

A DECADE OF CHANGE

Reflections in Hungarian and Slavonic
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COMMON VALUES FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION: A VIEW FROM A CANDIDATE STATE

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Introduction

The 1989 break-up of the Soviet bloc marked the beginning of the systemic transition in the postcommunist states of Central Europe. The collapse of the Soviet Union two years later was followed by the withdrawal of Soviet/Russian troops from this region. This process was completed by 1993 and meant the regaining of sovereignty by these states. In the wake of all these events an unprecedented systemic transition set in. First, from the centrally-planned to market-oriented economy and, second, from totalitarianism/authoritarianism to democracy. Some argue that the third element of renewed nation-building should be added to this scheme, to explain the sudden flare up of ethnic tensions, especially, in those states where economic and democratic transition was protracted (cf. Romania) or failed (cf. Moldova). Others opine that nation-building simply took precedence over economic and political transition in nation-states that gained independence for the first time (cf. Armenia).

The most successful post communist states (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) had applied for European Union (EU) membership already in 1993 and 1994. Later they were joined by other post communist candidates including post-Yugoslav Slovenia and the post-Soviet republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The condition for opening accession negotiations with candidate states was approximation of economy, politics and law according to the EU standards. This process spurred up development and bred discontent as well. In a matter of a few years whole professional/social groups disappeared (200 thousand miners in Poland) and new ones sprang up (PR, IT, finance, marketing specialists etc.), while some were marginalized (eg. smallholders in Poland who account for one-quarter of the population).

Question of Values

In 1999 Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic became NATO members. Due to the changes in Central Europe and the EU as well as the dynamics of transatlantic politics, the agreement is that Poland and other qualifying postcommunist states should become members of the EU as soon as possible (2004?). This poses many a question:

Firstly, how such membership will mesh with the renewed nation-(re)building projects.

Secondly, how will the necessary approximation changes alter the culture and politics of the candidate states after accession.

Thirdly, what will the relations between the old and new EU member states look like within the enlarged Union.

Limitations in time and space do not permit one, there is no time to analyze these questions in detail. Anyway, straightforward answers to these issues can be available only after the actual enlargement of the EU takes place. Most crucially, one could say that asking these questions amounts to beating around the bush. This would be to speak for the sake of speaking without tackling the very core of the problem. That is to say, what will be the common values, which the new and old EU members agree to share? What will be the agreed upon values that may bind the Union into a congruent entity?

In the EU's anteroom

The Central European states freed from the iron curtain's shackles suffered a severe inferiority complex vis-à-vis Western Europe. Over there 'in the West' there was democracy and working economy. Those sharply contrasted with the oppressive regimes in 'people's democracies' and bleak shops deprived of goods by communist economy. Then the concept arose that the postcommunist states must 'return to Europe'. When the reforms brought about a sound level of political stability and prosperity, Central European politicians and intellectuals began to claim that there was no need to return to Europe because the states had always been in Europe, Soviet occupation or not. But this is not so obvious, for instance, in Ukraine, where the 'return-to-Europe' discourse still predominates due to the failure of the systemic transition.

The usual image of the EU a textbook gives is that of a Grecian temple. The EU's common roof rests on 'three pillars'. They correspond to common economy, common Foreign and Security Policy, and Cooperation in Justice and Home Affairs. In that scheme no values are mentioned. But the discussion is all the rage behind the scenes. At the beginning of the 1990s Morocco's application for membership in the EU was turned down on the grounds that this state was not 'European'. The same measure was meted out to Turkey. But Ankara's pivotal role in NATO and unwavering secularism made Brussels accept Turkey as a candidate state in 1998.

In the curricula of European Studies the student is offered the unproblematic solution to the question what it means to be 'European' in the case of the EU. The three pillars of its 'Europeaness' are:

- the monotheist Judeo-Christian tradition;
- Greek philosophy;
- Roman law.

