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Geopolitical fault-line cities in the world of divided cities

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A B S T R A C T

The literature on divided (or contested) cities has expanded rapidly during the past decade, with a handful of iconic sites presiding over the long list of cities wounded by conflict, violence or general unrest. In this article, it is suggested that this literature has overlooked a particular, and increasingly prominent, type of divided city deserving of attention in its own right: the geopolitical fault-line city. The main differences between the "classic" divided city and the geopolitical fault-line city relate to the character and origin of conflict. In divided cities, conflict is mostly local and related to social and spatial justice concerns, discrimination, security and political representation; this makes it somewhat predictable. In geopolitical fault-line cities, on the other hand, the main disputes are about geopolitical alignment, foreign policy, and the overall character of government; such disputes are largely scripted elsewhere, adding a substantial measure of volatility. This article's contribution lies in its provisional theorization of the geopolitical fault-line city in the light of the literature on divided cities. Against a background of powerful ongoing changes in the global information landscape – most notably the increased influence of social media – it illustrates the main characteristics of the geopolitical fault-line city, theorizing its distinctiveness as intrinsically related to the spatio-temporal evolution of information diffusion across the territories of antagonistically predisposed geopolitical alliances.

1. Introduction

Can cities be divided without being spatially segregated or polarized? Can cities that are not located along or near "civilizational" (Huntington, 1993, 1996) fault-lines or ethno-national borderlands be divided in ways that transcend the routine uneven spatialities of capitalism? And can cities that are located on such fault-lines be divided in ways that do not necessarily trace ethno-national or religious lines of distinction? These questions matter because most research on divided cities touches upon a handful of – admittedly diverse – iconic sites of hyper-segregation and/or inter-ethnic or inter-confessional conflict, most of which located in Europe or in the Middle East, along the edges of former empires (Anderson, 2008) or along cultural fault-lines *à la* Huntington (1996), which are areas of fluid overlap between two or more supposedly unharmoniously co-existing cultural realms. Examples include Sarajevo, Belfast, Beirut and Jerusalem, but also Cape Town and Johannesburg. In such cities, divisions are spatially cemented, residential segregation is overwhelming, and the risk of violent conflict is constantly present.

However, intense residential segregation or long-term violence are not a necessary condition for the emergence of polarizing divisions in cities. In this article, it is argued that urban geopolitics is inextricably linked with geopolitical narratives and practices located at other scales, from the national to the global, which may or may not have socially – but not necessarily spatially – divisive or polarizing properties. These narratives and practices, together with the characteristics of the (dis) information landscapes associated with them, exacerbate political tensions at the urban level, producing *geopolitical fault-line cities*. This paper elaborates on this concept, arguing that it illustrates a situation of existing or potential urban conflict that is qualitatively distinct from the one present in the "classic" ethno-nationally divided city (Allegra, Casaglia, & Rokem, 2012; Anderson, 2008; Boal, 1999; Bollens, 2013), while also being related to it, and frequently even overlapping with it. To be clear, the distinction is not absolute, and cities may be divided in both the ethno-national sense and in relation to the geopolitical identities manifested by their inhabitants, divisions that may well evolve hand in hand.

Even so, these two forms of division should be kept conceptually apart. In classic divided cities the character and origin of the conflict is largely endogenous, being related to social and spatial justice concerns, discrimination, security and political representation (Allegra et al. 2012; Boal, 1999). This makes it somewhat predictable (see Calame & Charlesworth, 2009: 7) or amenable to interpretation in the light of evolutionary conflict development models (e.g., Kliot & Mansfield, 1999). In geopolitical fault-line cities, on the other hand, conflict centres on issues located at a different scale, specifically on geopolitical alignment, foreign policy direction, and on the overall character of government. Disputes within these areas are largely scripted elsewhere, adding a substantial measure of volatility.

Current examples of geopolitical fault-line cities include Kharkiv, Riga, Yerevan, Caracas, and perhaps also most major cities in Turkey, while the Italian Years of Lead (the *Anni di Piombo*, i.e., the 1970s)

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produced similar conditions in Rome in the past. Interpreting conflict in these cities as being the product of geopolitical fault-line dynamics reduces the risk of incorrectly classifying them as ethno-nationally divided, and of interpreting the conflicts taking place within them as the product of inter-ethnic strife and competition. Such an incorrect classification means that any effort aimed at solving the conflict runs the risk of being misguided. For example, Latvia and Estonia are frequently described as ethnically divided (Korts, 2009; Smooha, 2002), which applies, per extension and almost exclusively, to these countries' major cities. While there is no doubt that issues concerning state language policy and citizenship have caused numerous frictions and conflicts, the overall trend has been toward resolution, particularly in Estonia (Budryte, 2005), yet tensions are rising once again because of the politicization of Soviet nostalgia (Duvold & Ekman, 2016; Korts, 2009) driven by the relatively transparent policy of "geopoliticization" of memory (Zhurzhenko, 2007) stemming from the Kremlin and channeled through its principal (dis)informational megaphone: state-controlled television.

Certainly, the notion that the way urban conflict unfolds is also influenced by geographically remote actors is not a new one (Kliot & Mansfield, 1999; Calame & Charlesworth, 2009: 11–12), but little is known about situations in which these distant forces are the *primary* actors involved. In other words, in geopolitical fault-line cities, localized conflicts and violence are not only connected to broader geopolitical processes (Rokem et al., 2017) – they are their main product. Against this background, the aim of this paper is to illustrate the main characteristics of the geopolitical fault-line city, positing its distinctiveness as intrinsically related to the spatio-temporal evolution of information diffusion across the territories of antagonistically predisposed geopolitical alliances. To achieve this goal, I will explore the points of contact between the literature on divided cities (for a review, see Allegra et al. 2012) and contemporary (dis)information diffusion (see Bakir & McStay, 2018), which is significantly related to the literature on the effects of social media consumption on political processes (for an overview, see Sunstein, 2018). I will build on this necessarily rather superficial acquaintance to develop a provisional, largely deductive, and light and revisable (Robinson, 2016) theorization of the geopolitical fault-line city, the product of my conceptual ruminations following the digestion of years of intermittent fieldwork in various post-Soviet settings. Because of my background as student of Central and Eastern European urbanism, and in acknowledgment of my lesser knowledge of the circumstances outside this region, my analysis largely refers to the conditions observed along or within what used to be the iron curtain separating the Soviet and North-Atlantic geopolitical orbits. As with much of the divided cities literature, universal generalization is thus not my intention; instead, I argue that the underlying logic of asymmetrical competing information spaces may reproduce geopolitical fault-line conditions comparable to those observable along the incandescent edges of the Russian Federation elsewhere.

The following section explores the changing geography of information diffusion across significant geopolitical boundaries, a central feature in the conceptualization of the geopolitical fault-line. The geopolitical fault-line is discussed more thoroughly in the next section, where it is also compared and contrasted to Samuel Huntington's (1996) controversial "civilizational" ditto. This prepares the ground for the subsequent section, which theorizes geopolitical fault-line cities against the background of the literature on divided cities, illustrating their expected internal spatial structures and their probable locations in comparison with "classic" ethno-nationally divided cities. The conclusions follow in the final section.

2. Geopolitical fault-line cities and information space

"The arena of competition between geopolitical ideologies, scripts, and traditions exists not only in the halls of government and institutions of foreign policy, not only in the editorial pages of newspapers or the images on nightly news, but also within the minds and hearts of the public." (O'Loughlin and Talbot 2005: 45)

In the early 2000s, the people and perhaps also the leaders of Russia – "truly a torn country" according to Huntington (1993: 44) – had differing geopolitical ideologies in their hearts and minds, yet the issue remained somewhat debated. As it is, 15 more years of Putinism put an end to this ambiguity (Greene, 2015), and Russia has re-constituted itself as a distinct geopolitical successor of the Soviet Union, albeit based on a heavily revised state ideology rooted in a sovereign morality of sorts (Sharafutdinova, 2014) and, arguably, in an obsession with old school geopolitics (Suslov, 2018). This, in turn, has "heated up" the receding edges of its self-asserted geopolitical dominion. The notion of the geopolitical fault-line city relates to these edges inasmuch as they can be understood as geopolitical fault-lines, imaginary thick linear spaces that act as interfaces of different global-scaled geopolitical "spheres of interest". Such interfaces are subject to the influence of conflicting geopolitical narratives and imaginaries, whereas ethno-national divisions, if present, are of subordinate importance. This, in turn, may polarize the population into opposing factions whose positions are soaked in ideology but dried-out in substance, and whose differences are hard to reconcile within the confines of normal political discourse. Moldova offers an illustrative example of this situation. For decades, its leadership has oscillated between an unconfident commitment towards the goals of joining European/North-Atlantic international institutions and uneasy periodical relapses towards a more pro-Russian vector, accompanied by mass unrest in the (quintessential geopolitical fault-line) capital city of Chişinău (Kennedy, 2016). The oscillating Moldovan foreign policy, and the accompanying civil unrest, is thus hardly the result of the country's ethnic divisions, but rather of its population's constant exposure to various aspects of Russian soft and hard power. These include the threat of debilitating economic sanctions imposed by Moscow, e.g., curbing the flow of remittances from Russia and various import bans on crucial Moldovan products, such as wine, fruit and vegetables (Cenusa, Emerson, Kovziridse, & Movchan, 2014), as well as the continued military presence in and support of separatist Transnistria, which very much looks like an early blueprint for the "people's republics" founded later in the Donbas (by Russian special forces, see Bukkvoll, 2016).

