

Why Should We Reinvent Central Europe?

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The European Union has been going through a crisis. It has lost its dynamism and can only strengthen its competitiveness and increase economic and social cohesion if the member states, regions, local governments and, not least, activist groups of local societies strive to achieve these aims. Not all public figures seem to have understood this in our country. It is only in a new spirit that new forms and methods of cooperation can achieve success. The various actors in the European construction ought to share a holistic vision even if, at the same time, the reality and possibilities are constantly changing in response to enlargement. While competing, they need to seek new opportunities for the necessity of cooperation. Within the new framework of cooperation, they will have to adopt to a new rhythm of institutional and social transformation. None of this is possible if the patterns of thought and action, characteristic of the era of nation state, are not overcome. The twenty-five member states, and their well-known differences, will obviously not cooperate in everything all the time. It would be naive to think so. However, a small or medium-size country is clearly unable to secure its interests alone in a club of such size. One of the main driving forces of the European Union was, even before the Eastern enlargement, the regional or even international lobbying power and negotiating capacities of individual groups of countries. It is time, therefore, for the newly joined countries, namely the eastern part of Central Europe, to discover the possibility of regional cooperation and mobilize all those positive elements of their past which may strengthen this new cooperation. **In order for the EU to become a successful global actor and for the integration process to continue satisfactorily, and for the new member states to view themselves as individually and collectively successful, Central Europeans need to invent Central Europe.** Rediscovery does not mean a return to the past and I do not intend to suggest a nostalgic escape. Nevertheless, certain historical frames of cooperation and coexistence exist to lead us out of the trap.

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Regional instead of central authority

The newly revived historic regions such as the Bánát or Western Pannonia can provide a new model for the as yet unformed frontier regions; they may represent a strategy of escape from the vicious circle of divided existence and mutual exclusion for those trapped in historical and/or political dead-ends. The metaphor of regions linked to each other like the Olympic rings accurately presents the new, potential boundaries of coexistence in the European Union. We should not visualize these regions mechanically, positioned side-by-side as nation states, but rather as new units entwined like the Olympic rings, supporting and sustaining each other. With their garlands of cities, open institutions, universities and research centres, these intertwined regions could strengthen social cohesion, sustaining with force and appeal the intellectual radiation of a larger region. This larger region is Central Europe. Successful regions could be the leaders in co-ordinating relations and networking in Central Europe: they could help demolish feudal and feudal-bolshevik structures in the post-communist states. Instead of re-enforcing a non-accountable and therefore often irresponsible central power, they would be capable of locally ensuring a good quality of life. So far Hungarian regions do not provide a good example as they lack decision-making power, but there are successful regions operating on the western side of Europe. Inter-connected regions could preserve and cultivate the diversity of cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious values in Central Europe better than any central power or wobbling cultural policy. If we want to invent Central Europe, we first have to invent and empower its regions, whether new, revived or revivable. There have been some encouraging signs of this new Central European cooperation and regional networking: the spread of quality tourism; the expansion of twin city relations; the rapid formation of academic and university networks; music festival traditions; the rediscovery of shared cultural treasures in the fields of literature, theatre, architecture or gastronomy are all unmistakable signs of the revival of regionalism. All of these endeavours have begun to appear in the programmes and activities of NGOs and in the visions of Euro-regions which traverse national frontiers - such as the West-Pannon region. World economic actors have realized this for a long time.

Taking the risk of breaking out

All this, however, is not enough for the successful integration of Central Europe. There are cities dashing forth like comets - successful communities bravely inventing themselves. But promising tendencies are often stifled or oppressed by many bad old habits, enemy images, a lack of information and language competence, an overgrowth of differing regulating systems and the opposing interests of their operating authorities, and by derelict infrastructure and the backwardness characteristic of peripheries. Most important is the lack of careful planning in the exploitation of common opportunities as well as a lack of shared perspective in thinking and action. Here in Central Europe, we carry in ourselves a kind of passivity, laziness, indifference, and sometimes even cynicism regarding our future. This does not make us attractive partners either for each other, or in the eyes of third parties. To keep referring to our history of vicissitudes, the grievances we have caused each other, our small size or our dependent economies after the EU accession, means we are still unable to take the risk of breaking out from the childish culture of complaint and scapegoating. Thus, the invention of Central Europe is not only inevitable for planning the successful future of an enlarged European Union, it is also inevitable for the invention of a successful Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Romania and so on.

This “invention” will at the same time necessarily lead to new and hitherto unknown stages of identifying and defining ourselves. In the history of the small states of Central Europe it is not unusual to threaten or to be threatened - at least in the direct military and political sense - by outside powers. It is unusual to become part of a strange and novel post-state economic and political community based on network governance, constant negotiation and reflection. This entails shared values and therefore real, *de facto* solidarity. Solidarity that cannot be based on “poor relative”-type expectations and paternalistic behaviour patterns.

