

BOOK REVIEW SECTION

Solarz, M.W. (ed.): Atlas of Poland's Political Geography. Poland in the Modern World: 2022 Perspective. Drukarnia Legra, Warsaw, 2022. 392 p.

"We have two duties to our friends: honesty and cordiality. Perhaps because these virtues are very difficult to practice."
(VINCENTZ, S. 1994 [1943], p. 77.)

Whether you are a reader with a layman's interest or a professional with knowledge of the subject, any map lover will be delighted to have a collection of maps of this quality to hand and leaf through.

My review is divided into two parts. The first is a closer look at the publication, approaching it from two angles: the ideological and theoretical concept of the atlas on the one hand, and its structure on the other hand. Thereafter, the second part of the review evaluates the publication from a specifically "Hungarian" point of view.

First, I have to note that, compared to the previous edition of the atlas (2018), the material covered has been significantly expanded and deepened. Meanwhile, the basic concept has not changed sub-

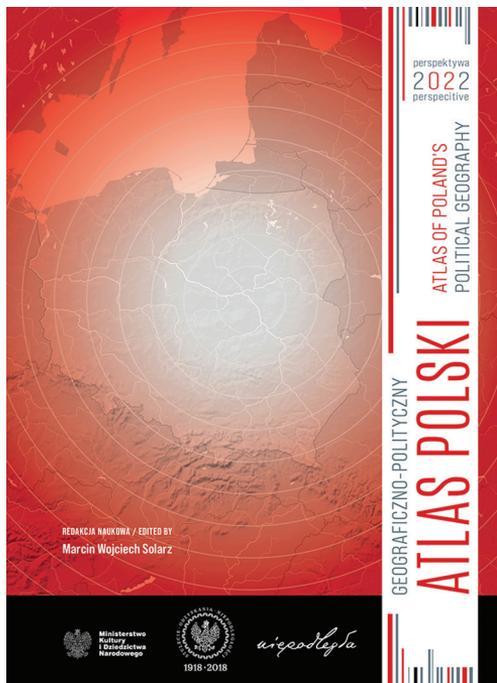
stantially. Hence, the book is much more than its title suggests. It is not simply an atlas of the political geography of a country, i.e., an impressive collection of thematic maps on subjects strictly within the scope of the discipline. Instead, it is a detailed and accurate portrait of the concept of Poland, in addition to its history, political and geographical existence, state institutions, power relations, physical geography, and socio-geographical foundations. It is a kind of self-portrait. The book, as the foreword illustrates, is seeking answers to the question of whether a "simply normal," in a specifically European sense "everyday" vision of a country is possible.

The geographical dimensions of the issues that fascinate and torment Polish society on this "historical stage" in this turbulent historical region of Europe are strongly linked to the question of borders. Virtually every aspect of the 'spatialization' of Poland, its geography, and all the social conflicts associated with it are reflected in the pages of the map collection. Moreover, presenting the conditions of existence for a state is also a great strength of the atlas. The attempt to explore the possibilities of constructing a "simply" Eastern European state may well be the most striking in this respect.

However, claiming that this work is simply a well-executed self-portrait would be misleading. More than that, it attempts to show what the "world" looks like from this particular Polish historical-geographical context. It is both a self-portrait and a window into the world, showing the way "Poland" sees – and seeks to see – itself and the world.

This alone justifies that the work could not be confined to a narrow discipline, i.e., political geography. Indeed, the thematic maps (and graphs) on display cover almost every aspect of human geography. Even economic geography is represented in its social aspects in numerous maps showing the spatial distribution of various indicators of economic performance, while the maps show the networks that ensure the supply of raw materials.

It has been an enormous undertaking to bring together this broad spectrum of approaches: to weave together the strands of different sub-disciplines, which differ in their methodological approaches and means of representation, into a coherent unit. This highlights – in addition to the meticulous work of the staff and professional communities who put together the atlas's individual sections – the work, ingenuity,



and perseverance of the editor who organized and conceptualized the whole project.

By its very nature, this edited collection of maps incorporates almost all the tools and methods of thematic cartography. It contains more than 900 (930, if I counted correctly) thematic maps and sketch maps, as well as, of course, general geographical maps and about 100 figures. The atlas contains an impressive quantity of information in excellent quality. Given its stated objective – providing a comprehensive, clear, primarily scientific, representative ‘tableau’ –, methodological issues are marginalized. Researchers more deeply involved in the issues presented may miss the methodological descriptions and, in some cases, perhaps a theoretical analysis. However, it is easy to see that their inclusion would have seriously stretched the limits of the work, which are financially constrained.

