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PAULINA POLKO, ROMAN POLKO, ROZGROMIĆ KRYZYS. JAK ŻYĆ W ŚWIECIE DOŚWIADCZONYM PRZEZ PANDEMIE, KRYZYS I WOJNĘ, HELION SA, GLIWICE 2023, PP 213

It has been long known now that Fukuyama's² prospect of 'the end of history' has proven to be a blind alley and was in fact but a transient period following the end of the Cold War, which is considered by some to have never truly ended³. Consequently, to speak of a variety of risks and threats being omnipresent in the contemporary world is not merely an inclination of security scholars and analysts who tend to paint a black picture of the latter, but a necessity that stems from the conditions and circumstances that characterize the reality in which we happen to live. Whether we like it or not, one could argue that to paraphrase the famous maxim by Pericles, 'just because you do not take an interest in risks and threats, doesn't mean they won't take an interest in you.' The aforementioned reality indeed is one that Beck⁴ correctly dubbed the "World Risk Society." That fact had long been overshadowed during the period of the United States' supremacy that extended from the said end of the Cold War until the first decade of the XXI century and has been referred to on occasions as 'the geostrategic pause'⁵ or 'the unipolar moment'⁶. Paulina Polko and Roman Polko themselves put it clearly as they point out that "over 30 years

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² F. Fukuyama, *Koniec historii i ostatni człowiek*, Kraków 2017.

³ S. Kotkin, *The Cold War Never Ended: Ukraine, the China Challenge, and the Revival of the West*, "Foreign Affairs" 2022, Vol. 101, No. 3, pp. 64-68.

⁴ U. Beck, *Spoleczeństwo światowego ryzyka. W poszukiwaniu utraconego bezpieczeństwa*, Warszawa 2012.

⁵ R. Rączkowski, *Russkije igry z NATO – od współpracy do konfrontacji*, "Przegląd Sił Zbrojnych" 2020, pp. 27-33.

⁶ Ch. Krauthammer, *The Unipolar Moment*, "Foreign Affairs" 1990, Vol. 70 No. 1, pp. 22-33.

that the Central-Eastern Europe experienced following the Velvet Revolution in the year 1989 was an anomaly in the turbulent history of this part of the”⁷ (author’s translation).

However, the 9/11 terrorist attacks marked the end of that period and heralded the advent of a new era of the globalized world. Ever since then, the awareness of profound changes affecting the security of various entities in various dimensions of their existence has gradually risen among servicemen, scholars, politicians, and citizens⁸. The two most recent milestones in this process have undoubtedly been the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine. Both have made all of us realize (or, at least, should have) that the unpredictability, instability, and precariousness of our world encompass events and processes that elicit challenges, risks, and threats, which may occur at the level of grand geopolitical conflicts and daily life alike. Suppose we add to this the continuously declining condition of the natural environment. In that case, the prospect of AI getting out of control of its creators, or mass migration exceeding the capacity of receiving countries for absorbing it, a recipe for disaster is at hand. In such a reality, encountering all kinds of new and ubiquitous challenges, risks and threats becomes everyday bread. The picture of that reality is aptly painted by Paulina Polko and Roman Polko in their book, which builds upon the previous one, published in the year 2018 under the even more telling title “*Bezpiecznie już było. Jak żyć w świecie sieci, terrorystów i ciągłej niepewności*”⁹ (“*Safe no more. How to live in a world of network, terrorists, and permanent uncertainty.*” – author’s translation).

The book under consideration is not a scientific one. Nor is it easy to define the genre that it represents. Its greatest value, though, appears to lie in the effect that this book manages to achieve, which is bridging the gap between scientific, popular science, analytical, and journalistic genres of literature that in one way or another aim to approach political and security matters. It is important in light of the disjunction between the purposes, content, messages, and audiences of those respective genres. More often than not, scientific volumes succeed in engaging an audience made of academics but fail to attract the attention of those outside of academia. At the same time, those who write and read analytical and journalistic books, articles, or reports that abound in factual content miss out on the theoretical framework that serves as a guidepost

⁷ P. Polko, R. Polko, *RozGROMić kryzys. Jak żyć w świecie doświadczonym przez pandemię, kryzys i wojnę.*, Gliwice 2023, p. 6.

