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1989: The Year of The Great Ambivalence

This paper argues against the re-nationalization of narratives linked to the events of 1989. It confronts the tendencies to define the transformation in Central-Eastern Europe as acts of national heroism with the reality of geopolitical facts. The paper's central argument is based on the reality of pan-European development: it emphasizes a transnational European narrative, one which tends to be overshadowed by the nationalization of memories.

Re-Nationalization and Europeanization

1989 was the year of the most dramatic transformation in Europe since 1945. The “Cold War” ended, the barbed wire between Hungary and Austria was lifted, and the Berlin Wall came down. Before those dramatic changes were possible, the transformation had started in the very centre of communist Europe: Mikhail Gorbachev declared the end of the Brezhnev Doctrine – and the free elections in Poland began the process which, within a very short time, would end the communist single-party dictatorship in Central and Eastern Europe. All the former communist countries in Europe commenced the transformation from a Marxist-Leninist single-party system to pluralistic democracy – together with a competitive multi-party system boasting free elections; and with checks and balances in the form of media pluralism and an independent judiciary. With the exceptions of Russia and Belorussia (and, at least for a certain period, Moldova and Serbia), all of Europe's former communist states opted for a “Western” orientation. That included NATO as well as EU membership.

Some aspects of this “Westernization” included one specific aspect that may have been overlooked in 1989 and the coming years: namely, becoming a member of the EU included the necessity to shift power from the nation state to the Union, especially concerning the “Single Market” architecture and the acceptance of the supremacy of European Law.

During the last years of Gorbachev, the USSR officially renounced the “Brezhnev Doctrine” – which implied (following the principle of “socialist solidarity”) the reduction of the national sovereignty of all members of the “socialist camp”. The Brezhnev Doctrine was the justification of the Soviet Union’s role as the East European power centre all other communist countries had to follow.

The year 1989 meant the renaissance of national sovereignty. But 1989 was also the year of the beginning of a policy leading to the reduction of national sovereignty within the European Union. In the dominant feeling of “national liberation”, that second aspect of Europeanization had been ignored – more or less. The European Union was perceived as an instrument to guarantee prosperity and individual freedom – but not as a transnational or supranational institution limiting Polish or Latvian sovereignty in the same way the EU limits French or German sovereignty.

The transformation in communist Europe seemed to be the triumph of national liberation. But by turning towards the West, the transformation process followed two different textbooks: the renaissance of the nation state, based on a Westphalian understanding of national sovereignty; and the adoption to the standards of political and economic design, which – following Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet – was focused on a post-national Europe.

In Western Europe, the process of European integration was designed and implemented with the clear intention to reduce national sovereignty. The “Jean Monnet Process”, starting in 1951 with the foundation of the European Coal and Steel Community, tried to control, to contain, and to limit nationalism. But in Central and Eastern Europe, the “Westernization” starting in 1989 was perceived as the triumph of national sovereignty. This is one of the contradictory perceptions which overshadow the ongoing integration today.

The contradiction of narratives: national heroism or the defeat of the “Second World”?

The transformation processes in Poland and Hungary, in Czechoslovakia and Romania, and in the GDR were the result of different national developments, ones that can be characterized as “national liberation” and “national democratization”. But first and foremost, the transformation was the result of the more or less peaceful surrender of the “Second World’s” centre – of Moscow, of the USSR, of Marxism-Leninism, of a military-political-economic system which by raw power had dominated over the eastern half of Europe since 1945.

Concerning the transformation in Central and Eastern Europe, the two narratives seem to contradict each other: the narrative of national heroism – and the narrative of geopolitical unavoidability. Both narratives are correct, both tell valid stories. The question is not about “right” or “wrong” – the question is which narrative tells the decisive story; decisive for the outcome of the year 1989.

When the Soviet Union started to rule over the Baltic States and Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria and East Germany, it was obvious that such rule was based first and foremost on one factor– military power;

military occupation. From the beginning of its rule, the USSR was confronted by opposition – political opposition, like the Hungarian “Small Landowner Party”, which did win the first and only democratic elections until 1989; military opposition, like the resistance of the Polish Home Army; as well as civilian resistance, like the demonstrations in East Berlin in 1953, in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and in Poland in 1980.