However, a case could be made for the salience of ethnic divisions elsewhere in Moldova, in the southern region of Gagauzia, where the demands of the Gagauz, a geographically scattered Turkic Christian community, have been met by granting them substantial autonomy (Cantir, 2015; Roper, 2001). Curiously, though, the Gagauz community has traditionally identified politically with Russia, in a manner that undermines the broad, if somewhat wavering, policy of "Europeanization" pursued by Chişinău, and economically towards Turkey, by virtue of the substantial economic aid received from Ankara. Culturally, it identifies with both Russia and Turkey, respectively for religious and linguistic reasons, despite having been heavily "Russified" during the years of Soviet power. Perhaps paradoxically, nostalgia for the Soviet past, like in multi-ethnic Transnistria, is arguably the main characteristic defining contemporary Gagauzian identity, and it has most certainly f(l)avoured the intense paradiplomatic relations between the Gagauz autonomous region and Moscow, causing deleterious side effects on the central government's manoeuvring space within foreign policy (Cantir, 2015). This, in turn, has increased the stakes in the intermittent flashes of conflict over geopolitical orientation in Chişinău.

Divisions over geopolitical orientation of the type found in Moldova do not rise out of a vacuum; they depend on information that mediates the relation between global-scale geopolitical imaginaries and the local (Soroka, 2003). The geographies of information flows and counterflows are thus intrinsic to the idea of the geopolitical fault-line. What is said and where it is said interact with the specifics of local context; the conditions for unhealthy "multiple realities" along fault-lines emerge where irreconcilable messages overlap.

In the past, such conditions were limited to border regions that were

able to receive television broadcasts from both sides, as was the case along the northern coast of Estonia during the years of Soviet power when the residents of Tallinn were able to compare and contrast the audiovisual cues served through Soviet and Finnish TV, respectively (Lepp & Pantti, 2013). With internet connections now being ubiquitous, social media have evolved into a crucial channel for the distribution of (dis)information (Bassin & Suslov, 2016), polarizing the information landscape, and causing the information fault-lines to become increasingly de-territorialized. While the impact of social media within this domain remains somewhat contested – Guess, Nyhan, Lyons, and Reifler (2017), for instance, suggest that "the conversation about information polarization places far too much emphasis on social media and other technological changes" (p. 14), whereas "our offline social networks are often more politically homogeneous than those we interact with online" (p. 14) – there is nevertheless substantial evidence that the consumption of news transmitted via social media has a negative effect on the reproduction of democratic values (Bozdag & van den Hoven, 2015; Ceron & Memoli, 2016) and an unhealthily polarizing effect on political discourse (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Sunstein, 2018).

While geopolitical *front*lines remain at the forefront of the information battleground, social networking sites have enabled the spread of different geopolitical narratives and "brands" (Suslov, 2017) through common interest groups and, importantly, with the help of the algorithms that determine the way their users are served online content (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Lazer, 2015; Spohr, 2017). This has scattered multiple contested (alternative) fact bubbles, that is, filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011) that encapsulate polarizing and often dubious notions of reality, within formerly relatively coherent media landscapes (Sunstein, 2018). Ultimately, this has a destabilizing – and asymmetrical – effect on the geopolitical assemblages' information pillars, transforming (or breaking down) the media discourses embedded in them, and producing a new type of fluid, virtual, geopolitical fault-line that transcends its traditional spatialized imaginaries. These bubbles are constantly fertilized by the self-reinforcing flow of fake news, cynical internet memes and troll comments that created them (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017), with memes being a particularly prominent weapon in the arsenal of the online geopolitical warrior (Bassin & Suslov, 2016), similar to the way they are deployed by supporters of far right politics in the United States and Western Europe (Davey, Saltman, & Birdwell, 2018). Eventually fact bubbles expand to the point where they start influencing political discourse and debate in the wider (offline) society (if anything, by forcing the latter into engagement, see Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018), producing small, or sometimes big,[1] replicas of the polarized environments present along geopolitical fault-lines. Once this happens, healthy debate about, e.g., foreign policy direction is mired down in a form of political populism that places geopolitical obsessions at the top of the agenda. In the following pages, I shall illustrate how the transition from territorially to virtually compartmentalized information space can be conceptualized in relation to the geopolitical fault-line.

2.1. Pre-www information spaces

Figs. 1 and 2 illustrate the diffusion of (dis)information, including outright propaganda, before widespread internet access (ca. 1960–1990, Fig. 1) and following the global breakthrough of social media (since 2010, Fig. 2). They assume the existence of two major geopolitical spheres of interest – one dominated by an illiberal-authoritarian or totalitarian state (red), and the other by a liberal democratic state (light blue). The Soviet Union and its satellites vs. the United States and its formal and informal allies exemplify this polarized situation. While works that contrast liberal-democratic with authoritarian media systems (starting from the seminal work by Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956) have attracted criticism, even many decades later and mainly by castigating a perceived Cold-War prejudice against the USSR (Szpunar, 2012), my intention is not to idealize the functioning of liberal-democratic information space, nor is it to demonize the Soviet mass communication apparatus. Yet, I see no need to disguise my preference for the former.

Because the approach focuses on the evolution of the spaces of information, rather than on the specific nature of the political systems associated with them, a similar framework could be applied to describe the situation existing between the spheres of influence of competing illiberal states too (e.g., the Soviet Union and China) or of illiberal democracies. Whatever the case, the configuration of the described information spaces would have to be calibrated to the specifics of the politico-economic systems present on each side of the border, and at least one side would have to represent a non-liberal democratic system.

The framework assumes that the two powers act as centres of their own information spaces, but that the illiberal-authoritarian state puts more effort into blocking information coming from the liberal-democratic side than is the case the other way round, meaning that the border enforces a one-way information blockade. However, because of the technical limitations involved in jamming television and radio broadcasts in border areas, and in rural areas in general (CIA, 1969), the latter essentially function as overlapping information spaces. Additionally, it is assumed that information circulates freely within the liberal-democratic space, however diverse, as political pluralism, press freedom, freedom of association, and so forth, are hallmarks of the system. Needless to say, neither illiberal-authoritarian nor liberal-democratic systems are static, meaning that the flow of information differs over time, particularly on the illiberal-authoritarian side.

The framework also distinguishes between formal "imports" and "exports" of information, and informal flows. The formal sphere includes carefully selected, manipulated, distorted or fabricated material exported by the illiberal state for publication or broadcasting exported to liberal-democratic countries (e.g., via the TASS news agency in the USSR); it also includes texts and reports produced by local sources in these countries, both by foreign correspondents for the mass media and by organizations/media that sympathize with (and often receive financial support from) the illiberal regime. Formal imports, on the other hand, consist of a thinner flow of politically neutral (competitive sports results) or convenient information (increase in unemployment in the light blue zone) which is also filtered to confirm, and to conform with, the overall ideological infrastructure of the regime. In short, formal exports are mostly propaganda, whereas the imports consist of propagandizable material filtered down to a trickle of neutral information fragments and an assortment of factoids and outright nonsense. Thus, both exports and imports of information were subject to the canonical "4D's" – dismiss (or deny), distract, distort and dismay (White, 2016).