⁸ B. Buzan, *People, States, and Fear: An Agenda for International Security in the Post-Cold War Era*, Boulder 1991; B. Buzan, O. Waever, and J. de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder 1998; W. Kostecki, *Strach i potęga. Bezpieczeństwo międzynarodowe w XXI wieku.*, Warszawa 2012.

⁹ P. Polko, R. Polko, *Bezpiecznie już było. Jak żyć w świecie sieci, terrorystów i ciągłej niepewności.*, Gliwice 2018.

for navigating a world of complexity, uncertainty, and turbulence. Therefore, it is crucial to find a way of balancing out the theory and practice of security, especially in a period in which people all over the world, Poland being no exception, cannot afford to either treat security as an academic quirk or to simply follow political, social, economic, and other types of events while remaining blind to broader backdrop against which they play out. The book by Paulina and Roman Polko, even though it does not (explicitly) introduce any theory of security, nor does it approach this phenomenon from the theoretical perspective, manages to capture the essence of what is referred to as “broadening security”¹⁰ and illustrate the meaning and relevance of the concept with real-life issues.

The book consists of three main parts that the authors referred to as “acts”, which are then divided into chapters. The “acts” reflect three processes, which constitute the factors underlying and defining not only the present but also the future security reality. Those are, successively, the Covid-19 pandemic, the ongoing war in Ukraine, and “the new normality”¹¹, the latter being the upshot of an array of factors that have already started to give shape to the social, political, economic, technological, and environmental landscape of the contemporary world and will continue to do so. When it comes to the pandemics, the authors elucidate it in a way that appears to simultaneously correspond and challenge “the black swan theory” introduced by Nassim Nicholas Taleb¹². On the one hand, they evoke several times “the bat from Wuhan” not only as the trigger and the root cause of the pandemics but also as a symbol of its unpredictability (ironically, one could in this context supplant the term “the black swan” with “the black bat”), mostly due to the complexity of the pandemics emerging out of a long chain of events that carved a path for a crisis that has not only taken a heavy death toll but has also undermined the global economy and in many ways adversely affected the well-being of millions across the world. On the other hand, however, the authors point to negligence and errors committed by many actors on many levels, without which either the pandemics could have been prevented or its effects could have been lessened. Those include disregarding the appeals by WHO specialists, a failure to learn from previous epidemics (SARS and MERS), lack of deployment of

¹⁰ K. Krause and M. C. Williams, *Broadening the Agenda of Security Studies: Politics and Methods*, “Mershon International Studies Review” 1996, Vol. 40, No. 2, pp. 229-254

¹¹ Those are elaborated upon in a vein similar akin to the so-called “security megatrends”. B. Balcerowicz, *Megatrendy rozwojowe a bezpieczeństwo międzynarodowe*, [in]: *Bezpieczeństwo międzynarodowe Polska–Europa–Świat Księga Jubileuszowa dedykowana Profesorowi Ryszardowi Ziębie z okazji czterdziestolecia pracy naukowej*, eds. J. Zajac, A. Włodkowska-Bagan, M. Kaczmarek, Warszawa 2015, s. 87.

¹² N. N. Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, New York 2007.

necessary precautions¹³. What is more, Paulina Polko and Roman Polko emphasize the general human tendency to ignore serious risks and threats and instead focus on petty matters that gain more traction than they should¹⁴. According to the authors, this is to be blamed not only on the decision makers but also on the condition of the societal cognitive capacity as well as general mindset, whose weaknesses and vulnerabilities include citizens' inclination to operate within the boundaries of their respective information bubbles¹⁵, reliance on conspiracy theories and their susceptibility to disinformation¹⁶. Those mechanisms fall into a larger category of the so-called 'info-warfare'¹⁷ and the threats associated with the latter, which run across all the megatrends taken up by the authors.

