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Book review: Leonidas Donskis (2013). *Fifty Letters from the Troubled Modern World: A Philosophical-Political Diary 2009-2012*. Nordhausen, Germany: Verlag Traugott Bautz.

Leonidas Donskis' "Fifty Letters from the Troubled Modern World" truly reads like a collection of letters from a European intellectual, philosopher, art and literary critic, politician and a historian of ideas. Its "unfinished and open-ended" (197) nature is both thought provoking and frustrating. The book covers a wild variety of current affairs topics ranging from the Arab Spring to the convoluted intricacies of the Belgian identity. As typical for Donskis, his writings are dotted with references to the works of Niccolò Machiavelli, William Shakespeare, George Orwell, Zygmunt Bauman, Milan Kundera and numerous other prominent intellectual, literary and artistic figures.

Despite its smörgåsbord flavor, I would single out at least five recurrent themes. First and foremost, it is about modernity. Following Bauman, Donskis argues that we live in the times of second (liquid) modernity with uncertainty, unsafety, insecurity (58) and technological revolution (64) as its defining features. The reification of power and its separation from politics creates ambiguous and insensitive new world where right wing policies are fused with left-wing rhetoric (157). Technology exaggerates and globalizes these manifestations of modernity reducing our societal interests to two Hollebecqian cornerstones: the entertainment of politics and the politics of entertainment (136).

Second, it is about historical memory. As a true Balt, he displays deep sensitivity toward history and the dangers of its political instrumentalization. Donskis passionately disapproves of the attempts to compare the Holocaust and the Soviet crimes against humanity. In fact, he goes even further arguing against the inflation of genocide, which according to Donskis can only be related to the Holocaust (169). He does not spare Lithuania for its attempts to construct a selective narrative of bravery and victimhood, which excludes Lithuanian Jews and their tragic fate during the WWII (164). However, Putin's Russia receives the brunt of author's intellectual contempt. Kremlin's Soviet nostalgia and its attempts to rewrite history are seen not only as a threat to the Russian society, but also to Russia's immediate neighbors. The language here turns surprisingly candid and blunt. Donskis, a self-proclaimed anti-Soviet Russophile, does not mince words describing Putin as a "nostalgic, colorless, faceless, and soulless figure" (92).

The criticism of Russian political elites also turns around their dismal human rights record, a third pillar of the book. As a MEP and a Coordinator in the Subcommittee on Human Rights at the European Parliament on behalf of the ALDE political group, Donskis is deeply concerned with Putin's "managed" democracy, especially its appropriation of fight against terrorism as a cover up for criminal abuses of power in the Caucasus and beyond (18). The author is equally troubled by Old Europe's double standards on human rights. This "self-inflicted blindness" (34) is usually meant for the big partner states like Russia or China, while small ones are held to a different standard. For Donskis, this impersonates the Realpolitik of the modern age.

Such double standards by European political elites also raise questions about the identity and future of the European Union. This is the fourth thread weaving through the book. While the author strongly adheres to the notion of common European home, especially when it comes to education and culture (155), he readily admits that the European project has recently hit a snag. The European financial crisis transformed the relatively egalitarian Union into a hierarchical system of creditors and debtors (158). In Donskis opinion, this is Germany's time to take up the leadership and hold the European Union together.

Finally, I single out the rise technology and its interaction with politics as the fifth recurrent theme of the book. Donskis approaches new technology as the key feature and instrument of the second modernity. In fact, technological change allegedly outpaces politics demolishing its traditional structures and reducing it to sophisticated communication games. The result is the end of politics as "it used be" and the beginning of "outright buffoonery" (193-4).

For all its intellectual insights and morsels of wisdom, the book raises as many questions as it answers. Since all the "letters" are just a few pages long, they are inevitably tightfisted on details. Is technology indeed that powerful, as it might have seemed in the early days of the Arab Spring? Haven't the traditional political/power structures survived just fine in all Arab countries?

Is Realpolitik an exclusive feature of modernity? For its origins, one might need to go much further than Machiavelli. It was the Athenians, who in the words of Thucydides famously pronounced one of Realpolitik's dictums: "(...) right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they will and the weak suffer what they must."<sup>1</sup> The essence of politics as "it used be" seems not that different from politics as they are.

If the Holocaust is the only instance of genocide in human history, doesn't the term "genocide" become superfluous? Even Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term, argued that the Armenian massacres by the Ottoman government qualified as genocide. Weren't the Armenians in the eyes of the Ottoman empire "guilty at birth" (168) just like Jews in the eyes of the Nazis?

Does Shakespeare sound modern or do we sound Medieval? How uncertain, unsafe and insecure are modern Scandinavian or Japanese societies? Can Russia afford a war with NATO and EU members or for that matter even such countries as Ukraine? Wasn't Germany the key engine for European integration before the European financial crisis?

These and many other questions bubble up while reading Donskis' "Fifty Letters from the Troubled Modern World." A reader is left to answer them. And this is done by design. In my opinion, it is both a key strength and weakness of the book. Still for those who seek to better understand the region, this book is a must read. It touches upon all strings of the liberal Baltic heart and mind.

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<sup>1</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 5.89 (T. E. Wick ed. 1982).