn't give any miniscule hope for resolution? Can art become an instrument for building peace? I hardly believe so. Definitely, art (the same as the slightest human action) has a powerful impact on the world we live in. Models and concepts articulated by artistic practice form the modes of perception and the ways of thinking. There is an old proverb: those who create the song for the people owe people's hearts. But no one can use art as an instrument for realizing one's good intentions (if don't speak about manipulation). Art becomes political when it is free from the necessity of achieving any political goal.

With my gesture *I am the Border*, which presupposes my repeated crossing of the administrative line ("border") as many times as possible during the day, I indicate and intentionally underscore this situation of anomie, which becomes visible on the border in its greatest manifestation. I break the habitual connection between the issue of crossing the administrative line and its function. The space for passive resistance could be already created by publicly declared boycott only. *But amplification of this situation of anomie by incessantly crossing the "border" simultaneously makes it visible and attempts to destabilize this situation that constantly strives for normalization.*

There are no doubts that the very gesture of crossing this administrative line will evoke suspicion at the very early stages, as this gesture doesn't have any purpose in its manifestation. While crossing the "border" strengthens the very occasion of its existence, emphasizing the

division of the territory itself, while boycotting puts into question the very relevance and validity of the administrative line's function of separation, the aimless gesture of walking, devoid of the necessity to reach either side, somehow performs the operation of erasure, thus depriving the "border" of its functionality. On the one hand, the gesture of repeatedly crossing an existing non-existent "border" without a (declarable) "purpose" has the potential to decrease its power and significance. On the other hand, possible aggressive reaction on this gesture reveals the very dangerous nature of this administrative line per se.

Actually, with my piece *I am the border* I simply repeat everyday routine of people who cross the administrative line in order to get medical help or to go shopping in Zugdidi. But my gesture, detached from any necessity, pulls this fake border out of utilitarian use acquired by the years of its existence, manifesting its vanity and danger.

It seems to me that the border is not something that passes through particular spaces or is set by secret service agents or international laws (which do not really work anymore, especially when talking about the East), but is in each of us. It is precisely here that Europe, with its glorious past and history of colonization, borders with barbarism. Is there an armed body guard inside of us? What does it look like?

References

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4. Von Weizsaecker, E., Wijkman, A. Come On! Capitalism, Short-termism, Population and the Destruction of the Planet, Springer, 2018, 220 p.