Informal information flows are beyond the control of the authorities on the red side, and despite the regime's desire to put a stop to them, complete success was virtually impossible. Inspired by the experiences of the Soviet Union and of its satellite states, I suggest six main circumstances or channels through which such flows could have penetrated the red territory: (a) via leakages from the overlapping information spaces of border zones (Lepp & Pantti, 2013), (b) through tourists (despite restrictions on their numbers or permitted destinations)(Arefyev & Mieczkowski, 1991), (c) via persons involved in international economic, political or academic cooperation (Gould-Davies, 2003), (d) through cultural exchanges (e.g., sister cities, Zelinsky, 1991), (e) via port cities (Diletant, 2015), and (f) via radio broadcasts from the light blue area, such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (Puddington, 2000). Under these circumstances, urban areas, especially large cities and cities located near borders, are more likely to emerge as

[1] An illustrative comparison could be drawn with the way the anti-vaccine conspiracy theory movement, having spent years bubbling in an online limbo zone and within offline fringe communities, suddenly gained pseudo-legitimacy in Italian political discourse with the populist takeover of government following the March 2018 elections (Financial Times, 2018, 6 August 2018).

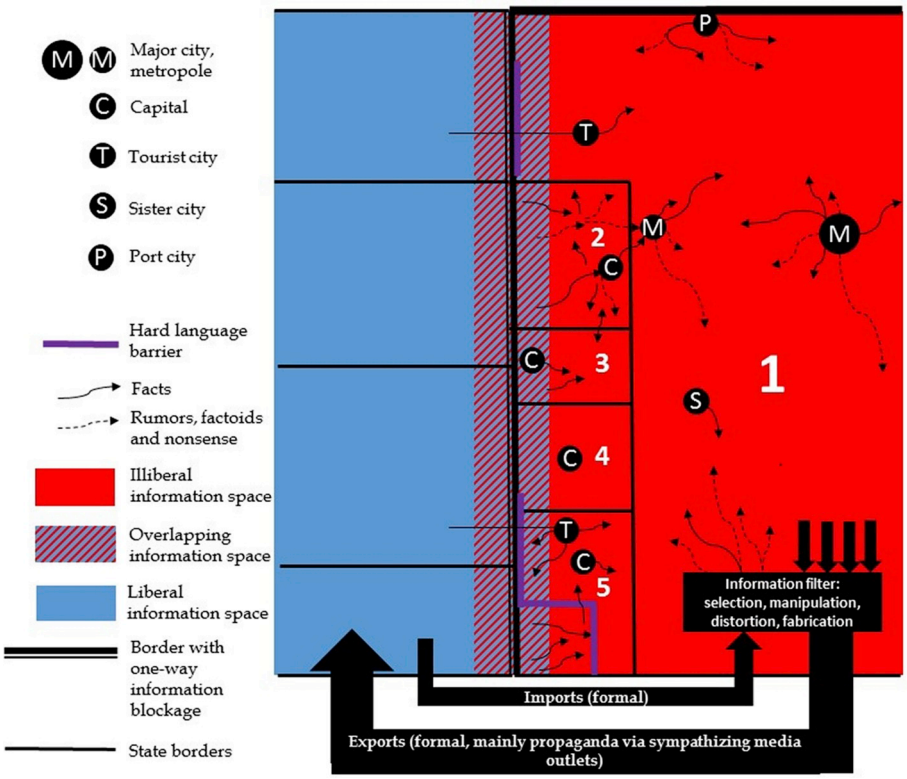

Fig. 1. The circulation of (dis)information across the geopolitical fault-line during the Cold War era. Hypothetical scenarios are denoted with their respective numbers.

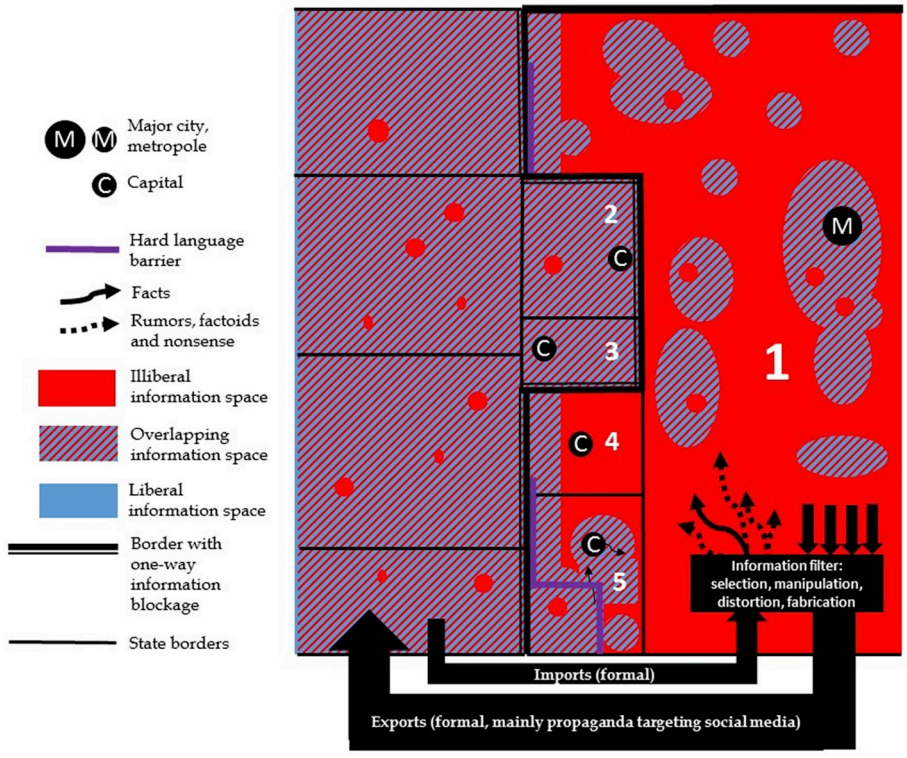

Fig. 2. The circulation of (dis)information in the age of social media.

nodes for the further diffusion of informal information throughout the red territory. However, the information spread this way is both selective and subject to deformation as it advances into the territory of the illiberal-authoritarian state; for example, it may be corrupted by security agents during its journey or it may simply be distorted as it travels between people and places. As a result, informal information emanating from the initial border-zone and/or metropolitan sites of propagation also includes a mix of facts and nonsense, albeit a mix that is not subject to the predictable filtering mechanisms of the formal sector.

In recognition of the diversity present among authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, five hypothetical scenarios are proposed, marked with their respective numbers in Figs. 1 and 2. It is worth noting that the core state need not necessarily be *the* most illiberal-authoritarian one located within its geopolitical dominion. The first scenario describes the situation in the core country of the illiberal-totalitarian geopolitical block (here modelled after the USSR), which imposes a largely successful blockade on incoming information, while remaining vulnerable to the penetration of information through the overlapping spaces present along inter-block boundaries. Moreover, information may flow in from the less guarded information spaces of neighbouring allied states (the second scenario, i.e., the colander state), particularly into cities located near the border to these states. Poland under Communism is a case in point, with the nearby Ukrainian city of Lviv having acted as the port of entry for much information that subsequently travelled as far east as the rocket-city of Dniepropetrovsk (now Dnipro), which was supposed to be well-insulated from the West (Zhuk, 2010). Moreover, information (and often artefacts) could flow in via the main entrance points of international travellers (capitals, port cities, tourist cities and sister cities) and via radio broadcasts that evaded jamming. As a result, large urban areas were in a privileged position within the red information space and functioned as hubs for the further diffusion of information within this space. All in all, however, this amounted to little more than a trickle of fragmentary images of the world beyond the geopolitical fault-line, only a fraction of which accurate. Together, these images contributed to a concealed and subversive popular geopolitics that likely contradicted the principal narratives presented via formal channels, rather than complementing or co-generating them. However, the overwhelming presence of state-controlled formal information, coupled with the pervasive risk posed by the work of the repressive organs, ensured that this contradicting information remain contained within a limited circle of dissidents.

In the third scenario, the state exerts tight controls on its information space, but the capital city is located in the overlapping information space exposing its population to multiple messages. This was, for example, the case in the German Democratic Republic and in Czechoslovakia (where Bratislava, as capital of the Slovak socialist republic, was in Vienna's immediate information orbit).

In the fourth scenario, the state attempts to exert complete control over its information space, with draconian measures taken to prevent all infiltration of information from outside. While it cannot stop the flow coming from its areas of information overlap, it nevertheless takes all possible measures to limit the damage. This was the case in Communist Albania, which received legally “unwatchable” television broadcasts from Italy and (even worse) Yugoslavia (King & Mai, 2008: 53), and it was the case until not long ago in www-deprived North Korea, which was exposed to the messages sent out by its southern capitalist nemesis.

