Interview - Maria Mälksoo

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Maria Mälksoo is Senior Lecturer in International Security at the Brussels School of International Studies, University of Kent. Her research interests lie at the intersection of critical security studies, memory and identity politics, international political sociology and critical IR theory. She is the author of *The Politics of Becoming European: A Study of Polish and Baltic Post-Cold War Security Imaginaries* (Routledge, 2010) and a co-author of *Remembering Katyn* (Polity, 2012). She has published on European security politics, liminality, memory wars and memory laws in Eastern Europe and Russia in various journals and edited volumes. Maria holds a PhD and MPhil from the University of Cambridge. She has held visiting fellowships at the Centre for International Studies, LSE and Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, and has previously worked at the University of Tartu, Estonia. Currently, she serves at the CEEISA Executive Committee and the EISA Governing Board.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Of course, I am tempted to recall the famous sneer by Max Weber ('I'm not a donkey, and I don't have a field') – for indeed, the most animating research appears to be nesting at the intersection of traditionally understood fields. For me, that would be at the crossroads of social theory, international history, and critical IR. Studies that take seriously the persisting hierarchies in international politics (normative or otherwise, e.g., between the West and East of Europe), the related status and recognition-seeking and stigma management in the foreign policies of states at various stages of subordination, transition, development and being 'civilised' stand out and go beyond the noise of time. Especially when they assume a further-going historical perspective than the social impact-craving academic standards set to our work in the contemporary craze to uphold instrumental policy relevance really call for.

Two debates in particular excite me enough to want to be part of them. The first is the steadily expanding discussion on ontological security-seeking in international relations. There is a lightbulb-moment to it as a sense of a continuous and stable self is something universally sought, yet still understudied in its multifarious empirical occurrences. The 'security of being' is an intuitively palpable issue for any scholar as there are not many professions out there where the work and the self-esteem of the worker are so intimately intertwined. Nor are there many other lines of work in which people would so willingly subject themselves to constant evaluation by the others, thus exposing the basic existential parameters of self and social identity to perpetual probing by peers and, by consequence, the possibility of devastation of one's identity and the making or loss of one's career. The study of ontological security in international politics further reminds us of the service social theory has done to International Studies, and the mounting intellectual debt in the other direction.

The second debate (which could also be regarded as a sub-debate of the first) concerns the discussions about defending a particular identity, a way of life, or a normative order (such as democracy) by restrictions on free speech or political association. The so-called militant democracy problem is particularly intriguing for me in light of 'memory laws', setting legal limits to the legitimate and normatively available public remembrance of controversial historical issues. I have myself studied the political function of various memory laws in the memory wars between Russia and its former Soviet dependents (Ukraine, Poland, the Baltic states) and the mnemonical recognition-seeking of eastern Europe vis-à-vis the West in general. It is interesting, although hardly surprising, how the European memory of the Second World War and its 'moral lessons' has reflected the traditional power relations between the West and East of Europe. This has started to change post-EU enlargement to eastern Europe, but the emotive stakes of the debate still

remain largely geographically intact.

A number of broader questions loom behind these debates, the aspects of which I am trying to address in my current research: what is the ethical way of coming to terms with the past? How is ontological security-seeking 'at home' related to states' international behaviour? And what kind of political function has Eastern Europe as a region (and East European area studies) fulfilled for IR theory?

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

The formative experience for me was undoubtedly the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoring of the independent Estonian state. It did feel like a miracle at the time when I was a child and it still does (albeit at risk of sounding sentimental), with all the IR theoretical ammunition in tow. Being an Estonian has certainly sensitised me to what Uriel Abulof describes as the existential uncertainty of small peoples. Working in the field of IR is a constant reminder how things look different in the periphery whilst the discipline has tended to pursue its theory-building and empirical analyses from the standpoint of the most powerful actors of the international system, casting less significant loci of international agency and knowledge as marginal. My interest in liminality, in-between regions and borderline states of belonging stems from the actually-experienced end of the Soviet nonsense of an order in my native country – and what came after.

I began my academic journey as a sociology undergraduate at the University of Tartu, Estonia; got an international history bug as a Soros-funded east European junior exchange scholar at the University of Montana in Missoula from the extraordinary history professor Paul Gordon Lauren at the turn of the millennium; and grew from a self-conscious Baltic defence intellectual-in-the-making to a critical IR scholar during my graduate studies at Cambridge. My PhD and MPhil supervisor Tarak Barkawi exposed me to the postcolonial perspective in security studies and taught me much about the interconnectedness of the wars of the world and teaching itself. Iver Neumann has provided a constant well of inspiration, mentorship and guidance on disciplinary boundary-shifting ever since I first read his *Uses of the Other: the "East" in European Identity Formation* . Much of his insights on the importance of practice in the study of diplomacy was tested when I had the opportunity to serve in the team of Toomas Hendrik Ilves, the fourth president of Estonia – who has, in his turn, added valuable empirical thickness to my understanding of the everyday workings of identity in international politics and in the post-Cold War East-West diplomatic dynamics in particular. Last but not least, I have been really lucky to have my closest intellectual interlocutor in my brother Lauri who has always been there for conversing about the changing order of things in the world from the perspective of international law. As formative experiences go, his words to a 15-year old me – 'Maria, it's amazing how little you know' – carry me on.