The structure of the work builds on the foundations of the previous edition five years earlier. However, the proportions have been slightly altered by including several new topics and more pronounced presentations. In this sense, the introductory chapter of the map collection (*Poland in Space and Time*, pp. 23–50) represents continuity for, in essence, it reflects the basic concept established in 2018.

The “backbone” of the entire atlas, both in terms of the number of pages and the number of maps published within a given section, is the second chapter, (*Borders, Territory and Memory*, pp. 51–162), which has been carefully elaborated and partially expanded. It includes over three hundred maps, more than a third of the total. Within the 13 conceptual chapters, the section on “historical identity and memory,” which seeks to capture the highly complex theme of “historical identity and memory,” takes place first with 70 high-quality and varied maps. The emphasis on this theme is perhaps one of the most commendable efforts of the whole work. Particularly well developed within this section are the detailed changes of Poland’s state borders in the 20th century. From a more narrowly interpreted “Hungarian perspective,” this section also deserves special attention, for example, for its careful analysis of the changes in the (Czecho)Slovakian–Polish state border. In addition to the presentation of border changes, the background of these changes is also revealed by ethnic geographic maps and historical outlines. From a purely political-geographical perspective, however, one of the most remarkable achievements within this chapter may be the sub-chapter (*Politico-geographical regionalization of contemporary Poland*, pp. 116–174), which, although it contains only four maps, is of great significance.

In terms of scope and number of maps, the second chapter is followed by two sections which, as already mentioned, are relatively outside the scope of political geography in the narrower sense. The third chapter (*Development*, pp. 165–232), presents

the country’s socio-economic development indicators broken down by region and mainly in comparison with the European Union. This chapter contains the largest sub-chapter (*The decade in review. Poland compared with the EU, EFTA, and UK*) with 116 thematic maps. All this fits in well with the concept, which, as it has already been mentioned, is not only presenting but also interpreting and, in all its complexity, exploring Poland’s self-understanding in the political geography and geopolitical context of contemporary Europe. A special section, the fifth chapter (*Geographical Names*, pp. 267–312), even exceeds the development chapter in terms of the number of maps (218). With its focus on identity, this section is undoubtedly somewhat “out of concept” but it is also certain that, from the point of view of this rapidly developing new field of research, it may be one of the most exciting parts of the whole work.

The fourth and sixth chapters (*The State and Politics*, pp. 231–266, and *Poles Abroad, Minorities in Poland*, pp. 313–318) are the parts of the book that address, by definition, the country’s political geography in the narrower sense, although the sixth chapter could certainly be classified under the umbrella term of ethnic geography too. A series of ‘classical’ electoral geography maps (*National Elections in 2015–2022*, pp. 252–265), which are well edited and represent a high standard, can also be enjoyed within this section, with 35 maps and eight graphics. Again, the maps depicting ethnic geography and exploring its spatial context are imaginative and of high quality.

Perhaps not entirely incompatible with the genre of review is expressing personal opinion. I cannot deny that the seventh chapter, which is in some ways an anomaly, is perhaps the one that left the deepest impression on me while I was scrutinizing the atlas. Poland and the “influence” of Poles on the world and in the world (and even in space: on the Moon and Mars) is a subject that stood out for its imaginative execution (*Polish Soft Power*, pp. 339–376). Moreover, this chapter is indeed full of innovative approaches, in both the elaboration of maps and the interpretation of “Polish influence.” The chapter is also characterized by a certain “pushiness” – in a good sense –, which is very appropriate. Personally, this is where I found my favourite maps in the atlas, which imaginatively and spectacularly show the goal-scoring output of the epoch-making football striker Robert Lewandowski between 2008 and 2022 (p. 358).

Although it may seem like a sort of inserted appendix, the final chapter of the atlas plays a vital role as it is seeking to illustrate the impact on Poland of the most significant external factors in the last five years, i.e., the COVID pandemic and the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, which escalated into an open war in 2023 (*Tempus Calamitatum*, pp. 377–389). If depicting a football star’s “work” is a heart-warmingly refreshing part of the map collection, unfortunately, depressive

maps dominate this chapter. Two maps stand out on pages 382–384 (NATO vs. Russia with Belarus), which I must admit I pondered at length. I wondered where I was familiar with the numbing impression of spasmodic fears that these maps of the military strength of the opposing camps conveyed, and it took me a while to realize that they were indeed – unwittingly – evoking the world of the similarly depressing propaganda posters of my youth in the 1970s.