It should be stressed that this approach illuminates a factor that appears to permeate all the sectors of contemporary security, namely its cognitive and informational aspects. In a world whose complexity continues to increase, access to information can be a boon or a bane alike, especially if its recipients do not possess sufficient cognitive and intellectual capacity and skills to comprehend and process the acquired information reasonably and critically. In such a scenario, information, instead of being a valuable asset, can become what Hanna Batorska terms an "informational pathogen"¹⁸. This corresponds with the classical model of security perception by Daniel Frey, in which, as pointed out by Agnieszka Pietrzak, Grzegorz Abgarowicz, and Piotr Matczak, the states of obsession and false security "make room for manipulation, whose main tool is control of access to information and its proper (suitable for a desired effect) creation"¹⁹ (author's translation).

Therefore, it could be argued that nowadays, far more than it used to be the case in the past, the level of security is to be equated with the way it is

¹³ P. Polko, R. Polko, *RoGROMić kryzys...*, pp. 14-18.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 26-27.

¹⁵ M. Krakowska, *Zachowania informacyjne człowieka w kontekście zjawiska epistemicznej bańki informacyjnej. Propozycja nowej koncepcji*, Kraków 2023, pp. 192-204.

¹⁶ P. Polko, R. Polko, *RoGROMić kryzys...*, pp. 33-41; R. Kupiecki, F. Bryjka, T. Chłoń, *Dezinformacja międzynarodowa. Pojęcie, rozpoznanie, przeciwdziałanie.*, Warszawa 2022, pp. 64-94.

¹⁷ D. Kaźmierczak, *Walka informacyjna we współczesnych konfliktach i jej społeczne konsekwencje*, "Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia de Securitate et Educatione Civili" 2017, Vol. 7; pp. 111-129; O. Wasiuta, S. Wasiuta, *Wojna informacyjna zagrożeniem dla bezpieczeństwa ludzkości, [in:] Walka informacyjna: uwarunkowania, incydenty, wyzwania*, ed. H. Batorowska, Kraków 2017, pp. 71-90.

¹⁸ H. Batorska, *Kultura bezpieczeństwa informacyjnego w środowisku walki o przewagę informacyjną*, Kraków 2021, pp. 168-183.

¹⁹ A. Pietrzak, G. Abgarowicz, P. Matczak, *Zmiana sposobu postrzegania bezpieczeństwa państwa i jego obywateli w świecie społeczeństwa sieciowego*, "Człowiek i Społeczeństwo" 2015, Vol. 40, p. 72.

perceived by individuals as well as the extent to which certain political events, societal changes, civilizational processes, or technological discoveries are discursively constructed to be seen as threats or treated as such because they render the reality complicated and unmanageable beyond people's tolerance and the ability to handle that. This conclusion happens to be in line with Ulrich Beck's and Anthony Giddens's findings on the unceasing process of modernity becoming more and more intractable, especially due to civilizational and technological progress²⁰. Giddens claims that "in conditions of modernity, the dangers we face no longer derive primarily from the world of nature." Even though he admits that 'ecological threats' still exist, he nonetheless considers them to be "the outcome of socially organised knowledge, mediated by the impact of industrialism upon the material environment" and a "part of (...) a new risk profile introduced by the advent of modernity", by which he means "the particular portmanteau of threats or dangers characteristic of modern social life"²¹.

The reasoning, as outlined above, dovetails with the insight of Paulina Polko and Roman Polko into the mechanisms through which the pandemic of COVID-19 has led to an intricate jumble of mutually intermingled mechanisms that have profoundly affected and essentially subverted the social reality in which we used to live. The authors describe meticulously a whole range of various effects that the pandemic yielded, such as the business and societal consequences of remote working, disruption of supply chains, weakening of entire industries (although some, as mentioned in the book as well, flourished), and scarcity of certain products²².

A similar approach is used by the authors with respect to the war in Ukraine. Paulina Polko and Roman Polko expound at length on the roots of the war, paying special attention to the process of Vladimir Putin's rise to power as well as the methods he employed to achieve that goal, which included first and foremost starting wars in Chechnya²³ and murdering political opponents and journalists²⁴. Just like in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, Putin's rise to power and the war in Ukraine itself are shown as a result of long years of overlooking and ignoring Putin's plots, provocations, murders, hostilities, and

²⁰ U. Beck, *Spoleczeństwo światowego ryzyka...*; A. Giddens, *Nowoczesność i tożsamość. "Ja" i społeczeństwo w epoce późnej nowoczesności*, Warszawa 2001.