Some of your recent work examines historical memory in the Baltic states. Could you briefly outline how the experience of Soviet rule has affected the biographical narrative in these states?

The Soviet period generally features as a rupture in the continuity of the Baltic states (and the continuity of their biographical narratives thereof) since the illegal annexation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania by the Soviet Union in the course of the Second World War marked the loss of their independent statehood for the better part of the second half of the twentieth century (that is, 1940-1991, with a spell of German occupation during World War II). The emphasis on the legal principle of state continuity (or, alternatively put, the ideology of legal restorationism) also illustrates the central importance of a continuous sense of being for the ontological security of the Baltic states. So besides all the legal and political benefits of restoring violently interrupted statehood rather than establishing new post-Soviet states in the course of secession from the USSR, there were obvious identity-related advantages for the Baltic states in reinstating their place in the community of nations in 1991. Compared to the majority of post-Soviet cases, the Baltics' clear juxtapositioning of themselves to the Soviet period as a cautionary past never to be repeated along with their interbellum experience of statehood helped with setting their post-Soviet course of development firmly on the European track. This, however, had an opposite effect on their relations with Russia as the self-proclaimed state continuator of the USSR.

Of course, a sobering realisation that the world is full of victims, historical injustice and suffering – and that the position of an exceptional victim was already occupied (even though there'll always be many contestants for the 'honour'), was bound to come later. Regardless, the Baltic states have persistently pursued criminal and historical justice vis-à-vis the Soviet communist regime, as most recently exemplified by an international conference organised as part of Estonia's Presidency of the Council of the European Union on 23 August 2017, the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Communism and Nazism. History buffs remember 23 August as the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 – an event whereby the fate of the Baltic states was sealed and an important 'memory event' in the contemporary memory wars in eastern Europe. In all, the biographical narratives of the Baltic states openly challenge the Russian state-endorsed narrative of the Soviet 'Great Patriotic War' as an exclusively defensive undertaking against Nazi aggression (which effectively ignores the Nazi-Soviet collaboration under the auspices of the said non-aggression treaty of 1939).

How does this differ from the Russian biographical narrative of the Soviet period?

Russia's state-sanctioned biographical narrative of the Soviet era is inevitably controversial as the Russian Federation has tried to inherit the great power status without really coming to terms with the massive human rights violations and international wrongdoings of its Soviet predecessor. For example, the official Russian line holds that the incorporation of the Baltic states to the USSR was voluntary – and even if it was murky around some edges, it was still legitimate, as some chips of wood had to fly in order to counter the Nazi menace. Russia has guardedly sought to defend the central elements of its state-endorsed mnemonic vision with a clause criminalising the dissemination of 'false information' on the activities of the Soviet Union during World War II, along with the now disbanded presidential commission to 'counter attempts at falsifying history against Russia's interests'. Of course, enshrining state-approved interpretations of history in law in an attempt to buttress and safeguard a version of one's past 'self' for the present needs is hardly unique to Russia. Ukraine, for instance, has its own set of controversial 'memory laws' on decommunisation, adopted shortly after the Euromaidan-generated regime change.

At the 'collected' level of remembrance, the Russian mnemonic tapestry of life and death under the Soviet regime is far more nuanced, as Svetlana Alexievich's stunning sociological collages powerfully show. By and large, the preferred frame of public remembrance of communism's violent legacy has been the victimhood and heroism of the Russian people. The state-endorsed narrative and consequent policies (or the lack thereof) have been reluctant in attributing accountability for the political repressions and identifying perpetrators. This is hardly surprising considering the deep-running continuities between the Soviet and post-Soviet elites in contemporary Russia. The political and legal assessment of the legacy of Soviet communism, as persistently called for by the "Memorial" Society in Russia, is deemed endangering for the current regime. The inhumanities of the previous regime are remembered through the lens of grief, leaving the question of responsibility effectively unaddressed. It is ironic that the current Russian regime has meanwhile appropriated the moral high ground of defending human rights, preventing genocide and remembering Holocaust in its contemporary identity-political pursuits abroad, along with pre-empting and punishing instances of the 'rehabilitation of Nazism' in the former Soviet space (think Ukraine, again). Russia's way of handling its Soviet past is the central animating force behind my current attempts to conceptualise the interconnectedness of states' transitional justice and foreign policies.