The era of post-nationalism: coexistence of the old and new

We need to reconsider our nineteenth- and twentieth-century depository of concepts, partly replacing them and partly adding to them. This task is exciting but at the same time also difficult since, in contrast with oversimplifying presuppositions (based on easily digestible black-and-white and either/or logic), we will have to grasp bizarre forms and unexpected turns of the coexistence of the old with the new by developing new concepts and a new language. The concept of a post-national constellation was

developed by Jürgen Habermas back in the mid-nineties. For him this did not mean that European nation states and nations had completely lost their significance or had been irrevocably doomed to dissolution in the melting pot of the EU and globalisation. It rather meant that they had lost the exclusive nature of their sovereignty and the belief in such absolute sovereignty.

This mass belief had enormous mobilising power and pushed the European nations through a lot, including good and bad. Having acknowledged the unstoppable and destructive effects of nation state rivalry, European states voluntarily gave up part of their sovereignty for the sake of an as yet unformed common “collective sovereignty.” This was one of the most positive turning points in the twentieth century. It remains crucial even if the process is in principle not irrevocable and carries with it the theoretical possibility of the European Union falling apart. At this point, at least, neither its economic and institutional successes, nor the goal of integration can be regarded as given. And this uncertainty is underlined even more by the deepening crises of politics and confidence today.

In the post-national age, the nation state has remained an important actor, both from an objective and a subjective standpoint, in the supra-national processes of globalization and integration; but it is only one of several new and often more dynamic actors. In the twenty-first century, it is no longer able to convincingly play its eighteenth or nineteenth-century role as the pioneer of progress. If we want to invent Central Europe and Hungary with it, then we must start a new discourse instead of the old one of uniting the nation. In our networking societies in the age of network governance, the supposed but indefinable, changing whole will not be, even at the level of discourse, bossed around by its parts. In our age of post-nationalism, processes enjoy priority to rules of exact boundaries and sharp distinctions. Let us gaze deeper into our past, but also let us look around much more widely at our present, and take notice our future opportunities. Our only reliable guide on the road towards a better and more promising future is a past that is understood in its complexity and entirety, including the controversies regarding shameful and regrettable conflicts and behavior.

The culture of feeling bad

A significant percentage of Hungarian society is notorious for not trusting in themselves or their own future. Part of the reason for this is that this society has not come to terms with its own past. It may be that the relative successes of the seventies and eighties and the self-deception of “goulash communism” and “refrigerator socialism”,

and the years as the “happiest barrack,” have deceived us and we identify too much with the role of the leader. Our failing to face ourselves led to the development of a culture of feeling bad. Apart from a few exceptions, a failure to look in the mirror was followed by a failure to wash. We could not start democratic transformation with a clean face and a clean slate. Today, this does not characterize only one political party, but the attitude of a whole society. The cynicism in relating to our past has become a public social behaviour pattern. In my opinion, this is a particularly important problem as this is what has poisoned and keeps poisoning our public life. Generation after generation has grown up socialised in such an environment, unaware of the ethos of civil courage and civil society that only recently started to take root in our country.

Democracy without democrats

Put it this way: from a social point of view, the democratic transformation has been a failure. We had nice hopes and we had a nice time. The eighties had a cathartic character - at least among the intelligentsia and in student circles. We rightfully hoped for fundamental changes - not so much with the appearance of political parties, since everyone knew in advance that would not be such a big deal. You could establish eight or ten new parties overnight. But the transformation of social and institutional mentality, as we already suspected, was going to be a lot more difficult and tedious. Creating the forums of public life is one thing, but to institutionalise democratic culture is extremely difficult, and we were not prepared for that. We were naive, which is natural. We were unprepared - and perhaps even that is natural. But to not face this for fifteen years, to sweep it under the carpet - that is less natural. It is time, therefore, for us to face this failure. Yes, Hungary is a democratic country as far as its institutional system and political structure are concerned. But it is a democratic country without democrats. And democracy in the social sense cannot exist without democrats, just as civil society is inconceivable without civil courage or civil norms of behaviour - i.e. without civilised existence. According to official reports, our democratic institutions are functioning all right. However, there are various groups, and not only the two large political camps, that do not allow democracy to become a social norm; there are quite a few visible as well as invisible economic interest groups that simply use it to their own ends. Public life lacks the power to face and solve problems or create a consensus; Hungarian society lacks cohesion. Influential economic and political interest groups interpret the concept of public good arbitrarily and to their own liking, according to the rules of the old-new petty kingdoms of feudal-bolshevism. They use the letter of the law to hit each other on