If we compare East Berlin in the summer of 1953 – and East Berlin in the fall of 1989; Prague, summer 1968 – and Prague, fall 1989; Budapest, fall 1956 – and Budapest 1989, then there is no doubt that the failures of 1953 in East Berlin; of Budapest in 1956; and of Prague in 1968 were not the result of a lack of national heroism. The Poles and Czechs, Slovaks and Hungarians, East-Germans and Romanians who tried to transform the existing dictatorship into democracy acted heroically before 1989. They did not succeed, they were unable to succeed, due to the intervention of Soviet tanks; due to the policy upheld by the post-Stalinist war lords in Moscow, who were committed to securing their European zone of interest, their share of Europe. After all, the Red Army had liberated and conquered that zone in its war against the armed forces of the “Greater German Empire”.

The difference between the failures of transformation attempts before 1989 and the successes of 1989 was defined by the transformation in the very centre of the bloc itself, in Moscow. The transformation in the periphery of the bloc could not have been successful as long as the bloc’s centre was unwilling to accept transformation in the USSR. The history of the demise of the European communist systems started in 1985, when the small, aging, and ailing elitist leadership of the Soviet Communist Party transferred power to the generation of Gorbachev and Yeltsin.

Gorbachev realized that the “peaceful competition” between West and East had resulted in the defeat of the world shaped by Lenin and Stalin. Economically, technologically, psychologically the post-Stalinist leadership had lost. It needed decades before this basic fact was recognized by the disciples of Marxism-Leninism. The “socialist camp” was unable to overtake the West as Khrushchev had promised – and as Brezhnev still claimed to believe. Soviet communism was bankrupt – economically and technologically, morally and intellectually.

There was heroism on the streets in East Berlin in 1953 as well as in 1989. There was heroism in Budapest in 1956 and 1989. There was heroism in Prague in 1968 and 1989. But what we have to accept is that the heroism of the people fighting against the Marxist-Leninist dictatorship, fighting for freedom from the orders coming from Moscow – that heroism did not fail because of a lack of dedication and courage before 1989. That heroism ultimately succeeded not because of any significant increase of Polish or Czechoslovak, of East German and Hungarian dedication and courage in 1989, as compared with the decades before. The difference was that in Moscow, a new leadership had accepted defeat in its competition with the West. The consequence was that Mikhail Gorbachev cancelled the Brezhnev doctrine. The decisive factor which made the transformation in 1989 a success was not the renaissance of nationalism. The decisive factor was the strength of liberal, of Western democracy.

Returning to good (or not so good) old Europe – or joining a completely new Europe?

Looking back today – what was the decisive outcome of the last three decades? Was it, is it the impact of the return of a Europe shaped after World War I – by Brest-Litovsk, Versailles, Trianon? How different is post-1989 Europe from the Europe which failed after 1918, 1919, 1920? Let me rephrase the question: how safe and how democratic was Poland between the rebirth of the Polish state and the invasion of German and Soviet troops in September 1939? How free was the newly established state of Slovakia as a Nazi satellite? What was the impact of the authoritarian Horthy regime on the daily liberty of Hungarians? How stable was Romania between authoritarianism, military dictatorship, and the pressure from different sides – from Nazi-Germany and from the USSR? How successful was Yugoslavia in convincing its nationalities that the new state of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was more than Greater Serbia?

How did it happen – starting already in 1922 – that Italy became a model of the political system globally soon known as “fascism”? Spanish democracy did not survive in this period, and neither did democracy in Portugal. Is this Europe of failing democracies the Europe post-communist countries were eager to return to in 1989? How can we explain the hidden agenda of the nostalgia for the last century’s first half, for the decades of world wars and the Holocaust? Nostalgia – for Mussolini’s Italy, for Horthy’s Hungary, for Tiso’s Slovakia, for Antonescu’s Romania, or for the united Germany of Hitler? Why are populist movements on the rise, ones most often defined by a simplistic nationalist understanding of “Us” versus “Them”? Of course, there is a multiplicity of explanations; there are many scholarly articles and books trying to explain the renaissance of nationalism. Let me offer just one rather abstract interpretation: the success and the visibility of neo-nationalistic populism all over Europe is an attempt to escape the complexities of globalization: globalization, the contemporary face of modernization; globalization, which is not the result of a conspiracy but the result of the logics of economic and cultural modernization. Populism is the promise of return into a catastrophic but nevertheless romanticized past. But why is this promise appealing to significant segments of society?