To what extent does self-identification as 'European' inform the ontological security of the Baltic states?

Identifying as 'European' is part of the normal order of things for most after the Baltic states' institutional 'return to Europe' in 2004. It is something certainly less acutely and compulsively worried about compared to the 1990s when all diplomatic efforts of the Baltic Three were essentially focused on this very mission – to become European by becoming members of the EU and NATO. I was reminded of the offhand depiction of the 'Baltic Three' as if it was a single state when touring the Mini-Europe park in Brussels with the family as the space Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania collectively take up in the exhibition is very modest indeed.

I can think of two new sets of anxieties related to the Baltic 'Europeanness', neither of which is unique to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania though. One the one hand, the handling of the most recent refugee/migration crisis has sown doubts among many in the Baltics whether 'Europe knows what it's doing'. Hence the surge of political forces in

search of a more 'authentic' and 'sovereign' self, openly admiring the model of government in Hungary and Poland along with vilifying the EU for threatening their relatively peaceful 'Hobbitland' with 'very different kind of people'. Meanwhile, critical intellectuals and liberally inclined politicians worry about the hollowness of the local European credentials in light of the scant emotional solidarity with the refugees and a rather foot-dragging political solidarity with the more immediately affected EU counterparts.

The general rise of populist parties and politics – in the Baltics just as elsewhere in Europe – underscores how important it is to better understand people's everyday insecurities, especially after experiencing such fundamental political transitions as the move from Soviet communism to European democracy.

***The Politics of Becoming European* was published in 2010. Have Polish and Baltic perceptions of Europe changed significantly since then?**

A central argument of the book was a plea to understand various European identities dialogically in order to shed light on the reasons why the sense of liminality proved so persisting in the self-conceptualisations of Poland and the Baltic states even after the EU enlargement. These days, I find the discourse *on* Poland and eastern Europe generally more intriguing than Polish and Baltic perceptions *of* Europe. It is curious how 'eastern Europe' has returned as a normative challenge in various debates concerning the EU's current sense of self. The illiberalism trending in Hungary and Poland and a vague yet widespread association of the Baltic states as the next likely battleground of a NATO-Russia confrontation are the main culprits here, along with the already mentioned lack of enthusiasm of the 'new Europeans' for solidary burden-sharing in the migration crisis. The demonising of the east European migrants in the Brexit debates in turn has further contributed to the uncanny return of the familiar tropes of eastern Europeans as 'not quite like us' – as cunning schemers and adamant nationalists for some, and troublemakers for the peace and unity in Europe for others.

This pattern suggests that perhaps the end of the Cold War as a critical juncture in recent European history did not really change the basic existential parameters of the Western self and social identity vis-à-vis its east European counterparts that much. The 'barbarians' are not anymore at the gate, but within the walls of the European order – and the latter seems to be cracking under the combined pressure of various crises.

The allure of 'illiberal democracy' in eastern Europe raises at least two uncomfortable questions for the EU: has it actually fulfilled its democracy-building promise with the accession of post-communist states in light of the frequent assessments of Central and Eastern Europe currently 'living 1989 in reverse'? Is the EU, in fact, equipped with proper legal and political instruments to intervene in case its members are undermining the Union's functioning principles in practice? This is something the Union is trying to sort out in the Polish case now.

Does the European Union itself exhibit ontological security-seeking behaviour?

Indeed it does, as ontological security-seeking is underpinning each actor's ability to act in the world with basic confidence about how the world works and one's own place within it. It is more than just defending and promoting a particular self-vision in the world (via the EU Global Strategy on foreign and security policy, for example), but also living it, ensuring maximum consistency between identity and deeds, preaching and practice. The obvious good in the ugliness of Brexit, the migration crisis, and the many anxieties and uncertainties generated by modern hybrid threats is the mirror they force in front of the EU's 'self': what are its core parameters that cannot be compromised about? What is the key value the EU seeks to defend?

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Scholarship is an exercise in endurance. I believe we all feel like discouraged occasionally. Don't give up and lose hope, despite the inevitable hard times along the way. While it would be a fascinating addition to the sociological introspection of the discipline if one would undertake a proper study of the rejections various IR scholars have received throughout their careers, it is important to keep in mind that it is less about us as agents of knowledge and more about the actual ideas and research *per se*. The research should still be enjoyable – not a source of constant

questioning of one's worth nor just part of a fad currently attracting the attention of funding bodies.

My main advice is to venture out into the 'mother fields' of IR – history, social theory, international law – without the disciplinary filters in between. Despite the perks of Google Translate, it is still wise to properly learn a few languages (not that I've followed this piece of advice particularly well myself). Ditto for a spell outside of the ivory tower – if only to realise how good we actually have it inside. Be responsible – and be brave.

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This interview was conducted by Conor O'Reilly. Conor O'Reilly is an Associate Features Editor at E-International Relations.