the head or to create obstacles. They are not the least worried by the fact that they are thereby producing public bad instead of public good. Thus, the institution, form and appearance of constitutionality are undeniably present. But the content of democracy, a democratised society is still absent: the socialization of democracy has come to a halt. It had begun, but stopped very quickly and this is to be blamed primarily on the political elite - on the caste of politicians, the political parties and their apparatus. Whoever strives for power and gains hold of power, or even functions in opposition to the power obviously has more responsibility for what happens in the country than those who do not. At the same time, our politicians and their parties are also products of our society. Why have certain essential reforms not taken place in the past fifteen years in Hungary? If a prime minister promises to support research and education, why does this mean withholding money? Civil society is also responsible for the lack of questioning, for not calling to account those in charge for their deceptions and lack of honesty. The media are also indifferent, either because they are politically bound or because, even if independent, they are struggling with no resources within a narrow sphere. Therefore, our public discourse is mostly restricted to superficial back-stabbing or back-slapping and inefficient fuming. In the meantime, journalists from more or less identical opposing camps are effectively and incessantly throwing dirt at each other and each other's politicians. This 'media ping-pong', played over our heads, has been until now a smart way of distracting society. But today trust in politicians and the parliament has sunk dangerously low. Only 2% cent of Hungarian society trust fully, and 7% more or less, the politicians they themselves elected. In the background, economic interest groups of the political powers continue their negotiations, now and then cynically informing us about developments.

The spread of the public bad

What enables the political elite and the media to behave like this? - the indifference and cynicism of the society, or the fact that the society is too weak and unprepared to protest and confront its elected or non-elected representatives with their shortcomings. Arguing about why one politician is worse than another is not only an infinitely boring and hopeless game, it is also the discourse of self-deception. This is the reason why I recommend a new public discourse and a suitable, comprehensible language. We ought to discuss why Hungarian society is unable to bring forth energies that would question this practice and somehow stop the 'public bad' from spreading and becoming the norm. In my view, Hungarian society is capable of this - we have the necessary

standard of material culture as well as the intellectual resources. The problem lies elsewhere. Something has gone stale, has decayed in us. We must learn how to speak anew. Often it seems that people do not want to believe this, and thus this is where I put the question: Why? Perhaps because it is easier to say from the beginning that we had no change of regime here, only a change of gangsters; that our politicians are all cynical and corrupt, they all steal and all they want is power - thereby refusing to take responsibility. But the responsibility is still there, since it is us who elect and re-elect them. In this sense, Hungarian civil society has, as far as I can tell, stumbled to the ground; but not in all senses. The number of our civil organisations is extremely high, even by comparison internationally. According to statistics, there are some 100,000 foundations and associations operating in Hungary. Seeing this, some sociologists draw the conclusion that civil society in Hungary is strong. But this civil society is only statistically strong. We are, among other things, a country of appearances: of creating and maintaining appearances. The disproportion between the number of NGOs and the ability of civil society to influence public life ought to give us a lot of food for thought. Put shortly: *we could do a lot more than we are doing*. We must step out of the present circle of bogus discourse claiming it is all the fault of the politicians. The 'third sector', as Mark Nerfin called it, i.e. civil society, is not doing what it is supposed to do. At least not the way it should and could, the way we thought it would back in the eighties. In the second half of the eighties, I toured the country for about 3-4 years because people wanted to talk. I visited the smallest clubs and remote villages, I visited the iron works in Dunaújváros and also spoke to young bankers. Once I was invited to Miskolc, to a circle of trade union activists from the county. When I entered the room, I thought they were going to burn me alive from the way they looked at me. But they just wanted to hear something; they could feel that a major change was coming. They needed someone else to declare things that they were not ready to declare.

Civil society is a collective game

Today we are satisfied with being able to verbally express anything: starting with labelling the others as communists or anti-Semites, to play the game of 'my communist is a good communist but your communist isn't' - and we are good at that. In the meantime, the world is passing us by. This is why I keep emphasizing Europe and Central Europe - because this is where our responsibility is the greatest. Because with this mentality of ours, refusing to accept responsibility, we definitely cannot be successful in the environment we now chose for ourselves. Europe, just like Central

Europe, is a collective game. We do not seem to want to understand this. Collective games can only be played successfully and to everyone's satisfaction if the rules of the game are agreed upon and adhered to. We cannot change them arbitrarily during the game. If they don't work, we can invent new ones - again, together. In a reality that changes at such a pace, we may often find the need to change the rules: invent new ones and replace some of the old ones. But to do this in a fair and useful way from the point of the game as a whole is only possible on the basis of debate, mutual consideration and the search for compromise. This is the only way the public good can be formulated - and reformulated in Hungary. The notion of public good has fallen to pieces in Hungary. In order to re-establish it, to draw up a new social contract, we need to encourage new patterns of behaviour and employ new techniques. We will need social innovators, social entrepreneurs, communities built and organised from below, and their mutual cooperation. This is the essence of the movement called 'Reinventing Central Europe'.