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## Editorial: Is societal transition an easy task?

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**Biographical notes:** Gilbert Ahamer is inclined to analyse fundamentals of philosophy for the target of designing new paradigms driven by foresight when it comes to develop policies for mastering globalisation. As a physicist, environmentalist, economist, technologist, and geographer, he suggests that radically new concepts might beneficially contribute to solving the pressing problems of global change. He co-founded the ‘Global Studies’ curriculum at Graz University, Austria, studied and established global long-term scenarios when affiliated to the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis IIASA, and is active in institutionalised dialogue-building for the Environment Agency Austria in Central Asia, Ukraine and Georgia since his earlier affiliation to the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

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As with earlier special issues, this editorial represents an *umbrella* under which all contributions to this – my fourth *IJFIP* special issue entitled ‘Transition of global society and technology’ – find their appropriate place. This umbrella is the *paradigm of societal transition*.

For our authors, the domain of societal transition spans from the primordial questions of ‘what is space and time?’ to ‘what values are common to several civilisations?’ and ‘how can an ‘energy transition’ be achieved, especially in the transitioning economies of Eastern Europe?’ The present Part I as well as the upcoming Part II will touch upon a cascade of questions: *How to steer transition?* What to avoid? What to risk? How to secure success?

Under our present-day socio-political circumstances, three countries deserve to receive an elevated level of interest because of their distinctly different paths of transitioning: Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.

Depending on the readers’ *standpoint* – i.e., geographic and paradigmatic location (which is actually incidental) and possible own involvement in recent political transitioning – the answers and degrees of inclination towards what is dubbed ‘desirable’ and ‘undesirable’ will no doubt turn out to be impressively diverse.

Almost a century ago (though history never has a genuine ‘starting point’), contradictory visions on hunger-driven depopulation in Ukraine (Sergento, 2014) stirred the existing divergent views on how independent Ukraine had been from Russia since both had come into existence (Kappeler, 2014). While earlier decades had still witnessed a tectonic east-west border within Ukraine itself (Olegzima, 2012), this inner tension largely vanished as a result of the annexation of an integral part of Ukrainian territory (Crimea) by Russia and the hostilities in Eastern Ukraine. After these two events, even the Russian-speaking population in the east now feels Ukrainian (Steinmeier Formula, 2019) – thus effectively (but unexpectedly) the Ukrainian *identity was strengthened* by

the imposition of repeated military threats onto Ukraine. Decade-long peace negotiations (Spiegel, 2019, OSCE, 2019) are basically aiming to reconcile divergent views on who is culturally the owner of this territory. We see here that any approach based on historic *possessions* (in the view of one conflict partner) appears as highly outdated in the view of the other conflict partners and especially in our present global society based on dignity and self-determination (KhPG, 2019). The fact that there *is* manifest military engagement deployed by the Russian side simply remains unperceived according to the perspective of their official media. At the same time, this country answers its youth's quest for democratic self-expression by jailing their own critical youth (Mironow, 2020). When these same events are seen from the perspective of the *other* party (Ukraine, having meanwhile mastered a major democratisation and societal transition, despite still existing lacunae: Francis 2020), a perceived lethal menace causing 12,000 war victims to date in Eastern Ukraine becomes a clear fact – how unthinkable for the continent of Europe (Leshchenko, 2019; Biden and Harris, 2020). What can at least be learned from these historic decades is: a policy based on 'possessions' leads to results quite the opposite of what was previously intended.

For decades (when Minsk offered itself as an independent site for peace negotiations), Belarus promised (for optimists within east and west) to provide opportunities for a softer transition, while seemingly successfully combining some of its Western and Eastern economic ties (Ackermann, 2020). However, the suspicion of *political engineering* became too great in (an increasingly united) population's perception, given Belarus' executive forces' open brutality in the streets combined with the neighbouring country's repeated acts of allegedly poisoning declared opponents (Ben, 2020; Gregory, 2020; Rubin, 2020) at the same time. A decidedly peaceful (Tschernych, 2020; Orłowski, 2020; Attasunzew, 2020) mass movement in Belarus has for months now been successful in keeping open provocation away from their demonstrations (Davidzon, 2020). At the same time, this peaceful movement to date enjoys only rhetorical support from EU neighbours (Haring and Viačorka, 2020) while the power-vertical-oriented eastern neighbour does offer effective support, even if quite tacitly (Clark and Barros, 2020; Gould-Davies, 2020). Avoidably, the Belarus government has cut itself off from any remaining ties of loyalty by unnecessarily damaging good neighbourly relations (Coynash, 2020). Such facts are – as usual – accompanied by Russian explanations of collateral damage that certainly overstretch any reader's idea of what is actually reasonable. Stories of 'polite people' and 'small green men' or 'Navalny only poisoned himself' are accepted only by those citizens in a population that deliberately accepts excuses in place of clear evidence (Shraibman, 2019; Ulitzkaya, 2020; Dobrokhotov, 2020), even if such excuses come close to outright fabrication. As long as citizens of a large European country decide to willingly believe whatever is presented to them, their own transition to a *dignified future* appears impeded.

Dialogue has not yet been established among holders of these controversial viewpoints (Shraibman, 2020). The clear and obvious production of fake news (Himmelspach, 2020) enhances such an eminent structural obstacle to well-informed dialogue. May the present IJFIP issue contribute to all sides being able to meet 'the other' in an actual dialogue.

Where will you stand as an observer, dear reader? If personal dignity and freedom are guiding human values, the answer should be clear.

All authors of this volume have made up their own minds, and I interpret their implicit answers as a clear *yes* to inalienable *human dignity*.

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