In the fifth scenario, the state applies a mid-range level of censorship and information blockage. The informal diffusion of information happens the usual way, that is, via the overlapping information spaces along borders and through the main entrance points of international travellers. In this case, an impenetrably hard language barrier prevents the proper transmission of words (but not of images) across the geopolitical fault-line. However, the state portrayed in this scenario is multi-ethnic, and part of the population is able to partake directly in the consumption of foreign broadcasts, while the other is not. Under such circumstances, information may be carried on to the latter group with the support of the first. Such was the case in Soviet Estonia, where the Finnish-language broadcasts posed much less of a language barrier to Estonian-speakers than they did to Russian-speakers. Likewise, Greeks and Turks living in Bulgaria connected the closed Bulgarian communist dictatorship to the relatively open (or at least different) Turkish and Greek information spaces (Paraskevov, 2012).

2.2. Information spaces in the era of fast internet

In the era of fast internet and, particularly, with the rise of social media as sources of information, the picture presented in Fig. 1 is clearly outdated. At a general level, these developments mean that almost the entire globe has become an overlapping information space (Ayalon, Popovich, & Yarchi, 2016). However, this is not quite true, or at least not yet. While information flows freely in liberal-democratic societies, the same cannot be said about authoritarian or hybrid regimes, where tight controls, censorship, and self-censorship distort the information landscape. Moreover, in many illiberal-authoritarian countries, including Russia (Snegovaya, 2015), television remains the main source of news, invariably serving as the ruling regime's megaphone, though perhaps in a more sophisticated way than was the case in the past.

Fig. 2, which is designed like Fig. 1, describes the information landscape of the social media era. The formal transmission of information continues working in approximately the same way as it did before – positive or apolitical messages are exported from the red to the light blue territory, but at a greater scale boosted by the opportunities offered by the world wide web, whereas negative images and apolitical material are imported from the light blue to the red territory, and get processed additionally before being served. As a result, liberal democratic countries are more exposed to positive narratives about the authoritarian-illiberal context, than are authoritarian-illiberal countries to positive narratives regarding liberal democratic societies. This contrast is exemplified by the differences between the clearly propagandistic content produced by RT (formerly Russia Today) and that presented by Western international news broadcasters that are free to make their own editorial decisions, such as the BBC and CNN (Orttung & Nelson, 2018).

This tendency is reinforced within the realm of social media, where narratives promulgated from the red to the light blue side are far more vital than those travelling in the opposite direction. There are three main reasons for this: (1) negative messages and conspiracy theories are more easily bolstered by the algorithms steering the way social networking sites serve content (Bakshy et al., 2015; McNamee, 2018), (2) illiberal authoritarian regimes actively try to influence social media discourse (e.g., by planting “fake news” and spreading it using social bots, creating dubious Facebook groups, or by paid commenting in online debates, i.e. “trolling”)(Bassin & Suslov, 2016; Walker, 2016; Meijas & Vokuev, 2017; Lazer et al. 2018), and (3) they try to limit or block access to sites and materials deemed (potentially) damaging to the interests of the regime (Zittrain et al. 2017). Consequently, illiberal-authoritarian regimes are able to plant social media “bubbles” in liberal democratic countries and within the more liberal-minded regions of the countries they rule (the red spots in Fig. 2; comparable liberal bubbles in the red area are few, far apart, and short-lived), while spreading a general sense of doubt about the truthfulness or accuracy of any information circulating (Clem, 2017; Nygren, 2016). These planted bubbles are then watered by certain human characteristics – first and foremost the tendency to consume ideologically segregated news content (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016) and confirmation bias (Bakir & McStay, 2018) – that converge with algorithmic content sorting to place social media users in a unique, though not necessarily voluntary, role as active disinformation curators (Golovchenko, Hartmann, & Adler-Nilssen, 2018; Meijas & Vokuev, 2017). In such an environment, facts

have to compete with radicalized opinions (Riebe, Pätsch, Kaufhold, & Reuter, 2018), conspiracy theories and outright nonsense, harming democracy (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2018) and favouring the rapid rise of political parties on the extreme right, and sometimes extreme left, in Western Europe and the United States (Shekhovtsov, 2018).

Despite their militarization of social media (Zittrain, 2017), illiberal-authoritarian regimes are nevertheless unable to control them completely, nor are they able to control the flow of images, stories and experiences brought in from outside by people travelling. As a result, these regimes are not immune to positive counter-narratives, structured counter-disinformation measures (such as fact-checking functions) or citizen-curated corrective actions coming from the liberal democratic side, or from within. Ultimately, this destabilizes the authoritarian state's information monopoly, sustaining the presence of overlapping information spaces, particularly within major urban areas. However, these measures are not particularly successful when targeting audiences in Russia, where the majority accepts the Kremlin's anti-Western geopolitical master-narrative (i.e., Russia is constantly under military and cultural threat by Western countries, and it must defend itself and its traditional values against Western encroachment) as common sense (Szostek, 2018).

In Fig. 2, the five scenarios discussed above have been altered to reflect a hypothetical shift in the border between opposing geopolitical blocks. While the core state on the illiberal-authoritarian side remains in place, it is far more exposed to imported information than it was a few decades earlier. Meanwhile, countries 2 and 3 have switched sides; while this means that they now largely share the same characteristics as do the liberal-democratic societies in regard to their information landscapes, they differ in remaining unconsolidated as democracies, and in retaining a vivid memory of the past geopolitical alignment. Over time, unforeseen events (economic crises, the 2015–2016 European refugee crisis, etc.) may undermine trust in the democratic order, while the memory of the past may transmute into nostalgia among certain segments of the population. As more and more people with direct experience of this period pass away, the past becomes more vulnerable to revisionist re-interpretations, potentially leading to an illiberal-authoritarian relapse. To give an example, the Russian-supported separatists in eastern Ukraine chose the Soviet past as the discursive canvas for their pseudo-states (the Lugansk and Donetsk People's Republics, respectively), as did their precursors in Transnistria.

Summing up, the concept of the geopolitical fault-line has two dimensions – one that has strong territorial connotations, and one that does not. Whereas the first dimension relates to the strictly divisive role of inter-block boundaries, the latter is a more abstract phenomenon, denoting the increasingly deterritorialized political divisions, relating to foreign policy and geopolitical alignment preferences that characterize societies that have experienced the social media revolution in information diffusion. Of course, such divisions are not new in themselves; what is new is that the debates surrounding them now involve far more people than ever before in times of peace, affording them a position of greater prominence in political discourse.

3. Huntington, the geopolitical fault-line and .su internet addresses

Before moving on, it is important to clarify how the idea of the geopolitical fault-line is understood here in relation to the fault-line thinking typically associated with the controversial theses presented in Samuel Huntington's (1993) *Clash of Civilizations*. This is not least because the geopolitical fault-line is often confused with Huntington's civilizational ditto, particularly within public discourse, and because Huntington's ideas exert an enormous influence on foreign policy thinking and society more generally, in the United States as well as in Russia. To give an example, the Huntington thesis is central to the introductory chapter – called "Russia and Geopolitics" – of an important Russian high school geography textbook of the late 1990s (Baburin, Danyshin, & Yelkhovskaya, 1998). I contend that, despite some superficial similarities, there remains a fundamental difference between geopolitical fault-lines and Huntington's ethno-religious "civilizational" variant. Huntington's fault-lines lie at the edge of seven (or eight) major civilizations and, as such, they are largely constant – and characterized by perpetual instability and risk of violence. The notion of the geopolitical fault-line strongly downplays the role of cultural differences – far from being "basic" (Huntington, 1993: 25), cultures are fluid, hybrid and malleable – while emphasizing ideology, geopolitics and *realpolitik*. Cultural or civilizational discourse may indeed be appropriated for the advancement of geopolitical goals – the Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, for example, likes to refer to Huntington in order to justify and explain the Kremlin's confrontational foreign policy moves (Lavrov, 2014)[2] – but culture in itself does not offer any self-evident geopolitical precepts. Far more important in this respect is the position of different countries on two very closely related axes: democracy vs. authoritarianism, and liberalism vs. illiberalism, respectively.[3] As argued by proponents of democratic peace theory, armed conflicts and block-alignment based geopolitical competition almost invariably involve at least one part that is on the authoritarian-illiberal side (Doyle, 1983; Reiter, 2017). Similarly, the new friendship bonds and strategic partnerships that are emerging between Russia and the leaders of certain countries in central and south-eastern Europe have little to do with cultural affinity and a lot to do with economic interests (Aalto, Nyyssönen, Kojo, & Pal, 2017) and the latter countries' fading commitment to democracy and the rule of law (Ágh, 2016). The recent improvement in the relations between the Philippines and China (Ibarra, 2017) is taking place against a similar background. Relatedly, it is important to note that, unlike during the Cold War, contemporary illiberal-authoritarian states are not primarily driven by ideological concerns; instead, their prime goal is regime survival and the fortification of a regional sphere of interest (Weyland, 2017), of their own "geopolitical space", to borrow the chilling words of the aforementioned Russian school textbook (Baburin et al. 1998: 10). These interests are at odds with democracy promotion efforts in neighbouring countries, which pose an existential threat to authoritarian regimes. Such efforts and counter-efforts clash most vividly along the geopolitical fault-line, creating the conditions for conflict and violence. "Perfect storms" in geopolitical fault-line cities occur at times of critical juncture, such as the ongoing turmoil in Venezuela or the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine. Indeed, such events could trigger conflict even in regions considered relatively stable, such as the northern oblasts of Kazakhstan (Diener, 2015, but cf.; Commercio, 2004).