The religious dimension glosses over the lasting presence of Islam, first, in the Iberian Peninsula, then, in the Balkans and, nowadays, in the millions-strong immigrant communities of Muslims in Western Europe. It is also true of other religions, which immigrants have brought along to the EU. Moreover, the focus on Christianity and Judaism denies the Enlightenment tradition of agnosticism and the communist propagation of atheism. Over half of the Czechs define

themselves as agnostics/atheists and Sunday church going is a dying custom in Western Europe.

The emphasis on Greek philosophy chooses to overlook the fact that it was the Muslims who preserved and developed the tradition of Greek thought after the fall of the Roman Empire. Many a Greek philosophical work was reintroduced to Western Europe through an Arabic translation. On top of that, Muslim thinkers are not readily acknowledged for their development of Arabic numerals and algebra that proved so useful for the rise of modern technology.

Last but not the least, the elevated rank reserved for Roman law disregards the traditions of Germanic and Slavic laws so crucial for shaping Europe's structures and institutions. The early 19th-century imposition of the Code Napoléon on Europe is not mentioned either. This tradition prevalent in continental Europe stems rather from the Enlightenment than ancient Rome.

Ties that bind

The tentative trend away from this cultural-cum-ethnic perspective is provided by the Council of Europe. Within the Council's institutional framework the system of Human Rights protection came into being after World War II. A similar system for the protection of minorities is in the making since 1989. Human Rights and the dream of united Europe gave rise to EU citizenship, while the post-Cold War recognition of minorities caused Brussels to require candidate states to protect those adequately. The guiding tenets of this stance can be defined as civic values and multiculturalism.

The choice between these two extremes of either civic or ethnic values will decide the future of the enlarged EU. The scenario characterized by the espousal of particularist ethnic position would stall any further enlargement of the EU. It would pit the Union against the outer world and immigrants within construed as 'un-European', thus, 'dangerous'. This project could also turn racist as already one can hear that the EU should be reserved for 'white Christians' only. In a relatively short perspective, such a Union would lose the technological competition with the US. And more significantly, it would collapse under the staggering economic burden of its dramatically aging society.

The only way to offset this demographic trend is to attract immigrants. Even in the extremely ethnocentric Germany recent reforms relax its 'jus sanguini' citizenship allowing for its extension to non-ethnically German inhabitants. Berlin fully understands that without immigration the Germans and Germany will be just a pale shadow of themselves in half a century. A future European Union rebuilt on the foundation of civic values would be in position to catch up with the US, and to compete in the globalized world. What is more, after having transcended the ethnic bias, the Union's unique structure would allow for further pacific and consensual enlargement to the mutual benefit of the EU and the new member states.

Conclusion

I live in Poland. This used to be a multi-ethnic state. Non-ethnically Polish inhabitants accounted for one-third of the population prior to World War II. In the national socialist Holocaust Jews and Roma perished in the name of the 'racially pure' ideal. After 1945 the Kremlin shifted Poland 300 km westward so that now former German territories amount to one-third of Poland's area. The logic of 'ethnically clean' Polish nation-state pursued by communists, meant that over 10 million Germans had to leave or were expelled from this postwar Poland. In the latter half of the 1940s also hundreds of thousands of Belarusians and Ukrainians were expelled to the Soviet Union or dispersed all over Poland. At the same time 100 thousand surviving Jews left Poland on their own accord, and 30 thousand were expelled in 1968-1970. On top of that, in 1950-1991, over one million former German citizens and their descendents retained in Poland as Poles or polonizeable, left for West Germany.

The tragic events split my kin, half of whom live in Germany (a similar fate was met by many a family in post-partition India and Pakistan). These were not their choices and neither were those of my kin who had to remain in communist Poland. Everything happened above their heads. Not surprisingly then, I do not believe in grounding politics and statehood in specific ethnicity and culture. This eventually leads to the intrusion of politics into one's private life. And such an imposition makes an empty shell of Human and Minority Rights. Thus, I hope for an enlarged European Union of civic values - values that would allow one to freely participate in the Union's body politic without reducing the cultural diversity to be enjoyed in this enlarged space of freedom.