²¹ A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Stanford 1990, p. 110.

²² P. Polko, R. Polko, *RoGROMić kryzys...*, pp. 47-57.

²³ What happened behind the scenes of those wars and what was the role of Putin therein was described by Yuri Felshtinsky and Alexander Litvinenko. A former FSB officer, Litvinenko himself was poisoned with polonium in November 2006, dying as a result. J. Felsztynski, A. Litwinienko, *Wysadzić Rosję. Kulisy intryg FSB.*, Poznań 2007.

²⁴ One of the most prominent ones was Anna Politkovskaya, author of the book *Putin's Russia*, assassinated in October 2006.

war crimes²⁵. And, unsurprisingly, Putin's efforts to befuddle and mislead the Western leaders into believing his good intentions would not have been possible without intensive usage of propaganda²⁶ and other means of affecting the collective consciousness of Western political elites and societies. However, the authors' analysis is not limited to pointing out the mistakes on the part of the collective West. On top of that, it also includes a list of specific actions that can target and undermine the main sources of Putin's imperialist Russia, such as the aforementioned propaganda and sports²⁷.

Those two megatrends or mega threats, however, constitute only a fraction of a much wider array of factors that contribute to the complexity, volatility, and unpredictability of the contemporary world. What comes to the forefront of what the authors term 'the new normality', though, is the economy. They argue that "because the last crisis is 'something more' – as it refers not only to tightening the belt, but also to a revaluation of attitudes and needs in the name of a new sustainable approach to the Earth, people, and resources – hence our feeling that what is at stake is more than the amount of the annual bonus or the bank balance"²⁸ (author's translation). Given the fact that the economy does not exist without technology and technological progress, "the increasing intrusion of technology into the life of societies puts the human community at the risk of not only, for example, losing life savings as a result of a single cyberattack, but also – at the supra-individual level – of cybercrime disrupting the access to critical resources and services that are based on technology (...)"²⁹. Not less important, though, are the consequences of the ongoing climate change³⁰, as well as the aforementioned societal changes that stem from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, technological progress, or deglobalization³¹. But as it transpires it is the environmental threats that underlie the (anti)utopian concepts of the 'new normality', such as the so-called '15-minute city'³². In the last pages of their book, Paulina Polko and Roman Polko let their creative juices flow as they attempt to depict the future reality in which we are likely to find ourselves by the year 2050. They arrive at a somewhat disquieting conclusion that it might be "a world so perfect that it will be unbearable"³³.

²⁵ P. Polko, R. Polko, *RoGROMiC kryzys...*, pp. 70-80.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 79, 98, 105.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 126-134.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 150.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 154.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 154-156.

³¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 168-160; P. Zeihan, *Koniec świata to dopiero początek. Scenariusz upadku globalizacji*, Poznań 2023.

³² P. Polko, R. Polko, *RoGROMiC kryzys...*, pp. 172-176.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 215.

The undeniable value of the book by Paulina Polko and Roman Polko lies in the diligence with which they elaborate upon the most relevant present and future security megatrends, risks, and threats that have already impinged upon and are bound to continue reshaping our lives and the world in which we live in and. They provide their readers with in-depth analyses comprising roots, factors, mechanisms as well as actions and inactions that have led to the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, economic crises, and, last but not least, environmental changes that have the potential to turn upside down virtually all aspects of the economic, political, and societal order. However, perhaps the greatest value of the book under review in this article pertains to the effect of bringing the shadowy concept of security closer to the life of citizens, therefore bringing the gap between the academic theory of security, security-related analyses conducted by various experts, and finally the practice of the mundane world. After all, as the authors remind us, “one must (...) remember that when you are purchasing cannons, you may run out of money for butter”³⁴.

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³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 186.

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