When Francis Fukuyama (1989) first declared the End of History, he added an important *caveat*: the end of history, understood as the "total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism" (3) and as "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution" (3), means the beginning of nostalgia, which will "continue to fuel competition and conflict even in the post-historical world for some time to come" (17–18). This is a very prescient claim, as nostalgia is part and parcel of most ongoing conflicts in the Former Soviet Union; indeed Soviet heraldry permeates the symbolic landscapes of all breakaway regions outside of Russia, and increasingly of Russia itself. The self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk "People's Republics" (DPR and LPR) are founded on a state of spatio-temporal exception so deep that various branches of

[2] Russian geopolitical thought was far more divided on this issue in the 1990s and early 2000s (Tsygankov, 2003), but the more "hawkish" interpretations of Huntington gained the upper hand as Putinism took form (Katzenstein & Weygandt, 2017; Tsygankov, 2016).

[3] Of course, it is possible that certain cultures may value authority more than others, making them more likely candidates for being governed by an authoritarian leader, but democracies are or have been present on all continents, and within all "civilizations".

government operate with the anachronistic .su (Soviet Union) country code top-level domain internet addresses. The LPR's Ministry of Justice uses a Soviet Union address (https://mu-lnr.su/), whereas the closely related Ministry of Internal Affairs uses a Russian one (http://mvdlnr.ru/)(accessed 1 October 2018). Meanwhile the Transnistrian authorities have recycled the Soviet hammer and sickle in both the pseudo-republic's flag and emblem. Even so, nostalgia is not enough to generate conflict in itself because it does not relate to problems that are present in the here and now, yet it may function as a distraction from these problems. For this to happen, it must be politicised and "weaponized" by influencing collective memory (e.g., via media broadcasts), manipulating the semiotic blanket that envelops it (e.g., by renaming streets or building appropriate monuments), and redrawing the cognitive maps of the past. Being concentrations of symbolic sites, cities are the canvas upon which such changes are drawn, even though rural themes may form part of the (alternative) narrative that is being promoted. Under certain circumstances, the overlap of strongly voiced conflicting narratives of the past or present – e.g., of what really happened during WWII (Lehti, Jutila, & Jokisipilä, 2008; Zhurzhenko, 2007) – may activate and fortify dormant disputes on issues that had long ceased to be contentious. In extreme cases, conflict and violence may follow, polarizing the urban population in ways that elude the explanations presented in the vibrant literature on divided cities. Ultimately, the passage from nostalgia to conflict relies on historical revisionism, as well as on a confrontation with an antagonistic narrative, one that poses a fundamental challenge to the nostalgic storyline(s).

To sum up, the overlap of contradictory information spaces from both sides of the geopolitical fault-line, and the politicised weaponization of nostalgia, fortify the role of cities as information diffusion hubs and as places where multiple contradicting narratives are likely to clash. In cities located along the geopolitical fault-line these roles are amplified. *Inter alia*, this means that the premises for conflict along the geopolitical fault-line, but not necessarily along the "civilizational" ditto, are inherently embedded in them. Cities usually contain a critical mass of symbolic hardware, as well as a sufficient number of persons willing to support a conflict related to this hardware and to the broad narratives associated with it. Most importantly, contested local, regional and national organs of power are almost exclusively located in cities, and any violent event related to gaining/retaining control over their physical premises will inevitably involve some kind of urban conflict.

4. The divided city literature and the specificity of the geopolitical fault-line city

The literature on divided cities centres on two broad discourses evolved simultaneously over the past few decades. The first, which emphasizes the increasing socio-economic disparities characterizing major cities under advanced capitalism, is largely concerned with the related intensification of ethnic and socio-economic residential segregation patterns, particularly in global and world cities (Intrator, Tannen, & Massey, 2016; Musterd, 2005; van Kempen & Murie, 2009). The second strand concerns cities where the lines separating different groups are drawn hard and fast, cities in which outbreaks of violence between opposing (usually ethno-national or religious) groups are not uncommon. Such cities include numerous iconic sites of urban conflict and contestation, such as Belfast or Jerusalem (see for example Allegra et al. 2012; Anderson, 2008; Bollens, 2012). Thus, what the two strands of the literature have in common is their focus on segregation and on spatial injustices, while what sets them apart is, arguably, the extent of the phenomenon (Anderson, 2016) and, in particular, the extent and frequency of violence and coercion taking place in the city. Starting with Boal (1999), who proposed a scenario-driven typology of segregated/conflict cities – in fact more like a continuum – the two branches of the literature have been coming closer to each other during recent years (Allegra et al. 2012). The *rapprochement*, while arguably one-sided, is facilitated by the recent comparative turn within urban studies, which positions all cities – ordinary and extraordinary (Anderson, 2016) alike – equally before the altar of theory (Robinson, 2006; Roy, 2009). In the introduction to their edited volume on urban geopolitics, Rokem and Boano (2018) stress the potential of contested cities to inform urban scholarship more generally, a task fulfilled in numerous chapters of the book (especially in Rokem's (2018) own contribution). Indeed, *contested* is what these authors view as the main commonality shared by cities experiencing different degrees of segregation and conflict.

While these developments are more than welcome, ethno-nationally divided and/or segregated cities are not the only ones experiencing severe conflict and violence. At the most basic level, urban conflict can emerge in connection with just about anything: the demolishment of a cherished heritage building, the yuppification of a traditional working class neighbourhood, or the establishment of an environmentally hazardous new coal power plant. This is conflict that may appear anywhere and which, given a liberal setting, democratic decision-making and proper dialogue with(in) the population may help mitigate and possibly settle. Yet there are other conflicts that have far vaguer local underpinnings, if any at all. The outburst of urban violence surrounding the 2007 decision to relocate the Bronze Soldier statue from in front of the national library in Tallinn, the Estonian capital, to the city's military cemetery is a case in point (Ehala, 2009). The Bronze Soldier was raised in commemoration of the Red Army's "liberation" of the city, which is a highly contested interpretation of the Soviet Union's role in Estonian history (the less charitable counter-narrative is that Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union for the next 45 years). While it is true that the Bronze Soldier events exacerbated an existing rift between the Russophone and the Estonian communities, the major articulations of the conflict were staged further east (Pomerantsev, 2015). The early Putin era revisions of the Soviet past, including the dark years of Stalinism, clearly made their way into Russian media discourse, challenging the unconsolidated narrative of the USSR as a purely repressive state (Mendelson & Gerber, 2005). With Russian television being heavily consumed in Estonia's overlapping information space, rising tensions were to be expected.

To a certain extent, conflict in Moldova has a similar setup. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Transnistria, the narrow but heavily urbanized and industrialized multi-ethnic region located across the Nistru (Dniester) river,[4] "revolted" against the nationalizing tendencies of the newly independent Moldovan state, particularly within language policy, resulting in a brief separatist war (March–July 1992). The war was won by the Transnistrian separatists with the crucial assistance of the 14th Soviet/Russian army stationed in Tiraspol, the region's capital (Sanchez, 2009; Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2011). As a result, Transnistria reconfirmed its "independence",[5] and gradually morphed into an internationally unrecognized *de facto* statelet (with an expectation to be incorporated into the Russian Federation, see Sharkov, 2016), and one of Eurasia's numerous unresolved "frozen" conflicts. While ethnic explanations are sometimes invoked in describing the conflict, especially from the Transnistrian side in order to justify it (see Cojocaru, 2006), there is a broad consensus among scholars that the root conflict is not ethnic but rather (geo)political and regionalist (Cojocaru, 2006; Kennedy, 2016; Roper, 2001). Equipped with a significant army and effective repression organs, and buoyed by the hollow legitimacy of

[4] The ethnic composition of Transnistria was roughly one third Russian, one third Ukrainian and one Moldovan in 1989, and it has remained similar ever since. However, the number of Ukrainians decreased suspiciously strongly, while the number of Russians increased, between 2014 and 2015 (Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2011: 194, Gosudarstvennaya Sluzhba Statistiki Pridnestrovskoy Moldavskoy Respubliki, 2018: 28).