Finally, a few words about the “Hungarian aspects” of the work and how they are perceived. First, a critical remark. Within the second chapter, which forms the backbone of the work, there is a sub-chapter consisting of 48 map sketches (*Central and Eastern Europe – Geopolitical changes from 966–2022*). Two problems can be raised about the attractive maps in the series, this time from a strictly selfish, “Hungarian” perspective. The first is the cropping and spatial framing of the map sketches: unfortunately, these maps only show the tiny eastern part of present Hungary’s territory, so no major settlement in present-day Hungary “fits” on them and is therefore named. Obviously, the map series’ authors and the atlas’ editors must have had severe problems in solving the framing of the cut-outs of the map series, and several objective printing or page-editing difficulties may have played a role in this. Nevertheless, from “our” point of view, it is quite painful that in the end, Buda (or Esztergom and Visegrád) as the political centre of a country neighbouring Poland, was unfortunately left out of the map. It is true, we might add, that Kiev, for example, has also fallen victim to this choice of frame. It is, however, interesting to note that although the name of “Pozsony” is shown on the map series from the initial sketch (depicting the situation in 966) to the last one (2022), it is written as ‘Bratysława,’ which is somewhat anachronistic before 1918, at least in the light of contemporary Hungarian historical interpretation and historical-geographical naming practices. This is, however, undoubtedly only a nomenclature-related dilemma that could be solved in several ways.

The “bigger problem” or oddity is that in this series, the maps for 1003 and 1025 (as opposed to the maps of 966 and 962) show the whole territory of present-day Slovakia and even a little more than that: the border at Tokaj extending to the Tisza River, with Poland delimited by sharp contours. I do not dispute that there has long been a “Polish reading” of specific historical facts and documentary references that could be used as a basis for such an interpretation. I am not aware, however, of any recent radical change in the Hungarian historians’ perception of this issue in comparison with the position of György Györffy (1983), who was still formulating a refutation of these constructions in the 1980s.

During almost the entire reign of Hungary’s founding monarch, King St. Stephen, would the

Danube bank opposite to Hungary’s then “capital city” Esztergom have been part of the Kingdom of Poland? Including the whole of the “Little Danube Plain on the left,” and the whole of today’s Slovakia and Northern Hungary, including Tokaj? Well, I will have to get used to digesting this – for me – “new history,” that is for sure. Let me say, albeit in a rather unscientific way, that I do not really believe in it. Alternatively, perhaps more accurately: I am not really convinced of the historical validity of this reading. (I might add that the position of the Czech-Hungarian border on several maps in the atlas, up until 1241, differs radically from the way they are depicted in today’s historical-geographical atlases of Hungary.) On the Hungarian side, we must get used to the fact that this interpretation of history is rather consistent from the Polish perspective since we can already find this conception of the state territory in earlier parts of the atlas on page 46.

Looking through the collection of maps with “Hungarian eyes” – if that is how it can be interpreted – we can find many factors rooted in our “common” historical past, with political geographical influences and consequences: historical events and processes, and the presence of history-shaping personalities. However, these do not seem particularly significant or important when viewed through the whole work, i.e., through the “Polish window on the world” (as interpretative framework). Building on the pillars of a narrative of a ‘common history’ that might be considered more or less common, it is easy to find such clues, but the overall impression may not meet the preliminary “expectations.” Yet, this cannot be a coincidence. The atlas does not interpret and “map” Poland and the Polish society and nation within the – so to speak – familiar Central European framework but based on a global scale. It seeks to present a mirror of the world “seen” from Poland. On this scale, things are then “put in their proper place,” according to their weight and importance, for example, the ideal of the Polish-Hungarian historical community of destiny, which has been carefully preserved for generations.

Poland’s long and perhaps “forever unfinished” struggle for existence: from that perspective, the Hungarian threads, while they may be vital in themselves and, in their own right, significant and decisive in their own time, are mere “side threads.” But history is a mass of such side threads woven into a flowing series of events. The Vistula, the great river that flows into the Baltic Sea near Gdańsk (ancient Hungarian name ‘Dancka’) in the far north, is considered by many to be the main artery of Polish history and geography, and for good reason. The tributaries flowing into the Vistula from the southern side of the Carpathian watershed add at least as much to its waters as the Hungarian bonds have influenced Polish history and geography. That is by no means few or insignificant, and especially not “negligible!”

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