There exists an answer to the challenges of globalization: the integration of nation states into a common European Union. This integration has proven itself capable of building the best Europe we ever had: a Europe of peace, a Europe of liberty, a Europe of prosperity. Of course, it is not a perfect Europe. But it is a Europe we are invited to improve. It is a Europe which follows the principle “We are all different – we are all equal”. This Europe – developed from the West’s European Economic Community into an All European Union – is an unfinished federation. This Europe is not dictated by a centre, like Pan-European empires from the past – from the Roman Empire to the Empire of Charlemagne, from Napoleon’s Empire to the empire which signalled through its ruby-red stars shining from the Kremlin’s towers its intention to build a “New World”. All those empires imploded.

The Europe of the Union is not an empire; it has no centre – as Paris or Moscow were centres of the empires of the past. It is an association any democratic European state has been and still is invited to join. This Europe has become the biggest economic player worldwide, ahead of the US and of China. But it is still lacking the political instruments it would need to create a stabilizing balance between America and Asia. But for the first time in its history, Europe is not defined by intra-European warfare. For the first time, Europe can speak with one voice; and sometimes Europe acts beyond Germany and France, Poland and Bulgaria. Sometimes, Europe is already one.

The “End of History” – or the “Return of History”?

At the end of my talk, I want to present three scenarios for a realistic perception of Europe’s future. These scenarios contradict – but they don’t exclude each other. The future of Europe will not be defined by an “Either – Or” but by a “More or Less”; by a more or less between the two extreme points: between the “End of History” and the “Return of History”. All three scenarios are based on tendencies and probabilities – and must not be misunderstood as prophecies.

Scenario 1: Democracy – defined as political pluralism, free and fair elections, checks and balances, an independent judiciary – has never been so undisputed in Europe. There is an ongoing debate concerning “liberal democracy”, about the minimum standard of democracy. But there is no serious debate about the necessity of political liberty; about the need for an independent judiciary; about the positive role free media have to play. Before 1945, in most parts of Europe democracy did not exist, and before 1939, many observers believed democracy had reached its end, the victim of global megatrends. For many, democracy was a dirty word – as we can read in Josef Goebbels’ diaries. For Josef Stalin – before 1939 and also after 1945 – liberal democracy was just the window dressing of the bourgeoisie’s rule, a pretext in the war of classes. Beginning in 1989, the Central-Eastern European domino process – the first domino fell with the Polish elections in June 1989 – toppled the communist dictatorships just as – decades before – fascist dictatorship had been defeated. Democracy in Europe today has its deficits – but the principles of liberal, of pluralistic democracy are widely accepted.

Scenario 2: Behind the façade of democracy, authoritarian tendencies are rising: Populist movements and populist parties reflect a deep-seated resentment against representative democracy. Democracy as majority rule is seen in contradiction to minority rights, and “the people” in opposition against parliament. The difference between “Us” and “Them” – whoever that might be – is overemphasized. Complex rules, developed over the years and enshrined in constitutions, guaranteed by supreme courts, are denounced as an elitist construction. The very concept of enlightenment, of rationalism, seems to be on the defensive. Thomas Hobbes’ view of politics as permanent warfare mobilizes a significant part of political energy.

This energy becomes manifest in the frustration of those who see themselves on the losing side – despite the political freedom they have all been invited to enjoy since 1989. This is a frustration used and organized by populist movements and populist parties. In such an atmosphere of politics of exclusion, of excluding all who are defined as “others”, democracy can be lost. And with democracy lost, the process of European integration could turn into a process of disintegration.

Scenario 3: As all countries within the EU are profiting economically from the Union’s Single Market, an end to European integration as started after 1945 in the Western part of the continent is possible but not probable. The situation the United Kingdom finds itself in after the Brexit referendum in 2016 will prevent further attempts from other members to leave the Union. The Union will survive for the foreseeable future – as an unfinished federation, with an unfinished democratic structure, consisting of democratic member states with some democratic deficits. In the short run, Europe’s future will be defined by “Muddling Through”, or “Soldiering On”. The alternatives to European democracy as we observe it today are too dreadful. A return to pre-1914 and to pre-1939 Europe is an option nobody can wish. Europe will survive – less democratic than it could be; less unified than possible; and not strong enough to be able to play in the same political league with the United States of America and the People’s Republic of China.

Politically, Europe can be proud of its successes – of the successes made possible by the events of 1989. But mentally, Europe must not get lost in nostalgia which tends to make us forget the self-destructive energy that characterized the Europe of the past.

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