[5] Transnistria's initial declaration of "sovereignty" – from the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic but not from the Soviet Union, came 1990 (Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2011: 182–183).

Soviet symbology, the Transnistrian authorities have embarked on a public identity acculturation project that relies on Soviet sacralized narratives of the "Great Patriotic War", using them to interpret and justify the separatist war waged against the Moldovan "Fascists" and the region's Russian pivot (Cojocaru, 2006). "Fascist", in this context, means almost anyone who opposes the pseudo-state's belonging to the *Russkiy Mir* ("Russian World")(Kuzio, 2015b: 162,; Zhurzhenko, 2015a).

A similar situation characterizes the current Russo-Ukrainian conflict, where the Russian propaganda machine frames a conflict centered on the nation's foreign policy choices as a matter of ethnic Ukrainian "Fascists" and "Banderites" being pitched against ideologically pristine Russophones (Laruelle, 2015), which is an image that had been nurtured by the Ukrainian Communist Party and, subsequently, by the Party of Regions[6] to captivate the electorate of the industrialized eastern regions of the country (Wilson, 2015). However, because this takes place against a background of largely positive ethnic relations (Kuzio, 2018), such a move is chiefly aimed at influencing domestic opinion in Russia and opinion (and policy) in liberal-democratic countries rather than within Ukraine.

Kharkiv, Ukraine's second and Europe's 18th largest city, provides an illustrative example of this. Kharkiv is a largely Russian-speaking city located within short distance from the Russian border. Ethnic identities – which are mainly Ukrainian and to a lesser extent Russian – are seldom regarded as particularly relevant in Kharkiv, but local elites cultivated a sense of regional "borderland" identity starting from the late 1990s (Zhurzhenko, 2015b: 36). The city experienced non-violent conflict related to the way the Soviet past and Ukrainian nationhood were represented in the city for at least a decade (Zhurzhenko, 2011) before being taken over by a brief but very tense spell of violence following the Euromaidan revolution and the Russian landgrab of Crimea, during which pro-Russian, or probably just Russian (Rushchenko, 2016), elements attempted to establish a "Kharkov People's Republic" (Buckholz, 2017; Piechal, 2015). The acute crisis was over within a couple of months, but sporadic violence occurred for at least two more years, with Rushchenko (2016: 294) counting 42 terrorist attacks between February 2014 and May 2016, the vast majority of which with no human casualties in what appears to have been a strategy of "low intensity terrorism" (Rushchenko (2016), coupled with regular additional bomb threats, aimed at not alienating groups that could potentially sympathize with the perpetrators' cause. And there are plenty of such groups in Kharkiv, for according to very recent survey data collected by the reputable Kiev International Institute for Sociology for this author (n = 1250, concluded in August 2018), 34 percent of the city's population blames the ongoing Donbas war on the Kiev government and only 31 on the Kremlin, whereas most of the rest point their fingers at the demised Yanukovych regime (15.7 percent), at the United States (7.4 percent), or at the Donetsk oligarchs (6.4 percent). Thus, as Zhurzhenko (2015: 37) notes, the relative pacification of the city, which the dreadful example of the Donbas war may have encouraged, is fragile and reversible. The nature of the conflict, however, only superficially touches upon ethnic themes, whereas questions related to national geopolitical alignment, and the geopolitical instrumentalization of memory by local elites and foreign actors alike, have caused deep divisions in Kharkovian society. Not even an obvious act of hostility on behalf of the Russian state has broken these divisions substantially.

The Tallinn Bronze Soldier, Moldovan and Kharkiv cases illustrate how narratives prepared at a distance may seek legitimacy by exploiting the political potential of local ethnic differences, camouflaging diverging geopolitical and foreign policy world views as a simple matter of Russophones versus Russophobes. In short, ethnic divisions are not the salient aspect, but the conflicting sides may be tempted to activate them politically, potentially creating the conditions for inter-ethnic strife in geopolitical fault-line cities.

That said, the concept of the geopolitical fault-line city is not intended to replace that of the ethno-nationally divided/contested/polarized city, but to complement it. Indeed, because ethno-nationally divided cities tend to be located at the edges of existing or past empires due to "underlying causal interactions between imperialism and nationalism and the failures of the state- and nation-building in the peripheries of empire" (Anderson, 2008: 10), they are also likely to be located along present or past geopolitical fault-lines. This means that ethno-nationally divided cities and geopolitical fault-line cities are likely to be found in similar regions. Indeed, geopolitical fault-line cities may be ethnically diverse without being particularly divided on this basis.

4.1. Conflict in ethno-nationally divided vs. geopolitical fault-line cities

Unlike in "classic" contested cities, ethno-national or religious conflict and spatial segregation are neither a necessary nor a likely characteristic of geopolitical fault-line cities. As a rule, conflict in such cities has little in common with the discrimination and segregation experienced by different communities living in divided cities, enforced through borders as in Sarajevo, walls as in Jerusalem, or constitutional rigidities as in Beirut (Bollens, 2013). Instead, what characterizes them is their location at the edges of different geopolitical spheres of influence and within heavily overlapping but contradictory information spaces. In such cities, conflict is volatile and unpredictable because it rarely relates to matters of immediate local concern (such as access to schools, political representation, the construction of new roads, etc.) and because it relates to a highly unstable, and constantly changing, core. As Huntington (1993: 27) noted, inter-ethnic (civilizational, in his own words) conflict centres on the "What are you?" question, whereas ideological conflicts centre on the "Which side are you on?" question. Inasmuch as Huntington's main thesis may be flawed (a topic not to be discussed here), this distinction is a crucial one, for it implies that the sides of an ethno-national conflict are relatively constant (indeed, members of one group may be legally or practically prevented from joining or identifying with the other), whereas it is easier to join or change sides in ideologically grounded conflicts. Conflict in geopolitical fault-line cities pertains to the latter category, dividing the population into relatively meaningless opposing factions – seen from the perspective of everyday urban life. Because the conflict does not link to specific problems experienced on a daily basis, it needs to be fuelled from the outside, most notably by the exposure to competing messages circulated via the traditional media and through social media interactions. Accordingly, both the roots of and the solutions to geopolitical fault-line conflicts are located far beyond the city limits.

Fig. 3 illustrates the principal differences between a hypothetical typical geopolitical fault-line city, whose residents are divided by (geo) political orientation or identity,[7] and a city that is ethno-nationally divided, legally, or in terms of group identities. For the geopolitical fault-line city, the light blue and red colours represent the population's division by (geo)political orientation (e.g., for and against NATO membership, in favour or against authoritarian political power),

[6] The Party of Regions was ousted president Viktor Yanukovych's political party. Over time, it developed into a powerful political machine based in Donetsk, but it collapsed completely in connection with the Euromaidan revolution in 2013–2014 (Kuzio, 2015a).

[7] The concept of geopolitical identity has not been discussed in the text, and its meaning is not entirely straightforward. In this article the idea refers to the notion that a particular foreign policy or geopolitical orientation may be so strong or taken-for-granted among certain groups that it becomes part of the answer to the "what are you?" question rather than to "whose side are you on?" (see Huntington, 1993: 27). In eastern Ukraine, for example, considering the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as an opponent was the default opinion before the Russian annexation of Crimea (Arel, 2008; Gentile, 2015).

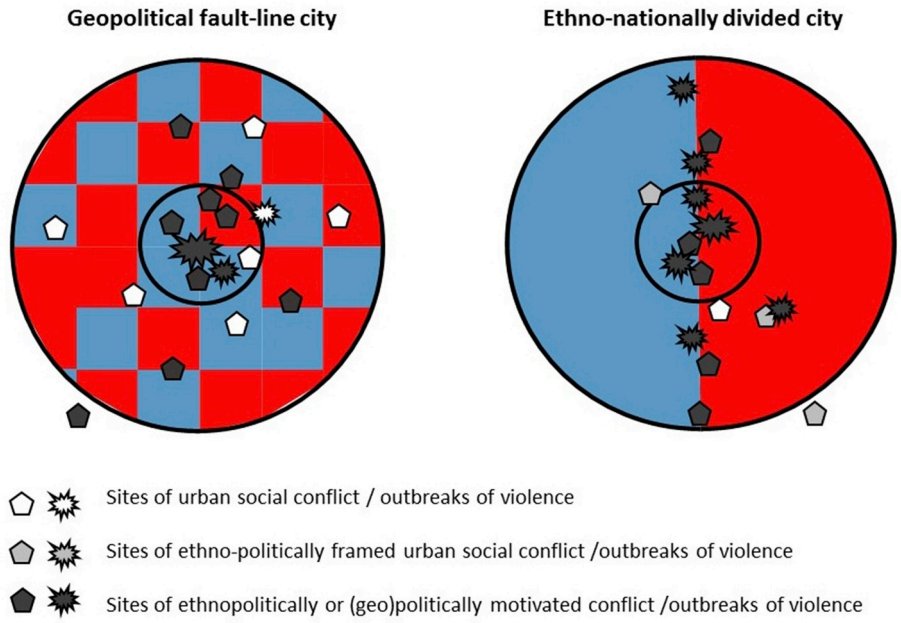

Fig. 3. Spatial divisions and conflict sites in geopolitical fault-line cities (left) and ethno-nationally divided cities (right). The inner rings represents the outer limits of inner city.

whereas they represent different ethno-national, ethno-linguistic or religious groups (e.g., Christians and Muslims) for the ethno-nationally divided city. The geopolitical fault-line city is portrayed with a checkered pattern that suggests a quasi-random distribution of the geopolitically polarized population, with certain concentrations reflecting possible correlations between social and demographic factors (and their corresponding geographies), and geopolitical orientation. The ethno-nationally divided city is portrayed as completely segregated, Jerusalem-style. Of course, reality is far more complex, but the intention here is to illustrate the key aspects differentiating these two types of divided cities, the pattern of residential segregation being the first and most evident one.

The second main aspect – equally important but arguably not as eye-catching – concerns the subjects and timing of urban conflict, including outbreaks of violence, as well as where conflict or violent actions take place. These conflicts may come in three forms. The first is "ordinary" urban social conflict of the kind that can be found in most cities (the white symbols in Fig. 3), such as that related to gentrification-induced displacement, NIMBY-ism, inequalities in schooling provision, etc. The second, denoted by light gray symbols in Fig. 3, is urban social conflict framed in, captured, or silenced by, ethno-political narratives because of the heightened salience and discursive prevalence of inter-ethnic or inter-confessional disputes and injustices in ethnocratic cities (Yiftachel & Yacobi, 2003; Yiftachel & Ghanem, 2004), for as James Anderson (2016: 18) notes, "in cities riven by ethnic and national conflicts […] there is a tendency to try and 'explain everything' in terms of the conflict, as caused by it or by the 'other side'". In other words, it is similar to the first type of conflict, except that it gets disguised, be it intentionally or not, as ethnic or religious. Finally, the third form of conflict is ethno-politically or (geo)politically motivated (dark gray symbols in Fig. 3). While the first two forms are largely "ordinary" and have similar root causes, ethno-politically and geopolitically motivated conflicts are both "extraordinary" (Anderson, 2016) and different from one another: the former focus on problems that influence the residents' daily lives (schools, political representation, security, etc.) and the latter mainly concern contested narratives and the blanket of symbols (monuments, street names, etc.) associated with them, as well as broader issues related to foreign policy orientation and geopolitical alignment. The main reason for this difference is that in ethno-nationally divided cities, the symbolic landscape reflects the extant ethno-political territorial divisions, whereas it does not do so in geopolitical fault-line cities, meaning that the entire population is exposed to the full spectrum of contradictory signs and codes. To illustrate, Gavrilo Princip, author of the 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, is both glorified and vilified within the urban area of Sarajevo – in Serb-controlled East Sarajevo and Bosniak-controlled Old Sarajevo, respectively (Ristić, 2015). Conversely, until not long ago, the residents of the Ukrainian cities of Kharkiv and Dnipro were exposed to multiple contested geopolitical and ethno-national narratives throughout the city, from Lenin's stern gaze to the *Holodomor*[8] memorial sites (Zhurzhenko, 2011). Thus, when conflicts over symbols do take place in ethno-nationally divided cities, they may be expected to unfold more frequently along the territorial boundaries separating groups, where mutual claims are more probable. Conversely, conflict over symbols in geopolitical fault-line cities will be subject to more scattered outbursts – in both time and space, leaving ample space for ordinary urban conflict to live its course. However, while relatively spatially dispersed, outbursts of conflict and violence will likely be concentrated in central areas because this is where most of the city's symbolic hardware usually rests.

4.2. The locational characteristics of geopolitical fault-line cities

At the macro scale, there are various locational and societal risk factors. The locational aspects include the city's relative peripherality (Anderson, 2008), its distance from current (Portnov, 2016) or former ("phantom") (see von Löwis, 2015) geopolitically salient borders and, when applicable, from military frontlines (Gentile, 2017). The main societal factors include the depth and prominence of regional and/or local urban identities (Kubicek, 2000; Stebelsky, 2018), the degree of control and authority exercised by central government (Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999), its (perceived) legitimacy, the role of local and regional elites (Kuzio, 2015a; Romero, 2000), and the linguistic geographies of the region. The latter determine the residents' ability to partake of the

[8] The *Holodomor* was the Great Famine of the early 1930s engineered by Stalin in order to subjugate the supposedly rebellious Ukrainian population.

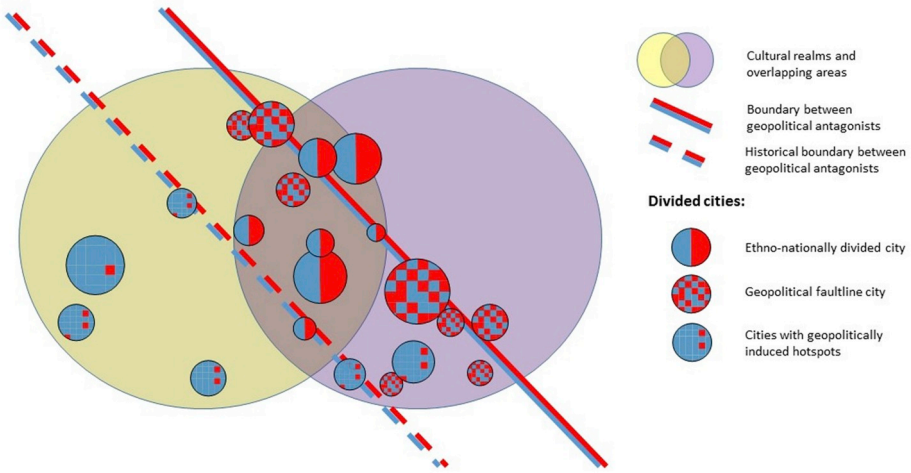

Fig. 4. The locational characteristics of ethno-nationally divided cities vs. geopolitical fault-line cities

media offer originating from across the border, which in itself may have socially dividing effects. This was, for example, the case in Soviet Estonia, where Russian speakers and the elderly (of all linguistic backgrounds) were not able to participate in the audiovisual feast transmitted across the Gulf of Finland (Lepp & Pantti, 2013).

Fig. 4 sketches the locational characteristics of ethno-nationally divided cities vs. geopolitical fault-line cities. In this simplified scheme, there are two hypothetical cultural realms, as well as a fluidly definable area where they overlap, that is, where the population hosts significant ethnic and/or religious divisions. Most "classic" ethno-nationally divided cities are located in such areas, because a mixed population is a necessary condition for their existence. Far from being fluid, the borders demarcating the territories controlled by geopolitical antagonists are clearly defined, but they are only loosely associated with the different ethno-national, religious or linguistic groups' areas of settlement. However, borders occasionally shift at critical junctures in history, leaving traces that may range from being barely perceptible to reasserting themselves as a constant feature of the political and electoral landscapes of the countries hosting them (von Löwis, 2015; Zarycki, 2015). Such phantom borders are included in the illustration to capture the potential (geo)political divisions associated with them. The territories located between historical and current geopolitically critical boundaries, as well as on both sides of current boundaries, are where the highest incidence of geopolitical fault-line cities may be expected. In Fig. 4, these boundaries delineate the areas (previously) controlled by an illiberal-authoritarian regime (northeast) and by a liberal-democratic one (southwest), respectively. Because dissent is usually rapidly silenced and/or crushed on the illiberal-authoritarian side, "active" geopolitical fault-line cities will mostly be present where the ruling regime is more permissive or where its power is undermined by local conditions, including local or regional elites, while "dormant" (i.e., apparently peaceful) geopolitical fault-line cities are present under all forms of government. Currently, eastern Ukraine (Kuzio, 2015a) and Belarus illustrate these two contrasting situations, but an unexpected event in Belarus – like a colour revolution or a deep(er) economic crisis – could change the situation.

While being exposed to dual information spaces, cities located in border regions present certain additional characteristics that, under specific conditions, may lead to conflict. First, they host more cross-border ties, both in quantity and quality-wise (Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999). Second, they may have relatively weak connections to the national centre of power (unless they happen to represent it). This, in turn, may influence the particular types of urban identities present, which may be hybrid or blurred, especially in areas where the language and culture present across the border is not very different (Zhurzhenko, 2015b). In some cases, this may imply a sense of relative detachment from the core and of unique local or regional identity (Paasi, 2003; Wilson & Donnan, 1998). It is reasonable to suppose that, when juxtaposed with the divisions fuelled by the overlap of competing information spaces, these border space traits may exacerbate the conflicts present in geopolitical fault-line cities and regions.

Under conditions of armed conflict, such as in eastern Ukraine, cities located near the military frontline are particularly likely candidates for unrest, not least because the frontline location means heightened exposure to propaganda messages from both sides of the conflict. Near-frontline cities are also the places that must initially absorb the flows of internally displaced persons (IDPs) or refugees generated by the conflict, putting significant pressure on their resources, and they are also places where the regular functioning of social and health services may be disrupted (Owczarzak, Karelin, & Phillips, 2015). The latter, in turn, are additionally strained by the fact that high risk sites deflect or discourage private investment, leading to heightened economic hardship and dependency on external support. Such conditions may lead to an intolerant reception of IDPs on behalf of the host community (Ivashchenko-Stadnik, 2017: 27). On top of that, there is the real and constant threat of enemy invasion and occupation, although the perceptions of this risk are not necessarily uniform, nor are the feelings towards the enemy. In fact, in the face of this risk, people may make different calculations concerning their personal best. This context may embolden "risk entrepreneurs" who may seek opportunities to cooperate with the enemy state or organization for personal economic of political gain.

4.3. *Information spaces and information "gated communities"*

Finally, one of the geopolitical fault-line city's principal characteristics is the overlap of contradictory, and polarizing, information spaces. The greater the degree of contradiction between and political salience of these information spaces, the greater the potential for societal polarization and conflict. For example, in the Ukrainian regions closest to the Russian border, exposure to and, especially, consumption of Russian television broadcasts has boosted the electoral performance of pro-Russian parties while possibly simultaneously producing a backlash effect on those with pro-Western inclinations (Peisakhin & Rozenas, 2018). Importantly, Peisakhin and Rozenas demonstrate that the effect is one of *persuasion* rather than of mobilization; in other words, polarization is amplified.[9]

[9] Since early 2014, when all Russian state-controlled channels were banned, Ukraine is no longer a good illustration of an overlapping information space, with the exception of the areas located in closest proximity to the Russian

However, the increased use of social networking sites as sources of information is rapidly eroding the traditional information spaces' territorial underpinnings. Footloose information, misinformation and disinformation are being created and propagated by both government and private actors faster and more extensively than ever before, and it is being amplified and multiplied through algorithmic tailoring, human confirmation bias, and citizen curation (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Golovchenko et al. 2018). The result is a substantial extension of what VanAlstyne and Brynjolffson (2005) called "cyberbalkanization": virtual fault-lines and information "gated communities", guarded by ideological dogmatists, bikini trolls,[10] social bots and other information "warriors", are rapidly supplanting the traditional geographies of information. This is redrawing the cartography of information diffusion, weakening the external boundaries of the conventional information spaces, while giving rise to a fractured information space where communication is limited and conflict is rife. The ensuing compartmentalization of the geographies of information, a "Johannesburgization" of sorts, enables, among other things, the rhizomatic spread of authoritarian narratives hinging upon geopolitical themes. When these narratives, like any provocative or emotionally antagonizing narrative, take the step into the offline world of (the cities of) liberal-democratic countries, they may produce small clones of the world's major geopolitical fault-lines.[11] The provocative appearance of the "Donetsk People's Republic" flag in front of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris during the recent *gilets jaunes* protests illustrates this (UNIAN, 2018). Thus, hotspots of heightened (geo)political tension, where a democratically minded majority must contend with a growing and increasingly vocal authoritarian-minded minority, can now be found throughout the world. In Europe, the cities most at risk are the ones located in unconsolidated democracies, in countries with inherited polarized media landscapes, and in countries that have unresolved conflicts or disputes surrounding the memory of past periods of authoritarian or totalitarian rule. Italy comes to mind, particularly because it has long been characterized by political and media polarization (Mancini, 2013), as well as many countries in Central and Eastern Europe, which have often been described as hosting increasingly "Italianized" media landscapes (Hallin & Mancini, 2012).

5. Conclusions

This paper's contribution lies in its *provisional* theorization of the geopolitical fault-line city, which was discussed in the light of the literature on contested cities and under the assumption that it is critically exposed to powerful ongoing changes in the global information landscape. I stress provisional, in adherence to the view that urban theory is best kept "light and revisable" (Robinson, 2016: 9), a continuous work in process that recognizes both contextual differences and the indeterminateness of the urban condition.

The key differences between the "classic" divided city and the geopolitical fault-line city, respectively represented by the likes of Jerusalem and Sarajevo versus Kharkiv and Chişinău, relate to the character and origin of the problems underlying conflict. In divided cities, the principal *enjeux* are mostly local and related to social and spatial justice concerns, discrimination, security and political representation. Thus, the dynamics of conflict largely mirror the extent to which these issues are addressed. In geopolitical fault-line cities, on the other hand, the main disputes are about geopolitical alignment, foreign policy, and the overall character of government (e.g., democratic vs. Authoritarian); as a result local urban conflict tends to be drafted elsewhere, acquiring a degree of volatility and unpredictability that goes well beyond that present in "classic" divided cities. Such concerns relate closely to the way the past is described and remembered, to collective memory, nostalgia and historical revisionism; they are particularly present in countries with unstable geopolitical predicaments, polarized politics, unconsolidated forms of government, or which have not come to terms with the darker periods in their political histories.

Rather than replacing or challenging the notion of the ethno-nationally divided city, the concept of the geopolitical fault-line city aims to refine and complement it. Ethno-national conflict may co-exist in geopolitical fault-line cities, but it is of subordinate importance and never the root cause of conflict. In other words, for significant inter-ethnic frictions to emerge in a geopolitical fault-line city, the mobilization, encouragement and politicization of ethnic interests would have to be promoted by actors at higher levels, including the national and the international. This has not happened in any of the cases mentioned in this paper, nor has it, arguably, happened in the war-torn region of the Donbas, where recent survey research shows that while ethnic identities have become somewhat more salient since the onset of war, mixed identities and remarkably similar opinions on foreign policy continue to prevail on both sides of the frontline (Sasse, 2018).

Geopolitical fault-line cities experience periods of heightened conflict only under certain conditions, i.e., when global or regional geopolitical rivalries reach a critical level of antagonism upon which at least one contender starts making extensive use of disinformation and propaganda to further its agenda. This, in turn, nurtures a flow of counter-information that exposes the population to information spaces characterized by incompatible, highly polarizing, geopolitical narratives. In this sense, geopolitical fault-line cities are information fault-line cities where some residents, for various context-specific reasons, are likely to pick sides and act decisively upon their choices, with the vast majority merely sympathizing with the one or the other, or neither, camp. Yet, with the information spaces of the television era now immensely transformed by the near-global availability of fast internet connections and, in particular, by the rapid establishment of social networking sites as (fake) news-related anger venting devices, information fault-lines are rapidly complementing their territorial expressions in favour of a deterritorialized mode of (dis)information diffusion. The latter produces virtual fault-lines and compartmentalized information spaces – information "gated communities" – scattering them across the planet where it is most vulnerable, resulting in a new, elusive, topology of disinformation that is a significant threat to the democratic order. The toxic atmosphere present in geopolitical fault-line cities is thus being recreated, at a striking pace, in the cybersphere. The moment it touches down, things get instantly unvirtual: locally, as a neighbourhood-level riot, or nationally, through its impact on election results. The improbable kakistocrats currently residing in the White House exemplify this.

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(*footnote continued*)
border. Peisakhin and Rozenas' (2018) study is particularly valuable because it juxtaposes presidential and parliamentary election results with Russian television signal strength, allowing the comparison of areas where Russian (analog network) television can be watched with those where it is practically improbable.

[10] A bikini troll is a very common type of internet troll that uses a fake social media profile to pose as a young woman of attractive appearance (Aro, 2016).

[11] The conditions for such mini-fault-lines may be present on the illiberal-authoritarian side too, but again, silencing dissent is in the nature of the system.

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